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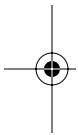
GOD'S FORGOTTEN ONES

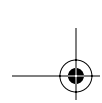
ONE SUMMER, Johnny was ministering among the poor on a six-week urban project with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in Los Angeles. Part of his assignment was to spend time in a convalescent home in the central part of the city. The elderly who are in need make up a segment of the poor who are easily overlooked in our society. Since many are tucked away in homes and hospices, they are not as visible as are those who are younger and on the streets.

This convalescent home was smelly, understaffed and poorly kept. Few residents had visitors. For a new guest arriving to serve the residents, it was very awkward. Some residents were mentally ill; some were not responsive at all. Others were even hostile. Members of Johnny's team were struggling in the first few days with why they had been called to serve there. "Why are we here?" "This is depressing." "We can't do anything to help." Such remarks began to be made openly.

One day, after Johnny had been there for about a week, an elderly woman slowly walked up to him in the hallway where he was standing. She drew close and pointed a finger at him. "I know why you're here," she said in an accusatory tone.

She paused as my friend looked at her, wondering what this was about. Realizing he didn't know what she meant, she went on. "I know





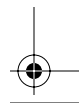
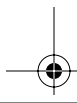
why you're here," she said again. "You're here because God wants us to know he hasn't forgotten about us."

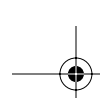
The woman turned and shuffled away. Johnny was stunned. Another team member was so moved she nearly cried on the spot. By the end of that summer, many of that team cried as they left the friends they had made, because in many of those relationships they had found something of the kingdom of God.

In that moment, the person who spoke to Johnny that first week was not a delirious old woman but a prophet who saw the kingdom of God with a sharpness that he could not imagine. With one line she had indeed summarized one of the central purposes of God in bringing him to visit with the residents. Johnny would have taken paragraphs to explain this purpose, fumbling through Christian words and concepts. But a little old lady, poor in means, alone in a convalescent home, could see and sense the work of God more deeply and sharply than anyone on his team. She had received the word of the Lord, in the flesh—the incarnate love of God in the team that visited her that summer. It was a beautiful moment, one that Johnny will never forget.

As my friend found out that summer, many of those in need have God-given dignity and insight. The Lord's wisdom may be found there. In fact, the Lord himself is found among the poor. The kingdom of God is found in the dirty, grimy, common places of the world. And in his presence, we are all changed.

This was another central purpose in bringing Johnny and the other students to be with the elderly in this convalescent home over the summer. Jesus wanted them to know him and to know his work among those who are in need. For them, the point that summer was not so much that they came to help the elderly remember that God hadn't forgotten them. That was the Lord's word to the woman and to her friends in that place. The word to Johnny was a bit different. It was as though God said, "I have seen and remember these people who live here, in need and out of sight. I have not forgotten them. Have you?" That was a word that Johnny and all of us involved in that summer's urban project heard loud and clear.





But through his experience at the convalescent home, Johnny also heard a more subtle word—an invitation to him. It was as though Jesus said, “Come meet me here, among these people.”

This is the unique experience of those who minister among the poor. They are invited to encounter the utterly beautiful presence of God in the midst of those in need. It is mystical; it is difficult to describe. But the experience is known to many of God’s people. Mother Teresa and St. Francis had the experience; and the invitation is extended to all of God’s people when we receive the good news of Jesus and decide to follow him.

In the sheep and goats story at the end of Matthew 25, Jesus says that inasmuch as we have helped those who are poor and outcast, we have ministered to him. He so identifies with those who are in need that as we serve them, Jesus tells us, we encounter *him*. It is this meeting, this encountering of Jesus and his good news that so many people of his day found so disturbing.

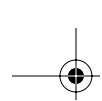
A DISTURBING DIAMOND

The good news that Jesus brought about the reign of God involves many things. A good friend of mine once asked, “What is the gospel?” and many people responded with something like “The gospel is the good news that God sent Jesus to die for our sins and reconcile us to himself.” But when does Jesus say that this is all the gospel is? He offers that to know him is eternal life (John 17:3). John 3:16 is usually attributed to Jesus, and so maybe we can say that in one sermon he defined the gospel as his death for our reconciliation.

But Scripture tells us that at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry he comes into Galilee preaching the gospel of God, and he says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). This seems to associate the gospel with a fixed time that has now culminated (the time is fulfilled), a realized political reality (a kingdom), a radical 180-degree change in a person (repentance) and commitment (belief).

That doesn’t sound quite as simple as the definition found in gospel



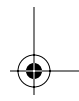


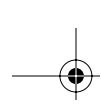
tracts. It seems many-faceted, like a jewel, perfectly cut, glimmering with striking brilliance as the light bounces off all its intricate surfaces, producing so many colors and such exquisite beauty that viewers lose their breath. It is so compelling that, if clearly seen, any person would go out immediately and liquidate their resources in order to acquire it. It is so compelling as to disturb the course of a life. To say “It is a diamond” of this precious stone is true, but these words hardly capture its beauty, intricacy or compelling nature.

Always time conscious and aiming for efficiency, we like to come up with one-line formulas to describe the gospel. Yet in truth, Jesus preaches about so many topics with such varied analogies and object lessons that if his topic is always this gospel, then it is an amazingly involved and complex thing. It may be good news—indeed it is—but it is so involved, so all-encompassing, so demanding, so alarming, so violent and radically different in nature, that on one occasion he said that a person must be entirely re-created to receive it (see John 3:3). The person who receives this good news must simply start over and push the reset button in life.

Jesus says nothing so simple as, “Well, if you just think that I’m here to save the world, that I will die for you, then rise, and that I’ll eventually come back, you’ll be cool.” Conversion is not a matter of intellectual assent. It is true that our minds, our very thoughts, are hostile to God and need to be transformed (Romans 12:2). We must be retrained in how to think. We must throw out all the old ways we have been taught and learn freshly from the master teacher. We must begin again. But it is not only a matter of intellectual assent, much less to a one- or two-line doctrine. *All* of us needs to be remade. We need to learn how to act right, to see right, to love right, to hate right, and we have a teacher, a counselor, who will instruct us: the Holy Spirit.

This is all very disturbing, and rightly so. No one who encountered Jesus was able to just ignore him. All went away disturbed. The person and the message they encountered in Jesus were fundamentally different from the way they were used to seeing things; it was alarming. It was





good news to some. Better said, it was really good news to all, but only some received it as good news. And the gospel is just that—a beautiful, disturbing reality that God is bringing into the world.

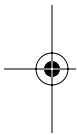
The word *gospel* is used only fifteen times in all the Gospels combined. And none of those verses define it very clearly. In several it is referred to as the good news of the kingdom. In several it is associated with the poor—good news specifically for them. But it is used as a general term and always associated with Jesus, his coming and his ministry.

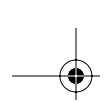
If Jesus' central concern was to distribute the good news to people, then his many sermons as recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John should give us a glimpse of what that good news is (especially since it is not defined in a nutshell as we might like). The most frequent single topic in Jesus' teaching seems to be the kingdom of God. He is centrally concerned that people understand what this kingdom is about. He is concerned that they enter it, becoming citizens of his realm. This is the goal of his ministry: whether he is healing people or casting out demons or speaking to a crowd, his central concern is that people enter the kingdom of God.

HOW GOOD DOES THE GOOD NEWS SOUND?

This kingdom of God, which is supposed to be good news particularly to the poor, is not well received by everyone. It is true that before Jesus' trial and death, many people followed him. But these were mostly common people. They were the poor, the blue-collar workers, not the economically or socially elite, not the politically powerful. The faith, the kingdom, the gospel that Jesus preached did not generally seem to be heard by such people as good news. A few prominent people did follow him and receive his teaching as good news. But many others viewed it as such a threat, such a revolutionary and even destructive force, that they killed him for it. It was not good news to them. They could not see the good in it.

Down through ensuing generations of humanity, the true gospel has never been popular among those who have found great success in the





world. Only in some moments of rousing revival have many of those who have worldly privileges really renounced their other allegiances and followed only God. The “gospel” that has been popular is a version that allows and commands no substantive change in the way we live, think and relate.

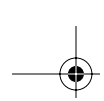
In the United States today, divorce rates, sexual practices and consumer lifestyle choices are largely the same for those who claim Christian faith and those who do not. Few are disturbed by the “gospels” that are commonly preached, for these syncretistic versions of the Christian faith have been co-opted by our world of idols. Love of money, individualism, materialism and consumerism have polluted our Christian spirituality. This gospel tells us that if we only believe, we will be materially wealthy, in good health, masters of our economic future and able to live the high life. Then there is the pop-psychology, self-fulfillment, achievement-oriented version, which tells us if we only believe, we will be happy, stable and healed, without a care in the world. This cannot be the same gospel that Jesus preached.

These versions don’t match up well with the economic hardship, substantial persecution, and real pain and suffering that the New Testament church underwent. When sin is repented of, people’s economic circumstances do often improve, and in the presence of God there is joy and healing. Yet these blessings must be placed in clear balance with the rest of the teaching and lifestyle of the gospel.

A COUNTERFEIT VISION?

Frequently what we have instead of Jesus’ good news is news that is good for allowing us to continue to do as we please. It is good news for just us. It is not good news for the poor, since we have the habit of supporting economic policies (domestic and international) that exploit the poor for our benefit. It is not about entering God’s kingdom through great difficulty and suffering, since many of our habits and strategies aim toward making ourselves comfortable. It is not about hating one’s own life or about living simply, since we indulge freely in self-realization groups and





the pursuit of riches. It can't be about making a choice of allegiances between the state, our own family and God since we are rarely forced to make these hard choices. Though Jesus says the gospel is about justice for the poor, abandoning everything else for God's kingdom, and hating our lives, we frequently seem to define it otherwise. The gospel apparently has become the good news that we don't have to change and can look forward to a bright future in the world.

Yes, the kingdom of God is about evangelism: it seeks new members who desire to live under God's direction and guidance, who are willing to be retrained in life. Yes, the kingdom of God is about healing, sometimes of a very personal and emotional nature. Yes, the kingdom of God is about power—the power of God's Spirit ministering to finite people. And yes, the kingdom of God is about dealing with the evil and injustice in the world. Those who have become part of God's kingdom will speak out about injustice, even as Jesus did.

Most fundamentally for us, the kingdom of God is not just about us. It is not about justifying a lifestyle that we want to live at the expense of the rest of the world. It is not just about having an ecstatic experience that would justify the way we live and help us forget our conscience and the heart of God.

Jesus is very clear that concern for those in need is a litmus test of faith, not to be failed by any who hope to enter his kingdom. God has not forgotten about the poor. The question for us is whether we have forgotten about God.

The kingdom of God is about justice. It is about people being drawn back to worship God and choosing to act faithfully. It is about personal and corporate righteousness. It is about the justice of God, the justice that his people are to pursue by his means. It is about justice and not *just us*. This vision, the vision of shalom, is not new, but it is news. Some of us are rediscovering it in the Scriptures and in life in the church.

