



What's the Big Deal About Corruption?

Applied Biblical Worldview

By Dwight Vogt

Systemic corruption is nothing new. The Protestant Reformation is rooted in Martin Luther's identification of corruption in his own religious community. In 1520 he wrote:

I have come to see that they [indulgences] are nothing but a fraud of the Roman flatterers by which they rob people of their faith and fortunes. Indulgences are a swindler's trick of the Roman flatterers.¹

In many societies, corruption is a way of life, so woven into the fabric of the culture people hardly think about it. "What's the big deal about corruption?" they might ask.

But corruption is a big deal. It sabotages the progress of individuals, families, communities and nations. Whether at the highest levels of government or every day transactions between common persons, corruption always undercuts the progress of people. It limits and slows the development of your neighbors, your community, your nation.

Why is this? Because corruption always benefits a select few while the majority pays the cost.

Corruption especially hurts the poor. When it takes a bribe, and not just good grades and ability, to get into the university the scale tips away from the poor.

Some have argued that corruption can be beneficial, that it is a necessary evil. To this, the Anticorruption Policy and Strategy statement of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) says,

The bulk of the evidence indicates that corrupt actions typically generate far more costs than benefits. A study of corruption in one country, for example, concluded that corruption intensified ethnic conflict, ruined the efficiency of municipal government and federal agencies, crippled the merit system of hiring and promotion, and generated an "atmosphere of distrust which pervades all levels of administration."²

Corruption is not, as some claim, an unseemly but necessary solution to "grease the wheels" of an inert bureaucracy or industry. No, corruption puts grit in the wheels.

¹ Luther, Martin, Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church (October 1520)

² Asian Development Bank, *Our Framework Policies and Strategies: Anticorruption*, p. 16

Corruption undermines the value of work and individual merit. Why earn a doctorate degree when another person can easily purchase the same?

Corruption hinders legitimate business activity. How can you compete honestly in business when others gain unfair advantage through corruption?

Corruption endangers peoples' safety when it results in poor construction and products and the bypassing of public safety rules.

Corruption undermines peoples' support and confidence in government and public institutions.

Corruption is the antithesis of freedom.³ In a free economy one person produces a product and another gives money appropriate to the value of the item. However, when you are forced to pay bribes to get the electricity on, the phone to work, and the water to flow, there is no equal exchange of value. You cease being a free citizen.

Corruption grows like a malignant cancer. One bribe leads to another. If you have to pay a bribe to get something done, why not be corrupt yourself? If everyone else is scamming the system, why shouldn't you? If fact, you're losing if you don't. Corruption spreads like a virus. In 2016 the Asian Development Bank had a 34% increase in the number of firms and individuals it caught violating its Anticorruption Policy.⁴

Corruption works because it most often happens in secret. The average citizen does not normally see exactly who benefits and how much. Nor do they see what the cost is to themselves.

Corruption at the highest levels is often the perfect theft because most people do not see the thief in action nor do they recognize any loss to themselves. They just know that the economy is suffering or that a road did not get built correctly.

Corruption at the petty level of daily life is visible but people often view it as the price they have to pay to get what they need.

Corruption is a major issue all over the world.

What is corruption?

Here's a standard definition of corruption: *the abuse of public or private office for personal gain.*

³ Mangalwadi, Vishal. *Truth and Transformation: A Manifesto for Ailing Nations*, Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing, 2009, p. 236.

⁴ Asian Development Bank, *Office of Anticorruption and Integrity: Annual Report 2016* , Institutional Document, March 2017.

Vishal Mangalwadi, in his book, *Truth and Transformation: A Manifesto for Ailing Nations*, defines it this way:

*Corruption involves abusing one's power to harass, coerce, or deceive others (individuals, institutions, or the state) to acquire value (money, service, goods, ideas, time, property, or honor) without returning proportionate value to them.*⁵

Corruption violates at least four principles critical to the flourishing of individuals, communities and nations. **These principles are foundational because they are tied to who God made us to be as human beings and the purpose He gave us to live out.**

1. The human dignity principle.

Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Every person ever conceived God created in His image. This gives every person intrinsic dignity and worth in the sight of God. Job 34:19 reads, "Who shows no partiality to princes nor regards the rich above the poor, For they all are the work of His hands." All are equal in dignity and value in the sight of God.

Corruption violates this principle because it favors one person over another. It benefits the person who has money and power over the one who does not. It robs people of their dignity and their freedom. It enslaves.

To the degree corruption violates this principle, the development of a community, society and nation will be undercut.

2. The creation or dominion principle.

In Genesis 1:28 God gives all people a divine overarching purpose for their lives on this earth.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Nancy Pearcey, in her book *Total Truth*, explains why this verse is called the Cultural Mandate.

*The first phrase, "be fruitful and multiply," means to develop the social world: build families, churches, schools, cities, governments, laws. The second phrase, "subdue the earth," means to harness the natural world: plant crops, build bridges, design computers, and compose music. This passage is sometimes called the Cultural Mandate because it tells us that our original purpose was to create cultures, build civilizations—nothing less.*⁶

⁵ Mangalwadi, 237

⁶ Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 47.

God gives to every human being the purpose of creating and adding value to this world. Every person is made to create, to contribute, to add value. No one is exempt.

Corruption violates this principle by enabling a person to *get* value without *adding* value. The corrupt person does not add value. He does not contribute anything new or substantial.

The classic example is the feudal landlord who installs a chain across a river that flows through his land and then hires a collector to charge passing boats a fee to lower the chain. There is no added benefit, nothing productive is added, no wealth is created by the transaction. The land owner has made no improvements to the river and is helping nobody in any way, directly or indirectly, except himself. He is simply finding a way to make money from something that should be free. He is taking the wealth of others without creating or adding any wealth in return.

To the degree this principle is violated, the development of a community, society and nation will be undercut.

3. The love your neighbor principle.

In Matthew 22:36-40 Jesus says that all the commandments are summed up in the command to love God and the second command to love your neighbor as yourself. Galatians 5:14 says "For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" God says the purpose of mankind on this earth is to love your neighbor as yourself. What does this mean?

In simple terms, to love your neighbor is to determine what is good (and best) for the other person and then do this. It is to benefit the other. The word "benefit" comes from the Latin *bene facere*—to do good to. For example, plumbers love their neighbor by providing reliable piping for clean water and sanitation in a home. They may never see the homeowner, but their quality work contributes to the good of that person. In turn, the homeowner loves the plumber by giving a complete, on-time payment so the plumber can provide for his family. The eyeglass technician loves his neighbor by making a quality pair of glasses that helps another see clearly. The recipient loves back by paying a fair price for the glasses so the technician can feed his family.

These are business transactions, yes. But this mutual exchange of benefit and good is the essence of God's design for human flourishing. This is why God gave the command to love your neighbor.

Corruption violates this principle. There is no mutual exchange of benefit when one has to pay an "additional processing fee" to get their paperwork done in a timely manner when it should have been done on time without the payment.

There is no mutual exchange of benefit when a government official

- Approves legislation that rewards a company for a big campaign contribution, but does not benefit the general public that government is meant to serve.
- Accepts illicit payments to facilitate access to goods, services, or information to which the public is not entitled.

- Denies access to goods and services to which the public is legally entitled.
- Receives an illicit payment to prevent the application of rules and regulations in a fair and consistent manner, particularly in areas concerning public safety, law enforcement, or revenue collection.

To the degree this love your neighbor principle is violated, the development of a community, society and nation will be undercut.

4. The worship God principle.

Our cultures are ultimately a reflection of the God or gods we worship. Another way of saying this is culture is downstream from worship. That is, the way we do politics, economics and social relationships is downstream from worship. Corruption, as woven into politics, economics and social relationships is downstream from worship.

Who is the God or gods we worship? What is the character and nature of the God or the gods we worship? When these gods are bribable, corrupt culture and behavior follows.

The living God, the Creator God of the Bible, is just. Deuteronomy 10:17 is one of the clearest passages on this subject: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes."

Is the god worshiped humanity itself, because "there is no god?" Is the god worshiped a person or one's self? If so, humans are corruptible. Corruption creeps in when we deny God.⁷

Psalm 14:1 says:

The fool says in his heart,
"There is no God."
They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;
there is no one who does good.

Is the god worshiped the spirit world of Animism? Animism is the belief that spirits indwell animals, plants, rocks, rivers, the weather, buildings—all things. These gods are capricious and they can and must be appeased (bribed).

When the gods are bribable, corrupt culture and behavior naturally follows.

The Creator God of the Bible is incorruptible and will judge corruption. This God says "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15). Corruption is a form of stealing. It is ultimately a cost or a loss born by people who

⁷ Mangalwadi, 243

receive no benefit. That's called stealing. We sin against God and man when we steal. We sin against God because it is contrary to His design for humanity. We sin against people because it harms them.

No community, society, or nation will long prosper and develop that worships a corrupt god. None will prosper and develop that is built on stealing.

Finally, morality is not relative. Corruption is not moral in one country and immoral in another. Corruption and stealing are harmful to people in any country. The creation mandate applies to every person in every country, as does the "love your neighbor" principle, and the commandment to not steal. There is a divine judge—God—who will someday judge every person. 1 Corinthians 6:10 says thieves will not inherit the kingdom of God.

What to do? Here are four suggestions.

First, stop it!

If you are giving, or taking, bribes – stop it. If you are cheating on your taxes – stop it. If you are telling a lie to extract a government benefit – stop it. If you are making decisions in favor of the few based on their wealth and influence—stop it. You are hurting others. You are stealing from them.

This is easy to say but hard to do. People struggle because the incentives to go along with corruption are so great. It is especially difficult when refusing to pay a bribe stands in the way of what seems to be a much greater good.

A friend of ours, Tom, and his partners had a fantastic development program going on in a country in Southeast Asia. The program was helping local farmers move to a sustainable cash crop. They had built a soybean oil processing mill thereby creating a dependable market for local farmers to grow and sell soybeans. The whole project was eventually derailed because local officials kept putting up barrier after barrier in terms of bribes. They needed ongoing approval for various parts of the project and the officials simply would not sign papers without a bribe. Tom wouldn't pay. Nothing got done. Eventually he had to close the factory and leave. The farmers lost their soybean market. Because the government was politically oppressive, the farmers could not complain. Did our friends do the right thing considering all the people who were being helped because of the project? This is the hard reality of corruption.

At other times the cost may be personal hardship. My colleague Scott recently traveled to a West Africa country. As he was leaving, the customs office at the airport wouldn't stamp him out of the country unless he paid a bribe. Scott said he wouldn't. The official insisted and after about 10 tense minutes, he relented. But what if he hadn't? Would Scott have missed his flight? What if he had an urgent reason, say a wedding or funeral, to get home?

That's the hard reality of corruption at the individual level. You know in your heart you need to "stop it" but other factors make it really hard.

Do you give in for the perceived greater good or do you keep feeding the cancer that is killing the nation in the first place?

There is no easy answer, but we do have a powerful God who desires to give us wisdom, courage, and strength in every situation through His Holy Spirit when we ask Him for it.

Second, speak against it.

As a pastor, a business owner, a neighbor and a friend, let people know that corruption directly undercuts the development of your community and nation. Corruption violates the principles put in place at creation by which every person, family, community and nation can develop and flourish. Corruption limits progress for all on all levels – economically, socially, physically and politically. It reduces productivity and wealth.

Don't secretly (or openly) applaud the co-worker who is cheating and getting away with it. Remind people of the biblical principles mentioned above, and their implications. Let people know that corruption is not a victimless crime. The public always pays with a poorer economy and living condition. Corruption costs lives, dignity, freedom, health and money. It is a major obstacle to democracy and the rule of law. It depletes public wealth – roads don't get built, education suffers. It corrodes the social fabric of society. It undermines trust in the political system, in its institutions and its leadership. It hurts the environment where people live.

Speak out. Changing systemic corruption requires public disapproval and intolerance of corruption – which then shapes the culture, which shapes the systems and institutions of culture.

Here too, there can be great danger and hardship in speaking out. Seek wisdom and strength from God.

Third, pull back the covers.

It is easy to do wrong when no one sees it. But shine the public light on people's private behavior and they will often change (For those who practice it, corruption is only sin if you get caught!) No one likes to be seen and known as a "wrongdoer." Find ways to bring to public light what is done in the dark. The framers of the U.S. constitution knew the heart of mankind was not to be trusted and built checks and balances into government for this reason. In one community of Brazil, young people are taking pictures of unfinished government projects and posting them on Facebook to put public pressure on government officials and contractors who are influenced by corruption. Social pressure can go a long way in changing behavior.

Fourth, promote free market exchanges and reforms.

If competing private companies are providing services, the customer can bypass the one that requires a bribe. No one pays a bribe if he has other options. If the government controls the rights to water in your town, and the water officials require bribes to get water, people feel like they have no choice.

Be patient and persistent. The Asian Development Bank has found that long-term success is more likely to come through patient and persistent economic, legal, and institutional reforms rather than short-term and largely reactive efforts to punish wrongdoers.

Your calling

Vishal Mangalwadi asks, “Did Jesus ask us to pray that we might go to heaven, or that the kingdom of heaven might come to this earth?”⁸ God is on a mission and this mission is that His kingdom would come to this earth. His kingdom is where His will is done on earth as it is already done in heaven. His will is that truth, goodness (righteousness) and beauty would prevail. Corruption and all of its harm and destructive effects on people and the earth is not God’s will.

God calls us to join Him in His kingdom mission – starting in our own lives.

Of this calling, Mangalwadi writes,

*It is right to be concerned with the flaws in our society, but the cross calls us, first of all, to come to terms with our own flaws and transgressions. We (human beings) are more important to God than our social structures.*⁹

*We must repent and ask for forgiveness for the sins that we have committed. Then we must go on to receive God’s Holy Spirit so that we may live by his law. ... God’s law is summed up in the command to love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as ourself.*¹⁰

Mangalwadi goes on to say,

*Corruption survives by fear, the fear of loss, the fear of not having, the fear of shame, of physical harm, and most supremely the fear of martyrdom and death. Therefore, a person cannot reform his community unless he is willing to transcend his community by surrendering to God alone... The cross is a rejection of the world and a giving of oneself to God for the world, in order to serve the world.”*¹¹

Choosing the cross is a matter of knowing God well enough to trust Him.

Standing against corruption in your own life, in the lives of those around you, and in your society requires a Holy Spirit empowerment that goes beyond miracles and signs and tongues. Mangalwadi writes, “The transformation that the Holy Spirit brought about in the disciples was to strengthen them to take up their cross in a confrontation with the kingdom of Satan.”¹²

What changed at Pentecost was not the disciples’ ability to do signs and wonders: the 72 had already been sent out to heal the sick and returned saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!” (see Luke 10) No, what changed was that a fearful group of disciples now had courage and power to take up their cross in a confrontation with the kingdom of Satan so that the kingdom of heaven might come to the lives of those around them and to this earth. In the end, this is the answer to corruption.

⁸ Mangalwadi, 256

⁹ Mangalwadi, 258

¹⁰ Mangalwadi, 259

¹¹ Mangalwadi, 252

¹² Mangalwadi, 256

The same Holy Spirit indwells every believer. He guides us into all that is true. In all that is difficult, He enables us. In virtue, in patience and courage, we can resist corruption. And every small resistance will contribute to the eventual transformation of a society. May it be so.



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