

On poverty



I'd rather not "look this issue in the eye". It's just so uncomfortable. Poverty is a grinding, merciless overwhelming enemy.

From a distance it's not so bad. It's remarkable after all just how much happiness people can find even in the middle of severe poverty.

I grew up in the middle of a Mennonite farming community. Poverty? My only recollection of it was that mom and dad insisted we not put too much butter on our bread! It's not that we were poor, but they were remembering the Great depression. Just words to me.

My first jolt from this ignorant bliss happened in Chicago. Heather and I were in training with Literature Crusades [now International Teams] for ministry in Latin America. We were sent to do door to door work in the south side of the city. We met a man named Jim. He's probably dead by now. He was unmistakably poor. And he made an impression on me I never forgot.

South America was a real eye opener in terms of poverty. It seemed to be everywhere! We got to know people personally who worked so hard, for so little and somehow – pressed on. I couldn't help but think, "if I weren't a Christian and were in their shoes, I could easily become a violent man."

Here in Canada we have poverty also. It isn't the same, but it's real. Broken families, addictions, rebellion, ignorance, lost health, lost jobs or businesses all contribute to poverty in our land of wealth and plenty. And, something more: some are born with abilities and opportunities that just aren't there for others.

What can be done about the curse of poverty? Is there a way to make it go away? Solomon said it well, "the things that are crooked are more than can be straightened."

But where does responsibility lie? Without question, those who have not – are responsible for themselves. And those who have – are responsible for those who have not. I don't believe anyone calling themselves a Christian can shrink from this unblinking truth.

Both individuals and churches must look poverty in the eye. We may not be able to straighten all that is crooked, but neither may we simply turn away.

Every individual or church that names the name of Christ "and is among the haves" [he who has ears let him hear] ought to do three things. They should:

1. Find a way to give to those in great poverty in another country.
2. Find a way to give to those we know personally who are in need, without demeaning them.
3. Find a way to encourage our governments to protect and be generous to those who are in need.

These realities must show in our personal and church budgets.

How much should we give? Enough so that we will not be ashamed when we meet the One who said, "from those to whom much is given much will be required" and the day is coming when the "first will be last, and the last will be first."

Uncomfortable, isn't it?

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Gord
Martin