Hong Kong Baptist College

Corruption - and what we can do about it

Opening remarks - about being at Baptist College in the past.

1. How corruption originates

If you ask the Hong Kong Government officials how corruption originated in Hong Kong, they will give you answers like this: "Corruption is a way of life in Asia - you can't stop it - so you might as well accept the situation."
or "The Chinese have always done things by corrupt methods. You have to accept it."

This kind of answer has been given to me by Mr. Peter Law, head of the Anti-Corruption Branch of the Hong Kong Police. A similar answer was given to me several years ago by the present Attorney General, Mr. Denys Roberts. A different answer was given last week by the Commissioner of Police, Mr. Sutcliffe when he said "The police are no worse than any other Department." This kind of...
statement solves no problems. When I hear anyone speak like this I am angry, and even begin to wonder if the person who speaks like that is perhaps involved in corruption himself. If he is not, why does he treat it as such an unimportant matter? Why does he talk as if there is no way of taking strong action against corruption.

Of course, I realise that it is not easy to get rid of corruption completely, but I also realise that unless very strong action is taken against it, it will become worse.

It is, of course, and insult to the Chinese people to say that Chinese have always done things by corruption. If I were Chinese I would not accept such statements. In fact, it is simply not true. I deal with the problems of a lot of Chinese people, and have been successful in many cases, but only once or twice has anyone attempted to give me money. They often come back to my office to say THANK YOU, which I greatly appreciate, but not to offer money. Therefore, I say it is not true, and Chinese will only
offer a bribe if they are forced to do so, or if they are asking
for something they have no right to obtain. And in that way they
are the same as all other people all over the world.
If any Chinese person in Hong Kong is corrupt and offers a bribe,
it is usually because he cannot get his rights without it. He
does not like it, but has no other way.
When I study Chinese history, I find that under the Ching Dynasty,
people could not pass examinations or get official positions,
or even get human rights, unless they paid someone a bribe.
Where there are no political rights, people sometimes have no
other way. If they have no human rights, there is no other way.
Corruption is not caused by the people, but by the system that
will do nothing for them unless they pay money.
This is not just a Chinese way. In history we know that the
British traded in drugs, breaking Chinese law, by offering bribes.
And I am sure you all know how it was a Chinese official, Lin Tse
Hsu, who refused to be bribed, and the British then used force
to continue the drug trade.
The majority of the population in Singapore is Chinese, yet I believe they have got rid of a lot of the corruption there. And of course the Chinese population of China today is probably the least corrupt in the world. Therefore, if we want to find the origin of corruption, we cannot look at one race of people, or one area of the world, and say that a country is corrupt because of its people. Many western countries today are corrupt. If your teacher does not mind, I will say that there is a great deal of corruption in the U.S.A. today, and there is more corruption in my own country today than there was when I was young.

It seems to me that in our modern world, as Asian countries progress towards getting rid of corruption, western countries are moving towards more corruption. I hope that this is only a temporary thing, and that our younger generation will demand measures to stop this trend.
In politically backward countries, the danger of corruption is greater, because without political and human rights, people have to pay for those rights. And I believe that it is partly due to the political backwardness of Hong Kong that there is so much corruption.

I can remember a time twenty years ago in Hong Kong, when there was such a shortage of primary schools that parents were willing to pay corruption to get a child into school. They still often have to pay corruption to get housing, hawker licences, driving and taxi licences, identity cards, and many other things that they have a right to. Where there is a short supply, there is a danger of corruption. It has always been the policy of colonial rulers to deal mostly with corrupt people. A colonial government is never very popular, so it is prepared to buy its supporters by corrupt methods. For example, how many people have been given O.B.E. and other such honours, because they supported the colonial Government by donating money to a hospital or some other work that decorates the colony.
How does the colonial Government get its local supporters? By appointing them to Councils such as the Legislative Council, the Executive Council, or the Urban Council and other bodies. As Napoleon said, "Men are led by toys," and these honours given by the Government are like toys. Once they have obtained these toys, these men are willing to be LED. This, surely, is a form of corruption. And if the form of Government is corrupt, how can we expect society to be un-corrupt? A corrupt tree produces corrupt fruit.

2. Is corruption harmless?

Hong Kong officials always try to make it appear that corruption is fairly harmless. I notice that at the present time they are talking about having a drive against crime. But no drive against crime can succeed, unless it includes a drive against corruption — and in fact, a drive against corruption must come first.
Mr. Peter Law makes it appear to be very simple when he says that it is only an agreement between two people, both of whom are satisfied.

Some officials go even further and say that a person in the Government who is NOT corrupt may be troublesome. I remember a few years ago, a European in the Education Department reported some persons in the Department for making a lot of money on textbooks. They were co-operating with printing or publishing firms to change the pages or make other small changes every year in the school text-books, forcing students to buy a new book every year. The European official reported to the Director of Education, and said he wanted to take action against those who were doing this. The Director told the officer that he thought he did not understand Chinese people, and had him removed from the Department. Later this Director had to retire, and it was believed that he himself was involved.
A nursing sister was told when she was offered a job in a Government hospital that she would see many things wrong there, but as she would only be in Hong Kong a few years, she should ignore what she saw - it was harmless and unimportant. She resigned.

The question is, Is corruption harmless? Can we let it continue and just shut our eyes and pretend it is not there? Is it more important to put tickets on cars, clear hawkers from streets, stop and search boys for knives, and not do anything special about corruption?

Well, my own opinion is that all the wrong things you see - the gambling, drugs, vice of all kinds, illegal parking and hawking, and even youth crime, have been made worse, or even caused, by the corrupt system, and therefore it is not harmless, and that we can never deal with crime unless we first deal with corruption.

I am not the only one with that opinion, but I will quote only
one other person - a Swedish Writer, who was recently quoted in a local newspaper. He said that some people consider corruption as a kind of oil to help the Government machine to work. The truth is, says this writer, corruption HINDERS work at all levels. It HINDERS the carrying out of all plans and programmes. Besides, it destroys one's respect for the Government.

I believe that is true. Corruption has caused many Governments to collapse. Those who say that corruption is an Asian way of life should look at Asia, including the old Governments of China, and will see that corruption causes governments to fall. Look at the Philippines where corruption was perhaps even worse than in Hong Kong. Look at Saigon and South Korea. These governments are weak because of corruption. And corruption could cause the Hong Kong Government to collapse unless something is done about it. Unfortunately, corrupt governments never understand this point until it is too late to save them.
3. I should like to mention some ways in which we can see *law and the results of corruption doing a great deal of harm in Hong Kong doing damage.*

1. **Destroys law and order**

   Laws are made for the good order of a state. They are intended to control evil persons and protect innocent ones, *see that there is justice for all.* In Hong Kong, because of corruption, they do exactly the opposite, protecting the guilty and harming the innocent.

   For example, labour laws are supposed to protect the rights of workers, to make sure that they get their wages paid, that they are not overworked, that they get certain rights such as protection from accident or compensation for injury.

   Sometimes these laws are not carried out. If a factory owner can escape the carrying out of these labour laws by paying money, the law is useless and workers are no longer protected. Slight improvements in labour laws have been made in the past few years, but unless all our inspectors are free from corruption those laws are of no effect.
Some of you have studied the overcrowding problems in Resettlement estates. You may also have noticed that some tenants have very comfortable rooms, with plenty of space. Recently I found one family of only two or three persons. They had two large rooms in one estate, a flat in another estate, and they also owned a flat themselves. They could not have obtained all this without help from some corrupt official. In one estate, rooms intended to help overcrowded families in an old estate were being sold at several thousand dollars each by an officer on the estate. Although I reported this, giving his name, he was not punished - he just resigned his job.

People sometimes come and express their anger to me - in fact they sometimes blame me - because of this situation. They do not realize that the Government had refused to do anything about it.

Therefore our society is threatened by this kind of corruption. If those angry people all got together, they might get action from the Government. If the Government refused to do anything, it could result in serious disturbances.
The people of Tai Hang Tung have already begun to join together to struggle for better housing conditions. The Government will be very foolish if it ignores them. Another headache at the present time is the allocation of hawker stalls in the new markets in resettlement estates. Those who are being given the stalls are not always genuine hawkers operating with licences. Some of them have been running large illegal shops on estates, after paying corruption money to police, officers and black society members who are the ma chai of the officials. The genuine hawkers are therefore angry because they have not been given their rights.

Corruption makes a danger to human life too. All buildings are supposed to be checked to make sure that they have followed the plans, that building materials are of the right standard, and that there is safety in case of fire. But there are cases where corruption has covered up danger. I am sure you will remember a year or two ago how the Chong Hing
building became dangerous after 11 years of use, because salt water had been used in the cement, rusting the steel, and the building was not only larger in area, but had several stories more than the authorised plans. In fact, no occupation permit had been issued. Yet the building was occupied, flats were sold, and people's lives were endangered. No action for corruption was taken against anyone, though it is obvious that many officials had failed in their duty. Unofficially I was told by an architect that a Legislative Councillor had personally obtained permission from the Governor at that time to have the building occupied without waiting for a permit.

And in the recent fire at North Point, there is talk about a price being bargained while people died in the fire. A newspaper reporter told me that he obtained his information from a manager of a well-known company in the building. Yet Mr. Peter Law, head of the Anti-Corruption Branch, told the reporter that it was "NONSENSE" and no such thing had
happened. An enquiry has been started, but I find that an enquiry is not intended to find out the truth, but to keep the matter secret during the time of investigation. Later, everyone has forgotten about it.

A few weeks ago I spoke to two Legislative Councillors, one Chinese and one European. They told me that in a fire in a factory, the factory owner was told he must pay $80,000 or the fire would not be put out. He agreed, but later he thought this was wrong, and he refused to give the money. The next time when there was a fire in his factory, it was allowed to burn out complete - the Fire Services refused to fight the fire.

I do not know why those two Legislative Councillors did not make this public - they were both angry - but perhaps their position on the Legislative Council would be threatened if they spoke up.
Likewise, after a traffic accident, the driver may fix up with the police so that the pedestrian is said to have been careless, with the result that it is not possible to claim compensation. Sometimes a man loses an arm or a leg in a traffic accident, or the breadwinner loses his life: the driver can escape while the victim gets nothing and loses his means of livelihood. Often it is a child who is killed and the case is fixed up in that way. The parents feel that their child's blood has been sold — indeed that is often the case.

All that I have said is intended to prove that great injustice is caused by corruption. Danger to human life also results from corruption. Causes Crime But corruption is even worse than that, as it causes crime. Protects criminals.

How can drugs be so easily bought in Hong Kong? Young and old people die from drug addiction, and this trade is mass murder.
How many lives are lost or destroyed through gambling, the selling of young girls in music parlours and brothels. All these vices go on because of corruption. It makes me feel sick when I think of the very young lives that have been sold and ruined by criminals and their corrupt police protectors - just to get money into their pockets. Last week a young Form 1 girl left school and disappeared from her home. She was not a bad girl, and no one knows what happened. No young girl is safe in Hong Kong with these criminals around, yet nothing is done to stop this corruption that is destroying so many homes.

I have come across some cases of rape, assault, robbery and murder, in which, because of corruption, the criminal has been allowed to go free. (Quite recently a woman reported that she was blackmailed for $10,000 by a policeman and a Triad gangster. Although she gave all the details, the gangster was not arrested, and the Government Prosecutor deliberately made the case so weak that the policeman was also set free. He had to pay a large sum}
of money to the Prosecutor to fix up the case so that no action would be taken against the blackmailers.

This is why crime is increasing in Hong Kong, and if the Government says it will have a drive against crime but does not deal with corruption, I would say that the Government does not really intend to deal with crime at all. Many young people have gone into crime because they have seen how criminals can live in comfort if they are corrupt and pay the police. The young criminals are copying their methods. Arresting young people on the streets, raiding gambling and drug dens at night – all these recent activities are only a game of pretence, and will make no difference to the crime situation. In fact, I can only guess that the result will be worse, because as the police find more gambling and vice dens, more money they will be able to collect from them.
4. What can we do about it?

1. I think the first thing is to examine our own attitude towards corruption. Are we angry about it? Do we think it is only an agreement between two people and therefore it does not matter? Do we believe that it is destroying our society and causing danger to all of us? Would we strongly refuse either to offer a bribe or to accept one if someone offered it to us?

Unless we are clear in our minds that corruption is a great social evil, we are not likely ever to do anything to try to stop it.

Personally I am greatly grieved and angry about it, and I would demand the heaviest punishment for anyone who takes part in demanding corrupt money to give permission for men to break laws that injure or destroy other people.
2. If we do feel angry about it, what can we do?
   Some people tell me to do something about it, and I am very
   willing to try, but one person cannot do much. The Government
   knows how to deal with that. Now when I report corruption, the
   first thing they ask me is to tell the name of my witness,
   or the person who made the report to me. Generally that
   person does not want his name to be used, and the police are
   then happy and say I have no evidence, no witnesses, and I
   am only making up the story.
   We MUST all be willing to speak up. It may not be easy to do
   that one by one, but we can speak up unitedly. We can collect
   evidence from other people and make a united statement of what
   we know and what we demand.
   For example, if the people on one estate would all give examples
   of corruption they know happening on their estate, I believe
   that the Government would have to take action.
If ever you work in Government service, I hope you will try to join together all those who refuse to join in corruption, and make a report protesting against it, giving the actual facts and details. One man in the Resettlement Department often writes and tells me details about the corrupt officials in his department, and I am sure that his report is correct, but I can do nothing about it because the Government only asks me who made the report - and when I say I do not know, they know they are safe from investigation. To keep silent means to support the crime of corruption.

In a recent speech, the Governor, Sir Murray Maclehose said, quoting from a well-known English politician:

"The surest way to spread crime and violence is for honest men to keep silent." That is also true about corruption. By saying nothing, we are making it easier for corrupt people to be corrupt.
3. **Demand severe action against it**

If we can catch the big leaders in corruption, I think no action could be too severe. **Men who destroy our society in this way should suffer the severest punishment:** they are not fit to live in society.

In the past the Government has been very **soft** on corrupt persons, just taking departmental action (which means only moving them to another job) or allowing them to retire early with the money they have extorted from the public. They must be imprisoned for a long time and all their wrongly acquired money confiscated.

We must demand that the Government stop this covering up for them. My own guess is that in the present investigation taking place, nothing will be done, and the Government will say they cannot find enough evidence.
4. Demand an Independent Body to deal with corruption

Corruption at present is investigated by the Anti-Corruption Branch of the police - or, as the Chinese say, "The Corruption Branch". It is like asking a thief to investigate the activities of the gang of thieves of which he is a member. We must unite in demanding an independent body of persons to investigate.

5. Change the system of questioning

The police at the moment will not investigate corruption in a department. They will only investigate an individual in a department. That means that they find a scapegoat, but never find out how corruption works through the whole department. For example, I once caught a policeman collecting money from hawkers. I did not report him, as I knew he was not collecting the money for himself, but for the police station. If I had
reported him — and I had witnesses who would have come forward — he might have been punished. But I knew he was collecting for others and it would be unfair to punish only one person.

These are some suggestions as to what you can do about corruption, but I would like to repeat that if everyone keeps silent, this evil will continue to grow, and will threaten the safety of the whole community.

Summary

1. Corruption undermines the moral of any government;
2. It keeps good men silent — therefore we need unity of action;
3. It destroys the rule of law in any community;
4. It encourages vice — gambling, prostitution etc.
5. It causes the government to be inefficient;
6. It destroys justice, and may lead to rioting;
7. It causes the collapse of governments finally.