



Breaking the Spirit of Poverty

Colter Bloxom – March 7, 2010

So after my freshman year of college I had decided that I no longer wanted to study acting. I was far too busy with it and didn't have time to spend doing a lot of the things I loved which mainly included investing in people. I knew that someday I was going to have to give up the dream of playing sports five nights a week. So it took all of that freshman year for me to realize that I wanted to spend more time loving and caring for people and trying to change the world. So I went home for that first summer and got an internship at my church that I attended growing up. I believed that the most logical spot in ministry for me was worship and music so I interned under our worship pastor. I thought that through being a worship pastor I could spend the time investing people the way that I wanted to and could help change the world with the backing of a church. I thought that I should probably go to seminary after I graduated and if I was going to do that I might as well be getting my degree in religious studies, philosophy, or one of those other majors that teaches you how to be a great younger thinker.

Today, I still remember the conversation that I had with a friend who was a few years older than I was at the time. I was telling him all of these thoughts and he told me that if I wanted to change the world, I needed to understand how the world worked. While religious studies might give me more of a heart for the suffering of the world and philosophy might give me more of an understanding of moral standards, they wouldn't teach me how the most important thing in life worked: money.

Let's be honest, whether or not we want to admit it, cash rules everything around us.

So I took his advice and decided to get my degree in economics. I thought it was a pretty strong major and would help me understand the way that money worked pretty well and the way that the world worked. Since then I've taken some pretty great classes on how our economy and our international economy works. And no, I cannot tell anybody here how we can "get out of this mess."

Now, the reason that I have such a desire to understand money and say that money is the most important thing in the world is because if you want to make a lasting impact in the world, your best bet is usually financial. In order to help people get out of poverty we of course need to have love, but love that produces nothing is sort of meaningless. People do not get out of poverty from hugs and kind words. And I don't mean to downplay physical affection and verbal affirmation. Because one of the biggest problems we have with the impoverished communities in the world is these people not knowing their self worth. It is extremely important to help restore the humanity of the broken and poor by doing more than opening our checkbooks.

But we have to be doing both of these things consistently. We'll often hear about two different kinds of people when it comes to giving and loving. There are people who may not have a lot to give financially so they give by talking to people on the streets and listening, which is incredibly important. And we'll hear about the people who might not be as good relationally and don't have quite as much time but they have a lot of wealth stored up so they are free to give generously. I believe that it is clear that we are called to do both of these things whether we have room to or not. We have cheapened what it means to sacrifice into giving away what you don't want anymore. To sacrifice means to come out of your own benefit. To take away from your convenience. To move you towards discomfort. Jesus points us towards giving out of our necessities in Luke 21.

1As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. 2He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins.[a] 3"I tell you the truth," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. 4All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

Jesus says to them, this widow has given the most out of all of you. Now this isn't because she put in two coins and everybody else gave one coin. It is because she gave out of what she needed. Not out of what she had stored up in abundance. Bill Gates could give away half of his fortune and he would still have more money than I or anybody else in here, could ever give combined. But according to these few verses, I could give from all that I have and I will have given more.

Again this points us back to sacrifice. To giving out of our poverty and not out of our wealth.

One time last year my roommate came up to me and said he has just woken up and was 30 minutes late to work and needed to borrow my car to get to work, since the original way he was going to work would no longer allow him enough time. My first thoughts were, "What does this mean for me?" I thought ok, it's about 5 pm and I've got some meetings on campus to go to in about 30 minutes so this means that I'm going to have to walk to campus. This means that I am going to be without a car until I get home so I won't be able to leave during the break of my meetings to go get dinner. This means that I am going to have to either bother someone for a ride home or walk home. I thought, you know this doesn't really sound all that convenient for me. I think I need the car maybe not quite as much, but I still need it. And I thought that I could justify this, you know I'm not the one who accidentally fell asleep and was late for work. I'm not the one who didn't plan accordingly, why should

I give up my car for a few hours. But then I remembered what it actually means to sacrifice. Loving and giving sacrificially isn't supposed to be convenient. If my roommate came to me and said, can I borrow one of your four cars and I said yes, that would be nice, but it wouldn't be very sacrificial. And I don't believe that God doesn't honor giving that isn't sacrificial. The point I'm trying to make is that we don't want to miss opportunities to serve and give because it didn't fit into our plan for the day.

We have begun to live our lives in bondage to our possessions. We can't give unless it is out of that extra giving money we set aside after we bought all the cool things we want to buy for the year.

Jackie Pullinger wrote a fascinating book called *Chasing the Dragon* in which she describes her journey as a young single woman from England to Hong Kong to work among drug addicts and the abject poor. In a speech she gave she stunned the audience by saying that the reason we distance ourselves from the poor is our own fear of being poor. We don't want to lose control of our lives. We don't want to wake up one day and realize that no one really cares about us. This she said is at the heart of our fear, and it is valid.

So we plan to be generous when we have enough, but we never seem to get there. A lack of contentment pervades our society and affects us more than we may realize. We are in the grip of a fear of never having enough.

I think that this is the way that we want things to operate. We are afraid of what is not finite and balanced and so we are not ultimately willing to do a whole lot to throw the equation off. Even more so, we are not willing to do anything to throw the equation off if we are not sure we can quickly fix it. We do this in the way that we give as well. We give out of our excess and not our necessities. We always think, as soon as I make a little bit more money, then I will be able to support this cause. Jesus demands that we don't give out of excess, but out of all that we have though.

James Ryle defines the spirit of poverty as "holding on to what you have for fear of not getting more." Sometimes the more you have, the more you cling to it for fear of losing it. That's the spirit of poverty. This would explain why often it is the poor who are openhanded and give away the little they have, while the rich can be tightfisted.

Whenever I've gone to the homeless parks to pass out burgers the people there are always wanting to share and to get everybody involved. My speculation to this is because they know what it is like to go without, and want to remove that feeling from others by giving.

Those who have a spirit of poverty see life as a finite pie. They think, "If someone gets a piece of the pie, there will be less for me." But the bible unequivocally contradicts this kind of thinking: "*One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty*" (Proverbs 11:24).

Those with a spirit of poverty always ask the same question: "what do I get, and when do I get it?"

In the book, *Hope Lives*, the author describes the spiritual poverty that can come from having too much. She writes, "My poverty is real when my love is deadened, medicated, frozen by too much. And my soul is maybe in even more danger than those in the poverty of too little."

The Spirit of Abundance

On the other hand, people who live with a spirit of abundance think, "All I have and all I need comes from God. I don't have to protect it cling to it, or withhold it from anyone because God is the source of all of it," They genuinely believe Proverbs 11:25: "A generous man will prosper he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed."

In 2 Corinthians 9:6 Paul writes, *Remember this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*

Breaking the Spirit of Poverty

It's counterintuitive, but we break the spirit of poverty when we give extravagantly, when we give beyond our means- when we give what we want to keep for ourselves, when we actually give what we need, when we give out of our own poverty. When we do this, something inside us breaks free. The spirit of poverty is broken in the act of giving.

I recently wrote my support letters to go to Haiti since I won't be able to afford the trip on my own. My neighbor was sitting there watching me package up my letters and asked me if her name was on one of those envelopes. I told her that it was but didn't want her to feel any pressure to give. She told me, "let's go to the bank right now." Now I was impressed but this didn't shock me, because I know her personality. She is a giving person. But I was almost saddened by the situation at the same time. You see, my neighbor is 24, finishing her last year of undergrad and financially independent from her parents. She works two jobs to support her self and is trying to finish up her degree this semester. She is very open with me about her finances and I know that she is just about living paycheck to paycheck. She was so willing to give to me and I know that this giving came out of what she needed to live, not what she has stored away in case any short term missionaries ask her for money.

A few years ago when I did not have any income I decided to start supporting compassion international by having a sponsor child. It cost \$32 a month to sponsor a child, which went towards food and education. At this time I did not have any income but was sure that I could make with these donations until I started having some income. Not more than a few days later I went to the bible study that I was involved with through a campus ministry and my bible study leaders had some exciting news for me. They recently attended a conference and the people hosting the conference decided to give them 300 dollars each to do something good with. This totaled 600 between the two of them. They decided that they wanted us to choose something good to do with the money so they split it between the 10 of us, which resulted in me getting \$60.

So why does this giving matter so much? In Matthew 25 Jesus says...

31"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

41"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

44"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

46"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

The spirit of poverty isn't doing things for the poor but it's the belief that we are the poor and we want to stop having this spirit. The more that you have the more that you cling to it. The people who do this, it's evidence of their faith in Christ. The fact that they are not aware of their good deeds is a reflection of who they are in Christ.

- Verse from James; Faith without works is dead.
- If you want to make a lasting financial impact in the world you have to know how money works.
- Inconvenience
- God of abundance

How can I help?

- Decide what matters to you.*

What is it that you care about? I believe that we are called to be sympathetic to all of the injustices of the world but to try to change them all at the same time will just be spreading ourselves thin. It will be hard to have a lasting impact on a certain issue while we are spending our time working on every issue that the world has seen. One important guideline to remember during this is that we should probably pick an issue that is relevant and attainable. We often are romanced with the idea of feeding all of the starving children in Africa, which I do not mean to downplay and is of course a significant issue, which deserves a lot of attention. But there are plenty of kids here in Tucson who go without meals daily, or on programs to get breakfast and lunch at school because their family can't afford to give them both. Find ways to get involved in things that you care about and that you can make a difference in. And if you feel that your heart really does go out to the children who need our attention internationally, there are organizations you can donate to, or maybe you can take the advice of God and simply go.

- Be available to those around you.*

There are people that we encounter daily who are doing all they can to make ends meet. Reach out to the poor who are in your own neighborhood or even in your own family. We have been placed in a world where people are struggling all around us and Jesus calls us to walk around with our eyes open to this and to not turn a blind eye to such things.

- Be creative.*

Many of us want to help in breaking the spirit of poverty but are so busy that we don't have the time to think what that looks like on a day in day out basis. Try to use paper money instead of credit and keep all your loose change. At the end of the day, put your change in a jar and at the end of the month give the money to somebody who needs it. Or go to McDonalds and buy 5 gift cards that have 5 dollars each on them. The next time that somebody on the street tells you that they are hungry, give them a McDonalds card. This way you can ensure that they are getting a meal.