

Galatians 2:10

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[0 : 00] So these were the words that were directed to Paul that he records for us in this letter that he writes to the Galatians.

Remember the poor. Remember the poor. Why was he called by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem to remember the poor? Why did they consider that to be something that was important?

If we were to go through our Bibles and try and count all the occasions when God makes mention of the reality or the topic of poverty, of the poor, of injustice, of oppression, and similar themes, we would find that the Bible is replete with God speaking on this subject.

Indeed, if you tried to cut out every verse on the subject from your Bible, your Bible would quite literally fall apart. What would remain wouldn't be sufficient to hold it together. I don't know if that's something we often reflect on.

We often imagine that it holds or occupies such a significant place in God's word for us.

[1 : 27] Well, tonight I want us to consider one of those verses that appears at a very unexpected juncture. There in the passage that we read in Galatians chapter 2 and in verse 10, And all they asked, that is, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, all they asked was that we should remember or continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

Now, to have a sense of the significance of what is being said here, we do need to have a little bit of an idea of what's going on in the context of the letter and of the events that Paul describes in this chapter.

As Paul writes this letter, he is angry. He is very angry. And he's angry for probably the only thing that would be capable of making him quite so angry.

He's angry because the gospel is being attacked. The gospel is being undermined. The glorious good news of Jesus Christ and his free gift of salvation to all who believe is being undermined.

Indeed, it is being replaced by another gospel, to use the very language that Paul uses. Notice at the beginning of this letter, in chapter 1 and in verses 6 and 7, we read, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel, to another gospel, which is really no gospel at all.

[2 : 53] Paul speaks in very strident and very vigorous language, criticizing those he is writing to for abandoning the gospel and being persuaded, being lured into adopting what he calls a different gospel that is no gospel at all.

Who were the ones who were causing all this confusion among the church or the believers in Galatia? Well, there are those who are sometimes described as or identified as the Judaizers.

These were Jews who professed to be Christians, but who were insisting that Gentile converts to Christianity essentially become Jews and participate in Jewish ceremonial practices.

In particular, they insisted that Gentiles be circumcised. And you might say, well, this seems a bit of a peculiar little requirement.

Is it really that big a deal? Well, Paul realized that it was a big deal indeed, that it was a huge deal, because essentially what these people were saying is that salvation involved faith, but it was faith plus.

[4 : 08] Faith alone was not sufficient. If you were to be saved, by all means, you had to have faith in Jesus, but in addition to that, you needed to do A and B and C.

And if you didn't, then you weren't saved at all. Now, that's stated really quite explicitly in another passage in Acts chapter 15 and verse 1, where the same topic is being addressed.

And let's just notice what is said there in Acts chapter 15 and in verse 1. We read there, this is in the context of the council at Jerusalem, where this matter was also being discussed.

We read, some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers. And listen to what they said. Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

So you see how critical this matter was. They weren't just saying, oh, it would be a good thing if you were circumcised, or we recommend that you be circumcised. No, they're saying if you're not circumcised, you can't be saved.

[5 : 08] You can't be a Christian. You can't be part of this community of faith. And Paul rightly saw this as an attack to the very heart of the gospel, that we are saved through grace and by faith, or by grace and through faith alone.

Now, the Judaizers who were peddling this other gospel knew that if they were to succeed in imposing their point of view, they would need to undermine the authority of Paul. And Paul responds with this letter.

And from the very first quill stroke, he launches his attack. Notice how he begins the epistle. Paul, an apostle, not sent from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Here, unlike in other epistles, he is determined to establish from the very beginning his authority as one sent by Jesus Christ and God the Father.

And so what he says isn't just his opinion, but this is him as God's spokesman on this matter. So even as he introduces the letter, he has in mind those who are seeking to undermine him.

[6 : 24] And in the letter, he continues to set out his stall and establish his authority in what follows. And in chapter 2, he relates a visit that he made to Jerusalem where this very subject was dealt with by Paul and by the leaders of the Jerusalem church, James, Peter, and John in particular.

And these men, they thrashed things out and they came to a God-ordered agreement that prevented what could have been an ugly split in the nascent church. We see the conclusion to their meeting as it's described for us in verse 9 of chapter 2.

James, Peter, and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the Jews.

So there was an agreement on how the missionary endeavor would continue and this error would be confronted. And this was a defining moment for the early church.

It would be difficult to over-exaggerate how critical it was that Paul and the leaders of the church in Jerusalem come to a God-honoring agreement on this matter.

[7 : 34] And I think the reason I'm stressing how defining this moment was is that we then have, out of the blue and seemingly a bit out of place, in the midst of these big questions, we have Paul adding one detail with respect to that assembly of first-century divines.

And it's the words that we find there in verse 10. Having treated these huge matters of great doctrinal significance that were critical to the health and well-being of the church and its expansion, we then read this, that these leaders in Jerusalem, all they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

What does this verse do that Paul includes here in this chapter? What does it do? Well, I think it does a few things. First of all, this verse recognizes a reality, but it also establishes a priority.

The verse also identifies an advocate and it demands a response. And that's the way we're going to make our way through thinking about this verse that we find there at the end of this section of chapter 2.

First of all, this verse recognizes a reality. Paul and the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, they have had a good day. They have averted a split.

[9 : 00] They have secured the continued growth of the church among Jews and Gentiles. And they can feel very satisfied with all that they have achieved. But in the midst of their satisfaction, there is a shadow that hangs over them.

There is an inescapable reality that they cannot ignore. It's as if the very door of the room where they thrashed out these doctrinal matters, at that very door, a child is beating on the door and is crying out to the leaders of the church, what about me?

This shadow is the shadow of poverty. In Acts chapter 11, Agabus prophesies a famine in Jerusalem.

And as these men met to discuss theological issues, that famine was ravaging Judea. This was a famine that, as we can just imagine, not that we perhaps have ever experienced it, but as we've seen the effects of famine, this was a famine that was affecting the weakest and the poorest.

There was nothing to eat. There were those who were starving. There were parents who were seeing their children crying from the pain of hunger. That was what was happening in Judea as these men met and discussed these matters.

[10 : 25] And as I say, we perhaps, I would imagine, I don't know all of you, but I imagine most of us, if not all of us, have been spared that experience in our own lives. But we have seen, perhaps, maybe firsthand, if not firsthand, we've seen on our television screens those who suffer in this way.

In recent days, it's from Yemen. You know, the pictures from Yemen, even though we've maybe become accustomed to the images, they're such that we recoil. I don't know if that's true for you.

Sometimes you just look away. You can't look at that small child who the reporter then tells that, oh, the following day died. Malnourished to a horrendous degree.

Well, in some measure, that is what was happening in Judea. Indeed, the original purpose of Paul's visit to Jerusalem, where he was able to thrash out these matters concerning the Judaizers, the original purpose was to hand over a gift for the poor in the churches in Judea, suffering as a result of this famine.

The issue of poverty demanded action. It demanded a response. Just as the threat of a church divided between Jews and Gentiles had been averted, so the threat of a church divided between haves and have-nots had to be tackled.

[11 : 48] Poverty was a reality in the first century Roman Empire, and very particularly at this time in Judea, in Jerusalem. And, of course, 2,000 years later, poverty, scandalously, remains a reality in our world.

That child that we imagine banging on the door of the conference room in Jerusalem also bangs on the door of our comfortable churches and cries out today, what about me?

As you sing, as you pray, as you study the Bible, as you make your plans, what about me? What are you going to do about me? How are you going to help me? And as I think we've made mention of in prayer, we don't have to cross oceans to encounter poverty.

Tonight, in the cities and large towns of Scotland, there will be those who spend the night exposed to the elements. We have heard of the plight of children in our own towns and cities who are the victims of neglect and abuse.

And the problem is, so we are told, a growing one, maybe in a very small way. Some of you who are involved as volunteers with the food bank can also witness that.

[13 : 02] Those who are affected by, and some perhaps indeed in the grip of poverty. And this verse recognizes that reality.

It was a reality for the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, and it remains a reality today. But the second thing that this verse does is that it establishes a priority. And the simple point that I'm making is that the leaders of the Jerusalem church, in making this request of Paul, remember the poor, in making this request, indeed, the manner in which they make it, they establish a priority.

Because notice how the verse begins. Verse 10, All they asked was that. All they asked. As if to say, this one thing Paul remembered.

Was it the only thing that Paul had to do? Was it his only priority? No doubt there were many others. But this is the one that is highlighted by name on the part of the leaders there in Jerusalem.

And in that way, what they're doing, what they're establishing for us, by their example, they're establishing that remembering the poor is central to the mission of the church. Now that could sound very grand, but maybe sufficiently grand to not be that threatening.

[14 : 19] So maybe let's rephrase that. Remembering the poor and acting in response to that remembrance ought to be central to the mission of any and every, and including our, congregation.

I wonder if that's something that you're persuaded by. Well, let's listen to what others have said. Leaders of the church in the past who we might not have expected to take such a line or we might be surprised to hear their perspective.

Let me just read for you something that was written by the Puritan theologian John Owen. Now John Owen, some of you may have heard of John Owen, some of you may not have heard of him, and that's fine, but John Owen was by common consent the weightiest of the Puritan theologians, a man of deep understanding.

And yet it's interesting what he has to say on this matter, a matter that you might not have expected him to have an opinion or express an opinion. Listen to what he says. And he expresses himself in this way.

Churches and their members ought to think of caring for the poor as an eminent grace and excellent duty. For Christ is glorified and the gospel is honored when we care for the poor.

[15 : 38] Many people consider it unspiritual or something that should be spontaneous rather than organized. Many think it should not be central to the work of the church, but in fact, it is one of the priorities of Christian communities because it is the way we show the gospel grace of love.

Well, that was the opinion of John Owen, and I think grounded in the Scriptures. Let me just quote one other worthy from the past. Jonathan Edwards, across the pond in North America in the 18th century, a very renowned preacher there in America.

He also speaks on this matter. Indeed, he had a tract or a small book that carried the title The Duty of Charity to the Poor Explained and Enforced. And in that book or in that article, he says as follows, and he poses a question.

Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in strong terms and in a more peremptory fashion or urgent fashion than the command of giving to the poor?

And he poses that rhetorical question. So the question then, if we agree with these worthies whose opinions are grounded, I would contend, in the Scriptures, we have to ask ourselves the question, is remembering the poor a priority for us?

[17 : 02] Is it central to our life and mission as a congregation? In the early church and indeed among Jewish people, and we see that reflected in the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount, giving to the needy, giving alms, giving to the needy was a regular duty for the Jews.

Now, we have no such practice. We certainly don't have it formally established that we are to give to the needy of what we do give for the work of the church.

how much is destined to relieving the needs of the poor. I wouldn't want to come up with a percentage because it would be so small that it might be almost embarrassing.

In our mission budget that we have been speaking about on Sunday evenings or highlighting some of the areas that we seek to support, there is a small amount destined for tier fund, as I was mentioning before.

And though modest, at least in some way, that is in response to an acknowledgement of this responsibility. So these words of the leaders in Jerusalem, they acknowledge a reality, they establish a priority, but they also identify an advocate, an advocate for the poor.

[18 : 19] And who is this advocate? Well, Paul himself. You see, remembering the poor for Paul was not a burdensome duty. He states very clearly here in verse 10, the very thing I was eager to do.

He's not reluctant to do what he's being asked to do. It's something he was already doing. They asked that he should continue to remember the poor. He had come to Jerusalem with an offering for the poor. And they say, that's great, Paul.

Continue to do that. Paul already was an advocate on behalf of the poor. In what way did he advocate for the poor and against poverty, against injustice?

Well, if we were to answer that question, how Paul did this, we would really have to cover quite a lot of ground. But let me just very fleetingly mention some ways in which Paul advocated for the poor.

I think he did so perhaps most significantly in his teaching. When we read through the epistles, we find his teaching, and some of his teaching impinges on this very matter.

[19 : 23] First of all, the teaching of basic principles that undermine the very structures of injustice and poverty. For example, concerning the equal value of all before God.

Paul builds on that truth, and he develops it, this reality that we all bear God's image, he develops it richly in describing Christians as being those who have been transformed to the likeness of his Son.

Now, as this principle of our value in God's sight would penetrate into the collective conscience, a practice like slavery, for example, would become untenable.

And how could we possibly countenance slavery in the light of this biblical principle that we are all equally valued by God? It simply is so contrary to this basic biblical principle.

And so in presenting these biblical principles, Paul was undermining the very foundation for poverty. But also in his call to believers to a new lifestyle where reaching out and sharing in love to the poor and the oppressed occupied a central place.

[20 : 36] Remember when Paul in his letter to the Ephesians is urging the new believers, some of whom had, before they were converted, had been robbers or thieves, and he says, those who used to steal, steal no more.

Think, well, fit enough. Work, rather. Work. And then what does he say? So that by working, you will have resources to give to the needy.

And so he says that the very heart of who you are as believers should be this concern to be able to help and to give to the needy. And so in that very practical and direct way, his teaching tackles the matter of poverty.

This idea of sharing with those in need was very much a feature of the New Testament church. One humorous evidence of that is something that was written by Tertullian, one of the early church fathers in the second century, in describing the Christian community.

And he said this, We have all things in common except our wives. Well, it's worth the clarification. But there he just illustrated or he described the life of these early Christian communities that those who were poor were provided for by their brothers and sisters.

[21 : 49] So by his teaching, Paul advocated for the poor. But he also advocated for the poor by his voice of protest. He didn't just teach in the subject. Where Paul identified the practice of injustice, he raised his voice of protest.

Remember the division between the rich and poor in Corinth and the hard words that Paul directed to the offenders. So particularly within the community of faith, but that principle can be applied to raising a prophetic voice of protest in the wider community.

By his teaching, by his voice of protest, by concrete action. We won't dwell on that, but we've already mentioned this collection for the poor that he had organized and that he had transported to Jerusalem.

But also by his own lifestyle and example. So Paul wasn't just pontificating on the subject. He lived it out, this concern for the needy, this desire to share with those who were in need.

Let me just read one thing that Paul says as he writes to Timothy. In 1 Timothy 6, and verses 6 to 8, listen to how Paul expresses himself. 1 Timothy 6, and verses 6 to 8.

[23 : 05] He says this, but godliness with contentment is great gain. And then listen to what he says, for we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.

And then especially what he says, but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Now, when Paul says that, he's not saying, well, that's the principle, but obviously I've got a lot more than that.

What he's saying is, I am content with food and clothing. And if my resources extend beyond food and clothing, well, that allows me to share with others. So when Paul urges others and us to be concerned for the poor, he's doing so from that place of personal authority because he himself was willing to live a life that was simple in its lifestyle in order that he might be able to help others, in order that he would not be a burden to others.

So in these different ways, Paul was an advocate for the poor and one who advocated for them and indeed against poverty and injustice.

One final thing that this verse does for us and that is that it demands a response. Paul stresses that remembering the poor was the very thing he was eager to do.

[24 : 23] The very thing that he was eager to do, the very thing that he was diligently engaged in. And I suppose the question for us as we bring it home to ourselves is, what about you?

How are you eager to do this very thing? How are you practically remembering the poor in this diligent, eager way as Paul says or expresses of himself?

Are we, each of us but together, eager to remember the poor and to act in their favor? May that be our concern?

Let us be eager in helping the poor. Let us give generously when opportunity affords to provide for a response to a disaster where the poor are affected or fundraising efforts of one kind or another on behalf of the poor.

By all means, let's act in that way. But let's also carefully, eagerly examine ourselves individually and as a congregation as we seek to construct and to put into practice a coherent and God-honoring response to the reality of poverty at home and abroad.

[25 : 37] And may God help us in that task. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that it tackles and tackles head-on the real world and the problems of the real world.

And poverty is a problem for today. How many countless millions suffer the reality of poverty who wake up every morning and that is their grinding reality.

We perhaps in great measure are spared that experience and we are grateful for that. We are grateful that you have provided for us, that this is not an experience that is ours.

But we pray that we would hear the voice of those leaders in Jerusalem voiced and directed to Paul a couple of thousand years ago. But through the millennia come to us this one thing we would ask of you.

Remember the poor. And we pray that we would, with Paul, be eager to do that very thing. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.