

Poor and Rich

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[0 : 00] Well, I know you're tired and probably ready to go home, so I'm not going to take very long. I just want to look at a single proverb this morning or this evening. What time is it?

I'm tired and I'm ready to go home. Proverbs 18.23, if you could turn there. Proverbs 18.23. This is an interesting proverb.

Proverbs 18.23. It's a perplexing little proverb. Remember the very beginning, the introduction of Proverbs that talks about this book is meant to teach you how to understand and to think through the riddles of the wise.

This is one of those riddles of the wise. It's not a moral statement telling us to do one thing or another.

It's saying this is how it is. Good or bad. Right or wrong. This is the way it is. And living wisely means you understand this little picture.

[1 : 04] It means you understand this is how it works. So do you understand this little picture? A poor man pleads for mercy.

But a rich man answers harshly. In the Hebrew, it's even pithier. It's even shorter, more condensed, more abrupt.

Maybe not even so clear as it is in English. It says, please of mercy speak the poor. The rich answer strongly.

And so it's a little more ignomastic than I think what it can come across in English. What's obvious is that at the very heart of this proverb is this relationship. Maybe you noticed it when I was doing it in a very literal translation.

The poor and the rich are right next to each other in the middle of this proverb. That's really the heart of the proverb. This relationship, the differences and the similarities between the poor and the rich.

[2 : 08] They're right next to each other. And it's natural for us to think of this proverb, a poor man pleads for mercy. That he's pleading with the rich man who follows.

That would obviously, and that very well could be the case. But it also could be just a more general statement of how poor people and rich people interact and live their lives.

What's generally true for them. How the rich and the poor go through their lives. And so we're getting invited into this proverb. And this little picture.

And it's not as simplistic as it first appears. And so you're invited to look around to ask what's going on. Is the contrast here between how the poor and the rich live generally or act generally?

Or is it showing the humble spirit of a poor person as they go to a rich person? And then the rich man's attitude of just don't bother me. Get out of here. It makes sense either way.

[3 : 13] If it's talking more generally just about how rich and poor people go through life. The point is the rich person doesn't need to be quite so careful about how they interact with people. They don't need to be, they aren't so needy or desperate.

They don't have to go around flattering people or kowtowing to people. They can even get away with being surly and kind of rude toward other people.

And that's certainly a way that rich people can be. The men have been studying the life of David on Wednesday nights. And just two weeks ago, two weeks ago I believe, yeah, we met Nabal who is rich.

He's rich. And David comes asking for help. And Nabal doesn't think twice really about being rude to David. He hears David's request through his messengers.

He gives a few snide comments, sends the messengers on the way, and he just goes back to his party. He doesn't think twice about how he treats David.

[4 : 25] Well, Nabal had lots of practice at feeling that way and thinking that way and acting that way. That wasn't the first time he was rude and confident and surly towards people.

So the rich just generally are more comfortable in their social situations. For better or for worse, that's just true. But if this is talking about how a poor man pleads for help and this rich person that he's talking to just turns him away, then the proverb is showing us that there is a certain humility that poverty teaches a person or should teach a person.

And there's also the other side of it. There's the selfish pride that wealth very easily creates in people. So we're continuing to look through this little picture.

What makes it even more ambiguous or nuanced in Hebrew is this word that NIV translates as harshly. It sometimes does mean harsh or surly or rude.

But generally and more often, it just means strong or forcefully. In Proverbs 30, chapter 25, or Proverbs 30, 25, it says, Ants are of little strength.

[5 : 51] And that's the very same word. Now, that's not saying ants are, you know, very meek and polite animals. That's not the point. They just aren't very strong compared to us. Proverbs 10, 35 uses the same word.

The wealth of the rich is their strong or their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor. So the rich do have strength. And Proverbs wants us to understand that.

They do have strength. They do have a fortified, a strong city. But Proverbs also says the wealth of the rich is their fortified city. They imagine it an unscalable wall.

So if we put kind of like all those Proverbs together, it kind of teaches us something about the dynamics of wealth and what having it can do to someone.

It's a wall, all right. We can't deny that. To have money is to have a wall of protection. Rich people, though, they have this tendency to make that wall something bigger than what it really is.

[6 : 58] So they turn a six-foot wall that is really valid protection and they turn it into a 300-foot wall. They go from standing on a six-foot wall of God's giving and they turn it into a 300-foot wall of their own making.

And as they think about their wealth, it changes them and they overinflate what that money is going to do for them. So this is a nuanced picture.

And the Proverbs are inviting us to look at this, into this fluid, this changing, because we're always changing, this changing picture of how wealth and poverty work.

And that means it's talking about us. It really is. It's not just talking about other people and how they handle wealth or haven't been handling it very well.

It's talking about us. It's talking about what wealth or poverty can do to us. Or maybe even for us.

So if we just say the bad people are the rich people and the good poor people, that's what this is talking about.

[8 : 11] Bad rich people and good poor people. We're taking a full color Renoir painting and just flattening it out into one of those black and white coloring pictures. This is a complicated thing because the world is complicated.

In my kitchen at my house, we have a large Renoir painting. I think it's called The Boat Party. And there's all these things going on. And I can just look at this painting and enter into it.

I can stare at it for minutes at a time because there's all these interactions going on. And you're wondering what these people are saying to each other, how they got there, what they're doing.

Well, that's what this is.

So if we just say a bad rich people shouldn't be mean to poor people, we could say that's true.

That's true. But that's not really getting to the to the complexities of the situation, because you don't need the Lord.

You don't need to know the Lord to be nice to poor people. But you don't need to fear the Lord. You don't need that heart of wisdom.

[9 : 19] You don't need that wisdom from above just to be nice to poor people. But you do need the Lord to have wealth and to use it wisely to experience the freedom or the protection that it gives you, but not to trust in it, to not look down on others who don't have it.

That's wisdom from above. That only comes when you're relating to the Lord and when really your ultimate trust is in the Lord. And then you can have money without money having you.

We can't ever get around that the heartbeat of Proverbs is a relationship with the Lord. You cannot have the wisdom this book is describing in its fullness without experiencing, without living in the

goodness of God.

And so the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. So whatever this proverb is meaning, and I think it's a layered picture, if we're ever going to see it for what it's saying and see how it touches us in our lives and how it applies to us, then we need to ask, am I fearing the Lord?

Does he have my ultimate trust? Does he have my ultimate confidence? Does he have my ultimate trust? So let's just keep digging into this. Let me ask you a question. Which would you rather be in this proverb?

[10:41] The poor man pleading for mercy or the rich man answering harshly? Well, a poor man pleading for mercy, that doesn't sound great.

That doesn't sound like a position you want to be in. Begging for more time. Begging for help. Begging because you need something.

You're desperate for something. Proverbs is honest enough to say there is no inherent virtue or goodness about being poor. Proverbs is honest enough to say that there is a power dynamic going on between the rich and the poor.

Proverbs 22, 7 says the rich rule over the poor. And the borrower is slave to the lender. And it's saying these things because that's how it is.

It's also saying you don't want to be on the poor side of that equation, of that occasion. We want to be the lenders. We want to be the helpers.

[11:43] We want to be free. We want to have the resources to meet life's challenges, to be able to help people who are in need. We want an umbrella because it's going to rain.

We don't want to depend on the credit card company's umbrella. And it's very steep, high priced when it comes time to rain. This poor man is in a place we really is not enviable.

We shouldn't want to be here pleading for mercy. But then there's this rich man's response. Now, if the word strong here means harsh or rude or proud like Nabal, we don't want that either.

We really don't want to be on either side of this, if that's what that means. Because this is showing us that wealth can do something to you.

It can dehumanize you from what God intended us to be as image bearers. It can freeze love in your heart. It can freeze humility in your heart.

[12:51] And so what is your wealth doing to you? That's an important thing to understand is it's always having some kind of effect on you. What is your success doing to you?

What is your past success doing to you? If you've been working a long time and now you've arrived and financially you're just doing fantastic, what is that success doing to you?

Is it making you more grateful? Is it making you more thankful, more compassionate because you know everything you have is a gift from God?

Is that wealth actually turning you outward towards other people in love and in generosity like our God? Or is it doing the exact opposite where you say, I worked hard.

I've earned this. And this is mine. And I've deserved this. And if that's kind of your tendency, you need to ask yourself, who gave you the ability to work?

[13:56] You didn't sort of fetch that out of thin air. God gave you the ability to work. Why aren't you in the hospital with muscular dystrophy, unable to control your muscles, your arms, your legs?

Why didn't you get into a car accident and your memory is just gone? Some perfectly hardworking people or perfectly willing to work people can't work.

You can. That's a gift from God. Who gave your parents? Who gave you your parents? So you say, yeah, I worked hard and I was willing to work and I have this ability.

And so where did that come from? You know, you had parents that years of discipline, years of training, years of bringing you up, taught you how to work.

Proverbs says that folly is bound up in the heart of a child. Folly is the natural state of a child. You just let them go and they're going to disgrace you, Proverbs says.

[15:05] Instead, what did your parents do? They put wisdom into you and it wasn't easy at times. And they had to keep going and keep going and keep going. So my ability, my willingness, my opportunities, my training, all of this is from God.

So what is your wealth doing to you? Is it making you harsh and unfeeling? There is a traditional Jewish proverb, not a biblical proverb, but just out of the Jewish tradition and culture says this.

To chase away beggars, you need a rich person. To chase away beggars, you need a rich person. And what does that mean? Well, it just means that rich people are really good at driving away poor

people.

They're used to it. If poor people are the mice, the rich people are very happy to be the cats. It's just a well-known general fact that the wealthier someone is, and this is just generally in the wider population, not Christian or anything.

It's a well-known fact that the wealthier people are, the less generous you become. The poor, it's proven year after year, give more of a proportion of their wealth than do the rich.

[16:23] Now, we can say, thank God. God makes Christians to differ. And I have seen that again and again and again. God does make Christians to be different. But this is just showing us that their wealth can dehumanize.

It can desympathize. It can change you and to make you cruel and heartless. Charles Dickens' character, Ebenezer Scrooge, became wealthy.

And as he grew in wealth, he became more cold-hearted and stony, more grasping and covetous. His wealth did not free him. His wealth shut him down more and more.

So the seeds were already there in his heart. The seeds are already in our hearts. And in Ebenezer Scrooge's case, increasing wealth was just fertilizer on the weeds of greed.

So we don't want to be wealthy if wealth strength turns you. If it freezes your heart. If it dehumanizes you and cuts you off from the pleas of the less fortunate.

[17:37] So if you see people in need and your first attitude is scorn, you should check your heart. If you see people who are less fortunate than you and your attitude is demeaning, then you need to check your heart.

So which would you rather be, poor or the rich man? The poor man or the rich man? Maybe the best answer of all is the answer that we're going to study sometime a little bit later is, is Eger's response.

In Proverbs chapter 30, he says, give me neither poverty nor riches. Because this is how he's thinking. He knows himself. He says, if I become poor, I might steal.

And if I become rich, I might say, who is the Lord? But Eger knew his own tendencies of his own heart. Poverty and riches are both roads to despising, forsaking the Lord.

Both are dangerous. And so Eger says, Lord, give me neither. Just give me what I need and let me be content with what I have. Now, if this proverb, again, we're going to go back.

[18:47] If the strength here has any sort of good connotations, then we could say, yeah, we want some wealth. We don't want to be begging. We don't want to be desperate.

We want to be able to meet our obligations. We want to be able to provide for the poor. That's what the Apostle Paul said the ideal is. You need to quit stealing, whoever's been stealing, quit stealing, learn to work, go to work, so that you can provide for your own needs.

But then he goes a step further so that you can provide for those who are in need, share with those who are in need. So if this word strong has any kind of good connotations, we need to see, yes, it's good to have that strength.

But that strength has dangers that are attached to it or dangers right next door to it. It's like you're moving into a house and the neighbor, though, likes to come over to your house and he can be a sketchy kind of fellow.

It's just to say this. You know how the book of James talks about things? Chapter one. It talks about trials and it talks about temptations.

[19:59] And trials and temptations are not two separate events in our lives. They're the same event. God using that trial to test our love, to discipline us.

And it's a temptation from the evil one to get us to sin. So being wealthy can both be a test to prove our love to the Lord. And at the same time, it can be a real temptation to look down on others and not to love people.

And you saw that happening in James. They're showing favoritism to the rich. And yet the rich are the very ones scorning the poor.

But let's change just the topic a little bit. So being wealthy can be a good thing. It can be a dangerous thing.

But let's just sort of change the topic. What about if we're talking about spiritually? And that's what this proverb isn't talking about necessarily spiritual realities.

[21:00] But let's apply it there. Let's not talk about the physical having wealth or not having wealth. Which would we rather be if we're talking spiritually? In relation to the Lord.

Well, the answer is clear there. We desperately need to be the first people. We need to learn to be poor people.

To learn to plead for mercy. To have hearts that are poor. Jesus said, blessed are the poor in Luke. And he said, blessed are the poor in spirit. In Matthew, for theirs is the kingdom of God. The blessed people are the first people in this proverb. Are the people that have learned how to plead for mercy.

Who say, I have no wall. I have no protection. And that's exactly what I need. And Jesus himself says it's hard for the rich to be saved. Because again, wealth has this tendency.

[22 : 02] It gives you a false sense of desert. I've done what I'm supposed to do. And now I'm being rewarded. A false sense of capability. Wealth can train your heart to be haughty towards others.

And negligent towards God. And so if we ever want to be rich towards God. The Bible is very, very clear. If you ever want to be rich towards God.

You need to learn to be poor before him. You need to learn what it means to live in the first half of this proverb. Being a poor man who's pleading for mercy.

So the gospel is not about the path of strength. It's not about yourself. It's not about providing for yourself. We come as sinners.

Desperately in debt. The parables are 10 million talents in debt. Can never repay in debt. That's us before God.

[23 : 04] We are so far in the hole because of our sin. We can never pay him back. And so we have to learn to become good at pleas of mercy.

And so are you comfortable begging? You can't be a Christian unless you're comfortable begging. Are you comfortable being a Mephibosheth?

Remember him from Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth? And he's a crippled man. And there he was. He was crippled. He lived on the king's table at the king's.

All he had was borrowed dignity, borrowed wealth, borrowed food. That's the Christian life. We really do, each one of us, live on the generosity of another.

We are Mephibosheths spiritually. That's the Christian life. Salvation isn't something we could ever have bought. It can't be something that we could ever earn. It's mercy you beg for.

[24 : 07] It's mercy you ask for. Come to me, all you who are thirsty. Come to the waters. And you who have no money, come and buy and eat.

So how do you buy without money? How do you get food from a restaurant without paying for it?

The only thing to do is to ask. The only way to get it is to ask.

You plead for mercy. There's no dignity of paying your own way. Hat in hand. You ask God. And that's how you begin the Christian life.

And that's how we live the Christian life. Again, this last week we learned about something terrible happened to David and his men. And they lost all their families and all their possessions.

And they were crying and weeping. And David, it says, found strength in the Lord. He had no strength. They cried until they could cry no more. They're completely broken.

[25 : 06] They have no hope. And it says, David found strength in the Lord. How did he do that? Well, he came as a beggar. He said, Lord, I need strength. I need help. That's what he did.

So how do you buy without money? You plead for mercy. And so if all you have is need, Jesus says, here's the good news.

Your need is all that you need. Your emptiness is all that you need. All I have is thirst and all I have is hunger. And he says, here, sold.

It's yours. His biggest trouble, God's biggest trouble is getting us to believe just how willing and generous he is. The first time, but every other time after that.

That's his heart. That's his heart. And let's just tie this together. How do you take this gospel truth of we need to learn to plead for mercy and we live on the goodness of others.

[26 : 07] And then how do we apply it to this to this proverb in practical ways? Well, if you're ever going to use your money to the glory of God to have it, but not to have it having you, not for it to have you, then God's grace has to capture your heart.

That ultimate humbling has to take place where you see yourself. The most fundamental relationship that you have in the universe is towards God.

And you're not a rich man towards God. You're a poor man towards God. That needs to capture your heart where God has now saved you. He's given you grace. And now you're ready to live with him as a Mephibosheth.

Now, that's the only way that you can ever have money without it owning you. And so we need to bring the gospel to the to our bank accounts. You know, in the ledger, in the account, there needs to be a cross, maybe not handwritten, maybe handwritten.

But we need to remember that the cross has something to say about our true wealth and our true poverty. And so maybe it needs the cross and the gospel and God's generosity needs to tear down our wall.

[27 : 19] Maybe we think, wow, I have an unscalable wall. And maybe the gospel needs to tear it down to its proper sides. There is only one true and unscalable wall. It's the Lord Jesus, who's a refuge for all who hide in him.

And maybe it needs to do something else. Maybe in God's strength, you need to start exercising better judgment and self-control.

So you aren't being pushed around. So you aren't desperately lurching from one problem to another. Maybe you're in the financial position you're in.

Because you aren't being wise. Well, the wonderful thing is, is the fruit of the spirit, one of the things that God works in us as we trust the gospel, as we live on Jesus Christ, is self-control.

A new way of thinking, a new way of saying no to ourselves. The gospel really does help us handle our money, not only for our good, but for God's glory.

[28 : 26] It really does help us to handle our money God's way. So brothers and sisters, this is a nuanced picture. It's complicated because money's complicated, we're complicated, life is complicated.

And so I want you to think about it. Think about it. Think about how it applies to you. And may God teach us to think about our money his way.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, this is an issue that does touch our hearts every day, our lives every day. Every day we're working, we're saving, we're spending, we're using, we're giving.

Every day our money is making a mark and showing our hearts. Showing us what we fear and what we trust and what we love and what we care for.

What we think about you, what we think about others. And so this is an area that we really need your wisdom. To not be simplistic and to simplify everything down into just easy pat answers.

[29 : 42] Not to look at our world and look at other people through simplistic eyes. So please teach us to look at our world, ourselves, our money like you do.

And all of its full color and spectrum and its complexity and difficulty. And as we learn how to think through these things, I pray that it would work out practically for us.

That we would learn how to do and handle our finances in a way that is pleasing to you. That shows your generosity. That shows your love. That shows your wisdom.

That shows your forethought. That shows your care. That we would reflect you. Not only back to you, but out into the world.

And how we handle our finances. Please give us wisdom and bring yourself glory from our lives. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[30 : 40] Amen. Amen.