

Cares For the Poor, Marginalized and Downtrodden

Proverbs 31:8-9, Matthew 9:27

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Our discussion focuses on an aged long problem with both societal and spiritual undertone. This problem ranges from discrimination, neglect, ignorance or possibly wickedness. According to Lilian Kiefer (2015), Discrimination and marginalisation have lasting effects in that they take away human dignity. Discrimination means to be treated in a negatively different way because of certain real or perceived characteristics deemed undesirable. Discrimination causes *marginalisation*, pushing the people that are discriminated against to the fringes of the mainstream society.

Marginalization describes a situation where people, person(s) or concept is/are treated as insignificant or peripheral. Marginalization most times go with poverty in that you would not feel marginalized if you can take care of yourself and situation. *Being poor is lacking sufficient money to live at a standard considered comfortable or normal in a society.* This has nothing to do with mental poverty or slavery, but physically lacking money. They are all around us, we see them each passing day. They have always been there right from when man sinned against God. Another aspect of our discussion is *those been oppressed or treated badly by people in power (downtrodden)*. These are all social issues and also spiritual in that they affect us one way or the other. Our focus today is care for these sets of people, the poor, the marginalized and the downtrodden. Do you remember the story of King Ahab who oppressed a man for his vineyard and his wife had him killed and you think it is not happening among us today? Let's see one of our texts,

Proverbs 31:8-9 -⁸ *Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. 9 Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

Many of us have heard of the word **boomerang**, that *curved stick that, when thrown in a particular way, comes back to the person who threw it.* Whatever we do or do not do will come back to us. The Bible contains many spiritual "boomerangs," which one way or the other *always* return to the ones who "throw them out." Let us consider a few: . . . *for whatever a man sows [there the boomerang goes, whirling out], this he will also reap [here it comes, back to the tosser] (Galatians 6:7).*

Cast your bread on the surface of the waters [out], for you will find it after many days [back] (Ecclesiastes 11:1). Cf Matthew 7:2, Luke 6:38.

Point to Note

It is true that Paul admonishes Christians to work hard and not be lazy. To the Thessalonians he admonished, “...if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either” **2 Thessalonian 3:10**. In **1 Timothy 5:8**, Paul says, “If anyone fails to provide for his own, and especially for those of his own family, he has denied the faith...”

However, the Bible confirms that the poor, the marginalized, the downtrodden will always be among us. Paul to the Galatians in **2:10**, “¹⁰All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along”. In **John 12:8** Christ reaffirms that “You will always have the poor among you...”. In **Deuteronomy 15:11**, Moses stated this, “For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land”. Cf **Matthew 26:11, Mark 14:7**.

Social Concern in the Old Testament

Throughout God’s law in the Old Testament, we see the care, provision, and redemption of the poor and marginalized highlighted. In **Exodus 22:21-23** God instructed, “²¹Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. ²²Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. ²³If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry”. See also **Leviticus 23:22, Leviticus 25:39-43, Deuteronomy 15:7-11**.

We see God commanded His people to treat the poor and marginalized fairly, to make provisions for them, and allow them to be released every Year of Jubilee. He also commands His people to give generously, not begrudgingly.

In Proverbs – we see God’s declaration for wise and skilful living – repeatedly we are given instruction on how to respond to the reality of God’s concern for the poor and needy. **Proverbs 14:21** “It is a sin to despise one’s neighbour but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy”. **Proverbs 14:31, Proverbs 28:27, Proverbs 31:8-9, Proverbs 19:17, Proverbs 22:9, Proverbs 21:13, Proverbs 22:22-23, Proverbs 29:7, Proverbs 17:5**. Notice the practices that are condemned in Proverbs: oppressing the poor, mocking the poor, gloating over disaster, shutting our ears to the cry of the poor, exploiting the poor, crushing the needy in court, closing our eyes to the poor, and not being concerned about justice for the poor. Ignoring the poor shows just as much contempt for God as actively oppressing the poor.

Notice the practices that are blessed by the Lord: being kind to the needy, lending to the poor, being generous, sharing food with the poor, giving to the poor, caring about justice for the poor, speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves, judging fairly, and defending the rights of the poor and needy. Being kind to the needy is even equated with honouring God, while oppressing the poor shows hatred for our Maker. See also **Isaiah 10:1-3, Malachi 3:5**.

In **Isaiah 58:6-7**, the Lord deplores those who claim to be religious yet do not “*loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, set the oppressed free and break every yoke.*” The kind of religion that God honours is “*to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter*” and “*when you see the naked, to clothe him.*”

Social Concern in the New Testament

The New Testament echoes God’s heart for the poor and marginalized that we saw it displayed throughout the Old Testament. In the New Testament the same sentiment is reechoed. See **James 1:27, Galatians 2:10, Acts 6:1-6**.

The early church modelled social concern. In **Acts 6**, seven godly men were designated by the leaders of the church to focus their attention on caring for the widows. (In this passage, widows represent marginalized people; people that have a difficult time or are unable to care for themselves.) In **1 Timothy 5**, Paul gives specific instruction to the body of Christ on how to care for widows.

Why We Lack Concern for the Poor and Marginalized

One re-occurring theme in the life of Christ is His compassion for people. Most of His miracles are bore out of compassion. One major reason, we see the lack of concern for the poor, marginalized or downtrodden is this word “Compassion” or Lack of Mercy. In Luke 6:36, we are told to “*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*”. What does it mean to be merciful as the Lord is merciful? It first means that our *hearts* will be touched by the needs of others. People begged Jesus, “Have mercy on us” (see **Matthew 9:27**), and He did. It is frequently said that He “felt compassion” or was “moved by compassion” See also (**Matthew 9:27, Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34**).

Ralph Bumpus’ tells a story about a man who had experienced bad times. He applied for a loan with a banker who was renowned for his aversion to loaning money to anyone who actually needed it. After listening to the man’s sad story, the banker said, “*I’m a good man, so let me make you a proposition. I just spent a great deal of money for an artificial eye. It looks exactly like my real eye. Here, then, is my proposition: If you can tell me which eye is the artificial eye, I’ll loan you the money.*” The man studied the banker’s eyes for some time. Finally, he said, “*The left eye is the artificial eye.*” The banker said, “*Are you sure?*” The man said, “*I am certain.*” The

banker was astonished. “You are correct,” he said, “but how could you tell that the left eye is the artificial eye?” “Because,” the man replied, “in your left eye, I saw a tiny spark of compassion.”

When people look into our eyes, can they see genuine compassion? Like Jesus, we need to sympathize with the weaknesses of others (see **Hebrews 4:15**). We need hearts that are touched by the needs of others.

We also need *hands* that reach out to help. Remember, it is not real mercy until both the heart and the hands are involved. If we see brothers or sisters “without clothing and in need of daily food,” it is not enough to feel sorry for them. We need to “give them what is necessary for their body” (**James 2:15, 16**). I like the expression used regarding Jesus: He was “moved with compassion” (see **Matthew 20:34; Mark 1:41**). When Jesus felt compassion, He was moved within and then was moved to *do* something; His mercy was expressed (see **Mark 5:19**). Even so, you and I are to “practice kindness [“mercy”; KJV] and compassion each to his brother” (**Zechariah 7:9**).

Hopefully, the theological framework provided above has helped to build conviction in our heart concerning God’s desire for the Church to care for the poor and marginalized. Given the Biblical support surrounding this aspect of God’s kingdom, why do many Christians still fail to demonstrate significant concern?

1. **Ignorance.** We do not learn what the Scriptures say about caring for “social” issues in life.
2. **Poor Theology.** Platonic thought has crept into Christianity. Many of us were taught that the soul is all that matters, and we should be indifferent toward the physical realm. While the believer is exhorted to live for eternal purposes and not just temporal ones, the body and its needs are never passed off as second rate or something to be ignored.
3. **Sin.** Our tendencies towards selfishness and laziness tell us that it is just easier to ignore social issues. We tend to forget the poor, thinking that we cannot do anything about their poverty, or we convince ourselves that they are not our problem.
4. **Overcompensating.** We are afraid that if we give too much attention to the social needs of the world, we will be accused of preaching the “social gospel.” Just because some secularists and spiritually dead churches have abandoned the precious truth of Christ does not mean that we alter God’s kingdom agenda in retaliation. We need to stay the course in pursuing God’s kingdom agenda in both spiritual matters and social/physical matters.

Ways We Justify Our Neglect of the Poor

1. **“I am Only Around Those Who Are Well Off.”** Have you seriously considered these questions: why do you live where you live? Have you surrendered this decision to the Lord? Are you showing favouritism by

avoiding poor people or low-income neighbourhoods? Are you clinging to comfort or justifying your inaction? Often, the reason we do not care for the poor is because we do not know the poor. Are you putting yourself in a place where you can invest in relationships and truly love your neighbour as yourself?

2. **“The Bible is Only Concerned with the Spiritually Poor.”** On the contrary, the Bible encourages spiritual poverty, because it leads us to understand our spiritual need for Christ’s Lordship. This does not underscore the importance of our care for the physically poor.
3. **“Do the Poor Really Experience Injustice and Exploitation?”** Look around. Do the poor who live near you have opportunities for redemption or are they stuck in cycles of poverty? What government policies are keeping the poor in poverty, rather than helping them out of it? It is easy to point fingers at the policies around us. Sometimes we even go as far as blaming leadership for the problem. We may be justified in our blame game, but the other finger points back to us, *you have the poor among you whatever you do one of the least of these brethren, you do unto me* (Jesus).
4. **“I Am Just Being Discerning with Those I Choose to Help.”** We do need to be discerning in whom we help and how we help (*not creating dependency, not being patronizing, etc.*). In **1 Timothy 5:3-16**, Paul instructs the body of believers to help those widows “*who are really in need.*” He instructs family members to care for their poor family members first, allowing the church to care for those who have no one to help them. He instructs the church to give to the widows who are over sixty who have modelled good character (most likely because they are unable to earn money for themselves). We know that some (not all) people that need help will not do their part in working. Proverbs warns us that laziness, the love of pleasure, and alcohol abuse will lead to poverty. It does not say that people who struggle in these areas are not to be cared for, but these things will need to be changed in order to bring about true reform.

Conclusion

The Bible is clear that the church is to advocate for the poor and the marginalized in the world, caring for their needs and pursuing justice on their behalf. Lawyers do **pro bono** as part of their way of helping the oppressed and less privileged, oppressed, and poor in the society. We are God’s children; we can do more. We are not to neglect spiritual needs for social ones, nor social needs for those that are spiritual. The two areas of need are not in opposition. On the contrary, Christ demonstrated care for the whole person, body, and spirit. As His followers, we must demonstrate the same, not allowing bad theology, laziness, and poor excuses to keep us from addressing the social needs around us.