

## Rescuing the Unborn with Selfless Love (Proverbs 24:10-12)

Proverbs: Living Well in God's World

Zionsville Fellowship | 7.9.2017 | Drew Hunter

Proverbs 24:10-12

- 10 If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small.  
11 Rescue those who are being taken away to death;  
hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter.  
12 If you say, "Behold, we did not know this,"  
does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?  
Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it,  
and will he not repay man according to his work?

We're in our last Sunday of our series in the book of Proverbs.

And in this final sermon, we'll look at one more text together, the text we just read. This text calls us to take responsibility for rescuing victims of deadly injustice. It calls us to rescue those who are unjustly being carried away to death. This text brings together two major themes in Proverbs.

1. One is the theme of selflessness. If you scan Proverbs looking for the words, "selfish" or "selfless," you won't find them. Because they're represented by different words. The word used to describe the selfless is "righteous."

In Proverbs, we've seen all along that "righteousness" is not just about private religious piety. The righteous in Proverbs are those who disadvantage themselves to advantage the community.<sup>1</sup> They sacrifice their own self-interest for the interest of others. They are others-oriented in their actions.

2. The other theme is human dignity. Proverbs repeatedly affirms the dignity of every human life. In Proverbs, the value of the weak and the poor is lifted up. In the ancient world and today the weak, vulnerable, and impoverished are often trampled on. Those with power overrun the weak.

But in Proverbs, the call is to care for the weak, the needy, and the poor. Because every human being is made in God's image. Proverbs upholds the dignity of every human life.

Our text this morning brings these two themes together: selflessness, and human dignity.

If you aren't a Christian, it's helpful (and maybe surprising) to see that the Bible resonates with what you value. We all know that selfishness is repulsive and selflessness is attractive. We all want a world where every life has value--where everyone honors the dignity of human life. The reason you want these things is because the God who wrote this book made you.

Proverbs takes these two themes (selflessness and human dignity) and applies them to a crisis situation.

It calls for selfless action on behalf of those whose human dignity is disregarded to the point of death. Some human beings are being unjustly killed; they are not valued as made in God's image. And this calls us to courageously rescue them. It calls us to show selflessness by rescuing victims of deadly injustice.

This text applies to any situation where any human being is being unjustly taken to death. It means that we have a responsibility to rescue them – because every human being has dignity – regardless of age, race, or ability to contribute to society. This calls us to be pro-life for all lives.

And there is one particular human injustice that is most pressing today. And it's the injustice against the unborn. So, we'll consider how this text leads us to care for the unborn.

I have four hopes for this message:

1. That it will strengthen and encourage those of you who are selflessly serving women, men, and children in their need.
2. That it will motivate some of you to re-engage with this work if you have stopped.
3. That it will become a turning point for many of us who are not taking responsibility to care for the needy and the unborn in our neighborhoods and nation.
4. And my hope is that God would comfort for those of you who are hurting. My hope is that God would pronounce comfort, not condemnation, over your heart. And that you would not walk away grieving without hope, but feeling deeply known and loved and forgiven and cared for by the Father, Son, and Spirit. And that you would trust in the sacrifice of Jesus for this full forgiveness.

The tone and content of this sermon... is not condemnation for those who have failed to protect others... it is grace for those who have failed to protect others, which includes all of us.

God has forgiving grace for all our failings; and he has empowering grace to lead us to love and serve.

And some of you who have been most affected by this issue... may now be used to be most effective to make a difference.

So, through this text, God calls us to show courageous selflessness in rescuing victims of deadly injustice. There are four words that summarize what can lead us to love our pre-born neighbors: Fortitude, Action, Responsibility, and Motivation.

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## I. Fortitude (v10)

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First, fortitude. Verse 10: “If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small.”

This is an indirect rebuke. This wise man is saying to us: days of adversity come. Hard times come. Seasons of suffering come. Moments of crisis come. And when they come, your character is exposed. You find out how strong you really are.

So, it says: here’s how you find out that you have small strength: when a day of trouble comes, you faint.

I don’t think “faint” is the best translation of the word here. The Christian Standard Bible gives a better translation: “If you do nothing in a difficult time.” The word refers to holding something back, or not doing something. This pictures courage standing up, ready to act in a crisis situation.

And notice the way this is written: it’s an indirect rebuke.

This is addressing the tendency in our souls to cowardice. The tendency to passivity. The tendency to see problems, but to do nothing about them.

The opposite of this is fortitude. We don’t use that word much, but it’s a good one. Fortitude is a combination of courage and patience.<sup>ii</sup> It is about sustained courage in the face of a challenging situation.

The New Testament highlights this as a Christian virtue. Galatians 6:9 says, “let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”<sup>2</sup> Thessalonians 3:13, “As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.”

So far this is just a specific call to fortitude. But the next verse applies it to a specific kind of situation.

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## II. Action (v11)

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Verse 10 challenges us to cultivate fortitude. Second, verse 11 commands us to action. Verse 10 called for fortitude in a general “day of adversity;” now verse 11 calls us to show fortitude in a *specific* kind of situation: “Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter.”

This gives us one, clear command. It’s a call to action. It is a call to rescue the innocent from unjust killing.

We don’t know who these victims are, or how they are killed. It could have been when a foreign army overtook people and carried them away to death. It could refer to babies who were sacrificed to pagan gods.

It could refer to injustice in the judicial system that wrongly sentenced people to death. It could be for protecting people from murder.

We also don't know how we are supposed to rescue the people. Is this through a direct encounter? Is it through creating more just laws? We don't know.

This is probably intentionally general.

Proverbs gives us general wisdom. We are to take it and learn to apply it to various situations in life. So, this gives us a principle: Do whatever you can to rescue any human being from an unjust death.

This principle resonates deep inside all of us.

We love movies where the hero rescues the victim from an unjust death. In superhero movies, the hero rescues the vulnerable from death. In military movies, the good army rescues people from unjust death.

And if you are a Christian, you have a long heritage of heroes. We have a legacy of God's people taking this seriously.<sup>iii</sup> Different situations. Different ways of rescuing.

- The patriarch Joseph was going to be killed by his own brothers. His older brother, Rueben stepped in to rescue him. When he heard of his brothers plot, [“he rescued him out of their hands, saying, ‘let us not take his life’”](#) (Gen 37:21-22). So, rescuing looks like personal persuasion.
- Israel was in slavery in Egypt, and Pharaoh ordered for their male children to be killed. The Hebrew midwives refused to do it. They rescued the children because they feared God. Here rescuing looks like personal courage to not kill the children.
- Centuries later another Israel was in exile. Another king gave an edict for genocide against the Jewish people. And Esther risked her own life in order to reverse that edict. And she saved her people by working to changing the law. Here, rescuing looks like working to change the laws of the land.
- In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, abortion and infanticide were normal. And none of the philosophers and intellectuals thought it was a bad idea. Some promoted it. But then as the gospel spread and people became Christians, they changed their mind.

An early Christian document explicitly says [“There are two different ways: the way of life and the way of death, and the difference between these two is great. Therefore do not murder a child by abortion or kill a newborn infant.”](#)<sup>iv</sup> So, here rescuing looked like church leaders teaching on the sanctity of human life.

- The early Christians also literally rescued babies. Some of the babies were left in the open or in the city dumps to die. Christians raised them and adopted them. Here, rescuing lives looked like opening homes and adopting children.
- A few hundred years ago William Carey became a missionary to India. But he didn't just tell people about Jesus, he also cared for their physical needs. In one place, he found out that people sacrificed over 100 babies each year by throwing them into the Ganges River. They were eaten by crocodiles. Carey launched an effort to end the practice. Eventually they passed legislation outlawing it – even though some said he was imposing his morals on them. Here again, rescuing looks like working to change the laws.
- William Wilberforce dedicated his career to ending the slave trade in England. He worked to change legislation. Many people viewed him as an extremist. He had a lot of setbacks. It took decades. He wrote, “never, never desist till we... extinguish every trace of this bloody traffic, of which our posterity, looking back to the history of these enlightened times, will scarce believe that it has been suffered to exist so long a disgrace and dishonor to his country.”<sup>v</sup>
- In parts of Africa, about a century and a half ago, many people thought twins were a curse. So if someone had twin babies, they killed them or left them out in the wild to die. Mary Slessor rescued and adopted on set of twins. She kept collecting them and started an orphanage. Through her sacrificial fortitude, she not only rescued children, many people became Christians through her. They saw the difference that Jesus made in her life.

Those are the various ways in which God's people rescued the innocent from death. We're now a new generation. And we have the same kinds of challenges to deal with. Proverbs said that there is a “day of adversity.” That “day of adversity” is, in our time, every day. Because every day, innocent people are being taken away to death.

Who is being carried away to death today?

I said at the beginning that I want to show how this text applies to abortion. This text either applies to abortion, or it doesn't – depending on our answer to one question. This either calls us to engage in this issue, or not, depending on how we answer one question.

And that question is the most important question in any conversation about abortion. It's this: Are the unborn human beings? Are the unborn people?

If we answer that question by saying, “yes, the preborn are human beings,” here's the implication: That means abortion is the greatest human rights issue of our time. It is the greatest justice issue of our generation. And it means that this text tells us what we're called to do. It calls us to actively work to love the weak and vulnerable in the womb.

So, the key question is: is the pre-born a person? Is the unborn a member of the human family?

How do we answer that question? Let's think about it from a few different angles.

1. First question: is the embryo or fetus a *part of* the mother, or a *distinct, living* being? According to the science of embryology, they are distinct, living, and whole human beings from the earliest stages. An embryo or fetus is a distinct being from the point of fertilization.
2. That raises another question. We would ask, "what kind of being is this?" We wouldn't just say, "it's a fetus." Because animals have fetuses. Elephants have an elephant fetus. What kind of fetus is it? That depends on the fetuses' parents. And the parents of this fetus are humans. So this is a distinct, human fetus. This is a human being.
3. Here's a new question: is the fetus alive? And the answer, according to the science of embryology, is yes. It is a living human being, distinct from the mother, and growing from the earliest moments.

So, according to science, the fetus doesn't become a living human being at birth. Birth changes the child's location, but not its identity. When we call the pre-born a "fetus," we aren't saying they aren't living human beings. We're just saying how old they are.

- We call them fetuses when they are in the womb.
- And we call them babies when they are out of the womb.
- And we call them toddlers when they are toddling around.
- And we call them teenagers when they are in their teen years.

All of those are different words we use to refer to different ages. And they all refer to the same person, just at different stages of development.

This is important to know because in everyday conversation, many people make one main assumption about abortion. The main assumption is that the preborn are not human beings.

And here's why this matters:

Because if a baby in the womb is a human being like a baby outside the womb, then that matters for how we treat her. It means that the pre-born should have the same human rights as a toddler.

We assume that toddlers are human beings. Which is why we believe that toddlers are entitled to the same right to life as adults. Age and level of development do not determine the level of our right to life. Toddlers are equally worthy of respect, and protection. Most people believe in human rights; and they apply them to all humans who are outside the womb.

But, we don't apply it to the pre-born. Because we don't think of them as human beings.

But if we were consistent here, then we would promote the protection of every preborn human.

Because we don't let men or women kill their toddlers. Why? Because the toddler is a human being, and we apply human rights to them.

We are pro-choice for men and women in many areas of life. But, as a society, we recognize that certain rights of others limit our choices. One choice that we do not affirm or accept is the choice to kill another human being.

And so, if we care about equal human rights, we have to apply those human rights equally.

If the preborn boys and girls are human beings like toddlers, and we care about human rights... then we are a generation that has a whole class of human beings who are denied those rights.

And, therefore, we are living in – what Proverbs 24 calls – “[the day of adversity.](#)”

It is a time when the weakest among us, the most vulnerable, are not defended. But are taken away to death.

It doesn't feel like a “day of adversity” to us. For a few reasons:

1. First, it doesn't *look* that bad. It's done privately. It's all very sanitary.
2. Second, it's legally acceptable. Since 1973, when Roe v Wade was passed, our legal system doesn't give the preborn human rights.
3. Third, it's culturally controversial. And when people have different opinions about things, our tendency is to take a relativist posture: if people disagree, then we can't really know the truth.
4. Fourth, we're rightly sympathetic with so many men and women who are put in hard situations. Many women face great challenges raising children they weren't expecting. And they are often very clouded or confused or conflicted in their thinking.

So, this doesn't look and feel like the crisis situation of Proverbs 24. But if the unborn are human beings, then it is.

So, here's a way to summarize the point: If the unborn is not a human being, then there is no problem taking her life. But if the unborn *is* a human being, then that changes everything. Because it makes the act morally equivalent to taking the life of a toddler.

And that means that verse 11 applies, and we're called to protect them.

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### III. Responsibility (v12)

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So far, we see the need for fortitude and action. Third, responsibility.

Those through history who modeled this well had fortitude and they took action to defend the rights of those who were unjustly taken to death.

They also often had another thing in common: They understood that they were responsible to help victims of injustice, even if they had nothing to do with the problem.

Verse 12 anticipates a possible excuse for inaction.

It addresses those of us who will hear verses 10-11 and still think that nothing is required of us. Verse 12, [“If you say, ‘Behold, we did not know this,’ does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? does no the who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will ne not repay a man according to his work?”](#)

This is speaking directly to us as the readers. [“If you say...”](#) That’s talking to us. This wise man knows how we may respond to all of this. And he anticipates our excuse. He knows we may say, “look... I didn’t know what was going on.”

And notice: the excuse is communal. The excuse is, [“Behold, we did not know this.”](#) There is a collective claim of ignorance. A whole community is saying, “Yes, this happened. We weren’t really aware of the details. We suspected maybe something might be happening like this. But we were busy doing lots of other good things. There are a lot of things to care about. There are a lot of people to love and serve. We didn’t know.”

So, the wise man asks another question: [“doesn’t God know your heart?”](#)

That’s surprising. He doesn’t say, “I know you know.” He says, “God knows what’s really going on in your heart.”

So, today, there are many cases of injustice that we may suspect are problems. I want to help us clearly know. So that we won’t rely on this as an excuse in our hearts.

So, here are just a few data points. Here is the current situation.<sup>vi</sup>

- Globally, there are over 40 million abortions each year.
- In America, there are about 1 million each year. To gain some perspective, Indianapolis has about 850,000 people.
- In 2014, 19% of all pregnancies (except miscarriages) ended in abortion.

This is the data. These are the number of reported human lives taken away to death. So, in light of this, what verse 12 mean for us when it says, [“Behold, we did not know this”](#)? It means that we can’t say that. We do know.



And this verse calls us to take responsibility.

This theme of taking responsibility for the needy is throughout Proverbs. Prov 31:8-9: “open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

The final line in our text, in verse 12, says that God will repay a man according to his work. I don't think that's referring here to those who are carrying the people away in death (though that's true). In context, this is a warning to those who are passive and do nothing to stop it. To those who make excuses saying “look, we didn't know.” Verse 12 says: “God knows your heart, and he will judge according to what you do.”

Here's some perspective.

What will future generations think about us when they look back? Nations have been through these seasons before. Germany with the holocaust. England and America with slavery. Horrific evils and injustices. Treating some human beings as less than human. And whole populations standing by passively when the injustice is going on.

What do we think of them now? What would they think looking back? We know that everyone shares the responsibility to act.

And so, R. C. Sproul made this comment in an interview conversation. He said that he thinks our current situation the abortion is worse than the holocaust. The intentions are not as evil, because people have been brainwashed. But even within the church, people are allowing the government to determine what is truly just or not. And here's what he said: “But if indeed we are determinately killing, and destroying, living, human, persons, that means that we have the most volatile ethical, social, moral issue in the history of the United States of America. And it's not just here; it's in the whole world (at least the whole Western world). And this is seen as the lowest point of corruption and of cultural disintegration that I can imagine. And... what are my great grandchildren...going to say about my generation that let this happen?”

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#### **IV. Motivation**

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Let's move to the final thing we need: Motivation.

This text calls us to courage, to action, and to take responsibility. This is weighty. And if you and I are really tracking with this, we see that this is meant to change our lives.

This is meant to stir every single person to some kind of sustained engagement to express love to mothers and fathers and our unborn neighbors.

This text is a confrontation.

It confronts our apathy. It confronts Christians who live generally nice, good lives, but who don't do anything about this justice issue of our time. It confronts those of us who are sporadic in our prayers and actions for the unborn.

And it calls us to change the course of our lives. To make the issue of abortion one of *the* main issues of our lives.

But here's the problem.

So many of us know the truth already. And we remain inactive. Or our actions are sporadic. Why? It may be because we're lacking two of the primary motivations we need.

The Bible doesn't just tell us what to do. It doesn't just command us to act. It actually gives us the motivation to do it. And that motivation is a revolution of the mind and heart.

There two primary motivations that we need in order to not just have a turning point this morning – but to keep walking in this new direction.

1. The first motivation is one that I've already spend time on earlier. It is the motivation that comes from knowing that the preborn children are made in God's image. They each have dignity. Each is made in God's image. Each has every right to life that a toddler or adult has. And that reality moves us to act to protect our fellow image-bearers.
2. The second motivation, though, is this: God's grace in rescuing *us*. Throughout the Bible, the primary motivation for caring for the needy is God's grace in caring for us in our need.

The original Hebrew readers of this text would have heard an echo of God's grace in this text. They would have heard it in the word "rescue." We're called to "rescue" those who are being oppressed and carried away to death. That word "rescue" was the main word used in the book of Exodus to describe Israel's redemption. Israel was oppressed in slavery. Pharaoh wanted baby boys carried away to death. And God rescued them. He delivered them.

And when God gave Israel their moral compass in the law, he told them to use that rescue as their motivation to care for the needy. Listen to Deuteronomy 24:17-18: "You shall not pervert justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless or take a widows garment in pledge [these were three of the most common oppressed and vulnerable people in their culture], but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this."

They were commanded to care for the poor and needy because God cared for them when they were poor and needy. They protect men and women and children from injustice and oppression; because they were oppressed – and God rescue them.

This is the foundational motivation through the New Testament as well.

The New Testament says that we have all failed to walk in justice. We have all failed in our responsibilities to others.

But then Jesus came. He came to rescue us from sin and death and hell. He came to rescue us from our day of distress, that would last forever in hell. He did it by enduring his own day of distress on the cross. He was taken away to death, and no one rescued him. He stumbled to the slaughter, and no one held him back.

Why? Because he was rescuing us. He came to rescue even those who carry others away to death. He came to bring grace to every one who will trust him – every woman who has had an abortion; every man who has pressured his wife or girlfriend to do it; every parent or grandparent who encouraged a son or daughter to do it; and everyone who has done nothing to stop the injustice and care for women and children in their need.

This is Jesus' grace. And this is what gives a new power in the heart. This is what happened to those first Christians in the Greco-Roman world who changed their culture. Many of the first Christians probably did kill their children before they became Christians. But then they met Jesus, and they got a new motivation. They received his rescue and grace, and they started to rescue others. Adopting those discarded babies and committing to raise their own.

This is the motivation that can change a whole generation. If we grasp the meaning of our own rescue; we will be motivated to rescue others.

So, these are the two motivations.

These two motivations can change the world. But it starts with us. I'm convinced that more Christians aren't doing more to protect the preborn children is because these motives don't function enough for them.

But if these motivations grip our hearts, we would gladly sacrifice our own time, money, energy, and comforts to protect others.

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## **Concluding Encouragements**

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And if we have these motivations working in our hearts, here are a few things that we might do:

- We will pray: We will pray for the preborn when we pray with our small groups and families.
- We will vote: We will think about how our vote matters for this issue.

- We will give: We will find out what pregnancy help centers are caring for women and children, and we'll give to help them.
- We will volunteer: We will find out how we can serve at a pregnancy help center or other organization.
- We will write songs and books and articles: We will use our gifts to engage in public discourse.
- We will talk with our friends: We will kindly and calmly ask them if they think the preborn are human beings. And we will winsomely help them see that since they are human beings, this is a human rights issue.
- As men, we will pursue sexual integrity before marriage and faithfulness in marriage so that we never put a women in a situation where she may be tempted to have an abortion.
- As men and women we will tell our children that we will never pressure them to have an abortion, but will do everything we can to help them raise their child.
- We will adopt children and help mothers and fathers raise their children. We will be pro-life for all of life.
- We will read and learn about the topic. The book, *The Case for Life* is at the resource center.
- We will engage in the government and legislation to make the laws of our country more just and humane.

In doing these things, we will be joining the long-legacy of heroes through history – who knew the grace of Jesus Christ, and so they loved their neighbor with courage, action, and responsibility.

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<sup>i</sup> See Bruce Waltke

<sup>ii</sup> Dan Treier, *Proverbs*, 72: “fortitude blends courage with patience.”

<sup>iii</sup> Examples gathered from John Ensor, *Innocent Blood*, 74-78

<sup>iv</sup> The Didache.

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in *Stand for Life*, 52.

<sup>vi</sup> From the Guttmacher Institute