

Wealth and Poverty in the book of Proverbs

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Introduction

When the Lord God first established his people Israel and made a covenant with them it was recognised that there would always be poor people in the land (Deuteronomy 15:11). Structures were put in place within this society to ensure that the poor were helped and did not suffer what ultimately could be premature death by starvation. The Sabbath day ensured rest for the labourer; the Sabbath year the canceling of debts and freeing of bonded workers; and the Jubilee year the return of ancestral land.

In the years leading up to the fall of both the Northern and the Southern Kingdom in Israel these laws were ignored and oppression of the poor became rampant. The prophets condemned the rich for exploiting the poor in the land (Amos 4:1, Isaiah 3:14, 10:2, 58:6, Jeremiah 22:16, 34:8-11).

In the New Testament (NT) Jesus recognized that the poor will always be present (Matthew 26:11), but in accordance with the covenant Law he helped the poor and needy who were again being oppressed by the rich and powerful (Luke 11:39-42). In fact, he commenced his ministry declaring that he had been sent to proclaim good news to the poor and to release the oppressed (Luke 4:18).

In the NT church there was an initial attempt to uphold the Law and have no poor among them (Acts 2:45, 4:34). However, as the Lord said in Deuteronomy 15, and the Lord Jesus said in Matthew, there will always be poor among you.

In the church today there are poor members and there are rich members, and this often causes tensions – both theological and practical. Sound Biblical teaching and pastoring is required to address such tensions. The book of Proverbs addresses the issues of poverty and wealth extensively- over 30% of the Solomonic sentence proverbs (10:1-22:16 and 25-29) touch on this issue.¹

Despite this bulk of references, however, difficulties remain because of the genre of literature in this book.² Short epigrams are not conducive to reasoned and detailed arguments. Because of this stylistic constraint the proverbs must be read holistically within the total collection.³ We cannot take one proverb in isolation and base a principle upon it. Moreover proverbs are not universally applicable – they can be applied in different situations with differing effects. ‘Typically each encapsulates and articulates an aspect of reality which can be recognized as true only when applied to an appropriate setting’.⁴

¹ Whybray 1990 pp15- 158 out of 513, Delkurt cited in Murphy p261 lists ‘more than fifty sayings’ on the theme rich and poor.

² Murphy 1998 p261, Waltke 1996 p325. Whybray 1990 p63

³ Waltke 1996 p326

⁴ Farmer 1991 p83

Character – consequence nexus.

Some proverbs point to a character/act- consequence nexus (i.e. you reap what you sow) to the effect that ‘good’ or righteous people are blessed with wealth and prosperity, while wickedness leads to poverty.⁵

10:22

*The blessing of the Lord brings wealth,
and he adds no trouble to it.*

10:4

*Lazy hands make a man poor,
But diligent hands bring wealth.*

3:9-10

*Honour the Lord with your wealth,
With the first fruits of your crops;
Then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
And your vats will brim over with new wine.*

10:15

*The wealth of the rich is their fortified city,
but poverty is the ruin of the poor.*

Scholars, therefore, speak of the ‘dogmatism’ of Proverbs in that it claims righteous living, including hard work, will lead to wealth, while wicked living and laziness leads to poverty. Then they say that this is not consistent with what is observed in life. In particular, the experience of Job and insights of Solomon in Ecclesiastes are said to contradict the traditional wisdom of Proverbs.⁶

However, this criticism of Proverbs for its ‘dogmatism’ fails to take into account the numerous other proverbs referring to wealth and poverty, in particular the ‘better than’ proverbs, which serve to qualify this basic proposition. It also fails to keep in view the theological foundation of wisdom as set forth in Proverbs, namely *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (1:7). Both these factors have implications for a broader understanding this character – consequence nexus.

Van Leeuwen helpfully structures the argument into four relationships shown in the diagram as follows.⁷

	Righteousness	Wickedness
Wealth	1	3
Poverty	2	4

⁵ van Leeuwen 1992 p27

⁶ eg Pleins 1987 p68, see Waltke 1996 p324 for the opposing view

⁷ van Leeuwen 1993 p28

In this diagram the normative relationships, as understood from the book of Proverbs, are the relationships represented by boxes 1 and 4. However, many proverbs do not fit into these two boxes. There are other factors at work that result in the wicked prospering and the righteous suffering-relationships 2 and 3.

Wealth

The righteous are blessed with wealth

Wealth is better than poverty in that it allows one to navigate life more easily. In modern parlance, wealth reduces the stress levels in one's life.⁸ In Proverbs 'there is a hard-nosed realism about the advantages of wealth'⁹, although the degree to which wealth is valued in the Solomonic sayings is surprisingly low.¹⁰ Wealth brings security as well as social recognition and power.

10:15 (also 18:11)

*The wealth of the rich is their fortified city
but poverty is the ruin of the poor.*

22:7 (also 18:23)

*The rich rule over the poor
and the borrower is servant to the lender.*

19:4 (also 14:20, 19:7)

*Wealth brings many friends
but a poor man's friends desert him.*

Whilst there are these clear benefits from having wealth, Proverbs does not leave the matter at this superficial or simplistic level.¹¹ It questions the way in which wealth was obtained and the attitude that one has to wealth. It also portrays disadvantages and even warns of the dangers of wealth.

How was wealth obtained?

There is no denying that righteous living, and *diligent hands bring wealth* (10:4b). Obeying the commands of the Lord and acting wisely will bring prosperity and honour.

22:4 (also 3:1-10, 16, 8:18, 21, 13:21b)

*Humility and the fear of the Lord
Bring wealth, honour and life.*

⁸ Modern secular wisdom as found in the Sydney Morning Herald Nov 2-3, 2002, p39, says you would expect people's happiness to grow over time in line with their pay. But psychologists are finding this is not true. Volunteers and carers tend to be the happiest in our community- however 'happiness' is defined.

⁹ Murphy 1998 p262, Perdue 2000 p177

¹⁰ Farmer 1991 p80, Whybray 1990 p60

¹¹ van Leeuwen 1997 p153

But ultimately it must be understood that the Lord is sovereign and it is in his divine providence that *the blessing of the Lord brings wealth* (10:22a). ‘Human strivings, especially diligence toward the task at hand, are not the ultimate causes of wealth’. ‘It is Yahweh alone, not human toil, who dispenses blessings that enrich’.¹²

Wealth can of course be obtained by evil actions and oppression of the poor. Bribery was a fact of life in the ancient world as it is still today. Lobbying politicians for favours can easily degenerate into bribery and corruption. Lying is widespread in the business world of the 21st century, not the least of which occurs on tax returns, so it still applies that –

21:6

*A fortune made by a lying tongue
is a fleeting vapour and a deadly snare.*

Proverbs denounces faulty weights and balances, an evil means whereby the businessman can get rich. There should be no deliberate deceit within business transactions.

20:23 (also 20:10)

*The Lord detests differing weights
and dishonest scales do not please him.*

Riches may also be accrued by oppression of the poor. The poor may be exploited in various ways as the means whereby the rich become richer. Deceptive wages (11:18) and charging excessive interest rates are noted as some methods of exploitation.

22:16 (also 14:31)

*He who oppress the poor to increase his wealth
and he who gives gifts to the rich- both come to poverty.*

28:8

*He who amasses his wealth by exorbitant interest
amasses it for another who will be kind to the poor.*

Whilst Proverbs acknowledges that people may get rich by oppression, it in no way approves such behaviour. It is possible to get ‘ill-gotten’ wealth by these evil means, but such wealth will not last- it is ephemeral. *A sinner’s wealth is stored up for the righteous* (13:22). Such wealth is clearly is not the result of the blessing of the Lord. Divine retribution will see such wealth taken away.

Attitude to wealth

Although Proverbs does not explicitly refer to the ‘love of money’ like Ecclesiastes 5:10 and I Timothy 6:10, it does maintain that man should not set his heart upon riches (28:20). Prosperity and an attendant secure and comfortable lifestyle must not become the ultimate goal of one’s life. Man must not put his trust in riches but must trust in the Lord (3:5).

¹² Perdue 2000 p165

11:28

*Whoever trusts in his riches will fall
but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.*

Although wealth can serve the purpose of protecting one from troubles in life, such protection is not independent of the security one has in the Lord himself.

18:11

*The wealth of the rich is their fortified city
they imagine it an unscalable wall.*

The note of wrongly placed trust in riches in the second cola of this proverb ('*they imagine*') is supported by a counter balance in the preceding proverb – *The name of the Lord is a strong tower* (18:10).¹³

The '**better than**' proverbs are the primary means by which the proverbs teach against putting trust in riches. They point away from any act- consequence theory.¹⁴ They in fact link righteousness with poverty, and wickedness with wealth, making it perfectly plain that piety and morality do not invariably lead to immediate social and physical benefits.¹⁵ Boxes 2 and 3 in the diagram represent these relationships.¹⁶

Legitimately gained wealth is good and beneficial, but there are things that are better; things that are of greater value in life and especially in death. Fear of the Lord, justice, wisdom, a good name, peace and tranquility are preferable to riches.

15:16 (also 3:13-14, 8:11,16:8, 16, 17:1, 19:1, 22b, 28:6, 22:1)

*Better a little with the fear of the Lord
than great wealth with turmoil.*

Wealth can be fleeting

It is unwise to put one's trust in riches because they can so quickly disappear. Wealth gained by unethical means is most prone to disappear because the Lord is acting against such a person (22:23).

Egyptian wisdom, namely that found in the Instruction of Amenemope, also refers to the ephemeral nature of ill-gotten wealth. 'Better a measure that the god gives thee, than five thousand (taken) illegally, they do not spend a day (in) the granary or barn' (ix.5-7, ANET 422), and 'If riches are brought to thee by robbery that will not spend the night with thee' (ix.14, ANET 422). These parallels found in documents from the Ancient Near

¹³ Farmer 1991 p81 While proverbs are individual units there is an element of grouping discernable in here. Waltke 1996 p326 says 'too many scholars fail recognize the restraints of these counter proverbs'.

¹⁴ Murphy 1998 p262, van Leeuwen 1997 p153 says 'they set conventional understandings of wealth and poverty on their head'.

¹⁵ Waltke 1996 p326, van Leeuwen 1992 p31

¹⁶ van Leeuwen 1992 p31-32

East indicate that Biblical wisdom is not necessarily unique but this is not to suggest that the Biblical account has borrowed from these documents, as maintained by Washington and others.¹⁷

Whilst it is the wealth of fools that is most prone to disappear, the words in Proverbs 23:5 are not specific.

*Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone,
for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.*

This vivid simile portrays how quickly riches can disappear. Job experienced exactly this, due to no fault of his own. It is wise to remember that with all wealth – whether an investment portfolio, a bank account, property or some treasure- that it is vulnerable to loss in this world.¹⁸

Wealth of no value in death

Solomon reminds us of an obvious fact – we cannot take riches with us when we die (Ecclesiastes 5:15). Proverbs also refers to death noting in 11:4 –

*Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath
but righteousness delivers from death.*

The day of wrath refers to the day of God's judgment, but just what the time frame is in this context is disputed. Some hold that as in Ecclesiastes, which looks at life 'under the sun', there is no focus on the after-life in Proverbs. But there is a genre effect, and the concept of immortality, of life beyond death, is present in Proverbs (12:28, 14:32). 'The argument of the book implies such a perspective' says Waltke.¹⁹ If the innocent (e.g Abel) die at the hands of the wicked (1:11), where is justice to be found, as declared in Proverbs 16:7 asks Waltke. It must lie beyond the grave, he concludes.

Proverbs therefore, warns against trusting in riches because, even if they make life more comfortable and secure in this world, they do not have any value whatsoever beyond the grave. With the same understanding Jesus of Nazareth exhorted his followers not to lay up treasure on earth but *in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also* (Matthew 6:19-21).

Dangers of wealth

Certain dangers may be associated with wealth according to Proverbs.²⁰

¹⁷ Washington 1994 p190-191

¹⁸ Whybray 1990 p60 notes the large number of proverbs which refer to disasters which may occur in human life, with a fall into poverty prominent among these potential disasters.

¹⁹ Waltke p327-8

²⁰ Pleins 1987 p72

13:8

*A mans riches may ransom his life
but a poor man hears not threat.*

This saying implies that a rich man may be kidnapped and held to ransom because of his riches. Of course being rich he can pay the ransom but the second cola implies that it is better for the poor man because no one will hold him for ransom in the first place.²¹ A poor man can sleep soundly without such worries (Ecclesiastes 5:12).

There are also other down sides to wealth. The friends that come with wealth may not be the true friends that one desires. There may be some irony in Proverbs 14:20.²² Some 'friends' will readily live off your wealth while you have it and then they are gone! The true neighbour is a friend whether you are rich or poor (18:24).

Restraint in getting riches

Is there any ceiling that should be placed upon the accumulation of riches? This is an important question being asked in the present day, especially in the corporate world but also in Christian circles.²³ If the relationship is simply understood as 'riches are the consequence of living a righteous life' (box 1), then what is unethical with continuing to accumulate riches? Proverbs declares –

23:4

*Do not wear yourself out to get rich,
have the wisdom to show restraint.*

11:26

*People curse the man who hoards grain,
but blessing crowns him who is willing to sell.*

Striving to get rich is discouraged; restraint is advised. Hoarding grain or gathering wealth beyond a reasonable level brings a curse from man, if not from the Lord himself.²⁴ Ecclesiastes 5:13 tells of a grievous evil viz. the hoarding of wealth. Similarly in the NT the farmer who hoarded his grain was condemned by God (Luke 12:20) and in James 5:3 hoarding of wealth is condemned.

²¹ Farmer 1991 p81, Whybray 1990 p22

²² Farmer 1991 p81 a similar sort of ironic twist may be attributed to the observation that 'wealth brings many friends' in 19:4

²³ van Leeuwen 1997 p200 considers that 'executives given exorbitant sums as their companies downsize .. and overwork their remaining employees' are condemned by Proverbs such as 22:16

²⁴ McKane 1990 p486 writes the 'better than' proverb of 15:16 points to the fear of the Lord being associated more strongly with a little than with great wealth. 'There is a ceiling of attainment consonant with endowment, and it is wisdom to know when the ceiling has been reached. The fear of the Lord is a limit to self-assertion'.

Generosity towards the poor

Rather than hoarding wealth beyond what is needed, the rich should be rich toward God (Luke 12:21). Helping the poor is understood as being rich toward God in the context of Proverbs and the NT (Matthew 25:31ff).

19:17 (also 11:24, 14:31b, 21:13, 22:9, 28:27, 31:20)

*He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord,
and the Lord will reward him for what he has done.*

This is because both rich and poor are of the same family- they are brothers in the Lord –

22:2 (also 29:13)

*Rich and poor have this in common,
the Lord is the Maker of them all.*

Both the king (31:9) and individuals (21:13) in the community are warned not only against exploiting the poor, but also against ignoring their plight. This teaching is in accord with that in the Law – *do not to be tightfisted or hardhearted toward your poor brother* (Lev. 25:35f, Deut. 15:7-11). The incentive is that the Lord will bless those who help the poor. Such help may be regarded as charity but the demand for social justice is also present, even if not to the extent of the prophets.²⁵ It is misguided to take Proverbs to task for not decrying social abuses, such as one sees the prophets doing. That is not the wisdom style.²⁶ In any case the fear of the Lord is the ultimate reason for helping the poor- love and justice meet together in Him (Psalm 89:14).

Poverty

Wickedness leads to poverty

The poor will always be present within the people of God and in secular society. What should be the attitude of the rich towards the poor? Are all the poor wicked or foolish? And, if so, should they be helped? Proverbs gives us some insights into the nature of poverty and even though its normative teaching or dogma may point to box 4 in the diagram, this must be qualified as with the relationship between righteousness and wealth.

Causes of poverty

Many studies have been undertaken seeking to determine the background of the proverbs.²⁷ Some postulate a rural setting and others an urban setting or a royal court. Whybray finds quite different attitudes towards wealth and poverty in the short, sentence proverbs of 10:1-22:16 and 25-26 compared to the other sections, and assumes that this is because of the different social classes.²⁸ He undertook a word study seeking to locate

²⁵ cf. Pleins 1987 p70

²⁶ Murphy 1998 p261

²⁷ E.g. Whybray 1990, Pleins 1987, Washington 1994 focuses on the international setting.

²⁸ Whybray 1990 p114 holds that the Solomonic sentence proverbs reflect the precarious world of the small farmer and the other sections (1-9 and 22:17 –24:22) the world of the educated urban dweller.

these differences. Although there is only one Hebrew word used for riches or wealth in Proverbs, there are a number of words translated as 'poor' and 'poverty'. Whybray studied the different occurrences of these words for 'poor' but concluded they are all synonymous.

Pleins argued that the 'values and interests of the wisdom writers are the same as those of the urban elite whom they serve' and are vastly different to the Hebrew prophets.²⁹ Murphy sees varied social settings reflected in the proverbs.³⁰ Tremper Longman III (PTC lectures, Sydney, August 2002) says we cannot be dogmatic about which proverbs come from which social class (poor rural, urban elite, or middle class) and prefers to study the literature as a whole.

Many of the proverbs clearly have an agricultural setting in which a man produces his own food (20:4). All inhabitants had a parcel of land allotted to them as the land was conquered and this was to remain within the family according to Jubilee laws. So it is presupposed they had the same starting point.³¹ How then could a man become poor?

Laziness

Proverbs clearly states that a lazy man, a sluggard, or one who loves to sleep will become poor. The lazy farmer does not plow his field, does not sow his crop and then at harvest time has nothing to harvest. He therefore has no food and goes hungry.

6:10-11 (also 19:15, 20:4, 13, 24:33)

*A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
and poverty will come on you like a bandit,
and scarcity like an armed man.*

How can this lesson be extrapolated into an urban setting? Again if a man refuses to work, preferring to sleep, watch TV or go to beach, he will find himself in poverty. This is the case in many societies today, even if in Australia many avoid poverty or at least hunger because of government help. Accordingly, within the NT church the teaching was *if a man will not work he shall not eat* (2 Thes.3:10).

Overindulgence

Certain people who have riches spend it all and bring themselves into poverty. They love the pleasures of life.

21:17

*He who loves pleasure will become poor,
whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.*

²⁹ Pleins 1987 p61

³⁰ Murphy 1998 p261

³¹ Farmer 1991 p82

In society today there are many temptations and inducements to spend beyond ones ability to pay, or to repay after having taken goods on credit.³² Poverty may result from such excessive spending.

Wealth that is easily gained, such as an inheritance (20:21), is prone to disappear quickly. The prodigal son (Luke 15:13) is an example of such self- inflicted poverty.

Ignoring advice

13:18

He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame.

Hasty planning

21:5

*The plans of the diligent lead to profit,
as surely as haste leads to poverty.*

Injustice

Oppression by the rich or powerful may be the cause of a man's poverty.

13:23

*A poor mans field may produce abundant food,
but injustice sweeps it away.*

Unjust taxes, or excessive interest rates amount to oppression of a man working hard to produce food from his fields. The king is specifically warned against acting with injustice and oppressing the poor (31:4-5, 17:15). The wicked king Ahab was found guilty of gross oppression of a poor man in his kingdom (I Kings 21).

Natural calamity

In the rural setting a man's crops may fail because of drought, flood, or disease. Job lost all his wealth through war and calamities. Ecclesiastes 5:14 refers to wealth lost through some misfortune. In an urban setting a man's business may fail, or he may lose his job through no fault of his own.

Attitude towards the poor

Not all poverty is the result of wickedness or foolishness (box 4). Proverbs 13:23 acts as a counter to the strictly retributive sayings in 13:21-22 and 10:22.³³ The righteous, such as Job, may for a time, experience poverty (box 2). Proverbs 24:16 indicates that a righteous man may fall for whatever reason (oppression, calamity?) but that he will rise again.

Though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again,

³² van Leeuwen 1997 p200 reflects that banks which freely offer credit cards at exorbitant interest rates, knowing that the poor will be trapped, offend the God who cares for the poor.

³³ Farmer 1991 p82, Pleins 1987 p68 argues strongly that there is a major point of contention between the prophets and the wise regarding the cause of poverty.

but the wicked are brought down to calamity

There is no indication that poverty *per se* is to be sought after as a more pious status for the Christian. Neither is their any teaching that the poor are happy in their poverty and that they cannot be helped.

The rich are to be generous to the poor without making judgment about the cause of their poverty.³⁴ It is as if they are lending to the Lord (19:17). It is the prerogative of the Lord to execute retribution upon those who are lazy or are living for pleasure.

The prayer of Agur

This prayer of Agur (30:8-9) is the only prayer within Proverbs and is most profound in addressing the issue of wealth and poverty. It includes the petition 'give me neither poverty nor riches'. Agur's ideas may go beyond those found in the sentence proverbs, however his request not to have riches cannot be seen as an 'entirely different note' as Whybray claims.³⁵ The concept of moderation has already been noted, particularly in the 'better than' proverbs (eg.15:16). In fact the reason that Agur gives for not wanting riches is entirely consistent with Proverbs 15:16- riches may lead him to not fear the Lord, or to say 'who is the Lord?' Agur's requests can only be understood against the background theology of the fear of the Lord – he wants neither to be rich lest he disowns the Lord, nor poor lest he dishonours God's name.

Agur's request not to be given poverty is consistent with the sentence literature of Proverbs, but it is claimed his attitude is different; there 'a poor man may be honest, and it is better to be poor and honest than to be rich and crooked (19:1, 28:6).³⁶ Poverty is not desirable, but the theological danger of poverty is not expressed in the sentence proverbs. This is true, however, the reflections of Agur extend rather than contradict the teaching of the rest of Proverbs.

The positive request of Agur for 'my daily bread' or for 'the portion allotted to me by God' should not be overlooked. 'It implies not a bare sufficiency for natural life, but a provision varying according to the calling in which God has placed us'.³⁷ This request is has a direct parallel in the prayer that the Lord Jesus taught his disciples (Matt. 6:11).³⁸ Agur recognized that the providence of God was behind all that he received. He was aware of the temptations associated with extremes of either wealth or poverty. With his daily allotment from the hand of God he would be content.³⁹ By the grace of God,

³⁴ Whybray 1990 p60 'whatever the cause of their poverty it is a moral and religious duty to show generosity towards them'. Although there is general warning about putting up security for a neighbour (11:15, 17:18).

³⁵ Whybray 1990 p79 'The ideas expressed here go beyond anything to be found in the sentence literature and are clearly the result of serious reflection'.

³⁶ Whybray 1990 p80

³⁷ Bridges 1998 p597, Whybray 1990 p79 uses the words 'bare sufficiency'.

³⁸ van Leeuwen 1997 p253 'the Lord's prayer has its background here'.

³⁹ Whybray 1990 p60 poverty can generally be 'avoided by hard work (accompanied by contentment with ones lot) and generosity to the poor'.

Christians can be content with whatever they are apportioned by God. *Godliness with contentment is great gain* (I Tim 6:6).

Conclusion

What should be the overall attitude of a Christian with regard to wealth and poverty? Is it better to be poor or to be rich? Wealth is not evil in itself, nor poverty pious.⁴⁰ Both have advantages and disadvantages according to the wisdom of Proverbs. One's *attitude* towards riches and also towards the poor is most important. 'Nowhere else in the Bible do we find this investigation into the character of the one who is 'blessed' with riches'.⁴¹

A character – consequence nexus is set forth in Proverbs but not as universal truth. The simple framework given by van Leeuwen is helpful in understanding the relationships that can exist outside this nexus as well as within. Behind this framework must be seen the providential hand of God in matters concerning wealth and poverty in this world. The fear of the Lord is man's overriding concern. He is to put his trust in the Lord and not in his own wealth. 'Christians walk by faith, not by sight and our conduct must show this. Faith (represented here by 'love' and the 'fear of the Lord') can transform a 'meal of vegetables' into a 'continual feast' (15:15).⁴²

The book of Proverbs portrays a community in which there are rich and poor, the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. These are not static conditions because some poor may become rich and some rich become poor. The apostle Paul knew what it was to be in need and what it was to like to have plenty. Many Christians have also experienced times of struggling and times of plenty, even in an urban society. The secret that lies behind the promise of prosperity for the righteous is 'fear the Lord and be content'. This is the very foundation of a righteous life (Hebrews 11:6). Paul learnt this secret of being content whether well fed or hungry (Philippians 4:12), even as he encouraged sharing of resources with the needy within the fellowship of God's people and in the wider community (Philippians 4:14, Galatians 6:10).

Synopsis

Wealth and poverty is discussed more extensively in the book of Proverbs than in any other book in the Bible. It is therefore an excellent place to find teaching for pastoral ministry on this subject that often causes tensions within a Christian fellowship.

The literary genre of Proverbs (largely epigrams), however, makes it difficult to construct a definitive systematic teaching. An individual proverb cannot be applied universally. For instance, a few proverbs (eg 3:9-10, 10:4, 22) teach that righteous living will be rewarded with wealth, while the wicked will become poor; a character-consequence

⁴⁰ Whybray 1990 p62, although McKane 1970 p486-7 commenting on 15:16 sees 'small means or even poverty being assigned a positive religious value, so there is a tendency to equate poverty and piety... wealth is inimical to the fear of Yahweh'.

⁴¹ Murphy 1998 p263,

⁴² van Leeuwen 1997 p153

relationship. But this teaching is qualified by many other proverbs, particularly the 'better than' proverbs (e.g. 15:16, 16:8) that caution against wealth and especially against trusting in one's wealth. Moreover, a reward will also be gained by giving one's wealth to the poor (19:17).

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This theology stands in the background of all 'wealth and poverty' proverbs, as exemplified in the prayer of Agur. He fears becoming rich and forgetting the Lord as well as becoming poor and blaspheming God's name. His request for neither riches nor poverty, but only his allotted portion from the hand of God, is not inconsistent with the rest of the proverbs, and it is a teaching maintained by the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 6:11) and the rest of the NT.

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