

Why Should I Care about the Poor?

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Why Should I Care?

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Last Thursday, a woman named Marie Mills was with her 77 year old father who had collapsed on a street in Washington, DC. Thankfully, they were right across the street from a fire station and there was actually a fireman leaning up against one of the fire trucks that was parked outside. So, a passer-by quickly ran across the street knowing that firefighters have some kind of emergency training and asked him to come and help this family in distress. The fireman's response was that they first had to call 911 and when and if he was dispatched, then he could come help them. Well, by now the crowd is starting to gather around this collapsed man and people are waving for the fireman to come over and help and he still refused. People even started calling 911. If that's what the fireman insisted needed to be done, that's what they did. Finally, Marie herself ran over to the curb in front of the fire station and cried out, "Are you going to help me or let my Dad die?" Imagine a daughter in that situation, even having to ask that question. Eventually, an ambulance arrived after what seemed like an inordinate amount of time. The subsequent investigation showed that there was a mix-up in the address and the ambulance got lost. Seventy-seven year old, Cecil Mills, died last Thursday of an apparent heart attack. Washington City Council member, Tommy Wells, later said, "Two things happened: one was that no one came out of the firehouse to help this gentleman. The other is that the ambulance that was dispatched was dispatched to the wrong address. There were a number of fiascos." Well, thank you, Councilman, for helping us with that.

You will also be relieved to know that the Washington DC Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department is investigating the incident. Their spokesman, interestingly enough, named Tim Wilson, those from our church will get that part, said, "Our duty is to respond to all requests for emergency assistance. If it's determined that proper protocols were not followed at the conclusion of our investigation, then appropriate action will be taken." How long is it going to take to figure that one out? And I hope nobody has a heart attack in the meantime.

Now, as an aside: for every story of fire or policeman failure, there are hundreds of extreme heroism. I mean, I could probably come up with a goofy pastor story if I needed to. That's what is part of what makes this event stand out so much. You would have expected people committed to public safety and emergency services to have given far different care than what was received by Marie Mills and her father, Cecil. Their

dereliction of duty is nothing short of outrageous. Would we all agree with that? However, I would suggest we don't have to go all the way to our nation's capital to find examples of apparent apathy and indifference to the needs of others. Most of us need go no further than the bathroom mirror we peer into each morning. It would appear, and you can decide how accurate this is in your particular case, but it would appear that there are a number of needs right around us about which we don't care as much as we should. I wonder how frequently that appears just as outrageous to our God as this fireman's apathy last Thursday appears to us?

With that in mind, please open your Bible this morning to Proverbs 14. That's on page 465 of the front section of the Bible under the chair in front of you if you need that this morning.

Our church's annual theme is "Loving Our Neighbors" and just to be sure that we're very precise about what that means because we think around here that God is a specific God and we believe sanctification is a very specific process so we don't want that to get lost in the fog. So, what do we mean by "Loving Our Neighbors." Five ways we're especially trying to do that this year: 1. by implementing our soul care initiatives to achieve deeper friendships within our church family. So, we want to grow at loving our neighbors with whom we attend church every Sunday. That's part of it and then secondly, as individual church members, growing in our ability to build stronger relationships with those who live right around us. I would encourage you every time that you hear that to think about your neighbors believing that when Jesus said to love our neighbors, he very well may have meant learning to love our actual neighbors. Thirdly, as a church family, developing our parish mentality to especially serve those who live right around our two ministry campuses. So, thinking strategically, thinking pro-actively about what it means to especially serve and minister to those who live right around our churches. Fourth, launching our Faith Community Development Corporation to serve urban neighborhoods with excellence. If the city is asking us to help revitalize urban neighborhoods with some of the highest concentrations of poverty in our entire community, we want to demonstrate Christ's love to every last street in our town in as many ways as possible. It's part of what we mean by loving our neighbors. Fifthly, constructing the first phase of our Senior Living Community. Showing love to a group of people who many in this throw-away society of ours seem to have forgotten, namely the elderly. So, we're talking a lot about this matter of loving our neighbors.

Now, at the beginning of the year, we're addressing head on what frequently prevents us from loving our neighbors well. Just the issue of apathy and indifference, can we just be honest enough about that? And the repetitive refrain that often justifies lack of involvement even on the part of the people of God and that is, "Well, why should I care?" Why should I care? If someone is having a heart attack out on the street in front of the firehouse, why should I care?

So far, we've talked about why should I care about friendships? Why should I care about the elderly? Last week, we talked about why should I care about racial reconciliation? This morning we'd like to ask the question: why should I care about the poor? Why

should I care about the poor? Let me just throw out a couple of opening salvos here before we read our text. 1. By using this title, I'm not suggesting for a moment that the average person who attends our church doesn't care about people who are struggling financially in our community or around this world and I'm going to try to point out that several points in this message that our nearly 50 year history as a church family would suggest otherwise. So, I believe it would be unfair, it would be untrue for me to give the impression that the people of Faith don't care about the poor. In fact, I have to be very careful about whatever material needs I might bring before our church family and the reason is, I know so many people would immediately respond. I can't think of one example in 26 years where I brought a material need either on the part of someone in our church or someone in our community or someone at a mission field around the world, where I brought one before our church family and it was not immediately met.

That's kind of incredible when you think about it and I want to be very careful so do the rest of our leaders, in not taking advantage of that kind of generosity. There is a difference between leading the sheep and driving the sheep and since many of these requests for financial assistance, material assistance, come to me first, I want to be sure that we're working with our pastors and deacons so that we vet any requests before it would be brought to our church family because I know from experience that so frequently, when a need is brought here, it's just going to be handled and handled quickly. So, take this title in that context.

Secondly, as we study these principles from this great Proverb together, I'm going to try to be as practical as I can regarding action steps because I realize it can be very frustrating for any of us to consider any aspect of "why should I care about" anything without a corresponding discussion "and here are the specific kind of steps I should think about taking in the days ahead if I believe God wants me to care about that more." So, be listening up for some practical action steps because you would want them, would you not? Good.

Now, let's read starting in Proverbs 14:18, and look especially for what Scripture says about the poor.

"18 The naive inherit foolishness,
But the sensible are crowned with knowledge.

"19 The evil will bow down before the good,
And the wicked at the gates of the righteous.

"20 The poor is hated even by his neighbor,
But those who love the rich are many.

"21 He who despises his neighbor sins,
But happy is he who is gracious to the poor.

"22 Will they not go astray who devise evil?

But kindness and truth will be to those who devise good.

“23 In all labor there is profit,
But mere talk leads only to poverty.

“24 The crown of the wise is their riches,
But the folly of fools is foolishness.

“25 A truthful witness saves lives,
But he who utters lies is treacherous.

“26 In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence,
And his children will have refuge.

“27 The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life,
That one may avoid the snares of death.

“28 In a multitude of people is a king's glory,
But in the dearth of people is a prince's ruin.

“29 He who is slow to anger has great understanding,
But he who is quick-tempered exalts folly.

“30 A tranquil heart is life to the body,
But passion is rottenness to the bones.

“31 He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker,
But he who is gracious to the needy honors Him.

“32 The wicked is thrust down by his wrongdoing,
But the righteous has a refuge when he dies.

“33 Wisdom rests in the heart of one who has understanding,
But in the hearts of fools it is made known.

“34 Righteousness exalts a nation,
But sin is a disgrace to any people.

“35 The king's favor is toward a servant who acts wisely,
But his anger is toward him who acts shamefully.”

We're talking this morning about “why should I care about the poor?” With the time we have remaining, let's scour the verses that pertain to this subject from this chapter and look for five reasons to treat those who are poor with compassion and grace.

I should probably say a word about the structure of the book of Proverbs in general. One writer said this, "Perhaps the most arresting feature of Proverbs 10-24 is what seems a complete lack of structure of arrangement in the collection of proverbs. They appear to have been assembled altogether at random." We saw that even as we were reading, where in some cases, one verse didn't necessarily go with what came before or what came after. That's just the nature of this kind of literature. On the other hand, there is, you noticed it as we read undoubtedly, there is at least some level of parallelism here because several verses clearly speak about the same subject, namely, what it means to please and honor the Lord and the way we treat those who are struggling financially and we're going to try to honor that parallelism even in the way that we structure this outline this morning.

So, five reasons to treat those who are poor with compassion and grace. Here's the first one and it's an important one: because poverty is often accompanied by loneliness. Proverbs 14:20, "The poor is hated even by his neighbor, But those who love the rich are many." One writer I was reading this week said this about that passage, "All you have to do is watch what happens when somebody wins the lottery to see the truth of that verse. He has family members and long lost friends coming out of the woodwork." But this matter of loneliness attending poverty is emphasized quite a few times in the Bible. Like this: Proverbs 19:4, "Wealth adds many friends, But a poor man is separated from his friend." Or a couple of verses later, "Many will seek the favor of a generous man, And every man is a friend to him who gives gifts." Listen, "All the brothers of a poor man hate him; How much more do his friends abandon him! He pursues them with words, but they are gone."

I want to encourage you to let the power of some of these words from the word of God impact your soul deeply as you think about how you're doing regarding caring for the poor and what these passages say about the attendant loneliness that comes with financial hardship. A poor person is hated even by his own neighbor. He is separated from his friend. The passage said the brothers of a poor man hate him, how much more do his friends abandon him. He pursues them with words but they are gone. Profound loneliness. Profound loneliness.

I'm going to try to develop this in several ways as we move forward this morning. We understand that people end up struggling financially for different reasons and the Bible speaks about those who are struggling financially as a result of suffering. They were sinned against in some way. On the other hand, some who are struggling financially are struggling because of their own sin. No question about that and we'll try to unpack that as we go but think right now, in either category, regardless of why a person finds him or herself in that position, in both there is attendant loneliness.

Here's a random example from the suffering side of the equation. Let's take a woman who has been abused and her controlling husband or boyfriend will not allow her to have contact with her family or contact with her former friends and he purposely keeps money from her as a means of increasing his control and then one day she finds the courage to leave that relationship, often to prevent additional physical abuse to herself or her children and now she is filled with shame and embarrassment because of her current

financial hardships and possibly cut off from her former support network and there is this corresponding unspeakable loneliness. I'm not talking about in some trite, "I'm not sure who I'm going to go out with this weekend," I'm talking about, "I don't have a safe place for my children and me to stay tonight. We do not have a place to live this week." The Bible is trying to get our attention. The poor is even hated by his neighbor. The word "hated" in this text means "despised; rejected; treated disrespectfully; discarded." I hope everybody in the church house would rise up and say, "We care about people like that. Regardless of the reason that resulted in them being in this position, we don't want anybody in this town to be alone." To be alone.

That's why I'm so glad for David and Sylvia Anderson stepping up and leading our Family Promise Ministry where we, along with several other churches in our town, take turns opening our building for a week at a time just to provide meals and a place to sleep for families in our community who are homeless. Think about that. Think about last night, families in our town who are homeless. That may be one of the take-aways for you to contact the Andersons and offer to volunteer and our church office can help you make that connection if you would like to, but please tell me we never want a child in this community sleeping in their car. Surely, the church of Jesus Christ cares about those who are lonely.

There is a second reason from this text: it's because looking down on others because of their poverty is sin. Are you listening up to the word of God? Because this makes it very clear and contextually verse 20 is speaking about a poor neighbor and then the very next verse I believe, talking about in a continuing fashion, that person who is a neighbor who is poor, "He who despises his neighbor sins." It couldn't be any clearer than that.

You may know there are several different words for "sin" in both the Old and New Testament. This one especially emphasizes the matter of missing the mark. There is a reasonable standard in the mind of God by which every person on his earth should be treated even those who are poor and when we in our minds, in our hearts, with our words, with our actions, or dare I say, our inactions, when we despise or when we discard or when we treat with contempt a person who is poor, we are what? Sinning. You can bake it, you can fry it, you can put brown gravy on it, come up with all sorts of excuses not to do what the Scripture would tell us to do, but God's word says that we are sinning. We're missing the mark that God has established for us.

I realize, you might say, "Heck, if I'm just going to be honest with you, Pastor Viars, I'm indifferent to the poor. I am. Once more, I'm not really sure I can change in this area and in fact, I'm not even sure I want to." Thanks for your honesty. I assume you would want me to be honest back. That very well may indicate that you have never truly trusted Christ as Savior and Lord. You may not be among the redeemed. What I'm talking to you about this morning isn't moralism. We're talking about from the perspective of New Testament theology, something that requires a transformation of your heart, that requires a supernatural interaction with the holy Son of God.

Interestingly enough, there is a direct connection between the message of the gospel and the topic of poverty. In a lot of ways. Here's one of them: 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich." What does that mean? It means Jesus was willing to take on a human body and then have the penalty of our sin placed upon him. That's what we were singing about this morning, to become poor so that we could, if we would, it's hard for Americans to do this next part, admit our need. Look at all of the stuff we had in our hands that we thought made us spiritually rich and therefore able to be reconciled to God on our own effort. To actually come to a point of repenting of all of that and acknowledging, "I am spiritually bankrupt." Not, "I need a little something to tie me over until payday," spiritually. "I am spiritually bankrupt and in need of a Savior." That's why the first Beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount is "Blessed are the poor in spirit." There has to be a willingness to acknowledge before a holy God, "I need a Savior and a Lord before I could ever possibly live in a way that pleases him." Without faith, it's impossible to please him.

So, why should I care about the poor? Well, because poverty is often accompanied by loneliness and because looking down on those who are poor is sin. Thirdly from this text, because being gracious to the poor brings joy. Is that true? Please don't leave this message this morning scowling at your wife saying, "Oh great, Ethel, now we have to be gracious to the poor. Just another way God wants to ruin my otherwise happy life." No, no, no. Happy is he who is gracious to the poor. Absolutely.

I mentioned earlier there are many in this church who for decades have quietly gone about showing that they indeed care for the poor, they care a lot. Here's one of the many ways that that is true: it's by your support of foreign missions. Do you realize a fair amount of the money that you give to this church goes to missionaries around this world who in a number of cases, are working with some of the poorest cultures on earth. One of the first mission trips that I ever took was to the country of Ivory Coast in West Africa. My wife, Chris, and I went there to be with our missionaries Nate and Carol Watkins who at that time, were working with Liberian refugees. Liberia had been under an extended civil war. Liberians fled Liberia to the Ivory Coast, many of them with nothing but the rags on their backs and so our missionaries, Nate and Carol Watkins, were there serving those distressed, poor people in the name of Christ. I was scheduled to speak at a Sunday night church service across the country and so they loaded us up in a couple of Jeeps and we headed off. The roads were unbelievable. You think you know potholes, you don't know nothing. These were pot-caverns. The reason, you might say, "Why are they so poor in some of these countries?" It's because their governments are so corrupt. I think some of us do not understand that.

So, they had been given foreign aid to build roads and the government officials pocketed a fair amount of money and they put this little thin layer of asphalt and called it a road. There were huge pot-caverns and so we actually had two flat tires on the way to the church house. I'm looking at my watch and thinking, "We're going to be like an hour late for church. Why are we continuing to go. Nobody is going to be there." But it wasn't my deal so I just helped out with the tires and we kept going. It got dark as we're driving.

These folks are walking along the side of the road with these big burdens on their heads and all that sort of thing. Just extreme poverty. We finally get to the town and there's no parking lot because the people don't need a parking lot, they don't have cars. So, we parked down the bottom of the hill and we started walking up a path.

The first sounds I hear are of the people in that church joyfully singing and the missionaries there had taught them some of our hymns but in their language so I didn't recognize the words but I certainly recognized the tune. We walked into that makeshift auditorium and people are joyfully singing even though we were incredibly late. I had dozens of responses to that in my heart but here was one of them: being incredibly thankful for every dollar our family and our church had ever given to support the proclamation of the gospel among men and women who were struggling with such extreme poverty because maybe they were poor but by the smiles on their faces and the intensity of their worship, the news of their poverty had not reached them. Or maybe better said: it had been superseded by the news of their Savior. What this proverb is saying certainly occurred in my heart that night: Happy is he who is gracious to the poor. That kind of sacrificial no-nonsense giving has marked this church family which is proof to people in many countries around the world that you do care. You care a lot. Praise God for doing that kind of work of grace in your hearts.

The fourth reason from this text is this: because your work ethic could be a blessing to others. Some of you need to especially listen up to this one because I think this could be one of the take-aways for many people hearing this message today. So far we've been gravitating toward illustrations of somebody being poor because of some aspect of suffering. Some people refer to that as "situational poverty" or "generational poverty" and there are all sorts of examples of that: someone struggling financially because of a devastating medical condition; or someone who has lost their job; or someone who has been the victim of theft; someone who has gone through a fire or a flood. I mean, the examples are endless. Situational, generational poverty.

On the other hand, the Bible also recognizes what we might call "consequential poverty." In other words, the poverty is at least in part the result of sinful choices. Like Proverbs 14:23, "In all labor there is profit, But mere talk leads only to poverty." Some of us know people whose success is always right around the corner. They're talking about it a lot. When it's all said and done, there is often more said than done. You see, some people have never been taught the value of work. Never. And the Bible speaks about that: "Lazy hands make a man poor, But diligent hands bring wealth. Do not love sleep or you will grow poor. Stay awake." Some of you need to hear that right now. Stay awake. You say, "This is the warmest I've been all week. I've got to take a nap." "Don't love sleep or you'll grow poor. Stay awake and you'll have food to spare. Drunkards and gluttons become poor and drowsiness clothes them in rags."

Many of you right now would say, "That's what my Momma taught me. That's what my Dad drilled into me. That's the way my parents lived before me and my siblings." Well, thank God for that but part of the challenge is we're living in a culture where a significant percentage of people did not grow up in a home where they were taught how to work. Or

if they did, they rejected what they were taught and now getting out of poverty is going to require significant effort.

Again, I'm not talking about significant effort on their part apart from the gospel. Everything that we're doing on a community level is for the purpose of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ but after a person places his faith and trust in Christ, we believe in partnering with and not landing down in a neighborhood as the great savior but partnering with men and women as they begin to accept personal responsibility for their change. It's the difference between a handout and a hand-up. We're talking about the value and joy of mentoring and I would encourage you to read this book, "When Helping Hurts" which emphasizes that very point. It's the balance from a soteriological perspective of Philippians 2:12-13, "Therefore my dear friends, as you have always obeyed not only in my presence, now much more in my absence, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works." For men and women who have placed their faith and trust in Christ and they recognize now they've got some work to do, you could be used of God to come alongside and help them in that work by mentoring them well.

You say, "Tell me what you mean." Well, you may have gotten to the place in your spiritual life where you're living in the first half of Proverbs 14:23, "In all labor there is profit." You worked hard this week and you should have. You've been delivered from the second half, "Mere talk leads only to poverty." Well, praise God, if you have allowed him to develop in you a strong work ethic. But hear me: maybe it's time now for you to step up and volunteer to receive whatever training is necessary so that you can mentor someone who is trying to get to that place and we have a lot to learn as a church. We have a long way to go on this particular point but one of the things that we are learning in our community efforts is that to be a blessing in our community, it is best done in the context of a loving relationship. Dr. Ware said it this way last Sunday, "No contact equals no impact." That's true.

Now, let's come up for air. What do we do with this? What are some of the take-aways? Well, here's one: just partnering with an existing agency in our town that is ministering to those who are poor. Not all of them may be gospel centered. There is nothing wrong with just in the spirit of lifestyle evangelism helping out an organization like that. I really like this Read to Succeed program that exists in many public schools and many public schools have a number of children struggling financially. I would encourage you to consider volunteering in a program like that. I would encourage you to consider volunteering with the Big Brothers, Big Sisters who actually have a faith-based option. Did you know that? In fact, by God's grace, two of the most valuable non-profit agencies in our town, everybody would say this, are led by members of Faith. Big Brothers, Big Sisters with Rhonda M. and the great job that she is doing and Bower Resource Center led by Pam R. I am quite sure that each of those ladies would be happy to speak to you about volunteering opportunities. Being gracious to the poor.

Here at our church we do Christmas for everyone. I love that ministry and I appreciate what the Huffers and the Briars do to lead us in that. I have the view and I hope you do

too. I don't want to sit my sorry self down at the Christmas table and stuff my face until we're absolutely sure that every person in this town has been served well at Christmas time. That's part of what we're trying to do as a church family. We have a food pantry and a clothing closet here and I appreciate the work that the Coles and the Hines do and we're trying to be as gospel centered in that work as we possibly can. Maybe one of the take-aways for you is to say, "I'm going to contact those persons and I'm going to get involved in that volunteer effort. Great. We also provide meals for homeless persons down at Mental Health America and I appreciate what the Hartchees and the Svensons do. It's a marvelous, marvelous work. There, too, there are plenty of opportunities to serve.

We're going to have loads of opportunities with our new Community Development Corporation and Laurie Walters is doing a fantastic job leading that organization. Opportunities everywhere. I'm simply saying, for everything that I've just mentioned: the way you might be able to especially serve is by providing mentoring because your work ethic that probably was poured into you by someone else could be a great benefit to someone in this community. If you say, "Boy, you've mentioned too many people. I can't keep it all straight," contact Sherry S. Laurie used to be our Human Resources Coordinator until we gave her this new job and now Sherry has been willing to step up as our Human Resources Coordinator. You can contact our church office and they will tell you how to get a hold of Sherry. You say, "Human Resources Coordinate? What's that all about?" Her task and joy is to connect people from this church who would like to serve with meaningful serving opportunities that meet their gift sets and passions and provide whatever training is necessary to help them do that well. So, if God is working on your heart right now and I hope he is because we've got the Bible open for crying out loud. I'm not staying awake just for the joy of looking at you. You say, "Yeah, and that goes both ways." That was totally off my notes. Let the conference begin. I hope you'll let the word of God impact you in a way that results in practical action steps if necessary.

The last reason is a strong one from this text: it's because we would never want to taunt his Maker. You have to make an exegetical decision I suppose, "He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker." Who is the "His?" I believe the "His" is the poor person. That's the point, "He who oppresses the poor taunts the one who made him, But he who is gracious to the needy honors him." You probably saw this debate between Bill Nye the Science Guy and Ken Ham. There's a lot we could say about that but Bill Nye's concern is that kids who aren't taught macroevolution and scientism won't be well prepared to function in today's world. We love science. We are the promoters of good science. We're not the promoters of scientism but what Bill Nye said on that particular point is exactly wrong. Failing to be taught the existence of our Creator God, our Maker, removes a powerful building block for the development of a gracious social consciousness. You see, the belief that every human being, poor or rich, has been made in the image of God. The word "taunt" in that text means "speaking sharply." One writer said this, "To ridicule what God made is to ridicule God himself." Thank the Lord for the opposite possibility, huh? "He who is gracious to the needy honors him."

I would encourage you to leave with three questions this morning. The first is: do you know Christ as Savior and Lord and has the gospel truly transformed your heart so that

you in his power, can live in a way that is consistent with this text? If not, we would encourage you not to be concerned right now about the poor out there but to be concerned about the poverty in here and acknowledge your need and place your faith and trust in Christ. Secondly, are you ready for a hard one? I would encourage you to evaluate yourself on your level of care for the poor and we're not interested in talk, we're interested in actions. What evidence is there in your life that you are living in a way that is consistent with this text and therefore you care? Thirdly this: what next step do you need to take this year to love our poor neighbors better?

We're going to be offering a class in the Spring in our Faith Community Institute called "Insights Into Poverty." But it's highly likely that God has already helped you identify some steps this morning. I want to challenge you to act on them in the days ahead and I also want to ask you to pray to God for us and to pray to God for you, that we would care about the poor as much as he does.

Let's stand together for prayer, shall we?

Father in heaven, thank you for the directness of your word. Lord, thank you for the truth of the gospel that makes it possible for us to live in a way progressively that is consistent with this text. And Lord, thank you for the many in this church who show that they care a lot, quietly but definitely. Lord, help all of us to get to the place where we please you in this area. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.