

POVERTY AND MORALITY: A CASE STUDY

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This case study looks at the link between poverty and morality by examining a real life situation. This is not to say that poverty directly reduces morality, but perhaps the moral options open to people are so severely reduced by their economic circumstances that morality may be difficult to sustain or simply too idealistic in the eyes of the poor who do not yet know Christ.

It is very easy for us to judge people for their immoral decisions, but are they entirely accountable for the choices? What were the circumstances behind their choices? And who is to carry the responsibility for the extreme social and economic difficulties that made people like this feel so trapped that a compromised morality seemed their only recourse? We have to consider that while their final choice may be an immoral one, their choice may be the climax of a long line of external factors including social greed and exploitation.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?”

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:3-7, NIV).

I first met Ding¹ while I was at the market. We said hello in passing, and he asked what my name was and where I was from. It was a typical Filipino encounter. He asked if he could talk with me for a while, which is also very normal in this culture. But all the same I felt a little uncomfortable. As long as we stayed in a clear public place, I supposed it was safe enough to spend a little time with him to see what he wanted.

¹ “Ding” is not his real name to preserve his privacy.

Ding is a guy of average looks, healthy, a good height, with a strong personality. He was dressed in his tight Lee jeans with a large shining buckle, a body hugging Sando,² an earring, and red highlights in his hair. He was obviously not a Christian. By any Filipino calculations he was obviously “carnal.”

I could guess at a glance some aspects of his lifestyle. Quick to judge, I already pictured him getting drunk with his barkadas³ and womanizing whenever he got the chance. I felt self-conscious walking along with him or sitting and talking with him. What will others be thinking? Especially other Filipinos who will quickly assume maybe he was a pimp for me. At least they would be laughing amongst themselves as they watch him become “my guide,” being friendly just so that this foreigner will take him for a free ride, buying him food, clothes, entertainment, or what ever other “fringe benefits” may develop out of the relationship.

What did he really want? I asked him straight to his face.

He said he would like to talk to me about some things.

Still, I was suspicious why he wanted to hang around with me. I asked him to wait for me while I went across the road, and watched him at a distance to see if he had any companions hiding in the crowd, but he just stood there alone, waiting, and communicated with no one.

I was beginning to be chastised by thoughts of what Jesus would do, because Jesus would even talk with crooks and prostitutes. For all I knew, Ding might be genuinely reaching out and I could be giving him the cold shoulder. He might sense my unease and leave. My chance would be lost.

“If other people jump to the wrong conclusions about me spending time with him, isn’t that their problem?” I told myself.

I still had another one hundred questions racing around my head but I went back across the road. We found a place to have afternoon tea, and a chance to talk.

² A Philippine-style singlet.

³ That is, “his drinking and gambling mates.”

He had been doing his own calculations too it seems, and figured there was something that made him feel he could trust me. He never asked me for anything. He did not even want anything to eat; just a drink. I was beginning to be impressed. He was not proving to be like some of the negative experiences I had had before.

“I need someone to talk to,” he said, and I agreed to meet him again.

He did not seem really distraught as if some sudden crisis had grabbed him. I began to sense there were some deeper life issues, something real and fundamental he felt burdened to verbalize. Anyway, I was also intrigued how it could be that his English was excellent, even though he was obviously not highly educated, not from a wealthy background, not a professional.

Over the next few meetings I discovered many sobering things. Ding was born and brought up in a very poor family in a remote part of Quezon province. His family owns no family land, simply laboring on other people’s farms. He was one of the very few in his family who graduated from high school. But what could he do in that remote place? There were no prospects for him in his hometown.

He was determined that neither he nor his family should have to live generation after generation in poverty. He was going to get out of the place and “make a difference.”

So as a young man of only 22 he moved to Manila, his first time in the big city. He only had enough money for a few weeks, and getting a job was nearly impossible if you had no connections; contacts to get you into employment, an uncle with a factory, a family friend who runs a store or some other open doors.

The money was running out quickly. He had no return fare, and he would soon be evicted from the boarding house once “one month overdue for payment” had been reached. Anyway, he was already beginning to get desperate as the money for food had already run out.

It was clear, he had to take desperate measures. Manila is a merciless place for the homeless without money or food; so merciless that it would not be unrealistic to imagine he would die in the city. He knew nobody, had no money. He looked at those sleeping on sheets of

cardboard under the overhead Light Rail and dared to let his mind see himself there just for a moment.

There was a certain panic that welled up inside him. There were only days left, that was clear. "I'll die if I can't do something fast!" he thought to himself.

He had seen some signs inviting "Applications Within" but he never had the courage to ask about the work. He did not have to be too bright to figure out what the game was. But what other choices were there now?

He tossed and turned for a few more nights, before plucking up enough nerve. He scrubbed up both his body and clothes, and took decisive action. He was good looking enough with a good physique. After only half an hour of discussion with the manager, he could start straight away. He was now employed: a "dancer" in a strip club.

It was so humiliating to take off his clothes in front other people and have then whistling and leering at every part of his body. Inside himself he had very mixed feelings. He was rejoicing that he had a job at all and this job paid really well. But on the other hand he was ashamed to make a living this way

Soon the manager explained that the club also ran an escort service for men and women. The manager explained that he did not have to agree to every proposition, but if he were not willing to ever "entertain" the club customers, he would have to look elsewhere for a "dancer."

This was really hard for Ding. He had not had any sexual experience before let alone this type of "service." All the same, he dare not lose his job. So he got used to it. After a while it just became a job. But his strong determination stayed with him. He planned his course of action and eventually got there. But it was going to take money and he had to be focused to do it without family connections to help. He worked for five years in the club, saving his money and learning English proficiently.

Finally he did it. He landed an overseas contract to work as ground crew for a foreign airline in the Middle East. This really pulled in big money and he saved everything he could for the five-year term. He came back from the Middle East two years ago now. He saved enough

to buy a piece of land in the country and build a house for his parents. He also had enough to buy a vacant section in Manila.

In the eyes of his family, Ding is a hero. They all know fully everything about his former lifestyle, but in fact they are proud of him for it because he made real money without becoming a “hold-upper” or a drug-pusher.

Ding is now waiting for confirmation of another overseas contract in a nearby Asian country. He will be working as factory laborer. His goal is now to build himself a house on his lot and also have enough money to start some sort of personal business.

In a material and secular way, at 34 Ding has really made something out of his life. So why did Ding want to talk to me? What troubles him that he has to find a friend to off-load with?

The problem for Ding is that material survival “by any means” has left him with all sorts of regrets and pain, most especially his sexual experiences. As a sexually inexperienced young lad, his feelings of self-worth are badly eroded and damaged. He is well adjusted in other areas of life and perhaps you could say that overall he has a good self-image, but in term of sexual purity, he feels dirty and sordid. Ding would love to marry a “sweet young wife,” to have a family and a happy home, but his earlier exploits make him feel unworthy of hoping for that.

It is easy to say glibly, “Well, I guess that’s the price you pay for immorality!” especially as you see him now, well fed, well dressed and some material things to brag about. But what were his choices in those fearful days of total poverty?

Is Ding really the one to blame? Sure, he was the one who personally chose the path of immorality, but in what ways was he cornered into these choices by poverty?

After spending several hours together over several meetings, I was the one who began to feel ashamed. When I first met Ding I made some quick but accurate assessments of him. The story he went on to tell me about his life was in keeping with what I anticipated. In that regard my reaction to him was justified. But I never really took the time to consider what circumstances made those choices seem the best of the bad selection as he saw them.

That is not to say that I think it is acceptable for any man to be a stripper and escort, but I can be much more compassionate about how he got into that situation. I can also see that others are in part to be held accountable, including the “systems” that cause such poverty and that provide the opportunities to do evil.

Now I have found the person inside Ding, a strong and resourceful person. I have found a person with a good heart, with real regrets and pains, a person who wants to do it right, a person whom I learned to care enough about to believe he deserved to find a new life in Christ.

Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:8-11, NIV).