Shrewd Samaritan: Faith, Economics, and the Road to Loving Our Global Neighbor

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In this inspirational and informative book Bruce Wydick takes the reader on the path to giving and the *homo economicus* way of doing it. Through storytelling, he explains poverty, its sources, and effective ways of giving to those in need. Wydick compares a giver with an amalgam of two Bible characters: the well known good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25–37) and the not so well known shrewd steward (Luke 16: 1–9). Wydick encourages us to investigate poverty and to take an effective role in addressing poverty alleviation. Supported by evidence and personal stories, he successfully fosters a feeling of excitement about becoming a shrewd Samaritan.

**Part 1: The Road to Loving our Global Neighbor**

In Part 1 (Chapters 1 and 2), Wydick opens the topic of becoming an effective giver by sharing the compelling stories of Dr Yee and the pilot Mike Burnett. Dr Yee reminds us that those who feel unsuited to give can successfully become shrewd Samaritans. Giving is an act of commitment and faith rather than knowledge and experience. On the other hand, Burnett exemplifies the pure joy of giving.

Wydick then warns us of the challenges in becoming shrewd Samaritans:

There are too many...people with good intentions whose impact on those living in poverty is hampered by their inability to 1) understand the root of the problems; 2) harness the resources available to them to resolve the (right) problems; 3) understand the causes-and-effect relationships related to poverty; and 4) distinguish between ‘warm glow; feelings of being a benefactor and creating tangible impacts for an intended beneficiary. (p. 12)

Recognizing, understanding, and acting upon these challenges make the difference between a good Samaritan and a shrewd Samaritan. The author describes the six *i*s or stages that people tend to go through on the road to becoming a shrewd Samaritan: (1) ignorance about the roots
of poverty and the physical and mental conditions of the poor; (2) indifference to the suffering of the poor because they are far from our immediate circle of life; (3) idealism in thinking that the problem of poverty can be easily depicted and solved; (4) the investigation of poverty supported by careful analysis of data, evidence, and expert information; (5) introspection on our role in addressing poverty; and (6) a commitment to projects that produce rigorous evidence of reducing poverty in the long term.

Part 2: Understanding Poverty

Part 2 evidences the economist in Wydick. He briefly describes the current academic discussion on the sources of global poverty. Supported by a plethora of leading literature in the field of economic development, Chapters 3 and 4 provide a historical framework on poverty and economic progress, followed by three leading schools of thought on the roots of poverty.

The first school of thought is that geography can cause poverty (Gallup, Sachs, and Mellinger, 1999; Sachs, 2003). For instance, landlocked countries experience high transportation costs and thus a disadvantage in international trade and economic wealth. Equatorial countries might suffer from unique diseases affecting the labor force productivity of these nations.

The second view states that the culture or social values imposed by colonialism and religion can undermine or promote economic progress (Blum and Dudley, 2001; Barro and McCleary, 2003; Weber, 1930). For instance, colonies exposed to biblical views about the virtues of individual ingenuity and the importance of property rights could explain hard work, creativity, and economic growth.

Finally, a third view is related to the institutional framework supporting the economic structure of a country (North, 1991). Whereas property-right laws, law enforcement, and well-developed legal systems can encourage individual creativity and business development, so corruption, “red-tape,” and ambiguous rules and regulations can hamper growth.

In Chapter 5, the author illustrates the economic concept of poverty or development traps and classifies them according to whether they are individual or collective and by whether they are external or internal.
Specifically, individuals can be trapped in poverty rooted in external factors such as malnutrition and credit constraints, whereas collective or community poverty can be embedded in external factors such as limited schooling and a degraded environment. Similarly, an individual can be trapped in poverty that is rooted in internal factors such as limited aspirations and low self-confidence, whereas internal factors of collective poverty can include poor values regarding productivity and natural resource protection methods.

**Part 3: Effective and Ineffective Poverty Interventions**

In Chapter 6, Wydick describes the “movement” of effective altruism (Singer, 2009, 2015) and its advances in efficient responses to global poverty, arguing that its actions and philosophical framework for addressing poverty are still limited. Wydick offers, instead, a framework in which effective giving must procure human dignity and human flourishing. Nurturing human dignity, for instance, can expose unique gifts and talents among the poor that are not recognized or cultivated in many intervention programs. The key argument is that any long-lasting poverty reduction program must be embedded within a human dignity and human flourishing framework.

The author makes a clear point: as followers of Jesus Christ, our motivation to serve others is to serve *Him*. This principle guiding Christians has produced more effective giving than non-Christian-based altruism. Wydick reviews the case of Compassion International, a child-sponsorship Christian-based organization that is highly cost effective and employs a human dignity approach. Its managers and practitioners work hard to reduce administrative costs, and most of its intervention programs include tutoring, encouraging, mentoring, fostering community well-being, and other actions supporting human dignity. Wydick ends Chapter 6 by encouraging the readers to recognize and evaluate their personal boundaries and resources before committing them to others.

In Chapter 7, Wydick focuses on how to differentiate between good and bad “findings” regarding effective poverty programs. He urges delving into statistical analysis, causation, and experimental designs in academia and proper research. He then describes the “Shrewd Samaritan Rating System” for evaluating the work carried out by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to address global poverty. The
system ranks three areas: (1) the cost effectiveness of the project, that is, how much of every dollar is spent on management costs versus the realization of the project; (2) the likelihood that the intervention can be replicated among different groups, regions, communities, and peoples; and (3) the impact on human dignity/flourishing relative to cost (defined in the book as the “Bang-3”). Chapters 7 and 8 describe and rank several well known programs, using a 5-star system in these three areas. Some of the programs described include microcredits, microenterprise training, entrepreneurial mentorship, cash transfers, child sponsorship, school constructions, and free health provision.

Chapter 9 focuses on the common characteristics found among the highest-ranked programs. For instance, interventions are more effective if they address the youngest populations (new-born babies and young children). Cash transfers show a high impact on human dignity due to the signal of trust given to the recipients in being able to choose how to spend the funds. Finally, faith-based interventions tend to provide more holistic and long-term outcomes, improve individual and community self-esteem, share a framework of good work and productivity based on biblical principles, and build strong relationships between the giver and the recipient.

Part 4: Becoming a Shrewd Samaritan

In Part 4, the author invites us to evaluate our individual skills, tools, and strengths to determine the most effective roles and responsibilities in the process of giving. For instance, in Chapter 10, Figure 6 illustrates how a shrewd Samaritan can spend resources to help others directly as an independent giver, or indirectly through one of the organizations described in Part 3. At the same time, a shrewd Samaritan can be a spontaneous/short-term giver or a strategic/long-term committed contributor.

A shrewd Samaritan must also analyze the types of giving by the degree of impact on the recipient. Illustrated in Figure 8, this analysis starts with the question: Does the gift meet real needs? If so, does it improve human dignity by increasing motivation, self-esteem, and the development of productive skills/tools? If the answer to both questions is “Yes,” this is the most effective form of giving. Yet, what about those gifts that meet real needs but do not improve human flourishing? The author defines these gifts as “alms giving.” Examples of alms giving
include helping orphans, the mentally disabled, and those with severe mental and physical problems.

Other possible outcomes include gifts that meet real needs but are not conducive to human flourishing or, worse yet, gifts that do not meet real needs. Organizations that build schools in remote rural areas in developing countries without additional support such as school materials, funds to finance teachers' wages and training, and mentoring to parents about the importance of education, are examples of these types of gifts. The mere construction of a school building is clearly an ineffective giving. The worst-case scenario is "destructive giving" or gifts that do not meet any real need and undermine personal motivations or market environments, such as those gifts promoting aid-dependency or oversupplying markets with imported products, and dropping the prices for domestic producers.

Chapter 11 illustrates the different roles that the giver can assume in the act of giving. "Investigators" dedicate their education, time, and skills to understand and work on poverty issues. "Givers" provide funds or time to organizations with a mission to eradicate poverty. "Advocates" offer funds or time to represent the poor. They educate the public about the types of giving, as well as the givers and the population about the effectiveness of programs available to them. They provide evidence of the real needs of the poor. In short, these individuals facilitate the path for others to become shrewd Samaritans. "Creators" are the entrepreneurs of the poor. These individuals dedicate funds and time to create new and effective poverty-reduction programs, nonprofit organizations, or social businesses. "Directors" are the administrators of effective NGOs. They must possess unique gifts such as multitasking, organization, management, compassion, and a genuine love for the poor. They also must be effective at engaging the givers, the advocates, and the creators in the missions of their NGOs. Finally, "Practitioners" are those "on the front lines," developing relationships, helping to effectively transfer resources to the poor, and providing feedback to the directors. These include aid workers, missionaries, social workers, and microcredit officers. In this chapter, Wydick asks the question: Which of these six roles should an aspiring shrewd Samaritan assume? Supported by skills and personalities, the author assists the readers in this decision.

Wydick closes Part 4 with a seventh i: identification. In our prayers, he encourages us to ask God for guidance to identify our roles and the
people we are called to serve. He states: “we give more and better when we identify with specific individuals and groups.” Wydick recognizes the challenge of identifying ourselves with our global neighbors in meaningful and effective ways, and thus, he provides a list of practical steps to initiate this identification process.

References


