

Good News To The Poor – What Good News?

Series on "Go Fish"

In his gospel, Luke gives an account of how Jesus announced the beginning of his ministry.

"Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'" Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:14-20 NIV)

What did Jesus mean when he said he came to bring good news to the poor? Over the years, Christians who live in wealthy nations like ours have tended to lean towards one of two answers.

1. The Gospel Is Good News To The Spiritually Poor

Some Christians say that Jesus was referring to those who are spiritually poor. They would take us to Matthew's gospel where Jesus said ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*** (Matthew 5:3 NIV). He also said ***"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."*** (Matthew 5:6 NIV) These people would say that Jesus doesn't define poverty solely in terms of physical hunger but in terms of poverty of spirit. He's talking about a hunger and thirst after righteousness. They would point out the times when Jesus taught people rather than feed them or heal them, because he was wanting to show them that there was more to this life than having a full stomach, or being healed. Jesus talked to hungry people about eternal life, about freedom from the grip of sin. He recognised that meeting the physical needs of people was not enough. People need to be saved from their sins. That's why Jesus came and died on the Cross. Some of these people would ask us why it is that we pray so fervently for people to be healed of physical ailments, but are not nearly so fervent in our prayer for people who are spiritually sick. They would ask us why we are so moved by people in desperate physical poverty, yet so unmoved by people in despite spiritual poverty. They would point us to Jesus, weeping over Jerusalem as he descended the Mount of Olives, broken hearted over the spiritual state of the city, and ask why we are not broken hearted over the spiritual state of the cities we live in.

Just before Jesus left this earth he said this to his disciples. ***"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*** (Matthew 28:19 -20 NIV) Whatever else it means, that command is an imperative to take the gospel to people who are spiritually poor. Good news to the poor has to mean those who are spiritually poor.

Some years back I recall reading a Bible Society report of a Pastor from Chad, in Africa, who was heading back to his home country, which at that time was experiencing civil war. There was poverty in the land. Many people had lost everything. Some were starving. On his way home this Pastor stopped off in Abidjan on the Ivory Coast, where a

missionary offered him food and medicine to make up his baggage allowance. But the Pastor didn't want those things. He said, "Fill my suitcase up with bibles. We have learned to place less importance on the things that pass away, and more importance on the things that last." This Pastor saw the priority of the Gospel as being good news to the spiritually poor.

What did Jesus mean when he said he came to bring good news to the poor? Other Christians would give a different answer.

2. The Gospel Is Good News To The Poor

These people would say the poor doesn't just mean the spiritually poor, it means the poor. All through the Bible there is ample evidence that God has a bias toward the poor. God is on the side of the vulnerable, the isolated, the weak, the powerless. Jesus said ***"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* (Luke 4:18 &19 NIV)** When he talked about the year of the Lord's favour, Jesus was referring to the year of Jubilee, a year of justice, when wealth was redistributed so that the needy had enough. Jesus didn't see people just as souls to be saved, but real people who were hungry, sick people who needed healing, oppressed people in need of liberation, blind people who needed to be able to see.

One of the central passages to understanding what Jesus was meaning is found in Matthew 25:31-46.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 'Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' 'Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' 'The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' 'Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' 'They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' 'He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' 'Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.'" (Matthew 25:31-46 NIV)

When we feed the hungry and care for the poor, Jesus says that's the same as if we are feeding and caring for him. The surprise ending to what Jesus said is this. Those who didn't care for the poor were cursed, and cast into the fire prepared for the Devil and all his angels. Those who do care for the poor spend eternity with Christ.

3. What is the Good News?

Is the Good News meeting the spiritual needs of people, or meeting their physical needs? If you look at what Jesus did, you will see that he did both. He saw people as whole people. They weren't souls to be saved from hell, and nor were they bodies to be fed,

clothed and educated. They were people who needed to be made whole. For those of us who think that all we need to do is preach the gospel to people, I want to ask you a question. How much of what I am saying right now would you be taking in if you were suffering from AIDS, had a bad case of dysentery, you were itching all over with lice, your children were starving, you were out of a job, and you were feeling light-headed because you hadn't eaten anything for three days? Would you sit patiently and listen to me if I told you God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life? Would you take any notice of me if I didn't do all I could to meet your physical needs? To ignore your physical and emotional need to concentrate on your spiritual need would be a denial of the Gospel. What sort of Good News to the Poor is it that says "I'm only interested in seeing you saved from your sin."

But let me turn this around. Isn't it just as much a denial of the Gospel to feed people, bring about justice, eradicate disease, educate people and offer all sorts of welfare programmes without talking about Jesus the Saviour who came to liberate us from our spiritual poverty? What is the point of bringing good news to the poor if at the end of the day well fed, clothed, educated and well adjusted people who have benefited from our Christian compassion go to a Christ less eternity because we didn't tell them how to be whole through Jesus Christ? Jesus said that he came to bring us life in all it's fullness. That fullness of life has to encompass every need of every person, or we make a mockery of the Gospel.

Last week I talked about a number of ways that we could fulfill the mission of Jesus, by seeking and saving people that are lost. But what does it mean for us in affluent Switzerland to bring good news to the poor?

This evening I've asked three Westlakers who are bringing good news to the poor in our local setting to talk about what they are doing, and why they are doing it.

Servons Nyon

Corlea is the driving force behind "Servons Nyon".

1. Corlea, what does Servons Nyon do?
2. What prompted you to establish Servons Nyon?
3. What impact is it having on the lives of people you are meeting?
4. Are there any particular issues you face that we could be praying about?

Asylum Seekers

Cathy and Karen have been involved with some of the Asylum seekers who have passed through Nyon.

1. Who are the Asylum seekers and where do they come from?
2. What was your motivation in getting involved with these people?
3. What sort of things do you do with them?
4. Have you seen any evidence that the gospel is good news to these people?

LiNK Au Pair Connexion

Paul and Becky have worked with hundreds of Au Pairs over the years. While most of them are not in poverty, many are poor in spirit.

1. In an average year, how many Au Pairs do you have contact with?
2. What numbers on a weekly basis?
3. What are some of the physical and social needs of Au Pairs you deal with?
4. What sort of spiritual needs do you see in the Au Pairs you meet, and how are you trying to meet those needs?
5. How do you see the gospel making an impact in their lives?

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