

A World of Need, A World of Opportunity

This past Sunday, the sharing at worship service converged on Haiti, but somewhat by happenstance, rather than by explicit intention. It is incidental – or serendipitous – that the speaker serves in Haiti, where my son Nate currently volunteers, and from where our family is considering adopting a teenager. (The latter two are related, of course, but it is not as though we set out particularly to adopt from Haiti; it just turned out that way.) As it happens, though, Haiti helpfully illustrates biblical teaching on a variety of issues relevant to any developing or struggling nation. So while this devotional will illustrate biblical teaching through Haiti, the biblical teaching is universal in application.

Day 1: The responsibilities of government Daniel 4:24-27

While we have not yet reached this passage in our sermon series on Daniel, it bears brief glance at this point. In chapter 4, king Nebuchadnezzar has a vision, which warns that he will suffer an extended psychotic episode, and, as a result, will be forced out of civilization to wander the countryside. God lays down one condition for his restoration to sanity: he must acknowledge his own creatureliness, and God's sovereignty in bestowing rule on whomever he wishes (4:25). At the same time, Daniel offers a remedial action in the hopes of postponing or forestalling this judgment: "Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue" (4:27).

In countries where suffering is widespread, malevolent oppression typically bears a large share of the blame. Haiti, for instance, was once considered 'the jewel of the Caribbean', supplying up to 50% of the gross national product of its colonial master, France. But foreign oppression – colonialism, slavery, post-independence reparations, unfair trade, and international domination, including by the U.S. – crippled the economy. Additionally, decades of internal corruption and political brutality have decimated the country.

God takes notice. Nebuchadnezzar was not an Israelite, nor was Babylon the people of God. It was just another of many nations in the world of that day, and he, just another ruler. Still, God tracked his conduct, and held him responsible for misdeeds. Without access to the Jewish Bible, he was still held accountable to moral standards of governance and justice. By those standards he was guilty: he failed to do what was right; he did not defend the oppressed. So he came under judgment. Still, God offered grace, and the opportunity for repentance: "renounce your sins ... and your wickedness." God even held out the prospect of cancelling the judgment if the king would act with integrity and defend the oppressed.

This text provides a comfort for victims of oppressive governments and corrupt rulers. God holds both responsible for their sins against the powerless. Sometimes, as in the case of Mubarak of Egypt or Gaddafi of Libya or Amin of Uganda, it happens in this life. Other times, as in the case of 'Papa Doc' Duvalier of

Haiti, retribution does not come until after death. Still, Scripture promises justice for the oppressed and disenfranchised, whether in this life, or in the next.

Day 2: The responsibilities of churches 2 Corinthians 8:13-15

Paul spends two chapters in 2 Corinthians telling the church in Greece why they should care about their famine-deprived brethren in Jerusalem. The two churches were divided by 1,000 miles of geography, three months' travel, as well as ethnicity, language, and culture. Beyond all that, the church in Corinth was not particularly wealthy. But still, the Christians in Corinth had some measure of affluence, and some discretionary funds. So Paul calls them to give to the impoverished church of Jerusalem: "At the present time your plenty will supply what they need."

We live in a time when churches spend tens of millions on property and building, justifying it in terms of ministry to an ever-burgeoning upper-middle-class clientele, all the while our cities suffer from multi-generational poverty, crime and dysfunctional schools, while our countryside is crowded with low-wage immigrants and their impoverished families. In a previous century, churches spent exorbitant sums building cathedrals with spires that point to heaven; in this century, churches spend similar sums building auditoriums with theater-grade seating and concert-quality sound systems. Either way, one wonders how to justify such expenditures in the face of this passage or impoverished churches around the world.

From practical experience, of course, we learn that charity must be given wisely, or it is wasted to corruption or creates dependency. In the case of Haiti, Timothy T Schwartz, an anthropologist and former aid agency researcher, recounts a entire litany of well-intentioned but poorly executed relief efforts that only made matters worse (sometimes *much* worse, see his book, *Travesty in Haiti*). So *before* we give, we do well to research appropriate channels and types of giving. But *that* we who can afford it actually do give appears non-negotiable.

Day 3: The responsibilities of individual Christians James 1:27

Commonly, if seeking a quick gauge of someone's spiritual condition, we might ask, "Have you ever given your life to Christ?" Or, with a little more time, we may take a cue from a person's personal morality (or lack thereof). While cautioning us against assessing others, Scripture legitimizes the former criterion, and this passage itself endorses the latter. But right alongside personal conversion and private morality, James offers another criterion of assessment: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress." Measured by this criterion, how is your spiritual life?

Of course, here again we have to be judicious in any remedies that we undertake. Schwartz tells of 'orphanages' in Haiti in his day that used American charitable donations to provide private education for children of the wealthy elite. Additionally, some of the more common orphan programs are relatively expensive to administer. So discernment in the distribution of charitable gifts is advised, lest

our generosity do more harm than good. Still, with due attention to such details, the cost of inaction vastly outweighs the cost of action, both now for the impoverished, and later for us, when we meet God.

Day 4: Living so that we can give James 5:1-6

With all the stuff that a consumer economy urges us to buy, and with obscenely rich people common in our society, it is hard to suppose that most of us are wealthy enough to be at risk from the threats of James 5. And with globalization creating great distance between producers and consumers, it rarely crosses our minds that our comfortable lifestyle may be built on the backs of impoverished farmhands in Latin America, or child labor in Asia. Where abuse is systemic, it is hard both to recognize individual responsibility, and to know how to correct it. Still, in an era when 2 billion people live on \$2 a day, we must consider the possibility that James 5 may also apply to middle- and upper-class American Christians.

We want to avoid acting out of guilt or fear. At the same time, we want to avoid not acting at all. If Scripture makes little impact on our standard of living, or on our standard of giving ... if we live in big homes, drive late-model luxury cars, spend a quarter-million dollars each on college tuition for our children, take expensive vacations, and throw extravagant weddings ... it is worth at least asking how else we might invest this money, and whether our lifestyle has temporal ramifications for the poor or eternal ramifications for us.

Day 5: Spending our money, and expending our lives Mark 10:28-31

Of course, in a country as – until recently – prosperous as our own, it is reflexive to think of giving in monetary terms. Jesus did include financial generosity in his expectations for his followers. At the same time, he calls at least some of them – some of us – to considerably higher levels of expenditure: giving up home, family, and career to serve him. This does not necessarily entail leaving one career in order to enter vocational ministry. It could simply involve shifting the focus of a career from making money to helping others, or changing the location of a career from a place of abundance to a region where the need is pressing.

While Jesus calls us to service and to sacrifice, at the same time, he is no man's debtor. Here he promises two compensatory rewards: (1) a hundred times as much in this life, and (2) eternal life in the next. Conversely, he also warns that many of the elite in this life will be impoverished in the next. And so, we each rightly ask ourselves: "Am I one of those whom Jesus is inviting to leave home, family, and possibly career, for him?" "Or is he calling me to leave home and family, and redirect my career in a way which is most useful to the most people in greatest need?" Or, for those still in school, "Is God calling me to choose a major which is useful in some direct way for those in need?"

Day 6: Keeping the end in view 2 Timothy 4:6-8

As Paul neared the end of his life, he could look back with satisfaction and contentment. Though ever regretful for persecuting Christians in the early stages of his career (1 Timothy 1:15-16), he could look back on a lifetime of service for God, and look forward to a spectacular reward from the Lord: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day."

It is hard for people in their teens, twenties, or even thirties to realize that in the blink of an eye, productive career comes to an end. Then all that is left is to survey the years past, whether productive or useless, whether good or bad, at a time when it is hard to find time or energy to make remedial adjustments, in an effort to be useful, to make a difference, or to shape the overall tenor of a life or a career. The only remedy is a preventive ... to live intentionally now in order to avoid disappointment – and to enjoy satisfaction – as the years roll past.

If you are as productive for God and those in need in the next five years, as you have been for the last five, how useful would you have been over the course of a decade? If you multiply that by four (or possibly five), to cover the typical span of a career (or a healthy life), what will you have to look back on in old age? A life of productive service for God and people? Or a chronicle of lost opportunities? Now is the time to make any necessary adjustments, before that opportunity is lost for eternity.