

What are the wrong ways to treat the rich and poor? (22:16)

He who oppresses the poor to make much for himself, or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty.

THE TEXT (NASB)

He who oppresses the poor to make much for himself, or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty.

He that oppresseth the poor to increase his riches, and he that giveth to the rich, shall surely come to want. KJV - Proverbs 22:16

INTRODUCTION



Watch out! Don't treat the rich and poor the same way, lest you hurt yourself.

Some tactics that look like they will improve your finances actually backfire. You think you're going to get more, but end up with less.

The text describes two financial tactics that are very different, yet lead to the same place: **Poverty.**



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COMMENTARY

Speaking to the Wealthy

Let's look at them each individually, but first notice that the text is addressed to someone with power and resources. It addresses someone in a position of wealth and influence. Someone must first have a measure of wealth before he can **oppress the poor** or **give to the rich**. Thus the text is a warning to those who are not poor, but have a discretionary surplus. They have extra, but it needs to be handled properly. This speaks to most of the population in North America and Europe.

Translation

Note that the NASB and KJV translations are very similar; the text is apparently simple to translate. However the German translation and the K&D alternate translation suggest that the text could be rendered as: By oppressing the poor, you are in fact giving to the rich and that will lead to certain poverty.

The Tanakh translation of the Holy Scriptures by the Jewish Publication society puts it this way, "To profit by withholding what is due to the poor is like making gifts to the rich—pure loss."

The Hebrew word for *poor*, דָּל (dāl, pronounced "dahl"), refers primarily to poverty coming from weakness or humility. This could refer to an abuse of children in forcing child labor.

The Hebrew word for *only*, אַךְ (akh, pronounced "ahk"), denotes emphasis and restriction. This means that both oppression of the poor and favoritism toward the rich, definitely (surely) lead to poverty. There's no doubt about it.

The first part of the text speaks of the poor oppressing the poor to make much for himself. The giver's selfish motive is clearly stated. The second part of the text does not state the motive for giving to the rich, but selfish motives are implied since it brings evil results on the giver. It matches the first part of Proverbs 13:11 where wealth evaporates whenever it is obtained fraudently, such as giving wealth to those who don't need it.

Double Trouble

Note the conjunction in the text is "or," not "and." This means that either action leads to poverty. Imagine the plight of those who naively practice both. That's what the German translation implies. A person who withholds aid from the poor in effect is helping the rich, and ending in poverty. Having said that, it's noteworthy that the conjunction is absent in the Hebrew. Thus the greater of the two evils is oppressing the poor for personal profit.

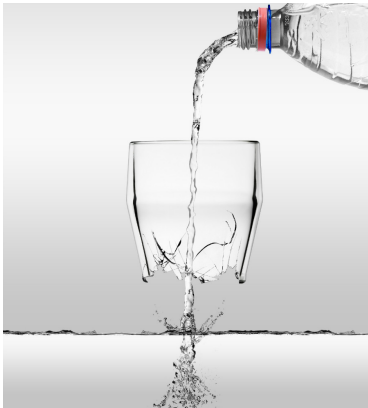


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Why would someone want to oppress the poor? The poor are:

1. Often needing money and will tolerate abuse.
2. Often without access to external aid (e.g. legal counsel)—easy prey.
3. Often weak and put up little resistance.
4. Sometimes accustomed to being bullied and don't fight back.
5. Sometimes gullible and easy to deceive.



How do oppressors hurt the poor?

1. By robbing them of the little they have.
2. By paying them wages and benefits below the market norm.
3. By delaying payment of their earnings.
4. By issuing them loans with interest rates above the market norm.
5. By making them work excessive hours or under unhealthy conditions.

Why would someone give to the rich since they aren't needy?

1. To gain the favour of the rich for some future benefit.
2. To appear to be rich themselves.
3. To avoid giving anything to the poor, perhaps out of contempt of the poor.

In the context of retail selling, the text speaks against the policy of uniform, inflexible pricing. For example the Canadian grocery chain, *Sobey's*, unlike many others refuses to sell day-old produce at a discount. Instead they dispose of any food or product that has exceeded its store shelf-life. Many of the poor look for bargains. Oppression pains the poor more than the rich. The poor have less cushions to act as shock absorbers. The text speaks in favour of income and asset tests being used by governments prior to doling out welfare payments.

Commentaries and Clarification

1. Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges: *The Proverb describes "two opposite methods of self-aggrandizement, grinding the poor and currying favour with the rich, have a common end in*



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penury."

2. Amplified Bible: *He who oppresses or exploits the poor to get more for himself Or who gives to the rich [to gain influence and favor], will only come to poverty.*

3. Biblical Illustrator - Avarice -SYCOPHANCY¹: *"He that giveth to the rich." Avarice, whilst tyrannic to the poor, is servile to the rich. The wealth it gets it employs with a miserable, crawling baseness, to win the favour and command the smiles of the wealthy and the great. A fawning sycophancy will eat out the true manhood of the civilized world. Souls bow down before the glitter of wealth and the pageantry of power.*

4. New International Commentary² *This text describes two methods of self-aggrandizement that back-fire. "Gifts were made to the rich not out of love but to secure their favor... The giver to the rich is unrighteous, for when the righteous give, they enrich (Proverbs 22:9), not diminish (Proverbs 21:26). The juxtaposition of one who takes money from the poor, who needs it, with the one who gives to the rich, how does not need it, points up the folly. For example, ' It happens when executives are paid exorbitant sums....and overwork their remaining employees.' ... The paradoxical outcome for the oppressor and self-aggrandizer is due to the eyes of the LORD, who protects his moral imperium. (...Proverbs 14:31, Proverbs 15:25, Proverbs 17:5, Proverbs 22:12, Proverbs 22:22-23)*

Delayed Consequence with the Final Judge



Note that poverty does not follow immediately. There is a delayed reaction. God is the one who removes the wealth of those who oppress the poor and of those who give to the rich. No one, but no one, escapes God's final judgement on his financial resources. The word **only** is translated as *surely* in the KJV, implying that the consequences of either of these two foolish financial strategies is certain poverty.



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OUR CREATOR, REDEEMER, AND FRIEND

Jesus never played favourites. He did not prefer the rich over the poor. Thinking of super long term planning, Jesus recommended throwing a party for the poor rather than for rich friends, so that our rewards would come directly from God, even if we enjoy them *after* our physical death. Consider the investment strategy described in Luke 14:12-14.

When Jesus died, his only worldly assets were the clothes on His back, yet during His public service Jesus and his disciples habitually gave to the poor.

When confronted with a huge financial gift, Judas Iscariot, the treasurer of the group, said that it should have been given to the poor (Mark 14:5, John 12:5, 6). Even though Judas used to pilfer the treasury, he recommended a cash gift to the poor since it would likely be acceptable to the others. Financial aid to the poor was also standard in the early church (Galatians 2:10). Again, the underlying motives of Judas were not benevolent, but his proposed use of money by necessity needed to be viewed as noble and normal practice for the apostles. Jesus gave to the poor regularly (Acts 20:35).

APPLICATION

- Memorize the text in your favourite Bible translation and think about it often.
- Be very careful not to take advantage of those who are poorer than you.
- Be generous, but first investigate charities to make sure they are genuinely deserving. Be careful not to overly esteem high "net worth" clients or give them undue treatment simply because they are wealthy.
- Someone once said: You can't take it with you, but you *can* send it on ahead. If you are heaven-bound, wise, charitable donations are really everlasting investments.

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



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KEY WORDS

benefits, justice, less assets (quantity), oppression, poor (dāl pronounced “dahl”), poverty, rich, social assistance, bf sharing

ILLUSTRATION

Who is Generous Genevieve?



Generous Genevieve loves to give and has a big heart. Sometimes she chuckles to herself as she gives her gifts. Now here's a secret about her giving: She only gives to those who really need it—not just to anyone who asks for a handout. She gives because she thinks it's the right thing to do.

Strangely enough, the more she gave to those in genuine need, the more she got back. Some people give in order to get, but she considers that mere trading. Generous Genevieve gives for the sheer thrill of it. By giving she is keeping herself from emotional cancer. Emotional cancer, also known as greed, can take over one's heart and destroy their ability to enjoy even the simple things of life. Genevieve gives in order to increase her giving capacity.

Sometimes it hurts Genevieve to give. Sometimes she is short of cash because she has given to someone else, but that shortage doesn't last long.

Genevieve believes that there is always a reward for giving to those in need. She thinks that her generosity will come back to her benefit sooner or later. She coined the expression, “What goes



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around—comes around.”



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FOOTNOTES

1. Sycophancy is a behaviour in which someone praises powerful or rich people in a way that is not sincere, usually in order to get some advantage from them.

Examples from *The Cambridge Dictionary*: 1.1 He said that he would try to find the narrow landing strip between sycophancy and rebellion. 1.2 I hope that from me he will get neither unfair attack nor sycophancy.

2. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament Book of Proverbs Chapters 15-31*, Bruce K. Waltke, W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2005, page 216.

