

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

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The Poor Speak Out on Poverty

At the end of World War II, the Allies established the World Bank to finance the rebuilding of war-torn Europe. The World Bank's efforts were remarkably successful, and the European economies experienced the fastest growth in their history. Given this success, the World Bank tried a similar approach to assisting low-income countries: lending them money on generous terms to promote economic growth and poverty reduction. The results were less than stellar. Pouring in capital had worked to rebuild countries like France, but it did little to help in places like India. On the surface the problems in both places looked the same—poverty and starvation, refugees, lack of infrastructure, inadequate social services, and anemic economies—but something was different about the Majority World.

Solving the problem of poverty continues to perplex the World Bank, which remains the premier public-sector institution trying to alleviate poverty in low-income countries. Hence, during the 1990s, after decades of very mixed results, the World Bank tried a new approach. It consulted with “the true poverty experts, the poor themselves,” by asking more than sixty thousand poor people from sixty low-income countries the basic question: what is poverty? The results of this study have been published in a three-volume series of books called *Voices of the Poor*³. Below is a small sample of the words that the poor used to describe their own situation:

For a poor person everything is terrible—illness, humiliation, shame. We are cripples; we are afraid of everything; we depend on everyone. No one needs us. We are like garbage that everyone wants to get rid of. —*Moldova, p. 65*

When I don't have any [food to bring my family], I borrow, mainly from neighbors and friends. I feel ashamed standing before my

children when I have nothing to help feed the family. I'm not well when I'm unemployed. It's terrible. —*Guinea-Bissau, p. 37*

During the past two years we have not celebrated any holidays with others. We cannot afford to invite anyone to our house and we feel uncomfortable visiting others without bringing a present. The lack of contact leaves one depressed, creates a constant feeling of unhappiness, and a sense of low self-esteem. —*Latvia, p. 70*

When one is poor, she has no say in public, she feels inferior. She has no food, so there is famine in her house; no clothing, and no progress in her family. —*Uganda, p. 38*

[The poor have] a feeling of powerlessness and an inability to make themselves heard. —*Cameroon, p. 39*

Your hunger is never satisfied, your thirst is never quenched; you can never sleep until you are no longer tired. —*Senegal, p. 35*

If you are hungry, you will always be hungry; if you are poor, you will always be poor. —*Vietnam, p. 43*

What determines poverty or well-being? The indigenous people's destiny is to be poor. —*Ecuador, p. ?*

What one shouldn't lack is the sheep, what one cannot live without is food. —*China, p. 50*

Please take a few minutes to list some key words or phrases that you see in the quotes listed above. Do you see any differences between how you described

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poverty at the start of this chapter and how the poor describe their own poverty? Is there anything that surprises you?

We have conducted the previous exercise in dozens of middle-to-upper-class, predominantly Caucasian, North American churches. In the vast majority of cases, these audiences describe poverty differently than the poor in low-income countries do. While poor people mention having a lack of material things, they tend to describe their condition in far more psychological and social terms than our North American audiences. Poor people typically talk in terms of shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, social isolation, and voicelessness. North American audiences tend to emphasize a lack of material things such as

food, money, clean water, medicine, housing, etc. As will be discussed further below, this mismatch between many outsiders' perceptions of poverty and the perceptions of poor people themselves can have devastating consequences for poverty alleviation efforts.

How do the poor in North America describe their own poverty? While there do not appear to be any comparable studies to the World Bank's survey, many observers have noted similar features of poverty in the North American context. For example, consider Cornel West, an African-American scholar, as he summarizes what many are now saying about ghetto poverty⁴ in America:

The most basic issue now facing black America [is]: *the nihilistic threat to its very existence*. This threat is not simply a matter of relative economic deprivation and political powerlessness—though economic well-being and political clout are requisites for meaningful progress. It is primarily a question of speaking to the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America.⁵

Similar to the Majority World, while there is a material dimension to poverty in the African-American ghetto, there is also a loss of meaning, purpose, and hope that plays a major role in the poverty in North America. The problem goes well beyond the material dimension, so the solutions must go beyond the material as well.

The Distinction Is More than Academic

Defining poverty is not simply an academic exercise, for the way we define poverty—either implicitly or explicitly—plays a major role in determining the solutions we use in our attempts to alleviate that poverty.

If We Believe the Primary Cause of Poverty is...	Then We Will Primarily Try to...
A Lack of Knowledge	Educate the Poor
Oppression by Powerful People	Work for Social Justice
The Personal Sins of the Poor	Evangelize and Disciple the Poor
A Lack of Material Resources	Give Material Resources to the Poor

Table 2.1

When a sick person goes to the doctor, the doctor could make two crucial mistakes: (1) Treating symptoms instead of the underlying illness; (2) Misdiagnosing the underlying illness and prescribing the wrong medicine. Either one of these mistakes will result in the patient not getting better and possibly getting worse. The same is true when we work with poor people. If we treat only the symptoms or if we misdiagnose the underlying problem, we will not improve their situation, and we might actually make their lives worse. And as we shall see later, we might hurt ourselves in the process.

Table 2.1 illustrates how different diagnoses of the causes of poverty lead to different poverty-alleviation strategies. For example, during the initial decade following World War II, the World Bank believed the cause of poverty was primarily a lack of material resources—the last row of table 2.1—so it poured money into Europe and the Majority World. The strategy worked in the former but not in the latter. Why? The fundamental problem in the Majority World was not a lack of material resources. The World Bank misdiagnosed the disease, and it applied the wrong medicine.

Similarly, consider the familiar case of the person who comes to your church asking for help with paying an electric bill. On the surface, it appears that this person's problem is the last row of table 2.1, a lack of material resources, and many churches respond by giving this

person enough money to pay the electric bill. But what if this person's fundamental problem is not having the self-discipline to keep a stable job? Simply giving this person money is treating the symptoms rather than the underlying disease and will enable him to continue with his lack of self-discipline. In this case, the gift of the money does more harm than good, and it would be better not to do anything at all than to give this handout. Really! Instead, a better—and far more costly—solution would be for your church to develop a relationship with this person, a relationship that says, "We are here to walk with you and to help you use your gifts and abilities to avoid being in this situation in the future. Let us into your life and let us work with you to determine the reason you are in this predicament."

Unfortunately, the symptoms of poor people largely look the same around the world: they do not have "sufficient" material things.⁶ However, the underlying diseases behind those symptoms are not always very apparent and can differ from person to person. A trial and error process may be necessary before a proper diagnosis can be reached. Like all of us, poor people are not fully aware of all that is affecting their lives, and, like all of us, poor people are not always completely honest with themselves or with others. And even after a sound diagnosis is made, it may take years to help people to overcome their problems. There will likely

be lots of ups and downs in the relationship. It all sounds very time-consuming, and it is. “If you *spend yourselves* in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday” (Isa. 58:10, italics added). “Spending yourself” often involves more than giving a handout to a poor person, a handout that may very well do more harm than good.

A sound diagnosis is absolutely critical for helping poor people without hurting them. But how can we diagnose such a complex disease? Divine wisdom is necessary. Although the Bible is not a textbook on poverty alleviation, it does give us valuable insights into the nature of human beings, of history, of culture, and of God to point us in the right direction. ¶

1 Moody Publishers, 2009

2 World Bank, *Hear Our Voices: The Poor on Poverty*,

DVD (New York: Global Vision, 2000).

3 As quoted in Deepa Narayan with Raj Patel, Kai Schafft, Anne Rademacher, Sarah Kock-Schulte, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press for the World Bank, 2000)

4 There are many different locations and types of poverty in North America, including inner-city ghettos, rural communities, immigrants, and the new suburban poverty.

5 Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books 1993), pgs. 19-20.

6 Defining what is a “sufficient” level of material things is a nontrivial exercise that goes beyond the scope of the present discussion.

POVERTY: A BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

Condensed from chapter 2, pgs. 57-64, of *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting The Poor . . . and Yourself*.

Bryant Myers, a leading Christian development thinker, argues that in order to diagnose the disease of poverty correctly, we must consider the fundamental nature of reality, starting with the Creator of that reality. Myers notes that the triune God is inherently a relational being, existing as three-in-one from all eternity. Being made in God’s image, human beings are inherently relational as well. Myers explains that before the fall, God established four foundational relationships for each person: a relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation. These relationships are the building blocks for all of life. When they are functioning properly, humans experience the fullness of life that God intended because we are being what God created us to be. *In particular for our purposes, when these relationships are functioning properly, people are able to fulfill their callings of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work.*

For some people the brokenness in these foundational relationships results in material poverty, that is their not having sufficient money to provide for the basic physical needs of themselves and their families. For example, consider Mary, who lives in a slum in western Kenya. As a female in a male-dominated society, Mary has been subjected to polygamy, to regular physical and verbal abuse from her husband, to fewer years of schooling than males, and to an entire cultural system that tells her that she is inferior. As a result, Mary has

a poverty of being and lacks the confidence to look for a job, leading her into material poverty.

Desperate, Mary decides to be self-employed, but needs a loan to get her business started. Unfortunately, her poverty of community rears its ugly head, as the local loan shark exploits Mary, demanding an interest rate of 300 percent on her loan of twenty-five dollars, contributing to Mary’s material poverty. Having no other options, Mary borrows from the loan shark and starts a business of selling homemade charcoal in the local market, along with hundreds of others just like her. The market is glutted with charcoal sellers, which keeps the prices very low. But it never even occurs to Mary to sell something else, because she does not understand that she has been given the creativity and capacity to have dominion over creation. In other words, her poverty of stewardship locks her into an unprofitable business, further contributing to her material poverty. Frustrated by her entire situation, Mary goes to the traditional healer (witch doctor) for help, a manifestation of her poverty of spiritual intimacy with the true God. The healer tells Mary that her difficult life is a result of angry ancestral spirits that need to be appeased through the sacrificing of a bull, a sacrifice that costs Mary a substantial amount of money and further contributes to her material poverty. Mary is suffering from not having sufficient income, but her problems cannot be solved by giving her more money or other material resources, for such things are insufficient to heal the brokenness of her four foundational relationships. ¶