

The Hope of the Poor

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- [0 : 0 0] I want to read with you from the Bible, from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 4. As Joe mentioned, Jesus tells us here that he's come to be with different kinds of people.
- And so just see if you can pick up as I read who those people are. So this is Luke, chapter 4, verse 14. I'm going to start reading down at verse 30.
- So this is the Word of God. Verse 30.
- He 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 the year of God's favour.
- Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.
- [1 : 2 3] And he began by saying to them, today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.
- Isn't this Joseph's son? They asked. Jesus said to them, surely you will quote this proverb to me. Physician, heal yourself.
- Do here in your hometown what we have heard you did in Capernaum. I tell you the truth, he continued. No prophet is accepted in his hometown.
- I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.
- Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Sarapath in the region of Sidon. I know where many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed.
- [2 : 2 8] Only name in the Syrian. All the people of the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of town, took him to the brow of the hill in which the town was built in order to throw him down the cliff.
- But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. Amen. This is the reading of God's own good and holy word.
- So we're going to think for a little while about this passage in the Gospel of Luke and what it has to teach us about Jesus and his ministry in our world.
- There's quite a lot of outrage and anger initially, isn't there? So just try to think to church after lockdown, perhaps. And we're back in the old schoolhouse.
- I'm preaching. And I just infuriate you so much that you all rush forward, grab me and drag me up to Blackford Hill, which is a local landmark.
- [3 : 3 6] Take me around the south side of Blackford Hill where it's all rocky and steep and you want to throw me down so that I will break my neck and die. Well, that kind of stuff doesn't really happen in Morningside and I can't imagine what I would have to say to get that reaction out of you.
- But it's what happened here in Nazareth to Jesus. These people are not apathetic about their religion, are they? They care deeply. They care passionately.

But they seem to care about the wrong stuff. And because of the emphasis that Jesus gives to things, they really end up mad with him, really furious.

Why? Because Jesus doesn't conform to their priorities. He's put Capernaum before Nazareth, his own hometown. He doesn't conform to their pecking order.

Who does he think he is? This is Joseph's son. We know him. And Joseph's family were a dirt poor family. And then he doesn't conform to their prejudices or their expectations.

[4 : 41] They think that because of their morality, because they go to the synagogue, because they know the scriptures, because they're ethnically Jewish and they follow Judaism as their faith.

They think that that sets them apart as better than everyone else. And what Jesus says here is, no, that's not the truth. You're blind. You're not seeing what God is really up to in this world.

And when Jesus says this, it exposes the tectonic plates that are shifting beneath the surface of their lives. You see, initially, don't they?

They seem positive and receptive to Jesus. Just look what it says here in verse 22. So that's what's going on in the surface initially.

But later, there's this violent reaction against Jesus. These shifting plates beneath the surface of their lives that lead to an eruption of anger.

[5 : 44] That Jesus has challenged their religious lifestyle, challenged their beliefs, challenged their assumptions that somehow they have an inside track with God.

And angry religious people are a feature of every age, now and then. And they're always dangerous. And what we're going to see then is we see the fury of their reaction to Jesus.

That despite their devotion and their religion and their synagogue attendance and their very decent sort of moral living, they are far, far, far from God.

And so the question that Jesus brings here to them and to us is, how do we live near to God? How can we live near to God? If these religious, devout, moral people are so far from God, how do we live near to God?

And the answer that Jesus gives to that is this. By acknowledging that we are spiritually poor. Jesus helps us to live near to God by showing us that we are spiritually poor.

[6 : 55] Sometimes I give you a Thursday thought, something to remember on Thursday. I'm going to call it the Friday flashback this time. So see if you can remember an extra day. But this is what I want to say about that. Just try and remember later in the week this.

If we think that God owes us, we will be eaten up with anger when he doesn't give us the life we expect. Okay. That's what's going on here.

If we think God owes us, we will be eaten up by anger when he doesn't give us the life we expect. That's true for those people in Nazareth back then. It's true for us today.

How can we live near to God then? By seeing our spiritual poverty. So Jesus says, first of all, that he has come to rescue the poor.

And also I think here he's telling us that he has come to renew our hearts. So I want to understand those two different aspects of this passage of scripture. Jesus rescues the poor.

[7 : 58] And then Jesus renews our hearts. So the focus is in Nazareth. The camera zooms in down into the town and the streets of Nazareth and right into the synagogue.

And then we're in the synagogue and we see Jesus. And Jesus stands up and he takes a scroll of scripture from the synagogue attendant and he reads it.

And he opens it in the book of Isaiah chapter 61. And he reads just a verse or two from Isaiah 61. And I've got my Bible here so I can go back to Isaiah 61.

To the very place where Jesus read. And in your Bible it's worth doing the same thing, isn't it? So here we are, Isaiah 61. Just these words that Jesus read. The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me.

Because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted. To proclaim freedom for the captives. To release from darkness the prisoners.

[8 : 59] And to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. So Jesus would have read that in Hebrew. And then he would have translated it into Aramaic. Because even then most of the people who are in the synagogue.

Wouldn't have understood Hebrew. And so Jesus would translate what he'd read into their own language. And then he sits down to teach them. And he's saying to them, this is why I'm here.

Sometimes this is called the Nazareth manifesto. A manifesto is a statement of belief. An agenda for change. And so Jesus is saying, this is who I am.

This is why I'm here. This is why I have come to you. To preach good news to the poor. I was looking up manifestos this week.

I read the communist manifesto by Marx and his contemporaries. It's the history of all hitherto existing society. It's the history of class struggles.

[10 : 01] Very famous line from the communist manifesto. Well Jesus says, my manifesto is this. Good news for the poor. That's what I stand for.

That's my agenda for change. Change. Isaiah 61 is a passage about the servant of the Lord. A kind of mysterious figure in some ways in the Old Testament.

But one who they know will come and proclaim good news. And bring the kingdom of God to bear. And initially the people in the synagogue, they assume that this is good news for them.

That somehow they're the poor. But they can't actually see their own poverty. Jesus will go on to show that. Because they're also blind. So Jesus comes to open our eyes to what it is to be truly spiritually poor.

I'm the one who's come with good news. To show you how to live near to God again. I've come to declare the year of God's favour. That line in Isaiah 61 actually takes us all the way back into the book of Leviticus chapter 25.

[11 : 11] Where we read about the Jubilee Festival. Which was a festival that God decreed for Israel every 50 years. Where people had their debt forgiven.

And slaves were set free. That was the year of God's favour. And so Jesus is saying, I've come to cancel your debt. And set you free. So who are the poor?

Well, Jesus goes on to explain to the people of Nazareth in a way that they find, of course, really provocative and controversial. Because the spiritually poor are not oppressed Israelites with Roman occupation going on.

The spiritually poor are those who see themselves as being in great need of God's mercy and grace. And the people of grace.

The people of Nazareth, they don't see themselves as needing mercy and grace. They've got a very different view of what's going on. And to expose that reality, Jesus goes to two prophets from the Old Testament.

[12 : 19] Elijah and Elisha. And he uses them to kind of explain or illustrate exactly what he means by the poor. The spiritually poor.

Who are the poor? Well, here in the story, they're a widow from Sidon. She's not an Israelite. But she's poor. Her son is dying.

They've got very little food. But they're also a man called Naaman, who is a rich Syrian general found in the Old Testament. And so the fact that Naaman is wealthy tells us it's not first and foremost spiritual material poverty that's in view here.

Jesus is looking beyond that. What do Naaman, the rich general, and the widow who's in poverty have in common? Well, one, they're outsiders, aren't they?

They're spiritual outcasts. They are in the eyes of the people of Nazareth and the people of Israel. They're heretics. They're idolaters. They're foreigners.

[13 : 27] They're immoral people. They're unbelievers. And Jesus is saying it's to these spiritual outcasts, the unbelievers, the immoral, the foreigner, the heretic, the idolater.

It's to these outcasts that God has sent his son, that God has sent his prophets and his messenger. Why does God go to these outcasts rather than to those who are in Israel?

Because there was lepers in Israel. There were widows in Israel. God doesn't go to them. Why not? Because these outsiders are the ones who are receptive to the message of grace.

They're the ones who are aware of their need. Jesus is trying to show them, me, you, all of us.

That if we can't see our need, if we're blind to our spiritual need, then we're blind to the possibilities of grace. If we come to religion and to God with a sense of complacency and self-assurance, then we're not going to see how much we really need Jesus the Savior.

[14 : 42] The people of Nazareth kind of thought in some ways that they had God in their pocket, that God owed them something because they're moral.

They've got the right beliefs. They lead decent lives. They make good choices. They go to synagogue. They know scripture. They've been responsible. They work hard.

They help people. They volunteer at food banks, perhaps. And if we think, yeah, that's me too. I'm on the side of the good guys.

God, you know, I've earned myself a good life from God. God owes me because of the way I live my life. Then we're in for the same kind of shock as the people of Nazareth.

Because what Jesus is showing them is that despite your religion, your morality, your outward decency, your attendance at synagogue, your religion, all of that, do you know what?

[15 : 42] God owes you nothing. He owes you nothing. You may be in the synagogue every week, but God will not come to you because you are proud and self-reliant.

And you have no room for the reality and the presence of God in your life. You've got no room for good news because you can't see that you are poor.

You can't see your own sinfulness and brokenness and the lostness of your heart. We can all look good in the outside, you know, the odd bad thing, but we can all look good in the inside.

But God looks beyond that to the heart. And every human heart is marred and broken. Our motives are often messed up. So we might look respectable, but it's not the reality of what's going on on the inside.

So God has come to those who are spiritually poor, who see their need, who cry out for help, who know that God owes them nothing and that their only hope is in his mercy.

[16 : 52] These are the people that God comes for, that Jesus comes for. And if we begin to think, God owes me, God owes me, God will give me because I've earned it.

And then we don't get from God what we think we've earned, the life that we deserve. That's when anger explodes. That's what happens in the Nazareth synagogue. Their anger explodes.

God owes us more than this. Why would he go to the outsider instead of to us? Give us what we are due. God, pay up now.

Well, if we think that, God give me the life I want, the respect I'm due, the success I crave, the approval I want. What if God doesn't give that to us? Do you know what?

Then we will want to kill him too. We will want to drive Jesus out of our lives and over a cliff and say, I have no room for you anymore, Jesus, because you have not given me what I deserve and what I earn, because I have tried to be the person you told me to be.

[17 : 56] And that's resting on yourself and your own goodness and your own efforts, instead of on the gospel, the love, the mercy of Jesus, where we say to God, I know you owe me nothing, but please give me your mercy.

Give me your grace. I stand in need, empty handed before you. So that's what it is to be spiritually poor. What about the materially poor then?

Well, I think there is in the gospels a bias to the poor and oppressed. God cares about suffering. Scripture continually cries out on behalf of those who are oppressed by evil rulers, by those who are in hunger and need, those who are robbed of their wages and exploited.

Jesus meets with needy, broken people, sick people, poor people, hungry people. He feeds them, he heals them, and he helps them. So we are to love the whole person.

Christians don't just care about your soul. We care about all of you. We treat you as a whole person, body, mind, and soul. We care about all your needs, material and spiritual.

[19 : 13] Our ministry is holistic in that sense. So there's the materially poor, there is a care and a bias towards them in the gospel.

But I think also we've been shown here that there is within those who are poor and oppressed, those who are outsiders, there's a greater openness to Jesus Christ.

Tim Keller, I was reading to us, listening to a sermon about this passage by Tim Keller this week, and he's a retired minister from Manhattan. And in his sermon, he points out that as we read through scripture, we see that the socially disadvantaged, those who are suffering, are generally much more receptive to the work of God and his gospel.

That women who are often in oppressed and disadvantaged situations, slaves, foreigners, lepers, sick people, they're the ones who are so much more receptive to what God is up to in his kingdom.

In the stories of Elijah and Elisha, a widow in Sidon, a poor woman who's not an Israelite, is much more receptive to the message of the prophet than Ahab the king of Israel, a man of power and wealth.

[20 : 38] When Elisha goes to Naaman, the Syrian general, and tells him to bathe in the Jordan in order to be healed of leprosy, Naaman thinks that's beneath him. He's outraged at first.

It's his slaves who go back to him and plead with him, do what the prophet says. The socially disempowered, more receptive, more open to the work of God. Why is that?

Because the gospel is about giving up control and power, and that's much easier for those who are on the outside and who have little control or power in their lives.

But those of us who have power, who are used to being in control, who have every comfort that we want, we're less likely to recognize our need, and we're less likely to want to give up control and power in our lives to Jesus Christ.

If we moralize our money, if we moralize our religion, if we moralize our social standing, if we think that these things give us moral worth, then we become self-justifying.

[21 : 47] If we feel that we've got more worth because of our money, our more worth because we've got multiple postgraduate degrees, our more worth because we're outwardly decent and respectable, and if we think that this sense of worth, if that causes us to look down on people in need, the addict, the homeless person in the street, or the refugee, then we're seeing the trap that power and wealth bring.

That we hide behind these things, we find our identity and worth in them, and so we can't see that Jesus is our only hope, our need. So the gospel reveals spiritual poverty, and we need to see our spiritual poverty in order to draw near to God.

So Jesus rescues the poor, and Jesus renews our hearts. We need a new heart, don't we? A different kind of heart. The hearts of the people of Nazareth are exposed by the words of Jesus, and they're shown to be full of anger and hostility towards God and his message of grace.

And there is something deeply radical in the words of Jesus and in the words of Isaiah. This is the upside-down kingdom, isn't it? The reversal of the world's values. In the beginning of this chapter, chapter four, Satan offers Jesus the things that the world values.

Power, success, fame, influence. And Jesus shows how unimpressed he is by the values of our world, that wealth, intellect, success, morality, religion, power are not what he has come to show value towards.

[23 : 39] In the temptation at the beginning of the chapter, he turns aside the big dollar contract from Instagram that offers some global celebrity status. Why? Because he's come for the last, the least, the lost, the poor, the hungry.

And he knows that they're the ones who are open to his mission and to his kingdom. And he puts their plight at the top of the agenda. He invests them in their needs and struggles. And he calls us, he calls us all to follow him, to love those who are suffering and in need, to love those who are different from us, to love our enemies.

He calls us to set aside power and influence. He wants to turn our hearts upside down.

The change God needs is heart level change. Because heart level change affects every dimension of our existence. We're made new in every way.

I was seeing Paul Tripp, who's a Christian writer this week, saying the heart is the steering wheel. It has an influence on every other aspect of life. Everything we do in the home, at work, in friendships, as citizens, as church, in our views of sex and how we spend our leisure time, what we do with our money, all of that is driven by the heart.

[25 : 06] And so if we're going to live with a sympathy for the poor and the needy, if we're going to live with a willingness to give up power, if we're going to live with a willingness to be generous and give away what we have for those in need, then we need God to change our hearts.

Because we never leave our heart at the door, as Paul Tripp puts it. So a new heart, we need a new humility, don't we? How have you responded to what I'm saying?

How are you responding to what Jesus is saying? Is there a sense of outrage that somehow God's telling you your achievements, your money, your status are not good enough? Is there this anger deep within you about the way your life is going and how God has done things for you?

Verse 19 of the chapter tells us that God has come with a message of acceptance to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour literally means the year of the Lord's acceptance, a time of favour from God, a time to draw near to God has come with Jesus.

But then verse 24, Jesus uses that same word again. I tell you the truth, he continued, no prophet is accepted in his home town. You see, Jesus comes to offer God's acceptance but here's a response that refuses to accept him.

- [26 : 38] Why do we refuse him? Because it will cost us. Because we need to go low. We need to see ourselves as we really are. Needy, inadequate, failed, as beggars and that needs a new and profound humility.

Because I went against normal, personal and cultural ways have seen ourselves. Said before that Theophilus is who Luke wrote this gospel for, his friend Theophilus.

And Theophilus and others are wondering, is it stupid to be a Christian in a world that sees our faith as ridiculous or immoral or out of place? Is it really ridiculous to be a Christian when we face so much opposition and hostility for the values that we embrace?

and Luke is saying, don't be surprised because it goes against our own hearts and against the tide of society to go low, to humble ourselves and to say, I'm nothing.

Jesus faced that pressure in private, didn't he, in his temptation at the beginning of this chapter, that private struggle that says, don't humble yourself, don't make yourself nothing, grab power and prestige, grab influence, grab wealth, grab success, and Jesus says no to that.

- [28 : 01] And now in public, when the Nazorites were ready to exalt him and say, yeah, you're the guy for us, Jesus refuses that again and in public says, no, there is another way.

And he faces their hostility and their outrage because of that. So, don't be surprised at the internal pressure you feel not to humble yourself.

Don't be surprised at the cultural pressures we feel not to go the way of Jesus. Jesus survives this incident. You know, it's amazing.

You know, Satan says, throw yourself down from the highest point of the temple and see if God will rescue you. And Jesus refuses that test. But here, he's about to be thrown down from the highest point of the town and God does rescue him.

And it says he goes on his way. Now, that word way is an idea, a word, that Luke really likes and comes up a lot in this gospel and in the book of Acts which Luke wrote.

- [29 : 09] So, as you, we work our way through Luke, as you read your way through Luke, look for this idea of the way, the way, the journey that Jesus is on. Jesus goes on in his journey, the path that Jesus is taking.

And Luke's inviting us to take the same path, to go the same way, to take the same journey. And what is the journey Jesus is on?

It's a journey down, isn't it? It's a journey from the glory, the riches, the privilege, the power, the majesty of heaven downwards into poverty, towards the cross, to death, to agony and humiliation and pain and suffering.

That's the journey of Jesus and it's the journey that he is inviting his disciples on, including me and including you if you will follow Jesus.

Will you? Will you follow Jesus on this way? Will you join him in the journey that says the way down is ultimately the way up? It's when we empty ourselves that we are ready to receive Christ.

- [30 : 26] It's when we see that we are spiritually poor, that we are made rich by God's love and grace through Jesus' death and resurrection. I'm going to stop there and just say a quick word of prayer and hand over to Fergus for our next song, which is Psalm 9, The Hope of the Poor.

Lord, help us to see our own spiritual poverty and help us to see the poverty and need in the world around us. God, would we humble ourselves to see we're no better than anyone else, to see how much we need your grace, that Jesus is our only hope of salvation, that we can only come near to you when we come empty-handed in our need and say, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Help us to come with that clarity and simplicity to you now. in Jesus' name. Amen.