

## WHY DEMONIZE THE POOR?

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Thursday, 23 November 2006

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By Jim Jordal

"Poverty is the open-mouthed, relentless hell which yawns beneath civilized society. And it is hell enough."

Henry George, Progress and Poverty, IX

"The poor in Resurrection City have come to Washington to show that the poor in America are sick, dirty, disorganized, and powerless--and they are criticized daily for being sick, dirty, disorganized, and powerless."

Calvin Trillin, "U.S. Journal: Resurrection City," The New Yorker, June 15, 1968, p. 71

What does it mean to "demonize" some person or group? It means to equate them--or their behavior--with evil. It means to blame them for their unfortunate circumstances. It means to judge them solely responsible for whatever is wrong with society. It means to believe that if they would only change their values and behavior things would be all right. It means to separate or isolate them as in "the other side of the tracks" mentality. It means to identify those demonized as "different" in some socially, politically, or economically significant way. And above all, it means to refuse to accept any personal responsibility for whatever problems they or their group exhibit.

The United States has a reputation among so-called "developed" countries for blaming and shaming its poor. Ask your friends why people are poor, or why poverty persists. All too often you'll hear the standard answers: They're lazy. They won't take a job if it demands hard work. They have addictions. They're sexually immoral. They like to be poor. Their families are dysfunctional. They don't value education. In other words, their culture is deficient because it allows or even encourages behaviors that contribute to poverty, and minimizes those behaviors that could lead to increased economic success.

And even if your friends recognize the error implicit in many of these views, you'll probably hear something like "Well, we can't do anything about the poor because, after all, doesn't the Bible say 'The poor you have always with you' "? You thus run head-on into complete denial of any personal responsibility for either the poor or the causes of their poverty.

All these beliefs owe their persistence to small truths greatly magnified into major causes. Yes, some of the poor do exhibit many of these shortcomings. Yes, you can find all these dysfunctions somewhere among the poor. And yes, they do cause some poverty, but not the vast bulk of it.

It's human nature to evade responsibility. In fact, it's so rare for anyone in the public eye to accept personal responsibility for any unfortunate event as to be newsworthy if it happens. We practice deceit in every facet of life. Politicians disclaim responsibility, demonizing the other party for all evil. Teachers blame low grades on students who won't learn. Parents blame children for misbehavior. Police blame criminals for crime. And we all blame someone else for most of our societal problems.

So why demonize the poor? Because it's easy to do; it's convenient; it's emotionally and intellectually satisfying; and besides, they are powerless to resist the lies and half-truths spoken of them.

Demonizing the poor takes many forms and has many faces. Most common is the misperception that the poor are responsible for their own predicament. A corollary would be that if the poor would only stop behaving in such irresponsible manners, they would no longer be poor.

The common view that if the poor would work they wouldn't be poor ignores the reality that only entry-level jobs are available to the poor. These jobs pay so little that a family of four would need three full-time jobs just to rise to a minimum standard of decent food, clothing, and shelter (forget about such frills as health insurance, education, entertainment, travel, transportation, emergencies, and saving for retirement).

In Nicaragua several years ago we heard one native speaker describe his people as potters, painters, musicians, carpenters, bricklayers, clerks, laborers, and truck drivers--who also happen to be poor. Do you get the difference between that view and ours? He saw his people as legitimate, respectable persons who happen to be poor. Their poverty was not their identifying characteristic, as it is in the U.S.

It should be instructive for those of us claiming the Bible as our final authority to consider what it says about the causes of poverty. There are about 2,000 Bible verses relating to poverty in some manner, but I can count only 28 that blame it on faulty personal behavior. So, if most poverty is traceable to something beyond human behavioral frailties, what are the major causes according to Scripture? Literally hundreds of verses trace poverty to haughty, powerful persons using existing social, economic, political, and even religious systems to rob, oppress, enslave, and marginalize the poor. A few verses for your consideration would be Psalm 94:20, Isa. 10:1-2, and Amos 5:11-12. Use your margin references to trace these concepts elsewhere, and you'll see what I mean.