

Proverbs
Charity and Righteousness

Sunday, July 18, 2010

Introduction

In 2 Corinthians 9 Paul is writing to the Corinthians about an offering he was in the midst of taking up from all the churches of the Gentiles for the poor saints in Jerusalem (cf. Rom. 14:25-32; 1 Cor. 16:1-4). Judea had been especially hard hit by a famine, and the saints there, in addition to the famine, suffered persecution from the unbelieving Jewish population (see Acts 11:27-30). Consequently, things were hard for them.

Read and explain 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Note in particular the quotation in verse 9, which is taken from the 112th Psalm. Speaking of the righteous man it says

He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever."

We see here a connection between giving to the poor and righteousness. The point is, giving to the poor is an act of righteousness, and it is a righteousness that will be remembered by God forever: "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

Paul follows this up by saying,

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

In other words, have no fear to give generously because God will supply you with what you need in order to give so that you can continue to sow (that is, continue to give, which is likened to sowing or planting) and as a result you will share in an increase of righteousness.

The second thing to notice from the text is that when we are generous in giving to those in need, in addition to the practical help that is given to the poor, and the increase of the harvest of our righteousness, there is also glory that is given to God.

You will be enriched in every way [in material things so that we may continue to be generous to the poor], which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God (vv. 11-12)

Our giving becomes an occasion, becomes a reason, for God to be glorified because those who are helped give thanks to God for the help he has given through us. Not only so, but when the church lives in such a way that it can be said of us what was said in Acts, "There was not a needy person among them" because of the assistance provided for the poor, then what a witness that provides to the world! Unbelievers will fall on their faces and worship God and declare that God is really among us (cf. 1 Cor. 14:25).

The Deserving and the Undeserving Poor: An Important Distinction

Whenever we talk about the poor, we have to distinguish between those who are deserving of help and those who are not. This is not a very politically correct way to frame the discussion, but since we're not interested in being politically correct, but biblically correct, let's talk about it.

Not everyone who is poor is deserving of help. Those who *are* deserving of help are those who are poor *through no fault of their own*. It's not that they have been lazy or irresponsible. It's that they have suffered a set back that has either temporarily or perhaps even permanently made them incapable of adequately providing for themselves—widows and their minor children, for instance, about whom the Bible has much to say. These are among the chief categories of the deserving poor who are mentioned time and again in Scripture as those who entitled to compassion, along with others who are disadvantaged and powerless to provide for themselves. God commands us to care for them according to our ability.

The help afforded them may take different forms.

Gleanings of the field: **Deut. 24:19-22 (Ruth 2:1-16)**

Portion of the third year tithe: **Deut. 14:28-29**

Interest free loans: **Lev. 25:35-38** (Ex. 22:25-27; Deut. 23:19-20)

And of course there is always the possibility of outright gifts to the poor. These are ways to help the deserving poor.

There are also those whom we may call the undeserving poor, that is, those who are too lazy or irresponsible to provide for themselves. For these, the apostolic rule applies:

If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living (2 Thes. 3:10-12).

The *undeserving* poor who accept charity (whether from private individuals or from relief agencies or even from the state or federal government), are liars and thieves. They are liars because they pretend to be something they are not. They pretend to be people with legitimate needs when in reality they're irresponsible moochers. They're pretenders, fakers, posers. This is why I say, they are liars.

In the second place they're thieves. They prey upon the compassionate and take advantage of the generous by asking for and receiving what they have no claim to. In fact, they're thieves twice over. They're not only preying upon the compassionate, they're also depriving those who really need the assistance from receiving it. And they're doing this in two ways. First, they are receiving what could have, and *should* have, gone to someone who really needs it. And second, these pretenders make those who are in a position to give cynical and suspicious and therefore less likely to give even to those who really do need it.

Complicating the whole issue is the fact that in our day poverty has become a highly politicized issue. The simple fact of the matter is that those who are defined as poor are often defined that way for political reasons.

You may be aware that last week, a candidate for the U.S. Senate in the state of Kentucky, a man by the name of Rand Paul, made the comment that the poor in America are "enormously better off than the rest of the world."

Well, don't you know he got raked over the coals and publically excoriated for the comment. It was an impolitic thing for a candidate to say. It sounds to some like he doesn't care for the poor, that he's indifferent to the plight of the less privileged. But in the final analysis he's right, as I will show in a few moments.

The thing I want you to understand now is this: The word "poor" is a relative term. It's relative to who's defining it and what criteria are used to do so. And different people will use different criteria for different purposes.

Robert Rector *How Poor Are America's Poor?* (Summary, pp. 1-2)

As Rector points out, the social welfare programs, though often well-intentioned, often do far more harm than good because they don't take into account the interplay between political arrangements and the minds of men, in other words, how the policies of a government affect the way people think about themselves and their responsibilities. A relative absence of government interference in the lives of men tends to make them "energetic, enterprising, and thoughtful in pursuit of [their] own economic interests."¹ The more fully they see themselves as being responsible for their own prosperity and happiness the more effort they will put it and the less dependent they will be upon others. This is the tragedy of American welfare. When we loosen the tie between labor and reward so that people receive the rewards of labor without actually working for them, even though they are capable of doing so, then we take away the need for personal initiative and of for personal responsibility. And we destroy all incentive to work. We end up creating a mentality of dependence and entitlement. They don't know *how* to take initiative. They've never had a *need* to show any initiative,

¹ Theodore Dalrymple, *Our Culture, What's Left of it* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), p. 176

because there's always been someone there provide things for them and do things for them. They've convinced themselves that they are incapable of doing things for themselves.

Dalrymple essay (marked passages, pp. 176-179)

Our help should not be given in such a way as to create a sense of either dependency or entitlement.

Likewise, we should make sure that we are not subsidizing evil. "Charity which deliberately subsidizes visible moral evil or failure that is the product of moral failure is itself morally corrupt."²

With all this in mind, as provisos if you will, let's consider what Proverbs has to say about the poor, and our responsibility to them, understanding that when Proverbs speaks about the poor, it assumes the deserving poor.

What the Rich and Poor Have in Common

The rich and the poor meet together;
the LORD is the maker of them all (22:2)

Did not he who made me in the womb make him?
And did not one fashion us in the womb (Job 31:15)

Whoever mocks the poor insults his Maker;
he who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished (17:5)

² Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus* (Tyler, TX: The Institute for Christian Economics, 1997), p. 706

The Poor have no Friends

The poor is disliked even by his neighbor,
but the rich has many friends (14:20)

Wealth brings many new friends,
but a poor man is deserted by his friend (19:4)

All a poor man's brothers hate him;
how much more do his friends go far from him!
He pursues them with words, but does not have them (19:7)

The Wicked Oppress the Poor

There are those whose teeth are swords,
whose fangs are knives,
to devour the poor from off the earth,
the needy from among mankind (30:14)

The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food,
but it is swept away through injustice (13:23)

Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
but he who is generous to the needy honors him (14:31)

Whoever oppresses the poor to increase his own wealth,
or gives to the rich, will only come to poverty (22:16)

Do not rob the poor, because he is poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate (22:22)

The Righteous Defend the Rights of the Poor

A righteous man knows the rights of the poor;
a wicked man does not understand such knowledge (29:7)

If a king faithfully judges the poor,
his throne will be established forever (29:14)

Open your mouth, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy (31:9)

The Lord blesses those who are generous to the Poor

Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner,
but blessed is he who is generous to the poor (14:21)

Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will repay him for his deed (19:17)

Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed,
for he shares his bread with the poor (22:9)

She opens her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hands to the needy (31:20)

Better to Be Poor and Righteous than Wealthy and Wicked

It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor
than to divide the spoil with the proud (16:19)

Better is a poor person who walks in his integrity
than one who is crooked in speech and is a fool (19:1)

What is desired in a man is steadfast love,
and a poor man is better than a liar (19:22)

Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity
than a rich man who is crooked in his ways (28:6)