

CHAPTER 6: Our Worldviews & Poverty

My whole being will exclaim, "Who is like you, O LORD? You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them." Ps. 35:10

We have a choice about *how* we look at the problem of poverty in the world around us. Do we have the "mind of Christ" as we look at this issue? All too often, we judge the problem of poverty through our old, comfortable worldviews. This leads to incorrect conclusions as to the definition of "poverty," its root causes and how to solve them.

Secular Worldview

Because in the secular worldview true reality is physical, the secular thinker will define poverty in a materialistic sense. The amount of "things" one owns defines one's level of poverty or wealth. I remember sitting in a car parked beside a pile of garbage in Albania, Central Europe, one afternoon. I was amazed as I noticed the number of satellite dishes hanging on the sides of apartment buildings. I knew they had little electricity. Just then a man went by me on a donkey cart, talking on his cell phone. It was a startling mixture of things I would use in secular thinking to define poverty and wealth:

Garbage piled on the street = poverty

Satellite dishes for television = wealth

Little electricity = poverty

Cell phone = wealth

Donkey cart = poverty

Notice that the reference for the definition of poverty in this case is material things. A dictionary defines poverty as "the lack of means to satisfy a person's basic needs for nutrition, housing, clothing, and other essentials of life." It goes on to explain that "poverty" may also mean that one has less than those around them, but not necessarily nothing. In either case, it is referring to a lack of physical resources.

In this worldview it is believed that one of the underlying causes of poverty is something in evidence that can be clearly seen: structural injustice. Certain types of government and economic systems or "structures" in place are unjust and these are causing the poverty. If we can just change those structures, then everything would be OK. Even wars and natural disasters can be eliminated or their effects reduced if the right structures are in place. For example, several years ago there were two earthquakes of similar power. One was in Turkey and the other was in the United States (Seattle). Severe devastation occurred in Turkey and thousands of people died or lost everything. The earthquake in Seattle caused some buckling to the international airport runway, but little other damage. Contrary to Turkey, Seattle has a stringent building code designed to provide structural integrity in the case of an earthquake. Things were shaken, but not destroyed where the "right structures" were in place.

Looking at Africa, colonization would be at the heart of this structural injustice, although modern government structures (both in Africa and elsewhere) should also be considered contributing factors. Thus, the United Nations, World Bank, IMF and various wealthy nations have sought to find the key which would unlock the potential of the poorer nations. Structural readjustment has been demanded of the poorer nations by those with money before loans or grants would be released in an effort to reduce corruption and selfishness and force the poorer nations to fit into a Western form of economic structure. Unfortunately, much to the embarrassment of those requiring structural readjustment, it seems only the rich have benefited in country after country, while the poor have just gotten poorer.

The over-consumption of Western nations, depleting the poorer nations, is also a factor in structural injustice. Quite often the solution put forth to solve this problem is to do resource redistribution. In other words, it is to give to poor nations money and other physical resources. This has been tried in various ways, but the end result seems to again benefit only a select few. The less powerful voices are speaking in the wealthier nations about the problem of over-consumption, but this seems to be an issue the wealthier nations are unwilling to face. Thus, a wealthy democratic nation may enjoy the fruits of its wealth while at the same time may be struggling with the guilt that it is not able to find a way to bring other nations up to its material or physical level.

Animistic Worldview

An animist will define poverty as a “lack of power over the spirits.” Problems such as AIDS, war, flood, drought, no money, unjust laws, and ethnic hatred are caused by the spirits. Someone may have cursed him, or perhaps he has not done something he should have done to make the spirits feel good about him. Somehow, he has gotten the spirits angry with him, or someone else is angry and has gotten the spirits against him. His solution is to find out what needs to be done (sacrifices, fetishes, etc.) to make the spirits look upon him positively or to gain control over the spirits so he may triumph over others who would want to put him down.

Biblical Worldview

Notice that in both the secular and animistic worldviews, poverty is something *outside* of man. While the Biblical worldview would recognize that disease, war or structural injustice all contribute to the problem of physical poverty, it does not see any of these as the real root of the problem. According to the Bible, the problem is inside us: we are spiritually dead and cursed by sin. Because of this, man uses creation wickedly and treats fellow man inhumanely. We have generated both personal sin (through what we personally do) and corporate sin (through the systems we have set up and non-biblical values ruling our nations). We have unclean hearts, wrong-thinking minds and an unbiblical lifestyle. But thank God, Jesus has provided the solution to all our problems: we must be born again, and to see our minds, lifestyles and cultures renewed.

When Jesus began his ministry on earth he went into the synagogue and read from Isaiah 61:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”

And what was that good news for the poor?

“He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and to provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. . . They will rebuild the ancient ruins, and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity.” Isaiah 61:1-4,

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Take a few moments to imagine what it would look like to see those with broken marriages made whole, to have those who are captives to drugs or alcohol in your community set free from their sin and the effects of sin upon their lives, and to have a community that is relating with one another joyfully, instead of living in despair. Those healed people will rebuild and restore our communities, for what are the “long devastated” places, if not our communities? God loves justice and wants to break down the man-made structures or spiritual forces that would try to enslave us in poverty.

A few years ago I did a study of justice in the Bible. I expected to find lots of things about rules (thou shalt not. . .) and all the consequences of breaking those rules. Yes, those things were there, but I was very surprised to discover that God’s concern with justice was much more about economic justice than anything else. For instance, He instigated the “Year of Jubilee” to happen every 50th year as a means for those who had suffered economically to have their land restored to them if they had not already regained the means to buy back their land ^(Lev. 25:25-28). In this way, the descendants of those who had made mistakes or had suffered injustices were to be given the opportunity to become again active members of society, instead of beggars and slaves. There were laws designed to provide resources for the poor: instead of making sure that every bit of the harvest was cleaned out of a field, the poor were to be allowed to go through the fields and pick up the leftovers (Lev. 19:10; 23:22); every seventh year the fields were to be allowed to grow on their own and the poor were supposed to be allowed to do the full harvest in these years (Exodus 23:11); nor was interest to be charged to a poor Israelite because this would cause him to get hopelessly in debt (Exodus 22:25). Isaiah warned the Israelites:

“Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.” (Isaiah 10:1)

Likewise, Ezekiel warned the Israelites when he brought the word of the Lord to say that the sin of Sodom was that they did not help the poor and needy! Instead, they were overfed, arrogant and unconcerned (Ezekiel 16:49-50). We usually assume that it was only sexual sins that caused the downfall of Sodom, but no, it was also their failure to care for the poor and needy in their community. God is serious about this!

In the Old Testament Moses told the Israelites:

“However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.” (Deut. 15:4)

But in the very same chapter, later Moses says:

“There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in the land.” (Deut. 15:11)

Sometimes I have heard people use Jesus’ similar statement that “we will always have the poor with us” (Mt. 26:11) as an excuse not to do anything about poverty. Jesus ministered constantly to the poor and He gave to the poor so obviously, He did not mean we were to do nothing. Instead, I believe this was an acknowledgment by both Jesus and Moses that because of sin in this world that no matter what we do, there will always be some poor people. Again, poverty is a result of sin, whether it is structural sin (unjust laws or economic systems in place) or personal sinful decisions.

Biblically, gifts to the poor were designed not to be simple handouts, but the means by which the poor could regain their place in society as a viable, functioning member. (See for instance: Deuteronomy 15:7-15.) It is much more complicated to give a gift that will provide someone with the means to become an active, contributing member in the community than it is to simply drop a few coins in a beggar’s bowl. Often, this only soothes our consciences. Instead, as the people of God, we should be seeking to bring the whole solution Jesus has provided to the community: right relationship with God in all areas of life (Jn. 3:16-17).

Below is a chart that a group of Christian community development workers came up with as they discussed the difference between what God’s intentions were for us before sin entered the world vs. what this world looks like as a result of our sinfulness. Notice that there is poverty or “lack” in every area of life. Poverty is not just physical.

Break into small groups and compare what God wants for us and how this has been damaged by the effects of sin. In your discussion describe what society would look like if the power of the Gospel could bring transformation in the lives of people to move them back to what God’s intention for us is.

What God Wants for us Intellectually:	Influence of Sin on us Intellectually:
To know God	Know good and evil
Know how to manage resources	Not in control
Ability to learn	Intellectual capacity reduced
Knowledge of ourselves and others	Lack of care for creation

Ability to think and be creative Wisdom Decision making ability (will) Healthy identity Understand creation Sharing of gifts (complementary abilities) Knowledge to be used for good Able to express emotions appropriately	Knowledge used for destruction Ignorance Mental illness Marred identity Selfish destruction/misuse of resources Pride and deception Told how to think (manipulation) Psychological disorders
What God Wants for us Physically	Influence of Sin on us Physically:
Health Reproduction Peace between animals and mankind Balance (no natural disasters) Clean water Moderate climate Enough food Security Abundant harvests	Sickness, disease, injuries Pains in childbirth Enemies with animals/hatred, war Floods, earthquakes, forest fires, etc. Pollution Drought, deserts Gluttony, famine Fear, death Insect infestation, weeds
What God Wants for us Spiritually	Influence of Sin on us Spiritually
Obedience Daily intimate relationship with God Talking to him as if he were present Involved in every part of our lives Dependent fellowship Transparency Everlasting love Spiritual part of us fully active Modeled on trinity	Separation Fear, guilt, shame, sin, selfishness No relationship with God/idolatry Lack of fellowship Worship of creation versus creator Negative view of God Spiritual bondage (demonic) Hostility against God Giving authority to Satan
What God Wants for us Socially	Influence of Sin on us Socially
Fellowship Interdependence Love and harmony God-centered Community Good communication Healthy family Justice Holy government Sharing resources Respect	Isolation, loneliness Independence Hate and war Self-centered Prejudice, competition Arguments, misunderstandings Divorce Unfair markets, false imprisonment Corruption, bribery, selfish dictatorship Greed, hoarding Abuse

With a Biblical worldview of poverty we should understand that poverty is more than a lack of material things. It is also poverty of relationships that may be evidenced in broken homes, tribalism, and discrimination according to race. It is intellectual poverty seen in poor education or lack of opportunities. It is spiritual poverty when there is no growing relationship with God in evidence. Unlike the animist who would need to do sacrifices or prepare fetishes, or the secularist who might advocate resource redistribution, the Biblical worldview's method to achieve the solution to poverty is to have sin forgiven, to be transformed as people into the new creation that God makes, to grow in relationship with God, and see our communities renewed and growing toward spiritual, physical and social wholeness. God can and will bless us and our communities as we seek to do His will in our communities.

When you lead people to Christ in a community where the Gospel has never been and you disciple people in the ways of the Kingdom, obviously there will be transformation not only in their lives but in how they live, how they relate to others, and how they live out their lives as people representing God and the Kingdom of God. The Gospel is wider than just sharing the good news of salvation and planting churches. The new believers and new churches are salt and light in their communities and through prayer and living as believers who have new values and new lives can transform communities into places that reflect the goodness and grace of God.