

The Gospel and Poverty

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Introduction

Poverty is one of the major problems the world is facing today. About 10% of the world's population lives in **extreme poverty** - less than 2 US dollars (\$1.90) a day. And about 3 billion people in the world live in poverty. The most common understanding of poverty is a situation where people do not have enough material things to meet their basic needs. **But, poverty is not just material lack of things.** If that was the case, then providing things for the poor would solve the problem of poverty. Unfortunately, it is much more complicated than that.

Bible has a lot to say about the poor. There are **197 uses** of the word "poor" in the Bible. But, we know that prior to the disobedience of Adam and Eve, there was no poverty. In other words, **the Fall is the root cause of poverty in the world.** Bryant Myers, one of the leading evangelical Christian development thinkers, says, *"The way we understand the nature of poverty and what causes poverty is very important, because it tends to determine how we respond to poverty."* Our understanding of poverty must be firmly rooted in the teaching of the Bible in order to respond to poverty according to God's redemptive purpose (Clifford 2010).

Causes of Poverty in the Bible

There are several causes of poverty mentioned in the Bible, let me share with you three main causes:

a. Poverty Caused by Others

One of the causes of poverty is those who became rich by oppressing the poor or by hoarding riches in the face of obvious needs. **E.g.** currently many rich businessmen are either hoarding face mask or selling it in high price when people are in desperate need because of coronavirus outbreak. Other examples of the poverty caused by others include - High interest rates on loans (Exodus 22:25–27), delayed wages to the worker (1 Timothy 5:18), biased justice system (Leviticus 19:15), corruption, etc. Zechariah 7:10 says: “*Do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor.*” There are a lot of warnings against oppressing others throughout the scripture.

b. Poverty Caused by Self

This cause of poverty results from laziness or moral foolishness of an individual. (**E.g.** Prodigal Son eating pigs food after squandering his father’s wealth is an example of moral foolishness (**Luke 15:11-24**). The book of Proverbs talks a lot about poverty caused by self. In **Proverbs 14:23** it says, “*All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty*” (NIV) And to avoid this kind of poverty, Christians are expected to work, instead of depending on others.

c. Poverty Caused by Natural Disaster

This cause of poverty involves sudden disasters that destroy wealth. Famines that force people to relocate in search of food (**Genesis 47 - Jacob and his family moved to Egypt**). Droughts that prevent farmers from producing crops, earthquakes that damage property, etc. Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright says, these natural disasters

are “*the result of living in a fallen world in which things go wrong for no reason*” (Wright, 2004).

Whatever the cause of poverty is, God has repeatedly commanded His people to care of the poor throughout the scripture. And Jesus Himself has helped the poor throughout His life and ministry.

Jesus’ Response to Poverty

Throughout the Gospels, we see that Jesus was deeply concerned about the poor. He says in **Matthew 25:4**, “*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me*” (NIV). He associated with tax collectors, and sinners. He ministered to the poor, women, children, and those held in low esteem in the society. In fact, these people were the object of many of His miracles.

In **Mark 8:2** Jesus said to His disciples, “*I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat*” (NIV). Jesus had compassion for those poor and hungry people. So, He performed miracle to feed them.

Jesus considered the poor part of His ministry. We see that in **Luke 4:18-19** when He stood in the synagogue and read the following words from Isaiah: “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (NIV).

In terms of Jesus’ response to poverty, one of the well-known, yet often-misunderstood statements is: “*The Poor You Will Always Have With You.*” We find this statement in three Gospels: Matthew 26:11, Mark 14:7 and John 12:8. So, let us look at what did Jesus really mean when He said, “*The Poor You Will Always Have With You?*”

Let us look at the passage in John 12:1-8 (NIV):

*Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. 3 Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 5 **"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages."** 6 He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. 7 "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. 8 **You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.**"*

Judas Iscariot, the treasurer to the disciples, scolds Mary for anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. We see that his view of poverty was not grounded in a biblical theology. In fact, his comments were, a response of self-interest. So, Jesus defends Mary and responds with this statement: "The poor you will always have with you."

There are Christians who have gone to the extreme of taking it as an excuse to completely ignore the poor. They say that it's a problem that simply can't be solved. After all, Jesus Himself said, "*The poor you will ALWAYS have with you.*" So, it is crucial for us to look at this statement in its original context.

Jesus referred to **Deuteronomy 15:11**: "*There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.*" (NIV)

When God said, “*There will always be poor people in the land,*” He was actually referring to His command to the Israelites to take care of their fellow brothers and sisters in need.

Few verses earlier, in **Deuteronomy 15:4-5** God said, “*However, there need be no poor people 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*” (NIV). So, God’s intention or desire is that there would be no poverty among the people. But, because of their disobedience to His commands, there were poor people in the land.

Likewise, there is so much poverty in the world today because people continue to disobey God’s command. So, Jesus is calling us to care for the poor among us. Now, the question you may be asking is, how can I respond to the needs of the poor?

Evangelical Christian Response to Poverty

Majority of the evangelical Christian response to poverty has been focused on economic and spiritual needs of the poor. We have done a great job in **saving lives** on the earth by giving material things, and **saving souls** for heaven by proclaiming the Gospel. Btw, those are valid needs of the poor, and we should continue to respond to them. But there are other needs of the poor that are equally valid, but often neglected in our response to poverty. They are ‘psychological needs’ and ‘social needs’ of the poor. Since evangelical Christians are already doing a great job in responding to economic and spiritual needs, I will focus on our psychological and social response here.

a. Psychological Response

According to the ‘Voices of the Poor’ project, conducted by the World Bank to listen to the world’s poorest people. They asked the poor people from 60 different countries, **what is poverty?** Majority of them defined poverty in psychological terms. They said, ‘desire to feel better, have a sense of dignity, wish for respect, have peace of mind, lack of anxiety, and happy’ are some of the signs that poor people are in need of psychological development (Myers 2011). It is evident that poor people are really concerned about their psychological well-being.

In the Philippines, the Social Weather Stations (SWS) reported that almost **40** percent of the national population of the Philippines **consider** themselves poor. But, in reality, only half of those people (20 percent) are considered poor. Since poverty is usually rooted in the mindset of the poor, there has to be a psychological response.

In the book, *When Helping Hurts*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert encouraged evangelical Christians to **empower the poor**. They say, “*Do not do things for people that they can do for themselves*” (Corbett and Fikkert 2012). Indeed, a lot of times poor people need more than material things; they need new ideas and moral support. Therefore, our response to poverty should deal with the roots of poverty, not just focusing on its fruits.

b. Social Response

Likewise, social poverty, which is also understood as relational poverty, can affect anyone regardless of socioeconomic status. It is a form of poverty far more destructive than economic poverty. Social poverty is a deep lack of connectedness with others that people need for

their well-being. It also involves social exclusion, which is being excluded from social, cultural, and political arenas.

So, our response to poverty should include speaking for the rights of the poor, advocating justice, conflict resolution, etc. In addition, we should provide opportunities for the poor to find new friends, build relationships, form networks, and have a place to belong. And in responding to the psychological and social needs of the poor, we're not trying to proclaim the 'Social Gospel', 'Poverty Gospel' or 'Prosperity Gospel.' We are actually proclaiming the good news of the Gospel because God is concerned about the whole person.

Conclusion

Evangelical Christian response to poverty should go beyond the body and the soul. We should minister to the whole person. I have come up with this framework to understand and to respond to poverty in a holistic manner. 'Holistic Development Framework' defines poverty in economic, psychological, social, and spiritual terms, and proposes an intentional integration of economic, psychological, social, and spiritual development. When poverty is understood and responded in a holistic manner, poor people experience shalom (peace, wellbeing, wholeness), which is our ultimate goal in responding to poverty. So, let us be intentional in responding to the economic, psychological, social, and spiritual needs of the poor.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are the causes of poverty in our community/country?
2. What are some practical ways to respond to the psychological and social needs of the poor?