

Sermon follow-up
6/21/09
Rich Lusk

Some churches focus on engaging the culture, others on helping the poor, still others on worship. We want to be a church that does it all!

I have not preached very many sermons on mercy at TPC, but I have woven mercy into many of my sermons. As always, I owe a good deal to Tim Keller when I deal with this topic. Several of the illustrations and catch phrases I use when discussing this topic come from him, though now almost in a subconscious way since I've been listening to Keller with great regularity since 1995, when I started at working at Redeemer Pres in Austin.

I highly recommend Keller's book *Ministries of Mercy*. John Stott has a number of works where he calls on the church to minister in both word and deed. Like Keller, Stott maintains a fully biblical balance between these two complementary forms of ministry. Another helpful book is Tim Chester's *Good News to the Poor*. I've been quite impressed with all of Chester's writings, and this book of equal worth to the rest. I also recommend reading Amy Sherman, Mark Gornik, and William Cavanaugh.

Randy Alcorn's book *The Treasure Principle* is a very intriguing and challenging book on Christian finance. I think Alcorn is a bit too pietistic, and not sufficiently strategic, but his book is full of pithy illustrations and helpful admonitions, encouraging us to hold on loosely to our earthly treasures.

The sermon was a further elaboration on a thesis/slogan I'd like to TPC to live by: "We must pursue the center without abandoning the margins." Or: "Serve the margins without abandoning the center" (depending on which way you are inclined). This point is this: We should seek after cultural excellence in our vocations, but should also be continually reaching out to the poor and powerless around us. In other words, we seek to be *humble elites*, acquiring cultural power not for our own sake, but the sake of the weak.

God calls us to turn money into mercy; in doing so, we turn temporal goods into eternal treasures. We use earthly currency in a way that serves God's economy of grace.

As I said in the sermon, we must start with creation, not with the fall, or all our theologizing will go astray. I once heard a theologian say that the difference between Reformed theology and fundamentalism is that the Reformed start with creation (and therefore avoid legalistic rules about the use of created things)

while fundamentalists start with the fall (and therefore are always suspicious of created things).

What drives the practice of mercy? Remembering God has been merciful to us. In 1 Tim. 6:17-19 Paul is clearly calling on the rich to practice an ethic of *imitato dei*, imitating the ways God has richly lavished undeserved gifts on us. We have to remember, we were all, spiritually speaking, naked, thirsty, hungry, and homeless. God took us in and clothed us (with Jesus), gave us living water (in the form of the Spirit), fed us (in the Eucharist), and gave us a home (in himself and in the church). How can we not desire to replicate that in our treatment of others? Furthermore, Jesus endured all those things for us – he became naked, thirsty, hungry, and homeless on the cross to spare us of these things for all eternity. Remembering this truth is what drives us to be merciful.

We cannot get involved with helping the poor on a broad scale without getting involved in politics and the transformation of social structures. Otherwise the poor never have access to the kinds of public services and capital resources that middle-class-and-above folks take for granted. The stories of Ray Bakke (in *The Urban Christian*, where he tells the story of a colleague: After having sat in court for a day, he said to the judge: "Your honor . . . Where is the justice in this court?" The judge replied, "Reverend, this is not a court of justice. This is a court of law. If you want justice, change the law!") and Robert Linthicum (in *City of God, City of Satan*, p. 45) prove that we cannot help the poor without working for more just social systems.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, and I believe he was right about that.

In his fine 2 volume commentary on proverbs in the NICOT series, Bruce Waltke defines the righteous and wicked this way: "The wicked advantage themselves to disadvantage others. The righteous disadvantages himself to advantage others."

If the city is going to rejoice in our presence (as the Bible says it will), then we must be an asset to our community. We must bless out city in tangible ways. Helping the poor is one way to grab the attention of the whole city.

The history of the church is full of stories of God's people winning the favor of people (many of whom eventually convert) by doing good deeds that meet human needs. Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate in the 4th century said that the Christians not only cared for their own poor but for the pagan poor. Until unbelievers are saying things like that about us, we cannot expect widescale

change. It was said of the early Christians that they shared their purses and their hives, but not their beds (e.g., they were liberal when it came to sharing wealth, but were strict when it came to sexual ethics). The stories of later reformers like Charles Simeon and Thomas Chalmers show us what can happen when a few key churchmen (and their congregations) take seriously the call to be a blessing to the surrounding community.

We have tried to divorce faith and finances, but it cannot be done. For example, in Luke 3, when John the Baptist is asked what repentance looks like, all three of his answers have to do with using money in just ways.

The problem with earthly treasure is not that it is bad, but that it cannot last (1 Tim. 6; Prov. 23:5). Randy Alcorn compares our use to money to Confederate money shortly before the fall of the CSA. It's going to lose its value, so use to buy what lasts in the meantime. Use temporal money to invest in eternal treasure. Alcorn calls this the "ultimate insider trading tip" and says that when we invest in God's kingdom, we're putting our money in something that has better security than the FDIC can ever hope to provide. Remember, someday even American dollars will be worthless, except as collector's items.

Alcorn says that when the lightning of grace strikes, the thunder of transformation rolls. If grace is the action, obedience is the reaction. Alcorn says that if God raises our standard of living, it is so we can raise our level of giving. Blessings are really tests: God wants to see if we are more interested in our kingdom or his. Alcorn notes, "Just because God puts money in your hand does not mean he intends for it to stay there."

John Piper has said "don't waste this recession!" In other words, let it do its work on you. Let it dethrone your idols and make you aware of how others in more impoverished countries live (where there is perpetual recession, or no recession at all because things could not get worse).

Giving is the best antidote to greed.

When I said in the sermon that how much you choose to give above and beyond the tithe, I did not mean to imply that how generous we are is a totally privatized decision. What I meant is that, in the end, no one can bind of conscience and force us to give. No one can impose extra-biblical rules on us. However, when we try to decide how much we should spend on ourselves vs. how much we should give away, it might be best to consult with close Christian friends who can keep us honest, make us accountable, and hold our feet to the fire if we are being selfish.

Thomas Chalmers on the potential of impersonalized government welfare to destroy and dehumanize:

It is in the power of government benevolence to corrupt its objects.

Psalm 72 shows us that rescuing the oppressed from injustice and oppression is a kingly action.

A very encouraging book is *Urban Shepherds*, written mostly as a series of interviews with some of the key people who helped develop Restoration Academy, an inner city Christian school in Birmingham. I strongly recommend reading this book.

After Sam Houston's conversion, he was a changed man, no longer crude and belligerent, but peaceful and joyful. According to his biography, after his baptism he said he would like to pay half the local pastor's salary. When someone asked him why, his simple response was, "My pocketbook was baptized too."

Do we have baptized pocketbooks?

A. W. Tozer:

Money as a form of power is so intimately related to the possessor that one cannot consistently give money without giving self.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne:

I am concerned for the poor but more for you. I know not what Christ will say to you in the great day . . . I fear there are many hearing me who may know well that they are not Christians because they do not love to give. To give largely and liberally, not grudgingly at all, requires a new heart; an old heart would rather part with its life-blood than its money. Oh my friends! Enjoy your money; make the most of it; give none of it away; enjoy it quickly for I can tell you, you will be beggars for eternity.

In the sermon, I quoted pretty extensively from William Cavanaugh's *Being Consumed*. This book is a very strong expose of American consumerism. I do not agree with every aspect of the book, and I think the alternative economics

Cavanaugh proposes is problematic. But the book has some definite strong points, especially when Cavanaugh is dealing the problem of “shopaholics,” market “branding” as an alternative spirituality and a way of forming an identity, etc.

One problem we have, especially as conservative Americans, is that we take for granted the social systems that tend to serve our interests and leave others out (e.g., inner city neighborhoods do not get nearly the police coverage that peaceful suburban neighborhoods get). These are difficult issues and defining justice in any given policy or circumstance may prove to be complicated. We tend to think justice means individual rights are honored, but that is not really a biblical definition. But neither is biblical justice a matter of imposing equality, as though we were commanded to create an egalitarian paradise.

If we say that justice is a matter of individual rights, then we will let the poor stew in their own juices and assume that their predicament is their own fault. Of course, at some levels it likely is their fault (though there are exceptions). But even so, we must remember that our spiritual poverty is our own fault and yet God rescued us out of it. Had Jesus only died for the deserving poor, he would not have died for anyone.

This is not to say that we cannot make distinctions between different kinds of poverty, and make assessments about individual responsibility. We most certainly can. But we cannot do so as a way of evading the responsibility. Even the most undeserving poor are, at some level, victims of the sins of others and should be offered help. What the categorizing of different types of poverty does for us is it allows us to figure out to best handle the person’s poverty in way that will guide them towards self-sufficiency.

Keller has a very good discussion on deserving vs. undeserving poor, and conditional vs. unconditional mercy.

Tim Keller:

Mercy is a command of God, yet it cannot simply be a response to a demand. It must arise out of hearts made generous and gracious by an understanding and experience of God’s mercy. It is the hearts of the congregation that must be melted until they ask, “Where is my neighbor?”

Warren Buffet:

It is more blessed to give than to receive, but then it is also more blessed to be able to do without than to have to have.

Dallas Willard, showing that giving is more for our sake than for the sake of those we help:

I do not think I exaggerate when I say that some of us put our offering in the plate with a kind of triumphant bounce as much as to say: 'There—now God will feel better!' ... I am obliged to tell you that God does not need anything you have. He does not need a dime of your money. It is your own spiritual welfare at stake in such matters as these. ... You have the right to keep what you have all to yourself—but it will rust and decay, and ultimately ruin you.

Not everyone appreciates this balance between word and deed ministry. The trend among "mainline" protestants for a long time now (and increasingly among Roman Catholics since Vatican 2) is to not do evangelism, but just care for the poor and then hope they ask questions. Evangelicals by contrast have often focused exclusively on evangelism and teaching, while neglecting service to the marginalized. Evangelicals often fear a social agenda will detract from the more important work of proclaiming the gospel. In America, the stereotypes have been: liberals care about social justice, evangelicals about evangelism; liberals care about bodies and communities, evangelicals care about individual souls. But these are false dichotomies.

Scripture calls us to a balance between word deed. Both are absolutely essential. They are inseparable if we are to reweave the threads of society, if we are to mend the torn fabric of creation, if we are to restore shalom. How, then, do they relate? Excellent discussions can be found in Keller, Stott, and Chester, but briefly, they we can say they relate as co-partners in kingdom ministry. (Note: I think Stott is more balanced than Keller gives him credit for being.)

We should not really speak of one serving the other as a means to an end. We are called to both demonstrate and proclaim the kingdom, so word and deed are inseparable. True, if we can only do one we choose to give primacy to evangelism because it meets man's eternal need for redemption in a way that social action alone cannot. Better to be poor and saved than well off and damned. But to focus on this point exclusively would actually be to truncate the full salvation Christ brings us. Plus, evangelism that does not include care for the poor is going to be misunderstood, ineffective, perhaps even dishonest. When we do evangelism among the poor, we must also meet their physical needs; word and deed act as text and context to one another, so that the message only becomes clear in an environment of tangible love. Evangelism is "out of context" if we do conjoin words with deeds.

Social action can be seen as a door to evangelism and a partial means of evangelism. It can also be seen as a consequence of evangelism, since the saved will inevitably get involved in deed ministry. Deeds of love have value even if the person we serve does not convert when he hears our message. But most

importantly, we should simply see these aspects of ministry as a reflection of the ministry of Christ, who was “mighty in word and deed” (Lk. 24). Ministry in word and deed both serve the single end of God’s kingdom, which promises to renew all things. If we love as Jesus loves, we cannot leave the world where it is.

Here is an article on mercy ministry I wrote several years ago:

REDEEMER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Beyond the Ballroom

Volume 1, Number 2



The Glasgow family enjoys the live auction and "Dinner in the Ballroom."

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

By Rich Lusk

What is the church's unique mission in the world? Is it preaching the gospel? Or is it engaging in mercy ministry? Biblically, it seems to be both.

The mission of the church should be modeled after the mission of Christ. In the gospel of John, Jesus says to the apostles, and thus to his church, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Of course, in one sense, Christ's mission was unique and cannot be imitated. The Son came to live a perfect life to earn righteousness for us and to die a sacrificial death to atone for our sins; no one can copy this aspect of the Son's mission.

We must ask ourselves: what are the needs of the people with whom I come into contact?

But there is a way in which the church does follow in Christ's footsteps in its mission to the world: through serving others. Jesus said, "the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve," and "I am

among you as one who serves" (Mark 10:45 and Luke 22:27).

How then did Jesus serve? And how is the church to serve in the same way? The life of Christ clearly combined the preaching of the gospel with mercy ministry; he evangelized in both word and deed. In fact, Jesus described his ministry as a fulfillment of several Old Testament prophecies, saying, "The blind receive sight, and the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." In the same way, the church must penetrate the world, proclaiming the message of salvation in Christ *and* showing forth his mercy in acts of love and kindness. No doubt, it seems that it would be easier in many cases to simply tell people the gospel without getting deeply involved in their lives; after all, saving their souls is the most important thing, right?

Scripture doesn't let us off the hook so easily. God requires that

Continued on page 2

YEAR ONE AND BEYOND

(PART II)

By Paul Hahn

I seem to be asked the same set of questions over and over again:

◆ So how's the first year been in Austin? ◆ How do you think the church is doing, now that it has been in existence for a year? ◆ Where do you see the church going from here?

In the first issue of *Beyond the Ballroom*, I tried to put into words what the first year (and part of a second) in Austin has been like for the Hahn family. To sum it up in a phrase, it has been "delightfully stretching." And now all the Hahns are about to be stretched a little further, especially Fran, as we look expectantly and prayerfully toward the arrival of a new baby sometime in late summer or early fall!

In this issue I'd like to reflect on the second of these three questions: **How is the church doing?**

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Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.

These words were penned by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesian church. He burst into spontaneous praise to God for the immensity of his goodness that he had poured out on his people throughout the ages, in particular upon those who had been gathered in Christ right there in the church at Ephesus.

I, Paul the green-horn church planter, find the same kind of

Continued on page 2

"Mission" continued from page 1

his people minister in works of service as well as in words of grace, and if we don't do both we aren't really loving our neighbor (1 John 3:17,18). We cannot separate mercy ministry from evangelism any more than we can separate a person's body from his soul. True love requires that we share the gospel with those around us. But love doesn't stop there; it ministers to the whole person, meeting both his spiritual and his physical needs. If we place exclusive emphasis on evangelism, we will undermine the credibility of our witness and our words will sound hollow and hypocritical. If we treat mercy ministry as a substitute for evangelism, we fail to point others to the only one who can truly rescue them out of their misery, Jesus Christ.

Our deeds must be an embodiment of our words and our words must explain our deeds. It is not coincidental that at least two of the original deacons, Stephen and Phillip, were not only engaged in mercy ministry but were also effective evangelists. We must ask ourselves: What are the needs of the

people with whom I come into contact? Do they need to hear the wonderful news of Christ's saving work? Do they lack materially in a way I can provide?

Of course, we must always be discerning in our giving and we must consider the situation as well as God's calling for us as individuals, but our obligation to evangelize and show mercy is clearly inescapable. We must be agents of Christ's mercy and grace in our culture.

In summary, the Bible defines the church's mission in the world as a wholistic one: We proclaim the whole Christ as Savior and King, by both our words and our deeds, to the whole person, body and soul. Nothing short of this will do.