

Scriptures for Justice

Proverbs 21:13

Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor
will himself call out and not be answered.

Psalms 31:8-9

Open your mouth for the mute,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
9 Open your mouth, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy

Psalm 41:1-2

Blessed is the one who considers the poor!
In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him;
2 the LORD protects him and keeps him alive;

Psalm 146: 6

Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob...
7 who executes justice for the oppressed,
who gives food to the hungry.

Luke 4:18-19

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Lk 4:18-19)

SOCIAL JUSTICE: God's Heart for the Poor

Here are some comments I found online describing what it means to be poor.

1. *Being poor is receiving a box of crayons and a \$1 coloring book for Christmas*
2. *Being poor is checking the coin return slot of every soda machine and pay phone you go by.*
3. *Being poor is compromising on a relationship to secure shelter for your children.*
4. *Being poor is regularly relying on a paycheck advance and paying the fee you can't afford.*
5. *Being poor means having to pay your bills with money orders because all the banks have you blacklisted and won't let you open a checking account.*
6. *Being poor means late charges, overdraft fees, and high interest rates, if you ever even qualify for a credit card.*
7. *Being poor means throwing mud on your license plates because you couldn't afford to renew them on time.*
8. *Being poor is knowing you will be judged by people, despite never having a conversation.*
9. *Being poor is knowing how hard it is to stop being poor.*

God's Heart for the Poor

We have all been told that God has a heart for the poor. Most people would think that if God created the world and mankind, He would have to, if He is good, and that is true. But what some people don't realize is just how big His heart really is for them. After the nation of Israel was freed from Egypt God set up what is known as a theocracy. A theocracy is a form of government where God is the one who governs. He is the president, and the prophets and the priests were His advisors. The Law of Moses, with its 613 commands is the fruit of this theocracy. These commands brought life and death, blessings and curses. One of the most notable features in the Law of Moses was God's concern for the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the foreigners. Here are some examples that reveal God's heart for the poor.

1. Charging Interest to the Poor was Forbidden

Leviticus 25:35-38

"If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. **36** Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. **37** You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. **38** I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt

In God's theocracy, there is no such thing as ignoring the poor. You were to take him in and have him live with you. It did not end there; you were also to lend him money. But in doing so...you could not charge interest. Can you imagine living in a society where you could not be charged interest? When I bought my house, I paid 177,000 dollars. If I continued to make payments for the next 30 years, I would have paid 474,000. That number is minimal because it is assuming the property taxes would not go up; which would never happen. What that means is that when it is all said and done, I would have paid 274,000 dollars in interest alone for my house. It is insane when you realize you are paying almost double what your house is worth.

We live in an economy that makes a ton of money off of us because of interest. From houses, to student loans, to credit cards, to payment plans for medical bills, we are getting hammered with interest. If you are poor in this country, interest rates, late fees, overdraft fees, paycheck advance fees, leads to further poverty because you are paying interest on money you don't have. Our bureaucracy is the opposite of God's theocracy. He did not want to see the poor get poorer...he made it a law that we are to help the poor and not take advantage of them by charging interest. Imagine being able to live in a society where people would not be charged any interest at all, especially the poor. The poor would actually have a chance to move forward before they took two steps backward.

The second example of God's heart for the poor involves food.

2. The Jewish People could only Gather Crops Once; the rest was for the poor to glean

Deuteronomy 24:19-22

"When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. **20** When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. **21** When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. **22** You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt...

So during the harvest the Jewish people had one chance to gather food for themselves from the harvest. If they forgot to harvest a certain area, or if more fruits and vegetables grew in the olive trees, grapevines, or they dropped produce as they were storing them in God's theocracy they could not go back. In other words...there was no such thing as seconds. The widow, the foreigner, the fatherless had dibs on whatever was leftover. They were not charged for this provision; the food was free. It is similar to today's food bank, where the poor could have a meal for free....the only difference being the food

was not donated, or expired, and they could actually take it home. Many times when you are poor you often receive food no one really wants to eat.....this was not the case in God's theocracy. You eat what the rich eat and you can return for more.

Several years ago I went to a park in Tacoma and met a homeless man. He was standing over another homeless man who was passed out on the grass. He made me laugh because he was yelling at the other guy very loudly, "Are you dead!" Then he approached the guy and nudged him with his foot. The other guy woke up irritated and walked away and yelled, "No I'm not dead!" I was laughing so hard that it led to a conversation with this homeless guy. As he shared his life God impressed upon my heart to take him out to eat at McDonalds. I later found out that he hadn't had McDonald's in many years. As we were consuming our food the tears began to gush out. "This is a very kind thing you have done for me" he said, "thank you." Before I was a Christian, I would have never taken a homeless stranger in my car to eat with me at McDonalds. But God has changed my heart since I have been a Christian

A third example of God's provision for the poor occurred every seven years.

Every Seventh Year the Poor were Relieved from their Debt

Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 9-11

At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. **2** And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the LORD's release has been proclaimed.

And if you became bitter about this reality...God also said.

9 Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near,' and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin. **10** You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. **11** For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.

Can you imagine being released from your debt every seven years and having a chance to start over? For those who owe money to people, or have high credit card debt, this would be a fantasy-----but in God's theocracy it was a reality. Every seven years God's people were obligated to cancel any debt. There are many people today who have credit card debt that they have been paying off for more than seven years and they are discouraged because with the interest they cannot seem to get ahead and if they pay the minimum amount, depending on how much they owe; they could be paying on the card for the rest of their life because of the interest. Sometimes the only solution is to finally give in and file bankruptcy.....and even that is hard to do with the new restrictions. Some people are just stuck and they just don't see a light at the end of the tunnel. If you can qualify for a loan or consolidate your bills....you are still stuck with paying interest and service fees that just add to your debt. In our economy the poor just can't seem to get ahead. But not in God's economy. The poor are released from their debt every seventh year and have an opportunity to start fresh and learn from their mistakes.

There is one more example of God's heart for the poor that is worth mentioning. It happened every fiftieth year and it was known as the year of Jubilee.

3. In the year of the Jubilee, all Real Estate was returned to the Original Owners

Leviticus 25:10; 27:24

And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan.

In the year of jubilee the field shall return to him from whom it was bought, to whom the land belongs as a possession.

This sounds absolutely insane in our economy; but it was required in God's theocracy. So here's a little context. After the nation of Israel crossed over into the land of Canaan, they were divided into tribes and everyone except the priests, were given a tribal land. Over the course of time, some were forced to sell portions of their land to make ends meet. What happens today happened back then. The rich were able to slowly acquire a ton of real estate and sell it at a higher cost to make money. In due time, certain families were able to become rich and very influential in the land. If this course continued...they would die and their families would inherit their land and net worth. But in this type of economy the rich became richer and the poor became poorer because of supply and demand. This is how the rich declared an empire

So God who has a heart for the poor would declare the fiftieth year a Jubilee and each clan would receive back the land that was allotted to their fathers when they moved into the land of Canaan. The rich had to give it back and the poor were able to once again start off and try to build an inheritance for their families. Like I said, this is foreign to our way of thinking where we are used to people acquiring large chunks of real estate and building their little empire. God did not want certain people to have a monopoly over others for an extended period of time; instead He limited that monopoly to fifty years and gave everyone a chance to start over in an equal playing field.

Someone might object: If we owned the land through business ventures why would we have to give it back? Surely, it is not a bad thing to want your family to have a good inheritance.

The answer boils down to this: In God's theocracy the only person who owned land was Him. He allotted the land and the people were to be stewards over that territory. God never wanted us to act like this is my land and this is my money. He always wanted His people to understand they were stewards of the possessions He owned. He wanted them to understand they were sojourners in this life and not to become too attached to there land. He wanted them to be dependant on Him and not their possessions. Consequently, before things got out of hand and the rich became richer and the poor became poorer God made a provision to restore things to how they once were in the real estate market. Imagine that, a real estate market where the poor can finally have their own home. That's God's theocracy.

Jesus

This heart for the poor is exemplified in the New Testament by Jesus, who Philipians says that being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be gained; but made himself nothing, taking the very form a servant. Think about that; God took on the form of a man and choose to be homeless. He could have ruled over people like a power-driven king or made a fortune in the real estate Market....but he choose to identify himself with the poor. At the outset of his ministry, Jesus stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth and read from the prophet Isaiah:

Luke 4:18-19

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Lk 4:18-19)

These and other examples, signify God's deep concern for the poor.

Challenging Our Perceptions

After studying God's heart for the poor we now have to look at our own perceptions. Let me give you an illustration. Suppose someone walks into this church and they are a young professional, well groomed, hospitable, and kind hearted. You would probably make a mental note and say to yourself, "I would like to meet them after the service." Most people would be delighted to have such a guest come.

But what kind of perception would you have if someone who was obviously poor, unkempt, and had a bad aroma walked into this church? In most cases, you would not feel the same about this visitor as you did the first. You might not even have a desire to meet them because they are offensive. This is a modern day example of what the apostle James says in his epistle.

James 2:1-5

2:1 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. **2** For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, **3** and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," **4** have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? **5** Listen, my beloved brothers,

has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

I hate to say it but many of us have negative perceptions when it comes to the poor, especially if they are homeless. But the reality is that if a homeless man walked into this church we should rejoice because of all the places they could be—they are right where God wants them. God doesn't care if someone is Oregon State educated and working at H.P. or if they are homeless and living under a bridge. What's important to God is the soul. God wants that soul saved so the angels can rejoice and they will become heirs of heaven. When you mold your perceptions into God's; then you begin to see reality as it really is. To a holy God, whose perfect, who's kingdom is in heaven; who has everything He needs; we are poor and homeless without direction. We are smelly because of our sin and to be despised. Yet God loves us with a perfect love and sent His son to die on our behalf. Developing a mindset like God when it comes to people is hard because the culture we live in has shaped the way we think about each other. We must rise and grow in grace with people, especially the poor.

Our Personal Response

Objection 2: As Christians not only does God want us to challenge our perceptions; but He wants us to respond with the love of Jesus. Now some of you might object and think, "Well there are a lot of poor people who are beggars and if you give them any money they are just going to buy drugs or alcohol." Some of you think that beggars are liars and make a hundred grand a year. "I'm not going to give them any money; they need to get a job and clean themselves up!" Those are good points; but have you ever noticed that when Jesus was confronted with a panhandler he never gave them money? What he did give them was a conversation, healing, and some hope. In the end, you don't have to give money; but you should give them respect; an acknowledgement.

When I was a teenager in Tacoma my friend and I said hi to a homeless man. Do you want to know what he did? He actually gave us twenty dollars and said we were the first people to say something kind to him. We started saying hi to every homeless person from that point on.

When I went to seminary there were fellow students who decided to be homeless for about three weeks. What they said was that in any given day, at least fifty people did not acknowledge them. They were disgusted and ignored them. Chances are if you even say hello to a homeless person on your own initiative—it would probably be the most positive thing they have heard all day. Imagine their response if you actually took a prayer request and prayed for them? There will always be scammers, rich and poor—but we have to remember in the end, they are people.

So how can you as a Christian respond in a Christ like manner when it comes to the poor? Here are some ideas. You could be like Jackie Barksdale and help out at a local soup kitchen. I have personally talked to some of the poor at the soup kitchen where she works...and they think the world of her because she brings them a smile and genuine affection for the people. If you know how to quilt, you can form a group and donate them to the homeless under the bridge. You can also

give money to trustworthy Christian organizations like Compassion International, Food for the Hungry, or World Vision. As bad as we might think it is in America; it pales in comparison to places like Columbia, Ukraine and Africa. Closer to home, you might offer to baby sit from time to time for a single mom who could use some time for herself to be alone. The possibilities are endless, you could visit your local nursing home or hospital; if you are handy, and you could fix up someone's house or car; that just doesn't have the money to make the needed repairs. Whatever you do; just don't ignore them. God has always wanted justice for the poor and He uses His people to make sure they are cared for. Justice for the poor is a big deal in God's theocracy.

Conclusion: God has a heart for the poor. All throughout the Bible He has made provisions and has cried out through His prophets that the poor, the widow, the fatherless be shown justice. We have to remember everyone is made in the image of God and are God-bearers. If you have been poor before or are struggling financially today...you need to know that you are significant in God's eyes and that He has never forgotten you. I asked my friend who grew up in a poor family and now is successful in life, what he thought the poor today needed. He responded from people they need respect from others and they should not be ashamed of their background. They should be proud of who they are and appreciate their family, friends, and accomplishments. As far as the government, he said, what the poor need most is not government-sponsored money; what they need is education. Education is the key for helping the poor climb out of their social economic standing. When it comes to us, this education is not just manifested in the school system---it is also manifested by studying God's word and understanding His heart for the poor. In the end, we want to rid ourselves of the negative perceptions we have of the poor and change them to model God's. In the end, it does not matter if you are rich or poor; the angels will be rejoicing when God's image bearers accept Jesus. In heaven, we will be like children in the sandbox.....we will not care about a persons economic standing; we will just care about enjoying each other's company. We will once again build sandcastles.