

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

August 9, 2016

What do you see when you look at this photo? Does it remind you of someone? Does it remind you of a time in your own past?

Have you ever known grinding poverty? Do you know it now? What emotions stir within?

I've been reading about poverty quite a bit lately. I've read Ruby Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*¹ four or five times. I've read Steve Corbett's and Brian Fikkert's *When Helping Hurts*² two or three times. I've just finished Randy Nabors' *Merciful*,³ and I heard him speak on the topic in Baltimore last year.

Even after all this, though, I'm no more than a novice on the subject. And, while Jill and I have known years when we weren't sure how we were going to feed our children or pay the rent, even working five jobs between us, we have never *really* known poverty.

I do help a little bit through my involvement with the OMI *Coalition for Compassion*, and I'm a board member of *Help End Homelessness Howard County* (HEHHC), but what little I do is but a tiny drop against the need, even here in one of the wealthiest counties in one of the wealthiest nations the world has ever known.

HEHHC began several years ago when some folks at the Kittamaquindi Community began to get really frustrated by their labors in the HoCo Cold Weather Shelter each winter (which they still do). **The problem was that after all that work, all of those families were still homeless.** And the KC folk began to research what could be done to alleviate the root problem rather than just a symptom of the problem.

"Housing First," which is what HEHHC is about, makes a real difference in homelessness, and has the potential to enormously reduce the number of persons and families in our land who sleep outside because they have no where else to sleep. I want to share some of the things I've been reading, and then to end with an epiphany that came over me just this afternoon . . . and that just may make a real difference in CBF and in Oakland Mills.

Here are some thoughts from Randy Nabors, who, with his wife, grew up in the projects of Newark, NJ, when they were some of the most awful places in all these United States:

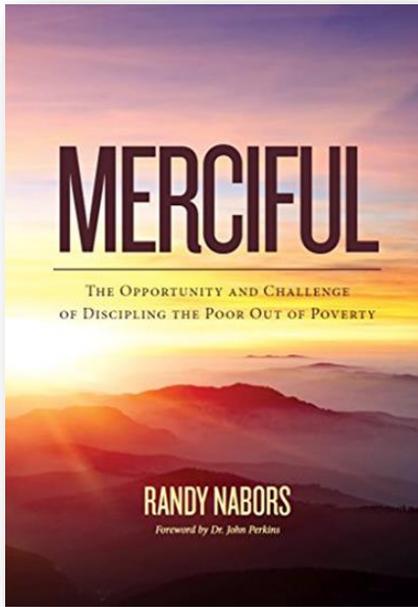


¹ Ruby K. Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach*, revised edition (aha! Process, Inc., 2013).

² Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2009).

³ Randy Nabors, *Merciful: The Opportunity and Challenge of Discipling the Poor Out of Poverty* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2015).





“It not only hurts to be hungry, it’s demeaning and demoralizing to not have enough money to feed your kids or pay your rent. It’s humiliating to try to explain to your spouse or your kids why you can’t keep the water running and the lights on. It’s a sad way of life to feel as if roaches, mice, and rats have more freedom than you do and it makes me angry to know that some kids are forever mentally behind because they inhaled and ingested lead from the paint in their dilapidated houses.

“Some kids move almost every month during the school year because their mom keeps getting kicked out of one place after another. Poverty impacts its victims from many different directions all at the same time. There’s not just too little food, or too little cash, or a bad house, or a bad school, or a violent neighborhood, or no employment. In many cases it’s all of these and more, often happening simultaneously.

“Poverty affects the way people are treated by the police and the courts, either with not enough attention or way too much of it. There’s lack of adequate medical care, lack of decent diet, lack of care and services available for families that are dysfunctional. In many of these homes young children are vulnerable to being sexually abused and exploited, sometimes simply because no one else is paying them any attention due to the chaos in the life of their family” (Nabors, 15).

“In the midst of hopelessness, fear and weakness, there’s a Savior, whose name is Jesus. He is able to take the victims and transform them into members of God’s royal family. **Unless you’ve experienced it yourself, it’s difficult to explain how great and wonderful a difference it makes for someone trapped in poverty to enter into a personal relationship with the living God**” (Nabors, 16).

“Sometimes poverty is not the direct result of anyone’s lifestyle, but the result of circumstances over which a person has no control. In other cases, poverty can be directly related to behavior and poor choices. For us as believers, our love of neighbor means we must care about their relationship to Christ – their need for a Savior. We are not allowed a simple dismissal of anyone who is poor due to their own misbehavior” (Nabors, 52).

“In the face of a poor person’s sin, do we still believe the gospel is able to change people? Is our compassion compromised by our own self-righteousness? What right do any of us have to be self-righteous at all, considering our own sins? **Mercy is given to those who by definition do not deserve it – sinners – like me and you**” (Nabors, 53).

Jesus told us that “*The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor*” (Luke 4:18), and God shows special concern for the poor from one end of the Bible to the other. When Jesus told us about the Final Judgment, He told us that some of the chief criteria by which we will be judged are how we have related to the hungry,



the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner (Matthew 25:31-46). Caring for the poor is a BIG DEAL with God.



One way to talk about these “Matthew 25” efforts is to describe them as “mercy ministry.” Randy Nabors defines “mercy” as “*compassion toward those who are in need, resulting in action to alleviate that need through acts of charity leading toward self-sustainment*” (Nabors, xxviii). Corbett and Fikkert have helpfully made distinctions between three dimensions of mercy ministry:

“One of the biggest mistakes that North American churches make—by far—is in applying relief in situations in which rehabilitation or development is the appropriate intervention.”

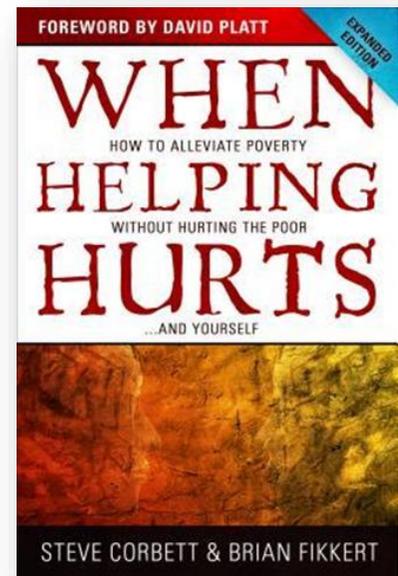
“**Relief** can be defined as the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis. . . . There is a need to ‘stop the bleeding,’ and this is what relief attempts to do. The key feature of relief is a provider-receiver dynamic in which the provider gives assistance—often material—to the receiver, who is largely incapable of helping himself at that time.

“**Rehabilitation** begins as soon as the bleeding stops; it seeks to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions. The key feature of rehabilitation is a dynamic of working *with* the ‘tsunami’ victims as they participate in their own recovery.

“**Development** is a process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved—both the ‘helpers’ and the ‘helped’—closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. In particular, as the materially poor develop, they are better able to fulfill their calling of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work.

“In many, if not in most, instances, you will find that the materially poor in your community are not in a free-fall; that is, they are not in need of relief. Ironically, you will also typically find that most existing organizations in your community are focusing on providing relief.”

“There are at least two primary reasons for this. First, many service organizations have a material definition of poverty; hence, they believe that handouts of material things are the solution to that poverty. As a result, they often provide relief to people who really need development. Second, relief is easier to do than development. **It is much simpler to drop food out of airplanes or to ladle soup out of bowls than it is to develop long-lasting, time-consuming relationships with poor people, which may be emotionally exhausting**” (Corbett & Fikkert, 120).



Corbett & Fikkert remind us that “We are the richest people ever to walk the face of the earth. We do not necessarily need to feel guilty about our wealth. But we do need to get up every morning with a deep sense that something is terribly wrong with the world and yearn

and strive to do something about it. *There is simply not enough yearning and striving going on*” (Corbett & Fikkert, 28).

“The goal is *not* to make the materially poor all over the world into middle-to-upper-class North Americans, a group characterized by high rates of divorce, sexual addiction, substance abuse, and mental illness. . . . Rather, the goal is to restore people to a full expression of humanness, to being what God created us all to be, people who glorify God by living in right relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation” (Corbett & Fikkert, 78).

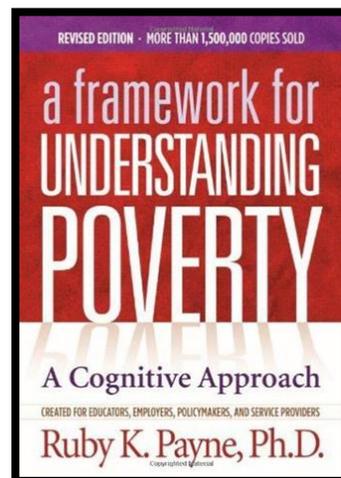
Ruby Payne, an educator and educational consultant, has noted that “four things that move you out of poverty are **employment, education, relationships** of bridging social capital (people who are different from you), and/or a **future story** (Payne, 6). And, although Payne doesn’t point this out, Nabors, Corbett, and Fikkert all take pains to point out that **the Church is God’s primary agent for helping those four things happen:**

For human life to flourish in communities of poverty, where there are not clean or safe streets but rather crumbling sidewalks, failing schools, no jobs, high rates of violence and crime, and too many broken families, *I see one powerful force that can begin to turn things around. This force is a vibrant church on a mission to love the people of that community, to lead them into a discipling relationship with Christ, and to gather them into a worshiping, loving and supportive body of Christ* (Nabors, 272).

They remind us that “Each of us is responsible to participate at some level in helping our congregation to be everything Scripture calls it to be, including fulfilling its biblical mandate to care for the poor” (Corbett & Fikkert, pp. 14-15).

The challenge of discipling the poor out of poverty involves “establishing long-term, loving relationships that function as a lifeline for helping children and families climb out of the mess they are in; but **if we keep giving groceries when what people really need is jobs, we are missing the point**” (Nabors, 211, 196).

As I’ve read and pondered and prayed and pondered, I’ve wondered what God has for me to do in all this—today, right here in Oakland Mills. I’ve wondered what we at CBF might be called to be and to do that we are uniquely prepared to be and to do. And right at the end of Nabors’ book, he listed a link that caught my eye: www.jobsforlife.org.



I went to that link, as I hope you’ll do (www.jobsforlife.org/about/ourstory), and discovered an amazingly hope-full Christian ministry that began in Raleigh twenty years ago and has spread to many cities around the world.

The *Jobs for Life Network* is a collection of Christ-centered churches and organizations committed to transforming lives by leading *Jobs for Life* classes in their communities. These classes teach people

God’s design for work, provide a supportive community, and help persons find and maintain

meaningful employment. The goal is to help to end poverty through the God-given dignity of work.

As far as I can tell, *Jobs for Life* doesn't even cost anything. All the resources are provided free . . . all that is needed is teachers, facilitators, and supportive folk to build life-giving relationships and to help persons discover their God-given worth and dignity:

- through support systems,
- by using appropriate discipline strategies and approaches,
- by establishing long-term relationships with appropriate adults,
- by teaching the hidden rules of the middle class,
- by identifying options,
- by increasing individuals' achievement level through appropriate instruction,
- by teaching goalsetting,
- by developing a future story (Payne, 84).



It seems to me that we at CBF are uniquely able to do these things. All we need is some folk who sense God's call to such a work. **This just might be the Main Thing God has for us to do.** If your heart quickens with these words, check out the JFL website, and then let's talk.

"Mercy ministry will give you friends that are very different from the ones that come naturally to you. Mercy ministry will force you to depend on a mighty and awesome God. Mercy ministry will enlarge your soul, give credibility to your faith among those who watch you, and give pride to your children that the religion of their parents is not hypocritical. So I appeal to you to join me as we **"go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice"** (Matthew 9:13; Nabors, 306).

Dave

