



UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

LESSON FIVE: "SHE CAN AFFORD THAT AND SHE'S ON WELFARE?"

STORY FOR THE DAY

Tracy volunteers weekly in a free food kitchen in an inner-city neighborhood. Most of the people who come through the line are day laborers, single mothers with their children, the elderly and some who have mental or physical disabilities. All are either living in poverty or are close to it. One day, as Tracy ladled a spoon of spaghetti and meat sauce onto a plate, she noticed that the person across the counter from her was wearing a Bluetooth earpiece phone, at that time one of the newer technological advances available. Tracy turned to the volunteer beside her and quietly pointed it out to him, "Are you kidding me? She can afford THAT and she's here getting free food?"

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

Americans like things. New things. Big things. Expensive things. Shiny things. Fun things. Things, things, things. Our things sometime define us. Who is Susie Smith? "You know, she's the girl with..." We let our things become so much a part of who we are that they no longer seem like luxuries to us but necessities. Do you remember when having a telephone, television, computer, or cell phone was considered a luxury? No longer.

This lesson explores the difference between relative and absolute poverty. It also explores why, for people living in poverty, items that were once seen as luxuries are now seen as necessities.

RELATIVE VS. ABSOLUTE POVERTY

Compared to poor people living outside the United States, people living in poverty in America do not seem to have it so bad. Most have apartments, cell phones, televisions with cable, and other "luxuries." However, this does not mean that those living in poverty are not poor or marginalized. When people living in poverty do not have the ability to obtain what are the culturally accepted basics, they are marginalized and it is termed "relative poverty." This is different from "absolute poverty," which is the inability to access the necessities for survival: food, water, clothing, shelter, sanitation, education and health care. Nevertheless, poverty is poverty whether it is relative or absolute. Both types of poverty embody their own struggles, hardships, and physical, emotional, and spiritual damage.

TYPICAL FAMILY SPENDING

Today's society seems to be growing more and more materialistic. There are always new gadgets and fads that advertisers tell us we "must have." It seems like more and more money is spent on such purchases.

That perception, though, is misleading. Typically, families are spending 32 percent less on clothing than they did in the 1970s.* Although we may purchase more clothing, we spend less on it due to overseas manufacturing (globalization) and clothing trends (fewer high-cost items such as suits and leather shoes; more jeans and T-shirts).

Families also are spending less on food (including eating out) – 18 percent less than families of four in the 1970s. The reasons for this are: (1) we eat less meat and more pasta;

*All statistical information is from Warren, E. (2007). *The vanishing middle class*. In S. J. Edwards, M. Crane & A. L. Kalleberg (Eds.), *Ending poverty in America: How to restore the American dream* (pp. 38-52). New York: The New Press.

(2) we shop at discount supercenters; and (3) more efficient agribusiness and food production.

At the same time that consumer spending is down, spending on fixed expenses is rising. Housing prices are 76 percent higher than in the 1970s (adjusting for inflation), cost in health insurance is up 74 percent (which leaves 48 million Americans unable to afford it), transportation costs are up 52 percent, taxes are 25 percent higher for a two person family and credit card fees and interest rates are higher.

Since 1970s ...	
Housing prices	76% higher
Cost of health insurance	74% higher
Transportation costs	52% higher
Taxes	25% higher

REDEFINING LUXURIES

Items that once were considered luxuries now have become necessary to function educationally, socially and economically. So much of what we know about our world and our culture comes to us through television or computers. Without access to these information sources, people living in poverty become more marginalized and isolated. Educational activity increasingly occurs through the computer and Internet; without them, children quickly fall even further behind. A telephone or cell phone (now cell phones are cheaper to purchase than a landline phone) is the connection to jobs, family, and resources. A car is a necessity for most people living in poverty in areas without reliable public transportation.

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Practical use of these items is not the only legitimate reason to own them. When you have had a hard day what do you do to escape and relax? Watch television? Go for a drive? Play video games? Exercise? Go out to eat at a restaurant? Imagine having a hard day every day. How would you cope? For many people who do not live in poverty, what might seem to them like frivolous purchases by the working poor are simply a coping strategy to help escape the hard realities of a hard life. Such short-term escapism to unwind is necessary for good emotional health. All of us need this, so why would we think people living in poverty do not need it? Everyone needs opportunities and access to fun and relaxation. We allow ourselves this opportunity because we see it as a basic human need, therefore, shouldn't we allow it for those living in poverty who already struggle enough to meet their basic needs?

HUMAN DIGNITY AND RESPECT

In such a materialistic society, people are usually identified, at least in part, by what they own. One appears successful if he or she owns a spacious house or a new car. In a way our possessions communicate to our peers, "I can provide for my family," "I am competent" or "I have the ability to own these things." Commendable or not, in some small part we garner our dignity and worth by what we own. Many times people living at or near the poverty line still own a nice car or fancy jewelry or the latest technological gadget. With these possessions, they are communicating clearly that "I can provide" or "I am competent" or "I have power." It becomes a way to say, "Treat me with respect."

» MAKING IT REAL

1. When you think about what 'poverty' looks like, what comes to mind? What are the differences between that picture and the picture of relative poverty that we described into today's lesson?
2. What are some status symbols for the American middle class? What do these symbols say about the person who owns them?
3. Can you name some opportunities in your community for people to enjoy themselves for little or no money? How could your church body help to create these opportunities?
4. Can you name some things aside from the basic necessities (food, water, clothing, shelter) that you "can't live without"? How would life be different without them?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Reflect on your spending habits. What do you spend the most on? Are there items that would be considered luxuries? What if your character and worth were judged based on your spending? How do you feel about that? What does your spending say about you?

BENEDICTION

"This is our great challenge and consolation. Jesus comes to us in the poor, the sick, the dying, the prisoners, the lonely, the disabled, the rejected. There we meet him, and there the door to God's house is opened for us."

Source: Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey, August 4th

CALL TO BE ATTENTIVE

Is there a tired mother in your church who needs a break? An elderly person who needs company? A family member who has too much to handle? Look around this week for ways that you can help people to find room in their lives to escape or unwind.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Dessert, even!

George and Mary walked into the cafe for the first time not knowing what to expect. Newly homeless, they had heard on the streets that the cafe gave free, hot-cooked meals. "I couldn't believe it," Mary recalls. "We were served on china plates, with real silverware, and we were given choices. They even offered us desserts! No place else in town showed us that kind of respect."

Do people who are homeless deserve hot meals, real plates and desserts? Or should they just be grateful for whatever they get?

