

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL



A Devotional for Mercy Ministry

T. R. Hinson, Jr.

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To my wife, who blesses the world around
her with daily acts of mercy.

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| New Clothes: Genesis 3:17-21 | 1 |
| Sojourners: Deuteronomy 10:17-19 | 5 |
| Miracles of Mercy: 1Kings 17:8-24 | 9 |
| God's Call to Mercy: Esther 4:1-17 | 15 |
| Trust: Psalm 146 | 19 |
| True Fasting: Isaiah 58:1-12 | 23 |
| The Least of These: Matthew 25:31-46..... | 27 |
| Lacking One Thing: Mark 10:17-22 | 31 |
| Good News: Luke 4:16-22 | 35 |
| Who is My Neighbor: Luke: 10:25-37..... | 39 |
| Unity: Philippians 2:1-11..... | 43 |
| True Religion: James 1:27 | 47 |
| Bibliography | 50 |

NEW CLOTHES

Genesis 3:17-21

My pastor relishes his lunch time walks from the church to his home. He uses the solitude to collect his thoughts, ponder ideas for the future, and to pray. One day he noticed a middle-aged man sitting drooped-shouldered on the porch of his apartment building. Strangely, he had only a towel wrapped around his waist. There must have been something about the way he was staring dejectedly at the sidewalk that compelled my pastor to cut across the lawn and ask if there was anything that he could do. The man barely looked up. He was poorly groomed and wreaked of alcohol. Apparently, he had locked himself out and there was no one to call on for help. Eventually, he was persuaded to walk back to the church office where a locksmith could be called. My pastor took off his jacket, put it across the man's shoulders, and they set off down the sidewalk. Slowly, the man's spirits began to brighten. He was amazed that anyone, especially a preacher, would be willing to be seen with a half-naked drunk. My pastor just laughed and spent the next hour using a wonderful opportunity to share the gospel.

I don't know what happened to that poor fellow but I do know that for one brief moment, in the midst of his suffering, he experienced mercy. This remarkable passage from Genesis helps us to see how merciful our God is towards us even when we are reaping the terrible consequences of our sin.

17 And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you, in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were

taken, for you are dust and to dust you shall return.”
20 The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was
the mother of all living. “And the Lord God made for
Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed
them”. Gen.3:17-21

Have you ever had your sin exposed for the entire world to see, all of your facades transparent, your defenses nonexistent? How did people respond to you? Were you treated harshly, ridiculed, or criticized? Imagine the situation in Eden. God had just given Adam a beautiful creature, just like himself, to love and to cherish. His only job was to rule the earth and fill it with godly offspring. And he blew it. He did the one and only thing he was forbidden to do. And that one fateful act plunged a perfect paradise into a harsh world of suffering.

What Adam really deserved was death. God had warned him that if he did this one wrong thing, he would surely die. And we can be sure that being cast out of a cool, lush garden where he enjoyed perfect intimacy with God, his wife and all of creation into a harsh, dry, desolate desert felt like death. Yet the Lord allowed him to live 930 years. Not only did God not put him to death immediately, but he tenderly and mercifully made clothes so that Adam and his wife would not have to be ashamed. What an amazing display of the kindness of God. Commentators suggest that the animal skins anticipate the covering of our shame by the righteousness of Christ. This may be true, but I don’t think we should lose sight of the thoughtful, tender mercy of God, in the midst of disobedience, punishment and shame.

If you are in a position of authority, remember to be merciful when those who are under you falter. Even if you are completely justified, be merciful, just like our heavenly Father was merciful to Adam and to us. Let them know somehow and in some way that you still love and respect them. Remember the time when a holy and awesome

God stooped down to sew animal skins for his poor, frightened, beloved creatures, so that they wouldn't have to be ashamed.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, forgive us for the times when we have been harsh and judgmental. Help us to remember that reconciliation and restoration of relationship should always be our goal. Remind us, by your Holy Spirit, of how kind you were to our first parents in the aftermath of their rebellion and of how merciful you've been to us in spite of our disobedience. We've been forgiven much. Therefore, may we, out of deep gratitude to you, forgive others. Amen.

SOJOURNERS

Deuteronomy 10:17-19

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, over 40 million Hispanics now live in our country, making them the largest minority. Coping with this huge influx of predominantly Mexican neighbors has been a great challenge for communities. Hospitals, school systems and other public services are struggling to find ways to deal with unanticipated numbers of poor immigrants who don't speak our language. Many of them come out of extreme poverty that most Americans can't even imagine. Most of them are simply looking for a better life and good jobs that will provide money for relatives living in squalor.

Our country appears to be deeply divided over the issue. National polls indicate a groundswell of resentment, fear and frustration. According to a Wall Street Journal poll taken last year, 45% of Americans believe immigration is bad for our country. A Pew Center poll reported that 48% of Americans feel that Hispanics threaten our values and customs. We are now building a huge fence to keep "illegals" out. Armed militias are actively patrolling the border. Our politicians in Washington seem paralyzed and unable to develop a reasonable immigration policy.

What is wrong with this picture? Why are we so reluctant to embrace these poor people who are desperate to find a better way of life? This passage from Deuteronomy has a lot to teach us about how God feels about the "sojourners" in our midst.

17 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. 18 He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. 19 Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. Deut. 10:17-19

According to this scripture, the main reason we are to love the sojourners among us is because *God* loves them. Even though he is “God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, the awesome God,” he loves the fatherless and the widow. In ancient near eastern culture, caring for the weak and powerless was a sign of a truly great king who didn’t need to show favoritism to more powerful subjects.

The second reason God commands the people of Israel to love the sojourner is because *they* were once sojourners. They were aliens for 400 years in Egypt before God rescued them.

If you have ever traveled to another country and been unable to speak the language, you know how terribly intimidating it can be and how completely dependent you are on the mercy of your host country. God’s desire is that we, like him, look for opportunities to seek out the sojourner among us and provide him with whatever he needs.

Think about your current situation in life. Perhaps there is someone in your own family who’s different. Maybe there is someone of a different race or religion. Look at your neighborhood. Chances are there is a Hispanic, African-American, or Asian family that has moved in recently. What have you done to welcome them and make them feel at home? Have you invited them into your home or to church? My guess is that your church is like mine and is filled with people who are mostly like yourself. Why is this? What would the church look like today if we had been obedient? God has called us to love strangers and to invite them into our lives. We must recognize that our natural response of fear, suspicion, and even hatred of those who are different from us is wrong and deeply offensive to God. We desperately need the Spirit to transform our hearts so that we can repent of this terrible sin. We need to not only *accept* this huge influx of poor Hispanics that have flooded our country but to *pursue* them and to love them with sincere hearts and make sure that they have all that they need for a comfortable life here.

There are some among us who have heeded the call. There is a tiny, predominantly white, elderly congregation in our city that, like many churches, has found itself in a dying neighborhood filled with poor Hispanics with whom they have little in common. The church had an offer to close its doors and merge with another congregation but they decided instead to reach out to their new neighbors. Every Monday and Thursday evening, big buses lumber through the neighborhood picking up children and taking them back to church where volunteers help with homework, prepare a meal and teach them about God. On Sunday afternoon, another group of volunteers gather in about 50 homeless persons for worship and a meal. On Friday mornings the church has opened a free medical clinic.

This is the kind of attitude that our country desperately needs. Hopefully, our leaders can craft legislation that is fair to the millions who have sought legal citizenship but also compassionate to the millions who are here illegally. Hopefully other churches, while all of this is being worked out, will reach out to these strange people who have come to live among us with their different customs, language, and religious faith and show them the love that God has for them.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we confess that our natural tendency is to dislike people who are different from us. We know that this is wrong. Please forgive us. Thank you that your desire is to transform our hearts so that we would be more like you. May your Holy Spirit empower us with gifts of mercy, kindness, compassion and hospitality. May we seek out those who sojourn among us and love them because you love them and because you have loved us. Amen

MIRACLES OF MERCY

1 Kings 17:8-24

Recently a friend of mine told me about a miracle that happened on a mission trip to Mexico. The purpose of the trip was to have a medical clinic and also to refurbish a church that had fallen into disrepair. A certain amount of funds had been allotted for each ministry team. Unfortunately, the costs were much higher than anticipated. About midway through the week, Rick reluctantly approached the local pastor and told him that there was simply no more money to buy either medicine or building supplies. The pastor graciously understood and the two of them asked God to provide guidance as to how they might spend the rest of their time in Mexico. But privately my friend was discouraged, embarrassed, and angry that he had grossly underestimated the cost of the trip. However, later that evening, as he was rummaging through his suitcase, he found an envelope stuffed with \$2000! He still, to this day, has no idea where that money came from. Needless to say, supplies were bought, the repairs were completed, and the clinic continued to see patients.

I don't think Rick will ever be the same. He had been on many mission trips overseas and had seen God work in amazing ways. There was no question in his mind that God could provide, but when the crisis in Mexico came, his faith and confidence in God's provision was deeply shaken. And yet, in spite of his lack of trust, God still provided in a miraculous way.

Does this sound familiar? Hasn't God been merciful to us over and over again, but then when the circumstances of life seem to be turning against us, our faith seems to vanish. Why don't we have the quiet, confident and peaceful trust we want but instead are so quick to be filled with anxiety, fear and discouragement? This amazing story from 1 Kings illustrates as well as any in the entire Bible that God's mercy is available to anyone, even when faith seems to be lacking.

8 Then the word of the LORD came to him, 9 "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." 10 So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." 11 And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." 12 And she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die." 13 And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says the LORD the God of Israel, "The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth." 15 And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. 16 The jar of flour was not spent; neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah. 17 After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. 18 And she said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!" 19 And he said to her, "Give me your son." And he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed. 20 And he cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow

with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?” 21 Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the LORD, “O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” 22 And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. 23 And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, “See, your son lives.” 24 And the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.” (1Kings 17:8-24)

Elijah lived in a terrible time of apostasy. Ahab and his wife, Jezebel “did evil ... more than all who were before him.” (1Kings 6:30) One of the most despicable things he did was to establish Baal worship throughout Israel. Baal was a Canaanite storm god who was thought to bring rain and fertility to the land. Therefore, as punishment for Israel’s apostasy, the Lord brought about drought and famine. Elijah was told to go to Zarephath where a widow would take care of him. Now in those days to be a widow was almost certainly to be destitute. In fact, whenever the Bible speaks of “widows” you could just as easily substitute the word “poor.” So, imagine how outrageous this must have sounded to Elijah. Now Zarephath was on the Mediterranean coast between Tyre and Sidon, in the heart of pagan Baal worship. And it was there that Elijah found a poor widow gathering sticks to make, what she believed, would be the last meal for herself and her son. Elijah asks her for a drink of water, and then a cake--the last bit of food that she possessed. Miraculously, the Lord uses this tiny bit of faith from what seems to be the most unlikely source, in the most unlikely place, to provide for the three of them until the drought was lifted. Yet, in spite of this amazing display of mercy, the widow disparages Elijah when her son becomes ill. But God chooses to have mercy on her once again.

I have been medical director of a free clinic for the last twenty years. Over that time, God has graciously provided a free space, innumerable volunteers, and funds to buy medicine for the homeless of our community. We have never had to apply for any grants. We have relied completely on God's provision. But two years ago, our ministry seemed to be coming to a close. The homeless shelter needed space for additional staff and we were asked to leave. My assistant found a better job in another city. Our equipment was worn out and not worth moving to a new site. All sorts of questions filled my heart. I wondered if God had forsaken me. Had I not been faithful? Was he withdrawing his favor? Did he want me to do something else? Did he really want me to abandon these people who lived in shelters and boarding houses that I had taken care of for the last two decades? We prayed for guidance at our weekly prayer meeting. Then, out of the blue, a nurse practitioner called and asked if he could help. He had connections with the military and was able to find used exam tables and dental chairs.

But we still needed a space. All of the local churches and shelters had previously turned me down. But then I got a call from the local Rescue Mission. The director had changed his mind. Within a few weeks, the mission truck pulled up to our site, loaded up all of our equipment and set it up in a newly remodeled space that they gave to us for free. They refinished the floors, painted the walls, and provided tables, chairs, and desks. We had a waiting room, two exam rooms and a pharmacy as well as a bathroom and two additional sinks. God hadn't forgotten us after all. He simply had something better to give us. I was completely humbled and ashamed that I had doubted his provision.

Why are we like this? Why do we forget so easily? I think of Jesus' disciples in Matthew 16. Twice they had seen Jesus feed thousands from a handful of bread and fish. Yet, at the very next stop, the disciples are stressed because they forgot to bring any food. Jesus seems exasperated. "How is it you don't understand?" he says in one translation.

Christine Pohl has written a wonderful book on hospitality. While doing the research, she visited eight Christian communities involved in mercy ministry. One of her many discoveries was that almost every group could relate stories of God's amazing provision in times of great need and limited resources. They always seemed to have enough to carry out their mission. Isn't this exactly what God promises us in 2 Corinthians 9:8? (Pohl 1999)

What about your life? What is God calling you to do? Perhaps you have been asked to get involved in children's ministry or go on a mission trip. If you are like me, you start thinking about all of the reasons that you *can't* do it. You are too busy, you've never done it before, it costs too much, etc. In this passage, I think God is telling us that if we will just trust him, like Elijah and the widow at Jaraphath, he will provide for whatever we need to do his work even when our faith might be lacking.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, please forgive us for our terribly limited lives. We need to realize that you delight in providing for our every need particularly in ministry. We are so faithless. We are so stingy with our time and money. Over and over again you sustain us, and over and over again we worry about tomorrow's needs instead of trusting in your steadfast love. Help us to step out in faith and stretch ourselves in your service that we might bring glory to your name and advance your kingdom beyond all that we thought was possible. Amen.

GOD'S CALL TO MERCY

Esther 4:1-17

William Wilberforce was an evangelical Christian who served in the British Parliament during the late 1700's. One of his friends was John Newton who convinced Wilberforce to use his position of power to help abolish the slave trade. After many years of effort, this terrible practice was finally outlawed in the British Empire. This achievement is probably one of the most significant events in the entire history of the church. Wilberforce's life is a beautiful testimony of the tremendous good a believer can accomplish when he takes advantage of the position of influence that God has given him. (Metaxas 2007)

Unfortunately, most of us tend to not take advantage our own situations very well. Many years ago in Persia, another highly placed individual was able to use her influence with the king to save an entire race from annihilation.

1 When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. 2 He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. 3 And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. 4 When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. 5 Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn

what this was and why it was. 6 Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, 7 and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. 8 Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people. 9 And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. 10 Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, 11 "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law--to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days." 12 And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. 13 Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 14 For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" 15 Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, 16 "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." 17 Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. (Esther 4:1-17)

Why is it so hard for us to obey God? I think in Esther's case it was fear and she certainly had plenty of reason to be afraid. Had the king not looked upon her favorably, she could have been put to death. In addition to fear, we often fail to appreciate our own significance in God's plan. Both Esther and Mordecai knew what needed to be done but Esther needed Mordecai to clarify for her exactly how high the stakes were. He believed that God was going to rescue the Jewish people and that Esther had been placed in an influential position by God for exactly this purpose. For Esther, Mordecai was God's prophet.

Sometimes we need a "Mordecai" in our life to clarify what God is calling us to do. Unfortunately, even when we know what we are to do, we often refuse and choose instead to follow our own plan.

Jonah is a good example of what can happen when we disobey. God called him to preach repentance to Nineveh so that he could have mercy on them. But he refused and took a ship to Tarshish. It took a terrible ordeal at sea to teach Jonah that going against God's purposes was bound to fail. The truth is that Jonah didn't want God to have mercy on the pagans. Fortunately, Esther did do the right thing and disaster for the Jewish people was averted.

The question for us is: what mission of mercy has God uniquely positioned us for? Who in our neighborhood or workplace is in need of our care? Are we, by God's providence, placed in a position of influence where an injustice might be addressed?

David Batstone has carefully documented hundreds of cases of enslavement and trafficking all over the world and maintains that there are many who are oppressed even in our own country. Gary Haugen is one of the heroes in his book who responded to God's call. He has used his training as an attorney and his experience in third world countries to form the International Justice Mission to help bring freedom those who have been entrapped by this terrible evil. (Batstone 2007)

We need to pray that God will open our eyes to circumstances in our own life where things like this might be happening. We may need to get godly counsel to help us see where fear or complacency might be keeping us from stepping out in faith. We will then definitely need the Holy Spirit to give us the same courage and commitment that Esther had in order to obey God's will.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, please forgive us for being blind to our own situations and blind to the need for mercy around us. Bring people into our lives that can help us to see clearly what you have called us to do. Then, please give us the courage, wisdom and strength to respond to our calling so that your name will be glorified and your kingdom advanced. Amen

TRUST

Psalm 146

George Muller was a 19th century Christian evangelist who has inspired the faith of millions. He lived in Bristol, England, where he preached the gospel, distributed Bibles, raised money for overseas missionaries and established a network of orphanages for homeless children. By 1870, over 2000 children were being cared for in five different homes in the Bristol area. Remarkably, Muller never asked for financial support. In fact, as a pastor, he refused a regular salary. He never went into debt but put his faith completely in God to provide for the financial needs of all of his ministries. (Muller 1985)

Muller's approach to fundraising is in stark contrast to modern day Christian ministries which never seem to tire of soliciting. Many churches have even hired professional fund raising organizations to help them accomplish their goals. Christians really seem to be no different from non-Christians in putting their trust in the almighty dollar instead of God. In fact, in almost any situation, we seem to look for help from everywhere else except the Lord. We look for doctors to help us live longer, lawyers to get us out of trouble, psychologists to make us happy, teachers to educate us, and government leaders to do everything else. We should learn to be more like George Muller and put our trust in God, not man or money, to provide for our needs. This psalm encourages us to put our trust in the tender compassion of our all powerful, eternal Father in heaven.

*1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!
2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing
praises to my God while I have my being. 3 Put not
your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom
there is no salvation. 4 When his breath departs
he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans
perish. 5 Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD his God, 6 who made*

heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever; who 7 executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; 8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. 9 The LORD watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. 10 The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise the LORD! Psalm 146

Why should we trust God? According to the psalmist, we trust him because he is powerful and because he is merciful. Therefore, he is worthy of our trust. The God who “made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them” is surely a God who can provide for us. A God who provides “justice for the oppressed”, and “upholds the widow and the fatherless” is a compassionate God. If he is faithful to the weak and the powerless, then how much more will he be faithful to us?

Some of us find it hard to trust anyone, even God. Yet Brennon Manning believes that trust is the most precious thing we can offer God. (Manning 2002) This is exactly what the psalmist is encouraging us to do. Trusting God doesn't mean that bad things won't happen to us. Jesus trusted perfectly in his Father but suffered terribly. We trust in God because we know that he has created everything that exists and because he is kind. We also trust in God because he is a God who has experienced suffering. He knows what it's like to be oppressed, hungry, bowed down and imprisoned. He also knows what it's like to be misunderstood, betrayed, abandoned, tortured, subjected to injustice, and put to death. Yet we continue to put our trust in money or other human beings. Trusting God is one of the great secrets of living an abundant life. It frees us up from the paralyzing worries and concerns of the world so that we can enjoy the life God has given us to lead.

When we started our first free clinic in 1986, we went before the elders of our church to ask advice. We were expecting to be told how to put together a board of prominent business people and raise money. Instead, their primary advice was that we begin meeting together for prayer. That precedent of prayerful dependence upon God has provided a solid foundation for twenty-two years. Remarkably, we have been free from any financial worries. We need to learn to trust in the Lord with *all* aspects of our lives and we need the Holy Spirit to grant us the faith to do so.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, please forgive us for trusting in everything else but you for our needs. Please help us to remember that you are all powerful and sovereign over all things and that you are a compassionate and faithful God who loves to care for the needy. May your Holy Spirit give us the ability to trust in you. Free us up from anxiety about the future to love and care for the poor as you do. Amen.

TRUE FASTING

Isaiah 58:1-12

Recently, our pastor called us to pray and fast for the selection of new elders and deacons. He did a wonderful job reviewing the relevant passages and explaining the benefits and potential pitfalls of fasting. As I have been thinking about fasting in my own spiritual life, I can't help but remember an old-fashioned TV preacher who would plead with the audience to fast and send *him* their tithes. The idea was that if you sent money to his ministry, he would guarantee that God would send you a huge financial blessing in return. This same gimmick, of course, has been used by others over and over again to elicit funds from gullible viewers.

Unfortunately, I think we all tend to lapse into this idea of using God as a giant vending machine. We think if we go through all the right motions whether its prayer, fasting, tithing, going to church, or reading the Bible, God will give us whatever we want. But God's desire is that worship would flow out of our *hearts* and not out of some devious plan to manipulate him or impress others. He doesn't want to be treated like a pagan god that has to be appeased. That is exactly what we do at times and apparently what the people of Israel were doing back in Isaiah's day.

1 "Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. 3 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. 4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and

to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? 6 "Is not this 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? 7 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? 8 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. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, 10 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 be as the noonday. 11 And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. 12 And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. (Isaiah 58:1-12)

What does true devotion to God look like? According to Isaiah, it is loosing the bonds of wickedness and letting the oppressed go free. It is sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless

into your house, and clothing the naked. It is pouring yourself out for the hungry and satisfying the desires of the afflicted. A life devoted to caring for the poor and needy is the kind of worship that our Father desires. This is exactly what Jesus was saying to the Pharisees when he chastised them for tithing mint, dill and cumin while they neglected the “weightier matters of the law” such as justice, mercy and faithfulness. Jesus criticized their hypocrisy just like Isaiah does in this passage. (Matt.23:23)

Of course, we are guilty of the same sin. Some of us are very careful not to miss a single church service but find it all too easy to neglect a request from a charity or to check in on a neighbor. Over and over again, we need to be called back into right relationship with the Father.

My friends Paula and Randy are a wonderful example of what responding to God’s call to proper worship can look like. Over the last five years, they have opened their home to a variety of young men and women whose lives have been decimated by drug and alcohol abuse. In addition to inviting them into a warm family environment, they help them find work, take them to the doctor and most importantly, provide spiritual guidance. Remarkably, nearly all of the sixteen young adults who have spent time in their home are now walking with the Lord. Recently, they have opened a halfway house for women who have problems with addiction.

Simply going through the motions of religion is deeply offensive to God. He longs to bless us as this passage from Isaiah teaches. If we learn to worship him with our whole heart and with our entire lives, we can expect to receive his blessings, if not in this life, then certainly in the life to come. Only he can give us a heart that is capable of this kind of worship. Attending services, reading our Bibles, praying and fasting are wonderful expressions of devotion if they flow out of a heart that has been loved by God. If, however, we are using them to obtain God’s favor or to impress others we can expect that our

fasting and prayers will be not only ineffective but will actually be offensive to him.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, forgive us for our tendency to fall into empty ritual, neglecting the needs around us. Fill our hearts with your Holy Spirit. Remind us of how much you love us. Help us to see that our entire lives are worship and that a life devoted to the poor is the kind of worship that you delight in. We cannot do this on our own but need you to give us this kind of heart. Amen.

THE LEAST OF THESE

Matthew 25:31-46

For their last year of seminary, my son and some of his pals decided to form an “intentional community” in a poor part of town. The idea was to learn to live together, love each other, and reach out to the community around them. The group was surprised when Tim, one of their classmates, volunteered to join their adventure. Tim apparently had terrible allergies and seemed to hypersensitive to the entire world. The very last place you would think he would want to be is a crowded inner city hovel surrounded by drug addicts and prostitutes. My son said it was so bad that if somebody were to light a cigarette *outside* on the sidewalk, Tim would run into the bathroom, slam the door and start puffing on his inhaler. One beautiful spring morning, Tim happened to be jogging through a little patch of woods near the apartment. Why he was even running outdoors that day is a mystery because he almost always used the gym. In any case, as he was running, he noticed a person shivering under a black tarp. Amazingly, Tim stopped and investigated. What he found was a half-starved, half-naked black man who couldn’t speak English and smelled, according to my son, “like a dead animal”. Remarkably, Tim helped the man to his feet and half-carried him along the trail back to the car and up to the apartment that was already overcrowded with six seminary students and all their stuff. The boys got the man undressed and into the bathtub. The poor fellow had never seen such a thing and didn’t even know how to use the faucet. When he was done, there was a thick film of residue nobody wanted to touch. They found him some clean clothes and he collapsed in a heap and slept for thirteen hours.

Steve, a roommate from Uganda, knew Swahili and was able to find out that their new friend was an Ethiopian Christian who had fled his country and miraculously made his way to the United States.

Amazingly, there happened to be an Ethiopian church nearby who agreed to take him in.

My son says the most amazing thing about this story was Tim. Of all the people he knew, Tim was absolutely, without a doubt, the most unlikely person to have cared for this man. Tim apparently thought nothing of it, but his friends knew that this was not something he would have done six months previously. Tim's heart had been changed and the transformation was apparently more powerful than all of his hang-ups. His story and many more like it will probably be one of the millions recounted at the end of the age which Jesus describes for us in this passage.

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' 40 And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' 41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for

the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44 Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ 45 Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matt. 25:31-46)

Many evangelical Christians are probably bothered by the criteria for salvation that we find in this remarkable passage. Isn't the heart of our reformed doctrine, "salvation by faith" and not by works? And if works are the final criteria, does this mean that we should try to do good deeds so that we can be sure we're saved?

It's interesting to note that the "sheep" don't remember their specific acts of mercy. This suggests that good works rather than being premeditated acts designed to achieve salvation are simply just spontaneous events that flow out of a transformed heart. I believe that this is what happened to our friend Tim. Our Father wants to change us into creatures that are like him. He wants us to love the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the stranger, the naked, and the prisoner just like he does. The people who are going to be saved are the people whose hearts have been rewired to do just that.

Mother Teresa seemed to be profoundly impacted by this passage. Leaving a comfortable job as a high school teacher, she plunged into the depths of the slums of Calcutta. Looking for "Jesus in distressing disguise", she welcomed lepers, the terminally ill and babies thrown into trash bins. Thousands of people have been rescued from a lonely death on the streets into the loving arms of her Missionaries

of Charity. What an incredible testimony to the unbelieving world! By rejecting the wealth, power and sensuality of the world, her nuns embrace poverty, obedience and chastity and love the unlovable. (Spinks 1997)

How can we possibly have that kind of love? Maybe we could start by emptying ourselves of some of the world, like Tim and his seminary pals did and like Mother Teresa. Maybe we could spend a bit more time in prayer, in worship and in community with other believers. Maybe we could begin to discover who the poor are, where they live, how they live. Maybe we could follow Mother Teresa's advice and start at home with our spouses and children, our neighbors and coworkers. There are plenty of people around who need to know the love of God.

PRAYER

Father, may are hearts not be discouraged by this passage but rather filled with joy that you loved us enough to make us your own. We long to love the way that you love. We want to have a heart for the poor and the needy. We know that you have given us access to all the resources of heaven to do your will. Transform our hearts. Bring people into our lives that need help and empower us to love them just as if we were loving you. Amen.

LACKING ONE THING

Mark 10:17-22

The United States is certainly one of the richest countries the world has ever known. Unfortunately, there is a huge discrepancy in the distribution of those riches. The top 10% own 70% of the wealth. The bottom 30% own less than 1% of the wealth. Thirteen percent of the US population, or 37 million Americans, live below the Federal Poverty Level, which is the highest percentage in the developed world. Eleven percent of U.S. children don't know where their next meal is coming from.

In spite of a median income of over \$46,000, most Americans aren't very generous. According to John Piper, Protestants tithed only 2.9% of their income in the year 2000. If that number were increased to 10% (which is what the word "tithe" means) an additional 139 billion dollars a year would be available for the poor and needy. (Piper 2003)

We may have more in common than we thought with a certain rich young ruler Jesus encountered 2000 years ago.

17 And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" 20 And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." 21 And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." 22 Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Mark 10:17-22)

I suspect most evangelicals are baffled by Jesus' response to the young man's question. Why didn't he simply tell him to accept Jesus as his personal savior? As usual, he surprises us. Just like his response to the lawyer in Luke 10, he tells the man that the way to obtain eternal life is to obey the law. Remarkably, the young man asserts that he has done so. But Jesus, knowing his heart, then gives him a challenge, "sell all that you have and give to the poor... and follow me". At once, the man's hidden idolatry and covetousness are revealed for all to see. This is why he was disheartened. He may well have thought that he had obeyed the letter of the law, but clearly he had *not* obeyed the most important commandment—to love the Lord with *all* of one's heart. He loved his wealth more than he loved God. Like many of us, he wants to have his cake and eat it too. But Jesus says, it's impossible to love God and money. (Luke 16:13)

We prefer to think of this interaction between Jesus and the young ruler as an isolated commandment to a specific person in history. But the exact same command is given to *all* of Jesus' disciples in Luke 12:33. In fact, much of Jesus' teaching centers around the idea of "losing your life" for the sake of the kingdom. This specific teaching is found in all four Gospels at least once and in two of the Gospels twice. (Matthew 16:24-25, 10:38-39, Mark 8:34-35, John 12:25, Luke 9:23-24, 14:26-27) Sadly, I'm afraid most of us simply do not know what it means to lose our lives for the sake of Jesus. The lives of millions of poverty stricken Americans would be dramatically changed if we could somehow discover what it means. It's the classic "elephant in the living room". Just like the rich young ruler, we are blind to our own covetousness and idolatry. How desperately we need Jesus to uncover *our* hearts and let us see the depth of our sin. The sin of Sodom was not only sexual immorality, but according to Ezekiel 16:49, they had "pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy". The sin of our country, I believe, is the same as the sin of Sodom and the same as the sin of the rich young ruler that Jesus confronted in this passage.

So, what are we to do? We could start by taking a hard, prayerful look at our financial situation—what we own, our income and how we spend it, and how much we actually give. Then, we need to come up with a biblically sound plan consistent with being a disciple of Jesus. If you are like most people, you don't have any kind of financial plan. You simply spend all the money you make and then some. Put yourself in the place of the rich young ruler. Are you, in fact, willing to give up all you have for the sake of Jesus? I pray we all are.

About 1700 years ago, a young Egyptian named Antony read this same passage from Mark and it completely changed his life. He had been born into a wealthy Christian family and inherited a significant estate. He gave everything that he had to the poor and arranged for his sister to be placed into a convent. He devoted the rest of his life to prayer and fasting, became the founder of monasticism, and powerfully influenced the church throughout the world for centuries to come. (Meyer 1978)

The love of money has been a cause of all kinds of evil in the church. Very few people have found the “narrow door” of life like our brother Antony. Most have followed the broad and easy path of the sorrowful young ruler. Sell the things you don't need, give freely to the poor, and follow Jesus.

PRAYER

Dear Father, please forgive us for having covetousness hearts. We have greatly underestimated the power of this sin and how pervasive it is in our lives. The world around us is in such need and you have blessed us with so much. Please empower us by your Spirit, to empty our hearts of all its idols, and to joyfully give to the poor, that we might have an eternal treasure in heaven. Amen.

GOOD NEWS

Luke 4:16-22

Michael Miller first began working with street kids in Honduras in 1993 while doing an internship at Wheaton College. There are approximately 40 million of these kids in Latin America. Most of them are either orphans or runaways from poverty, alcoholism and abuse. In Tegucigalpa, the capital, there is a huge dump where some children actually live. Many of them are addicted to a yellow glue they find there. Other kids live in a shantytown built on the steep banks of the river that divides the city. After a heavy rain, it's common for children and entire families to be swept away by the rising waters.

Michael renewed his desire to work with street kids while assisting with the Hurricane Mitch clean up in 1998. By the year 2000, he officially began the Micah Project, named after the famous verse in Micah 6:8. This ministry focuses on rescuing young boys from a life of poverty, drug addiction, gangs, violence, and an early death. They are adopted into a Christian community where they receive good food, a safe place to sleep and an education. Some graduates then come to the United States for college. The hope is that these former street toughs will then go back to Honduras and become godly leaders. Hundreds of kids have been impacted by this broad-based ministry which also includes other areas of outreach such as feeding the poor, new home construction, and hosting medical and dental mission teams. It's truly amazing that all of this good work for the poor of Honduras started with a college internship in 1993.

This scripture from Luke reminds us that when Jesus began his ministry 2000 years ago he went first to the same type of people that Michael Miller is reaching out to: the poor.

16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. 17 And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He

unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 22 And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:16-22)

When Isaiah made this prophecy around 700 B.C., he was anticipating the Babylonian captivity. It was a proclamation of hope that one day an Anointed One would come to rescue his people and bring them home again. It would be like a year of jubilee.

Jesus' audience in Nazareth must have been thinking about the Roman occupation and wondering if he was the one who would deliver them. Thankfully for us all, the good news Jesus proclaimed had more far reaching implications. Just like Michael rescuing children from a trash heap, Jesus came to rescue us from the terrible consequences of sin and rebellion and to give us eternal life.

But why would it be that when God became man, the first people he approached with his message were the poor? Why wouldn't Jesus first go to the religious leaders or the king? The reason is because it's the poor who are actually *looking* for good news. Captives want to be free, blind people want to see and those who are oppressed are looking for a liberator. I think this is what Jesus is teaching us in the Beatitudes. The kingdom of God *is* good news for the poor, but the rich have already received their consolation. (Luke 6:20-26)

A rich man is often completely unaware of how bankrupt his heart is. The world has been good to him. He has everything he needs. God can only complicate his life. It's truly only the sick who need a doctor. Try convincing your 20 year-old son that he needs a physical. If he is anything like my son, you will have to make the appointment yourself and physically take him there. But when Michael Miller has a medical team come down from the U.S., people may travel for miles on foot for the chance that they might get some help. And when the street children of Tegucigalpa hear the jeeps coming at night with bowls of rice, they come running out of their shacks and alleyways to stuff themselves with the only meal they will have that day.

How do *you* receive what God has to offer? Are you rich and well satisfied, content to stay at home, or do you come running when he calls? Take a hard look at your own life. Have you been good news for the poor? What would your life look like if you became good news for the poor tomorrow? Only God can show you. It may be volunteering at a crisis pregnancy center or showing up to fix breakfast at a homeless shelter. Or it may be like my friend Chuck, who organizes a group of men to go down to the jail to preach the gospel, have Bible studies and spend time with the prisoners.

The fact is most of us *aren't* good news for the poor. We are bad news. Rather than giving out of our abundance, we are spending ourselves into debt. Rather than volunteering for mercy ministry, we fill our lives with diversions. If the God of the universe at the beginning of his earthly ministry announced that he was going to be good news for the poor, shouldn't we do the same? If we have truly *received* like Chuck and Michael, we ought to be able to give. Listen for his voice and see if you hear him proclaiming good news to you. Receive it into your heart and then go out and proclaim it to the poor just like he did.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we confess that we have been bad news rather than good news for the poor because we have spent our time and energy filling up our lives with things we think we need. We have been blind to the fact that our wealth and our abundance have oppressed us and made us captives to their allure. How desperately we need to be set free by our Messiah, who has been anointed by the Spirit of God to rescue his people. By the power of your Spirit, free us up from ourselves so that we might be enabled to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor to those who suffer among us. Amen.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Luke 10:25-37

Robin is a delightful young lady who worked as an intern in a local church. She suffered from depression and unfortunately her medication had caused her to gain quite a bit of weight. She was feeling especially sad about this one day and at staff meeting told the group she was struggling. Remarkably, none of the pastoral staff showed any interest or offered any consolation except an ex-gay man named Will. Now Will was new to the church and had recently started a controversial ministry for homosexual men who want to come out of the gay lifestyle. That afternoon he sought out Robin and discovered that one of the reasons she was discouraged was that she was out of money and down to her last pair of jeans that would fit. Immediately, Will wrote her a check for \$100 for some new clothes. Robin says it was one of the kindest things anyone had ever done for her. Several years later her depression lifted, she lost all of her excess weight and she actually got engaged. Will was the first person at the church she called with the good news.

Isn't this story amazing? How is it possible that church professionals ignored her pain and a modern day "leper" she hardly knew reached out to her? The hard truth is that although we talk a lot about loving our neighbors, we all have a pretty limited idea of who our neighbor is and don't really have a clue what it looks like to love them. This story that Jesus told in the gospel of Luke has a lot to tell us about loving our neighbor.

25 And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" 27 And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he

said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” 29 But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 34 He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.” (Luke 10:25-37)

The lawyer seems to know his Bible. He is able to distill the entire Law down to two basic commands from which all the others are derived: love God and love your neighbor. (Deut. 6:5, Lev.19:18) And Jesus says simply, “...do this and you will live.” Of course, the lawyer has to take it one step further. He’s probably hoping for another opportunity to show the listeners how much he knows. Once again, Jesus masterfully reveals the man’s heart. As the story unfolds, the lawyer and anyone else listening would naturally expect the hero to be a lay person who would outshine the professional clerics. Instead, Jesus chooses a despised heretic to be the savior. Just like that, the lawyer is “caught” by the parable. Just like the rich young ruler in

Mark 10, Jesus exposes the lawyer's heart to be filled with evil instead of love. Notice how the lawyer cannot even bring himself to say "Samaritan", but rather says, "the one who showed him mercy." To which Jesus says, "...go and do likewise". In other words, be like the Samaritan whom you hate. (Fee and Stuart 2003)

The truth of the matter is that God requires that our love be as comprehensive and perfect as his. The ability to love one's enemies, even a heretic, is a mark of perfect love. (Matt.5:43-48)

So, how do we, in the twenty-first century, respond to this story? Tim Keller cautions that this parable is *not* a moralistic teaching encouraging us to love our neighbors better. Instead, he says "Jesus is seeking to humble us with the love God requires, so that we will be willing to receive the love God offers". The weight of the parable is designed to drive us to our knees as we discover our utterly bankrupt hearts. Our only hope, therefore, is that we might be filled up with the love enabling Holy Spirit of God. (Keller 1997)

How often do you try to justify yourself like the lawyer did? Think back to your last Bible study or your last discussion in Sunday school. What was the attitude of your heart as you were trying to convince someone of what a particular passage means? All of us need to be freed up again and again from our tendency towards self-righteousness and self-justification.

When John Bunyon realized his righteousness was found only in Jesus Christ, he said it was like chains falling off his legs or like giving up pennies in his pocket for a treasure chest of gold in heaven. How liberating it is to give up our own meager self-righteousness for the infinite righteousness of Christ. (Keller 1997)

God expects us to love like he loves and he loves everyone, even his enemies. The problem is that we cannot do that on our own, no matter how hard we try. We have a hard enough time being civil to our own family, much less loving our enemies. We need to be

reminded that once we were God's enemies, yet he loved us and the atonement of Jesus justified us forever. We need to ask the Spirit to fill our hearts so that we can love the way he loves.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, please forgive us for having hearts filled with hate instead of love and for constantly trying to justify ourselves by what we know, what we say and what we do. Please help us to empty our hearts of our own self-righteousness that they may be filled with the righteousness of Jesus and that we might begin to live out our lives thinking, speaking and acting out of a hearts filled with the love of Christ instead of ourselves. Amen.

UNITY

Philippians 2: 1-11

Several months ago a team from a local church went to a poor community to help build homes. One of the men on the team unfortunately took the liberty of volunteering the entire group for extra duties throughout the week. This included cooking breakfast for other workers, clean up details, devotions, etc. Naturally, since he had not consulted with the team leader or the other members of the group, his over-zealousness created a lot of anger, resentment and conflict. Many felt that working an eight hour shift at physical labor they were not used to was all they were prepared to give. As a result, what could have been a wonderful week of mercy ministry ended up being an unpleasant endurance test.

Something like this may have been going on in Philippi when Paul wrote his letter. There was apparently a serious problem within the fellowship that Paul wants to address and we don't find out until chapter 4 that it is between two women, Eodia and Syntyche. Throughout the letter, Paul pleads for unity among the Philippian church leaders which is extremely important whether you are talking about a church plant or a mercy ministry project.

1 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,

7 but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil.2:1-11)

Are there any situations like this in your own church right now or perhaps within your family or neighborhood? Are there people not speaking to each other because they are disagreeing about issues? Have you ever tried to intervene as a peacemaker like Paul? Paul's suggestion to the Philippians was that they follow the example of Jesus and humble themselves before the Father. His cure for conflict is humility.

It's important to define what is meant by humility because it's not a virtue that the world values very much. The world teaches us to do whatever it takes to get what you want because you deserve it. Humility is not about being a doormat and neither is it about being passive. It is, as Paul teaches, simply counting others more significant than yourself and looking not only to your own interests but the interests of others.

The best illustration of this is Christ himself, who, though he was God, humbled himself to the lowest of the low; a cursed, crucified and forsaken corpse on a cross between two criminals. He did this because he considered our need for redemption to be more important than his desire to remain in perfect fellowship with his Father. His cure for our conflict with the Father and with each other was his own humiliation.

Therefore, as followers of Christ, just like Eodia and Syntyche, we need to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand. We need to allow our hearts to be broken by our sinful divisiveness and attend to the redemptive, reconciling, humbling power of the Spirit of Christ. Then we will be ready to handle all of the potentially disunifying situations that are sure to come.

For example, let's say you are going to meet with the mercy ministry team next week. With a limited budget, you need to decide between multiple ministry opportunities, all of which are in need of funds. How in the world are you going to decide which ministries get how much money with everyone on the team having favorites? To begin with, you pray. You ask the Holy Spirit to grant you humility. You remember that you are united with Jesus and also united with your brothers and sisters on the team. You remember Christ's example. You repent of your selfishness. You go to the meeting and gently try to persuade but you are more than willing to compromise for the sake of unity.

Remember that the cure for disharmony is humility and the source and best example of humility is Jesus Christ. He is the answer for our conflict filled lives now, just like he was in Philippi 2000 years ago.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we confess that we are self-centered and arrogant. We rarely consider the needs of others above our own. We desperately need your Holy Spirit to remind us that we are united with Jesus Christ and to follow his example. As he humbled himself for us, may we learn to humble ourselves before each other, remembering that we belong to one body and Jesus is the head of that body. We believe it is your desire that we live in unity with one another. We look forward to the day when all of your creation will exist with you in perfect harmony. Amen.

TRUE RELIGION

James 1:27

Over the last several years, I've been privileged to witness the dramatic transformation of a young man in a nearby church. He had been a believer for nearly ten years and a casual glance at his life would suggest that his faith was alive and well. He read the Bible, went to church most of the time, tried to do the right thing and for all intents and purposes, practiced his religion in a manner that was indistinguishable from most evangelical Christians. After several years of gentle persuasion, he was finally convinced to go on a mission trip to Central America. His expectations were quite low, but God's purposes for this young man were extraordinary. Since that trip, my friend's life has taken on a passion and a zeal that seems to have the mark of the Holy Spirit. He is driven by a desire to seek out and care for the poor in other countries and in our own city. He has given up golf and has started taking seminary classes. Instead of sitting in the balcony half asleep, he is now actively involved in leading worship. In short, it seems that he has finally "got religion" because the Lord rescued him from a life of complacency. And it all started with a visit to help the poor of Nicaragua.

I believe that my friend is a good example of what James was trying to communicate to the early church in this passage. True religion is a transformed life that is distinctive in the world because it is characterized by a concern for the poor.

27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.
(James 1:27)

What exactly happened to my young friend? Was this a conversion experience? Was he really a Christian before? There is no question that he would have been able to give all the right answers to all of

the right questions. His life, at least externally, seemed to contain all the right ingredients – Bible study, prayer, worship, and fellowship. However, in retrospect, something was clearly missing. My friend says it's like he was asleep and God woke him up.

This may have been the context of James' letter to his fellow Jewish believers. It may be that some of them had been lulled to sleep by the good news that they didn't have to earn their salvation. Jesus, as Paul was preaching throughout the empire, had earned it for them. Some would contend that James was actually contradicting Paul. The truth is that they were fighting against two different problems. Jerry Bridges says that we tend to err in two opposite directions, both of which are equally wrong. "Legalism" is the belief that God's favor is dependent upon our good works. "License" is taking God's gift of salvation for granted and living as we please. James argued, just as Paul would, that genuine faith is always manifested by good works. (Bridges 2001)

How should we respond to this passage? God may be asking us to take a hard look at our own lives. We need to utilize the test that James has given us and take our "spiritual pulse." Is there any evidence of caring for the poor? What drives us? Have we allowed the cares and concerns of the world to dominate our thoughts? Can our lifestyle be distinguished from that of an unbelieving person? Remember that once *we* were poor orphans and Jesus visited *us* and adopted *us* into his family. We need the Spirit to empower us with the same love, compassion and mercy that characterized Jesus' life.

Chad and Jane are a beautiful example of a couple whose hearts have been transformed by God's grace into a life of obedient faith. Twenty years ago, they served for a short time in Kenya as medical missionaries. They now reside in the United States but have never lost contact with their friends in Africa. War and HIV have created over two million orphans in Kenya. New Life Homes adopts and cares for hundreds of abandoned babies from hospitals, roadsides,

and churches. Chad and Jane have started the Amani Children's Foundation to provide assistance for New Life Homes linking the tremendous wealth of North America with the tremendous need in Africa. As a result, new orphanages filled with the love of Christ are popping up all over Kenya. And it all started with a visit to the poor twenty years ago.

So, remember what true faith looks like. Remember how easy it is to fall asleep, like my good friend, and slip into a life of complacency. An externalized religion is a far cry from the impassioned heart that our Father has and desires to give to us. Remember the life of Jesus and how he spent his life visiting the poor and proclaiming the good news of God's Kingdom.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, please forgive us for our terrible tendency to become either lazy or legalistic. Keep us awake and aware of how deeply and passionately you love us and the poor. Help us to love and care for the needy among us and to keep our lives free from the cares and concerns of the world around us. Amen

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