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# PREACHING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR: *A Theology of Poverty*

Harold Shank

After singing "If I Had a Hammer," "This Land Is Your Land," "Puff the Magic Dragon," and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" Peter, Paul and Mary conclude their concerts with Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind." The song takes up the concerns of the unfortunate of the world:

How many deaths will it take till he knows that  
too many people have died?/  
How many years  
can some people exist before they're allowed to  
be free?/  
How many times can a man turn his  
head, pretending he just doesn't see?/  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind.  
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

People pondered these matters long before Bob Dylan set them to music, yet his questions renewed the issues. What will it take to move us to action? Will it be the mounting death toll that causes people to respond? Will it be the passing years of suffering that jolt others to action? Will it be the guilty conscience of the turned head that finally leads to help?

## Proposals for Solving Poverty

Beyond that, Dylan's lines raise the issue of how much progress we are making in this area. How many is too many? How long is too long? What does it mean to bring justice to the land?

In the years since "Blowin' in the Wind" was popular, we have seen many suggestions as to how we can deal with the inequities and injustices in the world. Garrett Hardin was a distinguished biologist at the University of California at Santa Barbara when he proposed "lifeboat ethics" in the 1970. In an article in

**Psychology Today**, he urged us not to help the poor and third world nations. He said that the pockets of wealthy people in the world were lifeboats. If humanity is to survive, then we must keep the people in the lifeboats safe. Widespread death and destruction is the only way to deal with poverty and starvation. If there is room in the boat, let a few more in, but otherwise keep them out in order to ensure the survival of the race.<sup>1</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, Charlie Garriott, a Christian worker who serves on the Sioux Indian Reservation, maintains that to deal justly with the American Indian, all their land should be returned and they should be recompensed for three hundred years of injustice.<sup>2</sup>

John White, in his book **The Golden Cow**, argues that most of middle class, American lifestyle is sinful. He puts down everything from advertising to salesmen, from television evangelists to church fund raisers.<sup>3</sup> In a volume called **God's Foreign Policy**, Miriam Adeney tells the story of giving up life in America and moving to a third world country to resettle refugees and change everything from politics to agriculture.<sup>4</sup> Ron Sider, in **Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger**, attacks all people living in affluent societies for not doing enough to help the poor.<sup>5</sup>

It is striking that nearly all of these views deal with poverty from the perspective of the "haves." The goals are set in terms of what we ought to do, not what the poor need to receive. Would the return of Minnesota and Montana really help the Indians, or if we all moved to third world countries would the world really be a better place? What is our goal in helping the poor? Does the answer just blow in the wind? As God's people, where do we start?

## The Proposal of Jesus

In Luke 4:16, Jesus entered the Nazareth synagogue one Saturday. Apparently, standard practice in the service called for someone to read a text from

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the Law and then for a meturgeman or interpreter to translate the text into the language of the people, explaining it as he went along. Then if there were any guest speakers present who wanted to talk, they would stand. After they were recognized, they would then read a text from the Prophets and speak.

Widely known as a rabbi, Jesus stood after the reading of the Law. The leader of the synagogue motioned for him to go ahead and speak. He read this text from Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

Only one line of his comment survives in Luke 4: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Even as he spoke, people began to respond in two ways. At first, they were impressed. After he cited the stories about Elijah helping the widow and Elisha healing Naaman, they began to turn against him. They chased him out of their synagogue to a place outside of town where they were going to throw him over the cliff, but he escaped their deadly intentions.

### What Does It Mean to Preach Good News to the Poor?

Just as Jesus' application of the ancient text bothered the people in Nazareth, so the statement from Isaiah troubles us. How are the poor connected to the preaching of the Gospel? Poverty raises economic issues; the Gospel deals with theological concerns. Poverty calls for help and aid; the Gospel flourishes with preaching. Does the statement mean only the poor can hear the Good News? Does it mean that once the poor hear the Good News, the preacher's task is finished? What sort of connection do Isaiah and Jesus imagine between physical poverty and spiritual Good News? The first answers to those inquiries come by way of the ministries of Jesus, Isaiah, and the Jerusalem church.

*First, the ministry of Jesus illustrates how the preaching and the poor go together.* Reports on his work are found in Luke 4:14-16, 6:20b-21, and 7:22.

And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country. And

he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day.

"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied."

And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me."

Jesus worked with the sick, the disenfranchised, the handicapped, the bereaved, and these were the very people who responded to his message. He was winning converts among the poor in the backwater areas of Palestine, not among the rich and powerful in the cultural centers of the ancient world. Jesus never intended just to quote the words from Isaiah; he showed by his actions that the Good News was to be preached among the poor, not just the poor in spirit but the poor in money. His audience included not only those in spiritual distress, but those literally in distress. Jesus' own

ministry combined serving the body and the spirit.

*Second, the ministry of Isaiah illustrates how peaching and poverty go together.* Jesus' work mirrored the call to ministry in Isaiah 55-66. Twelve chapters of Isaiah take up the return of the Jewish people from Babylo-

nian captivity. Ezra and Nehemiah tell stories of rebuilding lives and culture.

One major concern of post-exilic Jerusalem was poverty. In the midst of burned-out buildings and homelessness, people feuded. As a result, the poverty of many people worsened. God was angry about the injustices being done. In Isaiah 58:7, 10-11a, God called his prophet to help these afflicted people, to bind up their broken hearts, and to set captives free:

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom

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you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things.

Yet the ministry of God's prophet was not limited to physical needs and the overthrow of injustice.

Thus says the LORD, "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy."

These passages in Isaiah 56:1 and 65:17-18 indicate that God was concerned that they know his salvation. There was to be no evangelism without benevolence, but no benevolence without evangelism. So "preaching Good News to the poor" is shown in the ministries of Jesus and Isaiah.

*Third, the ministry of the early church also illustrates how preaching and poverty go together.* Luke gives six of twenty-eight chapters in Acts to describing the first church. In five of those chapters, he describes in detail the massive concern of the Jerusalem church for the poor. Many of the early Christians were poor. There was a benevolent program in place as soon as the church was started. As the church expanded, the benevolent program grew. Or as the benevolent program expanded, so the church grew. It is hard to tell the difference between the two. The Jerusalem church

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grew and helped the poor. They preached Good News to the poor.

### **A Theology of Poverty**

What did God have in mind when he ordained Jesus to preach Good News to the poor? It happened in the ministry of Isaiah, in the work of Jesus, in the

efforts of the Jerusalem church, but theologically, what is happening? How can we understand what God wants? The answer to these questions lies deep in the fabric of Scripture rather than in any one verse. Three fundamental concepts in the Bible unite "preaching" and the "poor."

*First, preaching Good News to the poor finds unity in God's Love.* If in our preaching, people do not sense our love, then it is not Gospel preaching. If in our helping, people do not sense our love, then it is not helping. It does not matter how strong our sermons, how clear our words, how many kilowatts we use in our broadcasts; if the people who receive do not sense our love, then it is not the Good News. It does not matter how many Life Skills Labs, how many soup kitchens, how many give away programs we have; if the people who receive do not sense our love, then it is not Good News.

God's love finds expression in verbal presentations of the Gospel, but also in the physical offers of assistance to the poor. Both the love of the speaker and the content of the message are Good News. Both love of the giver and the offer of the gift are Good News.

To divorce love from the Good News tears out the heart of Scripture. To somehow believe that the doctrine of Scripture can be cast out to a hopeless world without love rips at the very fabric of our faith. To keep love to ourselves betrays God no less than keeping mum about the cross.

Although God's love flourishes in our church buildings and among our church members and is expressed by many good people, Christians cannot be beguiled into believing that God's love should exist only in churches of Christ or in good people or among the loveable.

God does not limit his love to the slaves who built the tent shrine in the wilderness or to the Israelites who constructed the limestone temple above the Kidron Valley or to the Christians who put up the red brick church buildings along America's main streets. God is not just the God of Israel, of American Christians, of the rich and affluent, but God of all!

God wants good tidings of his love to be felt by the poor and afflicted. He wants to dress the wounds of the brokenhearted. He wants the unjustly imprisoned to know the freedom of his love. God loves the needy.

God's love for all humankind forms the basic fabric of Scripture. If God's people do not believe that, who will? If the church of Christ does not believe that, who will? If love is not available in our churches, like it was from Isaiah and Jesus, where is it available? If all people of all races and all backgrounds are not welcome in our midst as they were in the presence of Jesus, where will they be accepted?

What city in the United States offers genuine friendliness and acceptance? Not one! Which community in our nation is known for urging people to stand

in the blaze of God's magnificent love? Not one! Which metropolitan area welcomes the disenfranchised, the lame, the blind, the poor, the cast off from the other areas? Not one!

But that is exactly what Christians must do. We are not called to be God's frozen people, who give a cold shoulder to the down and out, to the people who are different or odd or bad or wicked or poor, but our churches are to be places of warmth and welcome. We are not called to be God's frozen people who give such a chilly reception to the outsider and to the handicapped and to the foreigner that they seek warmth elsewhere.

We must imitate the Jerusalem church where rich and poor joined around the Lord's Supper in unity. We must be a church where the rejected of our society can find love and concern.

Rather than keeping the love of God to ourselves and regarding the unfriendliness of our apartment buildings, the isolation and loneliness of our city, and the poverty that lies just a few miles from our buildings as the problems of others, we must welcome these as opportunities for us to be the church. The pleas for us to cook meals, donate clothes, and minister in the inner city are not burdens to be borne or jobs to be ignored, but they are opportunities for us to be the church. We need the outsider. The poor are God's gift to us to help us understand our role in the world as spreaders of his love.

Many in our society and in our churches hold that everybody should pursue their own interests and not interfere in the lives of others. Many think that what others believe is a private matter. All of that is wrong! Love demands interference. Love demands teaching. Love demands breaking down the phony barriers of society.

Being the loving church means providing a haven for the outsider. Being the concerned church means doing for others what the church has done for us. Being the God-like church means being joyful over opportunities to sacrifice. One of the ways in which we preach Good News to the poor is by sharing God's love!

*Second, preaching Good News to the poor finds unity in God's Grace.* If people do not sense the grace of God when we go into our pulpits, if people do not sense the grace of God when they read our tracts, if people do not sense the grace of God when they hear our people talk about the church, then it is not preaching the Good News. If people do not sense the grace of God when they pick up clothes at our building, if people do not sense the grace of God when they get Christmas baskets from us, if people do not sense the grace of God when they get a voucher from our workers, it is not preaching the Good News.

Helping the poor must be done with grace, recognizing that we are saved by grace, and communicating verbally that the help comes by his grace. There

is no room in helping the poor for any attitude that we are better or that we have arrived or that we look down in judgment and pride.

God calls his people to serve the poor out of recognition that all are without merit. It was offensive to God when the Israelites appeared at the temple with their freshly groomed sheep and ready-to-be-slaughtered cattle, and yet had hearts that lacked humility and sensitivity. An Israelite might walk past a poor man and not notice, but the incident would not get past

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God. It was inconsistent to want to worship God, yet not care for the oppressed. To want to serve the God who cared for the needy without having the same care in one's own heart offended the Lord.

Most of the Old Testament is the story of how Israel forgot these principles. They forgot that they had been poor. They forgot they had been slaves. They forgot that God loved the poor. They forgot that God loved the slaves. They forgot that love was not earned. They forgot that they enjoyed God's wonderful blessings not because they were worthy, not because they were special, not because they were obedient, not because they had the right doctrine, not because they wore the right name, not because they had the right genes, not because they were the right color or race, but because God gave them a love they did not deserve.

Furthermore, they forgot that there was a connection between God's identification with the poor and God's unmerited love. The people who did not help the needy had forgotten something significant about who they are and what had happened to them. Thus God could send Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul to call his people to help the poor, not as a spiritual side show, not as an auxiliary off to the side, but out of the central concern he has shown to Israel in leading them out of Egypt, to the exiles in leading them back to Jerusalem, and to modern America in rescuing us out of sin.

If we begin to think that our preaching or our salvation or our church life has nothing to do with the poor, then we need to look again at Scripture. We need to look again at Amos where God's prophet rebukes the people for playing church while ignoring the needy. We

need to look again at Jesus who says to the goats on his left hand, "When you didn't do it to the least of these my brothers, you didn't do it to me" (Matthew 25:45). We need to look again at Paul, who proclaims in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "Though Jesus was rich, yet for your sake he became poor."

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God's love is free. It is not earned. God is not obligated to give us anything. It is free. It is a gift. It comes not because we earn it or deserve it or qualify for it. It comes because he loved us.

No one is worthy of God's love. Not the poor. Not the rich. Not the lost. Not the saved. It is out of this understanding of receiving something for free that we help others. It is not a matter of somebody good helping somebody bad. It is not a matter of somebody who is together helping somebody who is a mess. It is not a matter of Mr. Clean helping Mr. Dirty. Rather, it is clearly a matter of one who has received something undeserved helping another who receives something undeserved.

Helping the poor is an extension of the unmerited love of God. It is not a time to depersonalize or humiliate or build one's own sense of importance or generosity, but every cup of water is an extension of the cup of water we have already received. Every visit is a reflection of the visit we have already received. Every bit of food, every nickel and dime shadows that which we have already received.

There is not a person who deserves to be saved. There is not a person who is pure and holy by their own discipline and iron will. There is not a person who deserves the deep red blood flowing down Calvary's hill. Not one. Not one! The moment we move to the position that God owes us, at that moment we become like the people in Jesus' home town who refused to hear what God was saying.

Having received grace, we respond with grace. Back in the 1930s, seven unemployed farmers from Mississippi on the way to Nashville to find work ran off the road just outside Nashville. Three people were killed. Three children were in the car. Before the police or ambulance arrived at the scene, people from one of the churches of Christ in Nashville were there. They opened their homes and took care of the three children. They paid the medical bills of the injured. They con-

ducted memorial services, purchased grave plots, and buried the three who died. They also erected tombstones over the individual graves. Somebody called the church office and asked, "Why did you go to all this expense? Why did you buy expensive stones? These people were just poor people!" The answer came back: "Everybody deserves to be buried with dignity."

There is something about the spirit of God in that response that turns our heads. Even we want to know what it was about that church that made them do that. It did not make good business sense. Cultural norms did not demand it. Social pressure went another direction. The thing that moved those people was the spirit of a God who loves with no strings attached.

A young couple came to the front door of a downtown church. They carried several bags of what looked like all that they owned. Most of us would have opened the door a crack to make a safe initial inquiry. But the elder who saw them did not. He opened the door wide, smiled, and said, "It's so good to see you. Come right in. I'm so glad you stopped by."

Dignity. Kindness. Sensitivity. They never go out of style. What a wonderful lesson that elder had learned about passing on love. What wonderful pleasure our father in Heaven must have had when he saw his servant expressing grace. It is in passing on grace that we preach Good News to the poor.

*Third, preaching Good News to the poor finds unity in God's Salvation.* If our preaching does not get to the cross, if our message does not talk about Jesus, if our churches never get to the death, burial, and resurrection, then it is not preaching the Good News. If our programs to help the poor do not have some way of kindly sharing about the cross, if our aid to the ghetto does not contain some notion of Jesus, if our help to the homeless never mentions the heavenly home, then it is not preaching the Good News.

No simpler explanation of Jesus' adopted purpose statement emerges than the simple point that the best news for the poor is the Good News. "He has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor." The best news for everybody, whether they live in a penthouse or a shotgun house, comes packaged under the title GOOD NEWS.

Jesus came with Good News for the poor. He was not lying. His goal was not just to keep the masses quiet. His goal was not to make everyone middle class. His goal was not 100% employment. His goal was not to deprive some to satisfy others. His goal was not to serve tables and ignore preaching.

Rather the Good News about eternal life which begins new and lasts forever has direct application to poverty. It is better news than any economic or political program. It is Good News because it brings a caring and loving God together with hurting and needy people, and it is done through God's saved community.

No higher response, no better aid, no more

lasting refuge can come to the poor than the story of God's grace at the cross. Nothing can better satisfy the deepest hunger of the poorest person than the Bread of Life. Nothing can more adequately quench the driest thirst than the Blood of Christ.

The ultimate solution to humankind's most fundamental problems lie in the Good News. New housing, shipments of food, better medicine, astute counseling, well-planned re-education, drug detoxification centers, job-training sessions, and a host of other needed and necessary elements of expressing God's concern for the poor all fall short of the change possible through the Good News of Jesus Christ.

### **The Answer: Preach Good News to the Poor**

Christians must imitate the Jerusalem church. We must follow Jesus. We must welcome the outsider to the love of God. We must give to the poor and the unfortunate freely, just as we have freely been given to. We must cultivate the spiritual. We must raise the holy. We must overcome our frozenness, our quietness, and speak. We must ignore the cultural norms that say "mind your own business" and "do not talk religion," and we must preach the Good News to

the poor. If we carry that message of love, grace, and salvation to the poor of our society, do not be surprised at all if revival sweeps America, starting in the ghettos.

A few years ago at the end of their twenty-fifth anniversary concert, Peter, Paul, and Mary looked over their audience. Mary said, "You were, and you are, and you will always be the answer that blows in the wind." Television cameras scanned the audience as many people wiped tears away from their eyes because she had touched a chord in their hearts.

But to depend on people like them and people like me to find within our hearts the answer seems risky business.

The answer does not blow in the wind. The answer is in the heart of God. When his people fully understand the heart of the Father, then his people will be moved to deal with others with compassion and Good News.

*"Preaching Good News to the Poor: A Theology of Poverty" was presented as the keynote address at the First National Conference on Ministry to the Poor and Homeless on May 4, 1990, and will appear in a forthcoming book about churches of Christ and the poor.*