

# Reconsidering the Meaning of Poverty

*Discuss these questions before beginning this week's unit.*

- What is poverty? List the first five to ten words or phrases that come to your mind when you think of poverty.

- List the first five areas (e.g., of your city, community, the world) that come to mind when you think of poverty.

## **What's the Problem?**

The average North American enjoys a standard of living that has been unimaginable for most of human history. Meanwhile, 40 percent of the earth's inhabitants eke out an existence on less than two dollars per day. Indeed, the economic and social disparity between the haves and the have-nots is on the rise both within North America and between North America and much of the Majority World (Africa, Asia, and Latin America).

If you are a North American Christian, the reality of our society's vast wealth presents you with an enormous responsibility, for throughout the Scriptures God's people are commanded to show compassion to the poor. In fact, doing so is simply part of our job description as followers of Jesus Christ (Matthew 25:31–46). While the biblical call to care for the poor transcends time and place, passages such as 1 John 3:17 should weigh particularly heavily on the minds and hearts of North American Christians: "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"

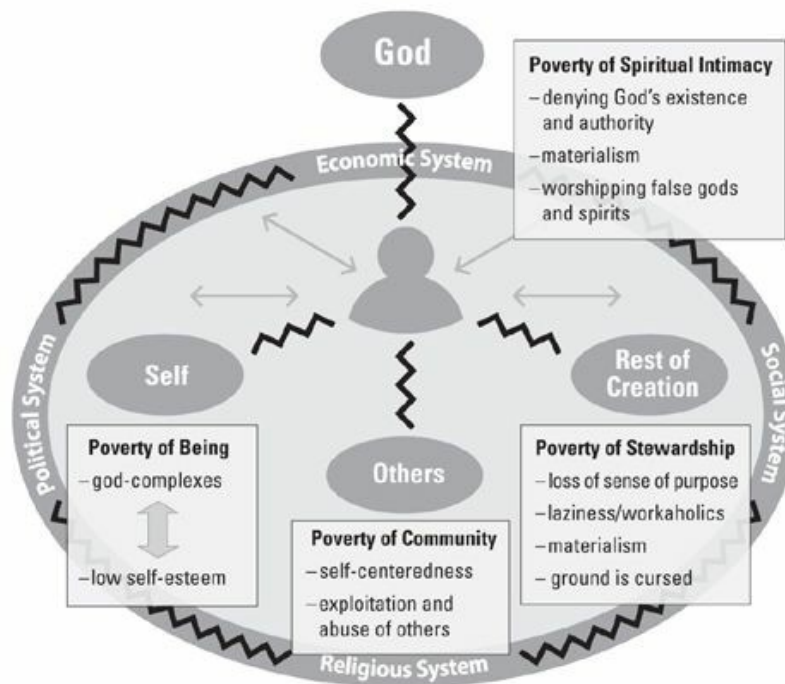
## **WATCH VIDEO**

[www.helpingwithouthurting.org/smallgroup-1](http://www.helpingwithouthurting.org/smallgroup-1) or <https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/Series/855>

## **APPLY**

1. Did the words the materially poor used to describe poverty in the video differ from the words you listed in the preliminary questions? If so, what words and differences did you find most surprising?
2. The brokenness of the four relationships illustrated below can lead to behaviors and circumstances that contribute to poverty.

## THE FOUR BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS



Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

Consider the story of a friend or family member who is poor. Where do you see evidence of each of the four broken relationships in his or her life? Can you see ways that this brokenness has led to his or her poverty?

- Broken Relationship with God:
- Broken Relationship with Self:
- Broken Relationship with Others:
- Broken Relationship with the Rest of Creation:

3. How might thinking about this person's poverty in terms of these broken relationships change the way you interact with him or her? Are there new ways you could show the love and healing work of Christ to this person or family in each of the broken relationships?

Poverty is the result of broken relationships. But as we will explore in the rest of this series, broken relationships can be restored by the work of Christ. He came to make all things new, breaking the hold of sin and death "far as the curse is found." He came to show us that we can have a relationship with our Father, that we have dignity as creatures made in God's image, that we are to love one another in nourishing community, and that we have the privilege of stewarding the rest of creation. The fall has marred what God intended for us at creation, but the work of Christ offers hope that what is broken, both inside of us and around us, will be repaired. His victory over sin and death is certain, and His healing power is our comfort and peace. Let's walk together as we explore what God's reconciling work in this world looks like, and how we can effectively partner with Him in ministering to people who are poor.

## GOING DEEPER (if time in group or on your own during the week)

“Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings.”

—**Bryant Myers**, *Walking with the Poor*

With this definition of poverty and the four broken relationships in mind, read the following story about Mary:

Mary lives in a slum in western Kenya. As a female in a male-dominated society, Mary has been subjected to polygamy, to regular physical and verbal abuse from her husband, and to fewer years of schooling than males. As a result, Mary lacks the confidence to look for a job.

Desperate, Mary decides to be self-employed, but needs a loan to get her business started. Unfortunately, the local loan shark exploits Mary, demanding an interest rate of 300 percent on her loan of twenty-five dollars. Having no other options, Mary borrows from the loan shark and, along with hundreds of others just like her, starts a business of selling homemade charcoal in the local market. The market is glutted with charcoal sellers, which keeps the prices very low. But it never even occurs to Mary to sell something else, because charcoal is the only resource she knows how to access. Frustrated by her entire situation, Mary goes to the traditional healer (shaman) for help. The healer tells Mary that her difficult life is a result of angry ancestral spirits that need to be appeased through buying and sacrificing a bull.

1. Where do you see each of the four broken relationships in Mary’s story, and how does each specifically contribute to her material poverty?

- Broken Relationship with God:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Broken Relationship with Self:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Broken Relationship with Others:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Broken Relationship with the Rest of Creation: