

## The Way of Privilege

### *What You Need to Know About the Issues Facing Affluent Youth*

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Curtis Miller

*In the midst of our ongoing justice efforts at FYI to right wrongs among those who are poor, we can't forget the needs, pains, and wrongs experienced by the not-so-poor. This article raises important issues to be considered by youth workers serving among middle class or affluent kids and communities.*

## Our Rich Young Rulers

“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”  
(Matthew 19:21) [1](#)

Jesus' words to a rich young man have arguably led to more concern—especially among the rich young Christians in American churches—than any other phrase that came from the lips of our Lord. As youth workers, we have probably tried at some point to soften the blow of these words in order to prevent any undue anxiety on the part of the students in our ministry. After all, Jesus couldn't *really* mean that we're supposed to sell *all* of our possessions, right? He is probably just talking about not letting our stuff control us, not finding our identity in things but in being his

disciples...right?

Judging by our lifestyles (as youth workers, how many among us have actually sold all of our possessions?) this is the conclusion we have drawn. However, if we were honest with ourselves and with what we observe in our students, we might decide there is more at stake in this passage. Jesus seems to imply that having lots of stuff is treacherous to the wellbeing of a disciple, perhaps even a threat to their salvation. After all, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24).

Those of us who have built relationships with the wealthy students in our ministries have likely been struck by the profound loneliness and poverty hidden behind the ipods, Sidekicks, and BMWs. I think what we are seeing in the lives of the rich young people of our own day is much the same thing that Jesus observed in the eyes of that rich young person he encountered in Judea. And Jesus’ warning in the first century still stands: our affluent adolescents are in danger.

## Having It All...or Not

Only in the last few years have psychologists begun to recognize that all is not well with today’s affluent adolescents. The findings have, to say the least, been surprising. Studies done by prominent psychologist S.S. Luthar have found that teenagers in affluent communities have significantly higher rates of depression, eating disorders, substance abuse and addiction, anxiety disorders, cutting and other self-destructive behaviors than all other groups of teenagers.<sup>2</sup> In many markers of mental health and development, affluent kids are worse off even than “high-risk” kids in the inner-city. According to adolescent psychology expert Madeline Levine,

the root of these problems is that affluent teens display a disturbing lack of an independent self and are therefore quite fragile in the face of relatively minor adversity. This in turn leads to the need for self-medicating and self-destructive behaviors like those listed above. [3](#)

Unfortunately for the affluent teenagers who are in desperate need of help, their problems have largely been dismissed. Rich kids are supposed to have all they need, including available, concerned parents and access to medication and treatment unavailable to other teens. However, a variety of factors and pressures have resulted in adolescents who are highly skilled at masking their problems and putting on a happy face for adults (Dr. Chap Clark's "world beneath")[4](#) thus hiding the deeper issues they are facing. In addition, affluent parents are more likely to dismiss signs that their children are in trouble as "just a phase" until the issues are simply too great to ignore. All this conspires against affluent adolescents getting needed attention, and sometimes needed treatment.

## **Keeping Up Appearances in the Culture of Affluence**

Levine and Luthar argue that two main factors in the "culture of affluence" conspire to damage the ability of rich kids to develop a healthy self: achievement pressure and isolation. Achievement pressure refers to the high premium placed upon getting results (being the best...or at least outstanding) and is fed by the perfectionism of the culture of affluence. What is most important is the destination, not how one got there. For example, one of the common pressures for teens (either self-imposed or externally imposed by parents, teachers, and others) is getting outstanding grades so as to get into a top college. What is emphasized is the

end result (the grade, the test score) and not the process (actually learning) or the character with which that result was achieved (hence the high occurrence of cheating). When results matter more than process or character, everyone and everything become a means to selfish ends.

The second factor, isolation, refers to the profound loneliness that is experienced among rich kids and is fed by the value of individualism. This plays out in two ways. First, affluent parents often have more distant relationships with their children than do parents in lower-income families. This comes, writes Levine, from parents being under-involved in important areas of their children's lives while being over-involved in relatively unimportant areas. Continuing our example of school pressures, parents often take a huge (often intrusive) interest in the academic performance of their kids, while at the same time paying little attention to where they go at night and who their friends are. Fortunately, there is hope for the parent who wants to have a better relationship with their child as studies have consistently shown that even the most jaded kids wish they had more time with their parents.

Also contributing to isolation is a culture that values busyness, stress, and hiding any vulnerabilities or weaknesses. These things prevent many in affluent communities, both young and old, from developing close, reliable relationships. Therefore, in difficult times there is no one to fall back on, and nowhere to turn for support.

In addition to achievement pressure (perfectionism) and isolation (individualism), Levine points out one more aspect of the culture of affluence that harms kids: materialism. Materialism means the emphasis on things over people and character, and is rampant in affluent communities. Materialism directly attacks a child's ability

to develop a secure sense of self because it means defining oneself *entirely* through outside markers of status. In other words, you are not defined by your character but by the things you have and by other people's perception of you. There is no internal self-development since all energy is being used to cultivate external perceptions. [5](#)

## If Not This, Then What?

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect about the culture of affluence is that many people in our churches, both adults and adolescents, don't realize that there is an alternative way of living.

Perfectionism, individualism, and materialism have become a sort of American Way that stands in stark contrast to the way of Jesus. But it is not always seen as such in our churches and ministries.

Research is revealing just how damaging this culture of affluence is to the teenagers in our ministries. But the question must be asked: if not this, then what? What do teenagers need to combat the destructive forces that surround them? As I have already mentioned, psychologists such as Levine and Luthar argue that the goal of adolescence is to develop into a healthy adult with a healthy sense of self, but the culture of affluence gets in the way. In order to continue their development, all adolescents—including those of higher economic status—need the following:[6](#)

- *Space and time for solitary reflection.* Most kids are so overscheduled that they have little, if any, time to be alone. What little time there is for relaxing goes to the important task of spending time with friends. The result is that adolescents rarely slow down long enough to ask themselves the hard questions like: "Who am I?" or "Where do I fit?" that contribute to a sense of self.

- . *Warm connection with adults, especially parents.* This does not necessarily refer to the amount of time spent, but the *type* of time spent. Levine quotes one teen as saying that his mother is “everywhere and nowhere at the same time.”<sup>7</sup> “It is in the quiet, unpressured moments,” Levine writes, “that kids reach inside and expose the most delicate parts of their developing selves.”<sup>8</sup> Adolescents need these moments with their parents.
  - . *Clear, firm, authoritative boundaries and discipline.* Kids do not need to be left to do whatever they want, nor do they need a strict, inflexible set of rules. Rather they need clearly defined limits and expectations that create a safe environment from which they can figure out how to approach challenges on their own. This includes setting clear boundaries and giving consequences when those boundaries are violated. As adolescents get older, these boundaries ought to be set further and further out.
  - . *The freedom to make mistakes and the discipline to face the consequences.* This would mean two shifts for affluent parents: allowing their children to make increasingly more (and more important) decisions on their own as they get older, and a commitment to not bailing them out when they make an inevitable mistake. In so doing, the child learns not only how to make independent decisions but also how to make better choices by learning first-hand from mistakes.
00. *A sense of self-efficacy.* In order to develop a healthy sense of self, an adolescent needs more than self-esteem (feeling good about oneself), they need self-efficacy (the sense that they can successfully influence their world and exert some control over their lives). This is highly connected to the previous point since being prevented from making decisions and taking action makes self-efficacy impossible. Many teens truly *don't* have any control over their world and they act out in response to their own helplessness.
- . *Development of internal markers of the self.* This refers to an understanding of who I am that comes from within me, rather

than from other people's approval or expectations. This results in having internal resources to deal with the inevitable difficulties and trials that come with life.

## Action Points: How Can Youth Ministry Respond?

Given the enormity of the problems facing our affluent students, it is tempting as youth workers to throw up our hands. After all, we already have enough concerns we're trying to juggle without adding more. Unfortunately, as recent research has shown, this is exactly the type of thinking that has resulted in the crisis of rich kids left adrift and isolated. While we can't solve these problems ourselves, we can begin to think through how we might respond to the issues faced by our students, and how we might approach the real needs they face. Here are three potential starting points:

1. *We can minister to our students' parents.* It is tempting to think that our job is simply to minister to our students, while some other ministry (men's or women's ministry in our church, etc.) will handle their parents. However, in order to effectively minister to our students, we *must* also minister to their parents. Parents are both the primary source of stress in affluent kids' lives (through achievement pressure) *and* the primary means to combat the outside pressures faced by teenagers (through strong boundaries, limits, and modeling an alternate lifestyle). Therefore, if the behavior of parents does not change, then regardless of what we teach in our ministries, students will go home to an unchanged system. Levine helps us understand creative, effective, and compelling ways to help parents learn and practice the following with their own kids:

How to recognize and respond to the often missed warning signs that all is not right with their children. The importance of warm

connection and intimacy with their kids. This is especially important because studies have shown that parents tend to over-estimate the closeness of their relationship with their kids. The critical importance of developing one's own healthy sense of self. A parent can serve as a model of how to be an independent person who opts out of the culture of affluence and perfection with all of its pressures and detrimental effects. This includes focusing on effort and character more than results. How to welcome healthy separation and develop independence while at the same time monitoring behavior and setting (and keeping) firm boundaries. This includes encouraging self-control and the ability to face the consequences of an action. Finally, we must do all of this while keeping in mind the extreme pressure many parents (especially moms) already feel to raise "perfect" children. Part of our challenge is to find a way to make these changes liberating and grace-filled rather than one more thing a parent needs to do to not screw up their kids.

*2. We can be creative in working against the culture of affluence in our youth groups.* This will likely fail without parental support. However, when parents are doing what they can to encourage the development of a healthy self in their children, we as youth workers have an exciting and crucial role in being an aid (rather than a detriment) to this process. The culture of affluence is pervasive and powerful, and the more trusted voices a student hears countering it, the more likely they will learn to reject it as well. As Levine reminds us, we need to find ways to do the following in our groups:

0. Encourage the development of character, independence and generosity among our students.
  - . Emphasize service to the local church, community, and world. It is

here that students can begin to look beyond themselves and to something greater.<sup>9</sup>

- . Give students opportunities to take initiative in the ministry and in the church as a whole and not worry about a few mistakes. By doing so (while still observing, assisting, and stepping in as necessary) we can give them a chance to develop their independence and sense of being a part of the community.
- . Develop a culture where vulnerability is valued and perfectionism is downplayed.
- . Encourage and create opportunities for self-reflection. Levine points out that while self-reflection is almost foreign to our teenagers, it is a crucial means of developing an independent sense of self. Such times give students a chance to think through who they are and how they relate to the world around them.

3. *We can be careful that our own lives reflect the Kingdom of God and not the culture of affluence.* Students are extremely perceptive, and we will not deceive them by teaching one thing and living out another. If we show in our own lives the perfectionism, materialism, and individualism of the culture of affluence while teaching about the way of Jesus, we will only cement in our students' minds the sneaking suspicion that this "Jesus thing" is unrealistic. We must ask hard questions about our values and actions and how they line up with the way of Jesus. What do our lives show to our students about what we really value? Are we modeling the way of Jesus, or the way of affluence?

- . Scripture quotations in this article are taken from *Today's New International Version*. [↔]
- . Suniya S. Luthar and Shawn J. Latendresse, "Children of the

- Affluent: Challenges to Well-Being,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14:1 (Feb 2005), 49-53. [↔]
- . Madeline Levine, *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids* ( New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006). Her book provides the backdrop for much of this article. [↔]
  - . Chap Clark , *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). See especially chapter 3 where Clark outlines the world beneath, “a separate and highly structured social system” (59) midadolescents have developed in response to adult abandonment. [↔]
  - . For a different take on how materialism and individualism lead to oppression for our kids see J.R. Rozko’s article for the FYI E-Journal at <http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/wp/2007/03/the-other-side-of-at-risk/>. [↔]
  - . These suggestions adapted from Madeline Levine, *The Price of Privilege*, and Chap & Dee Clark, *Disconnected: Parenting Teens in a MySpace World* ( Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007). [↔]
00. Madeline Levine, *The Price of Privilege*, 30. [↔]
- . *Ibid*, 31. [↔]

To help students engage injustices in the world and begin to make a difference around them, see our Deep Justice resource page at <http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/wp/deep-justice/>. [↔]