

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

July 25, 2017

In the summer of 2006, my friend, Dewey Fuller, and I spent ten days working with South African church planters in Malawi. We actually worked in that part of the country where David Livingstone had first worked, and we worked with several Malawian pastors, including Cleanly Mwachipiru and Age Bota.



Because the location where we worked was some 80 kilometers from our camp, the South African missionaries allowed us to use their pickup truck to commute back and forth each day. In those days, gasoline was hard to come by in southern Africa, and so the pickup truck had huge dual fuel tanks with which to take advantage of any fuel that became available. On one such occasion, we filled up both tanks, which cost the equivalent of several months' wages for a normal Malawian. Cleanly and Age both stood there literally with jaws dropped when they saw what we were doing.

Later, I asked them what the going wages were in that area, and Age told me that his brother worked on a British sugar cane plantation nearby, and he made the equivalent of \$1.44 PER DAY, which was considered a generous wage. It was now my turn to enter a state of shock.



You may be aware that the United Nations has a number of “Millennium Development Goals”¹ having to do with caring for the human needs of our planet. The good news is that globally, we have made stunning progress in reducing poverty.

The Human Development Index (an important measure of poverty) improved 41% between 1970 and 2010; and one of the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals set in 2000 – to cut in half by 2015 the percentage of people globally living in poverty – was actually achieved five years ahead of schedule.²

But it is still the case today that about 1.2 billion people struggle to survive on \$1.25 per day and another 1.2 billion try to manage on only two dollars per day. We have made astounding progress, but about one-third of our global neighbors still struggle to live on two dollars or less per day.

The picture in the United States is less hopeful. For decades, we, one of the wealthiest nations in the history of the world, have had the highest poverty level of all Western industrialized nations – currently about 13.5% of our population.³ As has been frequently

¹ <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

² The percentage of people living below the international poverty level (\$1.25 per day per person) has plunged by more than 50% since 1990. Central to this progress has been global trade and the widespread embrace of market economies, especially in Asia.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty_in_the_United_States

pointed out, from 1979 to 2007, 63.6% of all income growth in the U.S. went to the top 10%; but in the last few years, over 90% of all growth in income has gone to the top 1%.

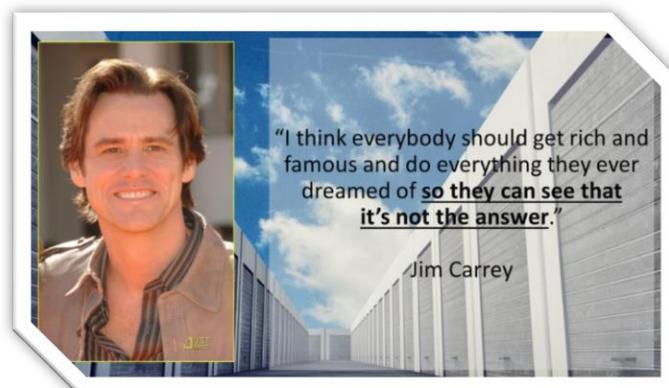
We Americans, and especially those of us who are better off, seem to have been largely transformed into “Homo Economicus”—people who believe the purpose of our lives is to accumulate wealth, often with little or no consideration of our neighbors’ welfare. It was in the mid-60s that the majority of incoming freshmen at U.S. colleges first told surveys that they were more interested in learning how to make money than in learning how to live a meaningful life. Those same persons are now our nation’s policy makers. And “MBA” is now said by some to stand for “Me Before Anyone.”

America’s much-discussed *income* inequality is now at levels last seen just before the Great Depression, but the inequality of accumulated *wealth* is even worse. A recent survey concluded that nearly 60% of Americans could not afford an unexpected expense of \$500.

Peter Drucker, a well-respected economist—and a Christian—is far more concerned about the moral problem of overpaid American CEOs than about the problems associated with immigration, legal or otherwise. Indeed, if Jesus were to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan today, He might well talk about “the good Mexican.”

“I am for the free market,” Drucker wrote, “because even though it doesn’t work too well, nothing else works at all. But I have serious reservations about capitalism as a system, because it idolizes economics as the be-all and end-all of life.”

Jesus told us long ago, “*Watch out and be on guard against all greed, because one’s life is not in the abundance of his possessions*” (Luke 12:15). And actor, Jim Carrey, once commented that “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it’s not the answer.”



Piling up material goods can never fill the emptiness of lives that have no purpose, and God has warned us over and over against making that mistake. While wealth is not itself evil (if honestly gained), wealth is quite dangerous, in that wealth frequently has negative effects on our moral and spiritual lives.

One might even make a case that persons and nations are unable to gather more than their share of economic wealth without injustice being a part of the mechanism of gain somewhere along the line. And it is not difficult to argue that the God revealed in the Bible is pretty much always on the side of the poor. The Bible is very, very clear that God’s faithful people should be actively engaged in seeking justice for those who are oppressed and poor.

While the Bible recognizes that both bad personal choices and unjust structures lead to poverty, the Bible is also clear that it is God’s purpose that all persons have fair access to the productive resources of society. Persons who act responsibly should be able to earn a decent living and be respected members of their community.

When the Hebrews were nearing the Promised Land, God told Moses to divide the land as equally as possible (Numbers 26:52-56). Knowing that some would then lose their land, God commanded that all land be returned to its original owner each 50th year, known as the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:13-23).

In between the Years of Jubilee, Moses told those who owned fields to round their corners at harvest time so the poor could harvest what was left. Similarly, he told those who owned vineyards to leave the second picking for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10). There was even a law that the land should lie fallow each seventh year so it could restore itself while feeding the poor and alien (Exodus 23:10-11).

While there is scant evidence that Israel ever followed these laws with much diligence, there were occasional efforts to carry out God's intent. But rather than point fingers at others, we might do better to consider what we're doing right here in America, in our own time.

Our government unfortunately seems to have a renewed commitment to "Getting all we can, canning all we get, and sitting on the can." Our leaders continue to pursue policies that benefit the rich at the expense of the poor. Health care is being ripped from the poor at home, and humanitarian aid is being ripped from the poor abroad. As I see it, this is not only contrary to the principles of Scripture, but is short-sighted and counterproductive in the extreme.

Can we even begin to imagine how world politics might be different were the United States to be as committed to housing, feeding, teaching and healing the poor of the world as we seem to be to using them for our own ends? Many have pointed out the tremendous stake that developed countries have in those countries currently less developed (and honesty compels us to admit that much of global poverty is related in no small part to the rapacious behaviors of colonial powers in the past and present).

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr famously noted that nationalism is "one of the effective ways in which the modern man escapes life's ethical problems." And Peter Drucker wrote that "Unless there is rapid development in the Third World – both economic and social – the developed countries will be inundated by a human flood of Third World immigrants far beyond their economic, social or cultural capacity to absorb." These prophecies are being fulfilled before our eyes.

At one level, **we at CBF are becoming increasingly generous and effective as we engage the needs of our friends and neighbors here in Columbia, and for that I am very, very grateful.** At the same time, as we consider our politics, we rich Christians in the United States (in Columbia and beyond) need to remember that "we have been enriched in every way so that we can be generous on every occasion, and others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies our confession of the gospel of Christ" (2 Corinthians 9:6-15).

To the work!

Dave

