

GOOD NEWS—BAD NEWS

Dear Friend,

In a world that is saturated with so much bad news, we all need some good news. Listen to the good news that Jesus brings as He sums up His mission on earth. “The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”(Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus’ proclamation of good news to the poor is backed up by over 500 verses in the Bible concerning wealth and poverty. In Luke, one out of every seven verses, and in James, one out of every five verses, relate to this subject. In spite of the fact that Jesus talked more about poverty and wealth than any other subject, it is still not stressed in most pulpits on a regular basis. Instead, the gospel message is frequently exchanged for the popular cultural emphasis that money is a sign of success. That’s bad news for the poor, particularly when it is made to sound like money is a sign of God’s blessing. The Pharisees, like many today, felt this way and looked down on Jesus for His poverty. (Luke 16:14) Jesus rejects this bad theology and brings good news to the poor declaring, “Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the Kingdom of God.”(Luke 6:20) In Luke 16:13 He declares, “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money,”

The bad news is, “People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men (and women also) into ruin and destruction.”(1 Tim 6:9) Jim Wallis in his book, The Call to Conversion, states, “The result of prosperity based on injustice is anxiety. Gloom, cynicism, despair, and hedonism are all fruits of the fundamental anxiety that characterizes the cultures of the wealthy nations. The spiritual crisis of the rich countries directly corresponds to the economic crisis of the poor countries. The rich hunger in spirit while the poor hunger for bread. Our spiritual malaise is the consequence of affluence in the face of deprivation. Conversion in our time is to liberate the poor and to make the blind see. The poor need justice, and the rich need restored sight.”

The good news is, “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned. From

that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”(Matt.4:16, 17) To repent means to turn around and not keep engaging in the same self-destructive behavior. Living in the Kingdom of heaven, also called the Kingdom of God, involves living a life of faith freed from being possessed by our possessions. Dom Hilder Camara stated, “I used to think when I was a child, that Christ might have been exaggerating when He warned about the dangers of wealth. Today I know better. I know how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one’s eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people’s hands, eyes, lips and hearts.” When that happens as God blesses us, instead of being good news to the poor, we become bad news.

Jesus’ proclamation of Luke 4:18, 19 was not just a proclamation of good news but an actual acclamation of the good news shared in good deeds among lepers, despised women and other marginalized people. He healed the sick, fed the hungry and cast out demons from the possessed. Jesus completely identified with the poor and homeless to the extent that in Matt.25:31-46 He clearly states that refusal to be good news in the form of feeding, sheltering, clothing and visiting results in eternal damnation. Now that’s bad news for those who refuse to repent and let the spirit of God move them from the darkness of their self-centered lives into the Kingdom of Heaven. Ronald J. Sider in his book, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, writes, “For Biblical Christians, the only correct response to sin is repentance. We have become entangled, to some degree unconsciously, in a complex web of institutionalized sin. Thank God we can repent. God is merciful. God forgives. But only if we repent. And Biblical repentance involves more than a hasty tear and a weekly prayer of confession. Biblical repentance involves conversion. It involves a whole new lifestyle. The One who stands ready to forgive us for our sinful involvement in economic injustice offers us His grace to begin living a generous new lifestyle that empowers the poor and oppressed.” Now that’s good news. Good news is expressed in Eph.2:8-10, “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” These good works resulting from a response to God’s grace is good news to those in need. It is the light Jesus speaks of in Matt.5:16, which results in deeds of kindness which is good news to the hurting. Jesus challenges us to not only share the good news in word but also in deed when He says, “Let your light shine before men (and women), that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

When, instead of being good news, we succumb to our own selfish, self-serving interests, we end up being bad news not only to other human beings but also to creation itself. As a result, in Romans 8:22 we read that the whole creation groans. Much of the destruction of creation we see today is directly related to human development efforts that put profits over people and the protection of the environment. Paul, in his writings, expresses that conversion and the preservation of creation are directly related. “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole of creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”(Romans 8:19-22) The bad news is that creation is groaning now more than ever before. Are we willing to be the good news that creation is groaning for at this hour and let the Spirit of God work through us to be earth-keepers rather than earth-breakers? Ronald Sider states as Christians, “We face a painful choice. To maintain and expand our material abundance, we are polluting our air and water and destroying our lands and forests. We simply cannot continue these present economic patterns, and reduce global poverty, and preserve a livable planet all at the same time. We could choose both justice for the poor and a livable planet--but only if we give up rampant materialism and make hard choices to reverse environmental destruction.”

I was asked this past week by a reporter, “What is evangelism?” I replied the word comes from the root word evangel which means good news. In order for me to do evangelism today among the hurting and homeless, I must share the good news in the provision of food, shelter, and training programs to break the cycle of homelessness in the name of Jesus Christ. I must strive in the midst of global warming, and the environmental destruction all around me, to be an earth-keeper rather than an earth breaker. As a follower of Jesus Christ “I must preach good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”(Luke 4:18, 19) Jim Wallis points out that “Eighteenth-century English preachers and nineteenth-century American evangelists deliberately linked revivalism to social change and proclaimed a gospel that was indeed good news to the poor, the captives and the oppressed. However, in what sociologist David Moberg has called ‘the great reversal,’ twentieth-century evangelicalism in the United States came to identify thoroughly with the mainstream values of wealth and power. As the country became rich and fat, so did its evangelicals, who soon replaced the good news of Christ’s Kingdom with a personal piety that comfortably supported the status quo. Evangelicals in most of the twentieth

century were not known as friends of the poor. Rather, evangelicals were known to have a decided preference for the successful and prosperous who saw their wealth as a sign of God's favor. Ironically, a movement that once fought to free slaves, support industrial workers, and liberate women came to have a reputation for accommodating racism, favoring business over labor, and resisting equal rights for women. In our nation's ghettos, barrios, and unions, evangelicals were generally not regarded as allies." That is not just sad news—it's bad news. Bad news for those who aren't seeing the light and love of Christ shining through His followers. It is also bad news when it comes to proclaiming the good news that Jesus provided through His death and resurrection. Bad news because the indifference of those who claim to be saved to the needs of others is causing those desiring salvation to look in other places rather than to the One who is the way, the truth and the life—Jesus Christ.

I'm tired of the bad news offered by bad religion, which ignores the teachings of Jesus and substitutes the priorities of certain segments of the religious community. Yes, I am against abortion and gay marriage, but I am finding myself increasingly irritated by those who try to make these the only two major political points of concern, while ignoring the Scriptural mandates requiring the people of God to care for the poor and needy. This bad religion is causing the good news of the gospel to appear as bad news to many who are hungry for the love and salvation that only Jesus can provide. Many Christians living in the midst of bad news, which perpetuates fear, are deceived in election after election to vote for politicians who claim to be pro-life. Once these wolves in sheep's clothing are elected, they proceed to cut Medicaid assistance, utility companies are given new freedom to raise rates and cuts are made to mental health and housing aid. Those who claim to be pro-life have all too frequently led the fight to oppose raising the minimum wage, helping poor illegal aliens seeking a better life to become citizens or anything else that offers hope and help to the least of these. That's bad news. It's bad news when the good news of the Prince of Peace is twisted to support war and its aggressive acts in order to protect U.S. oil interests.

It isn't easy to proclaim the radical good news that resulted in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Yet it is this revolutionary act, resulting in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that offers us life in the midst of this culture of Death. For we are told, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them

by the cross.”(Col.2:13-15) Wow, that’s good news! Good News that we have been entrusted with to share in word and deed. That’s good news, which empowers us to live our lives in such a way of direct service to the least of these that, in the not too distant future, we shall hear the King of Kings, Jesus Christ, say to us, “Come you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you give Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you took Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me. I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me. Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers (and sisters) of mine, you did for Me.”(Matt.25:34-40) That is good news. Let us now go forth and live in the light and hope that this good news provides!

Yours in Christ service.

Larry Rice