



A Shekel coin minted at Tvre.

What does the Bible actually say about poverty? Well, quite a lot, actually. Today we will look at a few passages from both the Old and New Testaments to see if there are major differences between them.

^{NIV} **Exodus 22:25** "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.

^{NIV} **Exodus 23:2-3, 6** "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd, and do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit... "Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.

^{NIV} **Exodus 23:10-11** "For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.

^{NIV} **Exodus 30:11-16** ¹¹The LORD said to Moses, ¹²"When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the LORD when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. ¹³Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel [this would have been about 1/5 of an ounce] as an offering to the LORD. ¹⁴Everyone who is numbered in the census, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the LORD's offering. ¹⁵The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half shekel, when you give the LORD's offering to make atonement for your lives. ¹⁶You shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the LORD, so as to make atonement for your lives."

^{NIV} **Leviticus 14:10-11** "And on the eighth day [the person to be cleansed] shall take two male lambs without blemish, and one ewe lamb a year old without blemish, and a grain offering of three tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil [An *ephah* was about 3/5 bushel or 22 liters], and one log of oil [A *log* was about 1/3 quart or 0.3 liter]. And the priest who cleanses him shall set the man who is to be cleansed and these things before the LORD, at the entrance of the tent of meeting... **vv.14:21-22**

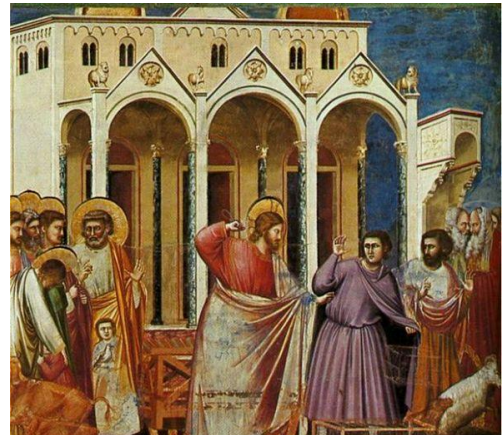
"But if he is poor and cannot afford so much, then he shall take one male lamb for a guilt offering to be waved, to make atonement for him, and a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, and a log of oil; ²² also two turtledoves or two pigeons, whichever he can afford.

Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 6: At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the LORD's release has been proclaimed... For the LORD your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you.

And now, we'll take a look at what the first three Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke say about the poor from a New Testament perspective.

^{NIV} **Luke 6:20** Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

^{NIV} **Matthew 19:16-23** ¹⁶ And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷ And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." ¹⁸ He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ²⁰ The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" ²¹ Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." ²¹ When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. ²³ And



Giotto's Cleansing of the Temple

Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

^{NIV} **Mark 12:41-44** ⁴¹ And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Now some questions to consider:

- 1) In Exodus 22:25, what provision does God establish. Is it still applicable today?
- 2) How would the modern world react to what Moses said about lawsuits in Exodus 23:1-6?
- 3) What is the underlying concern the provision of Exodus 23:10-11?
- 4) Why do you think everyone paid the same census tax (See Exodus 30:11-16), regardless of his level of affluence or poverty?
- 5) Now read about the laws concerning cleansing from disease in Leviticus 14: 10-11 and 21-22. Where is there a difference made here concerning the rich and the poor?
- 6) And finally read about the year of release in Deuteronomy 15:1-10. Why do you think this provision was a good idea?
- 7) What about the provisions for borrowing and lending in this passage?
- 8) (Now we will go to the New Testament) What does Jesus say about the Poor in Luke 6:20?
- 9) What does Jesus want the rich man to do in Matthew 19:16-23?
- 10) What does Jesus say about the poor widow in Mark 14:41-44?

Some reflections: In Exodus 22:25 we are warned not exploit the poor through usury. In fact charging interest is forbidden. The Children of Israel were not the only culture that took this perspective. C.S. Lewis notes that many of the great cultures of the Western World have abhorred the practice of usury.¹ The provision against usury is even stronger in the passage from Deuteronomy Chapter 15. And note how in this passage, the Children of Israel are instructed to lend to others at no interest but to borrow from none, in order to protect their national sovereignty and independence. My goodness, what a different country we would live in if we of the present day United States had adhered to this wisdom!

Exodus 23:2-3 and 6 instructs God's people not to deny the poor legal justice. Further, in Exodus 23:10-11, God's people are warned not to neglect charity to the poor. If you read through the twelve Minor Prophets of the Old Testament, you will see that the economic and political abuse of the poor was one of the major causes why God became so angry with Israel.

The provision of the census tax in Exodus 30:11-16 – a levy which is the same for everyone – is a way of maintaining every man's dignity, regardless of financial status. It's interesting that when Peter follows the instructions of Jesus and finds the coin in the fish's mouth, (See Mt. 17:27) it's enough to pay the Temple Tax for Peter and Jesus. This is pretty conclusive evidence that all the other Apostles had not yet reached the age of Jewish majority. Isn't it amazing what enthusiastic teenagers can do when given the right leadership!

The provisions in Leviticus 14:10-11, which permit less challenging sacrifices in order for the poor to be cleansed, show that God's people must not inhibit a poor man's health or his integration into society. And in Deuteronomy 15:1-10, God's people are instructed not to destroy a poor man's hope for prosperity (for the sake of assuring their own). The main message here is that the wealthy are called to practice gratitude to God for their abundance by showing charity, equity, and justice to the poor. So shall the rich maintain God's favor upon them.

But in the New Testament, Jesus says in Luke 6:20 that to the poor belongs the Kingdom of God. As I've noted before, this is so very similar to what Jesus proclaims in the Beatitudes, with regard to the Kingdom of Heaven belonging to the poor of spirit and the persecuted. (See Mt.5:3, 10) And as I've noted previously, these blessings are clearly expressed as something occurring in the present – as opposed to the other Beatitudes of Mt. 5:4-9 which promise **future** blessings. It seems clear Jesus believes that for those who suffer for righteousness sake, the Kingdom of God is here for their possession in this very present time, and not something we have to wait for.

¹ See the Section on Social Morality in Mere Christianity – page 85 in the Seventh Edition.

He also proclaims in Matthew 19:16-23 that divesting oneself of earthly wealth procures heavenly treasure, since poverty releases a man from impediments to entry into God's Kingdom. When the rich young ruler asks Jesus what the young man must do to inherit eternal life, at first The Lord quotes to him Commandments 5 through 9, (See Ex. 20:12-16) and then adds the duty mentioned in Leviticus of loving your neighbor as yourself. (See Lev. 19:18) Finally, Jesus tells the young man the one thing which will "perfect" him. The Greek word which is used here of τέλειος (pronounced *Tele'ios*) has the sense of 'to be complete.'² So, this act of charity which Jesus prescribes is necessary for the young man to be complete in his person-hood. Charity, in effect, completes the person.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the story concerning the rich young man from Matthew Chapter 19 is the reaction of Jesus' disciples when The Lord says, "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (Mt.19:22) The reason the disciples are so stupefied by this statement has to do with the Jewish perspective of blessing. For the devout Jew, material well-being was a blessing from God, and was an indication of faithfulness. God promised to bless those who were faithful to Him. So for Jesus to say that the wealthy would be **impeded** from inheriting God's Kingdom was a truly revolutionary statement, from the standpoint of the Jews of the 1st Century AD.

With the Widow's Mite in Mark 12:41-44, we learn that Charity from the poor is worth more than charity from the rich. There is a great lesson here for us in the life of the church. I have noticed in my own ministry how often a congregation can fall prey to recognizing the views and opinions of those who make significant financial contributions to the maintenance of the institutions in the parish. But, it is often those who give out of their poverty – like the widow in the account from Mark – these of modest means are usually the ones who are most committed to the Spiritual well-being of the congregation. So there is indeed a modern-day lesson to be drawn from this 1st Century account.

Jesus instructs us that those who endure through poverty and suffering in this life will be with God in the next. But great wealth inhibits our ability to see Him. The main message of these New Testament verses concerning the poor is radically different from that of the Old Testament. For with the coming of The Christ into our world, the poor have been given a special place in God's Kingdom, and poverty in this life is provident of great wealth in the next. As such, in a strange and radically different way, with the coming into the world of The Christ, poverty becomes an opportunity for the Kingdom of God to flourish through loving charity. JWB+, 04-28-16

² Albert Barnes writes convincingly about this in his commentary on Mt. 19:18-19 in his *Notes on the Whole Bible*.