

Good News for the Poor (Luke 4:18): Bible Commentary for the New Baptist Covenant

Poverty and wealth are always about political, cultural and economic relationships, and Jesus announces that he will bring a new relationship to the poor.

Jesus' choice of biblical text acts as a declaration of purpose for his ministry. The term good news first appears in Luke associated with angelic announcements of the birth of Jesus (1:19; 2:10). From then on, it is used to describe the content of Jesus' ministry. The day after the synagogue scene, Jesus uses "good news" to summarize the intent of his ministry: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God" (4:43). In three other places in Luke, "good news" summarizes Jesus' ministry (8:1; 9:6; 20:1).

This is a very unique proclamation that finds definition in the life and ministry of Jesus. It is "good news" that radically changes the world. All who hear this good news hear everything in life differently from that moment on.

This "good news" finds its particular expression in the word it brings to the poor. Jesus says he will "bring good news to the poor." This focus on the poor appears 10 more times in Luke. In each case, the text calls attention to Jesus' ministry to the poor. The poor are blessed (6:20). The poor are the subject of the good news (7:22). They are invited to the banquet when other guests do not appear (14:13; 14:21). The poor such as Lazarus receive special attention and favor (16:20, 22). Jesus challenges the rich man to give away his wealth to the poor to demonstrate faithfulness (18:22). Zacchaeus' immediate response to Jesus is to give his money to the poor (19:8). The poor widow's offering in the Temple receives Jesus' notice as an exemplary gift (21:2-3).

The term for poor (*ptochos*) refers to those who are abjectly poor or utterly destitute. The most common term for poor in the Hebrew Bible (*'ani*) carries with it the notion of economically poor, but it also suggests the idea of oppression, exploitation and suffering.

It is insufficient, though, to imagine that we can take words such as these, break them down and then understand the clear meaning of Jesus' proclamation in the synagogue. When individuals live in poverty, their lives are influenced by a host of political, cultural and economic relationships.

Poverty and wealth are always about such relationships, and Jesus announces that he will bring a new relationship to the poor.

Poverty does not solely reflect a lack of resources. Rather, it reflects the inability to make choices with one's life and for one's family. Poverty always reflects the power and domination systems that people have upon other individuals, a kind of power and domination that removes life choices. When Jesus stands before the synagogue and announces he will bring good news to the poor, he is effectively saying that he will give them the opportunity to make choices with their lives. The lives they live will now have the option of relationship and participation in the kingdom of God.

This proclamation has enormous potential power: The marginalized move into the center of relationship with God. The silenced receive the voice of prayer. The ignored have God's attention. The good news should proclaim to people that they now have a choice with their lives.

We must think more imaginatively than just developing some sort of analogy between poverty and one's spiritual, emotional, physical or economic state of being. How may we truly speak of choice for people? When someone is impoverished, he or she needs choices more than anything else.

Moreover, when we consider the likelihood that Luke's attention to poverty is a response to a relatively poor early church facing an influx of wealthy members who bring into the community affluence and power, the contemporary church must honestly assess its attention to the poor.

How does the contemporary church hear a Gospel written to the poor who are denied choice, when it has an abundance of choices? How does the church accept the mantle of these words of Jesus and work imaginatively to introduce choice to people who have no choice? Beyond considering the meaning of the words related to poverty, the contemporary church must envision a significant way to act that empowers the poor with choice.

Having seen the townships of Cape Town where tens of thousands live in tacked-together shacks, and recognizing that poverty is not limited to South Africa but finds its uneasy home even in America, we must accept that people need more than Jesus. They need the hope for choice that Jesus brings with his message of the kingdom of God. This requires intentionally embracing the needs of the poor and looking for every means possible to engage them at the source of their poverty, whether it is political, cultural or economic, and to be a part of a solution to offer them choices in their lives.

The poor need Jesus. The poor also need jobs and food. The poor need healthcare and dignity. The poor need education and hope. All these things rightly come in the kingdom of God. Solutions are as varied as that which the creative power of God at work in the minds of people can produce. Anything is possible.

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