

When Helping Hurts – Summary Notes

How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself

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Part 1: Foundational Concepts for Helping Without Hurting:

Why Did Jesus Come to Earth? He came to declare the good news to the poor - in word & deed. And the church needs to do the same.

“...Jesus summarized His ministry as follows, ‘I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also because that is why I was sent’ (Luke 4:43). The mission of Jesus was and is to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, to say to one and all, ‘I am the King of kings and Lord of lords, and I am using My power to fix everything that sin has ruined.’ As pastor and theologian Tim Keller states, ‘The kingdom is the renewal of the whole world through the entrance of supernatural forces. As things are brought back under Christ’s rule and authority, they are restored to health, beauty, and freedom.’ (p. 32)

“...saving souls is only a subset of the comprehensive healing of the entire cosmos that Jesus’ kingdom brings and that was the centerpiece of His message.” (p. 33)

“The curse is cosmic in scope, bringing decay, brokenness, and death to every speck of the universe. But as King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus is making all things new! This is the good news of the gospel.” (p. 33)

“...Jesus was saying... ‘I am preaching the good news of the kingdom, and I am showing the good news of the kingdom, just as Isaiah said I would.’ How useless it would have been if Jesus had only used words and not deeds to declare the kingdom. Imagine reading the story in Luke 18:35-43 about the blind beggar who was sitting along the roadside. Learning that Jesus was walking by, he called out, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ What if Jesus had said, ‘I am the fulfillment of all prophecy. I am the King of kings and Lord of Lords. I have all the power in heaven and earth. I could heal you today of your blindness, but I only care about your soul. Believe in Me?’ “ (p. 35)

“What is the task of the church? We are to embody Jesus Christ by doing what He did and what He continues to do through us: declare – using both words and deeds – that Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords who is bringing in a kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace. And the church needs to do this where Jesus did it, among the blind, the lame, the sick and outcast, and the poor.” (p. 42)

“Sometimes the local church might feel it is wise to own and operate a ministry to the poor under the direct oversight of its leadership. In other situations, the local church might feel that it would be wiser to minister indirectly by starting or supporting a parachurch ministry or simply by encouraging individuals to reach out to the poor.” (p. 46)

What is the underlying cause of poverty? It's that the fall messed up the four foundational relationships that God established for mankind: relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation. "If we treat only the symptoms or if we misdiagnose the underlying problem, we will not improve their situation, and we might actually make their lives worse." (p. 54)

"... before the fall, God established four foundational relationships for each person: a relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation. ...when these relationships are functioning properly, people are able to fulfill their callings of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work." (p. 57) The fall messed all of these relationships up. (p. 61)

When a person's relationship with God is messed up, he will either deny God's existence and authority or worship false gods. Materialism is another manifestation of this. (p. 61)

When a person's relationship with self is messed up, they either think too much of themselves or too little. (p. 61)

"[Materially] poor people typically talk [about their poverty] in terms of shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, social isolation, and voicelessness." (p. 53)

"Instead of seeing themselves as being created in the image of God, low-income people often feel they are inferior to others. This can paralyze the poor from taking initiative and from seizing opportunities to improve their situation, thereby locking them into material poverty." (p. 64)

"...the economically rich often have...a subtle and unconscious sense of superiority in which they believe that they have achieved their wealth through their own efforts and that they have been anointed to decide what is best for low-income people whom they view as inferior to themselves." (p. 65)

"...one of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates the poverty of being of the economically rich...and the poverty of being of the economically poor – their feelings of inferiority and shame." (p. 65)

"By showing low-income people through our words, our actions, and more importantly our ears that they are people with unique gifts and abilities, we can be part of helping them to recover their sense of dignity, even as we recover from our sense of pride." (p. 68)

When a person's relationship with others is messed up, they either become self-centered, or they may exploit or abuse others. (p. 61)

When a person's relationship with the rest of creation (all that we were meant to steward including money, time, things, the environment, etc.) is messed up, he can lose his sense of purpose or

become lazy. On the other end of the spectrum, he may become a work-a-holic or become materialistic. (p. 61)

“The way that humans create culture – including economic, social, political, and religious systems – reflect our basic commitments to God, self, others, and the rest of creation.” (p. 58) Messed up people create and impact these systems, and these systems impact messed up people...and mess them up even more. (p. 61)

“Until we embrace our mutual brokenness, our work with low-income people is likely to do far more harm than good.” (p. 64)

“Although all human beings are poor in the sense that all are suffering from the effects of the fall on the four foundational relationships, it is not legitimate to conclude that there is nothing uniquely devastating about material poverty. Low-income people daily face a struggle to survive that creates feelings of helplessness, anxiety, suffocation, and desperation that are simply unparalleled in the lives of the rest of humanity...the materially poor are trapped by multiple, interconnected factors – insufficient assets, vulnerability, powerlessness, isolation, and physical weakness.” (p. 70)

What is the goal?

“Material poverty alleviation is working to reconcile the four foundational relationships so that people can fulfill their callings of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work.” (p. 78)

“...material poverty alleviation involves more than ensuring that people have sufficient material things; rather it involves the much harder task of empowering people to earn sufficient material things through their own labor, for in so doing we move people closer to what God created them to be.” (p. 79)

“...work is an act of worship. When people seek to fulfill their callings by glorifying God in their work, praising Him for their gifts and abilities, and seeing both their efforts and its products as an offering to Him, then work is an action of worship to God. On the other hand, when work is done to glorify oneself or merely to achieve more wealth, it becomes worship of false gods.” (p. 79)

“Ultimately, the profound reconciliation of the key relationships that comprise poverty alleviation cannot be done without people accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior...While the biblical model is that the gospel is to be communicated in both word and deeds, the Bible clearly indicates that without the verbal proclamation of the gospel, one cannot be saved (Rom 10:14)...This implies that the local church, as an institution, has a key role to play in poverty alleviation because the gospel has been committed by God to the church.” (pp. 80-81)

We need to focus on people and processes instead of projects and products. (p. 81)

“Worldview transformation must often play a central role in poverty-alleviation efforts. In fact, in some cases people’s worldviews are so distorted that it is difficult to bring about any progress at all until the people undergo a major paradigm shift.” (p. 88)

We need to address broken systems in many cases. (p. 89)

For example, “The [American] ghetto...originated in the massive migration of African Americans from the rural South to northern cities from 1910 to 1960 as a result of the increased mechanization of Southern agriculture. Centuries of slavery and racial discrimination contributed to the relatively low levels of education of these migrants who fled north looking for blue collar manufacturing jobs. Upon their arrival in the North, a combination of economic forces, public policy, and housing discrimination caused the migrants to concentrate in inner cities...In the early 1950s...federal urban renewal and highway programs required land in inner cities, and African American neighborhoods were often razed. Low income African Americans were then relocated into publicly funded housing projects, while middle- and upper-class African Americans were forced to be relocated elsewhere...the FHA then began to offer subsidized mortgages that enabled millions of Caucasians to purchase homes in the suburbs and flee the cities. Ironically, advances in the civil rights movement later reduced suburban housing discrimination, allowing middle- and upper-class African Americans to relocate to the suburbs as well. As a result of this suburban flight, the remaining inner city, African American communities lost leaders, role models, working families, and a solid economic base. And then the jobs left. America transitioned from a predominantly manufacturing economy to a service economy. From 1970 to 1985, millions of high paying, blue collar jobs simply disappeared from inner cities moving to other parts of the country or overseas. Unemployment in the inner cities skyrocketed, and many African American inner city residents joined the welfare rolls, a system that penalized them for working by taking away benefits for every dollar they earned.” (pp. 91-92)

Part 2: General Principles for Helping Without Hurting

The first step in working with the poor should be to determine whether they need relief, rehabilitation, or development.

“Relief can be defined as the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis...[and] the receiver is largely incapable of helping himself at that time. (p. 104) Only a small percentage of the poor in your community or around the world require relief. These would include the severely disabled; some of the elderly; very young, orphaned children; the mentally ill homeless population; and victims of a natural disaster.” (p. 109) Relief might include hand-outs of free food, clothing, shelter, or even money.

When relief is required:

- “Relief needs to be immediate. If a person is in the midst of a crisis and cannot help himself, a timely response is crucial.” (p. 109)
- “Relief is also temporary, provided only during the time that people are unable to help themselves.” (p. 109)

“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...victims as they participate in their own recovery.” (p. 104)

“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...as the materially poor develop, they are better able to...work and support themselves and their families with the fruits of that work.” (p. 104-105)

When relief or rehabilitation are required, do them with the goal of development in mind:

- “Ensure participation of the affected population in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the assistance program.” (p. 111)
- “Conduct an initial assessment to provide an understanding of the disaster situation and to determine the nature of the response.” (p. 112)
- “Respond when the needs of an affected population are unmet by local people or organization due to their inability or unwillingness to help...Whenever possible, the first responders to a crisis should be the victims’ family members, whether those family members are geographically local or not (1 Tim. 5:3-4).” (p. 112)
- Target assistance based on vulnerability and need, and provide it equitably and impartially...Flinging resources around undermines the development of individual and communal stewardship, responsibility, and capacity.” (p. 112)

- “Aid workers must possess appropriate qualifications, attitudes, and experience to plan and effectively implement appropriate assistance programs.” (p. 113)

“Do not do things for people they can do themselves” including providing resources which might undermine local businesses; spiritual insight which we might be able to gain from them; knowledge & ideas which in many cases might not even translate into their context; free labor which undermines their calling to be stewards of their own time & talents and might also be taking jobs away from local people; and planning & managing initiatives that if planned on their own might lead to more buy-in and sustainability (pp. 115-119)

Focus on the ASSETS of the community as opposed to the needs.

“What gifts do you have? – affirms people’s dignity...” (p. 126)

“Once the assets have been identified, it is appropriate to then ask the poor individual or community the questions: ‘What needs can you identify that must be addressed? What problems do you see that must be solved? How can you use your assets to address those needs and to solve those problems?’” (p. 127)

Don’t try to use a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, learn & adjust as you go along (pp. 140-158)

“Our relationship to the materially poor should be one in which we recognize that both of us are broken and that both of us need the blessing of reconciliation. Our perspective should be less about how we are going to fix the materially poor and more about how we can walk together, asking God to fix both of us.” (p. 79)