

The Spiritual Power of Poverty

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The world is still plagued by poverty, and our attitudes towards those living below the poverty line can range from apathy to rage, from disdain to paternalism to pity.

No doubt, the way we regard the issue of poverty itself should be grounded in a deep desire to rid the world of it. But how should we regard those people living in this condition?

Baha'u'llah wrote:

If ye meet the abased or the down-trodden, turn not away disdainfully from them, for the King of Glory ever watcheth over them and surroundeth them with such tenderness as none can fathom except them that have suffered their wishes and desires to be merged in the Will of your Lord, the Gracious, the All-Wise. – *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 314.

The Baha'i teachings make it clear that no one should look down on anyone suffering from poverty. We are all created noble, and all possess the same array of potential virtues. Because of this inherent nobility, we never have the right to belittle anyone. Poverty and wealth are temporary conditions, limited to the boundaries of this material world.

Also, people living in poverty have so much to teach the world about spirituality.

Just as the physical body is developed through training, so is our inner self. To become actualized, the virtues within us must be developed through education and practice. Through spiritual knowledge of our true nature, as gleaned from the messengers of God, we become aware of our inner potential. Through implementing their spiritual lessons, we begin to sharpen these faculties.

No doubt, each virtue is developed in certain conditions and through certain actions. We develop generosity by giving, and we also learn about it when we have very little. We learn determination when our resolve is tested through adversity. In a word, each condition we find ourselves in presents us with a unique opportunity to develop different aspects of ourselves.

So, what does this mean in relation to those living in poverty?

No doubt, poor people face a life which elicits virtues that those with wealth may never acquire, or at least to the same extent. In my current privileged condition, I cannot fathom these dimensions but can only guess at them. I imagine that a life in which hunger is a daily condition forces one to reach deep into the resources of their being for the faith in God and resolve to keep striving. A life in which work is sporadic necessitates a trust in God that transcends any type of trust that a person whose life is stable and secure needs to have.

Abdu'l-Baha explained that those in poverty can be spiritually uplifted:

... Show the world that in spite of the utmost suffering, poverty, sickness, you have something which gives you comfort, strength and peace—that you are happy—serene—satisfied with all that is in your life. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Star of the West*, Volume 9, p. 86.

In fact, we could say that a life of poverty provides the opportunity to focus more on spiritual sustenance than material satisfaction. Of course, that does not mean this is an automatic attitude those in poverty always adopt. It can be very easy to look at the appearance of affluence and set one's aspirations on it—which may even make one's poverty more of a burden. But there must be certain spiritual lessons that one would learn more quickly if living with little wealth.

Baha'u'llah actually said that the poor are more likely to attain to spiritual progress:

Know ye in truth that wealth is a mighty barrier between the seeker and his desire, the lover and his beloved. The rich, but for a few, shall in no wise attain the court of His presence nor enter the city of content and resignation. – *The Hidden Words*, p. 41.

This is probably the reason that many of the world's most spiritual people throughout history have chosen a life of poverty, have renounced wealth to live a life devoted to the spirit. But what is it that feeds their souls?

The Spirit breathing through the Holy Scriptures is food for all who hunger. God Who has given the revelation to His Prophets will surely give of His abundance daily bread to all those who ask Him faithfully. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 57.

Where does true wealth come from?

... to be poor in all save God is a wondrous gift, belittle not the value thereof, for in the end it will make thee rich in God ... – Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words*, p. 40.

Place not thy reliance on thy treasures. Put thy whole confidence in the grace of God, thy Lord. Let Him be thy trust in whatever thou doest, and be of them that have submitted themselves to His Will. Let Him be thy helper and enrich thyself with His treasures, for with Him are the treasures of the heavens and of the earth. He bestoweth them upon whom He will, and from whom He will He withholdeth them. There is none other God but Him, the All-Possessing, the All-Praised. All are but paupers at the door of His mercy; all are helpless before the revelation of His sovereignty, and beseech His favours.

– Baha'u'llah, *The Proclamation of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 49-50.

Clearly, though, the Baha'i teachings do not condone grinding poverty or the continual subjugation of the rights of the poor. Baha'is believe that economic oppression should no longer be tolerated:

Some are too rich, some are too poor, some have millions and some have nothing. An organization is necessary to control this state of affairs. It is necessary to limit riches or it is necessary to limit poverty. Either extreme is wrong. There should be a medium state. If it is right for a capitalist to possess a great fortune, then it is also just that a workman should have means of existence. If poverty is allowed to reach a condition of starvation, it proves that there is a tyranny. Men must see that this does not happen in any case. There must be special laws. The rich must give of their plenty. If they have more than they need they must think of those who are in want.

The government of a country should make laws which conform to the Divine Law. The Law of God exacts that there should be neither excessive wealth nor excessive poverty.

– Abdu'l-Baha, *Star of the West*, Volume 2, p. 5.

Baha'u'llah explained that we should not passively resign ourselves to a life without means, but should actively work and live a spiritual and material life. Acceptance and perseverance are not antithetical. We accept the challenge, try to overcome it and grow throughout the process. When it comes to poverty, we all need to acknowledge that everyone is a noble being, regardless of their economic condition—and we all need to appreciate everyone's right to manifest that nobility. Every human being possesses the same inner qualities that mirror our Creator, and we are all deserving of a life with the basic necessities and the opportunity to manifest abundance internally and externally.