

God's Heart for the Oppressed

by Ronald J. Sider

“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

- Matthew 25:41-43, 45

When we examine the whole of Scripture, we know that caring for the poor is not the basis of our eternal salvation. Yet Jesus' scathing rebuke of those who ignore the needy tells us something critically important about the heart of God. It's a message that we cannot ignore. This passage from Matthew describes God's concern for the oppressed, a theme woven throughout Scripture. An astounding 210 verses in the New International Version use the words poor or oppressed. Many include specific commands to protect the poor or warnings against exploiting them. I believe three overarching biblical truths capture the essence of what the Bible says about God's heart to the poor. As I summarize what Scripture teaches on the subject, I encourage you to pray; "Lord Jesus, change my heart so that I begin to share Your love for the poor." The Bible repeatedly says that God lifts up the poor. "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; He seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor." (1 Samuel 2:8) Many other passages speak of God's commitment to uphold the cause of those who are impoverished and unable to free themselves from the yoke of oppression. (Psalm 113:7, 140:12, 145:14)

The Bible also teaches a second truth; God sometimes opposes and judges the rich and powerful. Is wealth a bad thing? No. The Bible clearly teaches that God has created a beautiful world and placed human beings in it to enjoy its splendor and to produce good things from it as His appointed stewards. (Genesis 1:26-31, 1 Timothy 6:17) The material world is not an illusion to ignore or an evil to escape. It is a good gift to embrace. Is God biased against the rich? No. The Bible explicitly declares that God has no bias toward the rich or the poor. (Deuteronomy 10:17-

18) What, then, is the problem with wealth? Scripture offers at least two answers. The rich sometimes acquire wealth by oppressing the poor, or they have plenty yet neglect the needy. In either case, God is furious. Wealth often hardens our hearts to the poor rather than sparking greater generosity. It is so easy to trust in our wealth rather than God, to treasure material things more than other people. (1 Timothy 6:6-11, 17 - 19).

Third, the Scriptures instruct God's people to share His concern for the poor. The Lord commands Israel not to treat widows, orphans, and foreigners as the Egyptians had done. (Exodus 22:21-24) Instead, His people were to love those on the margins just as God cared for the Israelites during the Exodus. God identifies so strongly with poor that caring for them is almost like helping God. "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord." (Proverbs 19:17)

On the other hand, "he who oppresses the poor shows contempt for His maker." (Proverbs 14:31) God despises the fasting of the Israelites because they tried to worship Him and exploit their workers at the same time. (Isaiah 58:3-7) Jesus' words were harsher still. To those who do not feed the hungry and clothe the naked, He promises a terrible judgment: "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25:41). The Apostle John issues the same stark warning: "If anyone who has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him." (1 John 3:17)

I fear that many Christians today who think they are quite orthodox have actually failed to integrate this crucial teaching into their understanding of Biblical faith. If knowing God is so closely tied to caring for the poor and oppressed, what must He think about rich Christians living in countries 150 times as wealthy as the poorest fifth of the world who give, a mere quarter of the tithe? As we examine our houses, cars, and family budgets, can we say our lifestyles are more conformed to Christ than the world? This is a question each of us must ask before God. Given the strength of these scriptural warnings, we dare not let ourselves off the hook that easily. Now please do not misunderstand me: We cannot earn our way into heaven by caring for the poor. The only way to stand before our Holy God is to cling to the cross, trusting that He forgives our sins because of what Jesus did on our behalf. We are justified by faith alone.

The oppressed of Jesus' day never doubted that bringing good news to the poor was a central part of His mission. (Luke 4:18-19) All they had

to do was look at what He said and did. But when today's poor look at the church, they have strong reasons to doubt that we are very serious about following Jesus' example. Unless prosperous believers match God's concern for the poor, our testimony as His people will lack credibility and power. The poor of the world today need Jesus. They need to see that God who sent His Son to die for their sins cares about their poverty, hates injustice, and invites them to become coworkers in His kingdom. Many of those who are despised, trampled, and famished will only see Jesus if we're willing to meet their physical needs.

God does not love the poor more than the rich. He cares equally about everyone, but God does long for wholeness, goodness, and joy for every person. Poverty crushes not just the body, but also the mind and spirit of billions of people the Creator tenderly loves. Those of us whom God has blessed with material prosperity must not neglect our responsibility to care for the needs of those who have so little. Let's ask Jesus to change us. Let's share God's love with the downtrodden who desperately need it.

Ronald J. Sider is professor of theology and culture at Eastern Seminary in Philadelphia and president of Evangelicals for Social Action, an organization promoting justice for the poor.