

FROM "THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM"

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Behold an infant. A normal man-child in most respects. A kind-natured child. A child with promise and potential.

Watch him as he enters a rancid, smoke-filled world that resounds with the shouts and crashes of parents in conflict. Listen to him as he begins to compete for affection and food, and finds both forms of nourishment in short supply. His cries and soon his words become demanding. He pushes and grasps for strong boundaries that will assure him he is safe and loved, but finds only weak indulgence. No clear limits. No consistent discipline. Just impulsive beatings and permissive disinterest from parents preoccupied with their own survival. He begins to question his own worth. School confirms his suspicions. He drops out. He roams the streets at will, disguising his fear as nonchalance.

Behold a young man. A kind-natured, strong, undisciplined young man. Watch him as he falls in love, marries, and starts a family of his own. See his dreams begin to crumble as he loses one job, then another. He is evicted from a string of dingy apartments. His neighbors and "friends" spread rumors of child abuse and deprivation. The county takes four of his children. His wife loses respect for him. He is falsely accused of bestiality, arrested, and thrown in jail. Watch now as inmates and officials violate him. Watch as the last glimmer of dignity is choked out.

Behold a man. A broken man, scarcely forty. Parents dead. Rejected by his family. He walks the streets alone, head bent, shoulders stooped, hair matted, teeth rotting, drool running down his unshaven chin. A kind-natured man now babbling foolishly a salad of loosely connected thoughts and phrases.

"Worthless, but good-hearted," people say. Except when the volcano of hurt inside him erupts in rage. Then his eyes become wild. He claws and bats at his wife and remaining children. In time the wildness and heavy breathing subside, and he returns to his subhuman existence. He is prideless, worth less to his wife and children than the social worker that issues their food stamps.

Watch now as a miracle unfolds. A metamorphosis! The wind of the Spirit of God blows through and about Lester's life. A man made in the image of God and reduced to nearly animal

form is slowly being restored. God begins to convince Lester that he has worth, that he is loved.

The message comes from many sources. A family who invites Lester and his family for a picnic. A businessman who continues to hire, fire, and rehire Lester on a job, insisting on a standard of responsible work yet holding on to Lester with firm love. People who notice and praise Lester when he is bathed, shaved, or wearing clean clothes. A person who accepts a gift from Lester without chiding him for “taking food out of his children’s mouths.” A minister who prays with Lester. A counselor who intervenes to cool flaring family tempers and helps Lester expose his festering hurt and anger to the sunlight of God’s acceptance. The people of God, the Church, become actors in the unfolding drama of re-creation while the wind of the Spirit breathes in new life.

What potential is confined within this unattractive shell we know as Lester? Who knows save the Creator himself? But of this we are certain: when Lester prays or weeps with joy, when he caresses his baby boy, we see the image of God.

THOUGHTS:

FROM "THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM"

CHRISTMAS AGAIN

"Christmas again. Damn!" His words are barely audible but his wife knows his feelings well. She sees the hurt come into his eyes when the kids come home from school talking about what they want for Christmas. It is the same expression she sees on the faces of other unemployed fathers around the housing project.

She knows this year will be no different from the last. All her husband's hustle, his day-labor jobs, his pickup work will not be enough to put presents under a tree. They will do well to keep the heat on. His confident, promising deceptions allow the children the luxury of their dreams a while longer. She will cover for him again because she knows he is a good man. His lies are his wishes, his flawed attempts to let his children know what the older ones know but never admit: the gifts are not from Daddy.

He will not go with her to stand in the "free toy" lines with all the others. He cannot bring himself to do it. It is too stark a reminder of his own impotence. And if their home is blessed again this year with a visit from a Christian family bearing food and beautifully wrapped presents for the kids, he will stay in the bedroom until they are gone. He will leave the smiling and the graciousness to his wife. His joy for the children will be genuine. But so is the heavy ache in his stomach as his image of himself as a provider is dealt another blow.

Christmas. That wonderful, awful time when giving hearts glow warm and bright while fading embers of a poor man's pride are doused black.

Thoughts:

CHAPTER 2

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

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,"¹ 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*. 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.²

— MOLDOVA

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.³

— GUINEA-BISSAU

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.⁴

– LATVIA

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.⁵

– UGANDA

[The poor have] a feeling of powerlessness and an inability to make themselves heard.⁶

– CAMEROON

Your hunger is never satisfied, your thirst is never quenched; you can never sleep until you are no longer tired.⁷

– SENEGAL

If you are hungry, you will always be hungry; if you are poor, you will always be poor.⁸

– VIETNAM

What determines poverty or well-being? The indigenous people's destiny is to be poor.⁹

– ECUADOR

What one shouldn't lack is the sheep, what one cannot live without is food.¹⁰

– CHINA

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 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 poverty¹¹ 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.¹²

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.

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.

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

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

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.¹³ 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. Hence, in the remainder of this chapter and the next, we root our understanding of poverty and its alleviation in the Bible’s grand narrative: creation, the fall, and redemption. We recognize that some of the material in these two chapters is a bit abstract. Hang in there! It won’t hurt too much. By design, the book moves from the theoretical to the applied. We need to establish a solid theoretical foundation if we want to build successful poverty-alleviation efforts.

POVERTY: A BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

In the Beginning

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 (see figure 2.1). 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.



FIGURE 2.1

Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

Note that human life is not all up for grabs! God designed humans to be a certain thing and to operate in a certain way in all of these relationships:

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD:** This is our primary relationship, the other three relationships flowing out of this one. The Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches that human beings' primary purpose is "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." This is our calling, the ultimate reason for which we were created. We were created to serve and give praise to our Creator through our thoughts, words, and actions. When we do this, we experience the presence of God as our heavenly Father and live in a joyful, intimate relationship with Him as His children.

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH SELF:** People are uniquely created in the image of God and thus have inherent worth and dignity. While we must remember that we are not God, we have the high calling of reflecting God’s being, making us superior to the rest of creation.

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS:** God created us to live in loving relationship with one another. We are not islands! We are made to know one another, to love one another, and to encourage one another to use the gifts God has given to each of us to fulfill our callings.

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH THE REST OF CREATION:** The “cultural mandate” of Genesis 1:28–30 teaches that God created us to be stewards, people who understand, protect, subdue, and manage the world that God has created in order to preserve it and to produce bounty. Note that while God made the world “perfect,” He left it “incomplete.” This means that while the world was created to be without defect, God called humans to interact with creation, to make possibilities into realities, and to be able to sustain ourselves via the fruits of our stewardship.

The arrows pointing from human beings to the surrounding ovals in figure 2.1 highlight that these foundational relationships are the building blocks for all of life. The way that humans create culture—including economic, social, political, and religious systems—reflect our basic commitments to God, self, others, and the rest of creation. For example, because William Wilberforce viewed “others” as being created in the image of God, he devoted his life as a politician to banning the slave trade in England at the start of the nineteenth century. Wilberforce shaped the political system in a way that reflected his fundamental commitment to love other human beings, including Africans. And the same is true of all other aspects of culture. The systems that humans create, including both formal institutions (governments, schools, businesses, churches, etc.) and cultural norms (gender roles, attitudes toward time and work, understandings of authority, etc.), reflect the nature of our foundational relationships to God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

But culture reflects more than just the expression of human effort. Consider again Colossians 1:16–17: “For by him [Jesus] all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (italics added). Note in this passage that Christ is the Creator and Sustainer of more than just the material world. His creative and sustaining hand extends to “all things.” This sustenance is

continuing, even in a fallen world. Hence, Christ is actively engaged in sustaining the economic, social, political, and religious systems in which humans live. There is certainly real mystery here, but the central point of Scripture is clear: as humans engage in cultural activity, they are unpacking a creation that Christ created, sustains, and as we shall see later, redeems.

As figure 2.1 illustrates, the arrows connecting the individual to the systems point both ways. People affect systems, and systems affect people. For example, much of our lives are spent working in organizations that play a huge role in shaping our self-images, our relationships to coworkers, the means by which we steward creation, and the setting in which we respond to God and in which He responds to us. And these organizations operate in the context of local, national, and global systems characterized by rapid flows of information, capital, and technology, which greatly impact the scope and nature of their operations.

More than ever before, the organizations in which we work are shaped by events on the other side of the world. For example, as China's economic policies emerge, the entire global economy is affected. Hence, the context in which we relate to God, self, others, and the rest of creation is influenced by actions of the Chinese government!

What's This Stuff Good for Anyway?

The importance of the doctrine of creation will become more evident as the book proceeds, but let's look at a few implications right away:

- The four key relationships highlight the fact that human beings are multifaceted, implying that poverty-alleviation efforts should be multifaceted as well. If we reduce human beings to being simply physical—as Western thought is prone to do—our poverty-alleviation efforts will tend to focus on material solutions. But if we remember that humans are spiritual, social, psychological, and physical beings, our poverty-alleviation efforts will be more holistic in their design and execution.
- Dirt matters, as do giraffes, wells, families, schools, music, crops, governments, and businesses. We must engage with the entire creation, including culture, for our Creator is deeply engaged with it.

- Our basic predisposition toward poor communities—including their people, organizations, institutions, and culture—should include the notion that they are part of the good world that Christ created and is sustaining. They are not just filth and rubble. (If you are wondering about the effects of sin, hang on until the next section.)

- We are not bringing Christ to poor communities. He has been active in these communities since the creation of the world, sustaining them “by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). Hence, a significant part of working in poor communities involves discovering and appreciating what God has been doing there for a long time! This should give us a sense of humility and awe as we enter poor communities, for part of what we see there reflects the very hand of God. Of course, the residents of these communities may not recognize that God has been at work. In fact, they might not even know who God is. So part of our task may include introducing the community to who God is and to helping them to appreciate all that He has been doing for them since the creation of the world. We will return to this issue in chapter 6.

The Fall Really Happened

Of course, the grand story of Scripture does not end with creation. Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and their hearts were darkened. The Genesis account records that all four of Adam and Eve’s relationships immediately became distorted: their relationship with God was damaged, as their intimacy with Him was replaced with fear; their relationship with self was marred, as Adam and Eve developed a sense of shame; their relationship with others was broken, as Adam quickly blamed Eve for their sin; and their relationship with the rest of creation became distorted, as God cursed the ground and the childbearing process.

Furthermore, as figure 2.2 illustrates, because the four relationships are the building blocks for all human activity, the effects of the fall are manifested in the economic, social, religious, and political systems that humans have created throughout history. For example, not loving “others” as they should have, politicians have passed laws institutionalizing slavery and racial discrimination. And not caring for “the rest of creation,” at times shareholders have allowed their companies to pollute the environment. The systems are broken, reflecting humans’ broken relationships. Moreover, in addition to sinful human natures and behaviors, Satan and his legions are at work, wreaking havoc in both the individuals and systems.

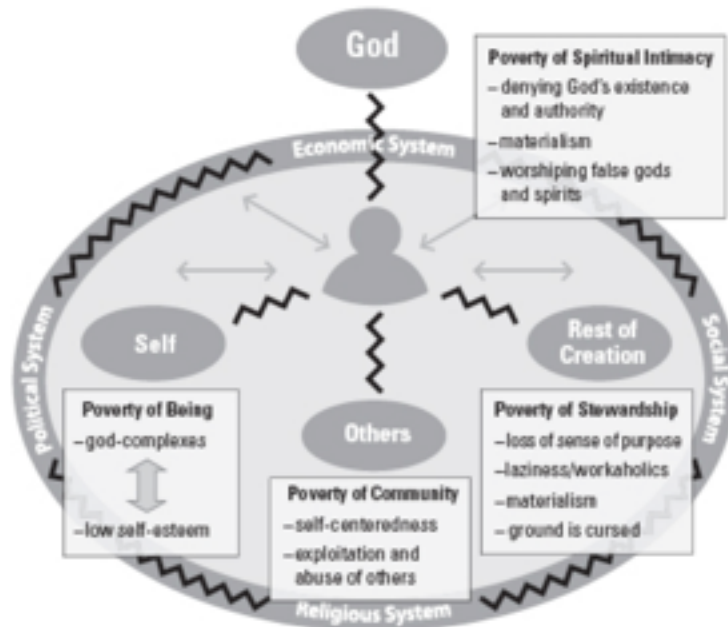


FIGURE 2.2

Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

These considerations lead to Myers's description of the fundamental nature of poverty:
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Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings.

Although Myers's definition correctly points to the all-encompassing effects of the fall, it is important to remember that neither humans nor the systems they create are as bad as they could possibly be. Christ continues to "hold all things together" and to "sustain all things by his powerful word." Hence, while the good creation—including both individuals and the systems they create—is deeply distorted, it retains some of its inherent goodness. Flowers are still pretty. A baby's smile brings joy to all who see it. People are often kind to one another. Governments build roads that enable us to get around better. Companies often pay their workers decent wages. And both poor individuals and communities continue to exhibit God-given gifts and assets.

WHO ARE THE POOR?

Stop and think: If poverty is rooted in the brokenness of the foundational relationships, then who are the poor?

Due to the comprehensive nature of the fall, every human being is poor in the sense of not experiencing these four relationships in the way that God intended. As figure 2.2 illustrates, every human being is suffering from a poverty of spiritual intimacy, a poverty of being, a poverty of community, and a poverty of stewardship. We are all simply incapable of being what God created us to be and are unable to experience the fullness of joy that God designed for these relationships. Every minute since the fall, each human being is the proverbial “square peg in a round hole.” We don’t fit right because we were shaped for something else.

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.

Mary's brokenness manifested itself in material poverty, but for other people the effects of these broken relationships are manifested in different ways. For example, for most of my life I have struggled with workaholic tendencies, reflecting a poverty of stewardship, a broken relationship with the rest of creation. Instead of seeing work as simply one of the arenas in which I am to glorify God, there are times in which I have made my work my god and have tried to find all of my meaning, purpose, and worth through being productive. This is not how God designed humans' relationship with the rest of creation to be. Of course, I am unlikely to experience material poverty, as my high level of productivity will usually put food on my table; however, at times my poverty of stewardship has had serious consequences, including strained relationships with family and friends, physical and emotional ailments resulting from stress, and spiritual weakness from inadequate time for a meaningful devotional life.

The fall really happened, and it is wreaking havoc in all of our lives. We are all broken, just in different ways.

WHEN HELPING HURTS

One of the major premises of this book is that until we embrace our mutual brokenness, our work with low-income people is likely to do far more harm than good. As discussed earlier, research from around the world has found that shame—a “poverty of being”—is a major part of the brokenness that low-income people experience in their relationship with themselves. Instead of seeing themselves as being created in the image of God, low-income people often feel they are inferior to others. This can paralyze the poor from taking initiative and from seizing opportunities to improve their situation, thereby locking them into material poverty.

At the same time, the economically rich—including most of the readers of this book—also suffer from a poverty of being. In particular, development practitioner Jayakumar Christian argues that the economically rich often have “god-complexes,” a subtle and unconscious sense of superiority in which they believe that they have achieved their wealth through their own efforts and that they have been anointed to decide what is best for low-income people, whom they view as inferior to themselves.¹⁶

Few of us are conscious of having a god-complex, which is part of the problem. We are often deceived by Satan and by our sinful natures. For example, consider this: why do you want to help the poor? Really think about it. What truly motivates you? Do you really love poor people and want to serve them? Or do you have other motives? I confess to you that part of what motivates me to help the poor is my felt need to accomplish something worthwhile with my life, to be a person of significance, to feel like I have pursued a noble cause ... to be a bit like God. It makes me feel good to use my training in economics to “save” poor people. And in the process, I sometimes unintentionally reduce poor people to objects that I use to fulfill my own need to accomplish something. It is a very ugly truth, and it pains me to admit it, but “when I want to do good, evil is right there with me” (Rom. 7:21).

And now we have come to a very central point: one of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates the poverty of being of the economically rich—their god-complexes—and the poverty of being of the economically poor—their feelings of inferiority and shame. The way that we act toward the economically poor often communicates—albeit unintentionally—that we are superior and they are inferior. In the process we hurt the poor and ourselves. And here is the clincher: this dynamic is likely to be particularly strong whenever middle-to-upper-class, North American Christians try to help the poor, given these Christians’ tendency toward a Western, materialistic perspective of the nature of poverty.

This point can be illustrated with the story of Creekside Community Church, a predominantly Caucasian congregation made up of young urban professionals in the downtown area of an American city. Being in the Christmas spirit, Creekside Community Church decided to reach out to the African-American residents of a nearby housing project, which was characterized by high rates of unemployment, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and teenage pregnancy. A number of the members of Creekside expressed some disdain for the project residents, and all of the members were fearful of venturing inside. But Pastor Johnson insisted that Jesus cared for the residents of this housing project and that Christmas was the perfect time to show His compassion.

But what could they do to help? Believing that poverty is primarily a lack of material resources—the last row in table 2.1—the members of Creekside Community Church decided to address this poverty by buying Christmas presents for the children in the housing project. Church members went door to door, singing Christmas carols and delivering wrapped toys to

the children in each apartment. Although it was awkward at first, the members of Creekside were moved by the big smiles on the children's faces and were encouraged by the warm reception of the mothers. In fact, the congregation felt so good about the joy they had brought that they decided to expand this ministry, delivering baskets of candy at Easter and turkeys at Thanksgiving.

Unfortunately, after several years, Pastor Johnson noticed that he was struggling to find enough volunteers to deliver the gifts to the housing project. At the congregational meeting, he asked the members why their enthusiasm was waning, but it was difficult to get a clear answer. Finally, one member spoke up: "Pastor, we are tired of trying to help these people out. We have been bringing them things for several years now, but their situation never improves. They just sit there in the same situation year in and year out. Have you ever noticed that there are no men in the apartments when we deliver the toys? The residents are all unwed mothers who just keep having babies in order to collect bigger and bigger welfare checks. They don't deserve our help."

In reality, there was a different reason that there were few men in the apartments when the toys were delivered. Oftentimes, when the fathers of the children heard the Christmas carols outside their front doors and saw the presents for their kids through the peepholes, they were embarrassed and ran out the back doors of their apartments. For a host of reasons, low-income African-American males sometimes struggle to find and keep jobs. This often contributes to a deep sense of shame and inadequacy, both of which make it even more difficult to apply for jobs. The last thing these fathers needed was a group of middle-to-upper-class Caucasians providing Christmas presents for their children, presents that they themselves could not afford to buy. In trying to alleviate material poverty through the giving of these presents, Creekside Community Church increased these fathers' poverty of being. Ironically, this likely made the fathers even less able to apply for a job, thereby exacerbating the very material poverty that Creekside was trying to solve!

In addition to hurting the residents of the housing project, the members of Creekside Community Church hurt themselves. At first the members developed a subtle sense of pride that they were helping the project residents through their acts of kindness. Later, when they observed the residents' failure to improve their situations, the members' disdain for them increased. What is often called "compassion fatigue" then set in as the members became less willing to help the low-income residents. As a result, the poverty of being increased for the

church members. Furthermore, the poverty of community increased for everyone involved, as the gulf between the church members and the housing project residents actually increased as a result of this project.

Our efforts to help the poor can hurt both them and ourselves. In fact, as this story illustrates, very often the North American church finds itself locked into the following equation:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{Material} & & \text{God-Complexes} & & \text{Feelings of} & & \text{Harm to Both} \\ \text{Definition} & + & \text{of Materially} & + & \text{Inferiority of} & = & \text{Materially Poor} \\ \text{of Poverty} & & \text{Non-Poor} & & \text{Materially Poor} & & \text{and Non-Poor} \end{array}$$

What can be done to break out of this equation? Changing the first term in this equation requires a revised understanding of the nature of poverty. North American Christians need to overcome the materialism of Western culture and see poverty in more relational terms. Changing the second term in this equation requires ongoing repentance. It requires North American Christians to understand our brokenness and to embrace the message of the cross in deep and profound ways, saying to ourselves every day: “I am not okay; and you are not okay; but Jesus can fix us both.” And as we do this, God can use us to change the third term in this equation. By showing low-income people through our words, our actions, and most importantly our ears that they are people with unique gifts and abilities, we can be part of helping them to recover their sense of dignity, even as we recover from our sense of pride.

Repenting of the Health-and-Wealth Gospel

One Sunday I was walking with a staff member through one of Africa’s largest slums, the massive Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya. The conditions were simply inhumane. People lived in shacks constructed out of cardboard boxes. Foul smells gushed out of open ditches carrying human and animal excrement. I had a hard time keeping my balance as I continually slipped on oozy brown substances that I hoped were mud but feared were something else. Children picked through garbage dumps looking for anything of value. As we walked deeper and deeper into the slum, my sense of despair increased. This place is completely God-forsaken, I thought to myself.

Then to my amazement, right there among the dung, I heard the sound of a familiar hymn. There must be Western missionaries conducting an open-air service in here, I thought to myself. As we turned the corner, my eyes landed on the shack from which the music

bellowed. Every Sunday, thirty slum dwellers crammed into this ten-by-twenty foot “sanctuary” to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The church was made out of cardboard boxes that had been opened up and stapled to studs. It wasn’t pretty, but it was a church, a church made up of some of the poorest people on earth.

When we arrived at the church, I was immediately asked to preach the sermon. As a good Presbyterian, I quickly jotted down some notes about the sovereignty of God and was looking forward to teaching this congregation the historic doctrines of the Reformation. But before the sermon began, the service included a time of sharing and prayer. I listened as some of the poorest people on the planet cried out to God: “Jehovah Jireh, please heal my son, as he is going blind.” “Merciful Lord, please protect me when I go home today, for my husband always beats me.” “Sovereign King, please provide my children with enough food today, as they are hungry.”

As I listened to these people praying to be able to live another day, I thought about my ample salary, my life insurance policy, my health insurance policy, my two cars, my house, etc. I realized that I do not really trust in God’s sovereignty on a daily basis, as I have sufficient buffers in place to shield me from most economic shocks. I realized that when these folks pray the fourth petition of the Lord’s prayer—Give us this day our daily bread—their minds do not wander as mine so often does. I realized that while I have sufficient education and training to deliver a sermon on God’s sovereignty with no forewarning, these slum dwellers were trusting in God’s sovereignty just to get them through the day. And I realized that these people had a far deeper intimacy with God than I probably will ever have in my entire life.

Surprisingly, as this story illustrates, for many of us North Americans the first step in overcoming our god-complexes is to repent of the health-and-wealth gospel. At its core, the health-and-wealth gospel teaches that God rewards increasing levels of faith with greater amounts of wealth. When stated this way, the health-and-wealth gospel is easy to reject on a host of biblical grounds. Take the case of the apostle Paul, for example. He had enormous faith and lived a godly life, but he was shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, naked, and poor.

Think about it. If anybody dares suggest to me that the poor are poor because they are less spiritual than the rest of us—which is what the health-and-wealth gospel teaches—I am

quick to rebuke them. I immediately point out that the poor could be poor due to injustices committed against them. Yet, all of this notwithstanding, I was still amazed to see people in this Kenyan slum who were simultaneously so spiritually strong and so devastatingly poor. Right down there in the bowels of hell was this Kenyan church, filled with spiritual giants who were struggling just to eat every day. This shocked me. At some level I had implicitly assumed that my economic superiority goes hand in hand with my spiritual superiority. This is none other than the lie of the health-and-wealth gospel: spiritual maturity leads to financial prosperity.

The health-and-wealth gospel is just one aspect of my “god-complex,” for there are all sorts of areas in which I need to embrace the message of the cross: “I stink, but God loves me anyway!” And without such repentance, my own arrogance is likely to increase the poverty of the materially poor people I encounter by confirming their feelings of shame and inferiority.

That day in the Kibera slum, God used the materially poor, people more visibly broken than I, to teach me about my own brokenness. They blessed me, even while I was trying to bless them.

One of These Things Is Not Like the Other

Although all human beings are poor in the sense that all are suffering from the effects of the fall on the four foundational relationships, it is not legitimate to conclude that there is nothing uniquely devastating about material poverty. Low-income people daily face a struggle to survive that creates feelings of helplessness, anxiety, suffocation, and desperation that are simply unparalleled in the lives of the rest of humanity.

Development expert Robert Chambers argues that the materially poor are trapped by multiple, interconnected factors—insufficient assets, vulnerability, powerlessness, isolation, and physical weakness—that ensnare them like bugs caught in a spider’s web.¹⁷ Imagine being caught in such a web. Every time you try to move, you just get more hung up on another strand. You think to yourself, Maybe this time will be different, so you try to make a change in your life. But immediately you find yourself even more entangled than before. After a while you come to believe that it is better to just lie still. This is miserable, but any further movement only brings even greater misery. You hate your situation, but you have no choice.

Most of the readers of this book do not lead this type of life. We believe that we have choices and that we can make changes, and in our situations, this is a correct assumption.

According to Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, it is this lack of freedom to be able to make meaningful choices—to have an ability to affect one’s situation—that is the distinguishing feature of poverty.¹⁸

Similarly, while “material poverty” is rooted in the brokenness of the four foundational relationships—a brokenness we all experience in different ways—this does not mean that there is nothing unique about “the poor” in Scripture. Although there are places in the Bible in which the term “poor” is used generically to describe the general plight of humanity, there are a host of texts (see chapter 1) in which the term is referring very specifically to those who are economically destitute. We cannot let ourselves off the hook by saying to ourselves, “I am fulfilling the Bible’s commands to help the poor by loving the wealthy lady next door with the troubled marriage.” Yes, this lady is experiencing a “poverty of community,” and it is good to help her. But this is not the type of person referred to in such passages as 1 John 3:17.

The economically poor are singled out in Scripture as being in a particularly desperate category and as needing very specific attention (Acts 6:1–7). The fact that all of humanity has some things in common with the materially poor does not negate their unique and overwhelming suffering nor the special place that they have in God’s heart, as emphasized throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Could You Survive in Poverty?

Put a check by each item you know how to do.

- 1. I know which churches and sections of town have the best rummage sales.
- 2. I know when Walmart, drug stores, and convenience stores throw away over-the-counter medicine with expired dates.
- 3. I know which pawn shops sell DVDs for \$1.
- 4. In my town in criminal courts, I know which judges are lenient, which ones are crooked, and which ones are fair.
- 5. I know how to physically fight and defend myself physically.
- 6. I know how to get a gun, even if I have a police record.
- 7. I know how to keep my clothes from being stolen at the Laundromat.
- 8. I know what problems to look for in a used car.
- 9. I/my family use a payday lender.
- 10. I know how to live without electricity and a phone.
- 11. I know how to use a knife as scissors.
- 12. I can entertain a group of friends with my personality and my stories.
- 13. I know which churches will provide assistance with food or shelter.
- 14. I know how to move in half a day.
- 15. I know how to get and use food stamps or an electronic card for benefits.
- 16. I know where the free medical clinics are.
- 17. I am very good at trading and bartering.
- 18. I can get by without a car.
- 19. I know how to hide my car so the repo man cannot find it.
- 20. We pay our cable-TV bill before we pay our rent.
- 21. I know which sections of town "belong" to which gangs.

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Could You Survive in Middle Class?

Put a check by each item you know how to do.

- 1. I know how to get my children into Little League, piano lessons, soccer, etc.
- 2. I have an online checking account and monitor my bills online.
- 3. Every bedroom has its own TV and DVD player.
- 4. My children know the best name brands in clothing.
- 5. I know how to order in a nice restaurant.
- 6. I know how to use a credit card, checking account, and savings account—and I understand an annuity. I understand term life insurance, disability insurance, and 20/80 medical insurance policy, as well as house insurance, flood insurance, and replacement insurance.
- 7. I talk to my children about going to college.
- 8. I know how to get one of the best interest rates on my new-car loan.
- 9. I understand the difference among the principal, interest, and escrow statements on my house payment.
- 10. I know how to help my children with their homework and do not hesitate to call the school if I need additional information.
- 11. I know how to decorate the house for the different holidays.
- 12. I/my family belong to an athletic or exercise club.
- 13. I know how to use most of the tools in the garage.
- 14. I repair items in my house almost immediately when they break—or know a repair service and call it.
- 15. We have more than one computer in our home.
- 16. We plan our vacations six months to a year in advance.
- 17. I contribute to a retirement plan separate from Social Security.

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Could You Survive in Wealth?

Put a check by each item you know how to do.

- 1. I can read a menu in at least three languages.
- 2. I have several favorite restaurants in different countries of the world. I use a *conciierge* to book the best restaurants as I travel throughout the world.
- 3. During the holidays, I know how to hire a decorator to identify the appropriate themes and items with which to decorate the house.
- 4. I know who my preferred financial adviser, legal firm, certified public accounting firm, designer, florist, caterer, domestic employment service, and hairdresser are. In addition, I have a preferred tailor, travel agency, and personal trainer.
- 5. I have at least two residences that are staffed and maintained.
- 6. I know how to ensure confidentiality and loyalty from my domestic staff.
- 7. I have at least two or three "screens" that keep people whom I do not wish to see away from me.
- 8. I fly in my own plane, the company plane, or first class.
- 9. I know how to enroll my children in the preferred private schools.
- 10. I know how to host the parties that "key" people attend.
- 11. I am on the boards of at least two charities.
- 12. I contribute to at least four or five political campaigns.
- 13. I support or buy the work of a particular artist.
- 14. I know how to read a corporate financial statement and analyze my own financial statements.
- 15. I belong to at least one private club (country club, yacht club, etc.).
- 16. I own more vehicles than there are drivers.
- 17. I "buy a table" at several charity events throughout the year.
- 18. I have worldwide coverage on my cell phone for both text and voice messages, as well as e-mail.
- 19. I have the provenance for all original art, jewelry, antiques, and one-of-a-kind items.
- 20. I easily translate exchange rates for currency between and among different countries.

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