

## Then shall your light break forth like the dawn

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What is the relationship between proclaiming the gospel and helping the poor? Is there a relationship at all? Our conviction is that there certainly is! However when many Christians and churches consider what is at the heart of the church's mission in the world today, often times we'll place our emphasis in just one of these two very good places, to the neglect of the other. Influenced to a large extent by our theology and church tradition, we can often tend either to major in the need for proclamation of truth, or in the need for radical love of the poor.

More conservative Christians will usually major in the first of those; contending for and proclaiming truth, but can tend to minimise the mercy in action ministry of the church – giving of ourselves to care for people in need in real, physical, concrete ways. This was certainly my inclination for many years, and I am grateful to God for His gracious revealing of this to me. More liberal Christians on the other hand tend to be the opposite; often loving to care for the poor in real, practical and substantial ways, but minimising the need for people to repent and believe the gospel. When we study the life and ministry of Jesus however, we see the two beautifully intertwined. He had no trouble weaving together a life of both gospel proclamation and radical love in action. I'm convinced that by His grace we need to weave them together too.

Often times among those of a more conservative lean, the nature of sin can tend to be thought of mainly just in vertical terms – our failure as law breakers and idolaters to worship God, and therefore our culpability before him. This is very true. All sin is ultimately against God, and idolatry can rightly be understood as the root sin from which all sin births. However there is also a very horizontal dimension to sin – our failure to love our neighbour and care about justice for the poor. The Old Testament prophets for example make it very clear that the Jewish exile was God's judgement both for the people's idolatry and for their failure to uphold social justice.

### Amos 5:11-12

Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him,  
you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them;  
you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.  
For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—  
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate.

The scriptures reveal a God who cares deeply for the poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed. In fact some of the most extreme language in the Bible is reserved for those who do not share his heart for the poor.

God's identification with and concern for the poor is most clearly revealed in the incarnation, ministry and ultimately death of Jesus Christ. It is here in the gospel that God Himself entered into and experienced ultimate poverty for us. And so it is here in the gospel; in the lavish mercy of God poured out upon we who were in a most wretched, poor and undeserving state, that we find our deepest motivation to in turn love those in need among us. It is the love and mercy of God towards we who were in great need that must compel us to pass on His love to others.

The scriptures speak volumes about the heart of God for the poor; but not just the spiritually poor, the physically and socially poor also. In Isaiah 58 God responds to those who wonder why He has not accepted their fasting and sacrifices in light of their love for the law and their practice of religion.

### Isaiah 58:6-8

Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

John Hayes, founder of InnerCHANGE (a mission order working amongst the poor) comments on the on the first phrase of verse 8;

'Then shall your light break forth like the dawn' is one of the most awesome promises in scripture. God speaks in simile to help us understand, but His full meaning is a mystery. Nevertheless, we believe the image describes the way in which God radiates his presence through us so that others might see something in us that makes them stop and consider. It is not the light of personal celebrity, but the light that points to its source, which is God. When we minister among the poor, those who see or learn of our work experience a resonance in the depth of their being, a calling out that this is the work of God...When we take the homeless into our homes, clothe the naked and feed the hungry, our light breaks forth out of proportion to the substance or success of our work.

At Chayah, as we have begun ministering to some of the poor and marginalised in our city, I have begun to see glimpses of what John Hayes is describing here.

One Friday night my friend Andrew and I sat and ate with a few aboriginal people who were drinking together in Musgrave Park (a park in Brisbane with particular significance to the aboriginal people, and which also has a bit of a reputation for crime after dark). After explaining who we were and our intentions, we were welcomed to join them (they were especially thankful when Andrew made it back with the pizza)!

Everybody has a story. And as I asked one lady about hers she started to open up, pouring out of her heart some of the pain that life had brought upon her as a part of the "stolen generation". She told me a few things about her life in one of the homes set up for these children; about how they were regularly punished severely, and how they were forced to attend church services on Sunday mornings – an ironic attempt by those in charge to try to "Christianise" the children. She also told me of the rape she was subjected to when a little older she was sent to work on a farmstead.

I felt deeply for her as she told me her story. However although I felt compassion for her, I knew I could not personally relate to or comprehend the magnitude of suffering and injustice this woman had been subjected to. But I knew someone who did. I believe the Spirit prompted me to tell her something of the Jesus who loves and cares for her; the Jesus who truly knows what it is like to suffer injustice at the hands of others; the Jesus who has entered into our world to bear our suffering – the suffering that should rightly be ours, so that ultimately we will not bear it; and that for those who are in Him a wonderful future of peace and joy with Him are assured.

She listened intently to what I was saying and then asked me to pray for her. As I prayed she cried just a little and expressed her thanks for what Jesus had done, and then when I had finished broke out into a hymn of praise. Surely in this park that night light had broken forth out of all proportion to the substance of anything Andrew and I had done. We had simply given few dollars for pizza, and a couple of hours to listen to and share the hope we have in the gospel with some hurting people we came across.

But through something so simple Jesus was being encountered. There was light breaking forth in the dark of that park, and I think I was learning something of what Isaiah meant in saying that when you care for the poor "the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard."

Shane Clairbourne, who describes himself as an ordinary radical (an ordinary person wanting to get at the root of what it

means to love), spent time serving lepers at the Home for the Destitute and Dying in Calcutta; the first home started by Mother Teresa. Here he helped people eat, massaged muscles, gave baths. Each day people would die, and each day, they would go out onto the streets and bring in new people. He explains that the goal was not to keep them alive (they had very few supplies for doing that) but to allow people to die with dignity, with someone loving them, singing, laughing, so they were not alone. Over and over, the dying and the lepers would whisper the word namaste in his ear. They explained that namaste means, "I honour the Holy One who lives in you." Shane recalls dressing a man's wounds and hearing him whisper to him namaste. He whispered back, Jesus.

Dying lepers in Calcutta, through the practical love and mercy they were being shown were able to see through the person helping them to the Holy One who was alive inside. And Shane was able to provide them the name of the Holy One they saw.

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In John 14:12 Jesus makes a startling assertion; "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father."

What an astonishing thing for Jesus to say – that we will do greater works than Him! What are we to make of this? I certainly haven't calmed any storms or raised anyone from the dead recently. I take this to mean that following his death and resurrection, Jesus as the exalted King with all authority in heaven and earth would be at work in the world through the Spirit and His church in a greater, more powerful way than he was when he walked the earth himself.

The era of the church would be the era of lives transformed by the power of the gospel and the Spirit – and through his church. But it doesn't come through the church only by her speaking words, or only by her doing deeds. Jesus came both proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and demonstrating that his kingdom had indeed come through his compassion, love and healing of every affliction among the people (Matthew 4:23-25).

Jesus' ministry methodology was not either/or, it was a weaving together of both. And it has not been superseded. He is at work in a very similar way through his people today. The redemptive reign of God comes upon broken people as we both proclaim the good news with our mouths, and as we embody (put flesh on) the love of Christ to our neighbours – perhaps particularly to the poorest, most vulnerable and marginalised among us.

Some of the people we see in our cities each day are in many ways our society's refuse. We get embarrassed by them, want to look away and certainly don't want to befriend and touch them (I guess they're a bit like the lepers and prostitutes that Jesus was scandalously seen with). And yet God has a way of choosing the foolish, the weak and the low in order to shame the wise, the strong and the high. And now He bids his church to come join with Him in his mission; to be his hands and feet and mouth in loving, caring and speaking his good news to all the broken people He died to heal.