

## **Remember the Poor**

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### **Introduction**

A few weeks ago Hope Worldwide initiated a 'Remember the Poor' Sunday. Inspired by this I thought it would be a good idea to give a reminder to you so today's sermon will be called "Remember the Poor". Hopefully there will be something in it that challenges some of your thinking or your actions because although many thousands of years of human existence have occurred we still do not do very well at taking care of the poor.

During this World Cup we have been reminded on many occasions of the state of many of the poor areas of South Africa as well as the fortifications around some of the richer homes. I also heard an account this week of the hardships faced by some who come to work in the UK as household servants (19 hour days, not allowed out, no pay, sexually abused etc). The issues are alive and well.

### **Stand up for the poor and needy**

PR 31:8 "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,  
for the rights of all who are destitute.

PR 31:9 Speak up and judge fairly;  
defend the rights of the poor and needy."

There are many examples of help/change brought about as a result of faith... Abolition of slavery etc, but there has always been a struggle between the establishment (& wealthy) against the poor and needy. We saw it with Jesus and the ruling Saducees, as well as with the law obsessed Pharisees, the Romans authorised the death of Jesus to keep the status quo. In the mid nineteenth century it remains, the song "All things bright and beautiful" presents the social hierarchy as God ordained:

All things bright and beautiful,  
All things great and small,  
All things wild and wonderful,  
The Lord God made them all.

The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at the gate,  
God made them high and lowly,  
And ordered their estate.

The conflicting issues have been described as:

- order of things set up by God
- faith in God is personal not one for social movements
- economy should be free as set up by God (not that he introduced money!) { Adam Smith et al }

These beliefs were leading to the exploitation of people in both urban and rural communities.

*George Edwards was one such person. He was born the sixth child of a poor Norfolk family in 1850 and his mother Mary was so malnourished that she was confined to bed and unable to breastfeed. George survived by eating onion gruel - onions cooked with dripping and salt and pepper, thickened with flour. His father Thomas, an ex-soldier who was denied his war pension, worked hard as a casual labourer for wages too inadequate to feed his children. Distress turned to despair when George's father was caught stealing turnips for the children's food and was sentenced to two weeks' hard labour. Not knowing where their father was, the family went to bed hungry and the loss of the breadwinner meant that they ended up in the workhouse.*

*Young George tried to assist in these dire conditions and when he was almost six he started work as a crow-scarer, chasing birds from dawn to dusk. It was gruelling work for a young boy, and if he fell asleep he was thrashed by the farmer and his wages were docked by two pence. Nonetheless, when he got his first week's wage of one shilling he ran to his mother and proudly exclaimed, 'Mother this is my money. Now we shall not want for bread any more and you will not have to cry again. You shall always have my money, I will always look after you!'... His experience of poverty and his Christian*

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*commitment led him to question the exploitation of the poor and to do something about it. He learned to read by becoming a Methodist lay preacher and later founded and led his agricultural union. His commitment to people and social justice would eventually lead to his election as a Member of Parliament.*

*The workhouses were established by Parliament to deal with the destitute poor - not as a compassionate act but as a warning, as demonstrated by one Commissioner's views: 'I wish to see the poorhouse regarded with dread by our labouring classes and the reproach for being an inmate of it extending downward from father to son. Let the poor see and feel that their parish, although it will not allow them to perish through absolute want, is yet the hardest taskmaster, the closest paymaster and the most harsh and unkind friend they can apply to.'*

From Graham Dale, *God's Politicians* (Harper Collins, 2000), ISBN 0-00-710065-5

The desire to do something about it should be in our DNA, our make up:  
PR 29:7 The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

It is a clear choice, care or don't. Once again there is no fence sitting. One of the reasons for this is given as care for God's creation and what He has stated is good:

PR 14:31 He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,  
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.

Commands further illustrate:

PR 3:27 Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act  
PR 3:28 Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"--  
when you now have it with you.

As with much of life, we can make excuses about a whole range of things, but when it comes down to it we can usually decide what approach we are going to take.

You can choose not to have concern but here is my first warning (illustrating Pr 29v7) – it may lead you to hell:

LK 16:19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. <sup>20</sup> At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores <sup>21</sup> and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

LK 16:22 "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup> In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup> So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

LK 16:25 "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup> And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

Perhaps Lazarus only received bad things because the rich man did not give him anything good – he showed no concern for the poor.

Jesus came and healed many, with many being poor. Society was not kind to them but Jesus showed that he had compassion and was willing to act. We can be distracted by money, health and worries of life but these take us away from the heart of God. When it came to this year's 'shake a bucket collection' it was the first time that I woke up on the day and did not feel like doing it. Well I had agreed to give Keith a lift in and back to coordinate our lives and families, plus I knew I had to go in. Keith also felt poorly. But we went and we enjoyed doing it, we enjoyed the fellowship and it got our

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mornings off to a good start. I wonder how many others did not have the determination to take part. It's not glamorous and you may not collect much but it's right. In the first few years when I took up the mantle post 2002 we generally got close to or reached the £1000 mark. I'm really glad that we got £600 this year but I can't help thinking that we used to do better (Leicester do proportionately better than us). We do have the Hospital clean-up coming up so if the bucket collection is not your thing, get some sponsors for the clean up. We did really well in supplying equipment for St Basils and helping those young girls and mums to make a new start and there are probably many other things that you as individuals are involved in, all I say is, whatever we decide to do let's do it not put it off.

### **The 'Israel' Principle on Debts and Helping the Poor**

The old law contains many interesting commands on money, lending, cancelling debts etc. This section sums it up for me:

DT 15:1 At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. <sup>2</sup> This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed. <sup>3</sup> You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you. <sup>4</sup> **However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you,** <sup>5</sup> **if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.** <sup>6</sup> For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you.

DT 15:7 **If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. <sup>8</sup> Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.** <sup>9</sup> Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. <sup>10</sup> **Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.** <sup>11</sup> **There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.**

The people of Israel were to be without poverty in its people. People were to be openhanded and give without a grudging heart and then the Lord promised to bless them. It was not about them as individuals but about the community and the demonstration of good governance passed down by an almighty God.

The final statement about the poor always being with us is repeated in Mark, but with an additional note that God should always come first.

MK 14:7 **The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.**

Our relationship with God should not suffer in our attempts to show compassion to others. Zealous activists have been known to get lost in the cause to the detriment of everything else.

The requirement of Dt 15v4 is demonstrated and fulfilled in the new church:

AC 4:32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. **No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.** <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> **There were no needy persons among them.** For from time to time

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those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was **distributed to anyone as he had need**.

AC 11:27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) <sup>29</sup> The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> **This they did, sending their gift** to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Etc...

For us – redecorating Darren and Tracey's house despite neighbour's houses being set alight, boarded up etc. It was a different background and it has been so influential in determining my comments when it comes to issues of poverty and hopelessness in the UK. The church is a great place to be exposed to different people that you would otherwise never meet.

### ***It's the Golden law again***

Is it any wonder that these commands always seem to govern my fundamental thinking and actions about everything to do with my faith?

LK 10:27 He answered: " `Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind' ; and, `Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

And repeated by James as he discusses how we judge one another:

JAS 2:5 Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? <sup>6</sup> **But you have insulted the poor**. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? <sup>7</sup> Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

Trouble makers are not often the poor, usually it is those that you hold in higher esteem! Favouritism.

JAS 2:8 **If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right.** <sup>9</sup> **But if you show favoritism**, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. <sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. <sup>11</sup> For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

JAS 2:12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the **law that gives freedom**, <sup>13</sup> because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. **Mercy triumphs over judgment!**

JAS 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Remember God's mercy to us. We do not deserve his forgiveness (many times over) but he gives it to us. We may have preconceived ideas about people we meet and we may favour those who meet our ideals but that is not God's way. Mercy triumphs over judgement.

MT 25:34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, `Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

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<sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

Time for warning number 2:

Sodom condemned for its poor attitude (aloof, no mercy)

EZE 16:49 " `Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. <sup>50</sup> They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.

But there is comfort as a result of the mercy given to us:

LK 12:32 "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. <sup>33</sup> Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

### **Monetary Equality**

The basic tenets laid out have led some to demand that we should give away what we have and become equal on a monetary level. From my examination the Bible does not show this. Money is our invention anyway, God wants us to show love to all and treat everyone equally but this does not preclude wealth or being naturally talented and doing well. We should just not be selfish about it.

(summarize – preparation for coming of kingdom, be prepared by building on what God has given you)

MT 25:14 "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. <sup>15</sup> To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. <sup>16</sup> The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. <sup>17</sup> So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. <sup>18</sup> But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

MT 25:19 "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup> The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. `Master,' he said, `you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'

MT 25:21 "His master replied, `Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

MT 25:22 "The man with the two talents also came. `Master,' he said, `you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.'

MT 25:23 "His master replied, `Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

MT 25:24 "Then the man who had received the one talent came. `Master,' he said, `I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. <sup>25</sup> So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

MT 25:26 "His master replied, `You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? <sup>27</sup> Well then, you should have

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put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

MT 25:28 " ` Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. <sup>29</sup> For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. <sup>30</sup> And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Some are born with greater talents but we must all make the best out of them that we can. Try something, do not be cowardly or risk adverse, live a life worth living and live it to the full (Jesus came to give us this). We all have our roles and responsibilities, our loves and dislikes, we must be the good stewards that God demands.

If you have money, don't keep it solely for yourself. The woman of noble character appears to be wealthy but had concern for those around her, her contribution was active not passive:

PR 31:20 She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.

The last warning in this sermon follows this up. Greed should be avoided:

EPH 5:3 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, **or of greed**, because these are **improper** for God's holy people. <sup>4</sup> Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. <sup>5</sup> For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or **greedy person**--such a man is an **idolater**--has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

### **Who to give to:**

We are told to remember our family first:

GAL 6:10 **Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.**

But we don't ignore others either:

ISA 58:6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?

ISA 58:7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter--  
when you see the naked, to clothe him,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

ISA 58:8 **Then your light will break forth like the dawn,**

and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

This is a great form of good news sharing! By our actions, others will know us.

### **Concluding remarks**

I will leave you with this final thought; look at this attitude and awareness of the potential to sin and drift away from God:

PR 30:7 "Two things I ask of you, O LORD;

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do not refuse me before I die:  
PR 30:8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me;  
give me neither poverty nor riches,  
but give me only my daily bread.  
PR 30:9 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you  
and say, `Who is the LORD?'  
Or I may become poor and steal,  
and so dishonor the name of my God.

God must always remain at the head of all things in our lives.

It is why we give to missions in the developing world – God is uppermost and the commitment of Christians in these countries provides a stable base for helping the poor. (If you need confirmation of this get to one of the meetings with the Hope India rep when he visits annually, it's very convicting).

It keeps our focus on righteousness and the reasons for our deeds clear in our heads.

We do it not because we are selfless, caring, sharing people but because of the mercy given to us by Jesus that has stirred that part of our character made by God. We are made in His image, we can love the unloveable.

The Spirit pricks our conscience, the Word cuts us deep to give us conviction.

Please remember the poor.

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