

**WISDOM CALLS (PROVERBS 21:13)**

## **Whoever shuts his ears to the poor will cry and not be heard**

Commentators debate whether Jesus's story about the rich man and Lazarus is a parable or an actual event that crossed the border between this physical world and the invisible next (Luke 16:19-31).

Regardless, the antagonist of the story is a notable example of a wealthy man who treasured up his riches and ignored the plight of the poor all around him. Dives (pr. die-veez) is the Latin word for wealthy and has become attached through the centuries to the miser of the story, clothed in purple and faring sumptuously each day while this second Lazarus, full of sores, begged for scraps at his gate.

Eventually, both men died, but their circumstances suddenly were exchanged. The rich man's wealth did not follow him into eternity, for none of it was shared and thus converted into heavenly treasure (Matthew 6:19-21, First Peter 1:4). As he passed through death and into eternity, he was instantly made bankrupt. Lazarus, on the other hand, was greatly enriched, simply by entering into the bosom of Abraham to await the final resurrection on Judgment Day. Dives entered into torment, tortured by fire so much that he wished only for a drop of cool water upon his tongue.

Only Abraham could answer his anguished pleas: a great, fixed gulf divided this Hadean holding cell where the righteous dead reclined in Paradise and the wicked dead suffered in Tartarus. No relief would come, and Dives learned what wisdom meant: "Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor Will also cry himself and not be heard" (Proverbs 21:13).

Insensitivity to the suffering of others, especially from society's most vulnerable, is inexcusable, and, although recompense might not arrive at all in this life, it is yet inevitable before a God who controls eternity. Without waiting for somebody else – another person, the church, the government – to step in, the disciple of Christ will step up and come to the aid of the poor, the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, the stranger. "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).

The apostle John applied this piece of wisdom especially to cases where brethren are involved on both sides. "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth and shall assure our hearts before Him" (First John 3:17-19).

Ignoring the plight of the poor, especially among brethren, is the worst example of selfishness and materialism and it must return to haunt.

Additional readings:

Monday, March 11 – Matthew 6

Tuesday, March 12 – Acts 4

Wednesday, March 13 – 2 Corinthians 9

Questions:

1. What happens to those who do not pay attention to the cries for help from others?
2. What could wealth not prevent? What actions, while living, would have aided the rich man in his eternal state? (Luke 16)
3. What caution should be considered when doing charitable deeds? What focus allows us to be generous with our earthly blessings? (Matthew 6:1-4, 19-24)
4. What did the early Christians do with their earthly possessions? (Acts 4)
5. Note the various things we should consider when giving to the needs of the saints: (2 Corinthians 9:6-15)
6. How is pure and undefiled religion defined in James 1:27?
7. What do we lack if we are unwilling to help others? (1 John 3:17-19)

**WISDOM CALLS (PROVERBS 21:27)**

## **The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination**

The Holy Spirit has warned that, “God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life” (Galatians 6:7-8). The wicked believer, however, is not so sure about that.

Can there be a wicked believer? Surely, there are many who believe in God, but not sufficiently to trust his promises and warnings (see James 2:19). Their need for fellowship and the church is limited, selfish, and ulterior to worship and praise. That need, however, is activated when it comes time for weddings and funerals. For others, it also extends to spring and winter holidays, perhaps baptisms or artificial rituals. Some wicked believers are even more consistent than that in their appearances, but remain uncommitted in the heart.

God, however, will not be mocked by the insincere worshiper who approaches the throne of grace with selfish motives. Wisdom calls: “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; How much more when he brings it with wicked intent (Proverbs 21:27)!”

Some feign worship to curry favor with others who value religion on some level. Their purposes might be political, economic or romantic, but their efforts are otherwise insincere. God is not mocked.

Others pretend faith to work a deception upon their neighbors. While committed to iniquity, they would prefer that not be known. Concealed in their hearts, in their web caches, in their nightstand tables is evidence to the contrary, but they still hope that putting on their Sunday best will be a sufficient costume to hide the truth.

Still others operate on a slightly deeper, but no less diabolical, level. They hope to “earn” Heaven by exerting the bare minimum effort, forgetting that salvation is by grace through faith and that they possess neither. James has written that faith without works is dead and Paul has added that the power lies in faith working through love (James 2:24, Galatians 5:6). Claiming to have religion – by wearing pious jewelry, genuflecting on command, writing a check, and a thousand other artifices – is never enough to satisfy a God who rewards the faithful, not the fool.

Sadly, the work and worship of the wicked can be quite deceptive at times, looking just like the real thing. After all, the Pharisees were reputed to be paragons of religious virtue in Jerusalem, but Jesus exposed them as hypocrites, play-acting at religion and well short of finding eternal life. Futile sacrifices, Isaiah called the worship of the wicked. “When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood” (Isaiah 1:15).

Additional Readings:

Thursday, March 14 – Galatians 6

Friday, March 15 – 2 Samuel 24

Saturday, March 16 – Amos 5

Questions:

1. What makes the sacrifice of the wicked even worse?
2. What basic principle in Galatians 6:7-8 should warn us about feigned worship and sacrifice?
3. Can there be a wicked believer? (see class material)
4. What sin had David committed? What effect did it have on him? What was the punishment?  
When David makes sacrifice to the Lord, what would he not offer unto the Lord? (2 Samuel 24)
5. What motivates some to feign their worship to God? (see class materials)
6. What challenged the worship of those in Amos 5? (Amos 5:21-24)
7. What makes the sacrifice of the wicked deceptive? (see class materials and Isaiah 1:15)

***The following lesson will be discussed on Wednesday, March 20<sup>th</sup> @ 7:00pm***

WISDOM CALLS (PROVERBS 22:28)

## Do not remove the ancient landmarks

Mark Twain suggested, "Buy land, they're not making it anymore."

The Middle East is plunged into terror and turmoil because of questions of land ownership. A mosque sits where the Jews would love to rebuild their temple and thousands of Israelis live on property the Palestinians want for their own new nation.

Property rights are so important to Americans that they are embedded with the Constitution's Bill of Rights; suits involving eminent domain are frequent, costly and divisive because it seems unjust to deprive a neighbor of his property, even when the public good (or a football stadium) is at stake.

The Law of Moses dealt with property rights in many ways, trying to ensure that tribes and families would not be wiped out by a bad harvest or a crooked speculator. Even before they arrived in the Promised Land, Moses warned, "You shall not remove your neighbor's landmark, which the men of old have set, in your inheritance which you will inherit in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess" (Deuteronomy 19:14).

That ancient landmarks established where one's property ended and another's begun. Surreptitiously moving the landmark would enlarge the borders of one estate at the expense of another, but might go undetected for years. The Proverbs reiterated the unfairness of stealing from a neighbor this way: "Do not remove the ancient landmark Which your fathers have set" (Proverbs 22:28). Before they crossed the Jordan, the Levites led Israel in a responsive statement of covenant on all these issues: "Cursed is the one who moves his neighbor's landmark. And all the people shall say, 'Amen'" (Deuteronomy 27:17)!

The ancient landmark reminds us of the order of things. Even before we presume to use something that belongs to a neighbor, we must first seek his blessing. It was covetousness and a willful violation of the Tenth Commandment that caused people to alter the landmarks and gain advantage.

The church must also respect the placement of an ancient landmark, a two thousand year-old document called the New Testament, that establishes an approved pattern of work and worship. It is a pattern and landmark often displaced when ambitions and personal preferences are elevated above divine authority. Instead of speaking as the oracles of God, men wish to create a system more to their liking and the result is worship that is full of spirit, but lacking truth, and works that are sometimes noble, but often far beyond the mission of the kingdom.

Ancient landmarks exist to establish ownership and authority. All authority in Heaven and Earth belong to Christ Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20). It is both a crime and a shame to move the landmark to suit oneself.

### Additional Readings:

Hebrews 6

2 Thessalonians 3

Matthew 28

Matthew 15

### Questions:

1. Why are landmarks important? What law governed literal landmarks in Deuteronomy 19:14?
2. What should the landmarks remind us of? (see class material)
3. What is the ultimate landmark for the church? (see class material)
4. What purpose should a landmark or foundational principle serve? (Hebrews 6)
5. In what way did Paul encourage us to walk? (2 Thessalonians 3)
6. Who has the power to establish all spiritual landmarks? (Matthew 28:18)
7. How can we tell the difference between traditions of men and actual landmarks? (Matthew 15:9)

***The following lesson will be discussed on Sunday, March 31st @ 10:00am***

WISDOM CALLS (PROVERBS 27:17)

## As iron sharpens iron, a man sharpens his friend

Moms everywhere tell their little boys to stop making faces; otherwise they might freeze that way!

There does not seem to be any empirical evidence of this ever happening all at once, but observation suggests that, over many decades, people's faces do tend to take on the joy, sorrow, and experience of their owners' lives. People accustomed to frowning tend to develop just the right wrinkles to make those frowns indelibly permanent. Happy faces freeze that way by the time the hair is white and the lines are drawn about the mouth and eyes.

What does not happen overnight becomes true with perseverance, either in that which is good or that which is unfortunate. It is that metaphor that wisdom conjures up to illustrate the power that good friends have to challenge and perfect one another (First Timothy 4:16).

"As iron sharpens iron, So a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Proverbs 27:17).

Iron sharpens iron. A steel blade drawn over and over against a rigid whetstone will only sharpen the serration. In just that way, a well-chosen friend will serve to motivate me to deeper reflection upon things than someone who is dispassionate, unconcerned, or flighty. An intelligent, spiritual, fellow traveler will not let me rest on my laurels, but will stir me up so that I might continue to grow, to challenge my assumptions, to see things from a nobler perspective than that which first appears.

Peter hoped to sharpen the countenances of his friends and brethren, writing letters to stir them from their complacency and back into action (Second Peter 1:13, 3:1). Paul wrote Timothy at least two letters, imploring that young preacher to "stir up the gift of God which is in you," not letting Timothy settle into idleness (Second Timothy 1:6). Friend-sharpening is a task for every Christian, social beasts with an interest in fellowship and mutual edification: "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Why do we so infrequently discuss the Bible when together outside of the assembly or the classroom? Imagine the insights to be gained from more robust discussions of the word of God; the flaccid understanding of the babe in Christ might grow strong if only we would make Scripture a higher priority. Can anyone argue that Paul was not a dear friend to Peter, especially when, in Antioch, he "withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed" (Galatians 2:11)? Peter later praised Paul, no doubt feeling blessed that he did not live the rest of his life with bias against Gentile brethren, but was plainly shown the error in his thinking.

Additional Readings:

1 Thessalonians 5

John 15

Galatians 2

Questions:

1. How would you define the meaning and function of Proverb 27:17?
2. What should the ultimate hope for our friends be? (1 Timothy 4:16)
3. What impact should we be having on our friends? (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
4. What did Peter hope to do in 1 Peter 1:13 and 3:1?
5. What act shows the greater love for our friends? (John 15)
6. What does the Hebrew writer say is important in the process of encouraging each other? (Hebrews 10:24-25)
7. Was Paul being unfriendly towards Peter in Galatians 2:11?



***The following lesson will be discussed on Wednesday, April 3 @ 7:00pm***

WISDOM CALLS (PROVERBS 30:7-9)

## Give me neither poverty nor riches

A few years ago, the prayer of Jabez gained instant popularity among western Evangelicals who adored its apparent validation of the gospel of health and wealth – Enlarge my territory! they pleaded with God.

The proverbs contain a prayer as well, but one that has never commanded quite the same audience. The prayer of Agur is dual, first involving freedom from dishonesty and deception, before moving to the more controversial subject of the corruptions of wealth.

Agur prayed, Two things I request of You (Deprive me not before I die): Remove falsehood and lies far from me; Give me neither poverty nor riches – Feed me with the food allotted to me; Lest I be full and deny You, And say, “Who is the LORD?” Or lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of my God. (Proverbs 30:7-9)

He wished to be set free from deception, to be no more its target and victim, but also no more its practitioner. Falsehood and lies are all about us, so much so that we feel we will fall behind if we do not join in from time to time. We seek a purity of purpose, however, that places great value upon truth, both biblical and personal. There is no ultimate salvation for the one who lives a lie, who wears a pious costume to conceal a contemptuous heart.

Granted, but how can Agur pray *not* to be rich? Everyone will pray against poverty, but Agur articulates thoughts that most of us never even entertain. We give glowing testimonials for the virtue of contentment and promise to be satisfied if only God provides us with ample food, raiment and respective places of abode, but never would we argue if he also decided to sweeten the pot with steaks, furs and McMansions.

Agur prefers a class more in the middle, fearing something that we all must acknowledge is a very real possibility. Poverty and wealth both provide serious challenges to faith. The poor is tempted to sin to provide for himself, while the rich is moved to deny God any role in his blessedness. Would anyone today repeat the words of Agur’s prayer and seriously mean them?

Would anyone forego the opportunity to become rich? Would anyone be willing to follow the Lord’s advice to the young ruler, at least in part, by sacrificing enough to drop a class and stay in between poverty and wealth? Early Christians seem to have done something like that, as they sold properties to provide aid to needy brethren (Acts 4:32-37).

There is great wisdom in Agur’s prayer, without the perversions people have added to that of Jabez, but we do not expect it to take hold very soon.

Additional Readings:

1 Chronicles 4

1 Timothy 6

Hebrews 11

Luke 18:18-30

Questions:

1. In what ways could poverty or riches be problematic? (Proverb 30:7-9)
2. In what way are falsehoods and lies connected to this issue?
3. What did Jabez pray? (1 Chronicles 4:9-10)
4. What is great gain? What happens to “they that will be rich”? What should the rich do? (1 Timothy 6)
5. What was Moses willing to sacrifice? Why? (Hebrews 11:24-26)
6. What example did the early church demonstrate for us? (Acts 4:32-37)
7. What instruction did Jesus give the rich ruler? What was his reaction? What lesson is learned from that scene? (Luke 18:18-30)