

Loving the Poor without Hating the Wealthy

Author: Gregg Okesson

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The title to this blog purposes to grab one's attention. However, it will likely have another effect, that of subtly communicating something that I don't want to intimate. Perhaps some might read this and think, "Oh, this guy just wants to have his cake and eat it too?". Or more directly, "How nice of you to defend the cause of the unjust, but you can't accomplish it without going directly to the source of the problem: the wealthy, privileged, and the powerful."

Yes, I admit the inherent tension connected to the title, and perhaps that strengthens my reason for using it. Some of the other bloggers in this "Poverty and Wealth" section have done well to highlight the importance of the relationship between the two. In other words, you can't talk about the plight of the poor without addressing the inequity of the rich or something like that. I want to build upon a similar foundation but take it in a different direction.

Firstly, all of our campaigns against poverty posit a certain amount of power. When we raise our voices, compose songs, submit political legislation, write blogs, and sometimes shake our fists in the air for the purposes of "eradicating poverty" or fighting against global injustices, we are drawing upon (and exercising) certain degrees of power. My problem, however, is not with using power (a topic desperately in need of redemption from the villainous ways it is thought about and used) but that these measures tend to gravitate toward a singular type of power (i.e. coercive) and have the tendency of perpetuating conflict between the rich and the poor.

This kind of clash of powers tends to "tear down rather than build up" (here I am reversing the Apostle Paul's words describing the kind of authority given to him by God; c.f. 2 Cor 10:8; 13:10). Bitterness mounts. Guilt becomes a weapon of mass destruction. Self-righteousness yields its ugly face. Hatred spills over against the wealthy.

Let me describe what I mean by way of a literary example. In Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the featured character, Anna, finds herself inwardly struggling with a philanthropic lady of high society who spends her days fighting against various public problems. Anna considers this lady and ponders these thoughts: "The whole thing is really absurd: her whole life is devoted to charitable affairs, she is a Christian, and yet she is always angry and she always has enemies, and all enemies in the name of Christianity and charity."

I hope you see my point. The wrongful use of power, even in the name of Christian virtue, tends to wreak damage: whether outwardly through direct confrontation, name calling, and other means of opposition which damage the interconnectedness of the image of God in humanity; or inwardly, by means of hateful thoughts, self-righteousness, or slander: thus, injuring the self.

I fear that some of our anti-poverty efforts, though well-intentioned, has the counter-effect of creating a highly polemical conflict with the wealthy. This does more than breed antagonism, but it also works deeper into the identity of Christian activists: affecting selfhood. Let me quote from one of my favorite authors:

"When identity is forged primarily through the negative process of the rejection of the beliefs and practices of others, violence seems unavoidable, especially in situations of conflict. We have to push others away from ourselves and keep them at a distance, and we have to close ourselves off from others to keep ourselves pure of their taint. The violence of pushing and keeping away can express itself in subdued resentment, or it can break out in aggressive and destructive behavior." (Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflection on the Relations between Church and Culture in 1 Peter", *Ex Auditu*, 10 (1994), p. 12)

We need to love the poor by loving the rich. Perhaps this sounds sanctimonious, or overly simplistic. I do not want to suggest that this kind of love assumes a weak posture, as if accepting everything that happens in our world without opposing anything. Love does not mean the absence of conflict; or the closing of our eyes/mind to sin, injustice, and mistreatment. Jesus cautioned against the "yeast of the Pharisees" and actively confronted socio-political forms of sin that manifested within first-century Palestine. Yet He also "loved" the rich young ruler, ate with tax collectors and other "sinners," and praised the faith of a centurion.

Rather than shunning power, we need to nurture it and especially the kind of love manifested in the Incarnation.

Jesus Christ walks into the world wielding a different kind of power: one that is creational, life-giving, unifying, and like the Apostle Paul's injunction: "for building you up, not tearing you down." Yes, one cannot look at the plight of the poor without considering how the wealthy relate to the possible causes, and solutions. But I also hope we can mount our campaigns with the ethics of Jesus' power. The wealthy need Gospel love as much as the poor and both need each other.