

# ■ THIS IS US

*Week Five | September 10, 2017 | Our Relationships with the Poor & Needy, Widows & Orphans, and Our Enemies*

## PREPARATION

### ■ MONDAY THROUGH WEDNESDAY

Spend some time alone with God's Word reading through Proverbs 21:3, 14:31, 19:17, 25:21-22, 15:25, and 23:10-11. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truths of this text and allow you to teach it well to those in your care.

### ■ THURSDAY THROUGH SATURDAY

Read through the questions included in the guide this week. Many questions have been included in this week's guide. Read through this lesson to determine which questions will work best to encourage, push, and grow your group.

### ■ DAILY

As you prepare, pray for the preaching of God's Word this coming week at the corporate church gathering. Pray also for your time together as a group, that the Spirit would make effective your teaching and bring gospel clarity, gospel change, and a heart for gospel mission to those that are present.

## THIS WEEK

### ■ KEY BIBLICAL REALITY

Caring for the under-resourced, unprotected, and even our enemies is the just duty of every Christian.

### ■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

When we don't reach out to the vulnerable or show compassion our enemies, we fail to show the world a correct picture of God's character, for He is the God who loved us when we were both vulnerable and His enemy.

### ■ MEDITATE

*"To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice." (Proverbs 21:3)*

## GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

- ❓ *What would you think about someone who claimed to be a vegetarian but ate meat every night of the week?*
- ❓ *How does our culture view the poor? How about our enemies? Do Christians in our society prove to have the same view or a different one?*
- ❓ *How would you define oppression?*
- ❓ *What kinds of oppression do we see in our own society?*

On an average Sunday morning, Christians far and wide gather to worship God and sing praises to His name. We lift our voices and hands, and sing lyrics that thank God for the gospel and the reality that He would come to us, love us though we were against Him, and help us in our broken and vulnerable state through Christ's work on our behalf. We rally around our common experience of being saved by the God who reaches down to the lowly, to those oppressed by sin and death and Satan, and pulls them up. Yet many times, we leave our worship experience and head out into our weekly routines, forgetting to do the very same thing for others in low positions all around us.

Though God showed us compassion when we were His enemies, we sometimes give the cold shoulder to our own enemies. While God helped us in our own vulnerability, we often neglect the vulnerable people who live right down the street from us. While God had compassion on our poor spiritual condition, we can be calloused toward the poor who struggle to survive in our culture. While God surely sees our ritual worship of Him, we will come to find out in this lesson that He also sees how our passionate, weekly songs impact our ordinary, daily schedules. God has a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to pride and hypocrisy, and He judges our lives based on the way that we engage those who are under-resourced, unprotected, and the way we love our enemies. If we do not engage these groups the way He engaged with us, it proves that for all our religious rituals and zeal, we don't actually care about the things God values. Let's open the book of Proverbs together to learn more about how God desires for us to engage with these groups of people.

Q: *How do you usually engage with the vulnerable people you encounter—whether that be the poor, a single mom, or the kid without a parent down the street?*

Q: *How do you usually deal with a person you consider an enemy?*

## ■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

So far in this series, we've learned a great deal about who we are as God's people. As we've seen, we are a people defined by the gospel, a people of the Scriptures, a people committed to church planting, and a people who are offered hope in our brokenness. As we move forward this week, we will learn that, in Christ, we are also a people who greatly value these relationships:

**1. OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE POOR AND NEEDY**

**2. OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE WIDOWS AND ORPHANS**

**3. OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR ENEMIES**

## GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.*

## INTRODUCTION: DOING JUSTICE

### ■ PROVERBS 21:3

Q: *What matters to God more than religious rituals?*

Q: *According to this verse, justice is not something we simply feel, but something we \_\_\_\_\_. Why?*

This proverb, like many other places in Scripture, shows us something important about God's value system. When it comes to the lives of believers, God cares about the way we treat those around us more than He cares about our rituals or showy worship. In ancient Israel, sacrificial ceremonies came in a lot of varieties and were offered up to communicate loyalty to God and to maintain right standing with Him. Most repulsive to God, however, was that His

people would often go through the ritual motions of sacrifices, but in their daily lives, they acted as if they did not know Him at all. One moment they'd perform sacrificial ceremonies that honored Yahweh and the next, they'd take advantage of the poor, neglect the orphans and widows all around them, and ruin their enemies with slander, gossip and exploitation. They would live with wonderful social connections and unbelievable luxury while many perished around them, in need of food, a home, a job, or a support system. They flourished while others floundered, all while performing sacrifice after sacrifice, as if they were right with God.

**Q:** *If we are heartless toward social issues as the people of God, how does this show the world the wrong picture of the Lord?*

Proverbs 21:3 shows us God considers this kind of behavior unacceptable for a believer, and instead of demanding religious rituals from us, He calls us to “do” righteousness and justice for those around us. While Christians today don't need to perform sacrifices any longer due to Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, we also have religious rituals that we gather around—things like church services, conferences, weekly Bible studies, worship nights, and so on. However, in the eyes of God, all the worship in the world makes no difference if our lives show that we don't care about doing right and just things towards those around us who are in desperate need.

We must note that “justice” and “righteousness” in this verse are not things we simply feel; they are things we do. God doesn't want our lip service or weekly rituals as much as He wants to see us practically care for those He cares about. As Jesus would later say, good trees bear good fruit. When we show the fruit of caring for others in our outward actions, it proves that we internally care about the things God cares about. When we do not bear the fruit of doing justice for others, it proves that we are not really rooted in the things God cares about, no matter what we may sing on Sunday.

So, who does God want us to “do justice” for? What does that look like? As we move forward, Proverbs will tell us.

## **OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE POOR AND NEEDY**

### **■ PROVERBS 14:31 AND 19:17**

**Q:** *Why shouldn't the poor be oppressed?*

**Q:** *In what ways are the poor oppressed, held down, or held back in our current society? Give both big examples and small ones.*

**Q:** *Why do you think the Bible equates our treatment of the poor to our treatment of God?*

Proverbs shows us that oppressing or insulting a poor person is an insult to God Himself. God has made all people in His image—people of all different economic situations. To treat someone differently because their financial or economic situation is lower than your own is not just unkind, it's a direct attack against the living God. As we see in Proverbs, when a believer shuns, disrespects, oppresses, exploits, slanders, or looks down on a vulnerable or under-resourced person, God takes it personally. God has always had a special part of His heart reserved for the vulnerable in society. When these people are either purposefully held down or simply neglected by the privileged who should be protecting and helping them, God reveals that He also has a special type of wrath reserved (Is. 10:1-4). On the flip side, when those in honored positions in society use their privilege to serve, protect, and take care of the needy, God reveals that He offers a reward for such kindness and justice.

**Q:** *How closely does God associate Himself with the poor? How does this change our perspective of both God and the poor in our own lives?*

**Q:** *What does God promise to do if we are generous to the needy?*

In Proverbs and throughout the rest of the Bible, it's hard to miss just how intimately God connects Himself to the poor. He almost speaks as if He is one with them, as if whatever one does to the needy, they do to Him. In fact, He even says that helping the under-resourced is considered a loan to God. God loves the poor so much, and is so united to them in heart, that He considers Himself indebted to those who are kind to them! This changes our view of not only God, but of the needy around us. As we engage with the needy in our community, we must remember that anything we do to them, good or bad, we do to God Himself. Even Jesus would later say that to offer financial help, food, clothing, and friendship to the marginalized is equal to doing those very things to him. Not only that, but he also says that believers who show no care for these types of things aren't truly believers at all, and will experience separation from God forever (Matt. 25:41-46). Those who truly love God can't help but practically love those He deeply cares about, and that includes the poor and needy.

Q: *What excuses do you usually give for failing to care for the poor? What does this say about your values compared to God's?*

## OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE WIDOWS AND ORPHANS

■ 15:25 AND 23:10-11

Q: *Whose house does God tear down? Whose residence does God protect?*

Q: *Why do you think this verse uses “proud” and “widow” as opposite terms?*

In this section of Proverbs, the author is framing his advice using stark contrast. While both parties in this proverb have a territory or a “house,” one gets torn down and one stays protected. What is the deciding factor in the fate of the territory? The posture or character of the person whose territory it is. The proud person will see his residence go to ruin. Throughout all of Proverbs, the “proud” person is the exploitive one. A wicked person not only struts like a peacock, but is intoxicated by pride in all his possessions and accomplishments. But, his own territory and accolades are not enough—he needs more.

The “widow,” on the other hand, refers to actual widows on one level, but on another level, also refers to all weak, impoverished, and unprotected people in a society, those whose few possessions are usually taken from them by the hands of the proud. Though the proud man thinks he can continually accumulate at the expense of the weak and destitute, God promises that He will tear down this man's stockpile with His own hands. The widows, however, find their territory secure and untouched in the end.

Q: *Why would someone want to “enter the fields” that belong to the fatherless?*

Q: *If someone takes what God has designated for the orphan, who will the person have to face?*

In order to understand the “landmarks” and “fields” in this verse, we must travel further back into the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy, God makes it very clear that He is the personal defender of the orphan and the widow, as they had no other advocate or source of help (Deut. 10:18). To make His care for them known, God demands in Deuteronomy 14:28-29 that the third-year tithe of His people was to be dedicated to support the lives of the Levites, foreigners, and the orphans/widows (also known as the “fatherless” in Scripture). In order for the helpless of society to survive, God expected the community to come together in shared responsibility giving their tithe to support those who couldn’t support themselves. He also warns them not to pervert justice to the widows and orphans (Deut. 24:17).

In the time of Proverbs, a landmark was a boundary stone that showed where property lines were drawn. To move a boundary stone was to steal not only a man’s current property, but his past ancestral heritage. Moving the landmark of an ordinary land owner was bad enough to invite a curse on your life (Deut. 27:17), but here, God warns against something even worse: stealing the land and provisions from victims who are too weak and vulnerable to defend themselves. This Proverb suggests that there are those who come into the “fields,” or societal provisions that God has designated for the weak and vulnerable (see Lev. 23:22), and stolen them for themselves, though they already have plenty. To these, God promises that as their Redeemer, He will be their strong source of defense against the privileged who are neglecting their needs and exploiting the few resources they have for survival.

To God, not helping the widow or orphan with our own resources (or anyone in a weak, defenseless, and vulnerable position) is equivalent to stealing what is rightfully theirs. Just as God equates the lack of tithing to stealing from Him (Mal. 3:8-10), He considers the neglect of helping the unprotected as robbing them. To avoid helping this group of people, in God’s eyes, is the same as walking in their residence and taking what’s not yours. This is not a mercy issue in God’s eyes, it’s a justice issue (Prov. 21:3). And in the end, if God’s people refuse to do justice to the oppressed or helpless, God promises that justice will be served by His own hand! We, like those in Proverbs, live in a culture with many widows, single parents, orphans, and children without enough support around them. Whether it’s helping a single mom with her yard, fostering kids who need a home, adopting a child, supporting an overseas orphan, or getting involved in a widow ministry, we all must obey the call to value the “fatherless” among us. If we don’t, God their Advocate will dispense the justice we failed to provide.

🔗: *Who are the “fatherless” or “unprotected” in our culture today? What groups of people are the most vulnerable and unable to defend themselves?*

🔗: *In what ways have you neglected or, in God’s eyes, “robbed” these groups of people?*

# OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR ENEMIES

## PROVERBS 25:21-22

**Q:** *What types of things should we do for our enemies?*

**Q:** *Who do you consider an enemy? Why is it difficult to practically meet the needs of someone you consider an adversary?*

While we might expect a loving God to ask us to practically help the poor, the widow, or the orphan, the command to love our enemies seems most unexpected. After all, the downtrodden and lowly of society need a warm, helping hand. But our enemies? If they end up needing a meal or a drink of cool water, it's likely because they got themselves into that place, and they should bite the bullet and endure the consequences, right? Not so, according to Proverbs.

As many Christians throughout history have shown us, loving one's enemies is the ultimate sign of a true believer. While people across many religions do justice for the oppressed, poor, and marginalized, no religion other than Christianity makes a practice of truly loving an enemy. This is where Christ himself shines brightest as our example, ...for "while we were still his enemies, he died for us" (Rom. 5:8-10). While we shunned, mocked, spat on, and ridiculed him in our cold heartedness, he offered us forgiveness and acceptance into God's family.

Yet, even though we were separated from God and headed toward eternity without Him, Jesus offered us rescue through the gospel, welcoming us as brothers and sisters. While many religious leaders throughout history have helped the lowly, only Christ died for his ruthless, hypocritical, self-obsessed enemies. Besides Jesus, no other prophet or spiritual leader known to man loves like that. When we were hungry and thirsty for true life, Jesus gave it to us, though we were once against him. We, in turn, are commanded to love like that as well. We must reach out to our enemies— those who we are jealous of, who have hurt or betrayed us, who constantly challenge us, who have a totally different lifestyle than we do, who take advantage of us, who violently disagree with our religious or political convictions, who punish us for our beliefs, who eat up all our capacity and resources never to return the favor—and extend practical love in return, meeting their needs. When we do this, we are most like Christ.

**Q:** *What is promised to believers who love their enemies?*

**Q:** *What do you think it means to "heap burning coals" on your enemies' heads?*



When we love our enemies in tangible ways, God says that this is like heaping “burning coals” on their heads. While this at first might sound like a way to “get back” at our adversaries, God’s main message is to repay evil with good, something Jesus illustrates through the gospel. Given the overall context and message, heaping coals on the head of an enemy is not for the purpose of harming one’s enemy, which would go against everything God instructs both here and throughout the Bible. Instead, this complicated phrase is likely an image of repentance on the part of the enemy, who will feel pangs of guilt when he is forced to accept help from someone he has treated as a foe.

The ultimate goal of the coals being heaped on the enemy’s head is not lasting shame, but repentance. Given that the bread and drink do the enemy good in the end, the coals must also assist in the same goal. On top of this, Proverbs forbids a person from taking personal vengeance, as do other biblical texts (Prov. 20:22; Rom. 12:19; 1 Pet. 3:9). Given that God will not reward those who take vengeance for themselves, we must conclude that heaping “burning coals” is not some clever way for believers to secretly achieve retribution against their enemies. Jesus did not love his enemies this way, with an ulterior motive for their punishment. Instead, he took punishment for them with the purest of motives. Any pain they experienced was the fruitful pain of repentance that leads to life, not shame or death. The same goes for us. When our enemies are in a humbled state to receive help from us, we should not revel in it. We should pray that it gives them a tender picture of Christ, and that in their heart’s pierced and disgraced state, they would be moved to true repentance.

## NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God’s Word to your daily life. Process how what you’ve learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

- 🔗 *Think about your weekly routine. Which of these do you struggle most to minister to: the poor, the orphan/widow, or your enemies? What in your life needs to change in order for you to incorporate ministry to these groups of people?*
- 🔗 *In your group, explore how you can serve and advocate for the oppressed or poor in your community. What is most held down or held back by the group of people in your current community? What can you do with the position and resources God has given you to help them?*
- 🔗 *Come up with names of single parents or parentless kids in your local community. If you don’t know any, find a way to get to know those in this vulnerable position. Come up with practical ways to take care of these*

*marginalized groups.*

*(Ideas: reach out to the Department of Family Protective Services or the South Texas Alliance for Orphans and ask how you could mentor or even parent a foster child. Walk around your neighborhood and get to know any single parents or widows—offer yourself as a free-of-charge babysitter or grass-cutter.)*

**Q:** *List the “enemies” in your life. Who agitates you, always outdoes you, or gets better opportunities than you? Who do you avoid? Who do you consider misinformed or wrongheaded about issues you hold dear? Who has betrayed or mocked you? Once you have a list made, consider the needs of these people and how can you meet them. In your group, discuss clear ways you can practically take care of these people with the resources you have.*

## PRAY

+ *Connect the truths from God’s Word to your daily life. Process how what you’ve learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

- *God, thank you for being a God who deeply cares for the marginalized, oppressed, and defenseless. Give me a heart that deeply cares for these groups.*
- *God, protect me from honoring you in lip-service on Sunday morning, but not honoring those you care about in my everyday life.*
- *God, give me opportunities to practically minister to the poor in my community. Introduce me to single parents and kids who need investment and care in my community. Use the resources of my time, energy, and money to help them.*
- *God, convict me when I stray into neglect regarding the poor, the orphan/widow, and even my enemies. Help me remember that you consider this a justice issue, and in your authority over me, rework my schedule and commitments in order to make room for these issues.*

**PROV. 21:3** God knows when we put on a fake, external show of our devotion while our hearts are actually worlds apart from the things He cares about. One of the ways He distinguishes this is by squaring our religious rituals with our compassion and practical help for the oppressed. If we are heavily involved in the former with no trace of the latter, our religious activities are likely just a show.

**PROV. 19:17 AND 25:22** The majority of Proverbs talks about the natural results of one's good or bad actions as being a "reward". These two verses, however, are the only two that speak of consequences that aren't natural. When we are kind to the needy and love our enemies, our reward comes straight from the hand of God. This reward is a supernatural result, not a normal one. This shows us just how important it is to the Lord for His people to embody His love for the vulnerable and even enemies.

*\*All commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes, The Reformation \*All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes, The New American Commentary Series (Proverbs, Ecc., Song of Songs), and the Preaching the Word Commentary Series by Kent Hughes.*

