

Into the City

Into the City as Servants to Its Poor (Luke 4:16-30)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 13, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ This month we're in a sermon series focusing on the ministry theme for the English congregation. It's called "Into the City". It's building off things we talked a lot about last year. About being *not* just **a church in a city** – merely located in one. And *not* **a church against the city** – where we disengage and separate from the urban culture around us. Nor do we want to be **a church of the city** – where we over-adapt to the culture and become indistinguishable from it.
 - Instead our vision is to be **a church for the city** – where we're seeking the *shalom* (peace) of our city. We want our city to flourish so its inhabitants, our neighbors, may flourish.

- ❖ **We want to be a church that pursues the good of our neighbors, that seeks to alleviate their suffering, in all dimensions.** So just picture our church hosting marriage seminars or parenting workshops that are open to our community. Picture our members banding together, taking initiative to serve low income families by organizing health fairs, tutoring/mentoring students, providing basic job training, etc. Picture our people feeding the hungry, serving the homeless, defending the victimized, identifying and addressing structural injustices, etc. (Some of this we're already doing!)
 - We want to be church that serves the good of our neighbors and seeks to alleviate their suffering, and to that I want to add – **especially to serve their spiritual, eternal good and alleviate their spiritual, eternal suffering.** And so the Word-based proclamation of the gospel, our evangelism to the city and its inhabitants remains a top priority. But the point is our Word ministries (outreach) and our mercy ministries (community service) are not separate activities but fall under the same category. **It's all about being for the city and working for its good in all dimensions, the material *and* the spiritual.**

- ❖ So over the past year we've been trying to establish this mind shift. To get us thinking about the purpose of the church not just being for us but *for the city*. And now building off that, we hope to make some ministry shifts that point us *into the city* to engage its inhabitants as witnesses to its lost, servants to its poor, and voices for its oppressed. And all the while, living life together as a contrast community, as a "city on a hill", that attracts by shining God's light to the city around us.
 - Last Sunday, we addressed our calling to be witnesses of Jesus and his amazing grace. This morning I want to talk what it means to follow Jesus into the city and share in his ministry to the city's poor.

Jesus' First Sermon

- ❖ The passage I chose for us addresses this very thing. Let me explain the context first, and then I want to draw out two points to consider. So here in Luke chapter 4 Jesus is at the very beginning of his public ministry. In v16, he returns to his hometown of Nazareth, and on the Sabbath he's invited to give the public reading. On this day the reading came from Isaiah, and Luke records Jesus' recitation of the words found in chapter 61:1-2.
 - Now what's in these two verses is probably just a summary of what Jesus actually read that day. If you compare vv18-19 to Isaiah 61, you'll notice the line "*to set at liberty those who are oppressed*" is not found. That's because it comes from Isaiah 58:6. **What happened is Jesus read a chunk of Isaiah that covered chapters 58 and 61, and Luke is just focusing on the most relevant verses.**

- ❖ After Jesus finished reading, it says in v20, “*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.*” Now unlike preaching today, sermons were delivered from a seated position. So after taking this posture, everyone had their eyes fixed on Jesus, anticipating his sermon on this text.
 - Look at v21, “*And he began to say to them*”. The fact that it starts that way suggests that Jesus said far more. Luke only records one sentence because it was the main point of the sermon: “*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*”

- ❖ **You have to realize how audacious it was for Jesus to make this claim.** Remember that Isaiah’s original audience were exiles in Babylon longing to be released from captivity and restored to their homeland. **Isaiah would often speak of a prophetic figure called the Suffering Servant, whom God would use to bring back his people from exile.** He was Israel’s Messiah, their Savior.
 - Now by Jesus’ day, the Israelites had long been released and settled back, but they were still under foreign occupation. So they still considered themselves to be in a form of exile. They still longed for the Messiah to rescue them and fully restore Israel’s glory.

- ❖ So try to put yourself in the shoes of a synagogue worshipper present that morning. Jesus shows up and reads from a familiar passage. If you were paying attention, you would’ve heard a promise of good news and liberation to four kinds of people: the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. And you would’ve caught his reference in v19 to the ancient practice of a jubilee year.
 - In the Law (cf. Lev. 25), every 50th year in the Jewish calendar was to be **a year of jubilee for all God’s people**. A year of liberation where all slaves are released from servitude. A year of redemption where all debtors are released from their debts. A year of restoration where all forfeited property is returned to its original owners. It’s a year of jubilee.
 - This is what the Suffering Servant is referring to when he says he’s here to “*proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor.*” **A jubilee of jubilees.** A new age of salvation marked by full liberation, full redemption, and full restoration.

- ❖ So think about it. Up until that day, I’m sure Isaiah 61 was read and taught by countless preachers. **But on that day, the preacher did something no one has ever done before.** He goes on to claim that *today* (this very day) all the promises that Isaiah spoke of have been fulfilled in your hearing. **The year of the LORD’s favor (the great Jubilee) has arrived because Israel’s Suffering Servant (the Messiah) has come.** And he’s standing right in front of you!

Distinguishing the Root from the Fruit

- ❖ Look again at what Jesus read in vv18-19. “*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, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*”
 - **I can understand why someone could read these verses and assume Jesus was all about reforming social structures.** They read this and think he came as a social reformer to right societal wrongs, and thus the mission of his church, his followers, is the same.

- ❖ I'm not surprised if that's the conclusion people draw about Jesus because people in his day did the same thing. They assumed he would bring about a social revolution. They wanted him to solve all their problems. They especially hoped he would overthrow the Romans.
 - But notice a key verb that shows up three times in these two verses. Jesus claims to have been anointed by the Spirit "to *proclaim* good news", "to *proclaim* liberty", "to *proclaim* the year of the Lord's favor". The same word can be translated "to preach".

- ❖ **Jesus is a preacher.** His mission is primarily to preach good news of a great jubilee year. But that's not to say Jesus was only a preacher. On numerous occasions he stayed up all night curing the sick, healing the lame, casting out demons, etc. **So again, I'm not trying to drive a wedge between our Word-based ministries and our mercy ministries.** Jesus was committed to both. But he made a proper distinction, and he properly prioritized the Word.
 - **This is where we've got to distinguish between the root and the fruit of Christianity.** Think of it like a tree. The root and the fruit are equally important. They're essential to a tree. But the root still takes precedence. You can have a fruitless tree – it might be a young sapling, it might be in a dry season – but so long as the root is healthy and in tact, you have a tree. But you can't have the opposite. If the root is unhealthy, if the root is extracted, then you have no fruit and soon you'll have a dead tree. So your priority is tending to the root.

- ❖ Now think about it this way. **The root of Christianity is the gospel and the proclamation of the gospel.** It takes precedence in the life of a church. And when gospel ministry is healthy and in tact, you can be sure that church will produce fruit. **And by the fruit of Christianity, we mean all the good deeds of Christian love and obedience** – one subset being our mercy ministry to the poor.

- ❖ So it's possible when a church is young or in a dry season, where no discernible fruit can be seen, which means there's probably not much going on in the church to serve the poor. So what do you do? How do you make the fruit grow?
 - Do you yell at the tree and command it to produce fruit? "*Why aren't you serving the poor? Why are you being so selfish?*" **No, just telling the tree what it needs to do and shaming it for not doing it, is not going to help. You have to tend to the root.** You have to tend to a church's grasp of the gospel.

- ❖ **The church needs to understand the gospel is not a rally cry calling you to do something great for the glory of God and the good of others. No, the gospel is good news telling you about what God has done for you through Jesus that you could not do for yourself or for others.**
 - And this news, when it's believed on, has the power to save you and transform you, and by the Spirit of God, it can empower you to live for his glory and the good of others. I just have two points today to unpack this idea of the root and fruit of Christianity. We'll study this text further next week and focus on being voices for the city's oppressed.

The Root of Christianity

- ❖ Let's consider our first point: **The root of Christianity is good news about God's Servant who was sent to the *spiritually* poor.** Now I realize v18 just says that Jesus was Spirit-anointed to proclaim good news to the poor. It doesn't include any modifier, so why am I saying the Suffering Servant was sent to the *spiritually* poor?
 - It's because of the examples that Jesus gives later on. Look starting in v25. Jesus compares himself with the OT prophets who were sent to the poor. Specifically he mentions Elijah being sent only to the widow of Zarephath (1 Kg. 17:8-16) and Elisha being sent only to Naaman the Syrian (2 Kg. 5:1-14). But if you recall, when we studied Naaman's story a couple weeks ago, he was actually quite rich. That's a really important observation.

- ❖ **If Jesus had illustrated his point by choosing two *literally* poor people from Scripture, then we might interpret him to mean that he's come with good news for just the *literally* poor.** That the gospel is only for the actual poor. That if you want to be a Christian, you'll have to renounce all your wealth. That's what we might conclude if Jesus had pointed to two poor persons.
 - But since he uses a poor widow and a rich general as examples of the kind of people he's been sent to deliver this good news, then there's no reason to make this confusion. **What the widow of Zarephath and Naaman had in common was not an empty pocketbook but an empty soul.** They were both spiritually impoverished. They were spiritual outcasts.
 - The widow of Zarephath was a Gentile sinner. She's poor. She's a woman. In that society, these factors were all working against her. She was on the spiritual outside. But so was Naaman. Remember he was a leper, the epitome of an outcast.

- ❖ So both of them were on the out. They were both spiritual outcasts. They're the spiritual poor. And Jesus' point in using them as illustration is to say that he has come with good news to those who understand they're spiritually poor. Jesus has come for them. But notice carefully what Jesus says.
 - He's not saying, "I've *also* been sent to the spiritually poor" but "I've been sent *only* to them." Look at v26, "*Elijah was sent to none of them but only to [the widow of] Zarephath.*" Or v27, "*Elisha [was sent] only [to] Naaman the Syrian.*" Why say "only"? Why was he sent *only* to the spiritually poor? **The point is only those who confess they're spiritually bankrupt and have nothing of value to earn God's favor – only they receive the gospel.**

- ❖ **Jesus didn't come for the righteous, the self-righteous, but for those who know they're sinners** (Lk. 5:31-32) Those who acknowledge they're on the outside of God's kingdom and have nothing to buy their way in. That's who Jesus is preaching good news to.
 - That's not everyone because not everyone recognizes their poverty. In fact, all of us, if left to ourselves, would scoff at the suggestion that we're spiritually bankrupt. **Maybe we'd never claim to be spiritually rich, but we might see ourselves as spiritually middle class.**

- ❖ I think that's a good way to describe Jesus' audience that day. They were spiritually middle class. Notice how they react to his sermon. They actually like it. No one is offended by his claim to be the Suffering Servant. Look at v22, "*And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.*"

- ❖ **The reason they're not offended is because they thought Jesus was talking about them.** When Jesus said he came with good news for the poor, they thought he meant them. They're thinking, *“That's right! We're the poor. We're the good ones. We're doing our best to follow God. It's those Sadducees, the wealthy priestly class, they're corrupt. Or it's those Romans, those immoral pagans, they're oppressing poor people like us. Thank God the Messiah is here. Of course we didn't think it would be Joseph's son, but oh well let's do this. When's this jubilee of jubilees going to start?”*
 - But then Jesus points to some people even poorer than them and says these are the kind of people I've come for. He points to a Gentile widow and a Syrian leper. And suddenly they're offended. They're furious and want to throw him off a cliff.

- ❖ That's how you can tell if you're spiritually middle class. Just think about Jesus' story of the Pharisee and tax collector (cf. Lk. 18:9-14). **The spiritually middle class definitely don't identify with the Pharisee in the story.** They're thanking God they're not like those smug religious types always judging people. I'm a Christian but thank God I'm not like those bigoted, pharisaical Christians, those fat hypocrites.
 - **But it's not like the spiritually middle class would identify with the tax collector either.** They're also thankful they're not like the immoral, the irresponsible, the irreligious. Thank God I'm not like the addict who keeps falling off the wagon. Thank God I'm not like that single mother with five children from four different partners. Thank God I'm not like that guy in the office who everyone knows is living such an immoral life.

- ❖ This is how you know you're spiritually middle class: When you hear Jesus saying the gospel is for that addict, for that promiscuous woman, for that immoral man – when you hear *that* you get offended. *“But they're not living the right way! They're not trying as hard to follow God like me!”*
 - *Do you see? To the spiritually middle class, the gospel doesn't sound like good news. It sounds like a handout.* Why would God be gracious to those who aren't trying to live the right way? That offends me because it makes my efforts to live the right way seem worthless.

- ❖ **Only to the spiritually poor does the gospel actually sound like good news.** The spiritually poor hear the gospel – they hear Jesus offer his salvation freely without cost – and without even lifting their eyes to heaven, they beat their breast and say, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”*
 - **The spiritually poor go to God with nothing in their pockets, nothing in their hands they bring, only to the cross they cling.** The spiritually poor understand they have nothing of value to earn or deserve God's favor. They owe everything to grace.

- ❖ This is the root of Christianity. And if you want to be a Christian, this is what has to happen – you have to receive God's grace with empty hands. I know some of you having been checking our church and you're wondering, *“Ok I'm not a Christian but I think I want to be one. What do I need to do?”*
 - That's exactly it. **You need to need. You go to God needy.** If you go to God with something in your hands, if you go to him saying, *“God, I've been trying really hard to do the right things and live the right way. I hope you noticed.”* – if you come to him like that, you're coming to him middle class. You're not coming poor. You're not coming needy. The whole point is the good news that Jesus came to bring is for the *spiritually* poor.

The Fruit of Christianity

- ❖ Now once you get that, once you get the root of Christianity, if a church is filled with those who recognize both the spiritual poverty in themselves *and* the spiritual riches of God's grace in Christ – then you're going to see fruit. This is our second point: **The fruit of Christianity are the good works conducted by servants of God to the *literally* poor.**
 - When those who are spiritually poor are at the same time recipients of spiritual riches, it changes you. It changes the way you look at money, at all your stuff, even the way you view your own social standing and that of others. It changes your attitude towards the poor and being generous with the resources God has put in your care.

- ❖ *Have you ever met someone who survived a near-fatal accident or beat a life-threatening cancer?* They often say they're living on borrowed time. **Every new day from that point on is a pure gift.** Having their life spared changes their whole perspective/attitude. From that day on, they're more appreciative of what they have in life and more generous to share it with others.
 - **Well if you understand the gospel, then you understand we're all living on borrowed time.** The first time we ever sinned against God, we should've died but he spared us. He treats us better than our sins deserve. He gives us mercy every new day, grace every minute.
 - So if you get the gospel, then you understand that every new day from the day we first sinned is a pure gift. This is all borrowed time. If you truly believe this, if you're deeply rooted in the gospel, then gospel fruit is inevitable. There's no way you stay the same. Your attitude towards the poor radically changes.

- ❖ Just think it about it. ***Why do we have such a hard time giving to the poor?*** There are a number of reasons, but a common one for us in the middle class is to think many of them have brought it upon themselves. The poor are poor because they squandered opportunities. They have to get their act together. They have to put in the time and hard work, and they can improve their own lives. They don't need handouts from me. That's what our American, middle class, can-do spirit says.

- ❖ **But the gospel says everything you have – your money, your job, your investments, your stuff – it's all grace.** You're spiritually poor. Every good thing you have is a gift of grace. It's all a handout from God. Yes, you put in those long hours. You put in the hard work. You earned that degree.
 - But the Bible says in Acts 17 that it's in God we live and move and have our being. That he gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. That he determined the times set for us and the exact places where we should live (cf. Acts 17:25-28).
 - In other words, you didn't choose your parents or where you'd be born or what kind of opportunities you'd have growing up. That was God. And the knowledge in your head, the strength in our arms, even the breath in your lungs is all a gift from God.

- ❖ When you realize how much a debtor of grace you really are, when you recognize that you didn't pull yourself up by your bootstraps but that God and his grace was there all along, then your attitude towards your own social standing and that of others is transformed.

- ❖ **The way you know you have a hold on the gospel is when you no longer feel superior to the most inferior, homeless man panhandling of the side of the road.** If you understand your spiritual poverty, then you look at that homeless man and all you can say is, “*But for the grace of God.*”
- ❖ But for the grace of God, I’d be in his shoes. **But for the righteousness of Christ freely received by grace through faith in the gospel, that’s exactly how I look before God.** I’m in filthy rags standing before a holy God (Isa. 64:6). But Jesus saved me. Jesus took away my filth and covered me with his righteousness. Though he was rich (the Prince of Heaven), yet for my sake he became poor (taking the form of a servant), so that by his poverty I might become rich (2 Cor, 8:9).
 - Not in material riches – but spiritual riches. We’ve been given the kingdom (Lk. 12:32). Only the Prince of Heaven, the only begotten Son, deserves the inheritance, and yet in the gospel he shares his heavenly inheritance with us. We are co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17).
- ❖ ***Christian, do you realize how rich you are in Christ?*** We look at these billionaires like Bill and Melinda Gates who are so generous and literally give away billions, and we think, “Wow that’s awesome. I’d do the same if only I were in their shoes, if only I had billions of dollars in the bank.”
 - *But don’t you see?* You’re actually richer than you think. When we look at life from that eternal perspective, it makes hoarding our stuff and holding on so tightly to our money seem pretty foolish. **We have every reason to be as generous (or more so) than the most charitable, billionaire philanthropist.**
 - When you truly believe you’re rich in Christ, that does something. It loosens your grip on earthy riches and frees you to generously give to serve the good of others, especially the poor and needy.
- ❖ If you’re having difficulty giving – or perhaps you do give but you want to do it with a cheerful heart – if that’s where you’re at, then you’ve got to tend to the root, to your faith in the gospel. Just having a preacher telling you to give more will do much as just telling a branch to grow more fruit. Tend to the root. Go back to the gospel. If you want to be a generous giver, a cheerful giver, then root your faith deep in the gospel.
 - Let me conclude by drawing your attention to the insert in your bulletin. This is a list of the various mercy and justice ministries that we either organize or support. So if you're feeling motivated to serve, especially to serve the poor in the city and low-income families in our neighborhood, you should look into *Stand Up For Kids* (homeless young people) and the work we're doing at *Shearn*, the public elementary school nearby. We've seen a lot of gospel fruit produced in these ministries, and we pray that you can add to that in the weeks and months to come.