
IS POVERTY NORMAL?

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By Jim Jordal

One of the reasons it's so difficult to eradicate poverty is that most Americans think it's a normal outcome of capitalistic enterprise. They see it as a game with winners and losers in a free market system operating in a political democracy. If you win it's because of your superior intellect, hard work, good timing, perseverance or other fortuitous attributes. And if you lose it's because of your lack of marketable skills and worthy attitudes and behaviors.

Since we all are aware of the vast range of human skills, abilities, and accidents of birth it then follows that the outcomes for some will be less than for others---so poverty becomes normal since somebody has to be at the low end of the curve of distributed human attributes. Poverty is now just another human difference---like height, intelligence, or manual dexterity.

When some situation is considered normal society loses interest in solving it since solutions are viewed as unnecessary or impossible. We can then commiserate over those unfortunate souls having the problem but at the same time studiously ignore it. Often we come to view poverty as "punishment" for bad behavior and as such it becomes both moral and necessary.

But is poverty normal and even necessary to the progress of society? Scholars explain that modern habits of accumulating wealth grew out of the transition from egalitarian hunter-gatherer to stratified farming economies, which made it possible for some to accumulate wealth based on the labor of others and thus to assume a privileged status.

Today in America amassing wealth is considered evidence of superior intellect or inventiveness. It has progressed so rapidly that we now possess the most unequal income and wealth distribution of any developed nation. The social consequences of this imbalance are staggering, yet many upper income persons consider this not only normal, but also beneficial as a sanction against laziness and ineptitude.

One would expect persons and institutions engaged in the pursuit of profit to defend poverty as a necessary outcome of business activity. But why do many religious institutions and their members also defend continued poverty in spite of the thousands of Bible verses leading to an opposite conclusion? Both Moses and Jesus are commonly quoted in defense of poverty. In Deut. 15:11 Moses counsels that his people be generous to the destitute because "the poor will never cease from the land." And Jesus rebuked his disciples when they questioned why a woman anointed him with costly ointment when the money could just as easily been given to the poor, with the comment, "For you have the poor with you always,

but Me you do not have always" (Matt. 26:1—11).

These verses must be taken out of context in order to use them to justify continued poverty. Moses knew that jubilee deliverance and redistribution of wealth would be strenuously resisted by the rich and powerful. Under that scenario, yes, there would always be poverty. Jesus knew the same thing---that his message of jubilee release from oppression would not be heeded so poverty would always be there.

The message taught by Jesus in his every action---including his first sermon---was that he came to deliver people from the social and economic conditions that created poverty. So to claim that he condoned it is to depart seriously from the heart of his message. Yet we continue to do this, whether out of selfishness, ignorance, misunderstanding, or even malice, I don't know.

But condoning poverty does not belong in our ecclesiastical structures, whatever its cause. It must be challenged. You can politely correct this faulty thinking with every opportunity. Be firm, but kind as you point out what Moses and Jesus really said about poverty. You can also use current figures to point out the extreme human costs of poverty today and the many benefits of attempting to change it.