

Things I Wish Were NOT in the Bible, Part Two: Congratulate the Poor and Damn the Rich!

By Steve Ramer
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Scripture: Luke 6:20- 21 and 25-26

“Congratulations you Poor!”
God’s domain belongs to you.
Congratulations you hungry!
You will have a feast.
Congratulations, you who weep now!
You will laugh...”
But damn you rich!
You already have your consolation.
Damn you who laugh now!
You will learn to weep and grieve.”
Luke 6:20 & 21 & 25 &26 the Scholars Version

Sermon

I don’t know about you,
but I’m feeling a little bit uncomfortable right now?

Perhaps I’m just “old school” enough that I’m still
a bit uncomfortable with such language being used in church!
I know this might be hard for many of you to believe
since I have used this translation, with its four letter word,
a number of times over the years when I have preached
on what are often called the “Beatitudes,”

Most of us are no doubt more familiar with
and likely more comfortable with more traditional translations
that use the far more commonly used and far more modern english words,
such as “blessed” and “woe.”

But I think the real reason that this passage makes me uncomfortable,
is that I know on which side, blessing or curse, that I land on!
So does Jesus really hate rich people?
And does he really think that materially poor
are to be congratulated for that?

Let me elaborate on my latter discomfort with a story.
As some of you know, soon after college,
I lived for two years in the Philippines.

I taught agriculture in a small college,
started by evangelical missionaries,
on the southern island of Mindanao.

They had also started a school and health clinic
located in the nearby mountains, but a full day's journey,
among an indigenous tribal group called the Manobo.

My two years there also coincided with the last few years
of the repressive Marcos dictatorship
that had been propped up by the United States.
Land confiscation by multinational corporate agribusiness
and deforestation by outside logging companies
had left these traditional people
clinging to the last range of old growth forest,
desperately trying to eke out a mere existence
on more and more marginally arable land.

Their homes, though constructed out of local materials,
were falling into disrepair, since the forest around them
could no longer keep pace with the increased demand.
Clothing was limited, dirty and torn.

Dwindling food supplies, typically just enough in good years,
gave way to months of hunger and malnutrition
during seasons of drought, floods, disease and insect infestations.
Poor nutrition, sanitation, disease, lack of immunizations
and basic health care lead to high mortality rates
especially among the children.

So when I think of "the poor," I think of these folks.
Yes I know all too well which side, of the equation, I am.
Which is good, especially when I am tempted
to bemoan my own state of affairs,
when suffering through, what my daughter, Lea,
sarcastically labels as, "first world problems!"

But still the thought of congratulating those folks feels downright cruel.
So what is Jesus trying to get at here?

Well, first off I do believe that God does love everyone,
which would include both the materially poor and rich.

As an itinerant preacher who travelled the countryside, Jesus,
like any good storyteller, first needed to get his audience's attention.
The poor folks, then, were likely shocked to learn
that they were indeed special to God.

“Wow we’ve never heard that before?” or perhaps,
“Wait a minute I’m poor and it doesn’t feel like a blessing!”

While the rich, on the other hand, left offended
by Jesus’ damnations and dire warnings.

A reaction like we might receive
when trying to get our alcoholic friend to stop drinking.
And I do think that the Bible would consider the accumulation of wealth
and conspicuous consumption, as dangerous addictions.

Addictions that are not only spirituality destructive
but harmful to the communities we are a part of.

Now last week, in part one of my series,
“Why Do We Care About the Poor?...
or Things I Wish Sometimes Were NOT in the Bible”
I shared that Jesus said many things in the Gospels,
that at times, I wish he hadn’t said.

Some of those have to do with how
we are supposed to treat those living poverty.
How we understand Jesus and how we then respond to his words
are certainly key in any attempts at being faithful to God’s calling.

Jesus was being both shocking and truthful,
or shockingly truthful, when he said the poor
are to be considered fortunate and not wretched.
Jesus was constantly trying to get folks, rich and poor,
to look at the world around them from a different perspective,
and to begin seeing things as God sees them.

This morning’s text gives us a specific example that God’s values
are radically different and usually the opposite of
the viewpoint and values of the dominant culture.

Throughout human history, one’s prosperity, or that of a nation,
has been considered a sign of God’s favor and blessing.

Coincidentally then, those who prosper
must be livin’ right and pleasing God!
We still see this taught in the many Megachurches
and by the preachers on TV that peddle the “prosperity Gospel.”

But it was the same way in Jesus’ day,
(except the lack of television sets of course!)
and this in spite of centuries of prophetic voices to the contrary.

Jesus is taking a radical U-turn from those popular religious notions by proclaiming that those in poverty are actually better off than those who are materially wealthy.

And by reading the Gospels, we know that Jesus repeatedly reversed this paradigm.
“It is easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get through the pearly gates!”

And in last week’s gospel reading, we heard Jesus tell a certain rich man to sell everything he had accumulated and to then give the proceeds to the poor if he hoped to please God!

Last week’s response to my question,
Why Do We Care About the Poor?
could easily be summarized as, “Cause Jesus said so.”

Historically, I suppose, we Mennonites would like to think that that’s a plenty good enough reason!

But I think we can come up with some other good reasons?
So let’s give it a try, what are some of the reasons why you think it best to be wary of the accumulation of wealth and to be attentive to those who are materially poor?
(Actually solicit some ideas)

Well a few things that come to my mind are:

Being truly attentive to the poor means I am more honest.
The overwhelming majority of the world’s population live more like the Manobo than they live like me.
That’s simply a fact, Jack!

Being honest and open to the realities of our world leads me to genuine spiritual growth.

Experiencing material deprivation or being sincerely with those who are poor can keep us vitally connected to what is real in our world.

By keeping it real and being honest, I gain critically new perspectives, which can provide me with genuine hope, reinforcing my flagging faith and providing me with much needed resiliency.

One of the first lesson we learn when we start down this path is that those things that are of true value seldom, if ever are purchased with money.

We also realize quickly that real values lead us to genuine joy! Focusing on what is truly valuable helps me grow and mature as an individual spiritual being.

Such illumination also helps us to create true community as I and others become more generous, compassionate and in the end more committed to working for a just world.

Maybe real material deprivation can help us to actually be more human by being more humane?

And since God created us to be humans in the first place, we would then actually be heading in the original direction of what God really wants us to be?

Maybe we could even become a little more like Jesus?

The recent plight of refugees fleeing into Europe has exposed both sides of this potential humanity. It's painful to watch precisely because it touches our humanity.

On one side we see governments respond by closing borders and in-prisoning the poor on trains.

But on the other side, we see thousands of individuals providing food, water and clothing and even welcoming strangers into their homes. And in this latter response we witness the most radical power in the world when the stranger in need, "the poor," suddenly becomes another human being "just like me!"

When this happens we all suffer together and we all become part of "the poor!" Suddenly the causes of the deprivation, like the stupidity of war, or systemic injustice can instead become the focus of a nation's ire.

Look what happens in our own nation when economic refugees cross our borders.

Once their humanity cracks our shells of indifference we become more compassionate and more likely to work for long term and just solutions rather than spend more money on weapons and walls.

Our own humanness here at FCMF,
prompts us to welcome homeless families into our church building,
not only to be warm and well fed
but to build new relationships as well.

But if we could not do this alone,
so we gather with 26 other congregations
to do more than we could ever accomplish alone.

And together we not only provide overnight emergency shelter all year long
but a day center that allows folks to shower, wash clothes,
and build new relationship with others
who not only help them to get back on their feet again,
but help them to perhaps feel just a bit more human again.

When the homeless of our town are being harassed for living outside
while our city fails to provide enough shelter space,
again our poor little church opens its doors on Friday evenings
so that folks not only can warm up and eat a good meal,
but so that they can build relationships and organize together
in order to advocate on behalf of all who are poor!

Together those with homes and those without,
are helping us all, rich and poor, to create a village
that is a more just and welcoming place to live.
And each of these endeavors become opportunities for us
to build authentic relationships with the poor.

And I wonder, as well, if this is not part
of the salvation that Jesus spoke of?

Maybe the truth that sets us free includes the ability
for me to see myself in the face of another person,
in ones we label as, "the poor" or "the stranger"
or maybe even as "my enemy?!"

I think we are smart enough to understand the truth
that we are all far more alike than we are different.

All of us, each and everyone of us, without exception,
are children of God, deeply loved and tenderly held.
When ever we realize this, and whenever we do something about it,

I ALSO BELIEVE, we inch just a little closer towards both
our ultimate purpose as well as our ultimate destiny.

Our ultimate purpose, that which we humans were initially created for,
is to be just that, completely human.

Our ultimate destiny, all that we are to ever hope for,
is to one day be lying in the bosom of our loving Creator!
But in the meantime, as we inch ever closer,
maybe we can even catch a little taste
of heaven here on earth!

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