Responding to Poverty – As a Christian

Poverty's Devastating Effects

I can still remember the feelings of curiosity, confusion and discomfort I felt as a watched the young boys. "What did those kids want?" I wondered.

As a child visiting Cuba with my parents, I was startled when some boys at a city park opened our taxi doors, then held out their hands. Later I asked my mother, "Did they work there? Did they want a tip?" She gently told me they were begging. My young upper-middle-class North American sensibilities were jolted by the harsh reality of poverty I had never seen.

One summer during university, while visiting Tijuana, Mexico, I was stunned to see people living in the city dump. Later that summer, I spent time with a friend in one of Miami's ghettos. One day, as I drove away, I noticed an ambulance headed toward the apartment building near where my friend hung out. The next day, my friend told me a woman had shot the man who was trying to seduce her, then she shot herself. Shocking as that news was for me, almost as much so was my friend's nonchalance. He seemed accustomed to events like this.

Those experiences kindled my personal interest in this theme. What is poverty? Why does it exist? How does it destroy minds and souls as well as bodies? What is a biblical perspective on poverty? And what should we do about it?

Income level and standard of living are often-used but insufficient measures of poverty. Some townships in South Africa and shanty towns in the Philippines make some North American housing projects seem like the Ritz.

Localized “relative deprivation” (i.e., large socioeconomic disparity between the poor and middle class) can multiply feelings of low self-esteem. Many social scientists emphasize psychological manifestations of poverty. Yale psychologist Ira Goldenberg defined poverty as “a psychological process which destroys the young before they can live and the aged before they can die. . . . [It] is a condition of being in which one’s past and future meet in the present—and go no further.”{1}

The precise economic line may be difficult to draw, but poverty’s effects can be devastating. Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs says, “More than 8 million people around the world die each year because they are too poor to stay alive. Every morning our newspapers could report, ‘More than 20,000 people perished yesterday of extreme poverty.'”{2} They die from disease, lack of medicine, unsafe drinking water.

Homeless Assistance

The little girl was sleeping so peacefully on a cot in the nursery playroom. As I watched her, I imagined how she might have felt only a few days earlier, maybe trying to sleep in the tropical heat under a noisy highway overpass. Now she was inside a lovely, air conditioned room with nice toys. She and families just like hers could feel safe, clean and protected at Miami’s Homeless Assistance Center, a facility organized and run through a coalition of community leaders, government agencies, churches, and faith-based organizations.

By its twelfth year, Miami’s Community Partnership for Homeless had helped over twenty-seven thousand men, women and children leave the streets for a better life. Their Homeless Assistance Centers are a community success story in which private and public sectors teamed to create a national model for eliminating homelessness. Would you believe all this

started from a church Bible class?

My friend Alvah Chapman served Knight Ridder Publishers as president and chairman for fourteen years. (Knight Ridder owned, for example, the *Miami Herald*, *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *San Jose Mercury News*.) At retirement, he and his wife Betty participated in a thirty-nine-week church Bible study class that required personal application.

Alvah had become distressed observing the plight of Miami's homeless and the lack of community leadership. He recalls, "The county said it was a city problem. The city said it was a county problem. And the Chamber of Commerce was not sure it was their problem."{3} The Chapmans decided to tackle homelessness. "The commitment to 'do something' was very strong" in their hearts, he explains: "We made a commitment to our [Bible] class and to our God that we would together provide leadership to the homeless problem in Miami."{4}

Today the Homeless Assistance Centers{5} they founded provide meals, showers, clothing, temporary housing, laundry facilities, health care, transportation, and job training—helping residents get back on their feet with dignity. The success rate for departed residents has been as high as sixty percent, considered remarkable in this field. Churches and synagogues have provided evening meals, companionship, and encouragement.

Often the poor feel trapped in poverty with no way out. Vicious circles breed feelings of worthlessness and despair. Drunkenness, violence, teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases are just some of the physical manifestations of coping with life out of control. Efforts like the Homeless Assistance Centers can help break the cycle of poverty.

Helping the Total Person

Poverty brings multiple problems: physical, psychological, and spiritual. Which should we emphasize in seeking solutions? Consider three approaches.

1. The *Outside-In Approach* changes circumstances to alleviate stress factors. Education and job training can enhance employment and living standards, thus decreasing psychological problems. Right? Not necessarily. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis argued that an elimination of physical poverty may not by itself eliminate the culture of poverty.{6} Perhaps you know some wealthy but unhappy people.

2. The *Inside-Out Approach* emphasizes counseling to encourage self-help. Attitude change is important, but if the economic system blocks options, what then?

3. The *Total-Person Approach* blends the other two, treating humans as physical, psychological, and spiritual creatures. The often-overlooked spiritual area, properly tapped, can influence both poor and rich.

John Perkins, an African-American, left his poor rural hometown of Mendenhall, Mississippi, vowing never to return. His brother had been shot by a policeman in that racially oppressed town. Later, Perkins placed his faith in Christ and returned to Mendenhall to help.

The organization he founded facilitated an inexpensive health care center, cooperative farms, a cooperative food store, house construction, tutoring, and raising college scholarships. Perkins' emphasis has been on helping local people help themselves. At the same time he's said, "I believe that the only commitment able to bring [interpersonal and community] healing is a commitment to Jesus."{7}

Jesus of Nazareth emphasized the total person. He healed the sick and fed the hungry. He also told people how they could

find meaning and fulfillment through faith in Him. Many Christian development programs have a similar focus, operating on the time-honored philosophy that if you give someone a fish you can feed them for a day; if you also teach them how to fish you can feed them for a lifetime.

World Relief, a Christian organization, provides worldwide disaster relief as well as self-help efforts like well-digging and agricultural training. Their microenterprise development programs establish community banking, savings and lending programs to help the poor become self sufficient. For example, a $75 loan to a Cambodian grandmother allowed her to expand her small home-front stand. She repaid the loan in full, entitling her to another, slightly larger loan. Eventually, she could support her sixteen grandchildren and serve as a role model for women in her village.{8}

World Vision, the Salvation Army, and most major Christian denominations have programs to help the poor.

Money and Poverty

We've been examining physical, psychological, and spiritual factors related to poverty and its possible remedies. Consider a common question.

Will money given to developing nations solve their poverty problems? Maybe it will help, but the extent depends largely on how the funds are managed. Sadly, Africa, for instance, is replete with examples of crooked officials diverting financial aid and national wealth into their own pockets. For instance, Nigeria's President Obasanjo estimates that corrupt African leaders have stolen at least $140 billion from their people in the decades since independence.{9}

Obasanjo is a follower of Jesus who has tried to root out corruption in his own nation. The *New York Times* gives a glimpse into the task he still faces. Nigeria export billions

of dollars of oil each year and returns thirteen percent of revenues from its states back to the states. The *Times* notes that "Much of that is siphoned off by corrupt regional officials who often pocket the money or waste it on lavish projects that do little, if anything, for ordinary people. For instance, one state produces a third of Nigeria's oil and has an annual budget of more than half a billion dollars to spend on its three million people. But most of [that money] goes to white elephants like a mansion for the governor and his deputy."{10}

On one of my speaking tours to Nigeria, a local doctor told me how businesses had adapted to the common custom of using bribes. Seems they started budgeting bribe money for their traveling representatives to use. The budget item was called public relations. But a problem arose when employees began to pocket the public relations money instead of using it for bribes.

Financial aid givers—nations, businesses and individuals—would be wise to focus on strict accountability measures and perhaps character education programs for government and business leaders and students in such situations.

In fairness, I should note that this corruption caveat has its critics. Columbia economist Jeffrey Sachs, who also heads an ambitious United Nations anti-poverty effort, feels the corruption charge is too often a simplistic explanation for poverty's root problems. While I feel that corruption is indeed a major concern, I agree with Sachs that poverty is complex and situations differ. Disease plays a significant role. If people are sick with malaria or AIDS, its hard for them to help themselves. Sachs also advocates international commitments to economic assistance, scientific advancement, and justice.{11}

What Can You Do?

Would you believe that by losing weight, you could help the poor overseas? Consider how some upscale U.S. secondary school students made a difference in Zambia.{12}

Student leaders at Wheaton Academy in suburban Chicago had a burden to raise $53,000 from their fellow students for a schoolhouse in Zambia. They found little enthusiasm at first, but then they began to pray regularly. Things took off and they exceeded their goal. Over a three-year stretch, the Christian students raised nearly a quarter of a million dollars for HIV/AIDS relief in Africa. Students encourage each other to forgo movies, Starbucks runs, and even Christmas presents and prom dresses.{13} The campus chaplain estimates that ninety percent of students have participated financially to build the schoolhouse and a medical clinic and to feed a villages children for a year. Students feel a personal connection with their Zambian peers. Some have visited the village they support.

Even adults joined the effort. Now, what they did is great. I bet you're going to like this! It was a weight-loss fundraising campaign, the Zambia Meltdown. Fourteen teachers and administrators lost 460 pounds over 100 days. That brought in $19,000 in pledges for lost weight. And get this: The headmaster and principal each lost 70 pounds.{14}

What can you do to help alleviate poverty? Consider some suggestions:

> *First, pray. God's concern for the poor far exceeds our own. Those Wheaton Academy students saw answers to their prayers. (Probably some faculty spouses did, too!)*
>
> *Second, give. An ancient Jewish proverb says, If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord—and he will repay you!{15} Many fine organizations can use your donations to effectively*

fight poverty. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof says, "Nobody gets more bang for the buck than missionary schools and clinics, and Christian aid groups like World Vision and Samaritan's Purse save lives at bargain-basement prices."{16} I would add World Relief, the Salvation Army and your local church to the list.

Third, go. Maybe you can volunteer with Habitat for Humanity or an international mission group. CNN highlighted Campus Crusade for Christ college students spending Spring Break helping to rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. You even may want to devote your life or career to relief and development. It is a worthy cause. I like what Jesus' mother Mary advised: "Whatever He [Jesus] says to you, do it."{17} And another of those ancient Jewish proverbs says, "Blessed are those who help the poor."{18}

Notes

1. "A Nation Within a Nation," *TIME*, May 17, 1968, 30.
2. Jeffrey D. Sachs, "The End of Poverty," *TIME*, March 14, 2005; http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101050314/.
3. Alvah H. Chapman, Jr., "Community Partnership for Homeless, Inc., A Narrated History," (As recorded in interviews for an oral history project by Dennis P. Kendrick, 2004), 6; http://preview.tinyurl.com/y7m7ey.
4. Ibid., 8.
5. Community Partnership for Homeless, www.cphi.org.
6. Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *Scientific American* 215:4, October 1966, 25.
7. *Christianity Today*, January 30, 1976.
8. World Relief newsletter, May 2006.
9. Tony Carnes, "Can We Defeat Poverty?" *Christianity Today*, 49:10 October 2005, 38ff; http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/010/19.38.html.
10. Lydia Polgreen, "Blood Flows With Oil in Poor Nigerian Villages," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2006;

http://preview.tinyurl.com/vk22t.
11. Sachs, loc. cit.
12. Jeremy Weber, "Raising the Compassion Bar," *Christianity Today* 49:8 August 2005, 50-52; http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/008/26.50.html.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Proverbs 19:17 NLT.
16. Nicholas D. Kristof, "Bush, a Friend of Africa," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2005; http://preview.tinyurl.com/y8wwoj.
17. John 2:5 NASB.
18. Proverbs 14:21 NLT.

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Integrity – A Christian Virtue

Kerby Anderson helps us understand the true meaning and importance of the Christian virtue of integrity. From a biblical worldview perspective, integrity is a critical element of a Christ centered life. Understanding integrity will help us incorporate it in our daily walk with Jesus Christ.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Integrity and the Bible

The subject of this article is the concept of integrity—a character quality that we often talk about but don't see quite as regularly in the lives of public officials or even in the lives of the people we live and work with.

The word *integrity* comes from the same Latin root as *integer* and implies a wholeness of person. Just as we would talk about a whole number, so also we can talk about a whole person who is undivided. A person of integrity is living rightly, not divided, nor being a different person in different circumstances. A person of integrity is the same person in private that he or she is in public.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about those who were "pure in heart" (Matt. 5:8), implying an undividedness in following God's commands. Integrity, therefore, not only implies an undividedness, but a moral purity as well.

The Bible is full of references to integrity, character, and moral purity. Consider just a few Old Testament references to integrity. In 1 Kings 9:4, God instructs Solomon to walk with "integrity of heart and uprightness" as his father did. David says in 1 Chronicles 29:17, "I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity." And in Psalm 78:70-72 we read that "David shepherded them with integrity of heart, with skillful hands."

The book of Proverbs provides an abundance of verses on integrity. Proverbs 10:9 says that, "He who walks in integrity walks securely, But he who perverts his ways will be found out." A person of integrity will have a good reputation and not have to fear that he or she will be exposed or found out. Integrity provides a safe path through life.

Proverbs 11:3 says, "The integrity of the upright will guide them, But the falseness of the treacherous will destroy them."

Proverbs is a book of wisdom. The wise man or woman will live a life of integrity, which is a part of wisdom. Those who follow corruption or falsehood will be destroyed by the decisions and actions of their lives.

Proverbs 20:7 says, "A righteous man who walks in his integrity; How blessed are his sons after him." Integrity leaves a legacy. A righteous man or woman walks in integrity and provides a path for his or her children to follow.

All of these verses imply a sense of duty and a recognition that we must have a level of discernment of God's will in our lives. That would certainly require that people of integrity be students of the Word, and then diligently seek to apply God's Word to their lives. The book of James admonishes us to be "doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (James 1:22). That is my goal in this article as we talk about integrity.

Corruption

As we examine integrity, I would like to talk about its opposite: corruption. We claim to be a nation that demands integrity, but do we really? We say we want politicians to be honest, but really don't expect them to be; perhaps because often we aren't as honest as we should be. We say that we are a nation of laws, but often we break some of those same laws—like speed limits and jaywalking— and try to justify our actions.

A powerful illustration can be found in the book, *The Day America Told the Truth,* by James Patterson and Peter Kim.{1} Using a survey technique that guaranteed the privacy and anonymity of the respondents, they were able to document what Americans really believe and do. The results were startling.

First, they found there was no moral authority in America. "Americans are making up their own moral codes. Only 13

percent of us believe in all the Ten Commandments. Forty percent of us believe in five of the Ten Commandments. We choose which laws of God we believe in. There is absolutely no moral consensus in this country as there was in the 1950s, when all our institutions commanded more respect."

Second, they found Americans are not honest. "Lying has become an integral part of American culture, a trait of the American character. We lie and don't even think about it. We lie for no reason." The authors estimate that 91 percent of us lie regularly.

Third, marriage and family are no longer sacred institutions. "While we still marry, we have lost faith in the institution of marriage. A third of married men and women confessed to us that they've had at least one affair. Thirty percent aren't really sure that they still love their spouse."

Fourth, they found that the "Protestant [work] ethic is long gone from today's American workplace. Workers around America frankly admit that they spend more than 20 percent (7 hours a week) of their time at work totally goofing off. That amounts to a four-day work week across the nation."

The authors conclude by suggesting that we have a new set of commandments for America:

- I don't see the point in observing the Sabbath (77 percent).
- I will steal from those who won't really miss it (74 percent).
- I will lie when it suits me, so long as it doesn't cause any real damage (64 percent).
- I will cheat on my spouse; after all, given the chance, he or she will do the same (53 percent).
- I will procrastinate at work and do absolutely nothing about one full day in every five (50 percent).

We may say that we are a nation that wants integrity, but

apparently a majority of us lack it in our own personal lives.

The Traits of Integrity

Honesty

I would now like to turn our focus toward four key traits found in a person of integrity. One of those traits is honesty.

We talked about some of the findings from the book *The Day America Told the Truth*. The authors found that nearly everyone in America lies and does so on a fairly regular basis. Truth telling apparently is no longer a virtue people try to adopt for their lives. We may say we want people to tell the truth, but we don't do it ourselves.

That is the problem with corruption; it is corrosive. We believe we can be dishonest just a little bit. We say we want people to be honest, but then we cheat on our taxes. We say we want people to obey the laws, but then we go "just a little" over the speed limit. We want to be honest just enough to ease our conscience.

It's a little like the story of the man who sent a letter to the Internal Revenue Service. He said, "I cheated on my income taxes, and felt so bad that I couldn't sleep. Enclosed find a check for $150. And if I still can't sleep I'll send the rest of what I owe."

Many of us can relate to that man. We want to be honest, but sometimes we find it easier to be dishonest. So we try to find a way to compromise our values so that a little bit of lying doesn't bother our conscience.

Trustworthiness

Another characteristic of a person of integrity is trustworthiness. A person of integrity is unimpeachable. He or

she stands by principles no matter what the consequences. A person of integrity realizes there are moral absolutes even in a world of relative values.

In Tom Clancy's novel, *Clear and Present Danger,* Jack Ryan is about the only noble character in the book. As he begins to uncover this clandestine government plot, he is confronted by the antagonist who makes fun of Jack Ryan's principles. He says, "You're a boy scout, Jack. Don't you get it? It's all grey. It's all grey."

I wonder how often people of integrity hear a similar statement in corporate board rooms or the halls of government. It's all grey. There are no absolute right and wrong values. It's all relative.

A person of integrity knows that it isn't all grey. There are principles worth standing by and promoting. There are values that should govern our lives. We have a responsibility to follow God's law rather than the crowd.

When the book of Proverbs talks of the "integrity of the upright" it implies that we adhere to God's will and God's laws. We have a duty to obey God's absolute commands in our lives and become men and women of integrity.

"Private" Life

There is a popular book on the market entitled, *Who You Are When Nobody's Looking*. Who are you when nobody's looking? Will I see the same person that I see when you are in a group of people? Do you do the right thing no matter what the circumstances?

There was a newspaper story years ago about a man in Long Beach who went into a KFC to get some chicken for himself and the young lady with him. She waited in the car while he went in to pick up the chicken. Inadvertently the manager of the store handed the guy the box in which he had placed the

financial proceeds of the day instead of the box of chicken. You see, he was going to make a deposit and had camouflaged it by putting the money in a fried chicken box.

The fellow took his box, went back to the car, and the two of them drove away. When they got to the park and opened the box, they discovered they had a box full of money. Now that was a very vulnerable moment for the average individual. However, realizing the mistake, he got back into the car and returned to the place and gave the money back to the manager. Well, the manager was elated! He was so pleased that he told the young man, "Stick around, I want to call the newspaper and have them take your picture. You're the most honest guy in town.

"Oh, no, don't do that!" said the fellow.

"Why not?" asked the manager.

"Well," he said, "you see, I'm married, and the woman I'm with is not my wife."{2}

Apparently he had not considered the consequences of his actions. Even when he was doing something right, it turned out he was also doing something wrong. A person of integrity is integrated and authentic. There is no duplicity of attitudes and actions.

When the apostle Paul lists the qualifications for an elder in the church, he says "he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:7). This is not only a desirable quality for church elders, it is a quality we should all aspire to. Christians should be "above reproach" in their public testimony before the watching world.

In the next section we will talk more about the importance of a public testimony of integrity and conclude our study.

Public Testimony

I would like to conclude our discussion by addressing the importance of integrity in our daily lives.

It's been said that *we* may be the only Bible some people ever read. In other words, people around us often judge the truthfulness of Christianity by its affect in our lives. If they see us as hypocrites, they may not go any further in their investigation of the gospel.

Every day we rub shoulders with people who are watching us. Your life will demonstrate to them whether Christianity is true or false. They make value judgements about you by your attitudes and actions. Have we made the right choice?

After his Sunday messages, the pastor of a church in London got on the trolley Monday morning to return to his study downtown. He paid his fare, and the trolley driver gave him too much change. The pastor sat down and fumbled the change and looked it over, counted it eight or ten times. And, you know the rationalization, "It's wonderful how God provides." He realized he was tight that week and this was just about what he would need to break even, at least enough for his lunch. He wrestled with himself all the way down that old trolley trail that led to his office. Finally, he came to the stop and got up, and he couldn't live with himself. He walked up to the trolley driver, and said, "Here. You gave me too much change. You made a mistake." The driver said, "No, it was no mistake. You see, I was in your church last night when you spoke on honesty, and I thought I would put you to the test."{3}

Fortunately the pastor passed the test. Do you pass the test when unbelievers look at you and your life and wonder if the gospel is true? It's a convicting question. When we live lives of integrity, opportunities for evangelism and ministry surface. When we don't, those opportunities dry up.

I have been encouraging you to develop a life of integrity. In some respects, it's a life-long process. But we have to begin somewhere. Our lives are the collection of choices we have made in the past¾ both good choices and bad choices. Perhaps you have seen the poem:

> Sow a thought, reap an act.
> Sow an act, reap a habit.
> Sow a habit, reap a character.
> Sow a character, reap a destiny.

I would encourage you to begin to focus on the verses and biblical principles delineated here. If you want to be a person of integrity, it won't happen overnight. But if you don't make a deliberate plan to be a person of integrity, it will never happen at all.

Notes

James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991).
Dallas Times Herald, 23 Sept. 1966.
Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations* (Assurance Publishers, 1990).

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