



The  
Chalmers  
Center



# What is Poverty?

# WHAT IS POVERTY?

The way we define a problem shapes how we try to solve it. So how do we define poverty?

Consider the following question: what is poverty? Take a moment and make a list of words that come to mind when you think of poverty.

We often think of poverty as a simple lack of stuff:



food



money



clean water



medicine



housing

So when we see poverty, we often try to help people by giving them stuff.

It makes sense, right? If someone doesn't have enough food, we should give them food. But the reality is a little more complex.

**“The way that we act toward the economically poor often communicates—albeit unintentionally—that we are superiors and they are inferior. In the process, we hurt the poor and ourselves.”**

**— When Helping Hurts**

# HOW THE POOR DEFINE POVERTY

On the surface, it seems like poverty is just about lacking stuff. But when you ask people who are poor to define poverty, they often talk more about how they feel: humiliated, ashamed, alone, afraid, and powerless.

When we only focus on giving people stuff that we think they lack, it doesn't address these feelings of shame, inferiority, and powerlessness. In fact, sometimes giving people things can actually make those feelings worse!

Think about it: if you were struggling, how would you feel if someone swooped in and provided for your family? You might find it helpful in the short term, but eventually, it could make you feel powerless.

When we only define poverty as a lack of stuff, we often treat the symptoms instead of the underlying causes. Until we change our understanding of poverty, any help we offer has the potential to do more harm than good.



## VOICES OF THE POOR

In the 1990s, the World Bank asked more than 60,000 people from 60 low-income countries the same basic question: what is poverty? The results were published in a book series titled *Voices of the Poor*.



**“For a poor person everything is terrible—illness, humiliation, shame. We are cripples; we are afraid of everything; we depend on everyone. No one needs us. We are like garbage that everyone wants to get rid of.”**



**“Your hunger is never satisfied, your thirst is never quenched; you can never sleep until you are no longer tired.”**



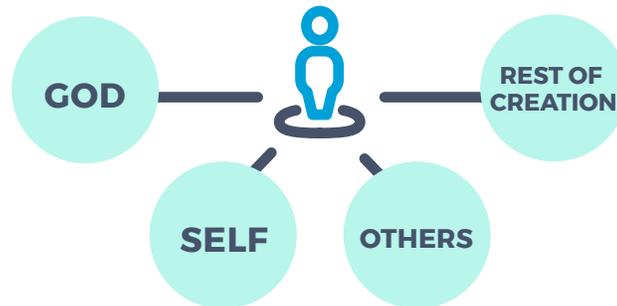
**“We cannot afford to invite anyone to our house and we feel uncomfortable visiting others without bringing a present. The lack of contact leaves one feeling depressed, creates a constant feeling of unhappiness, and a sense of low-self esteem.”**

**What words or phrases stand out to you in these quotes?**

# POVERTY: MORE THAN MATERIAL

Poverty isn't just a lack of stuff. It goes beyond the material and cuts to the core of how people see themselves. The truth is, we're all poor—everyone! We're all in need because we all experience brokenness in four fundamental relationships:

- Our relationship with God
- Our relationship with self
- Our relationship with others
- Our relationship with creation



Because of the Fall, sin entered the world, and all four of these key relationships were broken. Our intimacy with God was replaced with a fear of God. Our relationship with self went from a sense of dignity to feelings of shame. Our relationship with others went from community to conflict. And our relationship with creation went from joyful work to toilsome labor.

Everyone suffers from the effects of these broken relationships. So, we're all poor in the sense that we don't experience these relationships the way God intended. This brokenness doesn't look the same across the world. But we all share the same desperate need for Christ, who offers hope that what is broken—both inside us and around us—will be restored.

**“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 L. Meyers, *Walking with the Poor***

# HELPING RESTORES RELATIONSHIPS

There are times when it's helpful and appropriate to give things to people in poverty. But when we define the problem of poverty only in terms of stuff, we tend to overlook other important aspects of helping people.

Helping the poor is about reconciling the broken relationships at the root of poverty. It means taking the hungry person by the hand and saying, "I'm hungry too. But I've found the Bread of Life. He can provide the lasting help that you and I both need."

**"By showing low-income people through our words, our actions, and most 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."**

– *When Helping Hurts*

## WHAT NOW?

So where do we go from here? Should we just stop trying to help people who are poor?

When we broaden our understanding of poverty, it's easy to feel stuck or unsure what to do. It's overwhelming! Don't worry—we're here to help.

The Chalmers Center helps churches and ministries discover better ways to love the poor. If you'd like to take the next step and deepen your understanding of poverty, here are a few great places to start:



**Check out our blog**  
at [chalmers.org](https://chalmers.org) and  
discover ways you can  
help people who are poor.



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