

Prosperity and Poverty

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[0 : 0 0] For those of you visiting tonight, we are doing a series through Proverbs, a thematic series through Proverbs and we've looked at different themes and so this evening the theme is wealth and poverty. And the great thing about the Bible is that the Bible goes into no-go areas, doesn't it? It goes into places that we would rather it didn't go, to be honest. And this is probably one of these areas but what I am going to ask of you tonight or not so much tonight but moving forward is that if we are to know who God is in his character and his will for us, we do have to work at that, you know. It's very important. So this sermon or indeed any sermon will never really give you on a plate all you need to know on any particular subject. I know you know that, you realise that. But really what we hope to do is that the sermon will stimulate you and we pray that the Holy Spirit will take what is simply a taster and will encourage you and teach you and I to dig, to dig further, to find out more about who God is and what he thinks and what he wants for us and from us. And so that is very much what we do and hope to do through this series.

There are many more verses in Proverbs that speak on this theme and obviously we can't go through them all. And what I am going to say this evening is almost entirely taken from not only these verses but more verses. I am not going to give you the reference for them all because we would be here all night because there are nearly 80 references to this subject in Proverbs. Over 50 of them refer to poverty and that always gives you an idea, doesn't it? What is important to God? What matters to Him? And what is significant? In a book like Proverbs you would think, well surely if he is going to have that many verses it is going to be on something that really matters. And that is absolutely the case here. And we are reminded throughout Proverbs and very much what we have seen throughout going through this book is that God's wisdom is God's book of wisdom, isn't it? And God's wisdom is in ours because in our hearts we know that sin and selfishness diseases everything. It diseases all our attitudes and all our thinking so that selfishness just wells up within us and it is difficult for us to see things the way God wants us to see.

In Jesus Christ we are healed and being healed. It is an ongoing work. It is a finished work, one level as God looks as He sees the finished work of Jesus. We are covered in Jesus' righteousness but it is an ongoing work in our own hearts and lives. We are continually striving to serve and follow the Lord Jesus out of gratitude and love. And the Bible says something very significant. It says where your treasure is there your heart will be also. In other words what matters to us in our hearts will be what we treasure. And the longing of our lives and hearts is that Holy Spirit will enable us to see Christ as our treasure rather than wealth or materialism or relationships or careers or whatever it might be that we put in its place. So He exposes in His wisdom what is really important. And He wants us in our Christian lives and if you are not a Christian at least to be challenged by this that He is Lord of all we do. He is Lord of our spending, of our earnings.

He is Lord of our attitudes to those in leadership and even to their policies. Now I am not going to be political tonight. Well I will be. No I won't be. I will try not to be but I can't help it a little bit but it will not be party politics that I will go into because we need to recognise and know that God is Lord. We don't lay aside our Christianity when we think about our politics.

We don't lay aside our Christianity when we think about our economics. We recognise and know and see that He is Lord of all. Not just on a Sunday but Lord of everything that we are. Obviously I will not speak party politics. I never would. But morality is a very big part of politics isn't it?

[4 : 40] And so it is important that we recognise and take Christ into that. Now the first thing I want to say is just that point briefly about wisdom because unless we see all of Proverbs in the light of God's wisdom then it will just become moralism, moralistic teaching. It will become a set of quick moralistic phrases that we try and put into place to make ourselves right with God. We recognise that is not the case. Unless we have the cross at the centre of our understanding of God's wisdom then we will never take these Proverbs and put them in their rightful place because you remember that in 1 Corinthians 1 Paul speaks about the cross of Jesus being wiser, although it is foolishness to the world, that the foolishness of the cross is God's wisdom and God's foolishness is wiser than men's wisdom. In other words it is only when we see ourselves as God sees us and see ourselves in need of His salvation and the cross as the great answer to our need and to our sin and to the hope of forgiveness and until we cry out to God for His great work of salvation and realise grace is a gift we will never understand Proverbs. We will never understand His wisdom. It isn't moralistic teaching. It is teaching that flows from His great wisdom in the cross and enables us to strive to live like Jesus out of gratitude for what He has done for us. And unless we understand the core of grace which is that we don't earn it, that we don't deserve it but it is a free gift, we can't make ourselves right with God, that it is a gift, then we will never understand the teaching of Scripture which turns on its head all our philosophies of life and all our self-centred thinking. And until we understand grace then again the Proverbs will simply not make sense because the biggest thing that we face in our lives and as Christians we face all the time is this need to earn favour that we've earned it. We've done something that's worth God accepting us or other people accepting us. Everything in life, all the philosophies life is based on you get what you earn, that you deserve something, that we deserve something. And our fists shaking at God is because we think God is not giving us what we deserve. And until we see what grace has done and in this freeness and fullness that we haven't deserved it, then we will never fully understand the wisdom of Proverbs and the motivation behind living out the Proverbs. So the wisdom of the cross is fundamental to understanding the wisdom of Proverbs. And if you remember the way of love is the way of the cross. And in Proverbs 19:22 we have a hint towards that, what a person desires is unfailing love better to be poor than a liar. See the great King, the great author of Proverbs who writes to his son and speaks about the importance of all these great truths understands even here that what we all desire is unfailing love. That's what we desire, that's what's important to us. And that's what's offered to us in the cross, the unfailing love of the living God.

That is our deepest desire. And Proverbs recognizes that. Proverbs is not a manual for moralistic living. It's a manual which recognizes the way of love. And how we live that love is only when we accept and know and respond to the grace of God in Christ. So wisdom is the theme of Proverbs.

And we know that wealth and poverty define so much of the lives that we live. When you go out of here, wealth and poverty are absolutely crucial and important parts of the life we live. Proverbs 10, 15 says that, the wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor. That's true, isn't it? That wealth is so significant, it's like this great fortified city that enables us to live our lives. And that poverty is just a ruination for everyone.

And that's so much of what people think in this broken world. Proverbs recognizes that. It's a, it notes the contrasts between wealth and poverty throughout the book.

And we live in a world, don't we, where money counts, where money is really important, where poverty oppresses, where money is often used as a tool of power, used to judge, used to control, used to keep control and keep power in the hands of the few. Money is used to enable us to enjoy all the pleasures of life. And in the materialistic world in which we live today, that's often spiraling out of control. The deification, the worship of materialism and the pursuit of pleasure, very much in the thinking and the philosophy of the day in which we live yet. 700 million people live on less than one pound, 50 a day in this world in which we live.

[10 : 31] 10% of the world's population living in grinding poverty. It's an everyday reality. Half of the world's wealth in the hands of 1% of the world's population. Inequality, injustice, great wealth, grinding poverty. That's the world in which we live. That's the world in which we rise up as Christians. That's the reality. Wealth is the thing that gives us friends and influence and freedom and security. Poverty leads to oppression and isolation and loneliness and oppression, law-breaking and escapism into drugs and drink to forget the misery of life. That's the world in which we live. That's what we see every day in our newspapers. That's what we see all around us, the driving pursuit for wealth and the grinding oppression of poverty. Now, Jesus Himself said there will always be poverty. And I guess the opposite of that is there will always be riches.

But as Christians, do we just then shrug our shoulders and say, well, that's the world we live in? Does the wisdom of Christ have anything to say to us into this world of inequality and into this world in which our hearts reflect very often these same imbalances and inequalities?

Well, I think clearly it does. And there are one or two principles I just want to pick out from here this evening as we think about this theme. The first is Proverbs meets clear, we are all equal before God. Very important Christ-centered principle. Proverbs 22 verse 2, rich and poor of this in common, the Lord is maker of them all. Okay? That's His first principle. It's a fundamental equality that we recognize as believers. When God is our Creator, God is the Creator of rich and poor. I think generally unrecognized by a world that rejects God and His Lordship. We are all created by God, and we are all equal in God's sight. He gifts life to all. He gifts the ability to make wealth to those who have wealth. There's a basic dignity that God's word reminds us of when He says that the rich and poor have this in common. Our tendency, isn't it, always to categorize, to make enemies, to reject people often on the basis of their wealth or their poverty, maybe politically, maybe socially, maybe religiously or economically. And often that stems from pride.

But we are all equal before God. We remember that as we go out into our world without making judgments on what we see in front of our eyes. The second thing, the second principle, is that God is not impressed by wealth. Proverbs 22 verse 4, wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death. See, God is interested not in our pockets, but in our hearts.

He's not going to take account of our bank balance when we meet Him on that great day. He recognizes that these things are not impressive. His gifts to us are His gifts. He wants us rather to recognize the importance of humility and a thankful heart for all He has given to us.

[14 : 29] He knows that wealth doesn't last. We read that in one or two of the Proverbs. We can't take it with us. We hoard up wealth. We make sure we get great amounts of interest on what we have, but we can't take it with us. Naked we came from the womb and naked we return. There is only one currency beyond the grave. There are no savings accounts there. Even in this life, the Proverbs say wealth can sprout wings. We all know that, don't we? It flies away. It can sprout wings.

And it's a disaster to put money and the pursuit of that before Jesus Christ, before being righteous and righteous comes only in one place from the great gift of salvation through Jesus.

And in saying that, there's also no virtue in poverty. Life is not just about what we see and experience on the day. So that's the second principle. The third principle we're going to look at briefly is that wealth can be a blessing. Proverbs 10, 22, the blessing of the Lord brings wealth without painful toil for it. And many of the Proverbs speak about that. There's nothing in the Bible to say that wealth is evil or wrong or that we should get rid of all that we have or anything like that. It speaks about the importance of diligence, the importance of wanting, the rightness of wanting to provide for your family. It speaks about recognizing that God gives us gifts, gives us gifts to be productive, to make money, to do well. It can be seen as a source of great joy both to you and to other people around you. It can be and is the springboard for generosity in our Christian lives used to reflect our understanding of God's kindness. As He's been kind to me, so am I kind to others. It's a great way in which we can multiply gospel churches. We've seen it here. The great blessedness of seeing church plants grow and people coming to faith.

It's a wonderful counterbalance to injustice and the selfishness when it's used wisely. So wealth can be a blessing, and we need to remember that.

The fourth principle is that the poor need protected. The poor need protected. Proverbs 29 verse 7.

[17:10] The righteous care about justice, and this kind of moves into the justice theme that we looked at before, care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern. It's a great and a powerful theme in Proverbs. Many of the references to poverty speak about justice, speak about leadership, speak about governments and kings in their leadership, protecting those under their care who are poor, who are oppressed, who don't have wealth and who don't have a voice.

Generally speaking, in the world in which we live, we see that the pursuit of wealth leads to inequality, and along with wealth goes power and influence. We can't really deny that. Money talks, doesn't it? Money talks. And we see that danger even in the church. God recognizes that danger in the church. When in James 2, chapter 2, he says to the church that James is speaking to the church, that he's writing to him, he says, listen, if you show favoritism to some big shot that comes into the church, and he's rich in wealth, he says, oh, come down, sit at the best seat we have at the front, and then some poor guy comes in, you say, you're smelling a little bit and you don't look so good.

Go sit at the back somewhere in the AV booth or something. Go up there where no one else will see you. Then, you know, James says, don't do that. Don't show that kind of favoritism. Is it a very stark and very eminent expression of not showing favoritism? And it's a fulfillment of much of the proverbs that speak about these things. And it can be the same in families, can't it? It can be the same as individuals. You can use money and wealth to dictate or to control or to be subversive in the way we live. It can be oppressing. And the society in which we live, in the world in which we live, we see often that those who are poorest don't have a voice. Democracy doesn't really work for them. They don't have rights. Their rights are not so significantly valued, and they have no power to change things. That's been quite a significant kind of commentary over these last few days and weeks in our own country. And Proverbs speaks much about the behavior of those, particularly in power, towards the poor, recognizing their need for a voice.

Poverty can be the result of many disasters. Proverbs 17.5, if you've got that one up, Scott, yeah, whoever mocks the poor shows contempt for their maker. Whoever glots over disaster will not go unpunished. And I was just saying a link between poverty and disaster and not poverty and being a result of being indolent or lazy or careless or abusive in any way. And it's a recognition that in this world people can be poor for no reason, no culpable reason themselves. They are not guilty for becoming poor. They can be born into poverty, vast swathes of the world are born into that grinding poverty. And if we mock that, we show contempt for their maker. If we're careless in our wealth, because we are relatively so, then we don't understand grace or God or God's word.

So the poor need protected, and the Proverbs speaks a great deal about judging fairly, speaking up for them, acting justly towards them, not oppressing or exploiting or crushing them.

[21 : 12] There's righteous anger and good anger when the poor are oppressed and when those who govern only have profit or the economy as their moral parameters. And that's where in a sense we do, we do stray into the political in a sense, but it crosses every political divide, doesn't it?

It's not about party politics ultimately, but it's recognizing that when our leaders lose their moral compass and where only money is what drives them, then they forget their role and they forget the primacy of protecting those who don't have a voice as part of their role. And we as Christians fail when we just glibly swallow the political presuppositions of the day in which we live.

We need to be better than that. We need to be more significant as Christians in our thought processes for those who we pray for in leadership, and they are accountable to protect those who need most protecting. We should be restless about our political leaders and their thinking and about the moral compass that drives them. It's not just about sexuality, which is the one I think the church often picks up on, on the way that society and the world has abandoned God's model and pattern of sexuality. And we maybe do that, but reject or forget that the Bible has far more to say about poverty and wealth than it does about sexuality, and that we sometimes push that reality aside and think that, well, it's not really significant for us so to do. The Bible is a great deal to say about justice, a great deal to say about oppression, a great deal to say about protecting the poor.

However, also we recognize as a principle, we're nearly finished, that poverty is not always amoral, amoral. In other words, it's not simply that people can be born into poverty. Proverbs makes clear that poverty can be as a result of our own moral ineptitude. Proverbs 23, 21, drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness close them in rags. So it's reminding us of responsibility to act in certain ways to avoid poverty in our lives. Sometimes our behavior can lead to that.

We're responsible for how we live if we love sleep, if we are lazy, if we just live for pleasure and for drunkenness, if we're careless about discipline, if we don't listen to advice, if we spend our lives chasing fantasies, these are all proverbs. If we love to drink and love expensive taste at all costs, it leads to poverty. And maybe taking a little bit of a liberty here, but maybe it leads not only to physical poverty in many cases, but spiritual poverty.

[24 : 39] As we turn aside from the great lover of our soul, Jesus Christ, and focus on simply material things. So that's one. One more principle, and we're done. Generosity is not an option. Generosity is not an option. Proverbs 3, verse 9, honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops. That takes us right back to the beginning, doesn't it? It takes us right back to understanding the wisdom of the Lord. And the wisdom of the Lord has generosity at its very key, because of His generosity and because of grace. And that, therefore, grace, therefore, reflects how we live. And the way we live reflects our understanding of grace and His incredible generosity to us. So, you know, if someone's been really generous to you in this life,

I think generally it doesn't make us stingy. If someone's really generous to us, someone gives us great gifts, we love that so much, and we think it's an amazing, it's actually quite hard to accept sometimes someone being generous to us, because we feel we need to earn everything. But when someone is generous, and then we have an opportunity to be generous, I think we're more inclined to be generous, because we know what a great thing it was to receive, and what a great thing it is to give.

And so we give generously, because the Lord has gifted so much to Him. It's an honor to Him. It's to honor Him that we are not stingy. It's to honor Him that we give to those, that we recognize. We think it might be a drop in the ocean, we think, to the poverty in this world, or the realities. But if we can change one person's life by our generosity, if we can help someone in poverty, maybe in our family, maybe in the church community, maybe through compassion, or maybe through any number of church Christian organizations, or otherwise, that help those who don't have, then we are recognizing grace, and we are reflecting grace. Being kind to the poor, being kind to those who don't have, being generous to the point of sacrifice, God honors. And God never leaves us lacking when we have a spirit of generosity, to share our food, to share our homes, to share our ears, so that we will listen, to share our time, the measure that we use, it will be given back to us double, triple fold, because of the grace and mercy of God. Stingy is what stingy does, and gets back stingy. And the opposite is true, by God's grace and by God's goodness. So generosity and proverbs is just a given, because of who he is. So in conclusion, I think it's important that we recognize that proverbs encourages, discourages extremes, proverbs 30, 8 and 9. Give me neither falsehood or lies, keep lies from, give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, who's the Lord? Or I may become poor and steal and so dishonor the name of our God.

So isn't that great? And the Bible speaks of balance. Don't be too rich, so they just think, well, I don't need God, not important. Don't be too poor, so they say, what's the point of this God? The miserable dishonor Him by stealing or whatever, but recognize this great balance of just He will give us what we need. Now, I think there are people who have great wealth, and there are people who are very poor. And I think you need special grace for both. I think you need special grace to be rich and generous for Christ's sake. And you need special grace to be poor and accept it in Christ's name. But most of us, if we have our daily bread, that's good, because most of us aren't able to deal with the extremities of riches or poverty. What we need to do is fix our eyes on Jesus. Colossians 1 verse 27, make known the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. That's where our riches lie, Christ in us. That is what sets us apart.

We have a glorious inheritance. We have this great riches of the knowledge of Jesus Christ. And we have a great future of heavenly riches in His presence and in the new heavens and the new earth. The Bible has lots to say about wealth and poverty. But the greatest riches that it speaks of is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. I'd like to pray briefly in intercession before we sing our parting song. Lord God, we thank You for Your riches. We thank You that the Bible remains, because it's Your living Word, searingly relevant to everything that we are and everything that we do, that we don't have the option of opting out of Your truth with regard to wealth or poverty, or even our attitude to leaders and politics and those who govern, that we strive for justice and we strive for equality in life and in all that we are. May we reflect that in the way we live?

[30 : 55] We may feel powerless and small and insignificant. What difference would us being generous make in the wider scheme of things? May we find that our generosity changes people's lives and our life one person at a time? Lord, we thank You, as was noted in the bulletin sheet today, the offering that we took up for Suraj in Nepal last week, and for the generosity of folk in the church, that we can see that being used to employ gospel workers in Nepal and in Kathmandu. Bless that we pray and may it be a great blessing to Suraj and a great encouragement for him. We thank You for what we've heard of Cornerstone and Esk Valley today and the generosity of Your people in enabling us to employ gospel workers in these congregations and see fruit, spiritual fruit from the material generosity of Your people. Bless these churches we pray in our own. Bless us with generous hearts, we ask, in time, in energy, in our homes, in all that we are. We thank You for Shardak McKenzie and for her experience of our generosity of time and of care and prayer for her and her family in these days and her own recognition that Ian is now in a better place and that she will meet him on that beautiful shore before too long. Place of great, glorious, perfect wealth and riches in him. And we rejoice what we have by faith, the amazing inheritance that can never perish or spoil or fade. Give us the right, holding loosely onto the material things of this world. Help us rather to focus and fix our eyes on Jesus. So bless us and help us and guide us and keep us and be Lord of our lives. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.