

God, Life, and Everything
"Rich and Poor are Different"

"Class warfare" is one of those catch phrases used politically every time someone mentions taxes or income inequality or ... well pretty much anything having to do with politics.

But some recent studies have shown us interesting things about the rich and the poor, some that seem logical, some that may surprise (or not, depending on how brilliant you are). One study by Princeton psychologist Eldar Shafir and Harvard economist Sendhil Mullainathan showed that when people are worried about money issues, they don't perform well on tasks that require thinking. They also found that poor people think about money more than rich people because they are constantly fretting about how to put food on their table or pay the rent.

One of the interesting things about this study is that it looked not only at perpetually well-off and perpetually poor people but also folks who go through a cycle of wealth and poverty (they studied a group of agri-businessmen in India who annually go through a cycle of great wealth followed by a period of poverty. A sort of regular boom and bust.). Regardless of how long they have been wealthy or poor, the results are the same: those with money perform better, and those without have a hard time thinking clearly.

Why would this be? As psychologist Shafir said, "Financial constraints capture a lot of your attention." In other words, if you're worried about how to feed the kids or put gas in the car or pay the rent, you don't have brain capacity left over for long-term planning or immediate problem solving. Think of it as having to go to the bathroom while driving. It takes your attention away from the task at hand, and the worse you have to go, the less you can pay attention to the task at hand.

This fits well with statistics by the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey of 2012 which showed that those just above the poverty line spent a higher percentage of their income on food (at home, not eating out), utilities, transportation and health care. The wealthy spent a higher percentage of their wealth on education and retirement planning (by a lot).

Interestingly, once you have money, you quit worrying about it as much and can think more clearly and more long-range. You actually get smarter and can solve problems better. Those who go through the rich/poor/rich/poor cycle get better and worse at problem solving, depending on whether they have money (and aren't thinking about costs) or not.

What does this tell us? If you have money, you don't think about costs - you don't have to. So you can plan for your future...for yourself. Another study by University of California psychologist Paul Piff showed that wealthier people tend not to think about others at all unless it had something to do with them directly. Consequently, while the

rich give more money to charity in dollars, the poor give far more in percentage of income - forty-four percent more on average.

And you don't even have to be actually rich. You just have to identify yourself as having more. That's enough to make you more self-centered and less giving. Piff suggests this is because the poor have greater "feelings of sensitivity and care for the welfare of other people, the emotion that we call compassion."

Is this really any surprise? If you have ready money, you don't have to think about the cost of everything. You get annoyed when others question your wealth. You wonder what the poor are whining about, and you can't understand why they don't just pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

If you don't have money, then you weigh every purchase, count the pennies on everything and constantly worry. You really can't spare thought for bigger problems or always make clear-headed decisions. Conversely, you understand and feel for those who are in the same boat with you and reach out to help in whatever way you can.

Jesus talked about this more than 2,000 years ago. He told his followers how love of money kills the soul and makes us see others as tools, not as humans (think of the rich man and Lazarus). He knew that the poor live more compassionately (think of the widow's mite). And he knew that being poor makes it hard to keep your head above water let alone get ahead. That's why he showed such compassion for the poor and gave such serious warnings to the rich (think Mark 10:25 "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.").

Was Jesus fomenting class warfare? Based on these studies, I'd say he simply had a keen understanding of the human condition and was not afraid to lay it on the table. If you are poor, you will find it hard to get out of that condition without help. If you are rich, your soul will find it hard to make it to heaven without a different kind of help. How Jesus judges is not for me to say, but based on his words, I'd guess that help would include learning what things really cost.