

The Prayer Of Agur.

Text: Prov 30:7-9

1) Not poverty

Suggested Hymns:

2) Not Riches

415, 408, 157, 294, 383

3) Feed Me With The Food Allotted To Me

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Proverbs 30:7-9, ⁷ *Two things I request of You (Deprive me not before I die):* ⁸ *Remove falsehood and lies far from me; Give me neither poverty nor riches — Feed me with the food allotted to me;* ⁹ *Lest I be full and deny You, And say, “Who is the LORD?” Or lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of my God.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

“Give me,” prays the sacred writer, *“neither poverty nor riches.”* There are those people in our day who look upon both of these, poverty and riches, as evils, resolutely to be fought against; and if possible to be abolished.

No person ought to be rich, they say, so long as his fellow man is poor. It is important to remove such a blemish on society. It is the business of the State to take from the wealthy and give to the poor, and thus to equalise the material conditions.

To such an idea the Bible furnishes no syllable of approval. Throughout its pages it recognises the distinctions of rich and poor. It gives no promise of a time when it shall be otherwise, nor a single hint that it should be otherwise.

It is easy enough to show, apart from Scriptures, by simple reasoning power, that as long as there are various temperaments of people, from the differences in their callings, in their locality, and in their life's duration, there must be corresponding differences in their social status and in the amount of their personal possessions.

Those vain and foolish talkers who contend for equality of people's property might as well contend that all people ought to be of the same height and weight and strength, or that all trees ought to be of the same shape and size, or that all blades of grass be of the same length. These are idle, utopian schemes!

But confining ourselves, as we are accustomed, to the Holy Scriptures as our Guidebook, what do we find? How are people pictured as to their worldly substance? Some are rich, and some are poor.

We read of the beggar Lazarus asking for charity, *desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table*,¹ and of the rich, heartless man refusing him. Some of God's people were kings and opulent princes, such as David and Solomon, and some toilers, struggling for a livelihood.

Of the twelve disciples who accompanied our Lord, a few were well to do, as, for example, the sons of Zebedee, James and John. Peter possessed a house in Capernaum, while others were in a less favourable financial position.

Nor is there in the Bible any indication of a tendency to make it different. On the contrary, we find such passages as these: Proverbs 22:2, ² *The rich and the poor have this in common, The LORD is the maker of them all.*

And did not the Lord Jesus Christ say in John 12:8, ⁸ ... *the poor you have with you always ...*” The social distinctions are everywhere, and it will never be changed as long as man is what he is.

But this does not mean that we must not seek for ourselves such a condition, socially and financially, in which we know neither the burden of wealth nor the hampering of poverty. We are to have a sufficiency to enable us to best fill properly our position in life, and to serve our Maker faithfully.

It is such a condition that the writer of these verses — his name was Agur — prays for, stating the reason why. Let us devote our study to it and be blessed to our soul's benefit. This prayer, we find on analysis, resolves itself into three parts. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Not Poverty

“Give me,” he prays, *“neither poverty.”* And who is there that will not join him in this petition when he thinks of the difficulties, the destitution, and the hardships of poverty.

To do without the necessities of life and the utter minimum of its comforts:

- to see one's family in hardship, deprived of nearly all essential articles;
- to be hampered at every turn, not knowing how to meet one's most urgent obligations;
- to be looked down upon socially by better-off people;
- to go about with worn-out clothing;
- to be compelled to live with one's family among undesirable neighbours for the sake of cheaper rent;
- to find work growing slack just when the wants are multiplying, and no reserve, not even the most slender, to fall back on;
- never to be able to be charitable as one wishes by reason of a shallow purse

are these not (and many more could be added) among the disadvantages, the inconveniences that attach to poverty?

However, we must not say that all these experiences are pure evils. By the grace of God, if utilised properly, a person and his family may even be all the better for everyone of them.

But as Agur points out also, there is likewise danger that their effect will be in the opposite direction. Poverty of purse may lead to poverty of soul. He says that under the strain and burden of such incessant trial a person may lose his confidence in God and his peace of mind, and may suffer harm spiritually. That is what Agur dwells upon. "*Lest I be poor and steal.*"

There is no doubt that poverty is a strong temptation to dishonesty. When the stress and strain of want and trying circumstances are upon a person, the complaints of a wife and the request of little ones for what is the common possession of others, the policy of crookedness readily suggests itself, yielding to what is inconsistent with the high principles of integrity and honour.

An old proverb says: "*Poverty is cunning. It catches even a fox.*" There is nothing that will so sharpen a person's wits as an empty purse. Nor let nobody regard himself beyond such temptation. We can never tell what our integrity is worth until it is tested.

As one writer has expressed it: “*Many do well because they are well to do.*” It is only by God’s help, with a strong religious conviction, that can keep us in peace of mind in the face of harassing circumstances.

And associated with this is another temptation, to “*profane the name of my God.*” This, perhaps, is its most prevalent danger: fretful, impious murmurings, uttering hard things in the spirit of angry discontent against God: “*How can God permit such a thing if He is the kind and loving Being we are to believe He is? Where is His loving-kindness and care which He has promised?*” (overlooking entirely that there are also blessings connected with poverty, soul advantages) and storming against God’s providence and accusing the Most High with cursing and bitterness. It was this that Agur feared in regard to himself, and so he asks God to spare him such an extreme in his social condition.

2. Not Riches

“*Nor riches.*” Why not riches? Are they not an absolute blessing? That they are a blessing no one can deny. Wealth saves many people from the humiliations, annoyances, and snares that have just been pointed out as connected with poverty.

Wealth is an exceedingly useful means to smooth the path of life, to exercise generosity, to enlarge the circle of our knowledge, to increase our pleasure in the many and wondrous works of God. It is never spoken of in the Bible as an evil. On the contrary, it is represented as a real blessing, indeed, as one of the chief blessings.

But what is designed for blessing often proves the reverse, a temptation to which most people succumb. Agur says, *Give me neither poverty nor riches.* Why? “*9 Lest I be full and deny You, And say, “Who is the LORD?”* Practical unfaithfulness often follows a luxurious course of life.

It ought not to be so. The gifts of God’s kind providence ought to draw the hearts of those who receive them to the Giver. However, the opposite is often the case. The more we get, the more apt are we to forget God. It is when we are “*full,*” as the writer puts it, the body full of food and delicacies, the eyes full of pleasant visions, the heart full of creature delights, the bank-book full of receipts, - it is then we become insensible to our dependence on God’s bounty and that actual atheism develops. The gifts usurp the place of the Giver.

“*We can get along very well without God,*” people say. Have you not known such cases? Do we find that the richest people are the most pious? Have you yourself enjoyed your religion most when you have prospered most materially, and gone up in the social scale?

One prayer that we may need to pray is; “*Lord, do not permit us to become too prosperous.*” The reason for it is the fear which Agur voices here. And here he did not regard himself superior to the dangers which are connected with increase of goods: self-exaltation, vanity, and above all, a spirit that denies God, does not acknowledge His authority, and spurns His grace.

It ought not to be so. Yet, that in all times it has been so is another melancholy evidence of man’s depravity. Jesus, the Divine Teacher asks in Matthew 16:26, ²⁶ *For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*

3. Feed Me With The Food Allotted To Me

And so the author of these verses prays that he may enjoy the golden middle in life. “*Feed me with the food allotted to me,*” suitable to me. Clement of Alexandria compares our bread to a shoe which is uncomfortable if too large, and painful if too small. It must just fit to be of service.

So it is with bread. “*Feed me with the food allotted to me,*” says Agur. Preserve me from the snares of poverty and the embarrassment of luxury, the dangers on the right hand and those on the left. Grant me the medium lot, a moderate portion of worldly goods, enough to provide for a comfortable living.

And why? In order that he might have what would be most conducive to his temporal, earthly comfort and enjoyment and peace of mind? That would be a low interpretation of these words.

No, Agur had something else in mind, infinitely nobler. “*Give me these things, O Lord, for the best interest of my soul,*” he would say, “*for my growth in godliness and for my everlasting destiny, that ultimately I do not miss the treasures which do not fade away, reserved in heaven.*”²

A person must never forget what his real purpose in life is, and that all conditions must be made to serve that purpose. That is the lesson which our Lord

in today's Gospel places before us when He says in Matthew 6:24, *You cannot serve God and mammon.*

You cannot give the kingdom of God your first and foremost concern when you are so constrained and so unduly agitated and anxious over the questions; *'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'*³

And who can deny that just this, is one of the dangerous pitfalls of the present generation? Not poverty. But very few, scarcely anyone of us is so destitute as to be deprived of the necessities of life, pinched by hunger and compelled to wear shabby garments.

The danger lies in the opposite direction, and there is nothing more striking to note than the frequency with which our Lord warns His people against that danger.

"Mammon" was the god of the people in His day; covetousness was the reigning passion amongst the Jews. Even when they thought about the Messiah, He was to be a prince who would provide them with riches and worldly power.

And even though they were blessed with religious privileges above any race and received at last, the climax of all blessings in the life and ministry of the Son of God, they fell short of its advantages by reason of their covetousness and worldliness. Finally, they brought upon themselves the stroke of divine vengeance. Yes, even scattered and homeless among the nations, they are still known as a covetous, money-loving, and money-seeking people.

And is there not the danger of the same spirit taking complete hold upon us? Ask what is the great purpose of life with the multitude? What are most people labouring for? To glorify God and to serve Him and their fellow men? Certainly not!

Note the prominence that is given to, the honour paid to, wealth and the people of wealth. Note the ways and means by which it is obtained. *"Make money,"* is the motto of a vast number of people, *"honestly if you can, but make it anyhow."*

When is a person *"successful,"* to use a common phrase? Is it when he distinguishes himself for virtue, integrity among his fellows, as a great and good person? It means nothing of the kind. For many people it means when he is

successful in growing rich. That is the standard of a successful life, its popular great ideal. And we add, it is a great delusion.

And how is it working out, showing itself also in the conduct and the life of those who profess to be God's people? Living under the spirit of such times, they are liable to be infected with it.

In His sublime Parable of the Seed and the Sower, the Lord, describing the *seed that fell among the thorns*, says; *are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity.*⁴

Did He, the omniscient God, when He uttered these words, think of our times? Of the professing Christians of our day? Is not this the melancholy history of many people?

What is the reason that, instead of being useful, fruitful Christians, adorning the doctrine of God, our Saviour, in all things, the ministry of the Word brings forth comparatively little fruit? Why is there so much barrenness in the Lord's vineyard?

Are those upon whose hearts the good seed has been sown been smitten with the popular plague? Are they shrivelling up, choked with the thorns of the "*cares, riches, and pleasures of life*?" For where the one is, there the other two will also be found also. Let there be an honest, earnest investigation with most of us. When the atmosphere around us is so full of infection, we easily become infected.

Nor think that the greatest danger comes from outside of us. It lies within, even in our sinful hearts. If we kept these in proper health, sufficiently stimulated and preserved, the thorns would not hurt us.

And when do we keep our souls in "proper health"? How can we in our constant contact with those distracting influences maintain our Christian fruitfulness? The Lord has not left us without answer.

Plainly He tells us in today's Gospel, *Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness ...* First the kingdom of God! Before us lies His Word. Read that constantly, prayerfully, and meditate upon its sayings. It is the voice of the everlasting God. It is a wonderful instructor, wonderful adviser and preserver.

Let it be *a lamp to [your] feet And a light to [your] path.*⁵ Read it, and bring everything that you read and hear under its test. Let it dwell in your thoughts, and you will find yourself happily delivered from the delusion and vague pursuits of this present evil world.

Then there is the house of God. Make it a matter of conscience to attend the means of grace, the preaching and the Sacraments. In this place of worship we are in the presence of the Most High. Here you inhale a different atmosphere, the only truly pure, delightful, sustaining air, one that your soul needs amid this earth's contaminating, infectious, and poisonous atmosphere.

Here your immortal spirit can ascend as upon a mountain; here it can catch the glimpse of the world that lies beyond this world, with its blessed hope and joy. Here your ears hear messages that strengthen you to combat the Evil One and to fortify you against temptations. So do not fail to be present.

And in conclusion, do not neglect the exercise of prayer, both in your individual life and in your families.

A diver, before he sinks into the water, provides himself with a breathing apparatus. Without this he would perish. But clothed in it, he can sink many fathoms beneath the water, spend hours in the deep, and return to the surface with his treasure of pearls.

Such a spiritual apparatus we must have as we sink into the activities of our callings, into the waters of daily life and dealing with the world, the cares and deceitfulness of riches and pleasures, to keep alive in our souls a sense of divine things and to keep us from perishing.

That breathing device is prayer. See to it, my dear fellow Christians, that you ventilate your lives, your homes with family worship, and your occupations with prayer. That will enable you to walk in the fear of God, to overcome the world, and to maintain a close walk with your Lord.

Thus you will be *“seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”* May the good Lord, if it so pleases Him, give us all *“neither poverty nor riches,”* but supply us with what will help us, with safety and honour, and success, to do His will below and obtain the crown above. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Luke 16:21

² 1 Pet 1:4

³ Matthew 6:31

⁴ Luke 8:14

⁵ Psalm 119:105