

Seeing the Issues Clearly

Sometimes there is more happening around us than meets the eye. One of the coolest bits of technology that I've seen is super, high frame-rate cameras. They make cameras now that can record a million frames per second and the play back at super slow-mo. And it's amazing what you can see. Watch this clip. [prince Rupert drop]

Would you have ever believed such a thing? You would think that hitting it hard with a hammer would shatter that glass, but the explosion happens from the tail. You could never see that with the naked eye. But when we have a tool like super slow-motion camera, you can see things differently.

Well, that's what this whole series is about—seeing things differently. Now, we are embarking on a journey as a church to shape our church culture into a culture where lives are continually transformed by the grace of Jesus. Toward that end, we've formed partnerships with Together for Good and Prison Fellowship. But in order to do this, it's going to take far more than partnerships with organizations. It'll take a change of culture, of priorities, and most of all, it's going to take a change in how we choose to see.

Last week, we learned that *you and every person you meet* is a masterpiece created in Christ Jesus to do good works. This means you have intrinsic value and worth. God created you and that makes you priceless. And everyone you meet deserves your

attention and respect. The question is why we don't see ourselves that way and even more, why don't we see other people that way?

Well, the answer is that each of us in one way or another have been dragged through the mud, leaving us tattered and torn. It might be our own sin, we might be paying the price for other people's sin, it might be hurt or shame we're carrying. None of us is exempt. But the amazing thing about Jesus is that he had a way of seeing through the mud to the masterpiece inside. That's the vision we need to develop if we're to going to carry on the mission of Jesus.

Today, I'm going to expand on that thought, because not only do we need to see *people* the way Jesus sees them, we have to see the *mud* the way Jesus sees it. You might not want to call it mud. You can call it problems, issues, baggage, hurt, whatever. This is what I mean when I talk about mud. And it's important because how we view mud will make a world of different in how we address it in ourselves or in others.

Recently, the church has had two categories for what we do outside the church. *Outreach* and *evangelism*. In fact, you can divide churches—often according to age by what they value.

Today, young people are all about outreach and serving the poor. They have a passion for helping people in poverty. They believe churches over-spiritualize things and that rather than trying to save everyone's soul, we should be serving the poor. And in

that, they're not wrong. From the prophets, to Jesus, to the Apostle Paul—everyone agrees that we should be serving the poor. This was a central task of the early church.

But then you have (usually) the older crowd who says, what good does it do someone if we feed their stomach, but starve their soul? After all, what we do in this 80 years or so we have to live is small compared to the vastness of eternity. Serving the poor is great, but making disciples has to be the primary work of the church.

I want to propose a completely different way of thinking about what we should be doing as a church. You can call it evangelism, you can call it outreach—what I would call it is seeking Shalom. At the core of this way of looking at things is that, Biblically speaking, the opposite of *poverty* is not *wealth*, it's *Shalom*.

Shalom is a Hebrew word usually translated as “peace,” but it's really more than what we think of peace. It's when the fabric of life is woven together into a beautiful and functional tapestry. A person has *Shalom when their relationship with God, themselves, others and the world is right*. The goal of the Church then—for people both inside and outside the church—is to facilitate right relationship in all those areas.

So, if that's Shalom and the opposite of Shalom is poverty, then what is poverty? Well, it's much more than financial. That's why financial solutions aren't usually the best way to deal with it. If Shalom is about the four relationships, then we can say that poverty is *spiritual, personal, social and financial*.

Turn with me to Acts 3 and I'll show you what I mean. The book of Acts is a sequel to the book of Luke. It highlights how the church grew for 30 or so years after Jesus.

At first, the Church was almost exclusively made up of Jewish converts, and started in Jerusalem, where the Temple, the center of Jewish worship, stood. The early Christians—including the Apostles—continued to go to the Temple daily for worship. So, Acts 2:46 tells us about the early church, **“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts...”** If you turn the page from chapter 2, we come to our passage.

[read Acts 3:1-10] This was a common scene. The Temple was always busy with people coming and going to offering sacrifices and prayers throughout the day. One requirement of Jewish practice was almsgiving which means giving to the poor. Since there was no social safety net like social security or medicare, if someone was disabled and not able to work, their only option was to rely on the kindness of others. So, families brought their disabled family member to one of the Temple gates to beg.

This guy is a clear picture of poverty. But like the Prince Rupert's drop, there's more going on than meets the eye. So, let's start by thinking about what it would have been like to be this guy. How would you feel?

First, it says he was lame from birth. Now they didn't have wheelchairs or accessibility codes. They didn't have public service announcements or Sesame Street to encourage people to value those with disabilities. In fact, people believed that if someone

was blind or lame or had leprosy, it was the result of sin. So, unless that person was family, you wouldn't have found many people who felt sorry for him.

So, every day he would sit by the gate to the Temple and watch all the able-bodied people coming and going—walking past the mass of broken humanity, never making eye contact, but just throwing some change in the cup and moving on. Disabled people weren't allowed to go into the Temple to worship because they were unclean. This was a daily reminder that he was less than everyone else. No masterpiece here. Just a guy covered in mud. But let's look even a little closer. Because what I hope you're seeing is that his poverty was not something that would be fixed even if everyone who walked into the Temple gave him money. Remember our four categories of poverty?

His relationship with God was shaky since he wasn't even allowed to go into the Temple to worship. He might have seen himself as cursed and rejected by God. He would have wondered what sin he or someone else had committed that put him where he was.

What about his relationship with self? Well, first of all, he was physically broken, so that's one part of it. We can imagine that his self-esteem and dignity were pretty much non-existent. Every day, he sat in the hot sun and had the religious people throwing money at him like they were feeding pigs. He was disabled and couldn't work—he couldn't even volunteer at the salvation army.

His relationship with others? Maybe his family cared about him and maybe not. Maybe he was just some easy money as he sat begging. In any case, he was an outcast.

His relationship to the world? There was no way for him to be a productive member of society. And we need that in one way or another—it doesn't have to be a job where you earn money. It's just contributing to flourishing. And he didn't have that.

When you look at poverty this way, you can see why it's so hard to alleviate. There is enough wealth in the world to end world hunger. We have the resources to feed and clothe every person on earth, easily. We have the resources for a booming economy for the world. So why don't we do it? It's because infinite resources wouldn't end poverty because poverty isn't just financial. That's why people entering the Temple throwing money at the man would not alleviate his poverty.

I know someone who has all the money he'd ever need. He has enough stock accumulated that he could cash out, never work another day in his life and live very comfortably. But even with all that money, he feels spiritually, personally, and socially poor. He's tired of the rat-race. He's tired of marriage struggles and family struggles and purposelessness and he's just now slowly renewing his relationship with God.

You see, the four areas aren't pieces of a pie. They're a complicated web. One area affects the others. Financial stress or excess impacts our self-esteem and our relationship with God. Our relationship with God impacts our relationship with money. That's why the

root cause of someone's poverty might not be obvious and giving money or just feeding someone might provide immediate relief, but it seldom helps in the long-run.

But again, it's not just financial. One of the most poignant examples of how these areas impact the other areas has to do with community. The researcher, author, speaker Brene Brown has done thousands of interviews with people over the years, trying to understand human connection and community. And she said that she can boil down the difference between people who feel connected to a community and those who don't. She said, *"The people who [are connects] have a strong sense of love and belonging, believe they're worthy of love and belonging."*

This is why it's so important that our first to people must be, "you are a masterpiece, created in God's image." Yes, you're covered in mud and we can work through that, but you're worthy, not because you do everything right, but because God says you're worthy and Jesus gave his life for you because he believes you're worthy. Imagine what can happen when we approach people that way. This is the heart of the Gospel. *When people understand the Gospel—deep down here—it transforms every area of life.* Can we stop being ashamed of that?

Now, I doubt Peter and John were assessing this man in all four areas as they entered the Temple. I don't think that's the point of the story, but what we do see here is the result of Peter's confidence in the power of the Gospel. Here's what I mean.

In verse 3, as Peter and John were entering the Temple, the man asked them for money. This was the normal answer to his poverty. And so, what did they do?

Verse 4, **“They looked straight at him...”** The Greek here says Peter “fixed his gaze” at the man. He didn’t just glance at him, He looked into the man’s eyes. Everyone else would hardly turn their head, but Peter stopped and acknowledged the man.

Now, because he was in a lower social class, his natural response would have been to look away. Outcasts didn’t make eye-contact with someone from a higher class. But the first thing Peter says to him in verse 4 is, **“Look at us.”** Now on the surface, this seems kind of condescending and even mean. This is what you say to a child who’s in trouble and avoiding contact. But Peter wasn’t annoyed or angry. He was leveling the playing field. By looking the man in the eye, and by inviting the man to look him in the eye, he respected him. He wasn’t just mud as other people would believe. They were equal in the eyes of God.

Many times, when we “serve the poor,” maybe on a mission trip, we have the attitude that we’re the blessed Americans coming to save these poor people and we’re going to dignify them by stooping to their level. That’s wrong and it kind of an ugly attitude. But when we look someone in the eye, and don’t pretend to have all the answers, we acknowledge what God never forgot—that they are God’s workmanship with inherent dignity and worth. I’m paying attention because you deserve my attention.

So, he looks at them. Then comes Peter's response in verse 6, **"Silver and gold, I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."**

Now, one of the things we'll learn is that in emergency situations, it's right to give money or resources. But when our answer to chronic poverty is always to open a soup kitchen, or food shelf, or give a grocery card, we risk missing the real issue.

In fact, oftentimes, and maybe even most of the time *in our society*, handing out money actually contributes to poverty, because the root cause isn't financial, it's something else—spiritual or personal. A handout might feed them for a day, but erode their sense of dignity.

And often that's just the easy way, like throwing coins in the beggar's cup. When someone comes into the office for financial help, it's easy to hand out grocery or gas cards. It's harder to offer to sit down with someone to listen to their story to find out why they're in that situation and offer to walk with them through it.

Peter does the harder thing because he puts himself a position where he has to rely on the power of God. Think about it. What if he would have taken the man by the hand and said, *"In the name of Jesus Christ, rise and walk."* And the man just sat there. How ridiculous would he have looked? But he presumed on the power of God to heal.

Now, how often do we Christians settle for handouts because we don't believe in the power of God to transform? Do we assume that someone will always continue to

struggle the same way they always struggled instead of having the faith that God can heal any situation? Throwing money at problems is easy, but it leaves the person unchanged.

The question is, do we really believe that Jesus still heals? Bodies? Marriages? Hearts?

Peter took the man by the hand. No one but that man's family would have done this. Some scholars tell us that touching the man would have made them ceremonially unclean. But like Jesus in the Gospels, Peter didn't seem to care.

So, what happened? Verse 8, **"He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the Temple courts, walking and jumping and praising God."** Now, think about this. When Jesus healed the man every area of his life was made whole.

When the man was healed, where did he go? He went with Peter and John into the Temple courts—for the first time in his life! And as he was jumping, what else was he doing? He was praising God! His relationship with God was restored.

What about personal and social? Well, for one, his body was whole. He could look people in the eye without them having to stoop down to his level. He was now on equal terms with them and could be productive in society.

And financial—now he didn't have to rely on the kindness of others for his livelihood, but he could walk and work and earn. Each day he went to work, he would be reminded of his worth and value as God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works! While he was once the picture of poverty, he was now the picture of Shalom.

So, do you see why outreach and evangelism are really the same thing? Our job as followers of Jesus is to see people as Jesus sees them—God’s masterpiece, created with dignity and worth. That’s the first message of the Gospel. Whether financially rich or poor, we look people in the eye as someone who God delights in. We don’t ignore the mud. We acknowledge it—whether it’s circumstances or sin, whether it’s spiritual, financial or whatever it is—we acknowledge it and we say, “But that’s not YOU.” We’re honest about the fact that we’re in the same boat. And we form a relationship with them so we’re able know the real source of their struggle. And our job is not to fix people, but to bring them to the one who heals and transforms lives.

It typically doesn’t happen as quickly as it did for this man. In fact, there might be an area of life that will never be “fixed.” None of us will experience Shalom fully this side of heaven. So, it’s so important for us to be willing to stick with people—even people we know might never get rid of the mud. They’re still God’s masterpiece, that Christ died to redeem. That’s the core message of the church. That’s the heart of outreach, evangelism, discipleship and everything the church does.