

A Jubilee Response to the Gospel: Serving the Poor as the Poor **Christian Gray, August 2008**

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. – Matthew 6:12

Desiring his own, more palatable version of Scripture, founding father Thomas Jefferson personally edited and composed his own edition of the New Testament in 1804. Entitled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, Jefferson physically removed all “supernatural” contents of the four Gospel books, a task, he remarked, that was “as easily [done as] distinguish[ing] diamonds in a dunghill.”¹ Although this version of “scripture” was limited largely to personal use during Jefferson’s lifetime, a century after its completion it was reproduced for distribution among new members of Congress. Whether or not one can make a direct correlation between the dissemination of this text and a secularized sentiment of public faith over the past hundred years, it is clear our country is one that much prefers to be guided by morals rather than spirituality.

As easy as it is to point the finger at an act so blatantly careless and arrogant in its approach to the very infallible Word of God, the church today would do well in considering how we too have figuratively penned our own versions of *The Life and Morals*. Critiquing the two most apparent fallacies in Jefferson’s approach to Scripture - selectivity of Scripture and secularizing moralization of Scripture - this article will briefly examine how the current church often shares in these same errors, particularly in regard to a theology of poverty.

The Poor and the Whole of Scripture

He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me? Declares the Lord. – Jeremiah 22:16

Reflecting on the Evangelical church of my youth, I can not recall a single message pertaining to God’s heart for those who are poor or the appropriate Christian response to that heart. I remember a list of fine sermons framed around topics such as “joy” and “heaven”, but no teaching regarding what the bible has to say about poverty. It is unfair, however, to put the blame on any church’s omission without first placing the same blame on myself. I remember in college reading the bible cover-to-cover and in no way was I overcome with the gravity of the biblical message on poverty.

Post-college I was shocked to discover that there are approximately 2000 poverty-related verses in Scripture. Forming a relatively seamless stream throughout the written Word of God, both Testaments give the topic equal weight. From the lips of prophets and kings, shepherds and fisherman, and even God, Himself, came words of regard for the poor. Based on its “real estate value” alone, poverty can be considered anything but a minor topic of Scripture.

In addition to the frequency of reference, some of the most pivotal and resounding passages in Scripture revolve around the topic of poverty. “At the crucial moments when God displayed his

¹ Excerpt from the “Correspondence of Thomas Jefferson”

mighty acts to reveal his nature and will, God also intervened to liberate the poor and the oppressed.”² Although often overlooked, “the explosive message of the prophets is that God destroyed Israel because of their mistreatment of the poor.”³ Aside from idolatry, nothing seemed to rouse God’s passion more than issues pertaining to the treatment of those in poverty. Amos 5 is a prime example:

I can't stand your religious meetings. I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions. I want nothing to do with your religion projects, your pretentious slogans and goals. I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes, your public relations and image making. I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music. When was the last time you sang to me? Do you know what I want? I want justice--oceans of it. I want fairness--rivers of it. That's what I want. That's all I want.⁴ (v.21-24)

It should be noted that the concepts of “poverty” and “the poor” are broadly termed throughout Scripture. Under this umbrella are the destitute, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the disabled, the weak, the beggar, the widow, the fatherless, the alien, the stranger, the prisoner, the marginalized, the oppressed, and the spiritually poor. However, in spite of its far-reaching meaning, “... the primary connotation of ‘the poor’ in Scripture has to do with low economic status usually due to calamity or some form of oppression.”⁵

Selectivity of Scripture

The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.... In a very short time... the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see. Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel." – Isaiah 29:13-19

If poverty is such a repetitive and voracious theme in Scripture, how then do we miss it? This topic passes by our eyes in much the same way as Jefferson’s eyes passed by the miraculous: our viewpoint is always framed by the contour of our lenses. This remains true, maybe even more so, regarding concepts which pertain to spirituality. What we see is drastically slanted by what we already think and believe. Subsequently, the major obstacle a distorted lens poses is not simply a limitation in our ability to see truth, but in the capability for our hearts to change towards believing truth. Our blind, warped eyes cloak our hearts with an even greater blindness because the starting place for transformation is the possession of the true version of reality and truth (Romans 12:2).

Although this concept of lenses/worldview has been well discussed elsewhere⁶ and, thus, doesn’t require further discussion for our purposes here, the fact that there are varying types of lenses is noteworthy. Most of us know we have lenses, we are often simply blinded to which ones we own. Wearing unidentified, distorted lenses poses more than an inconvenience or distraction; its outcome is imprisonment in a false reality ruled by false gods (2 Corinthians 4:4). For Jefferson, his lenses

² Sider, Ronald. 1997 [4th ed.]. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*. Nashville, Tennessee: World Publishing. p.42

³ *ibid.* 44

⁴ Peterson, Eugene. 2003 [Remix ed.]. *The Message*. Colorado Springs, Colorado: Navpress.

⁵ Sider, Ronald. 1997. p.41

⁶ eg. Jung, Pepper, Maslow, Frank, and Messer

were *consciously selective*; however, as I believe is the case regarding Christians and biblical poverty, lenses can also be *unconsciously selective*. The task of the biblical prophets, as agents of the true God who seeks the people's freedom from the imposed slavery of false reality, was to dismember both forms of selective distortions by calling the Israelites into *remembrance of their God who had already set them free*.

This too is the purpose of the remainder of this article; a return toward a fuller hermeneutic of Scripture inclusive of "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40) via the "Remember[ance] that [we once] were slaves... [until] the LORD [our] God brought [us] out... with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm"⁷. (Deuteronomy 5:15)

The Jubilee Gospel

In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property.... If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you.... I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.

– Leviticus 25:13,35,38

Putting our eyes back on God always presents us with a renewed set of lenses for viewing both the world and Scripture. One way Scripture calls us to do this is through *remembrance*. Over and over again throughout the Old Testament the people of Israel were urged to remember the LORD their God, an act in itself capable of correcting, no transforming, both eyes and heart. In particular, His work of *liberation* was to stand out as evidence of His Lordship.

Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant. Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.' (Exodus 6:5-8)

Once we regain a more complete view of God that is inclusive of His attribute as "The Great Liberator", our eyes receive new sight. The "good news" of the Gospel comes into sharper focus. With the clarity of seeing all God has done to make us free, we gain a new bifocal perspective aligned toward 1) a greater sense of gratitude for God's gift of freedom and 2) a burden for those not living in the reality of that freedom. This is the same bifocal perspective offered us in the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). With a renewed Gospel-perspective, which always lends toward gratitude, our hearts can't help but follow suit; we become people who look to forgive (be distributors of freedom) much because we've been forgiven (been freed) from even more (Matthew 6:9-13). We become people who live out a Jubilee response to the Gospel.

⁷ Also see Deuteronomy 15:15; 16:4; 24:18, 22

The Jubilee was a response to God's gracious liberation and deliverance. As the people recalled how God freed them from slavery, their joyous response was to pass that freedom on by forgiving debts, releasing slaves, and redeeming the land.... As God liberally redeemed you out of Egypt, so you ought to graciously liberate your brothers and sisters. Jubilee acts of social justice aren't motivated by heavenly badges of merit. They're the natural and joyful response to the good news of God's liberation.⁸

Bringing this renewed Gospel-perspective to the text of Scripture, God's heart for the poor and His desired response for us in caring for the poor become illuminated. Instead of glossing by these passages, our hearts are set free to become gripped by them. As a result not only are we able to identify and thoughtfully pause within these passages but our motivation for response changes hands – from our hands to the Spirit's. We cannot help but be moved in love toward the need of others in joyful, grateful reciprocation for all God has done for us. "We love because he first loved us" (I John 4:19)

Moralization and Secularization of Scripture

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. – I Corinthians 2:12

Unfortunately a Gospel-centered, Jubilee-motivated response in serving those who are poor (or serving anyone for that matter) eludes much of the church of today. Overwhelmingly our motivation is "enslaved" to duty or obligation. An internally or externally-prompted guilt "forces" us into a conjured response framed around what we *should* or *have* to do. As a result, serving those in need becomes moralized – something we do because we feel it's the right thing to do. The problem is that contrary to popular belief, morality is not a Christian but secular motivation for response. Acting on one's morals is a self-motivated act, not a Spirit-initiated one. Morals may point us in the direction of *discerning* the "right thing" but they point to ourselves, not God, for the ability in *accomplishing* that thing.

As a result of this secularized motivation, serving the poor often becomes just another tick on the laundry list of shortcomings in our Christian experience. Inevitably, as with all of our other shortcomings, we file this topic into one of three categories: guilt (magnifying our shortcomings through a reduction of the cross), neutrality (minimizing our shortcoming through the reduction of Scripture), or disdain (justifying our shortcoming through a reduction of the poor). None of these reductions come anywhere close to measuring-up with the "full life" Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10). Something deep in us (the Spirit) tells us there is something more but we are often unsure how or what to change to make this "full life" a tangible reality. We long to be set free to freely respond to the needs around us, but in our secularized moralism we become "functioning atheists." Ultimately, responding atheistically on our own, without God, results in our becoming "functioning slaves".

⁸ Kraybill, Donald. 2003 [3rd ed.]. *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press. p.90

It's at this point of impact that Jesus "blows the ram's horn"⁹ to announce the very good news of the Gospel – with him comes "the year of the Lord's favor" (Jubilee)! In the same way the Israelites were to return their possessions to the original owners in the year of Jubilee¹⁰, Jesus announced the "great Jubilee" – the final return of ownership of world from the enemy to God. With Jesus we who were once slaves are now made free!

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim [Jubilee,] the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:17-19)

Author and theologian Ronald Sider refers to this proclamation of Jubilee given by Jesus as foundational to the Christian response to the poor:

At the supreme moment of history, when God took on human flesh, the God of Israel was still liberating the poor and oppressed and summoning his people to do the same. That is the central reason for Christian concern for the poor.¹¹

Because of Jesus we are no longer subject to the limitation of our sinful flesh. Instead "[we] have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God" (Romans 6:22). Even more, "[we] are no longer a slave, but a son; and since [we] are a son, God has made [us] also an heir" (Galatians 4:7). Once slaves, now children of the King – this is good news indeed!

The problem, of course, is that we forget that we're free. Because of this the Apostle Paul, with the voraciousness of an Old Testament prophet, exhorts us to *remember* our paid-for freedom: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

Remembering we have been liberated from slavery, from all debt, and even from death, changes not only what we see but who we are. In our remembrance that *we* too are the poor that Jesus came to save, *we* become the recipients of his good news – the good news not only of our salvation but of our ongoing transformation toward the fullness of life he offers.

In our remembrance we gain new lenses framed around Jesus and the Jubilee of his Gospel, the perspective capable of radically restoring our eyesight toward the goodness of God. Seeing the goodness of God transforms our heart into His heart. Developing His heart calls us to the world in love – a love we give freely and abundantly because it's not bound by moral or secular limits. Our love becomes supernatural. It becomes God's love, the very love that has overcome the world (John 16:33) and offers the poor with nothing less than the fullness of the kingdom of God (Luke 5:20).

⁹ The Hebrew term Jubilee means "ram's horn".

¹⁰ Jubilee was to take place every fifty years among the people of Israel. In addition to the sabbatical "rests" or "freedoms" that were to take place every seven years (release of slaves, canceling of debts, and a break from agriculture), land was also returned to the original owner during the year of Jubilee. In this way Jubilee (and Sabbath) are worshipful acts of stewardship – a recognition that all belongs to God.

¹¹ Sider, Ronald. 1997. p.48