



UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

LESSON SIX: "WHAT CAN ONE PERSON DO ABOUT POVERTY?"

STORY FOR THE DAY

One Sunday before church, a group of church members were standing in the hallway discussing their week. Jill told the group she took her children to the amusement park.

"We had a blast. I think we rode the Giant three times. Sammy got so sick. What a mess that was to clean up!"

Mark described a new project he was designing at his firm. "It's going to be a new art center down on 5th and Main, you know in that old factory that's been closed for years."

Susan discussed a story she had heard on the news. "They were talking about the millions of Americans living in poverty in the United States. I mean, I know there are poor people here, but usually when I think of poverty, I think of Africa or somewhere like that. They were talking about some bill that the government wants to pass that will make it harder for people to access help. I feel sorry for them. I mean I wish I could do something to help."

"We all do," Mark replied, "but poverty is so big, what can one person do?"

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

Yes, poverty is a big, worldwide problem, but it isn't so big that one person can't make a difference. Another way to look at poverty is to realize it is as big as one person's life. Start small (working with one person, family, organization, ministry, or agency) and work toward something bigger. Doing one thing that impacts one life positively is a big deal!

Caring emotionally and physically about someone who is experiencing poverty also will enrich you. Too often we think of ourselves as the "hero" rushing in to "do good" for some person who needs our help. What we may fail to realize is that we have as much or more to gain than the recipient could ever receive from us. Certainly when we open our hearts to act compassionately, we open our spirits to allow God to strengthen and instruct our faith. In this choice to give of ourselves, out of gratitude for what God has given us, God can help "grow us up" into more mature and Christ-like followers of Jesus' way.

This lesson provides practical actions that a person can take to combat poverty. The actions are organized from smaller to larger acts. You don't need to jump in trying to rid the world of poverty single-handedly. Instead, find something small you can do as a beginning point, or if you're already involved, find a way to expand what you are already doing.

»» MAKING IT REAL

1. **Get to know someone living in poverty.** How do you do that? Pay attention when you hear prayer requests at church or at the grocery store when you see someone who seems to need help. Is there a single mother who looks overwhelmed by grocery shopping and watching her children at the same time? When someone asks for money for food, offer to take that person to a restaurant and buy them a meal. Over the meal spend time in conversation trying to get to know the person.

2. **Volunteer** at a local organization, agency, or ministry that works with people living in poverty. Many times these groups are underfunded and understaffed. Volunteering in these organizations will give you the opportunity to begin to know and relate to individuals with whom you work.

3. **Educate yourself.** There are several good resources to learn more about the personal and societal causes of poverty. Ask your church to hold a special topics class to further educate your congregation about issues related to poverty.

4. **Build partnerships.** Building partnerships among churches, city and county agencies, schools and non-profit organizations is a great way to build cohesion in a community. It reminds us that no one can solve a societal problem alone, but that the solution doesn't seem so big and overwhelming if we come together and join resources.

5. **Advocacy.** The government, whether local, state, or federal, can seem like a big machine that one person cannot impact, but this isn't true. A single voice, joined by other individual voices, can change policies for the better. This is the essence of advocacy, i.e., speaking up for those whose voices are never heard. Calling or writing a letter to our local government, state representative, or congressional representative is a great way to be a voice for those living in poverty. Educating the government about people living in poverty is part of our right as American citizens. It is our right to call on the government to care for those who are marginalized in our society. It is our right to speak out against policies and actions of the government that we believe are unfair or harmful to people living in poverty.

CLASS DISCUSSION

1. Which idea above appeals to you and your personality? Which idea seems scary?
2. What gifts do you already have that can be used to make a small difference? What strengths or gifts does your family have? What about your Sunday School class? The members of your church?
3. Who are your state and local representatives? How can you communicate with them? Is there an issue in your town or community that you think they should know about?
4. What programs are already in place within your community to help those experiencing poverty? What are some ways that you or your church can partner with these organizations?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Spend time reflecting on the following passage of poetry:

*"...And right action is freedom
From past and future also
For most of us this is the aim
Never here to be realized;
Who are only undefeated
Because we have gone on trying"*

Source: T.S. Elliot, "The Dry Salvages"

What does it mean in your life to go on trying? How can you use your one life to make a difference in another life?

BENEDICTION

"That's what happens when you get involved. You learn people's names, and that makes all the difference. Poverty is no longer just a social or economic problem when you have a personal friend who is poor. Gang violence is not just a law-enforcement issue when you've spent time listening to a kid tell you why he has taken to the streets. "Welfare Mother" is no longer a term of derision when you've gone over the budget of a woman who is trying to raise her kids on \$410 a month. Personal involvement seems to defy the easy answers while at the same time opens up the possibilities of real solutions"

Source: Jim Wallis, *Faith Works* (p. 31)

CALL TO BE ATTENTIVE

Is there an issue or a cause that is important to you? Are you concerned about the well-being of women and children? The homeless? The hungry? What has caught your attention about this issue? Is there a small step that you can make toward alleviating this need? Are you willing to pray about it?



 **WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

But I'm here to help YOU!

In what ways might you change after getting to know someone who lives in poverty? What kinds of things might that person be able to give you? Would you be willing to receive them?