

(Devotional #35) **What is The True Gospel? – An Introduction Part 1:
The True Gospel and Social Responsibility**

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them – Ephesians 2:8-10

WHAT IS THE TRUE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST? Exactly which propositions are necessary for an understanding of the gospel? It's a simple question, but one we must be able to answer from the Scriptures themselves. Our conclusion must come from God's own revelation, not from man. So, for the next few lessons, we will consider this single question: "**WHAT IS THE GOSPEL**"? Now one might ask, "why place a focus on such a well-understood subject in an evangelical church"? This is a fair question to which there is an unfortunate answer: "because evangelicalism (in general) is becoming increasingly confused about the true nature of the gospel."

Eugene Peterson once said: "The Book of Hebrews is written for 'too religious Christians' – for "Jesus-and (fill-in-the-blank) Christians." Hebrews addresses Jesus-and-Angels, Jesus-and Moses, and Jesus-and-the-Priesthood, etc., but when describing the gospel, Hebrews deletes the hyphens, the 'add-ons.' In our time, it is more likely to be Jesus-and-politics." **When the gospel becomes 'Jesus-and' (fill-in-the-blank) ... it has ceased to be the gospel.**

In 1977, with great foresight, Charles Ryrie published an article in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, a publication of Dallas Theological Seminary, entitled, **PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL ETHICS**¹. He encapsulates so well the relationship between *salvation, sanctification, and 'good-works,'* that the vast majority of this lesson will be based on Ryrie's article. It will serve as 'something to think about as we begin a new year.' Making sure we are clear about this most important subject is a good way to begin 2021.

From the passage cited above (*Ephesians 2:8-10*) it is obvious there is a relationship between salvation and good works. Paul tells the Ephesians, '*we are created in Christ Jesus for a purpose that includes good works,*' so this is not even a question, it's a given. The pertinent question, however, has to do with the relationship of the two. What is the connection between the gospel and good works?

This may be a good place to state explicitly two facts that pervade everything I will be presenting in the next few lessons:

- **THE CHURCH IS NOT THE KINGDOM**² – In other words, the idyllic life that will characterize the Kingdom of God after Christ establishes Himself as the King who rules on David's throne, will not be realized in society pre-Second Advent.
- **DOING GOOD THINGS FOR OTHERS IS NOT A BAD THING** – I will not assert that good works have no place in the Christian life. To do so would be to violate the very words of Scripture recorded in Ephesians 2:10.

Please keep these two things in mind as we work through this series.

¹ Ryrie, Charles C., 'Part III, Perspectives on Social Ethics,' *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July – September 1977, Volume 134, Number 535, Pages 215-227.

² It may be somewhat acceptable to speak of "the kingdom" in the context of the church, but the term "kingdom" more accurately refers to the future Davidic Kingdom that will be initiated at the 2nd Advent of Jesus, when He will rule from David's throne in Jerusalem. Aspects of that future kingdom may be applicable during the Church Age but the tangible expression of "kingdom life" awaits the establishment of this earthly kingdom by Jesus Himself.

Ryrie begins his article by pointing out the different ways Jesus and His teachings are viewed by theologians. Some view Jesus as a great social reformer³, while others suggest Jesus did not concern Himself with social questions at all⁴. This lesson will attempt to sort out the truth regarding *'the cause-effect relationship,'* which is the proper way to express the bond between grace and works.

Part of the confusion about Jesus' teachings on social issues rests in the fact that Jesus lived and taught in relation to three different *stewardship arrangements*. What exactly does this mean? It means Jesus lived under the Mosaic Law during His earthly life, but He taught His disciples not only about the Law, but also about the coming Church Age, and about the future Kingdom. But we no longer live in the Dispensation of Law, and since the Millennial Kingdom awaits the Second Advent of Jesus, how are we to interpret His teachings in the Dispensation of Grace?

James S. Stewart, a Scottish minister, taught that the nature of the coming Kingdom is social, *i.e.*, its focus is on community and not on the individual⁵, but Jesus first spoke to Nicodemus in John Chapter 3 about the need for *the individual* to be *'born again.'* It is true that Jesus preached about *the Kingdom*, but the establishment of this kingdom requires individual repentance and the national acceptance of His Messiahship by Israel. But these things did not happen! As Daniel had predicted over five centuries earlier, Israel would reject the Messiah, and the enactment of the Kingdom therefore would be delayed⁶. So Jesus revealed what had been a mystery throughout the entire Old Testament, namely, that the Church Age (*a parenthesis of sorts*) would delay the establishment of His earthly Kingdom. The promise of the Kingdom was not abrogated by the Church Age, but it was delayed.

It is not difficult to see how the dispensational complexities of the era in which Jesus taught affect how we interpret His teachings. Following the lead of Dr. Ryrie, and in an effort toward clarity, the balance of this lesson will highlight his observations about issues that are at the forefront of consideration in today's evangelical churches.

THE ISSUE OF POVERTY:

For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me – Mark 14:7.

Here Jesus affirms the inevitability of poverty as a social phenomenon in the pre-Kingdom Age. ***The location*** here is Bethany; ***the timing*** is a few days before His crucifixion, and ***the context*** is the act of a woman, who came to the home of Simon the Leper with a vial of expensive perfume. With this perfume she anointed the savior, who was dining with Simon and some others. Her act drew criticism from Simon's guests, who asked (*critically*) ***"why was this expensive perfume not sold and the proceeds given to the poor"?*** Now this sounds like a question we might hear today. But Jesus understood why she had done what she did: ***"She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial."***

Jesus' comment about the poor, and His acknowledgement of the righteous act of this woman, neither serve as a dismissal of the problem of poverty, nor does it place on His followers the

³ Klausner, J., *Jesus of Nazareth*, Page 381.

⁴ Brunner, Emil, in *The Divine Imperative*, argues that Jesus was interested only in personal redemption and had little or nothing to say about social reform.

⁵ Stewart, James, S., *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ*, Pages 124-125.

⁶ See Daniel 9:24-27

overwhelming responsibility of resolving it. Jesus was not being callous or suggesting His followers ignore the poor. He was, however, contrasting the ever-present opportunity to address the problems of poverty with the unique opportunity to honor Him as He prepared to die on the cross for the sins of the world. In other words, the gift the woman brought to Jesus was more appropriate than a donation to the poor would have been.

What can we learn from this story? Well, we learn that opportunities always exist to do something for the poor, but the existence of poverty in the world is not necessarily a universal call to action. If poverty alone were a divine call to action, no Christian could possess anything but the barest essentials, for poverty is pervasive. If poverty itself were a divine call to action, asceticism would be the lot of all believers. As Ryrie states, *“if a person were to follow the slogan, ‘**THE NEED CONSTITUTES THE CALL,**’ he soon would be a nervous and starved wreck⁷”!*

When we give precedence to Scripture over the writings of many modern authors, we come to an obvious conclusion: **THE BIBLE NEVER DIRECTS BELIEVERS TO FIX THE CULTURE.** Jesus lived under the rule of the Roman Empire, and sadly for the conquered peoples, Rome ruled by means of **FEAR**. But never did Jesus instruct His disciples to *correct the wrongs* imposed on the Jews by the Romans. Neither did God instruct Israel to *‘fix Egypt,’* when Jacob migrated there, and Israel was not told to *correct the atrocities* imposed on the ancient world by the Assyrians⁸. Israel and the Church are called to walk by faith in the sufficiency of the Living God. God changes hearts one at a time, individually, when the gospel is preached and believed. The broader culture will be *‘fixed’* at the 2nd Advent of Jesus, when He establishes His Kingdom on the earth. In the meantime, charity in the Bible, almost universally, is a means for believers to take care of other believers, who are in need ... *but we are not commissioned to put an end to poverty or correct the social inequities in the broader, civil society.*

We are told today the church should be invested in the Social Justice Movement. This is another way of saying, *‘the divine directive of the church is to fix the world around us.’* This is wrong. Are there opportunities for us to do good in the world? Most certainly! But is this the mission of the church? Absolutely not!

We also learn from Jesus’ teaching that when we do address social issues, it should *not* be for show. Our society is plagued with what has come to be known as *‘virtue signaling,’* the act of performing acts that appear to be righteous in order to proclaim to the world that we are good. Virtue signaling can be an individual act or it can be performed by multi-national corporations. According to Jesus, whether done individually or by a large company, virtue signaling has no value before God. Jesus admonishes us with a better example in Mark’s Gospel: the act of a poor widow. *“Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury, for they all put in out of their surplus, but she out of her poverty put in all she owned ... all she had to live on” – Mark 14:43-44.* The widow’s gift not only was unselfish in that she gave all she had, but it was an act of great faith, for sacrificing all her earthly wealth was clear evidence of her complete trust in God, whom she knew would sustain her. The lessons are clear: *(1) all should give, even the poor,* and *(2) when a gift is made, it should be proportional to what*

⁷ *Op cit, Ryrie, Page 219.*

⁸ *You can search the Book of Jonah thoroughly, but you will not find any attempt on Jonah’s part to ‘correct the culture.’ Instead, Jonah announced the inevitability of divine judgment if the people of Nineveh did not repent.*

we have received from God. Ryrie points out in this regard, “*the test of true giving is not what is given but what is retained*⁹.”

Another lesson from Jesus’ teaching on poverty is this: “*While the poor are blessed, it is desirable to work for self-advancement*¹⁰.” In Luke we read, “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God*” – *Luke 6:20*. Matthew reads, ‘*poor in spirit,*’ but Luke focuses on real, tangible poverty. Jesus is not saying a state of poverty is desirable, suggesting we should renounce our possessions. The parable of Luke 19 argues otherwise, for there is dignity in work if a person is able to perform it.

The Old Testament law regarding gleaning¹¹ provided a safety-net for the poor, while at the same time protecting the self-worth of the impoverished by dignifying work. This principle, expounded in the Mosaic Law, required landowners to leave in the fields what could have been harvested and sold, but instead was left for the poor to gather. This law imposed a real, monetary cost on the landowner. It required those with means to play a role in caring for the less fortunate, while at the same time requiring the ones gleaning to get out of bed, go to the fields, and gather for themselves what the landowner had apportioned to them. In other words, there was an expectation that the poor would labor for the charity they received. The sheaves of grain were not bundled up for them and direct deposited into their bank accounts by the government of Israel. God wants both rich and poor to understand that what we have begins and ends with God Himself. James informs us that ‘**EVERY GOOD THING COMES TO US FROM GOD**¹².’

THE ISSUE OF WEALTH:

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who himself also had become a disciple of Jesus – Matthew 27:57.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews – John 3:1.

Both Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were wealthy ... and each man either was or would become a follower of Jesus. There is no indication in Scripture that Jesus suggested Joseph or Nicodemus rid themselves of their station or their wealth in order to become a disciple. In the case of ‘*The Rich Young Ruler*’ of *Matthew 19:16-22*, the issue never was his wealth; it was his certainty that he had kept the commandments perfectly and therefore was worthy of entering into God’s Kingdom on the basis of his own merit. Jesus asked him to divest himself of his wealth because He knew the young man would not be able to do so, and by this failure, he would come to see himself for what he was: a sinner in need of a savior.

Jesus did indicate that wealth makes it harder for a person to come to faith because wealth can deceive us into believing we are sufficient in ourselves:

Again, I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God – Matthew 19:24.

Jesus did not say a rich man cannot be saved; he said it is harder because wealth can cloud the reality that every man, irrespective of wealth or poverty, is in dire need of the grace of God and the salvation Jesus offers only at the foot of the cross.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, Ryrie, Page 219.

¹⁰ See *Luke 19:11-28*

¹¹ See *Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22* – ‘Gleaning’ was a social safety net in Israel that allowed the poor to eat, while at the same time, preserving their dignity.

¹² See *James 1:17*

*“These principles concerning wealth, say **not one word** about social responsibility. They all are couched in a personal context, not a societal one¹³.”* Ryrie goes on to say¹⁴, there is no scriptural support for a statement like this: *“**for the Christian, the war on poverty is not a political option; it is a lifelong battle based on the mandate of Christ, who loved the poor**”¹⁵.* Jesus indeed loved the poor for He loves everyone, but He did not mandate the church to preach a social gospel with a view of eliminating poverty or resolving every social inequity in the world.

WHAT ABOUT THE GOOD SAMARITAN¹⁶?

In Israel, scribes were interpreters and teachers of the Mosaic Law. Often the scribes attempted to trap Jesus by proposing anecdotal questions in the vein of *“have you stopped beating your wife yet”?* A ‘YES ANSWER,’ condemns the man as a wife beater because, by his answer, though he has ‘stopped’ beating his wife ... he identifies himself as *‘having beaten her in the past.’* Likewise, a ‘NO ANSWER,’ condemns the man as *‘still in the mode of wife-beating.’* However, the wise men of Israel never were able to outsmart the source of all wisdom, God Himself.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is the answer to a scribe’s question designed to trap Jesus. The question is recorded in Luke 10:25: **WHAT MUST I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?** Because Jesus was living during the Dispensation of Law, He gave an answer appropriate to *the stewardship arrangement (dispensation)* under which He lived: He asks the scribe, *“**What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?**” – Luke 10:26.* The scribe’s answer involved two well-known ‘laws’ – *“You shall 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 you shall love) your neighbor as yourself” – Luke 10:27.* Now no one should take issue with this answer ... the issue lies not with the answer ... for the answer comes from Scripture itself¹⁷. The issue is the inability of any man to do what the Mosaic Law required – and by telling the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus showed the scribe that the Law could condemn him, but it could not save him. So, realizing he was not going to be able to trap Jesus, but that he himself had fallen into a trap of his own making, the scribe becomes a philosopher when he asks, *“**Who is my neighbor**”¹⁸?* Clearly a man’s neighbor is anyone, who is in need. In this case, the neighbor was the man, who had been robbed, and the Samaritan was the man, who loved his neighbor (*the victim in this case*) as he loved himself. Hidden between the lines is the fact that the Samaritan also was the scribe’s neighbor, something that was so foreign to the mind of this man that he could not even consider it. And since the scribe hated the Samaritan, for Samaritans were considered by the scribes to be *‘scum of the earth,’* the scribe had not kept the Law as he had claimed – **CHECKMATE.**

Now the act Jesus described involved *an individual need* and *an individual response.* There were not 10,000 injured men lying in the road, victims of a sudden rash of highway robberies. Neither was the act of the Samaritan a pattern for the Israeli government to follow by imposing taxes on the Jews to fund a government program of some sort to remedy the issues of all, who had fallen victim to robbers. The parable was designed to demonstrate to the scribe his need of a savior, not to mandate the resolution of every social ill.

¹³ *Op. cit., Ryrie, Page 220.*

¹⁴ *Op. cit., Ryrie, Page 220.*

¹⁵ Wirt, Sherwood Eliot, *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical*, New York: Harper & Row, Page 136.

¹⁶ *The parable of the Good Samaritan can be found in Luke 10:25-37.*

¹⁷ *Reference Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18.*

¹⁸ *Luke 10:29*

No man or local church can resolve every injustice or social need we see in the world. Jesus did not heal every sick person, feed every hungry person, or save every lost person – and He did not command his followers to do so either. At the pool of Bethesda, Jesus only healed one man, while scores of others remained in their pitiful state¹⁹. It is interesting that of the thirty-nine recorded instances of Jesus healing the sick, only two of these (*Malchus and the Syro-phoenician's daughter*²⁰) involved individuals outside the commonwealth of Israel. Furthermore, Jesus did not try to reform the policies of the Roman Empire, nor did he instruct His disciples to make such reforms as the focus of their ministries²¹. When two brothers asked Jesus to settle a civil dispute, he refused²². Jesus paid His taxes, and He recognized the difference in the civil realm, *i.e.*, what falls under the purview of civil governments, and the spiritual, which is where the proclamation of the true gospel takes place.

Jesus created the church as a spiritual organism; His Bride – (*the church*) – is not a socio-political organization commissioned to resolve civil issues or resolve inequities in secular society. This is not the mission of the church because it is not the primary focal point of the gospel.

Over the next several weeks I will be looking at the elements of the gospel message revealed to us in the Bible, with a view to clarify exactly what the gospel entails. Following this study, Jeff will prepare a series on how the gospel, once properly understood and accepted, plays out in the world around us in the vein of Ephesians 2:10. So once the gospel is understood, the question becomes, *in what way are we, who have understood and accepted the gospel, to live as God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them?*

¹⁹ See John 5:3

²⁰ See John 18:10 (*Malchus*) and Mark 7:25-30 (*the Syro-phoenician's daughter*).

²¹ Compare this idea with the actual command of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20.

²² See Luke 12:13-21