

## Into the City

Into the City as Voices for Its Oppressed (Luke 4:16-21)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 20, 2015

### Introduction

- ❖ Last Sunday we studied this section out of Luke 4 where Jesus begins his public ministry. At this early point, he's already gained lots of notoriety. Everyone in the town of Nazareth is proud of this hometown kid making it big. It says in v14 that a report about Jesus was being spread throughout the Galilean countryside. The Greek for "report" is *pheme* where we get the word "fame". So Jesus was literally getting famous. He was being glorified by all.
  - ▶ But all it took was one sermon to turn that fame into fury. **The hometown crowd is infuriated by his message because what he ends up doing is extending the blessing of God to the kinds of people they've already written off.** People they consider undeserving of God's blessing, of the Lord's favor. People underneath them.
  
- ❖ We pointed out last week that Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah and essentially identified himself with Isaiah's Suffering Servant, this messianic figure who God plans to use to bring about a great Jubilee, a year – more like an age – of the Lord's favor.
  - ▶ And we noted how the crowd initially reacted favorably. They liked this sermon. *Why?* Because when he said he's been anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives and the oppressed, recovering of sight to the blind – they thought he was talking about them. And sure it could've included them, but then he goes on to extend that blessing to certain people they had written off.
    - He says, "I was sent to bring good news to people like the poor, Gentile widow from Zarephath or the wealthy, powerful, pagan general like Naaman the Syrian who also happened to be a leper." And to that, the crowds are filled with wrath and try to throw Jesus off the town cliff.
  
- ❖ What happened there? That escalated quickly. Why are they so upset that they're willing to kill their hometown hero? **It's because Jesus is taking an axe to the root of their tree.** He's challenging and chopping down their entire belief system, which is rooted in some false and unhealthy views of God and his salvation.
  - ▶ Last week I introduced this way of distinguishing between the root and the fruit of Christianity. We said **the root of Christianity** is the gospel and the proclamation of the gospel. And it has to take precedence in the life of the church. And when a church's grasp of the gospel is healthy and in tact, you can be sure that church will produce fruit. And by **the fruit of Christianity**, we're talking about all the good deeds of Christian love and obedience. We're talking about practical ministry to the poor, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, etc.
  
- ❖ Well for these town folk in Nazareth, the root of their belief system was extremely unhealthy. **It was based on self-righteous moralism. It was rooted in a God-helps-those-who-help-themselves mentality.** There was no grasp of grace. No grasp of the gospel. That's why they were so offended when Jesus extended God's blessing and favor to the helpless, meritless poor, to the immoral, irreligious outsiders. **They recognize that Jesus is taking an axe to the root of their belief system and so they tried to kill him.** Better he go than have our entire belief system fall apart.

- ❖ Now last week, we explained we're in a sermon series covering our congregation's ministry theme of going "*Into the City*". As more of a city church, we believe our call to follow Jesus includes a call into the city. That means our discipleship to Christ calls us into the city as witnesses to its lost (an emphasis on active evangelism).
  - ▶ Our discipleship also calls us into the city as servants to its poor (an emphasis on mercy/compassion ministries). But following Christ also means following him into the city as voices for its oppressed (an emphasis on justice/advocacy ministries).
    - That's going to be our focus this morning. I hope it doesn't elicit the same furious reaction we see in chapter 4, but then again I wouldn't be surprised. You just might find Jesus' axe against the root of your own tree. I just pray you recognize he's tearing down only to build you back up, rooted in the gospel of grace.
- ❖ I've got three points: 1) Jesus preaches the good news of freedom for those subjected to slavery. 2) Jesus preaches the good news of freedom for those oppressed by the powerful. 3) Jesus makes possible the good news of freedom that He preaches.

### **Freedom for Those Subjected to Slavery**

- ❖ Let's first consider Jesus' proclamation of **good news of freedom for those subjected to slavery**. Look back with me at v18. "*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*".
  - ▶ Now as we explained last week, I suggest that we read these terms, "the poor", "the captives", and "the blind" in a broader sense and not just limit them to the actual poor, the literal captive or blind. We demonstrated why it's appropriate to interpret Jesus as not referring to only the actual poor but emphasizing more broadly the spiritually poor. Those who see their spiritual poverty and inability in themselves to earn or deserve God's favor.
- ❖ Well I think we need to interpret the term "captives" in a similar way. *Why?* **First off, there's no instance in the Gospels of Jesus freeing an actual prisoner.** In fact, that's what confused John the Baptist in Luke chapter 7 as he was languishing in his prison cell.
  - ▶ Earlier Herod had him arrested but now that Jesus has launched onto the scene – now that everyone seems convinced that he's the Servant of the Lord sent to proclaim liberty to the captives – then why am I still in chains?
    - That's why he sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask if he was the One to come or should they be expecting someone else (cf. Lk. 7:18-20). **What John was coming to understand is that the Christ had been sent to bring, first and foremost, a spiritual liberation to spiritual captives.**
- ❖ **And then think about the way blindness is used as metaphor all over the NT to describe a spiritual blindness to the truth of God.** The most familiar instance is where Jesus calls the Pharisees, "*blind guides*" (Mt. 15:14). They're the blind leading the blind. In this case, blindness was being used figuratively in a spiritual sense.

- ❖ **There's another example where blindness and captivity are used together in a spiritual sense to describe the same group of people.** In John 8:31, Jesus told a crowd that if they knew the truth, the truth would set them free. But they're confused since they saw themselves as free men.
  - ▶ They say to Jesus, "*We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?*" Jesus replied, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.*"
    - Jesus is implying that these Jews were in captivity – but not in a literal sense. The shackles weren't around their wrists but around their hearts. They were slaves to sin. **Their hearts were so captive to sin that they could not *but* sin in all they do.**
      - They were in spiritual captivity. But blind to the fact. They assumed Jesus was speaking literally, so they didn't see themselves in need of liberation. They couldn't see their chains.
  
- ❖ **This is why the dual proclamation of liberty from captivity and sight for the blind are paired together in Isaiah 61 – because the specific way that sin enslaves you is by blinding you.** Sin blinds you from seeing the glory of Jesus and the supreme worth and joy of living freely in him. And so we're lulled into complacency as willing slaves.
  - ▶ Sin doesn't have to threaten us with a whip. We willingly do its bidding. **We're content under sin's mastery because we think we're free but we just can't see its chain around our hearts.** So Jesus' good news is that the spiritually blind and captive can have the eyes of their hearts opened to see "*the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*" (2 Cor. 4:4) and be released from sin's crippling guilt *and* grip over their hearts.
  
- ❖ Think about what this means: It means the gospel is not just a message about **freedom from the penalty of sin**. I think that's often all we hear and all we preach. People strictly associate the Christian gospel with the forgiveness of sins, the payment of a penalty, the rescue from hell. And of course, the gospel preaches this. It preaches freedom from the penalty of sin.
  - ▶ But it also preaches **freedom from the power of sin**. From its enslaving hold on you. So if you claim to believe in the gospel, you claim the freedom from sin's penalty, yet still live under sin's power and stranglehold – then you're fooling yourself to think you're rooted in the gospel. **The gospel is about freedom from sin's penalty *and* power. Jesus came to liberate you from future punishment but also present strongholds.**
  
- ❖ So if that's the good news at the root of your belief system, then it will bear fruit. *What kind of fruit?* Let me put it this way: Last week we said how coming to grips with the spiritual poverty in yourself and yet the spiritual riches you have in Christ is able to produce in you the good fruit/works towards the actual poor. **In the same way, coming to grips with the spiritual slavery you were liberated from in Christ is able to produce in you good fruit/works towards those in actual slavery.**
  
- ❖ When we speak of slavery we often speak of it as a thing of the past. But what we don't do enough is speak about modern slavery. And I confess that for far too long I've been ignorant to this tragic reality. **We're talking about what's been identified as the largest human rights violation in the history of mankind, human trafficking.**

- ❖ I was shocked to learn that there are more slaves today than were seized from Africa in four centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In fact, there are more slaves in the world today than at any other point in human history. **Estimates range from 21 to 36 million currently enslaved across the world.** Out of that, 78% are victims of labor trafficking while the remaining 22% are victims of sex trafficking.
  - ▶ If we zoom in on the problem of sex trafficking and bring it closer to home to the United States, you'd be surprised to know that four-fifths of sex trafficking victims (83%) are U.S. citizens. We tend to think of this as more of an international problem stemming from regions like Southeast Asia or Eastern Europe, and that these young girls (even boys) are smuggled into our country. **But the fact is that our fellow neighbors are also falling prey to the horrors of sex trafficking.**
  
- ❖ *Free the Captives*, the faith-based, anti-trafficking organization based in Houston (that we've partnered with on numerous occasions) has provided great help to survivors of sex trafficking – helping rescue girls and then providing safe housing, tutoring, basic job training, financial planning, legal services, etc. *Free the Captives* says over the years the girls they've helped came from Alief, Baytown, Greenspoint, Third Ward, Fifth Ward, Cypress, Katy, and The Woodlands.<sup>1</sup> **Again the point is that these modern-day slaves could very well be your neighbor.** Sex trafficking won't discriminate based on race or socioeconomic background.
  - ▶ But tragically it will when it comes to age. The average age for a teen entering the sex trade in U.S. is 12 to 14 years old. According to estimates, these children report that in one night their trafficker/pimp will sell them to 10 to 15 buyers, and at peak demand, like when a big sports event or convention comes through town, the number of buyers per night can skyrocket to as many as 45.<sup>2</sup>
  
- ❖ *Now what can we do about this? And how does the gospel relate?* Certainly the gospel ought to produce within gospel people a heart of compassion for these victims. **If God has freely rescued us from spiritual slavery – though we're undeserving, though our bondage was a result of our own poor choices – then that shapes our attitude towards victims of actual slavery.** We won't condemn them even if their bondage did result from poor choices. Instead we'll love them with compassion and fight for their freedom as Christ did for us. Practically speaking, I urge you to volunteer with *Free the Captives*. Indicate your interest in the bulletin insert.
  - ▶ But here's one more application that also requires the gospel. **Use the gospel to fuel your compassion for sex trafficking victims, but also use the gospel to cut off your addiction to pornography.** Because there's a direct correlation between pornography and sex trafficking.<sup>3</sup> Many pornographic performers and models are trafficking victims forced into this line of work by threat or other forms of coercion. **So the increased consumption of pornography actually increases the demand for sex trafficking.**

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<sup>1</sup> See online: <http://www.freethecaptiveshouston.com/survivor-care/sex-trafficking/>

<sup>2</sup> See online: <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-you-should-know-about-human-trafficking>

<sup>3</sup> See online: <http://stoptraffickingdemand.com/facts/>

- ❖ So here is where the gospel must be applied. If pornography consumption is something you're struggling with, you need to know the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ to free you from both the penalty of your sin and its power. **If you're in Christ, then pornography has no hold on you.** In Christ, you can say No (cf. Tit. 2:12). You're not enslaved to pornography anymore no matter how much it feels like it. To suggest otherwise is to deny the gospel and its effect in your life.
  - ▶ You have at your disposal – through your identity in Christ and the sanctifying power of his Spirit in you – all that you need to stop the use of pornography in your life. And now I hope you have an added motivation to do so. Do it for the glory of God, the good of your own soul, and for the sake of these oppressed, exploited, and abused victims of sex trafficking.

### **Freedom for Those Oppressed by the Powerful**

- ❖ I hope you see how the good news of Jesus is good news of freedom for those subjected to slavery. Now to our second point, **it's also good news of freedom for those oppressed by the powerful.** Look at the end of v18 where Jesus says he came *“to set at liberty those who are oppressed”*.
  - ▶ I mentioned last week that this phrase actually comes from **Isaiah 58:6. In that chapter, God was specifically rebuking Israel for not caring for the oppressed.** It was their responsibility and privilege as God's chosen people to look out for the little guy. God had protected them and fought for them so that they could protect and fight for others. But they misused God's blessings to serve themselves.
    - Well by applying this verse to himself, **Jesus is basically saying that he is here to fulfill what Israel failed to do.** He came to bless the weak, to protect the helpless. He came to liberate the oppressed.
- ❖ **Throughout the rest of Luke's Gospel, you see Jesus drawn to the little guy, drawn to the oppressed and opposed to the oppressive powerful.** After this, Jesus goes to Capernaum where we're told he stays up into the late hours of the night healing ever sick person brought to him (cf. 4:40). He touches lepers when no one would dare get close to one (cf. 5:13). He keeps company with tax collectors and sinners who were considered moral outsiders (cf. 5:30). He welcomes a woman with a scandalous reputation when no one else would dare be seen with her in public (cf. 7:37-38).
  - ▶ And the children. Let's not forget the children. **In antiquity, children were treated with little significance.** They were seen as a burden until they were strong enough, old enough, to contribute to the family. They were the “little guys” in every sense. So we read in **Luke 18:15**, *“<sup>15</sup>Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. <sup>16</sup>But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”*
    - *Do you see that?* Jesus stood up for the little guys. Jesus lent his voice to the voiceless. They were marginalized and overlooked. They were denied their dignity as those made in the image of God. Jesus drew attention to them and to their plight.
- ❖ Friends, I'm convinced that the most grossly marginalized and overlooked, the most desperately oppressed minority group in our society, who have been stripped completely of their dignity and worth and moral significance are – like in antiquity – children, specifically unborn children.

- ▶ **The most dangerous place for a child to live in our country is not in the slums. It's not on skid row. It's in the womb.** Because in the womb a child's life can be snuffed out without any reason, without any trial, without any legal repercussion. It's moral insanity.
  
- ❖ With all that's been going on in the news with the Planned Parenthood videos, I'm simply shocked at how those who defend Planned Parenthood and oppose any legislative effort to place any restrictions on the practice – how they repeat the same old refrain of being pro-women and pro-choice.
  - ▶ I'm all for being pro-women and pro-choice but I'd extend that to all women including unborn ones. I want to consider their choice if they want to live. **What's conspicuously absent from any of the public statements by defenders of abortion is any mention of the baby.** The baby is apparently of no moral significance in the debate. That's why I say the unborn are the most grossly marginalized and overlooked minority group in society today.
  
- ❖ A seriously horrific aspect of abortion in our country that you don't hear about is **sex-selection abortion**.<sup>4</sup> We're talking about little girls being targeted in the womb, which we know is a massive problem in place like China and India. But we'd be naive to think it doesn't happen here. Do you realize that there is no federal law that prohibits sex-selection abortion? And only seven states (Arizona, Kansas, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania – not Texas!) have enacted laws against the practice. There's a glaring **gender disparity in abortions**. We need to speak up for these girls!
  - ▶ And there's also a **racial disparity in abortion**. I was reading in the *Wall Street Journal* this week about how in New York City, home to the largest black population of any U.S. urban area, more black babies are aborted than born.<sup>5</sup> In 2014, black babies constituted 42% of all abortions in a city where blacks are 25% of the population. How this civil rights issue has been overlooked is beyond me. We need to lend our voices to these voiceless!
  
- ❖ **And one of the saddest aspects of abortion in this country is how it's being used to weed out the unfit in our society.** In an academic study spanning from 1995 to 2011, it was determined that between 60 and 90 percent of fetal down syndrome diagnoses led to abortion. The state of Ohio is currently trying to pass a bill to prohibit abortions where down syndrome is the reason. I read about it in the *New York Times*.<sup>6</sup>
  - ▶ The article says, *“But abortion rights lawyers say such a law would violate the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision, which guarantees a woman's right to seek an abortion until the fetus is viable. They also say that by focusing on the diagnosis of a fetal condition, it edges toward recognizing the fetus as a person, setting up a conflict between the mother's interests and those of the fetus.”*
    - My reaction was, “Exactly!” That's exactly the conversation our nation doesn't want to have. It doesn't want to talk about the personhood, the inherent dignity of the unborn child.

<sup>4</sup> See online: [http://www.texasrighttolife.com/a/1535/Sexselection-abortion-continue-as-male-preference-persists-worldwide#\\_Vfx0T7S1iLE](http://www.texasrighttolife.com/a/1535/Sexselection-abortion-continue-as-male-preference-persists-worldwide#_Vfx0T7S1iLE)

<sup>5</sup> See online: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/lets-talk-about-the-racial-disparity-in-abortion-1442356170>

<sup>6</sup> See online: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/23/us/ohio-bill-would-ban-abortion-if-down-syndrome-is-reason.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/23/us/ohio-bill-would-ban-abortion-if-down-syndrome-is-reason.html?_r=0)

- ❖ ***Does the location of the unborn in its mother's womb make it any less of a person?*** I remember when Princess Kate Middleton was pregnant with her first child, everyone in the media was talking about her baby being the future king or queen of England. No one spoke of her fetus as a blob of cells. They immediately assigned personhood whether they realized it or not. *But why would we only assign personhood to royal fetuses?*
  - ▶ The fact is it's so common for parent during pregnancy to give their babies nicknames. We sing and read stories to them while in the womb. We stick ultrasound pictures on the fridge and tell our other children that this is your little brother/sister in mommy's belly.
    - **Our instinct is to treat the unborn as a living person whether they're in or out of the womb.** Only when the baby is unwanted do we begin to dehumanize him/her.
- ❖ I think the moral outrage we feel as Christians when we hear about young girls and boys being exploited through sex trafficking is right. It's the proper fruit of a heart deeply rooted in the gospel. **But I hope the same outrage would be extended to abortion because we're still dealing with young girls and boys being dehumanized.** From the standpoint of the victimized child, there is no difference. Christian discipleship compels us to speak up and speak truth as voices for the oppressed.

### **Making Possible the Good News of Freedom**

- ❖ But having said that, I recognize that sex trafficking and abortion have their differences. I realize a mother's agonizing decision to abort her child is in no way equivalent to a trafficker's decision to sell a teenage girl or a man's decision to buy her. I would never be so callous as to draw a moral equivalence between the two.
  - ▶ I'm not naive. I'm not surprised if there are women among us who have had an abortion in the past, as well as parents or men who have encouraged a woman to get an abortion. I know what I've been saying has unearth many emotions that you've buried away. There are some here who have been carrying around a heavy burden of guilt and shame because of abortion.
    - And I know there are those here bearing the shame of pornography or perhaps even the guilt of selling or buying sex. For that reason, I want to conclude with my third point, and that's how Jesus is more than just a preacher who came to proclaim good news. I could do that. **Jesus stands apart because he's also the Savior (Messiah) who makes possible the good news of freedom that He preaches.**
- ❖ At the end of vv18-19, Jesus announces that he's here, "*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" We mentioned last week that he's talking about a Jubilee year. In the Law (cf. Lev. 25), every 50th year in the Jewish calendar was to be a **year of jubilee** where all slaves are released from servitude and all debtors are released from their debts.
  - ▶ But Jesus is talking about bringing a Jubilee of jubilees. A new age, a new era of salvation that he'll inaugurate through his life, death, and resurrection. **Where everyone has a chance for a fresh start with God.** To have the debt of your sins erased, to be redeemed from sin's enslavement, to be liberated from its penalty and power – all of this is available if you respond with repentance and faith to the good news that Jesus preaches.

- ❖ And this good news is only possible because Jesus made it so. **The amazing thing about Jesus' sermon that day is not what he said – but what he left out.** In v19, he stops with the words, “*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*”, which comes out of Isaiah 61:2. But there is actually more to that verse that he intentionally leaves out.
  - ▶ What Jesus stopped short of quoting goes like this, “*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God*”. I think Jesus omitted that line – not because he's embarrassed to mention God's vengeance in public – but because the reason he came was not to exact vengeance on guilty sinners.
    - **Jesus didn't come to bring God's wrath but to bear it.** He came to die on a cross bearing the sin and shame of abortion, the sin and shame of pornography, the sin and shame of enslaving others and selling or buying sex.
  
- ❖ Whatever sin you've committed, whatever shame you bear, you need to hear this right now: **The Lord's favor – his forgiveness, his blessing, his love – is available to you through faith in this Jesus.** Go to him. Ask for forgiveness but also ask for freedom. Then ask for power to change, to get up and shake off those chains, and walk out of here a free man or woman.