

VALUE ALL

Jesus values all people.

Martin Niemöller [NEE muhr luhr] was a prominent German pastor during the mid-20th century. He was imprisoned for seven years in Nazi concentration camps for his outspoken—though belated—opposition to Adolf Hitler. After the war ended, Niemöller acknowledged in his subsequent sermons and lectures that he, along with thousands of other German church leaders, had been guilty of being silent far too long as the Nazi regime persecuted, imprisoned, and murdered millions of people. His best known poetic line, displayed in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., warns of the danger of inaction simply because one's own group is not yet the primary target of abuse, cruelty, or discrimination.

While Niemöller was still preaching and lecturing worldwide about the danger of inaction in the face of evil, I was growing up in the South as an active participant in all the usual church activities—Bible study, discipleship training, summer Vacation Bible School, youth group, and all the rest. I recall that in one of the first sermons I really paid attention to, the preacher talked about two types of sins: sins of commission (doing something I shouldn't do) and sins of omission (failing to do what I should). I realize now that, in talking about sins of omission, my pastor was warning of the same problem Niemöller preached about—Christians who fail to stand up against that which they know is wrong and is harmful to vulnerable people.

This session focuses on the sanctity of human life and the duty we have as believers to stand up for those in danger of being abused, aborted, abandoned, or devalued. As followers of Christ, we are called and equipped by the Holy Spirit to value whom and what the Lord Jesus values. Jesus values all people. We who belong to Him in faith must value all people too. In our modern culture that increasingly devalues human life—from the unborn in the womb to the abandoned elderly—we as believers must find ways to act compassionately and boldly to uphold the sanctity of human life. It is a biblical truth found in both the Old and New Testaments. Thus, we will explore two brief passages, one in the Book of Proverbs and the other in the Gospel of Mark.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PROVERBS 24; MARK 10

Christians often turn to the Book of Proverbs to find wisdom from God on how to live. Indeed, the acquisition of godly wisdom is the central theme of the book (Prov. 1:1-7). A proverb is a brief, pithy observation of truth concerning a particular subject. On the other hand, proverbs should not be understood as absolute divine promises of human success in every situation. They are, rather, general statements of truth.

In compiling the Book of Proverbs, the inspired writer drew from the principles of God, from nature, and from experience in life. He sought to encourage others toward wise living by providing counsel through his proverbs. These sayings represented years of experience by the wise, and their aim was to impart wisdom to the inexperienced. The proverbs reflect instruction from God, and an individual gains wisdom by following the principles set forth.

Among several subjects the biblical writer addressed in Proverbs 24 was the sin of inaction in situations that demand action. In some circumstances, the believer's failure to act compassionately and boldly offends the Lord. Even if such intervention opens the Christian to danger or criticism, the action taken to right a wrong honors God.

In Mark 10, Jesus was making the final trip of His earthly ministry from Galilee to Jerusalem, where He would be crucified. He was aware of the sufferings and trials that He would undergo over the upcoming days. He even warned the disciples of what He would encounter in the city (Mark 10:33-34). The enormity of the upcoming events weighed heavily on the mind of Jesus. However, in the last few days with the disciples, Jesus continued to teach them. One area of instruction dealt with the importance of people who were deemed less than valuable by the prevailing culture. During the final week of His earthly ministry, even when facing death Himself, Jesus chose to emphasize that each human being possesses importance and value to God.

All of the events reported in Mark 10 relate in some way to the theme of life's value and helping those who are taken advantage of in life. In the first event, the Pharisees attempted to entrap Jesus in an argument, questioning Him about divorce (10:1-12). Prior to this event, John the Baptist had publicly denounced Herod Antipas for divorcing his wife to marry his brother's wife. As a result Herod imprisoned John and subsequently decreed John's execution (Mark 6:16-29). By posing a question about divorce, the Pharisees may have hoped Jesus would make a similar public denunciation of Herod and thus meet a similar fate as John the Baptist.

In first-century Jewish life, divorce was weighted in favor of the man, usually to the detriment of the divorced woman. A husband could declare a divorce; a wife could not do so without her husband's consent. An unfaithful husband might receive no punishment; a wife who committed adultery could be stoned to death. Jesus, however, refused to answer the Pharisees' question about divorce in the way they framed it. Instead, He focused on the Creator's original design for marriage (10:6-9). Jesus placed husbands and wives under the equal obligation to be faithful in marriage.

The second event reported shows the value Jesus placed on children (10:13-16). When a group of parents brought their children to Jesus to be blessed, the disciples rebuked the parents. In the prevailing culture, children were not to be seen or heard. Jesus became indignant, however, when He saw His disciples' dismissive attitude regarding children. Jesus gladly blessed the children and used the incident to teach His disciples the significance of these vulnerable people. Children represented the very qualities that were most valued in God's kingdom.

In a third event, Jesus encountered a wealthy Jewish leader (the so-called "rich young ruler") who wanted to know what he must do to inherit eternal life (10:17-22). Jesus used the encounter to expose the man's trust in his wealth. Jesus then turned to His disciples and further explained that those who seem to be most important in this life—especially in terms of material wealth—are the last to enter God's kingdom (10:23-31). Neither wealth nor poverty commend a person to God; only faith in God can do that. The wealthy individual and the poor person are of equal importance to God.

A fourth event took place as Jesus and His disciples journeyed on a road toward Jerusalem. After warning His disciples of what awaited Him in the city—His arrest, condemnation, death, and resurrection—Jesus confronted two of His disciples for craving positions of worldly power through appointment rather than true glory through self-giving service (10:32-45). The lesson for James and John, as well as for the other disciples, was that greatness in God's sight is measured in serving, not in being served. Jesus was the ultimate example of this kind of greatness.

A fifth and final event in the chapter occurred outside Jericho, where Jesus healed a blind man named Bartimaeus [BAHR tih MEE uhs] (10:46-52). Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus for help even while others told the blind beggar to keep quiet. Jesus took the time to stop His journey and to heal Bartimaeus, commending the man's faith in Him. Like the previous events, this event emphasized the value Jesus placed on all people, especially those on the margins of society who needed someone to stand up for them. This session will help us focus on what we as followers of Christ can do to value and stand up for the vulnerable people of our day.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

A CALL TO PROTECT LIFE (Prov. 24:11)

Proverbs 24:10-12 is part of a section of proverbs running from 22:17 to 24:22 and described as “the words of the wise” (22:17). In all likelihood, Solomon was responsible for most, if not all, of these sayings (see 1:1,6). In 24:11, Solomon challenged God’s people to take steps to rescue people who had been wrongly condemned to death.

VERSE 11

Rescue those being taken off to death, and save those stumbling toward slaughter.

The situation envisioned in this proverb likely was not one of applying capital punishment in the case of a justly convicted criminal. The Mosaic Law authorized capital punishment in cases the Lord had specified and in which a just judgment had been rendered (Gen. 9:5-6; Ex. 21:12-17; 22:18-20; Lev. 20:2,9-13). Instead, Solomon envisioned situations in which an individual or group was being unjustly targeted—that is, they were **being taken off to death** (“drawn unto death,” KJV; “led away to death,” NIV). The Hebrew verb rendered **rescue** (“forbear to deliver,” KJV) is an imperative; it called for action. The verb’s form also has a causative aspect; thus, it can be translated as “cause to rescue” or “cause to be delivered.” In other words, God’s people were commanded to find ways to advocate for and protect those who were in danger of being unjustly condemned to death.

We could wish that situations envisioned by the first half of Proverbs 24:11 were confined to the ancient world. That is not the case. The modern world still witnesses all too many examples of ungodly, unjust cruelty. Think of the genocidal actions by the Nazi regime against millions of Jews and other minority groups during World War II. Consider the murderous actions of today’s terrorists, targeting innocent men, women, and children while giving no thought to the value of their victims’ lives to God. Then consider also the continuing scourge of abortion, not just in America but throughout the world. Since 1973 and the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion in the U.S., more than 50 million abortions have occurred in our nation alone. Compassionate Christians cannot and must not stand by silently while so many yet-to-be-born babies are devalued as “tissue” and discarded. Too many of the unborn in our world today must be considered among those *being taken off to death*.

If the first part of verse 11 describes people who are victimized by others, the phrase **those stumbling toward slaughter** seems to refer to people who

unknowingly or foolishly fall into activities that threaten their own well-being. The New Testament Book of Jude presents a similar message when it urges Christians to “have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; [and to] have mercy on others but with fear, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh” (Jude 22-23). Solomon encouraged God’s people to actively **save** (literally, “hold back”) such people. This is not a reference to the salvation from sin that only Christ can give; rather, it is synonymous with the term *rescue* in the first part of verse 11. Regardless of whether the need for intervention arises from unjust treatment by others or from a person’s own foolish actions, the mandate to help remains the same.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Justice” on pages 968-970 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In what ways can the modern practice of abortion be considered an extreme case of injustice in God’s eyes? What are some efforts you have seen Christians make to stand up for the value of vulnerable groups such as the unborn or the elderly?

A WARNING AGAINST INACTION (Prov. 24:10,12)

Proverbs 24:11 expresses a call to wise action for God’s people. That verse is sandwiched between two verses that warn against failing to act in response to God’s call. In these verses, Solomon addressed two empty excuses God’s people sometimes offer to justify their inaction.

VERSE 10

If you do nothing in a difficult time, your strength is limited.

This verse is difficult to translate smoothly into English. Literally, the verse reads: “You have shown yourself slack (or inactive) in a day of distress; your strength is narrow.” Other English renderings include: “If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small” (KJV) and “If you falter in a time of trouble, how small is your strength!” (NIV). The word for “if” does not appear in the Hebrew, but most English Bible translations insert the term because it reflects the likely emphasis in the original text. In other words, the verse illustrates a typical Hebrew proverb with two parts. The first part sets up a scenario, or possible condition. The second part of the proverb then gives insight related to that scenario. Sometimes the relationship of the two parts is cause and effect: if Part 1 is actual, it will result in Part 2. At other times

the relationship is revelatory: if Part 1 is actual, then Part 2 is revealed as actual as well.

I believe that Proverbs 24:10 is best understood in the second sense. That is, a person's failure to act in appropriate ways **in a difficult time** does not cause but rather reveals that the individual's **strength is limited**. Let me illustrate the principle: in August 2005, Hurricane Katrina plowed into the Gulf Coast region of the United States. The hurricane resulted in tremendous wind damage but also in devastating flooding, particularly in the low-lying city of New Orleans where multiple levees were breached. In the days after the storm, two striking kinds of human behavior emerged. One type was lawless and wild; some people resorted to looting, chaos, and violence. A second type of behavior was heroic; some people risked their lives to help others to safety or to preserve order. The hurricane caused neither of those two types of behavior; rather, it revealed what was already in the hearts of people.

Solomon likewise taught that difficult times have a way of revealing a person's true character. Inaction at such times reveals a weak character. Whether the inaction stems from fear, uncertainty, or unconcern, the result remains the same. Thus, God's people are called to act compassionately, even heroically, for righteousness' sake when the culture devalues human life.

VERSE 12

If you say, “But we didn’t know about this,” won’t He who weighs hearts consider it? Won’t He who protects your life know? Won’t He repay a person according to his work?

In this verse, Solomon addressed a second empty excuse that is offered by God's people at times to justify inaction. Sometimes people say, **“We didn't know about this.”** To be sure, there may be times when God's people are not aware of specific situations that call for action. Acts of discrimination or injustice against vulnerable people may not have been brought to light. Does God hold His people accountable if they fail to act concerning situations they don't know about? The answer, of course, is no. God does not act unjustly.

On the other hand, this verse reminds us that God is all-knowing. He is the One **who weighs hearts**. In ancient Hebrew thought, the heart was the seat of the will—the place where decision-making took place and, thus, the origin of moral (or immoral) action (see Prov. 4:23). God knows our innermost motives for action or inaction. He knows when we simply aren't aware of something. He also knows when we willfully hide our heads in the sand to try to avoid having to deal with an unjust situation.

Further, God is the believer's ultimate source of protection in life (**He who protects your life**). He knows whether His people are trusting Him

in taking a stand for righteousness. Jesus taught His disciples to pray that God’s kingdom would come and that God’s will would be done “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). Jesus also taught that His followers were to live as “the salt of the earth” (5:13) and “the light of the world” (5:14), bringing His righteousness to bear on the culture in which they live—even when doing so invites persecution for His name’s sake.

Finally, God always rewards His people **according to [their] work**. This is not a reference to salvation from sin. The apostle Paul explained clearly that, in terms of salvation, we are “saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). However, he went on to teach that in Christ we are created anew “for good works” (2:10) and that one day all believers must “appear before the tribunal of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he [or she] has done in the body, whether good or worthless” (2 Cor. 5:10; see also 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

We as Christians can hardly claim to be unaware of the systemic problems in our culture in which human life is increasingly devalued. We may not be aware of what is happening with specific individuals, but even in those cases we can pray for the Lord to open our eyes and ears to the cries of those around us who need Christlike compassion and help. We can trust the Lord to empower and protect us as we take a stand for the value of every human life.

EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you encountered a difficult situation in which you had to decide quickly whether or not to get involved in trying to help? How did you respond? What factors led to your decision? If you had it to do over again, would you respond differently? If so, how—and why?

AN EXAMPLE SET (Mark 10:46-49)

Mark 10 relates several events that occurred as Jesus and His disciples traveled toward Jerusalem, where He would be arrested, crucified, and raised from the dead. Although each event’s description has its own elements and nuances of instruction, all the accounts teach the value of human life.

VERSE 46

They came to Jericho. And as He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a large crowd, Bartimaeus (the son of Timaeus), a blind beggar, was sitting by the road.

Joshua and the Israelites had completely destroyed the Old Testament city of Jericho (see Josh. 6:24-26). Despite a curse that Joshua spoke over the ruins, the city had been rebuilt in New Testament times by Herod the Great. Situated only six miles from the Jordan River at an elevation of 740 feet below sea level, Jericho enjoyed a mild to warm climate year round. Herod appreciated the mild climate and built a winter palace there. The combination of mild climate, rich soil, ample irrigation, and abundant sunshine made the area around Jericho especially attractive for agriculture. Access to several roads, including one winding upward some 3,500 feet to Jerusalem, helped make the city a prosperous trade center. Consequently, Jericho attracted tax collectors (see Luke 19:1-10) as well as beggars such as **Bartimaeus** [BAHR tih MEE uhs], whose name meant **son of Timaeus** [tigh MEE uhs] or “son of one who is highly valued.”

First-century Jewish society often viewed people with infirmities as sinners whom God had punished. If the infirmity had been present from birth, then the individual’s parents might be the ones being punished (see John 9:1-2). In any case, individuals such as Bartimaeus often ended up as beggars, **sitting by the road** and asking passersby for scraps of food, money, and clothing.

While blindness and other infirmities were deemed to be divine punishment, public begging was often viewed as shameful. People went out of their way to avoid contact with beggars, and many learned to tune out the beggars’ cries for help. Thus, Bartimaeus was likely disdained by his community. Privately he may have questioned his own value.

VERSE 47

When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out, “Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me!”

Bartimaeus no doubt heard the noise of a crowd getting near. Presumably he inquired as to what was happening, and someone told him that **Jesus the Nazarene** (“of Nazareth,” KJV, ESV, NIV) was traveling along the road (compare Luke 18:36). We are not told whether Bartimaeus had previously encountered Jesus, but it seems fairly certain that Jesus’ reputation was well-known in the area. Perhaps Jesus had passed near Bartimaeus at Jericho on His previous trips from Galilee to Jerusalem.

The designation for Jesus as *the Nazarene* appears 11 times in the New Testament; it distinguishes Jesus from other individuals with the same name. Upon hearing that Jesus was walking along the road, Bartimaeus could not contain his excitement. He began to shout, **“Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me!”**

The phrase *Son of David* contained messianic overtones. Only in this instance in Mark's Gospel was the title specifically applied to Jesus. For the Gentile readers in the original audience for the Gospel of Mark, this messianic title would have held little meaning. (Luke's Gospel mentions the title only twice. On the other hand, in Matthew's Gospel, where a Jewish background is more predominant, the title appears nine times. The heavy emphasis in Matthew's Gospel on Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy shows the connection between the title and the messianic promises of the Old Testament.)

Bartimaeus likely had overheard many conversations of Jewish pilgrims going to and from Jerusalem through Jericho. The Law of Moses instructed all Jewish males to attend three festivals in Jerusalem each year (Ex. 23:14, 17; 34:23-24; Deut. 16:16). Some travelers going to Jerusalem from Galilee no doubt talked of Jesus' teachings and healings. They may have talked aloud of the possibility that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Bartimaeus, also being a Jew, would have known the Messiah would be a descendant of King David. Thus, when he heard that Jesus was walking by, Bartimaeus readily used the title that specifically connected Jesus and the Messiah.

Bartimaeus asked for help from the only Person who might possibly make him whole. He cried out for Jesus to *have mercy* on him. If he were ever to be healed of his blindness, this was his best opportunity. Bartimaeus had no time to reflect or theorize. He blurted out loudly words that he hoped would gain the attention of the Person traveling by on the road.

Perhaps the request for mercy was among the pleas Bartimaeus commonly used in begging. Over time he might have learned techniques and phrases that proved to be persuasive in prompting travelers to give alms to him. This plea spoke to the heart of faithful Jews, and it echoed the cries of God's people toward God. Devout Jews at some point had begged for mercy from God. Maybe the plea had prompted contributions for Bartimaeus in the past. However, the cry for mercy from Jesus did not entail money. His cry was for something no ordinary traveler could give. Bartimaeus wanted to see.

VERSE 48

Many people told him to keep quiet, but he was crying out all the more, "Have mercy on me, Son of David!"

Bartimaeus's cries rose above the din of the crowd. Often throngs of people accompanied Jesus as He traveled. Many people wanted to hear His teachings. Many others hoped to witness a miracle.

To make his voice heard, Bartimaeus yelled loudly. His shouting disturbed some of the people nearby, and they sought to silence the beggar. Jesus was

an important teacher. They thought He was too busy to be bothered with the plight of a blind beggar. However, Bartimaeus only shouted louder.

VERSE 49

Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called the blind man and said to him, “Have courage! Get up; He’s calling for you.”

Rather than ignoring the beggar on the side of the road, Jesus did the unexpected thing by stopping. Why would Jesus take time for a beggar, especially since He was heading to Jerusalem to lay down His life on the cross? With so much on His mind, with so much to teach His disciples in the few days before His death, surely Jesus had more important things to consider than a blind beggar! Or, was the treatment of a blind beggar among the lessons Jesus wanted to teach His disciples?

Jesus had taught His disciples to love their neighbor using the parable of the good Samaritan to illustrate the principle (see Luke 10:27-37). That particular parable had been set against the backdrop of the dangerous road from Jericho to Jerusalem. With Bartimaeus, Jesus exemplified the principle of loving one’s neighbor by showing respect and kindness to a blind beggar on that same road from Jericho to Jerusalem. For Jesus, loving one’s neighbor was not an abstract concept to be admired; it was a lifestyle to be practiced. Jesus called for Bartimaeus to be brought to him. The crowd probably was stunned that Jesus acknowledged the beggar. Some among the crowd likely lived in Jericho and had seen Bartimaeus sitting beside the road on many occasions. But had they really seen the man as a person of worth? Or had they learned to ignore the beggar as part of the road’s background scenery? By contrast, Jesus took time to see a man who needed compassion and help. He saw beyond the garments of a beggar to see one for whom He would die on the cross.

Every human being has value because he or she is created in the image of God. Regardless of station in life or economic status, each person is of utmost concern for God. Christians are to embrace the Lord’s concern for all.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Blindness” on pages 224-225 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What individuals with physical or other disabilities have blessed your life recently? How did they do so? What are ways that believers can show Christlike love and honor to individuals with disabilities?