

Are there any benefits to poverty? (18:23)

The poor man utters supplications but the rich man answers roughly.

THE TEXT (NASB)

The poor man utters supplications but the rich man answers roughly.

The poor useth intreaties; but the rich answereth roughly. KJV - Proverbs 18:23

INTRODUCTION



Poverty can have at least one benefit: Sometimes it can encourage in us the happiest virtue of Humility.

A boy I knew got his first job as an attendant at a full-service gas station. He found that the friendlier people usually drove cheaper cars, while the drivers of luxurious vehicles were commonly rude to him. So says this proverb: A poor man can be unassuming and meek, while a rich man is often impatient and arrogant.

Poverty can help us learn personal humility; but why does this happen, and only sometimes?



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COMMENTARY

This proverb again is descriptive, not prescriptive, painting the sad picture of an unfortunate reality. Note how the *Good News Bible* translates it: “When the poor speak, they have to be polite, but when the rich answer, they are rude.” In the *Contemporary English Version* we read: “The poor must beg for help, but the rich can give a harsh reply.” This may imply that the poor ask, while the rich answer. Asking truly appropriate questions is usually wiser than giving answers of any kind.

Classic Comments

In Albert Barnes’ *Notes on the Bible* (ca. 1830), we read this paradox: “The poor man, of whom one might expect roughness, supplicates; the rich, well nurtured, from whom one might look for courtesy, answers harshly and brusquely.”

The *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* (ca. 1850) interprets: “The proverb expresses a fact of experience as a consolation to the poor, to whom, if a rich man insults him, nothing unusual occurs, and as a warning to the rich that he may not permit himself to be divested of humanity by mammon.”

The *Jamieson, Fausset and Brown* (JFB) Commentary (ca. 1870) observes that rudeness is tolerated more in the rich than in the poor, so wealth clouds our sense of etiquette and justice.

My father, Erwin Lipp, used to say, “When a rich man does something wrong, he made a mistake. When a poor man does something wrong, he is stupid.”

The Humble Are Often Quiet

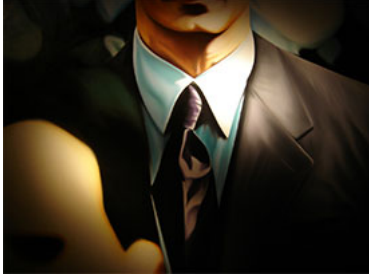
I once attended the farewell party for a senior vice president of a major oil company. As he was delivering his parting speech, this man at the back of the room was engaging in loud conversation. Heads turned. The boor was the new president of the company. So no one—me included—would ask him to pipe down. Sadly, the rich and powerful can abuse their position and easily bully others, without even noticing it themselves—such is the power of habits: Vices and virtues. There are depths to this proverb.

Translations: *Rich man, Poor man, Supplications*



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The Hebrew term for “a rich man” here, עשיר (ʾā•šîr, pronounced “ah-sheer”), is a single word, often rendered “the rich” or “rich person.” The “poor man” is the Hebrew word, רש (rāš, pronounced “rash”), used frequently in Proverbs. The Hebrew for supplications, תחנון (tă•hănûn, pronounced “ta-ha-noon”), is used eighteen times in the Bible, but only once in Proverbs. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT) says it indicates “the outpourings of a troubled soul and is used in parallel to ‘weepings’ in Jeremiah.” So the “supplications” in Jeremiah were accompanied with tears. They were not fanciful wishes, but desperate pleas for help. Tă•hănûn is used first (in any English Bible) at 2 Chronicles 6:21, when King Solomon asked God Almighty to be gracious to him and his people. In all its uses, it describes someone begging for help out of deep humility, and sometimes sorrowful contrition (Zechariah 12:10).

Pride versus Humility

Poverty necessitates courteous civility, while wealth permits an attitude of smug independence. The poor know they need others, and do not want to offend, lest they ruin their chances for help. The rich often feel that they don’t need material help from others and can be aloof and rude. Humility shows an awareness of personal need, while arrogance supposes that it needs nothing. The poor are more likely to ask God for help, because they have to, and they have more practice in asking help. In my experience, street people asking for spare change speak politely to me, calling me “Sir,” and if I refuse, many (though not all) reply “God bless” or “Have a good day.” Is it sincere? It is practiced, a real habit.

The mere possession of wealth may slowly transform childhood humility to prideful adulthood. We may not notice the change in our habits—the change in us. God may keep some of us poor, because He knows that riches will corrupt us. Humility appreciates everything in our lives, and gratitude is close to happiness. Pride is dissatisfied with everything around us, and discontent is close to misery. If we cultivate the habit of gratitude for everything, then we can bring that gratitude before the throne of God in prayer, and that gratitude is close to joy.

On Being a Better Beggar



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Poverty improves our begging skills. How can we be better beggars? Whoa—are we kidding? Better beggars? Who wants to be a beggar at all? At all costs, we want to avoid begging.

Forget about improving our “begging skills”—that was my reaction, until I had the disturbing thought, also found in Matthew Henry’s classic Commentary (ca. 1710):

Poverty, though many inconveniences to the body attend it, has often a good effect upon the spirit, for it makes men humble and submissive, and mortifies their pride. It teaches them to use entreaties. When necessity forces men to beg it tells them they must not prescribe or demand, but take what is given them and be thankful. At the throne of God’s grace we are all poor, and must use entreaties, not answer, but make application... as a pauper.

Similarly, in John Gill’s *Exposition of the Entire Bible* (ca. 1750) we read: “The poor is an humble suppliant to others for favours he asks in a submissive and lowly manner; he does not demand anything, nor prescribe what shall be done for him, but modestly tells his case, and submits it; so such who are poor in spirit are humble supplicants at the throne of grace.”

When we stand before our Creator, the Almighty, All-knowing God, how do we view ourselves? What would we be without Him? Until we properly relate to our Creator we will not be complete as individuals, but we must recognize His greatness and our puniness.

Everyday Steps to Better Begging:



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- Be respectful to any potential helpers;
- Be retiring and avoid arguments;
- Be patient and politely persistent;
- Be prepared to take “no” for an answer;
- Do not try to sell, trade or offer anything as you beg;
- Say “thank you,” if you receive anything;
- Be absolutely convinced of your need for help.

Being a beggar isn't so bad, if you know from whom you're asking favours. There's no unhappiness in approaching God Almighty as a beggar. God does not respect the proud. He does not prefer the dignified. Quite the contrary: “God opposes the proud but gives grace (favours) to the humble,” James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5. The poor know they need help, but the rich think they need nothing. They're wrong.

More Classic Comments

In Matthew Henry's Commentary we read:



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A prosperous condition, though it has many advantages, has often this mischief attending it, that it makes men proud, haughty, and imperious: The rich answers the entreaties of the poor roughly, as Nabal answered David's messengers with railing. It is a very foolish humour of some rich men, especially those who have risen from little, that they think their riches will warrant them to give hard words, and, even where they not design any rough dealing, that it becomes them to answer roughly, whereas gentlemen ought to be gentle (James 3:17).

Similarly, in his *Exposition of the Entire Bible*, John Gill says, "Being proud and haughty, lifted up with their riches, and in fear of none, they answer others with hard and rough words, especially their inferiors, and particularly the poor. This is not what ought to be, but what commonly is."

Charles Bridges, in his *Commentary on Proverbs* (1846), advises the wealthy, "to consider how much more dependent is he upon his God, than his meanest [poorest] brother is upon himself... Yes all of us are alike before the throne of grace. All of us must use entreaties here."

More Contemporary Comments

Pastor, author and song writer Mark Altrogge expressed it well in his blog (13 May 2013), when he quoted Jesus, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," Matthew 5:3. Altrogge went on to say that those who recognize their desperate need of God's help are the ones who are truly blessed. The world says to think highly of yourself, but before God Almighty, we are all in deep trouble, because of our rebellion and consistent imperfection. Sometimes, again sometimes, financial poverty can prompt a sense of spiritual poverty, which is a wonderful benefit.



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OUR CREATOR, REDEEMER, AND FRIEND

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit because theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” Matthew 5:3.

The Greek word for “poor” is better translated as “beggar.” Imagine that! The only ones who get into heaven are those who ask—who beg for it! Heaven can’t be earned, not even in part. Eternal life is a free gift (Romans 6:23) and if anyone thinks that they can contribute something of value to merit entrance into heaven, the abode of the Holy God, then they have not understood that all human acts of goodness are, in the eyes of a Holy God, as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

The more we know God, the more we know our unworthiness, and the happier we are.

APPLICATION

- Memorize the text in your favourite Bible translation and think about it often.
- Consider how you address those poorer than you. Are you polite or rude?
- Analyze your own attitude towards God. Apart from God, do you consider yourself rich or poor?
- Humbly ask God to cover your daily expenses. Beg of God and prosper.

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



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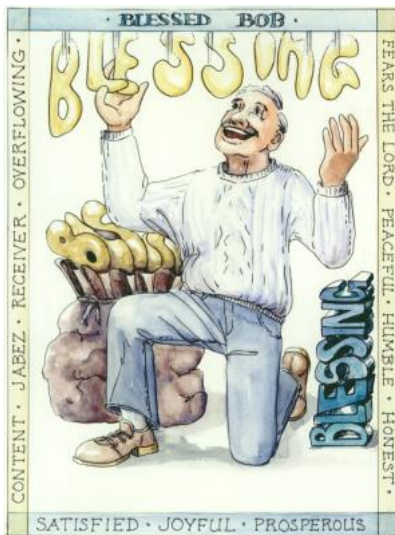
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KEY WORDS

benefits, better life (quality), contentment, humility, poor (rāš pronounced “rash”), prayer, pride, rich, poverty

ILLUSTRATION

[Who is Blessed Bob?](#)



Blessed Bob is very fortunate. He recognizes that good things come from God! God is shunned by many, but not by Bob. Bob loves God. He wants to receive all the good things that God has for him. He's not too proud to ask God for help. In fact, Bob prays often. Some think that he prays without ceasing. But he is not without fault. Blessed Bob makes many mistakes, and when he does, he admits his errors. He corrects them and presses on.

Bob gets so many blessings he feels overwhelmed. His cup overflows. But he doesn't hoard his blessings. Like Generous Genevieve, Blessed Bob likes to give to others. He is truly prosperous, even though there are many who are financially richer than he is.

We see examples of Blessed Bob in the Bible in the lives of Job and Joseph. Job went through some very good times (Job 29:2-25) and some very bad times (Job 2:7-8). Joseph had similar financial cycles (Genesis 39:2,21). Both men kept their focus on God, not on their financial condition (Job 1:21, Genesis 50:19-21).

More recently we have examples of those who have lived with the same life focus. R. G. LeTourneau was the inventor of the largest earth moving machines in the 1930's and 1940's. He credited God for his tremendous success. He gave away much of his wealth while he was



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still living saying that, "When I shovel money out to God's interests, God shovels money back to me, but God's shovel is bigger than mine." He was called the mover of men and mountains because of his great work and influence. On his gravestone, R. G. LeTourneau left all visitors with these words, SEEK YE FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS AND ALL THESE THINGS SHALL BE ADDED UNTO YOU MATTHEW 6:33.

Blessed Bob is full of joy. He is satisfied with life!

