

## When We Ignore the Poor

### A Study of Proverbs 28:27

Characteristic of Completeness: Compassion

Big Idea: The body needs some hands and feet to go with the mouth.

Related Scriptures: Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Psalm 41:1-3; 112:5-9; Proverbs 11:24-26; 14:21, 31; 17:5; 19:17; 21:13; 22:9; 29:7; 31:9, 20; Isaiah 58:10; Zechariah 7:9-14; Matthew 25:31-46; Mark 10:17-30; Luke 10:25-37; Acts 2:45; Galatians 2:10; James 2:15; 1 John 3:17

Introduction:

- A. (Play ► “Enough” video here.)

I’m not sure I like this video. It makes me uncomfortable. It raises all kinds of questions for which I have no answers. It makes me think. It makes me think about stuff I don’t normally think about. Like the poor, and the hungry, and all those less fortunate than I am. It challenges me to think about my responsibility toward them. What is my responsibility?

I have a confession to make. I haven’t given the poor much thought. I’ve been broke, but never really poor. My family isn’t poor. My neighbors aren’t poor. My friends aren’t poor. So it’s really easy for me to ignore the poor. What happens when we believers ignore the poor?

- B. Today I’m going to talk about a biblical text that will help us learn a little more about our relationship with the poor, about what our responsibilities are, about what we can expect in dealing with the poor. Our Characteristic of Completeness for the week ► is compassion. Our text is a single verse. It’s ► Proverbs 28:27. It says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 28:27**

He who gives to the poor will not lack,  
But he who hides his eyes will have many curses.

- C. This proverb utilizes something called asymmetrical antithetical parallelism. It is antithetical in the sense that two opposites are being contrasted. In this case, the opposites are the generous guy and the stingy guy with respect to the poor. The generous guy is the antithesis or exact opposite of the stingy guy.

The proverb is asymmetrical in the sense that the parallels in the proverb don’t quite match. For example, the proverb expressly contrasts ► giving to the poor with hiding one’s eyes. But this is an asymmetrical or imprecise contrast because we would expect the opposite of giving to the poor to be withholding from the poor. Likewise, we would expect the opposite of hiding one’s eyes to be opening one’s eyes.

Such asymmetry is a deliberate literary device that invites the reader to balance the asymmetry by supplying the implied parallels.

1. Let's ► identify the expressed and implied parallels in the order in which they are presented in our proverb.<sup>1</sup>
  - a. First, the generous guy is ► “he who gives to the poor.” The implied parallel is that the stingy guy, in contrast, ► is he who withholds from the poor.
  - b. Second, we are told that the generous guy ► “will not lack.” The implied parallel is that the stingy guy, in contrast, ► will suffer lack.
  - c. Third, we are told that the stingy guy is ► “he who hides his eyes.” The implied parallel is that the generous guy, in contrast, ► is he who opens his eyes.
  - d. Finally, we are told that the stingy guy ► “will have many curses.” The implied parallel is that the generous guy, in contrast, ► will have many blessings.
2. We now have contrasting profiles of the generous guy versus the stingy guy. But notice that the contrasts are not necessarily presented in a perfectly logical, chronological order in the proverb. That's okay. It's not a mistake; this is poetic language.

In my analysis of the proverb, I'm going to consider the third contrast ► first because it seems like the first logical contrast would be the one relating to the eyes. That's where it all starts.

- a. The resulting profile of the generous guy is that he begins by opening his eyes to the poor. Having his eyes opened, he then gives to the poor. Having given to the poor, God will see to it that the generous guy will not lack; in fact, he will have many blessings.
  - b. The contrasting profile of the stingy guy is that he begins by hiding his eyes from the poor. Having hidden his eyes, he naturally withholds from the poor. Having withheld from the poor, God will see to it that the stingy guy will suffer lack; in fact, he will have many curses.
3. The introduction of implied parallels and the rearrangement of contrasts do not in any way violate the integrity of the proverb. Rather, this merely unpacks and arranges the content so that we can address ► three important questions

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<sup>1</sup> William E. Mouser, “Filling in the Blank: Asymmetrical Antithetical Parallelisms,” *Learning from the Sages*, Roy B. Zuck ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 143-144.

in logical order—questions which serve as the three-point outline of my message:

- a. First, how do we hide our eyes, and how should we open them?
- b. Second, how do we withhold from the poor, and how should we give?
- c. Third, what can happen to us when we're generous or stingy?

I. Let's deal with the ► first question: How do we hide our eyes, and how should we open them?

- A. One of the ways I have hidden my eyes is by not paying much attention to what the Bible has to say about how God feels about the poor. Somehow I can read right over biblical words like, "give to the poor" and some kind of selfish translator in my brain converts it to, "blah, blah, blah."

Last Tuesday, I went to a Christian bookstore to look for books on helping the poor. I had to look hard. In the bestsellers section, there are books that seem to be mostly about self-improvement and personal fulfillment, but no books on helping the poor or feeding the hungry. I take it that books on poverty aren't exactly flying off the shelves these days. Maybe it's because I'm not the only one who has the selfish translator in my head that converts a book title about "giving to the poor" to "blah, blah, blah."

There are over 400 verses sprinkled throughout the Bible that speak about God's compassion for the needy and His desire that we believers share that compassion.<sup>2</sup> Let me give you just a panoramic sample of what the Bible has to say about the poor as a means of opening our eyes.

1. In ► Deuteronomy 15:7-8, God commands His people:

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Deuteronomy 15:7** "If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, ►<sup>8</sup> but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. . . ."

2. Proverbs ► 22:9 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 22:9**

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<sup>2</sup> Amy L. Sherman, "Who Are the Poor?" in *Sharing God's Heart for the Poor: Meditations for Worship, Prayer and Service* (Charlottesville, VA: Trinity Presbyterian Church—Urban Ministries; Indianapolis: The Welfare Policy Center of the Hudson Institute, February, 2000), 6, quoted by Dave Donaldson and Stanley Carlson-Thies, *A Revolution of Compassion*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 31.

He who has a generous eye will be blessed, For he gives of his bread to the poor.

3. Proverbs ► 29:7 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 29:7**

The righteous considers the cause of the poor,  
*But* the wicked does not understand *such* knowledge.

4. Proverbs ► 31:9 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 31:9**

Open your mouth, judge righteously,  
And plead the cause of the poor and needy.

5. Proverbs ► 31:20 speaks of an excellent woman, saying,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 31:20**

She extends her hand to the poor,  
Yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy.

6. Isaiah ► 58:10 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Isaiah 58:10**

*If* you extend your soul to the hungry  
And satisfy the afflicted soul,  
Then your light shall dawn in the darkness, And your  
darkness shall *be* as the noonday.

7. Zechariah ► 7:9-10 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Zechariah 7:9**

“Thus says the LORD of hosts:  
‘Execute true justice,  
Show mercy and compassion  
Everyone to his brother.  
►<sup>10</sup> Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless,  
The alien or the poor. . . .”

8. In ► Mark 10:21, Jesus tells the rich man,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Mark 10:21** “. . . sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven . . .”

9. In ► Luke 10, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan who compassionately and mercifully cared for the needy man on the side of the road. In ► Verse 37, Jesus says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Luke 10:37** . . . “Go and do likewise.”

10. Acts ► 2:45 describes the first church this way:

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Acts 2:45** and [they] sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

11. In ► Galatians 2:10, the Apostle Paul says of Peter, James, and John,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Galatians 2:10** *They desired* only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.

12. James ► 2:15-16 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **James 2:15** If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food,<sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit?

13. First ► John 3:17 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **1 John 3:17** 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?

14. Are you ► getting the idea that God is concerned for the poor and needy? As if all this is not enough to emphasize God’s concern, the Scriptures also tell us that God takes our treatment of the poor personally. In effect, God says, “Mess with the poor, and you mess with Me. Bless the poor, and you will be blessed by Me.”<sup>3</sup>

- a. Proverbs ► 14:31 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 14:31**  
He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker,  
But he who honors Him has mercy on the needy.

- b. Proverbs ► 17:5 says,

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<sup>3</sup> I borrowed this catchy line from Bill Hybels, *Making Life Work: Putting God’s Wisdom into Action*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 162.

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 17:5**

He who mocks the poor reproaches his Maker;  
He who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished.

c. Proverbs ► 19:17 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 19:17**

He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD,  
And He will pay back what he has given.

d. And in speaking of the treatment of the poor in ► Matthew 25:40,  
Jesus says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Matthew 25:40** . . . “inasmuch as you did *it* to  
one of the least of these My brethren, you did *it* to  
Me.”

15. It is ► remarkable how easy it is to hide my eyes from all that the Bible has to say. And I’m not alone. Noted pastor and author Rick Warren recently said, “How did I miss that? I went to Bible college, two seminaries, and I got a doctorate. How did I miss God’s compassion for the poor?”<sup>4</sup>

16. The truth is the church is the body of Christ on earth. We represent Christ to the world, including the poor. We are His body. And the body needs some hands and feet to go with the mouth. In fact, that’s the ► big idea for the week: We need some hands and feet to go with the mouth. That is, we need to open our eyes to our calling to compassionately help the poor, and not just talk about God.

B. Another way that I have hidden my eyes is by not paying much attention to the poverty in my own community and in the world.

1. I drive by Moon Mountain Elementary School, probably less than two miles from here as the crow flies, and the nice building conceals the reality that about four out of ten incoming students can’t speak English and are therefore disadvantaged academically. Many of these children are from poor, Spanish-speaking households. I need to open my eyes to my own community.

I see check-cashing stores popping up around the periphery of our Moon Valley neighborhood, and I don’t think too much about them. I don’t know anybody who goes to those places. Then I drive by Bell Road and 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue in the morning and I see dozens of men waiting in the hope that someone will

<sup>4</sup> Rick Warren quoted by Timothy C. Morgan, “Purpose Driven Rwanda,” posted 23 September 2005 at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/010/17.32.html>; Internet; accessed 31 January 2006.

hire them for the day to do some work so they can earn some money. It occurs to me that maybe *they* go to the cash stores. I need to open my eyes to my own community.

2. And as little as I have thought about the poverty in my own community, I've thought even less about poverty in the rest of the world. Let me show you a short video as a means of opening our eyes to what's happening in the world.

(Play ► “Hunger” video here.)

II. The video provides a nice segue to our ► second question: How do we withhold from the poor, and how should we give?

- A. The first part of the question is easy. We withhold from the poor when we simply do nothing. We withhold from the poor when we choose not to help them.
- B. The last part of the question is harder: How should we give? Some of the statistics presented in the video may suggest that solving poverty is all about giving money. One of the quotes in the video said, “the cost of eradicating poverty is 1% of global income.” Another said, “Providing universal access to basic social services to alleviate poverty would cost \$80 billion.” It almost sounds like all we'd have to do is to give enough money to poor people and the problem would be solved. Is that how we should give?

To be sure, I am not an expert on either the cause or the cure for poverty. But I've studied just enough to learn that giving to the poor is not always a simple matter. There are reasons why people are poor, and if we don't address the reasons, our giving might not be helping the poor at all.

What do you think would happen if we could somehow redistribute the world's resources such that there were no poor people on earth? Would that end poverty? I suspect not. I suspect that poverty would grow back quickly, like a weed, because we wouldn't have addressed the underlying roots of poverty.

Is it wise to give money to the panhandler standing on the side of the road with the sign that says, “God loves you”? Does that really give the person something worthwhile? I don't have a definitive answer. Rightly or wrongly, sometimes I feel compelled to give to panhandlers, and sometimes I don't. I tend to resonate with the TV commercial for the Phoenix Rescue Mission that depicts people donating to panhandlers as simply sticking Band-Aids on them; it doesn't really fix the problem.

Dr. ► Robert Linthicum is the closest thing I know to an expert on the poor. He is President and founder of Partners in Urban Transformation. He has written numerous books addressing the church's responsibility to the poor. He has taught urban ministry at seminaries and graduate schools in the United States and overseas. He's an ordained Presbyterian minister who has pastored inner-city churches in Rockford,

Milwaukee, Detroit, and Chicago. And he was formerly a Director for World Vision International.

Linthicum says something that you may find surprising. He says that most people—particularly people in third-world countries—are poor not because they have no money and not because they are lazy, but because they have no power. And powerlessness can have multiple causes, like corrupted, oppressive social systems, or a lack of skills or education, or mental illness. Therefore, our greatest gift to the poor is not necessarily more money; it's finding ways to help the poor to become empowered so that they can rise up from poverty themselves. Linthicum ► says,

*The essential poverty of the city's poor is powerlessness. . . .*

► *When the church becomes aware of such urban poverty, its tendency is to undertake programs to meet the discernible manifestations of such powerlessness—hunger, unsanitary conditions, polluted drinking water, slum housing. ► In doing so, the church has determined what the problem of those slum communities are, selected the solutions for these problems and undertaken the projects to address those issues.*

► *What the church does not realize in undertaking such ministry is that it is contributing to the problem, not solving it. ► It is addressing a result of the people's powerlessness, and not the essential problem itself. . . . ► And it is contributing to the people's powerlessness because rather than working with the poor as the poor seek to address the root problem, the church is making the poor dependent on the intervention of the church. ► People may be fed, water made clean, sanitation systems installed, housing built—but the people are still without self-determination. ► They are therefore more helpless than before, for they have been made dependent. They have been treated as objects for care, not self-determined and capable subjects of their own destiny.*

► *Only the poor of the city can assume responsibility for solving their own powerlessness. ► And the church must find ways to support and encourage the actions of the poor to assume control over such powerlessness, rather than contributing to it by encouraging greater dependence.<sup>5</sup>*

- C. That brings us ► right back to the question, how should we give to the poor? If we take Linthicum's advice, we should give in ways that have a shot at empowering the poor. That makes a lot of sense to me. It's giving that equips, giving that trains, giving

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<sup>5</sup> Robert C. Linthicum, *Empowering the Poor*, (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1991),

that helps people to better themselves. Let me show you a short video clip that gives an example of how just one person of great compassion and limited means can give in a way that honors the recipients and instills character qualities that can help the poor to help themselves.

(Play ► “Bicycle Man” video here.)

Let ► me tell you about some of the things that we are choosing to do at Moon Valley to help empower the poor to rise up from their impoverished condition. We’re new at this, and we have a lot to learn. We expect to make mistakes and adjustments along the way. But we’re determined. You can decide for yourself whether or not you want to join us in our process of learning to give to the poor.

We put an insert in your bulletin this morning titled, “Missions Moment.” It’s a new monthly listing of ways that we are trying to help locally, domestically, and internationally. Missions and helping the poor go hand in hand.

Let me briefly walk through this with you.

1. Locally, we’d like to help Moon Mountain Elementary School, the school with the large percentage of disadvantaged kids I mentioned earlier. I’ve spoken with the principal who says they could really use some help with tutoring and mentoring children, many of whom are from poor, largely illiterate families who don’t speak English. It has been shown over and over again that “hunger and poverty are partners of illiteracy and lack of education.”<sup>6</sup>

We’re praying and asking for one or two people from Moon Valley to become our liaison—a person who can stay in touch with the school administration, to report back to us specific needs on a monthly basis, and to coordinate help efforts. If you are interested in becoming a liaison or in helping as a tutor or mentor, please contact Pastor Jeff Merry.

2. Step One is a 140-bed transitional facility for people who are homeless, or trying to get back on their feet after treatment for substance addictions, or seeking refuge from abusive situations. Their needs are listed for you to consider. Mike Gardner, who is part of our church family, heads up the program and is our liaison. Please contact Mike to help.
3. We also have a fairly steady stream of needy or homeless people who come to us for help at Moon Valley. We consider each case individually and often provide food, and sometimes rent and utility assistance. We’re praying for a person or two to become our liaison—a person who can help us think

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<sup>6</sup> Donald E. Messer, “The New Urgency of an Old Challenge,” in *Ending Hunger Now: A Challenge to Persons of Faith*, by George McGovern, Bob Dole, and Donald E. Messer, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 5.

through ways in which we can better serve the people who come to us, and then help communicate and coordinate help efforts. Please contact Pastor Jeff Merry.

4. Domestically, we will continue to help the Shonto Indian community by supporting the church in Shonto. We'll be taking another trip this summer to help with a Vacation Bible School and some construction projects. Contact Scott and Andrea Cilley for more information on how you can help.
5. Also, we have adopted an inner-city church in New Orleans that was wiped out by Hurricane Katrina. The church is in an impoverished area, and has ministries for AIDS victims and unwed mothers. We'll provide more information soon on how you can help.
6. Internationally, we continue to support our missionaries—the Steels in Paraguay, the Harrises in Argentina. We will be providing more information in the next Missions Moment on how you can pray for them and help them.
7. And we will be supporting students from our midst who will be going on short-term missions trips this summer, including Laura Herrod to Peru and Jared Dubina to Guadalajara. If you'd like to support them, contact Galen Olsen.
8. There are two other ways you can give not listed on the Missions Moment, but you may want to write them down.
  - a. First, we have a ► Benevolence Fund to which you can donate that we use to help those in our church family in need of assistance. You can simply write "Benevolence Fund" in the memo part of your check.
  - b. Second, I am happy to endorse an organization called ► Food for the Hungry. You may recall that it was through Food for the Hungry that we gave thousands of dollars toward hurricane relief efforts a few months ago. Through them you can also sponsor an impoverished child in a third-world country for \$28 per month. Their website is at [www.fh.org](http://www.fh.org).

We will be asking Moon Valley Life Group leaders to pray with their Life Groups for these ministries, and to consider adopting one or more of them. For example, maybe your Life Group could adopt Moon Mountain Elementary School as your primary focus and commit, as a group, to helping out.

So, there are a few ways that you can join us in giving to the poor.

III. That leaves us with ► the third and final question to address: What can happen to us when we're generous or stingy?

Let's start with ► the stingy guy in our text. What happens to him? We are told that the stingy guy will suffer lack and have many curses. I've studied this some and I've come to the conclusion that this ain't good. In contrast, the generous guy will not lack, but instead will enjoy many blessings.

This goes right back to God's math I presented last Sunday. God's math goes like this. When the generous guy subtracts from all he has to give to the poor, God mysteriously adds back to the generous guy such that he has no lack. In fact, he ends up with more. Conversely, when the stingy guy chooses not to subtract but instead to ignore the poor in order to keep what he has, God subtracts from the stingy guy such that he ends up with less. He will suffer lack and, in that way, he gets curses instead of blessings.

What's up with ► the curses? What's that all about? It may sound like weird, voodoo-doll stuff. But it's not. The Hebrew word for curse carries the basic idea of being bound or hemmed in or limited or immobilized or rendered ineffective.<sup>7</sup> It's like having one hand tied behind your back. In fact, that's a pretty good word picture: If, as the body of Christ, we refuse to extend our hand to the poor, God will tie it behind our backs. And thus we will be less productive, we will be able to get less for ourselves, we will have less freedom, we will be more frustrated, and we will have a diminished capacity to receive and enjoy rewards in heaven—all because we're stingy.

Let me give you a biblical sampling of how generosity, or the lack of it, can affect various areas of your life. These are not guarantees; rather, they're descriptions of the way life usually works.

A. For example, generosity can affect your happiness. Proverbs ► 14:21 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 14:21**

He who despises his neighbor sins;  
But he who has mercy on the poor, happy *is* he.

B. Generosity ► can also affect your confidence and peace of mind. A good man is described in ► Psalm 112:5, 7. It says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Psalm 112:5**

A good man deals graciously and lends . . .  
<sup>9</sup> . . . He has given to the poor . . .

In the same psalm, it ► says of this good and generous man . . .

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<sup>7</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. “יָרַח לְרֵעֵהוּ,” (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980).

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Psalm 112:7** He will not be afraid of evil tidings; His heart is steadfast, trusting in the LORD.

<sup>8</sup> His heart *is* established;  
He will not be afraid . . .

- C. Generosity ► can also affect your health or even save your life. I'm not saying that the generous are always healthy. Nor am I saying that all sickness is a result of stinginess. But as a general rule, the generous will be better off physically. Psalm ► 41:1-3 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Psalm 41:1**

Blessed *is* he who considers the poor;

The LORD will deliver him in time of trouble.

► <sup>2</sup> The LORD will preserve him and keep him alive,

*And* he will be blessed on the earth;

You will not deliver him to the will of his enemies.

► <sup>3</sup> The LORD will strengthen him on his bed of illness;

You will sustain him on his sickbed.

- D. Generosity ► can also affect your own prosperity. Again, this is not a greedy, get-rich-quick formula. But God's math does work *for* the generous and *against* the stingy. Proverbs ► 11:24-25 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 11:24**

There is *one* who scatters, yet increases more;

And there is *one* who withholds more than is right, But it *leads* to poverty.

► <sup>25</sup> The generous soul will be made rich,

And he who waters will also be watered himself.

- E. Generosity ► can also affect your reputation. Proverbs ► 11:26 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 11:26**

The people will curse him who withholds grain,

But blessing *will be* on the head of him who sells *it*.

- F. And most importantly, ► generosity can affect your relationship with God. Proverbs ► 21:13 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Proverbs 21:13**

Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor

Will also cry himself and not be heard.

This goes right back to the idea that God takes our treatment of the poor personally. God says, "You close your ears to the poor, I'll close my ears to you. You hide your eyes from the poor, I'll hide my eyes from you."

This gives us strong motivation to have compassion for the poor and the needy. Here's the bottom line: The body of Christ needs some hands and feet to go with the mouth. Will you be the hands and feet?