

Helping without Hurting: Dealing with Poverty in an Urban Context

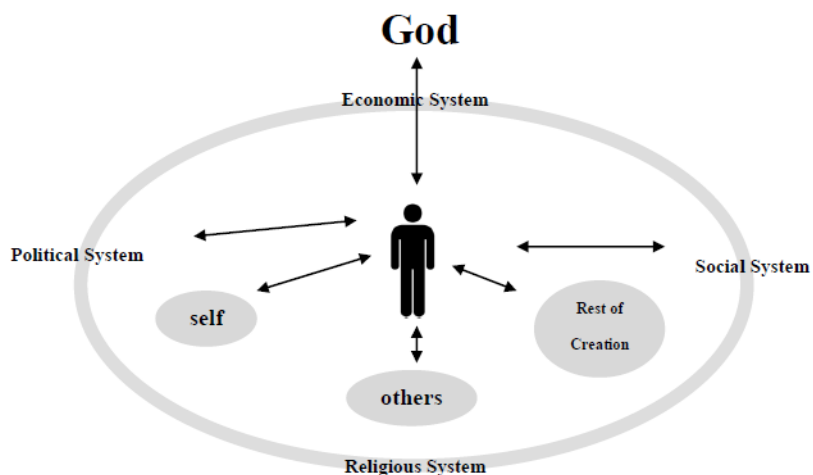
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Grace Baptist Church of Hamtramck is located in the ethnically diverse community of Hamtramck, Michigan. A city within the city of Detroit Hamtramck is greatly influenced by its much larger neighbor which is over 81% African-American. The plight of the black community in urban America has been well documented. Sadly, disproportional poverty is the norm. The purpose of this workshop is to look at the issue of poverty in general, the black community specifically, and how we as individuals and the church should relate to poverty.

Defining Poverty and Its Cause

What is poverty? At a very basic level poverty is a lack or scarceness of anything. Most of us, when we think of poverty, relate the scarceness or lack to material possessions as does Webster in its first entry: the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions. For most Americans, the word *poverty* suggests destitution: an inability to provide a family with nutritious food, clothing, and reasonable shelter.

Corbett and Fikkert, in their work, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor and Yourself*, define poverty in terms of relationships. Poverty is the result of broken relationships. Understanding poverty in this way will help to outline real solutions to the problem, so let's take a minute and look at this concept.



Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, p.27.

The above diagram depicts the relationships that exist for any human being. Obviously the most important relationship is the one with God; however, for a person to honor God the other relationships—self, others and the rest of creation—must be approached in a godly manner as well. The other relationships that must be given consideration involve systems, including political, economic, social, and religious. The purpose of this workshop is not to give a detailed look at this particular model of understanding poverty, rather to look at the root causes of poverty, so that a proper understanding of how to handle poverty, specifically material poverty, can be grasped. A brief look at these relationships reveals the following:

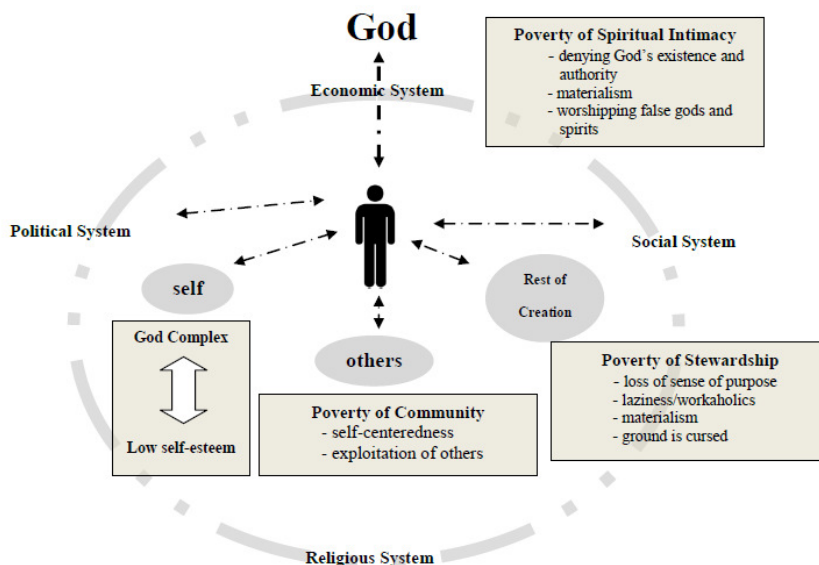
- Relationship with God:** This is the principal relationship upon which all other relationships are founded and from which all other relationships flow. Remember Paul's words to the church at Colossae, "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether 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" (Colossians 1:16-17; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:31). Humans must exist with the perspective that all things exist for God (in Colossians the Son) to glorify God, and anything less results in dysfunction or as we shall see later, poverty.
- Relationship with Self:** People have been created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and must exist in light of that calling. Our function is to reflect God's glory to the rest of creation.

- **Relationship with Others:** God’s command upon those created in His image is to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). What we do affects others and how we treat others affects our primary relationship with God.
- **Relationship with the Rest of Creation:** Genesis 1:28-30 commands us to rule over and subdue the earth. We have been given a stewardship trust from God; therefore, we must interact with the rest of creation (animals and environment) in a way that honors the Creator.
- **Systems:** God has ordained various systems (political, economic, social, and religious) that are affected by our actions; likewise, the systems around us affect how we function.

At the end of the creation week God noted that everything He had created was very, very good or perfect (Genesis 1:31). We are together today in this conference because something happened, something bad—the fall (Genesis 3). The fall changed everything. Sin and death entered into the world affecting all of the relationships ordained by God. The capacity for God’s creation to properly glorify Him had been grossly distorted. Adam and Eve’s relationships were now dysfunctional –

- **God** – separation; loss of relationship as intimacy was replaced by fear
- **Self** – shame
- **Others** – Adam blamed Eve for the sin
- **Creation** – ground cursed; pain in childbearing
- **Systems** – e.g. throughout history governments (headed by sinners) have manipulated, oppressed, and killed for the sake of existence

Note the following diagram which depicts the brokenness of the relationships which resulted from the fall.



Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, p.27.

As you can see from the diagram, Corbett and Fikkert relate the cause of poverty to brokenness; specifically, “poverty is rooted in the brokenness of the foundational relationships” (p. 62). According to this definition we are all impoverished. We have all been affected by the fall. There is poverty with respect to God, self, others, creation and systems. **Material poverty** is related to all of these relationships and is caused by the same brokenness. **Material poverty defined is simply a lack of the necessary resources (food, clothing and shelter) needed to sustain life.**

A Hurting Community

As was stated at the beginning, Grace Baptist Church has a strong African-American influence. Our outreach into the community is constantly being affected by poverty in the black community. As such, the discussion will turn briefly to the issue of material poverty in the African-American community prior to addressing solutions to material poverty in general.

Black poverty is a complex issue and is as old as African American history in the United States. It is far beyond the scope of this discussion to address the many causes of poverty. The fact of the matter is that it exists disproportionately in the black community. Historically, African Americans as a whole have always lagged behind other ethnicities with respect to income.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 27.4 percent of blacks are living below the poverty line in our nation (the city of Detroit is a staggering 36.4 percent). A family is counted as poor if its pretax money income is below the poverty threshold. Money income does not include

noncash benefits such as public housing, Medicaid, employer-provided health insurance and food stamps.

2010 Poverty Thresholds, Selected Family Types		
Single Individual	Under 65 Years	\$ 11,344
	65 Years & Older	\$ 10,458
Single Parent	One child	\$ 15,030
	Two children	\$ 17,568
Two Adults	No Children	\$ 14,602
	One Child	\$ 17,552
	Two Children	\$ 22,113
	Three Children	\$ 26,023
U.S. Bureau of the Census, Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010, Report P60, n. 238, p. 61		

Family of 4 Poverty Threshold per U.S. Government = \$22,113	
Median Household Income in Michigan	\$ 48,435
Median White Household Income Hamtramck	\$ 23,520
Median Black Household Income Hamtramck	\$ 10,849

The numbers do not lie. Material poverty is rampant in the black community, especially in the inner city. The issue of material poverty, however, goes far beyond the lack of material resources. One of the most devastating results of material poverty is a sense of being trapped. In the words of President Johnson, “[material poverty] is a world of decay, ringed by an invisible wall... [where] escape is arduous and uncertain.” In other words, the materially poor feel trapped and in bondage to their situation.

In their work, *When Helping Hurts*, Corbett and Fikkert argue that “the material 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”(70-71). No matter how hard they try the impoverished cannot seem to break free. The struggle goes on until they grow tired of it and accept impoverished entanglement as the status quo—hopelessness wins.

God Cares for the Poor

“The poor you will always have with you.” Mark 14:7 NIV

“If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.”

Proverbs 23:13 NIV

God cares for the poor.

When God established His nation, Israel, He made it clear that the poor were to be cared for; in fact, He went so far as to say, “there should be no poor among you [because of the richness of the land]...if there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted... There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.” (Deuteronomy 15:4, 7, 11). In addition to the book of Deuteronomy, the books of Exodus and Leviticus clearly identify God’s concern for the poor and His desire that we care for them. In Proverbs alone there are thirty-six references to the *poor* or *poverty*. In Isaiah God’s indictment against the children of Israel is that they have turned a blind eye to the poor (Isaiah 58). It should be noted that the weight of Scripture in the OT addresses the nation of Israel caring for the poor “among them.” Even references to aliens, those not ethnically Jews, referred to those aliens who decided to live “among them.”

With respect to the NT it is clear that Jesus (still operating under the OT economy) did not shut his ears to the cry of the poor. Clearly His primary concern was to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom calling His listeners to repentance; however, His ministry did address caring for the material needs of the poor. When Jesus interacted with the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-21) His command for the ruler to sell his possession and give to the poor, while a secondary issue, still witnesses to Christ’s awareness of the need. When the woman anointed Jesus’ feet with perfume Judas (albeit wrongly motivated) was indignant that the perfume had not been sold with the proceeds going to the poor. Again, the poor are not the point here, but the issue is still being addressed (John 12:1-8).

What about the early church? In Acts 2:45 it appears as though the early church quickly responded to the impoverished among them by selling their possessions and utilizing the funds for necessities. Likewise in Acts 4:34-35 the practice continued so that there were no needy persons “among them.” Acts 6 describes a whole new ministry, that of deacons, which revolved around meeting the temporal needs of the poor.

As Paul traveled on his missionary journey he was encouraged to by the church leaders in Jerusalem to “continue to remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10). James, not one to mince words, equates turning a deaf ear to the poor with faithlessness—

“¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.”

Again, James’ admonition is to the church in dealing with those in the church, again in a sense “among them.”

In summary, God clearly has a heart for the poor. He has commanded those with an abundance to care for the needs of the poor. Furthermore, it appears that the primary sphere within which this care occurs is within the God’s established body of people. In the OT that referred to the nation of Israel and now it refers to the church (I am not confusing the two, just making an observation). This is why the concept of “among them” was highlighted during the discussion.

Should the Church Help the Poor?

Should the church help the poor? Does the church have a role to play with respect to caring for the needs of the poor in general? This is a discussion about which many good men disagree. There is no clear mandate for the church to provide for the needs of the poor in general. The command given to the church is to fulfill the Great Commission. This includes making disciples, seeing them baptized (i.e. formation of the church), and teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded. The pattern of the early church was that the body of Christ, the local church, took care of those “among them” who were struggling with material poverty. James 2 leaves little room for discussion concerning the issue. In answer to the first question, “Yes, the church must help the poor among them.”

The question still remains, “How do we relate to those who are not a part of the body of Christ?” It seems as though Paul leaves the door cracked open a little as he reminds Timothy, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10). In this admonition Paul makes it clear that the church comes first, but then “as we have opportunity,” not to the neglect of Great Commission ministry, we “do good to all people.”

Hope for the Poor

Is the situation for impoverished hopeless? Thankfully the answer is an emphatic, “No!” Hope for a real and lasting solution is not in programs that address issues of food, clothing, and shelter. Hope for the hurting no matter where they live involves addressing the brokenness of *the* foundational relationship in their lives, their relationship with God. The only hope for a real and lasting solution is found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of reconciliation.

At its core reconciliation means to restore to friendship, fellowship or harmony. It is only as we reconcile the broken relationships related to God, self, others and creation that we find

hope. Reconciliation is a ministry that all believers have been given. Consider the words of Paul to the church at Corinth,

*“¹⁸All this is from God, who **reconciled** us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of **reconciliation**: ¹⁹that God was **reconciling** the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be **reconciled** to God. ²¹God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:18-21)*

In this passage Paul highlights one aspect of the atonement (Christ’s death for our sins), reconciliation. Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that they have been given a ministry by God as His ambassador. It is important to note that it is God who does the reconciling (vv. 18-19), however we have been made ambassadors of reconciliation (vv. 18, 20) to carry the message of reconciliation (v. 19). This is only possible as we preach the Gospel (including the vicarious, substitutionary death of Jesus Christ for sinners, v. 21) calling men, women, and children to repent and be reconciled to God. Reconciliation with God is primary. The other three relationships (others, self and creation) cannot be dealt with unless the sinner has been reconciled to God. This reconciliation is the first step to dealing with poverty on any level.

The beauty of the Gospel of reconciliation is that it can and does cross all geographical, ethnic, linguistic and cultural barriers. The Gospel of reconciliation is the cure, it is the hope for the impoverished all over the world whether in the city or in the country. The Gospel is the real and lasting answer.

How Does the Church Help without Hurting?

Once a person’s relationship with God has been reconciled it is possible for them to understand how the other foundational relationships in their life have been affected, and how they can move forward to begin reconciliation in each area. The discipleship process involves each of these critical areas. Let’s briefly look at how each of the foundational relationship areas relate to poverty.

- **God** - The person who has been reconciled to God realizes that they must glorify God by submitting to His Word
 - Work is a gift from God to provide for my family and me (Genesis 2; Exodus 20:9; 2 Corinthians 3:10)
- **Self** - The person who has been reconciled to God realizes that they have been created in the image of God and that their body a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).

- Alcohol and drug abuse lead to poverty (Proverbs 21:17; 23:21)
- **Others** – The person who has been reconciled to God realizes that they must love their family by working hard to provide for their family (1 Timothy 5:8)
- **Creation** – The person who has been reconciled to God realizes that work will not always be easy, but that there must be diligence (Proverbs 10:4).
- **Systems** – The person who has been reconciled to God realizes that they must submit to authority so that they can keep a job (1 Peter 2:13, 18).

Working through the four foundational areas above it should be noticed that the issues of work, or lack thereof, and substance abuse were addressed. These are two issues that present themselves often in urban ministry. Most of those who are poor suffer because of unbiblical choices they have made in life. Sometimes they suffer because of choices others have made. In either case the causes are generally complex and so the solutions are as a rule complex as well.

As we seek to help the poor in our body and in our community we want to make sure that we do so without fostering unbiblical behavior or codependency. Our goal is to help others without hurting them. Here is some helpful guidelines we have developed.

1. Keep the gospel and the concept of reconciliation at the forefront. If you lack the confidence that the one in need of assistance has not reconciled with God, then be very careful because you may perpetuate and exacerbate brokenness.
2. Pray that your love will abound in knowledge, depth of insight, and discernment (Philippians 1:9)
3. Do not eliminate faith and prayer by trying to play God.
4. Recognize that you cannot possibly help every person who comes to you in need of physical assistance.
5. Validate need. Trust, but verify. Ask questions. Is this really a crisis? To what degree is the individual personally responsible for the crisis? Can the person help himself (i.e. is he working or doing his very best to find work)? To what extent has the person already been receiving relief? Is this going to be an ongoing need? Are their children involved?
6. Determine whether the situation at hand requires relief or rehabilitation. **Relief** is defined as urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis. You are doing what the one in need cannot possibly do for themselves. **Rehabilitation** engages the one in need to participate in material poverty alleviation (i.e. getting a job, dealing with harmful habits, relationships)
7. Develop a policy for your local assembly concerning how you are going to address material poverty. Everyone needs to be on the same page.

8. Put together relief packages containing basic food stuffs that will provide adequate nutrition. Keep these on hand so that when the need arises you are not running to the corner store spending top dollar on a can of tuna!
9. Keep a list of local agencies: housing shelters, food pantries, medical clinics, etc., so that you can direct those in need if helping them is beyond what you can do.
10. Never give out cash...never!

Kristin is the wife of an urban church planter (Jay), the mother of six, and she plays an active role in the ministry of Grace Baptist Church in Hamtramck, Michigan, a city within Detroit. Since 2006 Kristin has been balancing the responsibilities of supporting her husband, nurturing her children, and working with ladies in the community by teaching them the Gospel of Jesus Christ and what it means to follow Christ.