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POVERTY AND JUSTICE: THE BEAN GAME

Poverty and Justice: The Bean Game

Learning Objective

To introduce to students the fundamental causes of poverty.

Core Messages:

1. God gave everyone talents.
2. Poverty can be a result of
 - a talent that does not earn much reward or compensation, yet is a talent nonetheless
 - poor decision-making by an individual
 - accidents or other negative things that befall a person
 - inadequate support from the government or other societal systems.
3. Decisions about how taxes are collected and how they are distributed.
4. Christianity calls us to help all those who suffer from poverty.

Lesson Preparation

Materials

- Plastic, see-through cups, one for each student
- A bag of beans (you'll need about 1000 beans)
- 75 to 100 3x5 cards
- A bowl big enough to hold a bunch of beans

Before the lesson

1. Fill cups with beans. Every student gets one cup.

- If you have 25 students, fill

5 cups with 100 beans

5 cups with 80 beans

5 cups with 60 beans

5 cups with 40 beans

5 cups with 20 beans

- If you have more or less than 25 students, aim for a similar ratio. There's no exact number here, you just want to make sure you have a wide variety.

2. On the 3x5 cards, make up 3 "decks":

- If you have 25 students, on one deck, write

"100 Beans" on 5 cards

"80 Beans" on 5 cards

"60 Beans" on 5 cards

"40 Beans" on 5 cards

"20 Beans" on 5 cards

- Make another deck of 3x5 cards; these cards read

"10 Beans" on 5 cards

"5 Beans" on 5 cards

"0 Beans" on 5 cards

"- 5 Beans" on 5 cards

"- 10 Beans" on 5 cards

- The third deck of cards read

"10 Beans" on 5 cards

"5 Beans" on 5 Cards

"0 Beans" on 2 cards

"-5 Beans" on 5 Cards

"Wipeout" on 3 cards

The Lesson

1. Have the students sit in a circle.
2. Engage them in a conversation about talents. Ask them to give examples of talents. They may say, "singing," "basketball," "teaching," "being nice," "studying," etc.
3. Help them understand that as you get older, you get paid for your talent. Tell them God gives everyone a talent, but some talents will gain a person more income than others. Again, ask the kids for examples. You could tell them someone could have a talent for teaching, but if you can shoot a basketball as well as LeBron James or Steve Nash, you'll make much more money.
4. Help them understand that in God's eyes all talents are valuable; how society rewards or compensates a talent is a different story. Some students are more talented with studies in school. For those who are not, they have other talents God gave them.
5. You are now ready to hand out the first set of cards, the deck that has the range of 20 to 100 beans listed on them. Tell them each card represents how much the talent God gave them is rewarded in society. Beans are a more neutral symbol than fake dollar bills.
6. Hand out the cards. This symbolizes that talents are something given by God, we don't earn them. You might shuffle them before handing them out.

7. Now, hand out the appropriate cup of beans to each student. This is done so students can start to actually see who has more beans than others.

8. Next, engage them in a conversation about choices people make that either enhance their talent, or diminish their talent. Students will say things like, "choosing to go college would enhance your talent," or "choosing to use drugs would diminish your talent." The point is simply that we do have free will to make choices, and some people do make choices that lead them to poverty. Not every poor person is a victim; some got there on their own.

9. Take the next set of cards. Shuffle and fan them out for students to pick from, without looking. They pick this card to symbolize it is something they chose, it was not handed to them. The cards with ten or five beans on them represent that this person made choices that increased their original talent. Negative bean cards represent choices that diminished their talent. Zero means they did nothing with their talent. Students then add or subtract beans in the cup accordingly.

10. The last set of cards represents "things that happened to you through no fault of your own." Again, ask the kids for examples. They may say things like "a car accident that leaves you disabled," "a friend of yours gives you a job," "a death of a parent" "a divorce." Of course, feel free to give your own examples. This is to teach kids that some are poor through no fault of their own. Take the last set of cards and hand them out to the students. Handing the cards to them symbolizes a choice they did not have. The "wipeout" cards represent something that was so tragic that it virtually wipes you out physically and financially, for example, a car accident that leaves you paralyzed.

11. Quickly add or subtract beans from the students' cups. Then have each student call out his or her total, so everyone can hear the disparity. You should have some students with as many as 120 beans, and some with as few as 10, and everything in between.

12. Place a bowl in the middle of the circle and describe or ask students for examples of what our taxes are spent on: roads, prisons, social services, public schools, to name just a few. Tell them that you need a total of 400 beans (or approximately 1/3 of what you handed out) to go into the common pot to cover these services. Ask the students, who should pay the 400 beans? What's fair? If everyone put in the same amount, let's say 15 beans apiece, that would bankrupt some students, and put others in a predicament. Is asking every student to give the same percentage of beans fair? This is just an open discussion to see how students determine what's fair.

13. After they decide how to get 400 beans in the pot, tell them there are more needs than there are beans. How is it decided which needs get funded? Do you cut back on jails to fund health care benefits for the elderly? Do you cut back on public schools to help children in foster care? The point of this discussion is to help students see that budget decisions are not always easy. You should also lead them to begin articulating their value system. What values are they basing their decisions on?

14. Ask the kids, based on the message of the bean game, if they can identify the causes of poverty. Many younger students will give examples, rather than an abstract category. For example, a student may say "A person decides to use drugs," rather than, "bad choices." Or a student may say "Someone was in a car wreck and left them paralyzed," rather than "Bad things happen to people."

Lead the students to give examples in all four categories:

1) A talent that is not well-compensated; for example, working full time at a fast-food restaurant might be the best this person can do

2) Poor decision-making; for example, deciding to drop out of high school at a young age

3) Bad things happened to them; for example, poor or neglectful parenting, or a serious illness

4) The government or societal system does not provide enough assistance; for example, a person on disability receiving a minimal amount to live on; or a very low minimum wage; or that health care is too costly, and so, many choose to go without.

15. Then ask the students of the four groups of poverty which group they are most inclined to help, and which group they are least inclined to help. Some may say they are most inclined to help those who are poor through no fault of their own, and least inclined to help those who are poor through their own fault. You can then have a discussion of what should be done for the group who are poor through their own fault, since we believe they are still children of God. The Church teaches that we need to have compassion for these people, as well. Some adults may tend to lump ALL poor in the "through their own fault" group. Hopefully, this lesson teaches students other causes of poverty, and that we are to be sympathetic to all. It also introduces them to the concept of taxes and the common good.

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