

## **Under God?: Protecting the Vulnerable**

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October 18, 2020

Celebration Baptist Church

Tallahassee, FL

Hello Everyone! Thanks for joining in today with us here at Celebration as we continue our “Under God” series. Our nation has an election coming up in just a couple of weeks, so we’ve been looking at issues that are relevant to Christ Followers every election regardless of who is running. These are perennial issues that the church should always care about. I’ve gotten a lot of feedback on this series! Nothing energizes people like discussing politics in church! So if you’ve missed some of this series, just go to our website at [celebrationbaptist.church](http://celebrationbaptist.church) and get caught up.

This week we will look at the issue of protecting the vulnerable. It’s a fundamental good that the Bible speaks to over and over again. If doing good is an essential function of government, then protecting the vulnerable is a mission critical part of what government does. So every election cycle, I should stop and ask myself how my vote and my voice can better enable and encourage government to fulfill this important duty.

Let’s pray and get started.

I grew up in a great home in a prosperous small town in Tennessee. My dad was a doctor and he made a great living, but it never felt like my family was way better off than everyone else. In my community, jobs were plentiful, housing was of good quality, education was top notch. It was a great place to raise a family.

Because of where I grew up, I had never been exposed to extreme poverty. That all changed when I went to college in the heart of Appalachia.

One of my roommates was a guy named Robert. Robert had grown up in the Appalachian Mountains in an impoverished home. He knew what it was like to be hungry and cold. Robert and I hit it off and became best friends.

I’m an outdoors guy and I quickly fell in love with the mountains around the college. There were cliffs and waterfalls and woods everywhere. I went climbing, repelling spelunking and hiking. In my mind, I was living in paradise.

One day I was getting ready to head out for another hike, Robert looked at me and said, *Why don’t you let me take you and show you what the mountains are really like?* I had no idea what he meant. I thought he knew of some new trails or natural sites in the area that I hadn’t already checked out. So I said, *Let’s do it.*

Robert took me to these little communities tucked way back up in the mountains. It was just house after house that were nothing more than one room tarpaper shacks. Most had no electricity or water. The first house Robert showed me was mind-blowing. I looked at him and said, *There's no way anybody lives in that!* About that time, some kids came running out of the front door. I looked at Robert and said, *This is wrong, something has to be done about this.*

Robert said, You're right. What are WE going to do about it? Suddenly, poverty was my problem. I'd never thought of it that way before. So Robert and I decided to get a bunch of college students together, go into the mountains and insulate homes for the winter. We passed the hat to pay for supplies. You had a bunch of college kids who'd never swung a hammer working on these homes. We decided to call it mountain outreach. Over the next year we struggled to get our little ministry on the map. The campus minister at Cumberland agreed to help. Then the college president heard about what we were doing and encouraged us and by the time I graduated from Cumberland, Mountain Outreach had built a couple of small homes to replace some of these one-room shacks.

Today Mountain Outreach is still going strong. People with far more skill than I ever had have gotten involved and propelled the ministry forward. And last year, I was invited to go back to Cumberland and celebrate the fact that Mountain Outreach had built 151 homes for the vulnerable families in the region. I'm so happy for those families and so glad that the university has continued to give students a chance to be a part of something so special.

I know many of you have had that moment when you realized there are people around us that are really struggling. When that light comes on for you, it's a call to action. Many of our people here at celebration work in government agencies that bring millions of dollars to bear on the problems of hunger or domestic violence. We've got people in our church who serve the needs of refugees. We've got people who work at DCF protecting children and creating policies that seek to reduce child abuse and neglect. We've got people who work for the department of health to make sure kids have vaccines and the poor have access to front line medical care. Others work in the private sector serving foster kids or work to prevent abortion, protecting the lives of the unborn. I'm inspired as I hear stories of how you've gotten involved to protect the vulnerable among us.

This isn't something that can be done solely on the personal level. Because there are so many vulnerable people in our country, the government has to bring it's resources to bear on meeting their needs.

We've been saying that government exists to do good, restrain evil and encourage it's citizens to do what is good. This is especially true when it comes to protecting the vulnerable.

This is a complicated topic and our nation is deeply divided about it. For example, *Which of the vulnerable are more important? Are unborn children more important than families in poverty? If I think one party is pro life, but another party is better on race or poverty, what do I do then? Is it better to help those who have already been born or better to protect those yet to be born?*

*What about illegal immigrants? Do we throw them all out because they violated our laws or do we let them all stay out because of humanitarian concerns?*

I'm not going to give you answers for each of these questions because I'm not sure I can! I know one thing, we don't have that kind of time!

What we can do is develop a biblical understanding of how God wants us to protect the most vulnerable and then take a closer look at some of the most pressing issues facing us in this area today.

When we think about protecting the vulnerable, we're talking about something that is often called social justice. This is a popular term in our world today but it's also a real hot button. You'll hear it thrown around from people across the political spectrum and it means different things to people who are politically on the right or left.

So let's get our minds around what the Bible says on the topic of justice so we're all talking about the same thing. I've got to warn you, the Bible speaks on this topic a lot and some of it's teachings are going to seem radical! So let's get started: The Bible teaches us that seeking justice for the vulnerable is at the heart of following God: **Micah 6:8 He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?** I'm to with walking humbly with God. I submit my will to his and follow him. This means that I love kindness. I put the needs of others ahead of my own. I'm to be excited about that, not burdened about it. It's what motivates me day after day.

Then with my relationship with God right and my heart right, I do justice. What does that mean? To do justice means to treat people fairly and impartially. Look at **Leviticus 24:22 You are to have the same law for the resident alien and the native, because I am the Lord your God.**" Every person, regardless of where they are from, get's a fair shake. If you need protection, the same laws that apply to everyone else also apply to you. If you've broken the law, you can expect the same punishment. That's justice.

Justice also means you get the same rights as everyone else. **Proverbs 31:9 Speak up, judge righteously, and defend the cause of the oppressed and needy.** The poor and the oppressed get the same access to fair treatment as the rich. The vulnerable are protected. That's justice.

Why is this so important? Why should we care about those who are vulnerable? Because God cares about them! He's not telling us to do something that he himself isn't about: **Psalms 146:7-9<sup>7</sup> He gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry. The Lord frees the prisoners. <sup>8</sup> The Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are weighed down. The Lord loves the godly. <sup>9</sup> The Lord protects the foreigners among us. He cares for the orphans and widows, but he frustrates the plans of the wicked.**

This is what justice is all about. God calls on us to join him in protecting and serving those who are most vulnerable. the Bible hammers away at this idea: **Jeremiah 22:3 This is what the Lord**

says: Administer justice and righteousness. Rescue the victim of robbery from his oppressor. Don't exploit or brutalize the resident alien, the fatherless, or the widow . . .

How about Proverbs 31:8 Speak up for those who have no voice, for the justice of all who are dispossessed.

Here's one that really brings the heat: Deuteronomy 27:19 'The one who denies justice to a resident alien, a fatherless child, or a widow is cursed.' And all the people will say, 'Amen!'

Wow! That last one really spikes the football doesn't it! Do you think God is concerned that we do everything in our power to care for the vulnerable?

You notice that all of these quotes are from the OT. The OT tells us about the relationship between God and the nation of Israel. They were to be an example to the rest of the world of how a nation could honor God in the way they conducted their affairs. So God expect the state of Israel to protect the vulnerable from injustice:

We see it in Deuteronomy 16:19 Do not deny justice or show partiality to anyone. Do not accept a bribe, for it blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. the Israelites were to have good law and policy against Bribery because poor people can't afford to pay bribes or buy political favors.

Think of the applications of this idea in our own country. It's one of the reasons there are laws that limit the amount of money an individual can contribute to a candidate. Poor people can't make large contributions so if we don't work to limit contributions we effectively lock the poor out of the political process.

It's why we have public defenders. This way if someone can't afford an attorney, they have some representation in the legal process. Guilty or not, they need representation.

God also expected the people of Israel to create opportunities for everyone to provide for their family and escape poverty. For example, listen to this law found in Leviticus 19:9 "When you reap the harvest of your land, you are not to reap to the very edge of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. So the law taught that a land owner wasn't to harvest all of the grain from his field. Instead, he was to leave some along the edges so that people who were poor could come along and harvest it. You might read over this law and think, No big deal, but if you've hit a rough patch, this law could be a lifesaver for your family. We see this law put into practice beautifully in the story of Ruth.

Ruth 2:3, 8-9 <sup>3</sup> So Ruth went out to gather grain behind the harvesters. And as it happened, she found herself working in a field that belonged to Boaz, the relative of her father-in-law, Elimelech . . . <sup>8</sup> Boaz went over and said to Ruth, "Listen, my daughter. Stay right here with us when you gather grain; don't go to any other fields. Stay right behind the young women working in my field. <sup>9</sup> See which part of the field they are harvesting, and then follow them. I

have warned the young men not to treat you roughly. And when you are thirsty, help yourself to the water they have drawn from the well.”

If you know the story, you know that Ruth and Boaz marry. They end up becoming king David’s great grand parents and are a part of the family from which Jesus himself would come. God uses his law regarding justice for the vulnerable to bring salvation in the world.

Now, we don’t really leave fields partially harvested anymore, but the principle of helping people provide for their own families still applies. Government should incentivize people to do good by using tax structures to encourage more hiring, better wages and better working conditions so that more people can provide for their families.

Our law should create opportunity for people to provide. We should incentivize people to do good by encouraging more hiring, better wages, better jobs and working conditions.

In addition to all of this, the nation of Israel was expected to roll out a safety net to catch anyone who fell through the cracks and found themselves in poverty.

Instead of seeing the poor as risky investments, the Israelites were commanded to loan money to the poor. But all loans were to be canceled every seven years!

Deuteronomy 15:7–11 <sup>7</sup> “If there is a poor person among you, one of your brothers within any of your city gates in the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. <sup>8</sup> Instead, you are to open your hand to him and freely loan him enough for whatever need he has. <sup>9</sup> Be careful that there isn’t this wicked thought in your heart, ‘The seventh year, the year of canceling debts, is near,’ and you are stingy toward your poor brother and give him nothing. He will cry out to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty.<sup>10</sup> Give to him, and don’t have a stingy heart when you give, and because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you do. <sup>11</sup> For there will never cease to be poor people in the land; that is why I am commanding you, ‘Open your hand willingly to your poor and needy brother in your land.’

So if someone was poor, they were to be helped and to be helped generously. But did you catch the little detail in verse 9? Every 7 years all debts were cancelled! The poor got the help they needed but they weren’t to be locked up in excessive debt.

Not only that, but every 3<sup>rd</sup> year, everyone was required to give 10% from all of their crops to help anyone in need. Deuteronomy 14:28–29 <sup>28</sup> “At the end of every three years, bring a tenth of all your produce for that year and store it within your city gates. <sup>29</sup> Then the Levite, who has no portion or inheritance among you, the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow within your city gates may come, eat, and be satisfied. And the Lord your God will bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

As if all of that wasn't enough, there was the year of Jubilee. Every 50 years, not only were debts forgiven, but land was returned to its rightful family. It was a complete economic reset — a once in a lifetime chance to start over no matter how deep your family was in trouble.

Leviticus 25 tells the whole story, but here's a part of it: **LEV 25:9-15** <sup>9</sup> Then on the Day of Atonement in the fiftieth year, blow the ram's horn loud and long throughout the land. <sup>10</sup> Set this year apart as holy, a time to proclaim freedom throughout the land for all who live there. It will be a jubilee year for you, when each of you may return to the land that belonged to your ancestors and return to your own clan . . . <sup>13</sup> In the Year of Jubilee each of you may return to the land that belonged to your ancestors. <sup>14</sup> "When you make an agreement with your neighbor to buy or sell property, you must not take advantage of each other. <sup>15</sup> When you buy land from your neighbor, the price you pay must be based on the number of years since the last jubilee.

Maybe your dad made some real mistakes financially and he wrecked things for your family. You weren't forced to live with the consequences of his bad judgement for the rest of your life. There was a year of Jubilee coming for you so that you and your kids could have a better opportunity.

So let's put all this together. The people of Israel were to protect the weak from the strong, helping people like widows, children and immigrants get fair treatment. They were to be generous toward the poor by leaving grain in the fields for them so they could earn living in hard times. They were to make loans to them, but then limit the duration of collection to just 7 years and then forgive the balance. No loan sharks or ridiculous terms for a loan. They were to set aside 10% of their crops every 3<sup>rd</sup> year as an additional safety net. Then generational poverty was disrupted by forgiving debt and restoring property rights to the original owner every 50 years, or roughly once in a lifetime. I told you the Bible deals radically with poverty!

You may be thinking, David that was then! This is now. We can't live that way today. I'm not saying we can. I am saying that there are principles we can learn from all of this that can apply to us today.

So today are there any issues of great injustice against the most vulnerable or issues regarding the very poor that should be on our minds as we vote? I believe so. Here are some of the things that came to my mind:

**Abortion:** There's actually been a small amount of good news on the Abortion front. The most recent data from the CDC indicates that abortions actually fell from 2015 to 2016 by 2%. The bad news is that 623,471 unborn babies were still aborted.

The Bible teaches that abortion is wrong. God sees the unborn as a person. **PS 139:13–14** <sup>13</sup> For it was You who created my inward parts; You knit me together in my mother's womb. <sup>14</sup> I will praise You because I have been remarkably and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful, and I know this very well. David is in awe when he considers that while in the womb, God was beautifully knitting together a thinking, feeling person. David wasn't being arrogant

when he says that he was fearfully and wonderfully made. He's giving God glory for what he did in the womb.

The Bible teaches that not only is God at work crafting us in the womb, he affirms we have a purpose before we're born. **JER 1:5 5 I chose you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.** We spend our lifetime discovering what God knew in the womb, that we were born for a purpose. We're not an accident but are intended to be a blessing to others.

A while back I met with a woman who was headed into an ugly divorce. Just as things were really unraveling for her, she discovered she was pregnant. For her, it was devastating news. She opened up her heart to a friend and her friend encouraged her to reach out to a pastor. This woman had been to an event or two at celebration, so she contacted me. As we met, she told me of her heartbreak and that her soon to be ex husband had told her he didn't want another child in the mix of their divorce so she should abort the baby. She looks at me through tears in her eyes and said, *What do you think I should do?* I quite unexpectedly found myself talking to this heart broken woman about the value of the life she carried. A few months later she dropped by the church. She held a baby in her arms. She looked at me with a great smile on her face and she said, *I thought about what you said and you were right, my baby is precious in the eyes of God and this beautiful child is precious to me.* When she told her husband she wouldn't abort the baby he was angry at first, then he delayed the divorce throughout the pregnancy and then when the baby was born, he realized the stakes were too high, he couldn't go through with the divorce. The marriage was still tough, but it was getting better.

Across our country, here in Tallahassee, tens of thousands of conversations like this are happening every day at local pregnancy centers. They're conversations that you can be a part of. I encourage you to support your local pro-life women's pregnancy centers with your money and your time. This is a fight that's got to be fought on both the government and private levels.

You may be thinking, *This is all well and good, but how does this effect public policy?* Does the Bible provide any insight into the role of just government in regard to abortion. In the OT, the law extended full protections to the unborn. **EX 21:22–25 22 “When men get in a fight and hit a pregnant woman so that her children are born prematurely but there is no injury, the one who hit her must be fined as the woman’s husband demands from him, and he must pay according to judicial assessment. 23 If there is an injury, then you must give life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, bruise for bruise, wound for wound.**

Look carefully at this law. If an unborn child is harmed through the carelessness of men who are fighting, they are to pay eye for an eye, limb for a limb life for a life. Taking the life of an unborn child was a capital crime. Both the mother and the unborn child are given equal legal protection. Killing an unborn child was murder.

As a Christ Follower, I do not live under OT law, but I am expected to learn principles from them. It is impossible to imagine that any just government as defined by scripture would fail to issue protections to the unborn. The stakes are absolutely sky high.

**Let's think about those in poverty for a moment:** In 2020 the projected poverty rate for all Americans is 10.5%. A family of four is considered to live in poverty if they collectively earn less than 26,000 a year. But here in Tallahassee the figure is 26.7%.

There's an old debate about poverty about who bears the responsibility. Should we rely on the government to solve the problem or is it really something that private charities and individuals should take on. The clear teaching of the Bible is BOTH.

In the Bible, government is harshly criticized for failing to care for the poor. **PS 82:2–4** is a great summary: **2 “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? 3 Provide justice for the needy and the fatherless; uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute. 4 Rescue the poor and needy; save them from the power of the wicked.”** Government should be involved in all phases of combating poverty. It is to address the injustices impacting the poor, like overcharging for interest on loans, chronic debt from which there is no escape or the mistreatment of employees. Government is commanded to ensure its people can be lifted from poverty and protected from exploitation.

That's the government side, what about you and me? Throughout the Bible God's people are repeatedly admonished to give generously to the poor. In MT 25, Jesus teaches about the final judgement and makes it clear that generosity toward the poor is an indicator of whether or not someone is a Christ follower. We're expected to care and care generously for the poor around us.

I've got a friend who lives this out on a daily basis. He runs a small business with lots of entry level jobs. So he uses his company as a platform to help people who are facing tough times. Not only does he hire people in great need, he gets involved in their lives. We were talking one day and he got up to leave. He told me he had to go to court. I asked if everything was OK and he said, *I hired this guy who's had some legal trouble. Nobody else would hire him, so I gave him a chance. He's been a great employee but recently he got into some trouble off the clock. Everybody around him has turned his back on him because he can't keep his nose clean. I figured somebody should be there for him and encourage him. I'm going to let him know I'm there for him and that there will be a job waiting for him when he gets out.* My friend put on a clinic of what it means to help the poor. I learned a lot that day.

As a Christian citizen I should encourage government to help the poor through a wide array of policies and laws and I should personally be involved in helping the poor as well. No government is just if it doesn't help its most vulnerable citizens and no Christ Follower can claim to be so if he or she is not actively and sacrificially engaged in helping those in need.

**One more, Immigration:** The Bible commands us to treat immigrants with compassion. **LV 19: 33-34** **When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you**



must be treated as one of your native born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God. The Bible is very clear that we should look at immigrants with great compassion.

Immigration has been one of the most persistent political problems here in America for the last 20 years or so. Many Americans are frustrated to know that every year tens of thousands of people cross our borders illegally. That frustration is understandable. We'd like to think that we're a country that establishes good law and then follows those laws.

But it's fair to say that we have an illegal immigration problem in America because first and foremost we have a legal immigration problem in America. Our immigration laws have been a mess for years and we're paying the consequences for the lack of leadership from our government in the area of immigration. I've got friends who are immigrants in this country and they're trying with all their might to have legal status here. The process is cumbersome, uneven and slow. We need to expect our government to do better, because helping the immigrant is something near to the heart of God and an expectation he has for government.

As Christ Followers, we've got a tremendous biblical obligation to care for the poor. We are expected to have a heart for the unborn, children trapped in generational poverty, the unemployed or the under employed, the immigrant or the widow.

So every election, we should use our vote to speak for them. We should call on our governments to protect the most vulnerable among us.

Then we should become personally involved with our time, talent and treasure to come alongside those who are hurting.

Imagine how the world would change if we took these two critical steps! It could be a game changer in a world that's become so hostile and acrimonious.

So as you think about all that the Bible says to us about caring for the vulnerable, let me just ask you, *How are you involved?* We're headed toward an election, so how are you going to use your vote to protect the vulnerable? As you prepare to vote consider the platforms and the records of each candidate. You can find the party platforms and voter guides on our App so that you can study for yourself as you prepare to vote. Look at their track records and the results of their respective ideas about how to help the unborn, the poor and the hurting. Make your voice heard and vote in such a way that the vulnerable are protected.

But this protecting the vulnerable isn't just a problem for the government to solve. If you're a Christ follower, you've got a clear biblical obligation to care because God himself cares so much for the unborn, the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, for anyone who finds themselves on the losing side of the battle against poverty. Today I want you to make a prayerful commitment to agree with God about serving the poor and do something. Choose an issue that you care deeply about. Maybe for you it's the fight against Abortion. Get involved. There are pregnancy centers here in Tallahassee that could use your support. Maybe for you it's the needs of women and

children who are living in poverty. There are ministries here in town that serve beautifully in this area. Get behind them and make a difference. What about the homeless or the hungry? We've got a feeding ministry here at Celebration and we work hard to give food to those who need it. Get involved. Poverty is a challenge that God expects you to care greatly about.

Let's take a moment and pray that God will grant us the wisdom to vote well and the courage to serve with passion and caring. Pray.