

What do the poor need—even more than handouts? (13:23)

THE TEXT (NASB)

Abundant food is in the fallow ground of the poor, but it is swept away by injustice.

*Much food is in the tillage of the poor, but there is that is destroyed for want of judgement.
Classic KJV - Proverbs 13:23*

INTRODUCTION



Justice!

Sometimes people can take advantage of the poor, because the poor have no access to just laws and law enforcement. Often, in this world, a whole people is poor, not because they're lazy, but because they're ruled by a government of thieves. The civil authorities in a country control all the tools of physical force, and this makes them responsible to administer justice.

If the police, judges, and lawmakers are corrupt, then the poor have little hope. But, from a spiritual perspective, it can be even worse to be powerful than poor!



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COMMENTARY

Translation

Unfortunately, the KJV rendering can be read as saying that the poor are hampered by a lack of “judgement,” a failure in their own management skills. Though this is sometimes true, I question the translation, since the poor always have the local knowledge and urgent necessity to make the most of their land. How could the poor have the foresight to let some land lie fallow, unless they’d stored up or reserved some of the abundance of past years? A clue is found in the Hebrew word מִשְׁפָּט (miš•pāṭ, pronounced “mish-pat”). In the KJV, miš•pāṭ is translated as “judgement,” but elsewhere in Proverbs, it’s normally rendered, “justice.” So this proverb states that the fallow ground of the poor could yield much food, but it’s destroyed through “no justice” or injustice (as in the ESV). Perhaps the unjust sweep up their reserves.

Uncultivated Land



Land is normally left unplanted, “fallow,” so that the soil can renew itself for future harvests. But that’s not the only reason. Sometimes people neglect to cultivate their fields, if they can’t enjoy the fruits of their own labour. I know of a farmer in communist Cuba, during a drought in the 1990s, who tended carefully the small patch of healthy corn by his hut, watering by hand what he had to keep for his family. The rest of the land, devoted to the state, remained neglected. Some of the poor are kept poor through no fault of their own.

We can see the failure of communism or socialism in Venezuela under the leadership first of Hugo Chavez (1999) and then Nicolas Maduro (2013). Both embraced strict communist economic policies, and their country is dying as a result. Even Venezuela’s vast mineral wealth in oil, gold, iron, and diamonds means nothing when badly managed. *The Guardian News* reported (12 February 2018) that, “Once Latin America’s richest country, Venezuela is today facing the world’s worst inflation crisis. The IMF [International Monetary Fund] projects inflation will reach 13,000% this year and the economy will shrink 15%.” The managers of atheistic communism are still experts in making and keeping people poor.

Reasons for Poverty



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There are at least two sorts of poverty: Self-induced or unjust. Thus the application of a single solution to eliminate poverty, like a guaranteed annual income, is misguided and unwise social engineering. Note that the criterion used here to identify the poor is their lack of food. The Bible teaches that poverty means the lack of food and shelter (1 Timothy 6:7-9). When the poor have no land of their own, or no resources with which to earn a living, they are truly impoverished and without hope.

Those who have no land or tangible assets lack the ability to leverage their labour, to amplify their work and increase their productivity. They may unfortunately turn to lotteries or gambling to have some hope in gaining wealth. If a government is corrupt, the poor suffer the most. It's ironic that much gambling is government-sponsored and therefore little more than an unjust and pathetic tax on the poor. This speaks to the need for private property as a basis for a thriving economy. The true measure of the justice and productivity of a government or company is its dealings with its poorest citizens or employees.

Hinduism and Poverty



In his outstanding book on world religions, Indian author Vishal Mangalwadi describes the plight of India under the Hindu belief in karma, unforgiving fate:



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For thousands of years, the absence of effective law, order, and justice had exacted a debilitating toll from our [common] people... coerced into thinking that it was unwise to be wealthy. Wealth, at least its display, was an invitation to trouble. If a [poor] family did manage to save some money for a 'rainy day,' they neither invested it in comfortable living nor in generating more money. Instead, they dug their cash and jewelry into their floors and walls, burying their wealth. This timidity and fearfulness is typical of cultures that teach people to hoard their meager capital. Families dare not 'squander' it on cultural creativity and personal advancement. Our neighbors lived in the same design of mud huts as their ancestors had two millennia earlier. Our history was frozen. An absence of savings and investment had ensured that no one invented agricultural or domestic appliances. India stagnated while the West advanced. Dreaming, investing and changing the status quo takes courage; but courage to melt an ice age does not grow in all cultural climates.¹

OUR CREATOR, REDEEMER, AND FRIEND

Jesus preached the Gospel ("good news") to the poor; others have preferred wealthier audiences, cursing the poor.

Proclaiming God's gift of free salvation to the poor was as amazing as the blind receiving sight, the deaf hearing, and the dead being raised back to life (Luke 7:22). Almost alone among prophets, Jesus did not favour the wealthy (Matthew 22:16).

Jesus was kind to all, regardless of their financial status. Wealth can sadly harden people and make them think they don't need God (Proverbs 30:9a, Revelation 3:17). The good news of the Gospel—God's provision of eternal life for all humanity—cannot be hoarded by the privileged rich!

APPLICATION



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- Memorize the text in your favourite Bible translation and think about it often.
- Speak up for the poor.
- Don't take advantage of those who are vulnerable.
- Encourage government leaders to administer justice rather than proliferating government programs.

Which of these steps, if any, does Jesus want you to take now? Ask Him.



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KEY WORDS

capital, communist, envy, farming, food, gambling, government, guarantee, incentive, injustice, justice, less assets (quantity), ownership, poor (rāš pronounced “rash”), private property, taxes, of serving others

ILLUSTRATION

Who is Self-Centered Sam?



Self-Centered Sam looks out for number one. Who's that? It's Sam, of course! Sam doesn't consider himself to be self-centered. One of his favourite books is [“The Richest Man in Babylon.”](#)

What does Sam do with his income? The cream, the very best goes to his own long-term growth fund. His motto is ‘pay yourself first.’ Some call him Stingy Sam. But he's not stingy; he's just making careful preparation for his own future, comfort, and well-being. He is part of the “me” generation. He typifies the Maslow's hierarchy of needs with self-actualization as apex of all values. Sam is a dedicated humanist. He doesn't recognize any higher power than himself. He's a tough negotiator.

Sam doesn't ignore charity. But how could he possibly help anyone one else unless there was something in it for him? Therefore any and all charitable donations must have full and public credit given to the donor. The more people are aware of his generosity the better. After all, a little bit of advertising is good for business. When his corporation gives a gift it comes as a percentage of profits, not revenues.



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His financial hero is the multi-millionaire, whose assets once exceeded the entire US treasury:
The great Railroad and Steamship Baron [Cornelius Vanderbilt](#).



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FOOTNOTES

1. "The Book That Made Your World - How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization" by Vishal Mangalwadi 2011 Thomas Nelson, Page 28

