

Nov 15th, 2010

Missions, Riches, and Poverty – A Random Article with No Point

I believe all Christians are called to incarnational ministry. That is, living among people in service to others. This is what Jesus did, and we are followers of Him. **For most, this involves living as ambassadors of Christ within their given spheres of influence:** As office workers, school teachers, stay-at-home moms, engineers or burger flippers –they all shine the light of Christ in their local setting.

For other Christians, a burden has been given to move outside their local context. We call these people missionaries. However, my understanding of God and his Mission leads me to believe all Christians should be involved in the task of making disciples. Hold on though! this may not be what first comes to mind. Sure, making disciples includes working with nonbelievers in secular settings, but is much more.

It might also look like:

- 1) a mother discipling her children
- 2) a husband encouraging his wife in the Lord
- 3) a high school student grading correspondence courses through CEF or a prison ministry
- 4) an elder mentoring younger folks in the context of a local assembly
- 5) an older child praying with a younger sibling

What stands missionaries apart from other believers should not be their lifestyle, but the fact they are trading their local context with one that – presumably – has higher need.

Here's where I think things get interesting: From a practical standpoint, any middle class American who decides to serve as a missionary outside his local setting will most likely be moving down economically. That's because hardly anyone is as rich as us. **As I look at the global state of affairs, I'm beginning to realize American suburbs are in many ways the pure embodiment of materialistic "nirvana."** To live in a climate controlled, weatherproof, tastefully decorated abode that has instant access to pure water, endless varieties of tasty foods and nonstop entertainment options is to live better than King Tut and practically every human who has ever existed from the dawn of time until now, [including now.](#)

I'm not saying there's anything intrinsically wrong with this situation or our material success. American's have worked hard to gain this prosperity: our wealth was created, not stolen. Much humility is required though as it wasn't created by us personally, we're only the fortunate recipients benefiting from others' blood, sweat, and

tears. And too, I think our country has been blessed by God from the faith of our forefathers.

All that to say: I don't think we in America should feel guilty for being rich or feel insignificant for "merely" having a local ministry. **A gospel witness is needed for those in suburban settings as much as anywhere else.** We live in an increasingly secularized – and fascinatingly diverse – nation that is fast becoming as needy for a gospel witness as many 3rd world countries.

As an egalitarian people we pride ourselves in believing a rich man has the same intrinsic value as a poor man. And rightly so: we are all human first and of equal value in the sight of God. I would greet and shake hands with my friendly chimney sweep in the same manner I'd greet and shake hands with the President of the United States. Well, maybe I'd ask him to wash his hands first.

But the reverse is also true: a poor person is not intrinsically more valuable than a rich person. **A ministry in the slums is no more important than a ministry in a neighborhood of million dollar homes.** And a ministry to the margins is no more important than a ministry among believers in the local church or within our families. The important thing is to have a ministry!

Working with the poor may be more fruitful than the rich though as **receptiveness to Jesus Christ will nearly always be higher among the poor.** This is because - from a practical standpoint - the materially rich and worldly influential tend to be spiritually numb (not as a rule, but as a generalization). This may be why Jesus warned so much against riches. I think Paul made an astute observation regarding the influential rulers of his age, **"We speak of God's secret wisdom... none of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."** (1 Corinthians 2:8)

I'm consciously aware I speak for myself in my indictment of the rich as I too am wealthy by any standard. There are several dangers to riches:

First: Greed, or the Love of Money. We all know about this one. (1 Tim 6:10)

Second: Having heaps of wealth in general. The danger here lies in the fact that wealth creates an illusion of control. Yet we aren't really in control. Even Bill Gates with all his billions will lose control when he dies; when he faces the judgment seat of Christ. (Mark 4:19, Luke 12:20)

In this same vein, I've talked with couples who've told me their walk with the Lord was most dynamic while struggling financially or with some other grim trial such as losing a child. In those crucible experiences they trusted in God, and He provided. **When we have it all we tend towards apathy and forget God.** At that point He becomes more of a nice idea or theory than the bedrock of our lives – the source from whom we depend on our survival. We think we can take Him or leave Him. Which is false, and that is the danger with riches.

But back to Incarnatioal Ministry. What about those places with no Christian witness? What if I'm called to go? **What if I'm called to a place that is impoverished?** How best to approach the situation? Would it be better – as an outsider – to share the Good News from a position of superiority – or on their level?

I think the answer is the latter. God entered the human experience on our level. He could have come in the form of a scary alien or – easier yet – airdropped Christian literature. But instead he gave up his riches to become poor, his glorified state to become human.

Christ traded his position of power for weakness, his comfort for pain, and his kingship for servanthood. A man of sorrows, he exchanged the joys in heaven for persecutions on earth. Misunderstood, he gave his life for his enemies, for those who eventually killed him. **And we are called to follow in his footsteps.**

So, who wants to sign up first?

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 2:8-9)

I ask, **“Who would voluntarily become poor, that a poor person might become rich?”** Besides Jesus, of course. And maybe Mother Teresa. I guarantee anyone choosing this path will cause eyebrows to be raised.

I wonder, *“Who will help? Who will share the love of Christ? Who will give dignity to those living in degradation?”*

We like to think poverty is self-induced: if only the poor would work harder they could pull themselves up by their boot straps. Perhaps sometimes, but that's just not always the case! What about *evil*? What about *oppression*? What about *injustice*? What about the *vulnerable*? What about the 22,000 children under the age of 5 who die *every day* from malnourishment and preventable diseases? What about [this 8 year old girl](#)? **Who's going to stand in the gap?**

"The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice. I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before Me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, **but I found no one."** (Ezekiel 22:29-30)

We are in a spiritual warfare. Of epic proportions. On a global magnitude. Perhaps I need to wake up. Perhaps I need to pray.