

“I Will Now Arise!”
Six Bible Studies on Women and Poverty
Written by Lois Mitchell and Faye Reynolds

Introduction

Women make up the largest oppressed people group in the world. Women and children are the ones that suffer most severely from the causes of poverty and oppression. War affects women; drought and famine, corruption and deviant behavior all take their toll first on women and their young.

“Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise,” says the Lord. “I will protect them from those who malign them.” Psalm 12:5

God is calling us to arise and become part of the solutions to these problems, rather than continue to participate in the causes of poverty and oppression. These six Bible studies will endeavor to openly discuss the factors that lead to the continuing plight of women around the world and offer opportunities to ARISE AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

This study is arranged into two primary sections. We begin each lesson by looking at a case study in Scripture of a woman who has suffered from a societal injustice. We will endeavor to uncover some of the factors that led to her situation, and how relief was brought. There is a brief introduction and questions that guide participants through the text.

Lois Mitchell then supplies the statistics and information pertaining to today and offers some ways in which Canadian women can begin to make a difference. It is our prayer that these issues will not overwhelm and cause a sense of hopelessness, but rather bring us to our feet and empower each of us to arise to the challenge.

God’s heart always resides with the weak and the vulnerable, those that suffer from oppressive social systems and the effects of a sinful world. God truly, truly loves women and when Jesus claimed his calling from Isaiah as being anointed to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive and set at liberty those who are oppressed; his calling was most certainly to women! Jesus indeed set women free in every encounter he had with them. Let us continue his ministry and also claim the Isaiah calling as our own.

Lesson 1: “The Laws may not Favour Us”

Read: Numbers 27: 1 – 11 Zelophehad’s Daughters
Job 42: 12 – 15 Job’s Daughters

Discuss:

- 1) *From your own understanding, what was the law that affected the future of these women? How would the law contribute to the eventual poverty of these daughters?*
- 2) *What did Zelophehad’s daughters do to address the injustice?*
- 3) *How much change was brought about by their action?*
- 4) *Who helped their cause by advocating for them? What does this passage reveal about the character of Moses?*
- 5) *How did the change fall short of ending this injustice?*
- 6) *Consider the Job passage? How did Job go beyond the law to ensure the well being of his daughters?*

Action and Response

- 1) *How do inheritance laws today often relegate women to a life of poverty?*

Without property, women are subject to the economic and social status of their fathers or husbands. Many women around the world are systematically denied property rights and are thus “enslaved” by paternal and patriarchal systems that do not recognize their capacity to live independently and productively. In societies which do not attach equal value to women and men, marriage reinforces a woman’s dependence and may make her vulnerable to exploitation of various kinds: sexual, psychological, financial, etc. **Women do not have property, they ARE property.**

- 2) *What actions might we be able to take to affect the laws that oppress women in countries like Africa?*

The denial to women of rights of inheritance is closely linked to the experience of extreme poverty for women in African countries, and elsewhere around the world. Lack of inheritance rights is both a cause of, and evidence of, a more widespread plague affecting women: violence against them. In light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic which disproportionately affects women in these same countries, women’s lives are even more precarious, and by extension, so too are the lives of their children.

For more information see:

http://www.cohre.org/view_page.php?page_id=180.

3) *What is the value in “small steps”? How did we change the laws in Canada to allow women to be recognized as persons and therefore entitled to hold land?*

For Canadian women, these conditions may seem archaic and clear violations to fundamental human rights as we tend to see these things through the lens of our own cultural glasses. However, we need to remember that here in Canada; women were not legally recognized as persons until October 18, 1929 when the Imperial Privy Council ruled that women were legally "persons" and therefore could hold seats in the Canadian Senate. On Jan 28, 1916 Manitoba was the first province in Canada to grant women the right to vote and to hold political office provincially. All of the other provinces eventually followed suit with Newfoundland completing the set on April 13, 1925.

For a time line of women's rights in Canada, see:

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCETimelineBrowse&Params=A1CAT22SRT26>

For most of us, these are now historical events. We tend to take the accomplishments of women (and men) who pioneered women's rights for granted. But the relative freedom we enjoy today is due to their efforts. The path to women's rights is a path that women from various countries must walk themselves, **but they do not need to walk that path alone!** **Canadian Baptist Women can walk with them,- encouraging them, advocating on their behalf, praying for them, helping them to carry the burdens that come from living in poverty.**

Scripture is clear that the call to God's people is a call to care for the vulnerable [see Amos 8: 4- 8, Psalm 72: 12 – 14, Luke 4: 16 – 19, Matt. 25:31 – 46). This care can be both comforting and prophetic, but it must be sensitive to the women themselves and to the spiritual, economic, political and social fabric of their lives.

4) *Is there any way that we in Canada can empower the women of other countries to gain their right to be persons of equal standing and own land?*

Prayer: Spend time in closing prayer asking for God's direction in any attitude that could use some adjusting and action that could be taken to free the women of Africa and other nations. Pray for those women.

Lesson 2: “The Land can betray Us”

Read: I Kings 17: 7 - 16 The Widow at Zarephath

Discuss the following:

- 1) *The fact that this woman was a widow made the affects of the drought more dramatic. Under what circumstances does one become a widow in Canada? What exacerbates the problem in other countries?*
- 2) *What basic needs are threatened during a drought?*
- 3) *What was the solution to her situation? How did she see the future for herself and her son?*
- 4) *How were her basic needs met? Who did God use to bring her relief?*
- 5) *Do you ever feel that you do not have anything to spare – that you are barely feeding your family? That you don’t know how you will manage to live another day? How does this Scripture challenge that attitude?*

Action and Response

This passage shows that there is a time for charity – a time for those in well-to-do nations to contribute emergency funds to help beleaguered nations through a difficult season. This may not lead to long term change, but it provides enough “flour and oil” to save lives from starvation. CBM offers avenues where our dollar can be most effective in crisis situations. Most recently, CBM in cooperation with the Food Grains Bank made a difference in Kenya when the rest of the world was ignorant to the devastating drought.

- 6) *How is global warming and our North American lifestyle leading to more drought and famine around the world?*

A new Decima Research poll indicates that the environment has become the number one concern of Canadian voters with 19% of poll respondents indicating that it's their top concern (over health care, the Afghanistan conflict and the economy) - see http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20070105/baird_070105/20070105?hub=Newsletter and <http://www.decima.com/en/newsreleases/>.

Some pretty crazy weather patterns have caught our attention and the global warming alarms being raised by scientists around the world are finally getting through. This is a good start – but let’s not fool ourselves – it’s only the beginning. If we acknowledge the overwhelming evidence that the industrialized countries of the world (including Canada) are guilty of polluting the atmosphere to the point that we’ve literally burned a whole in

the ozone layer, the question remains: what are we going to do about it? And who are we doing it for?

Our first impulse – sadly – is to look out for ourselves and our own. But do we realize how our lifestyle is affecting literally millions of people who live in poverty in other parts of the globe? Do we realize that, while we at least enjoy the lifestyle for which we have compromised environmental sustainability, they have enjoyed none of those benefits and actually live extremely precarious lives because of environmental impacts originating in other countries?

Did you know that if the whole world were to live at the same standard of living enjoyed by North Americans, we would need to have four or five planet earths? If God truly is a god of justice and righteousness, all of this will someday demand an account. And ignorance will not be an acceptable excuse. Nor will we be able to hide behind our political leaders. As Christians, our record as stewards of the environment (caretakers of the garden) is in serious need of attention. Improvement is possible (not to mention necessary and urgent!), but it won't be easy.

Check out <http://www.earthfromtheair.com/> for the bigger picture! Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth* is very aptly titled and worth viewing to understand more of the impact our wealthy lifestyle has upon the world.

7) How can we offer the basic needs to places of drought and famine?

There are different ways to measure poverty. "Relative poverty" compares individuals or families to other individuals or families in a common geographic area. The "Basic-Needs" approach used in Canada measures what people need to meet the basic requirements of shelter, food, clothing, transportation, etc. For more information, see: <http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/admin/books/files/PovertyinCanada2006.pdf>. While this is helpful within a country like ours, it does not show the true picture in developing countries where an astonishing number of people live on less than \$2 a day and many millions of people around the world literally do not know where their next meal is coming from. They live in **absolute poverty**, without any guarantee of the basic necessities for life at the bare bones level. And, the safety nets which catch many North Americans, Brits and Europeans, simply do not exist in many developing countries.

Canadian Baptist Ministries General Secretary, Dr. Gary Nelson, often pushes audiences to consider "what the Good News looks like in contexts different from our own". If part of our responsibility as a missional church is to "spread the gospel", we need to consider this question for outreach both at home and abroad. What is the good news for those living in absolute poverty?

Canadian Baptist Ministries is committed to an approach to missions which is reciprocal and partner-oriented. We work with partners in the countries where our field personnel are called in a relationship characterized by mutual respect and reciprocal learning. Canadian Baptists going overseas, whether as long term field personnel or as short term missionaries, have something to offer but also much to learn.

CBM is committed to four strategic drivers for mission at home and abroad:

- Grassroots leadership development
- Joint pioneer outreach
- Sustainable community development
- Global discipleship

Rene Padilla says:

“When the church is committed to integral mission and to communicating the gospel through everything it is, does, and says, it understands that its goal is not to become large numerically, nor to be rich materially, nor powerful politically. Its purpose is to incarnate the values of the Kingdom of God and to witness to the love and the justice revealed in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Spirit, for the transformation of human life in all its dimensions, both on the individual level and on the community level.” (from Mosaic, Spring 2006)

8) How can we work toward long term change?

God is a missionary God. When God initially called Abraham to be the father of His chosen people, His intention was that Abraham would be a blessing to all nations. If we are going to be used by God in the 21st century to bring about effective, long term change, we must have a global vision. God’s kingdom is global in scope. The blessings God has provided to sustain the peoples of the world – water, arable land, trees, minerals, etc. – must not be hoarded by the rich countries or exploited for the benefit of a few. Justice must begin within the household of faith and spread around the globe. Change is possible!

Prayer Time: Ask of God two things: 1) What are the changes that I personally need to make to aid the healing of my planet? 2) What would God ask me to give to ease the hunger and suffering around the globe?

Lesson 3: “Debt can Defeat Us”

Read: II Kings 4: 1 – 7

The Widow's Oil

Discuss the Following

- 1) *The woman in this story has just lost her husband and besides the grief of loss, she must deal with the burden of debt. What options did this woman have?*
- 2) *Many people cannot get a reasonable loan from a bank because they are considered “high risk” and thus must seek other alternatives. What might those alternatives be?*
- 3) *In North America, what are the temptations that cause families to fall into debt traps? (True example: a man bought a \$50,000 truck and leased it for five years. Within 2 - 3 years, he could no longer make the lease payments and so wanted to sell the truck. The truck had depreciated to \$30,000 but he still owes \$40,000. He now has a \$10,000 debt and no assets.)*
- 4) *How might single mothers become more vulnerable to debt?*
- 5) *What lifestyle choices could Christians choose that would help avoid debt traps? What services could a church offer to help families in debt?*
- 6) *What was the debt going to cost the woman in the story?*
- 7) *How did Elisha grant a “micro-loan” to this woman?*

Action and Response

- 1) *How might our micro-loans make a difference?*

What is microcredit? According to CBM's fact sheet on microcredit (<http://www.thesharingway.org/cbmin/docs/FAQs%20-%20MC.rev.pdf> and <http://www.thesharingway.org/cbmin/docs/FAQs%20-%20ME.rev.pdf>):

“Microcredit is a small amount of money loaned to very poor people who do not have access to formal financial institutions, such as banks. The loans are used for self-employment projects that generate income, allowing people to care for themselves and their families.”

It may be hard to imagine, but in low income countries where we have partners (such as Kenya, Rwanda, Bolivia, El Salvador, etc.) loans of as little as \$30 can make a difference, supplying the necessary capital to start or improve a small business or micro-enterprise. Vegetable stands, bakeries, carpentry shops, ceramics and crafts and small family farms are all examples of micro-enterprises. Small loans help individuals (and their families) develop a source of income – typically a meager income – but enough to provide both basic food supplies and, perhaps even more importantly, dignity and hope.

Lydia lives in a shanty town in Nairobi. We typically refer to these shanty towns as “slums”, but after a tour of Mathare Valley with Lydia, I'm reluctant to use that term because of the negative connotations. Yes, Mathare Valley is home to some 500,000 people who live in what can only be described as “inadequate” housing and sanitation.

But Lydia – a resident of Mathare Valley for 27 years - is a business woman. She makes and sells candy coated peanuts in bags of varying sizes. She lives with her husband in Mathare Valley. There is no doubt that her life is hard, yet she strikes me as a woman of incredible pride and vigor. She has her own business and she is also working to help other woman access funds to establish micro-enterprises of their own.

Lydia is one of many who have had a hand-up through a microcredit loan. Certainly there are many more Lydias, eager for an opportunity to become self-sufficient. As pride penetrates Mathare Valley, and other shanty towns around the world, hope seeps through communities and lives are changed. A small loan can make a very big difference!

2) *What would your group or you as an individual be willing to do to help another be released from the prison of debt?*

Have you ever been in debt? These days that's a bit like asking a group of women if they've ever been on a diet! We take debt for granted. Of course we've been in debt – is there any other way to live? We are encouraged and expected to “buy now, pay later” – we go in debt for houses, cars, education, and a host of consumer products from furniture to clothes to cosmetics to weight loss. Credit cards clutter our wallets and we talk more about “managing” debt than avoiding it.

However, if you're 60 or older, you may remember a day when debt was not assumed. When you waited until you could afford to buy, or when you put items on layaway and paid for them gradually, looking forward to the day that you could take possession of that item and use it. Times have changed.

Canada is one of the most affluent countries in the world. And yet, the aggregate consumer debt of Canadians is astonishing. Aggregate consumer debt is the amount of money, in total, owed by Canadians for the stuff we have that we haven't yet paid for – houses, cars, education, furniture, clothes, groceries – anything we buy on credit. Any guesses as to what our aggregate consumer debt is? Would you believe me if I told you that it is over \$750 billion dollars? That's \$750 Billion dollars that we're living beyond our means! No wonder short term mission trips to low income countries have a tendency to shake us up!

For more details see:

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=M1ARTM0012689>. Check out <http://www.creditcards.com/statistics/statistics.php> for some statistics concerning credit card debt in the US. See <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/personalfinance/creditcards.html> for an interesting article on Canadians and their credit card use.

So, what could we – what would we or will we – do to help our neighbor escape the sentence of debt and poverty? Whether a debtor lives in Canada or Mathare Valley, they live in a prison. To be sure, the average indebted Canadian lives much more comfortably than the average debtor from Mathare Valley – but it's only a matter of degree.

Interest rates, whether on credit cards or from loan sharks or even through legitimate financial institutions, can trap a person for years or a lifetime. People get in over their heads before they know it and get behind as soon as a crisis disrupts their repayment plans. In Canada we need to help people (maybe starting with our children and grandchildren) understand the dangers of debt. We need to help them curb their desires so that they are not vulnerable to advertising aimed at creating endless desires for “stuff”. And we need to encourage them (and us!) to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner, care for the widows and orphans – and, as we’re doing all that, we will be spreading good news and hope for the oppressed, whether amongst our literal neighbors in our communities, or among our global neighbors around the world.

Window on the World

Let’s take a look at our sisters on another continent: India. How does poverty affect their lives? What are the systemic (cultural, structural, political) causes of women’s poverty in India? The following excerpt is taken from the website of an organization called *The Hunger Project* (a global, strategic organization committed to the sustainable end of world hunger). Check out their website at <http://www.thp.org/> for lots of great information from around the world. Here’s what they say about hunger and poverty in India:

The persistence of hunger and abject poverty in India and other parts of the world is due in large measure to the subjugation, marginalization and disempowerment of women. Women suffer from hunger and poverty in greater numbers and to a great degree than men. At the same time, it is women who bear the primary responsibility for actions needed to end hunger: education, nutrition, health and family income.

Looking through the lens of hunger and poverty, there are seven major areas of discrimination against women in India:

- **Malnutrition:** India has exceptionally high rates of child malnutrition, because tradition in India requires that women eat last and least throughout their lives, even when pregnant and lactating. Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children, perpetuating the cycle.
- **Poor Health:** Females receive less health care than males. Many women die in childbirth of easily prevented complications. Working conditions and environmental pollution further impairs women's health.
- **Lack of education:** Families are far less likely to educate girls than boys, and far more likely to pull them out of school, either to help out at home or from fear of violence.
- **Overwork:** Women work longer hours and their work is more arduous than men's, yet their work is unrecognized. Men report that "women, like children, eat and do nothing." Technological progress in agriculture has had a negative impact on women.
- **Unskilled:** In women's primary employment sector - agriculture - extension services overlook women.
- **Mistreatment:** In recent years, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in India, in terms of rapes, assaults and dowry-related murders.

Fear of violence suppresses the aspirations of all women. Female infanticide and sex-selective abortions are additional forms of violence that reflect the devaluing of females in Indian society.

- **Powerlessness**: While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has little effect in the face of prevailing patriarchal traditions. Women lack power to decide who they will marry, and are often married off as children. Legal loopholes are used to deny women inheritance rights. (<http://www.thp.org/reports/indiaiwom.htm>)

Debt Loads of Low Income (Developing) Countries

Perhaps you've heard something of the discussion surrounding the economic straitjacket developing countries find themselves in when they are paying huge proportions of their Gross Domestic Income on interest payments to service their debt to other countries or to the World Bank. Perhaps you've heard of the *Jubilee Debt Campaign* – a campaign to end the impoverishment of developing countries through crippling debt repayment plans. The campaign is based on the following sad state of affairs:

The world's most impoverished countries are forced to pay over \$100 million EVERY DAY to the rich world in debt repayments, while poverty kills millions of their people. Meanwhile, creditors use their power over indebted countries to force them to privatize their services, open up their markets or cut essential spending. (<http://www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk/?lid=110>)

Change is possible when we are informed and when we commit ourselves to work together to end injustice and to spread hope. These are big problems and we can't do everything, but we can do something. Start where you are. Look around. Pay attention. Ask questions. Pray for God to show you how you can make a difference and pray that you will have the courage to do whatever God asks of you!

Prayer Time: Some things in this study may hit too close to home as debt is a huge problem in our society. Most of us have accumulated more than we ever intended. The purpose of these studies is again, not to induce feelings of guilt and helplessness, but rather to move us toward attitudes of wholeness and healing. Spend some time in prayer asking for God's wisdom and guidance for two things:

1. How do I or we as a family need to change our spending patterns in order to live within the means that God has provided.
2. What response would God ask of me to advocate for justice for those who suffer from debt around the world?

Lesson 4: “Racism can Challenge Us”

Read: Mark 7: 24 – 30

The Syrophenician Woman

Discuss together:

- 1) *What are the ethnic and racial tensions around the world that increase suffering for women?*
- 2) *What prejudice was the woman in the story facing?*
- 3) *How did she stand up for herself in this story?*
- 4) *In what way was Jesus both an adversary and an advocate?*
- 5) *Who should be the beneficiaries of God’s blessings?*
- 6) *How do we hinder all races and cultures from knowing earthly blessings?*

Action and Response

- 1) *What attitude of racism are you aware of in your own life?*

Racism is a persistent and destructive expression of sin. It infiltrates the thoughts (and therefore the actions) of individuals and it spreads like yeast through whole societies, infecting social systems so that no corner is immune from its effects. Sometimes racism is obvious – in your face – an eruption of deeply rooted feelings of contempt for those of another race. More often, it is subtle – barely perceptible beneath a veneer of “tolerance”. Like a toxin which is odourless and colourless, racism can work its deadly poison through a organization, community or whole society.

Most Canadians don’t consider themselves to be racist and most of us would not intentionally do anything to hurt someone of another ethnic or linguistic group. But this doesn’t let us off the hook! Racism is sin. Racism violates God’s purpose in creation. Racism divides God’s people. Racism is an abuse of power. Racism denies Jesus’ declaration that in Him, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (Gal. 3:28, NIV). Racism diminishes both victim and perpetrator. Racism is evil.

You may be thinking that this does not apply to you. That you really are the proverbial exception - that you view everyone the same and would never treat someone differently because of the colour of their skin or any other characteristic over which they have no control. I believe you, but is that really the point? Let me explain.

Racism isn’t just about prejudice or stereotypes. Racism is about PRIVILEGE and POWER – the ability to impose our will on others. In Canada we usually don’t need to use force to get our way. Whether we realize it or not, our social systems persistently favour white people, despite the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in the face of human rights commissions. Sure, marginalized people can fight for their rights – if they have access to the funds to do so and the stomach for all that legal battles entail.

The thing about privilege is that we take it for granted. We don’t even see it. We go into a bank to get a mortgage and are treated with respect and dignity. A black or native neighbour may go into the same bank to get a mortgage and also be treated with respect and dignity.

Same forms, same process. No racism there. At least not that we can see. But is it the same? Do the white person and the black person with the same financial history have access to the same funds? Or are there implicit limits?

2) *How can you work toward a more honest and open attitude to all people, whether across the lane or across the ocean?*

I (Lois) have noticed a disturbing trend in Canada as we become more aware of the effects of poverty around the world. The trend is this: somehow we seem to think that poor people in other countries are deserving of our sympathies and support but that poor people here at home are somehow “undeserving”. And, I think there are racial undertones. We can look at video clips of desperately poor African children and feel compassion for them, but our hearts may be more resistant to images of poor North American black or Hispanic or Aboriginal children in the more familiar settings of our towns and cities. Why is this?

Maybe it’s because we see the African children as being victims of their circumstances while we think that poverty at home is the result of poor choices. If we look a little deeper though, we may discover that in many cases, poor choices say as much or more about the social systems than about the character of the individuals who make them.

What do we assume about people? Do we have the opinion that people are basically good and, if given a chance (i.e. the right circumstances), will do the right thing? Or do we believe that people are essentially selfish and greedy, always out to get ahead? The empirical evidence is confusing. On one hand, we can think of examples of people who act courageously and selflessly at great personal cost or injury to themselves. On the other hand, are images of people looting in the aftermath of a tsunami or earthquake. It would seem that humanity has the capacity for both great good and great evil.

The prophet Jeremiah (17:9) says: “The **heart** is deceitful above all things, and desperately **wicked**: who can know it?” How can we then, rise above the natural inclinations of our hearts and become “good”? Romans 12:1-2 comes to mind:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, **but be transformed by the renewing of your mind**. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (emphasis added).

Prayer: If we are to overcome habits of racism, we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds. This requires, first of all, that we acknowledge our complicity in the racism present in our society, our denominational structures, our churches and ourselves. We cannot change what we do not acknowledge. The second step is to repent of our complicity, whether we participated intentionally or not. The third step is to align ourselves with God’s agenda – his description of life in the Kingdom where there is “. . . neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female...” (Galatians 3:28).

Lesson 5: “Inequity can Oppress Us”

Read: Matthew 20: 1 – 16

Parable of the Vineyard

- 1) *Do you like this parable? How do you feel about the “fairness” of the story?*
- 2) *How much is fair day’s wage in Africa? India? Indonesia? Canada?*
- 3) *How do we justify the inequity of income around the world?*
- 4) *How do our needs in Canada create more inequity in labour markets?*
- 5) *Is this parable a justification for continued inequity?*
- 6) *What is “fair” in the Kingdom of God?*

Action and Response

- 1) *What do you know about fair trade marketing? How might we participate in order to even out the inequities?*

Do you shop at Walmart? I (Lois) have friends who refuse to shop at Walmart, no matter what. The promise of “low price” doesn’t fool them. They know that in the global economy, low prices for consumers in North America (or any of the relatively affluent countries) means that labourers elsewhere (often in low income countries) are working at an “impoverishing wage”. It’s really as simple as that.

Now, having said that, I need to say that I still shop at Walmart – and the Dollar Store and Shoppers Drug Mart and Zellers and the Price Club and Reitmans and occasionally, at stores like American Eagle and Thrifty’s and the Gap and Sport Check. In my opinion, Walmart is really no different than the rest – just better at it. And, I suppose their “guaranteed low prices, everyday” slogan has forced other retailers to keep prices low – because that’s what the consumer wants.

There’s a very interesting book called The Walmart Effect, by Charles Fishman, that explains the way Walmart has influenced the entire global economy. It’s fascinating and frightening. It makes you realize that capitalism and the relentless pursuit of profit on the part of multinational corporations is ultimately responsible for many of the inequities in the world. And what can we do about it?

The way I see it, we have two options: fight the system or use the system. Fight the system would mean to join the anti-globalization activists who want to bring capitalism down. Using the system would mean to spend our energies, not on protests and political lobbying, but on more subtle forms of insurgency – living below our means, giving generously and strategically (for both local and global efforts to counter economic disparities and injustice) and practicing radical hospitality where we truly see all that we “have” as being entrusted to us for the purposes of God’s kingdom rather than for our own enjoyment and comfort. In short, living within a capitalist economy but not worshipping the god of consumerism and materialism.

We often hear about “free trade” agreements. We need to realize that free trade generally favors the rich. “Fair trade” on the other hand, ensures that primary producers receive a

“fair” price for the labour. Fair trade products in Canada are fairly limited: coffee, tea, chocolate, dried fruit. The 10,000 Villages movement has also introduced other consumer products into the North American market: clothing, crafts, books, CDs, etc. Buying fair trade products may not be much, but it certainly is a start. Here’s what wikipedia (online encyclopedia) says about fair trade:

Fair trade is an organized [social movement](#) which promotes standards for international [labour](#), [environmentalism](#), and social policy in areas related to production of [Fairtrade](#) labeled and unlabelled [goods](#). The movement focuses in particular on exports from developing countries to developed countries.

Fair trade's strategic intent is to deliberately work with marginalised producers and workers in order to help them move from a position of vulnerability to security and economic self-sufficiency. It also aims at empowering them to become stakeholders in their own organizations and actively play a wider role in the global arena to achieve greater equity in [international trade](#). (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fair_trade)

2) *What are other ways to create more equality in the market place?*

In terms of action items, here are some suggestions:

- a. look for fair trade products and, if you can afford to, spend the extra money it takes to support producers in low income countries;
- b. talk about “fair trade” with family and friends and encourage others to follow you example;
- c. suggest that your church use fair trade products whenever they are available and educate your own congregation as to the benefits of the fair trade movement;
- d. as you shop at your favorite retailers and look for bargains and “good buys”, remember those whose labour has produced the items you’re buying and find ways to put money back into their economy. We hear so much about political corruption in developing countries that we may be hesitant to give through government channels. Perhaps the best option is to give money through organizations like The Sharing Way to support projects identified by our partners in low income countries which will bring immediate relief and long term development.
- e. become informed. Pay particular attention to news items around free trade and fair trade so that you might raise awareness in your circle of influence about the effects of globalization on other parts of the world.
- f. locally, pay attention to public debate on issues like the minimum wage and other public policy impacting the poor and marginalized and become an advocate for justice right here at home.

Prayer Time: Take time to ask God to reveal one change that you can make in your life, no matter how small, that can lessen the injustice our North American lifestyle inflicts on other countries around the world.

Lesson 6: “Religion Can Bind Us”

Read: John 4: 1 – 26 The Samaritan Woman

Discuss the Following:

- 1) The Religious practices of Jesus’ day did not allow women to seek a divorce. Only the man could dismiss a woman with just a simple note. The Samaritan woman was “dismissed” many times until she was deemed of so little value; her present “husband” did not even see fit to marry her. *What choices did this woman have in her life?*

Do we ever truly choose freely? The fact is that our choices are conditioned by our life experiences and circumstances. Our choices might be limited by *tangible personal qualities* like our gender, our socio-economic status, our education, our age, our physical appearance, our abilities. They are also limited by *tangible systemic qualities* – social, cultural, religious beliefs and practices. And then there are countless intangibles – how we feel about our past, the current situation, possible outcomes of our choice or decision. Human behavior is wonderfully complex.

Think about this Samaritan woman, realizing that we can never completely put ourselves in her shoes. Certainly her very famous encounter with Jesus resonates with every woman on some level. But frankly, her life is so different from mine that I have to be very careful that I don’t assume too much of her motives. I want to take her at “face value”. Whatever choices she had made in the past, they ultimately brought her to Jacob’s well and this encounter with the living Christ. *Discuss together what ways the Samaritan woman may have been a victim of limited choice.*

- 2) *How did her lack of rights contribute to her present situation?*

Women around the globe live in a world that has been fundamentally shaped by men. Our realms of influence are often tempered by a social and political context which assigns women a set of circumstances which constrain their choices in significant and often predictable ways.

This woman’s social value and economic security – like that of all 1st Century women - depended on her relationship with men (father, husband, brother...). An outcast, she was drawing water from the well in the heat of the day when the respectable women were at home. There is a high cost to pay for being a woman of ill repute.

- 3) *Shame is a potent force. How did Jesus restore this woman’s dignity and worth?*

The Samaritan woman is astounded by the fact that Jesus, a man and a Jew, would have anything at all to do with her. I can imagine her approach to the well – seeing Jesus – “what is he doing here?”. She would naturally be suspicious, wary, hot and tired. No doubt the “appropriate” response under the circumstances was to turn away - in shame - and wait until the well is “safe” for such a woman as herself. But this is her destiny and she embraces it, although with some hesitancy.

4) *How did Jesus include her back into the faith and worship of her religion? What is the heart of the matter?*

Have you noticed how Jesus meets people where they are? This woman has come to the well for water – a fundamental human need, a point on which there is common ground for in the need for water there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Samaritan. Despite the social mores and norms, it becomes a safe space – holy ground. Jesus enters that space and transforms it.

Action and Response

5) *What religious beliefs and practices today work against women and create more poverty?*

We could look at other religious systems and point a finger at their teachings which constrain women and ultimately imprison them in circumstances which seem to us to be inherently unjust and even abusive. In Canada there has been much discussion as to whether practicing Muslims should be permitted to live according to Shariah law, especially when it prescribes treatment of women which is contrary to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This is a complex issue and if you're interested, you could begin some research with this CBC backgrounder: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/islam/shariah-law.html>.

But what about Christianity in 21st Century Canada? Are there Christian beliefs and practices right here at home which work against women and create more poverty? If our socio-political system is rooted in Judeo-Christian beliefs and if women in Canada find themselves living in poverty because of public policies which mitigate against them, could it be that our practice of Christian teaching has somehow contributed to this injustice?

Nancy left an abusive husband 20 months ago after 13 years of marriage. He has been charged on two counts: assault and unlawful confinement. He has a documented history of abuse, having broken Nancy's leg in a previous incident for which he was charged but not imprisoned. A preliminary hearing about 8 months after Nancy left established that there is sufficient evidence against him to warrant a criminal trial. The first trial date finally came but the trial was delayed due to a paperwork error.

For the past 20 months, Nancy's life has been a long and very unpleasant roller coaster ride. She has had some support from the "system" in the form of legal aid and Social Assistance. She has also worked in a low income job when she has been able to find work. She has moved from her home to an apartment and then to another community when her husband returned to the home with a new girlfriend. Her husband, though facing charges, has been "free" for the past 20 months to come and go as he likes. He has not contributed any financial support.

Is this just? Individual Christians have supported Nancy through all of this, but the question remains, how could the church advocate for systemic changes which would prevent scenarios like this one? Consider these statistics for Canada with an emphasis on women in poverty in Manitoba:

- Currently, 2.4 million women in Canada are living in poverty. 20.8 % or 1 in 5 Manitoba women are poor.
- The picture is much worse for single mothers. Single mothers continue to represent the poorest of all families in Canada. Half - 50.9% - of single-mother Manitoba families are living in poverty.
- 70% of Manitoba children living in poverty are living in a single female household.
- More than half of senior women living alone in Manitoba are poor.
- Poor children live in poor families. On average, the Manitoba child poverty rate has steadily remained above the national rate from 1989 to 2002. One in five Manitoba children live in poverty. Nationally, one in six children are in poor families.
- The burden of poverty falls heavily on single women, even though many are working hard.
- The income of a lone mother with 2 children working 40 hrs a week at minimum wage is less than 50% of Statistics Canada Low Income Cut-Off (LICO). In real dollars, she earns just \$15,000 a year but requires \$31,000 to meet basic family needs and remain above the poverty line.
- Put another way, a single mother with two children would need to work 80 hours a week at minimum wage to climb out of poverty.
- Women account for two thirds of Canadian minimum wage workers.
- Mothers struggling with poverty report routinely missing meals themselves in order to provide food for their children.
- Some women are especially vulnerable to poverty. The poverty rate for immigrant women is five percentage points higher, visible minority women's rates are roughly two times and the rate for Aboriginal women are more than double relative to Canadian women overall. (from <http://www.winnipeg Harvest.org/hunger/womenpoverty>)

For an excellent report on women and poverty in Canada, see http://www.napo-onap.ca/en/resources/Voices_English_04232004.pdf and <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection/SW21-57-2000-3E.pdf>.

- 6) Are there ways that Christianity as a "religious institution" contributes to strife in the world?

Perhaps it offends you to think that Christianity might somehow be contributing to strife in the world. The fact is that we can choose to close our eyes to injustice, whether it is right in front of our noses or halfway around the world. We also need to remember that there are “sins of commission” and “sins of omission”. There are currently about one billion people in this world living in abject poverty and another billion for whom survival from one day to the next is all there is to life. That’s about a third of the population of this planet! And all of this while the nations most conspicuously shaped by Christian beliefs are enjoying scandalous levels of affluence and are using far more than our share of the earth’s scarce resources. So, although we may see ourselves as “innocent” and not feel any sense of responsibility for the plight of these “neighbours”, can we at the same time claim to be followers of Christ?

- 7) What are the ways that Christ can use his followers to work against the injustice caused by religion and lead others to the heart and faith of worship?

In 1 Timothy 6:17-19 we read:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

The life that is truly life does not refer to material prosperity. And, until we Christians realize that there is a strong link between injustice and poverty it will be difficult for us to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the work of the Kingdom. Like the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-31), we may go away sad because we are unwilling to let go of the things we have.

The old hymn which says “We’ve a story to tell to the nations” will ring much truer when Christians share their resources with the poor and downtrodden and really devote ourselves to worshipping God in spirit and in truth!

Prayer: Continue to pray for wisdom and guidance in how true followers of Christ can heed the Micah 5 challenge, to DO Justice; LOVE Mercy; and WALK humbly and responsibly with God, the Father of ALL.