

Women, poverty, and society

by Vickie Shurelds

Psalm 109:31. For he stands at the right hand of the needy , to save them from those who condemn them to death.

Proverbs 3:27–28. Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, “Go and come again; tomorrow I will give it”— when you have it with you.

Last fall, I took a class that was designed to help educators become better equipped for teaching in a diverse classroom. One of the exercises was taken from the work of Dr. Ruby Payne and asked the questions: Could you survive being upper class? Could you survive middle class? Could you survive in poverty? I believe I was unique in that I did well on each paper. Of course, that was because I had lived a part of my adult life in each arena. The “upper class” questionnaire dealt with social etiquette. Middle class inquiries were about juggling home, career, family, and community involvement. The poverty sheet covered issues like cashing a check without a checking account, and getting essentials like soap and deodorant when all you have are food stamps.

It was a great exercise that engaged all my classmates and led to animated discussion on the financial state of America and how much attitudes about the poor have changed in the past decade. But, have those attitudes changed?

The number of Americans who live in poverty has increased in the past 10 years; today we have even coined new phrases like “the working poor.” Yet, there are people in our society who hate the poor. You may think that’s a strong statement; but being poor cannot be tolerated by some people. The poor are often labeled as lazy, unmotivated, and un-American. There are even those who insinuate the poor enjoy being poor so that others must take care of their needs.

In reality, most of us would much rather provide for our own families. But poverty, believe it or not, is a relative term. Certainly, the government has placed identifiers for their specific use, but when it’s your lifestyle, you may only realize poverty exists when you see your life through the eyes of a stranger.

For example, my mother grew up in a small Mississippi town. My grandmother cleaned the houses and watched the children of

Caucasian families in town, and because the two economic classes rarely crossed each other's paths, she spent most of her childhood unaware of the prejudice that existed in her own town, or the fact they lived in poverty. She still gets tears in her eyes telling the story of the day her baby brother showed the devastating symptoms of polio. She ran with all her might to the home where her mother was working and forgetting her training, knocked on the front door.

When the owner answered she began to blurt out the information regarding the collapse of her brother—the owner placed his hand on her chest and pushed her off the porch and said, “Gal, you know better than to come to this door! Go around the back and stay off my flowers!” He then slammed the door. It was at this defining moment she realized there was a difference between her family and the people that lived in that fine house “across the way”.

Dr. Payne suggests there are hidden rules that govern how each of us behaves in our social class. Because the rules are “hidden,” in other words, known only to those who are already within the group, there can be various roadblocks along the way for those who try to cross those invisible barriers. Those within the “group” are confused because they have always believed these issues were “common knowledge everybody knows.” For those fully aware of their poverty status, gaining access to the “rules” is a grueling process.

As believers in Christ, we must follow his example to reach those in need where they live: walking among them, acknowledging their presence and helping them seek out the places where their talents can bring additional strength to the community.

PONDER

- 1. What knowledge of hidden cultural rules do I possess that could be shared with others in a way that could make it easier for them to make positive changes in their own life?*
- 2. Do I place judgments on the decisions of others, assuming they have the same “common” knowledge and resources as I have?*

Prayer: Most generous and merciful God, place in us the compassion we need to reach out to those with fewer resources than we have; open for us the opportunity to provide support in their effort to live as you want all your children to live in peace. 🙏