

The Hole in Our Gospel

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My wife Janet told me that she didn't want anything for her birthday this year. Men know that this sort of request is usually bad news. Was she depressed? Did she want something really expensive? What was I missing? In fact she had read a book called "The Hole in our Gospel".

The idea of a hole in the gospel was new to me.

The word "gospel" means "good news." When I was a boy I learned that the Bible's good news could be summarized by 4 spiritual laws about my relationship with God.

These taught me that I was separated from God by my sin, but God sent his son Jesus to die for me, paying my debt so that I could know him and live with him forever.

I surrendered my heart to Jesus.

Afterward I felt different, and I had a new interest in praying and reading the Bible, but I wasn't sure what else was involved.

I had experienced a transformed relationship with God, but I didn't know that he intended to change my relationship with other people and the world at large.

I was missing a big part of the good news.

Tonight/Today I'm going to tell you a couple of stories about that hole.

I'll be drawing on two books about this subject, "The Hole in our Gospel" by Rich Stearns and "Generous Justice" by Tim Keller.

The first story is about Rich Stearns.

Rich was raised by a single mother and grew up poor. He went to Cornell University, where he became a Christian, and then he attended the prestigious Wharton School of Business. His first job was in Boston with Parker Brothers, the game company that manufactures Monopoly.

While living in Boston Rich and his wife Renee attended Park Street Church. They led the church youth group, tithed their income, and gave liberally to missions. Rich became the church's youngest elder at age 27.

He told people at work about Jesus.

This didn't seem to hurt his career, because at age 33 he became president of Parker Brothers.

Subsequently he was hired by Lenox, a maker of fine china, becoming president and CEO of the company in 1995.

Although Rich and Renee were successful as a family, in business, and as Christians, God had more in mind for them. One day a recruiter called and asked Rich if he was interested in becoming president of World Vision, a large Christian nonprofit organization that works with disadvantaged people around the world.

Rich said “no,” pointing out that as president of a fine china company he had no experience with international relief work. But the possibility of working for World Vision kept resurfacing in odd ways.

Rich decided that it was extremely unlikely God would want him to move to World Vision. Here are some of his reasons:

- I love being the CEO of Lenox
- I worked for 20 years to get where I am today
- I am on the brink of making a lot of money. We'll be set for life in just a few more years.

- We live in our dream house
- I have 5 young kids who love their Christian school and we would have to move them to the other side of the country. How will I put them all through college after taking a salary cut of 75%?

In his daily Bible reading Rich came to the story of the rich young ruler that we heard earlier. In this passage a successful young man seeks Jesus's advice. He was living a good religious life, but something was missing, and he knew it.

Jesus advised him “**if you want to be perfect** (meaning complete), **go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**”

Jesus told him he could live a complete life by giving his wealth to the poor. But the young man was unable to part with his possessions, which no longer seemed like blessings from God.

He went away sad, because his wealth had become a ball and chain preventing him from following Jesus and living life to the fullest.

As Rich Stearns read this story he realized that he was that successful young man.

He was living an upright and disciplined Christian life, **but God expected more.**

He writes “Two decades earlier I had bet the farm on Jesus Christ, and now he was asking me to hand over the deed. What was the most important thing in my life? Jesus wanted to know. Was it my career, my financial security, my family, my stuff? Or was I committed to following Him regardless of the cost?”

With tears Rich and Renee decided not to follow in the footsteps of the rich young man.

Rich quit his job.

They moved their family to Seattle, and Rich became president of World Vision.

Since then their lives have been transformed by a God-given purpose. They wouldn't go back to Lenox Fine China for anything, **because they are helping to change the world for Christ.**

Rich wrote "The Hole in Our Gospel" and is in such demand as a speaker that he's booked 4 years out – that's why he's not here telling you his story himself.

You may be thinking "that's fine for Rich and Renee. God called them to be advocates for the poor, but he hasn't asked me to change the world."

But in fact God wants all of us to change our world by caring for the disadvantaged.

Let's take a look at what the Bible says about this.

First of all, **God cares about powerless people.**

In fact, he is passionate about them.

Notice in this passage from the Psalms how active God is on behalf of the vulnerable: (Psalm 146:7-9)

“He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow.”

In this Psalm David mentions foreigners, orphans, and widows.

Together with the poor they are a quartet of powerless persons that the Bible mentions over 300 times.

Eager desire for this quartet is part of God's character.

Jesus is the same.

He began his public ministry in the Nazareth synagogue by reading aloud this passage from the prophets:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And it was Jesus who told his disciples “blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” (Luke)

Not only is God passionate about powerless people, **he expects us to care for them too.**

He repeatedly commands us to act justly toward the vulnerable.

What does it look like to do the right thing for the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the foreigner?

Certainly it means not taking advantage them.

But it also means going out of our way to provide for them.

Job's description of what it means to be just includes:

- giving the poor the things they desire
- sharing meals with orphans
- clothing the homeless
- advocating for orphans in court. (Job 31)

Jesus had a comprehensive concept of justice for the disadvantaged.

One day an expert in religious law asked Jesus the same question that the rich young man had asked: What must I do to live a complete life? (Luke 10:27)

On this occasion Jesus pointed the man to the Mosaic law, summarized in these 2 commandments:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,’ and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Apparently the second of these commands was a problem for the religious expert.

He was clear on his personal relationship with God but he was a bit defensive about whether his faith had transformed his relationships with others.

He wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus “**And who is my neighbor?**” (Luke 10)

In reply Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus had a radical concept of “neighbor.”

After all, Samaritans were bitter enemies of Jews, but the Good Samaritan stopped to help an injured Jew.

Our neighbor is anyone the Lord puts in our path or brings to our attention, regardless of their race, culture, or religious faith.

The Samaritan didn't have a religious argument with the injured man. Instead he took pity on him and sacrificed his own time and treasure to provide for him.

At the end of the story Jesus commands: **“go and do likewise.”**

For years I read Bible passages about caring for vulnerable people and assumed this was an optional activity that was peripheral to my faith.

But caring for the disadvantaged is a hallmark of followers of Jesus.

And there are sobering consequences when we don't reach out to our needy neighbors.

The main consequence is that our relationship with God suffers.

This is what God said to Israelites who neglected the poor: “I hate, I despise your religious feasts, I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.” (Amos 5:21-22)

To others who fasted for healing but saw no benefit, God explained that they had failed to love their vulnerable neighbors. He said:

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen . . . to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him?” (Isaiah 58:6-8)

If we are not caring for our needy neighbors, our church attendance, fasting, or other religious activities may be futile, and God may seem distant.

The ultimate implication of not acting mercifully toward the needy is found in Matthew 25, which was also read earlier.

It's Jesus's account of the final judgment, when he will separate all people into two groups.

Those on his right Jesus welcomes into his kingdom, saying:

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited 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 I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:35-40)

Then Jesus turns to those on his left and tells them they are cursed and destined for eternal fire, saying: “For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in,

I needed clothes and you did not clothe me . . . whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

(Matthew 25:42-45)

Of course we all want to be on Jesus’s right!

But the point of this passage is that we will be judged by our walk, not our talk.

It’s not what we believe that matters; it’s what we believe enough to act on.

And of all the actions that make up our lives, it is our care for powerless people that marks us most clearly as followers of Christ.

Why does Jesus depict the final judgment in terms of merciful acts toward the disadvantaged instead of doctrinal correctness, piety, or the sinner’s prayer?

It's because a genuine experience of God's grace leads us naturally to care for people in need.

Justice and mercy are the results of saving faith.

But "faith without deeds is useless." (James 2:20)

I don't know about you, but these scripture passages make me uncomfortable.

I don't love my neighbor like the Good Samaritan did.

And I wonder if I've actually seen Jesus disguised as a hungry person I didn't feed or a homeless person I didn't clothe.

Some of us worry that money given to a poor or homeless person may not be well spent.

I recently asked some missionaries about this. They live in Africa and receive near-daily requests for assistance.

They give with discernment, often in the context of relationship, and through the local church. But they err on the

side of giving to people who ask, because they don't want to miss an opportunity to care for Jesus in disguise.

That brings me to my second story, which is about my grandfather Shavarsh Topazian.

If ever there was a member of the quartet I mentioned, it was him.

He was orphaned at age 8 in Armenia, in the middle of a war.

Alone in the world, without resources or an advocate, he became an alien in a hostile country during a time of famine.

His chances of surviving were slim.

But a man named Clarence Ussher helped my grandfather.

Clarence was an American missionary who had started an orphanage for boys in that war-torn region. He gave my grandfather food, shelter, education, and a love for Jesus.

In his teenage years my grandfather came to the United States, married another immigrant named Alyce, and started a family.

Like many immigrants they were poor and they faced their share of prejudice.

They met a family at church named the Slaters.

The Slaters were tall and aristocratic Anglo Saxons, and my grandparents were short, dark foreigners who spoke heavily accented English.

But despite these differences the Slaters took my grandparents under their wing.

They regularly ate Sunday dinner in the Slater's home throughout the Great Depression. There they learned how to be Americans.

Seventy years later, my children can tell you stories about the Slaters.

The Usshers and the Slaters gave their time and treasure to help a foreigner, and they have a different kind of treasure as a result.

When I see them in heaven I will be part of their treasure, and so will the rest of my family.

Imagine if a billion Christians all over the globe cared for the disadvantaged the same way that the Slaters cared for my grandfather, or that Jesus cared for us.

It would be a social revolution in the name of Jesus.

If we want to live out the Bible's commands in this area we will have to deal with several objections. Jonathan Edwards was a pastor and missionary who lived in colonial New England, and he was passionate about helping the needy. He identified three common objections.

The first is that the poor aren't in extreme need and so don't require our help. It is true that most poor people in our country aren't starving. In fact, poor Americans are more likely overweight, in part because cheap food is often not nutritious. But hardheartedness on our part doesn't square with Jesus's command to love your neighbor *as yourself*.

We don't wait until we are in dire circumstances to meet our own needs, so we shouldn't require the poor to be on death's doorstep before we help them.

The second objection is that I have nothing to spare for the needy. After all, my own resources are stretched thin already.

But one of the main lessons of the parable of the Good Samaritan is that real love entails risk and sacrifice.

"I can't help" usually means "I can't help without cutting into my lifestyle or inconveniencing myself."

Nowhere in the Bible is there an income exemption from our obligation to help the disadvantaged.

The third common objection Edwards identified is that the poor are ungrateful and their poverty is their own fault.

In fact, most poor people are not lazy.

They are poor because of circumstances beyond their control, and they work hard to subsist.

Some have not made wise choices, but Edwards points out that the ability to manage our affairs wisely is a gift that God gives to some of us and not others.

Of course it's true that some poor people don't have noble characters, but we didn't either, yet "**while we were still sinners Christ died for us.**"

There are benefits of serving the needy.

The first is that "It is more blessed to give than to receive"
(Acts 20:35).

In other words, there is more happiness in giving than in receiving. If you've been on a short-term mission trip or spent a Saturday working at Carefest, you've experienced this truth for yourself. Janet and I experienced this when Benard Maritim, a Kenyan man, lived with us and other families in our small group while he was here in Rochester for a year studying at Mayo.

Benard made us smile, for instance when he learned how to operate our snowblower, or when he rode an elevator for the first time in his life.

But he also inspired us with his gentle manner, wise speech, and Godly frame of reference. We benefitted from Benard far more than he benefitted from us.

Secondly, when we give we loosen our grip on our wealth. Dr Dennis Palmer, a friend of mine who lives in Cameroon, likes to say that he wants to give like a rich man.

Dennis is certainly not rich by our standards: he lives on a missionary salary.

But he has an open-handed approach to life and is generous and ready to share.

He says that letting go of his money reminds him of what really counts in life, and turns his heart to Jesus.

When we spend more time with stock quotes than with the Bible our priorities are skewed. Serious giving can reinvigorate our desire for God.

Finally, when we place other's needs above our own we become more like Jesus.

“Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor.” (2 Cor 8:9)

Knowing Jesus and becoming more like him are the sources of joy, that deep contentment that comes not from our circumstances but from Christ.

If our Christian experience has been joyless of late, prayerful giving can rekindle God's joy in our hearts.

On your Ridgelines insert there are practical suggestions about how you can get involved, adapted from Rich Stearns and others.

I hope that you'll pick out one or two of these ideas and do them.

Learning about our disadvantaged neighbors is a good place to begin. They live here in Rochester and all over the globe.

We can all start by sharpening our world view.

The Fischer family has a world map on the wall to keep track of missionaries, as well as the locations of famines and disasters.

Your small group could study a book like “The Hole in Our Gospel” or Generous Justice.”

Next Chapter Ministries hosts Sunday brunch once a month.

This is an opportunity to meet men and women who used to be in prison and are turning their lives around.

Praying for the needy is another great way to get involved.

We can pray in the shower for families without clean water, pray at lunchtime for the one billion chronically hungry people on our planet, and pray when we drop off our kids for children who don't have a school to attend. We can also pray for opportunities to love our needy neighbors.

We can act by volunteering with organizations that meet the needs of the disadvantaged. Through Next Chapter ministries we can mentor a child whose life has been touched by crime.

Mike Murray has mentored Elijah for 3 years. He does something with him about once a week, often including Elijah in the Murray family's activities.

Mark Christopherson and other Autumn Ridge men participate in the Tuesday evening men's Bible study that meets at a Next Chapter discipleship home.

We can help refugees who've been resettled here in Rochester. It's as simple as showing them how to ride the public bus, use a microwave oven, or shop for groceries. These opportunities are organized by Catholic Charities Refugee Relief Program. Their contact information is in your bulletin insert.

Here at Autumn Ridge we can join Team Serve, which uses our skills to meet the basic needs of the disenfranchised. For example, Team Serve has helped families rebuild after floods, and repaired roofs for people who can't afford it. Team Serve is always looking for people who can swing a hammer, use a paintbrush, or rake some leaves.

Those of us who work in healthcare can use our professional skills to serve the needy here in Rochester by volunteering at the Good Samaritan Health Clinic, which provides free medical care for the underserved. The clinic needs doctors, nurses, dieticians, pharmacists, and receptionists. Dr. Bob Stanhope and many others donate evening time to staff the Clinic.

There are also healthcare opportunities around the world.

Autumn Ridge members including myself, Cheolsu Shin, Randy Marks, Chris Moir, Kendall Lee, and many others have served as short-term volunteers at mission hospitals overseas, and would love to tell you more about how to get involved.

Finally we can give by eliminating a regular expense and giving that money to a ministry that meets the needs of widows, orphans, aliens, and the poor.

My daughters and I gave my wife Janet a house for Mother's day and a goat for her birthday this year, but we ordered these from World Vision's alternative gift catalog.

The house was built in Haiti, and the goat was given to a poor family overseas.

Rich Stearns says "being a follower of Jesus Christ requires much more than having a personal and transforming relationship with God. It also entails a public and transforming relationship with the world."

God intends us to care for the powerless.

When we do so we experience the complete life and the deep joy God has in mind for each of us, and we change the world for him.

Find opportunities to trade your time and resources for the heavenly treasure that comes when you care for the needy.