

One of my favorite quotes from the church father's is from Augustine. I love it so much that I have to resist quoting it most weeks. But he says, his only worry when he preaches is that the force of the Bible's words may be obscured. Because when "folks can't interpret the Bible to suit their own views, they claim that clear and obvious words are obscure and uncertain: they can't call his words wicked and wrong."

He hits us all right on the head. We like to say the Bible is confusing whenever it convicts and challenges us. This morning is one of those times. The question we are going to ask the Bible is "when is it wise to give to the poor?" And that Bible's answer in Proverbs 19:17 is one we will want to call confusing. It is pretty clear what the answer is, but I don't think any of us will like it.

I want us to try and put our excuses to the side. To not try and find exceptions or reasons to call the Bible confusing. And instead to listen to what God's Word teaches us.

And like I mentioned last week. I want us to see what this proverb means in like of Jesus and the gospel. Turn with me to Proverbs 19:17.

I. Give generously to the poor (Proverbs 19:17).

The answer to our question is yes.

We are to give and to give generously.

Our primary attitude needs to be one of generosity

Our immediate spirit in our first response is not one of suspicion or a doubt or rejection when asked to give.

To be wise is to be generous to the poor.

"Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord." Proverbs 19:17

We will talk about the second part of this in a few minutes.

But we need to see it is calling us to generosity.

The wise thing to do and the Christian thing to do and the biblical thing to do and the gospel centered thing to do is to be generous to the poor.

This would not have been news to Israel.
It would have been a well known proverb.
It would have wisdom they heard.
And it would have been something they heard over and over in the Bible.
They were actually commanded and given several laws about this.
Giving to the poor was not optional for God's people.
It is not something they could do if they felt generous.
Or maybe they could give to this poor person but not that one.
It was something they were supposed to do.

There were many different commands to be generous to the poor.
Some of them were laws.
Some of them were commands.
And some of them were taxes.

Maybe the easiest example for us to get is from the book of Ruth.
You may remember Ruth goes to Boaz's field and asks to pick up some of the leftovers.
Whenever Boaz's workers dropped something or missed something, they were to leave it for the poor.

That was not generous; it was the law.
Moses commanded them to do this in all of their fields.
That they leave sections of their field for the poor, for the widow, for the orphan, and the immigrant.
That is one of the commands.

Farmers are also commanded to leave the corners of their fields.
Leviticus 23:22 tells them to not harvest everything.
To deliberately leave part of their lands and fields there so the poor can have it.

One of the biggest ways that a nation were commanded to care for the poor was the Sabbath year

Their calendar was meant to follow seven year cycles.
And every seven years all debts are forgiven.
Anyone who has lost everything and found themselves in debt will have it wiped clean and they can start again.

In anyone who has been a slave, which often came from poverty.
After seven years all the slaves were set free.
And every 7th Sabbath year will be a year of jubilee.
All the property was to go back to the original family who owned it.

Because all of the land in Israel was given by God.
And it was given to particular tribes and to particular families.
And God wanted every generation to have another chance.
If you had lost everything, your children could get the land back in the year of jubilee.

There are also three tithes Israel had.
Three main taxes they were to pay.
One of them was a poor tithe.
It is every third year and every sixth year there to take 10% from their lands 10% of all that they gain.
And that 10% went to the priests, and the orphans, and the widows, and immigrants, and the poor.

Then, after the commands of the Sabbath year, Moses goes on in Deuteronomy 15.

"Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near,' and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin. ¹⁰ You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹ For there will never cease to be poor in the

land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'

They are commanded to be generous.

To be above and beyond what they think the poor deserve.

What they think they are owed.

Or even what they think is wise.

God commands us to be generous.

All of this is just the baseline. It is the commandment.

If they refuse to do it, they are in sin. They need to go to the temple, make sacrifices, plead to God for forgiveness, repent, and then go and give generously to the poor.

I want us to see that the default position for God's people from the time of Moses has been generosity.

And if the year of Sabbath and the year of Jubilee are the baseline and they are to go above it.

And this is what Boaz does.

So this is not about giving, it is about giving generously.

It is the kind of giving that Boaz does when he sees Ruth, and then he tells his workers drop extra in front of Ruth.

The generous is then what he does above and beyond what is expected and what is commanded by the law and make sure that she goes home with plenty and gets more than leftovers.

The idea of generosity is going above and beyond.

It's going above what is expected it is going above what is commanded.

Even if we don't think they deserve it.

But for us we do not begin with generosity.

When the poor are put before us, we usually have questions.

There are plenty of people who walk in the church or call us on the phone and ask for money or for help.

My reaction is probably exactly the same one you would have.

I have questions.

And my questions are all geared towards the same thing.

I'm trying to find out if this is a legitimate need.

I'm trying to find out if I'm getting scammed.

We lived in Dallas for a number of years and the seminary campus is right in the middle of Dallas.

And our seminary was incredibly close to a lot of people who are homeless, and who are living on the streets for one reason or another.

Every time I pumped gas by our apartment I would get approached by someone.

My work was right next to a shelter, and there were camps and hundreds of homeless people right outside.

Every exit off of the highway intersection had people at each stop with signs.

So I got jaded.

And my default position quickly became, I am not giving you anything.

I don't believe you.

I don't think you deserve for me to give you something.

I don't think it would be wise for me to give you anything.

Half the time it seemed like a scam, or there are shelters nearby that would help you. Or I thought they were an addict who would just use it on alcohol or drugs.

So, I'll be honest, most of the time I did not give people anything.

Because I wasn't convinced it was a good idea.

I wasn't convinced that it was wise.

But this first is one of the verses that God has done a great work in my own heart.

Because passages like this kind of ruin my excuses.

Because generous implies going above and beyond
It goes above and beyond in giving to those who deserve it.
Is it uniquely Christian generosity to give to someone who deserves it,
won't waste it, and needs it?
Is that the kind of generosity only those who know Jesus would give?
Or is that just the kind of generosity that everybody would do no matter
who we were because as logical and wise it makes sense?

The wisdom of the Bible is simply that we give.
We give cheerfully.
We give generously.
And we give to the poor even when we think they don't deserve it.
We decide ahead of time to give.
Our default position is, we have already decided to give you already
decided to be generous to the poor
And so now we are just looking for opportunities to say yes to God to walk
in obedience

The question isn't "Will I give to the poor today?"
The assumption is that we will.
The question is only how.

And if we can make that shift in our thinking, it can help us be more like
Jesus
This is a shift that Brianna and I have made in our own finances.
It took time and happened gradually.

We decided we would tithe to the Lord.
We set aside 10% for the Lord.
You don't have to do that, but we want to be generous to God too.
And then we decided to set aside more on top of that to give.
It is just a category in our budget.
We have already decided to be generous and give.
Now we just look for chances to be generous and to give.

Deciding to do this helped change my attitude and the way I viewed people.

Now, there is room to discuss whether or not we should give some times.
Or whether or not it is always wise.
But too often we start with no.
We want people to earn our giving.
But the Bible never commands us to have that kind of wisdom.
It commands us to just be generous.

II. Because to do so is giving generously to Jesus (Prov 19:17; Matthew 25:31-46)

"Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord." Proverbs 19:17
And here's really why I think this when you look at the last half of this verse.
When we are generous to the poor, who is ultimately getting our money?
When do you lend your money to people who cannot pay you back and probably will not pay you back and may even waste the money that you have given.
Where does the money go?
Does it ever go to waste?
The Bible tells us that our money is actually going to the Lord.
When you give to the poor, you are not actually giving to the poor you are giving to Jesus.
When we give to those who are needy with Christian generosity, we are giving to God.

If we can get this, it will radically change us.
We need to remember this when the moment comes and someone who is poor is in front of us in need.
The question is not "will I lend to this person?"
The question is "will I lend to the Lord?"
Because this person who is needy, this person who is poor in front of you, is someone who is standing in for God.

When I started to look at it this way, it changed my interactions.
I'm not saying that I always try to give everybody money every time that I could.

But I said yes, a lot more often.

And a lot more of the time I was willing to listen to the Lord.

My question no longer is just is this person that wise to give them money or is it not the question was God do you want me to?

A caveat is that I do believe there is a good reason to not give it times.
I do believe that there are instances where it is unwise or that it can be harmful if you just continue to give and give and give to somebody who isn't making good decisions.

I can think of instances, even as a church, we have been unbelievably generous to people, and they've continued to ask and we felt like they hadn't learned and so eventually we started to have conversations about what needs to change for us to keep giving.

OK, I'm saying there is a place for that.

However, but I have often found is that if we're honest with ourselves, we can use this as an excuse to never give.

We can make our default position not generosity.

Default position is I'm not giving anything to anybody unless I know for sure they ain't gonna waste it.

Or that we will not give to anybody until it can be proven to me that it is a good investment and a good person to lend to.

All I am saying is that I can't find anywhere in scripture where that is how we are commanded to approach the poor.

Instead we are commanded to give and give generously.

And when we lend, we are actually lending to God and to Jesus.

And if he is commanding, and if he has asked for us to give generously, even to those who seem undeserving, I think we can trust Him with our investment, even if it doesn't make a lot of sense.

This is what makes Christian generosity Christian.
It is not that we do something that other people are not is that we give because we're giving to God.
We are willing to give even if it seems unwise.

Jesus even intensifies this and spells it out in Matthew 25.

Jesus is talking about the final judgment that will come.
And part of what he says is gonna determine who is judged and blessed and who sent into eternal punishment
It is those who gave to the poor.
Those who were willing to give even to the least of these.

Jesus says those who gave him food, and when he was thirsty gave him drink, and when he was a stranger, welcomed him into their home.
Those people will be blessed.

And they ask "when did we do this?"

"And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'"

The least of these tells us that many of these people deserved to be hungry and thirsty and strangers.
The people we think are reaping natural consequences of their choices.
Those who should have worked harder.

But Jesus says what you did to them you actually did to me.
When you lended to them, you were lending to the Lord.
When you fed them, you were feeding Jesus.

"And he will repay him for his deed." Proverbs 19:17

Jesus explicitly reaffirms the proverbs.
When we give to the stranger and when we give to those who are in need, we really are giving to Jesus.

And there is the part of the proverb that tells us he pays us.

And that is part of the judgment.
Those who know Jesus and are disciples of Him will give to the poor.
They will give to the least of these.
Those who do not know Jesus will not.
And they be will punished for eternity.

In many ways, it is a marker of whether or not we have placed our faith in Jesus or whether or not we actually love Jesus or not.
Whether we give to the least.

There are many different ways we can tell if someone is walking with Jesus and tell if they are filled with the Holy Spirit or if they're bearing the fruit of the spirit.
One of the ways Jesus gives here is that those who know Jesus are generous to the poor and those in need.
And those who do not know, Jesus are not generous.

But I don't want us to get this totally confused.
The gospel is not that we give money to the poor and then we are saved.
It's not the lie of the church in the middle age of this work here give to the church and by indulgences, and then your sins can be forgiven.
But Jesus does command us to give.
And that for me is one of the most challenging things.
But we do it.
Not because the least of these deserve it.
Not because we owe it to them.
We give because it is giving to Jesus.
And He asked us to.
That is what makes this Christian wisdom.
And that is what makes it Christian generosity.

III. And because Jesus gave generously to us (Eph. 2:8).

I reminded us last week that Christian wisdom must be informed by the gospel.

Our wisdom has to be shaped by Jesus.

So, what does the gospel have to do with giving to the poor?

The world might tell us that it is kind and altruistic.

Or that there is something nice about it.

Because being generous helps us feel better.

But the gospel gives us another reason to be generous.

It informs why we do this.

We do not do it because it is a good investment.

In fact, we might even give when it makes no logical sense.

And we do so because this is what Jesus did for us.

The gospel is the story of God coming to give good news to the poor. It was the very passage Christ read in the temple when He accounted Himself.

Jesus does not owe us salvation.

He did not have to come and save us.

We were all lost and dead in our sin.

We had no hope of salvation.

We were slaves stuck in a debt we could never ever pay.

And yet, Jesus came to pay our debt.

Jesus died in our place.

He came to serve and to love the poor and the unwanted.

Those who had nothing at all to offer Him.

You see, we always get it wrong when we talk about giving.

Whenever we have discussions of who we should and should not give to.

When we try to game out whether giving to this person is helpful or actually harmful.

When we think about the homeless or those panhandling on the side of the road.

We think of ourselves as those who are not poor.

And we believe we should be the deciders of if they are deserving or not.

But the gospel tells us that we are the poor.

We are the addict who has lost everything because we cannot let go of our sin no matter how many chances we get.

And yet, Jesus shows us grace.

We are the homeless who has been cast out of paradise and lost our heavenly home because we can't follow the simple rules.

And yet, Jesus shows us grace.

We are the poor who cannot escape the debt of our own bad choices.

We are the poor who cannot fix themselves no matter how hard we work.

Whatever the worst things you think of those people over there who are poor.

That is us.

That is who the gospel tells us that we are.

And Jesus shows us mercy we did not deserve.

He gave us grace we could never earn.

Ephesians 2:8 **"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,"**

Our salvation is an undeserved gift to the poor.

It is mercy to the undeserving.

It is a bad investment none of us would make if we were God.

But He did and He does.

Out of the generous mercy of His heart.

This is why we are generous and give to the undeserving.

We are reciprocating what Jesus did to us.

He gave even when we were undeserving.
He gave when we could never repay.
He gave something far greater than pieces of paper with green on it.
He gave far more than silver or gold.
He gave us eternal life.
He gave us something completely undeserved.

So therefore, we should do the same.
We do it as an expression of the gospel.

What does it look like when the church takes this seriously.
I don't think that it has to mean that we all start up a new ministry or a new program, but I do think it looks like all of us applying this to our own lives.

And I do think that it means we all become people who are generous.

This is what the church asked us.
Whenever the church after Pentecost, here's that someone is in need they give and they give generously.
If they don't have enough money to give, they take some of their stuff and they sell it so that they can give.

They're willing to do whatever it takes to give.
What would they say to the world.

And I do think that this is a generous church and we historically have been a very generous church.
When there is a need and when we ask you to give we give.

When there were families need Thanksgiving baskets we gave above and beyond and provided for families.
Christmas rolls around the kids need presents you guys show up and we give.
I hope that that continues and I hope that we do do this.

And I hope that we continue to do it in a doesn't just make us feel superior and we are giving to those who don't deserve it.

But I do think we need to remember that when we give we are giving to Jesus.

Where have we been this morning?

When it is wise to give to the poor?

It is pretty much always wise.

Even when we give to people who don't deserve it and waste it.

We are proclaiming the gospel and lending to the Lord.

We give to the poor because to do so is lending to Jesus and because He gave generously to us.

I am reminded of a story of C. S. Lewis.

He was walking with a friend to the pub and stopped by a drunk who wanted money.

Lewis gave him some and his friend was astonished.

His friend told Lewis "Why did you do that! He is just going to waste it on alcohol."

And Lewis just responded, "well that's all I was going to do with it."

What a chance to proclaim the gospel.

When you give money to someone on the side of the road and your friend looks at you and asks "why would you do that? They do not deserve it!"

And you can say, "they probably don't." "But I am giving because when I was poor and completely undeserving Jesus showed me grace. And so now I give to the undeserving too."

That's the gospel.

We act it out when we generously give to the poor.

Even when we do it in ways that seem unwise.