

Real Religion

It's was about 15 years ago when Barb and I lived in mid-town, and I don't remember much about the day but I remember that we stopped at mid-town Taco Bell for lunch. I don't think that Taco Bell is there any longer.

Anyway, we got out of the car and as we approached the door a fellow asked if we would buy him something to eat.

I hesitated as he was sort of raggedy looking with old clothes, he was probably in his mid-30's, and he hadn't shaved in a while, but Barb spoke right up and said "sure."

We ordered our food and bought him something also. He sat at the little table with us and started right in to eat, he was pretty hungry I guess. But Barb and I bowed our heads and I started to give thanks for the food.

He immediately stopped eating when he saw I was going to pray, and I remember him bowing his head and putting his hands together like this until I finished praying.

He was pretty quiet and Barb and I talked to each other as we normally do, about that time someone from Taco Bell came to our table and asked us if he was bothering us, it was obvious that he was getting ready to boot him out of there, and Barb, with tears in her eyes, told him, "No, he is okay."

Sometimes I'm pretty slow, it wasn't until years later when I was thinking about today's message that I remembered that incidence and realized, I know who that man was. I know his name. His name was Jesus.

Oh, I don't know what he called himself, or what his mother named him, but in a very real way, when he came into our lives, he was being Jesus. You say, Bob what are you talking about, have you lost your mind. Next you're going to say you saw Elvis.

But we, you and I, need to realize and understand that Jesus comes to us through the poor and the oppressed. Jesus uses them to come to us.

Not that in themselves they are particularly holy, but Jesus comes to us through the poor and the oppressed. Now why would I say that?

One reason is Because of Matthew 25:31-40, *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. "Then the King will say to those on his right, '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 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.' "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 of mine, you did for me.'"

That is great, whenever we help the poor and oppressed Jesus credits us with having helped Jesus Himself. Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing? Jesus has done so much for us and in this way we can do something for Him.

But Jesus goes on to say something very sobering,

41-46, "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 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, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

So He ends up saying, *"Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."* And WHY did He say that? Because, *"Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."*

A young boy was walking through the park. He had just gotten out of his Sunday school class, where his teacher had told the class that you never can tell when you will meet Jesus.

As he was walking through the park, he noticed an old woman sitting on a bench. She looked very lonely, so he sat down next to her. He said "Hi" and offered her a piece of his candy bar, which he had been saving. She accepted the piece of chocolate with a smile. They talked for a while about nothing in particular and then the boy offered her another piece, which she also gladly accepted.

They talked a little while longer and then the boy got up to leave. As he began to walk away, he turned around, ran back to the bench and gave the woman a big hug. And, she gave him her very biggest smile. When he arrived home, his mother saw a big smile on his face and asked,

"What made you so happy today"? The boy said, *"I shared my chocolate bar with Jesus. And, guess what, Mom? She has a great smile"*.

Meanwhile, the old woman returned to her little apartment which she shared with her sister. The sister said *"You're all smiles today"*, *"What made you so happy"*? She said, *"Well"*, *"I was sitting in the park sharing a chocolate bar with Jesus. And, you know what? He looks a lot younger than I expected!"*

And it is true, not only can Jesus come to us though the needy and oppressed but we can be Jesus to them.

Whenever you meet a suffering person, you will find that Jesus is there waiting to be loved in that person. That's why Jesus said, *"Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you do for Me."*

You cannot reach out to a person in need, you cannot embrace someone who's hurting, you cannot minister to someone who is in desperate straits, without having that eerie and wonderful awareness, that Jesus is looking back at you right through that person's eyes.

There have been times when I have stood up here and told you that God is no respecter of persons, that we are all equal in His sight. But when studying for this message I discovered I was wrong about that. God does not treat everyone equally.

He actually gives preference to the poor. God takes the side of the poor, when you study the Bible you will find that God has a definite bias toward the poor.

Let's look at some of those passages:

Proverbs 19:17, *“If you help the poor, you are lending to the LORD — and he will repay you!”* TLB

Proverbs 14:31, *“Anyone who oppresses the poor is insulting God.”* NLT

Proverbs 21:13, *“Those who shut their ears to the cries of the poor will be ignored in their own time of need.”* NLT

There are 2,000 verses in the Bible that call on us to respond to the needs of the poor. This is at the very core of the Christian faith. James 1:26-27, *“Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.”* (Msg)

Let me read you another one. 1 John 3:17, *“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”* NIV. The answer is: it can't.

What this verse is saying is: If you have no compassion for the poor, you're not really a Christian, because the love of God is not in you, Or if you are a Christian, then at the very least, you have hardened your heart toward God in this area.

A Christian has compassion and helps those in need. In fact, based on what the bible tells us this is one of the key ways you can tell who's a real Christian. Do they help the poor?

Now let me be a little practical, and blunt. Because I know the thoughts that go through American Christian's heads when I talk about serving the poor.

There are two primary responses.

The first one is, *“I'll write a check.”* And that is good, but it is only halfway there. Yes it's good to support the poor financially and we should do that.

But Jesus does not say, For I was hungry and thirsty and you wrote a check to the **Red Cross**, I was a stranger and you said, my **taxes** are paying for that homeless shelter, I needed clothes and you gave a couple bags of clothes to **Goodwill**, I was sick and you sent a check to the **American Cancer Society**, I was in prison and you sent money to **Prison Fellowship**.' No, that is not what Jesus said.

Now our **second response** is even worse. Because we say, *“I’m just too busy.”* You know my job is really time consuming, I’m busy making myself rich, so I don’t have time to help the poor.

And besides, I’m already involved in ministry, I’m in a small group, or I teach Sunday School, so I’m too busy.

Or the most common excuse of all is: **My kids keep me running**; sports practices, piano lessons, school functions, and I just don’t have time for anything else. I certainly don’t have time for the poor.

You know what that means? That means that sometimes we have to sacrifice kids activities, so we can do Jesus activities and do what is on His heart.

And the truth is, some of us here this **morning need to cut out some of the activities** that jam up every bit of our spare time, and we need to spend some of that time teaching our kids how to help the poor, and how to act like a real Christian, because it’ll change their life.

You know, it’s not enough, to just say you care. It’s not enough to say, *“Oh, that’s so sad, to see people suffering. I really feel sympathy. I’ll pray for those poor people.”* Jesus says, that is not enough, go do something about it.

Jesus says, I have to put feet to my feelings. Notice what the Bible says, 1 John 3:18, *“Let us stop just saying we love people; let us really love them, and show it by our actions.”* TLB

Real love acts. You say, “Oh, I’m a compassionate person.” Oh really? Prove it. What are you doing to help suffering people? The Bible is very blunt about this, James 2:15, *“Suppose you see a brother or sister who needs food or clothing, and you say, “Well, good-bye and God bless you; stay warm and eat well” — but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?”* TLB

The answer is nothing. It does no good.

Now, I live in the real world. Years ago my dad was up here visiting after my mom had died and he stayed with us for a number of weeks. We still lived in mid-town at the time and I don’t remember what we were doing but we had stopped at the mid-town McDonald’s. You can tell I have a very sophisticated taste in restaurants.

Anyway, it was summer, and all the tables were taken so we got our stuff and were sitting in the pickup eating with the windows down on a nice summer day. And a young fellow, I would say mid-twenties, came up and asked for some money to get something to eat.

He was a clean-cut young man, and we were sitting in McDonald's parking lot so I gave him 2 or 3 bucks to buy a hamburger. He took one look at the dollar bills and said "*All right!*" And took off down the street for the liquor store.

Also, in the 80's and early 90's there was a fellow downtown that was always asking people for money, he was usually on crutches and I saw him in a wheelchair one time, and he did look like he could use some help. But one day I happened to be in a sporting goods store in Soldotna and who do I see but this guy, I'm behind him in line waiting to pay for my stuff.

And he was walking just fine and when he went to pay for the fishing tackle he was buying he pulled out this big roll of \$20 bills.

Now, I live in the real world, I know there are a lot **con-men** out there. There are people who are working the system and it can be hard to really know who to help. You don't want to enable bad behavior but how do you know who really does need help?

Of course, if it is someone who is a member here that needs help this is not a problem but what if it is someone we don't know anything about?

Fortunately for us here in Anchorage, there is an organization called LOVE INC which stands for "**Love, In the Name of Christ.**" When someone needs help they are there to provide it in the name of Christ.

They have set up processes to weed out the phony's & con-men from the people who really do need help. But even though they are largely a volunteer organization they don't have enough volunteers and helpers and they do have some expenses.

They maintain a **call center** so that people who need help can contact them and not only that when a church in the area needs more help with a need than they can provide by themselves they can call for help. Right now they only have enough money to maintain the call center a couple times a week.

They would really like to keep the call center open all week but they don't have the funds to do so. As a matter of fact they have come close to have to shut down altogether because of a lack of money. As a church we help support this ministry at \$300 a month and a number of other churches help also.

Today, we are going to take a special offering for LOVE INC but Jesus doesn't want us to just write a check and say we are done.

Remember I said there were two primary responses to helping the poor, one was writing a check and the other was saying we are too busy to get personally involved. **Jesus expects us to get personally involved.** LOVE INC has ways you can get involved.

There are other ways of course but today I want to tell you about LOVE INC. In your bulletins is an insert labeled "**Share**." This is a form where you can list your skills, gifts and interests if you would like to follow through with what Jesus wants you to do and get personally involved.

It lists things like being willing to pray for Love INC to volunteering in their call center to helping with home repairs. You not only can donate things like furniture but you can volunteer to help deliver it.

And you can get involved in what they call "**Gap**" ministry. What is "**Gap**" ministry? It is a way to help people who fall in the "Gap." They have real needs that aren't covered by any government or other agencies including any church outreach to the poor.

For instance, when someone loses their home and everything, many times they don't have the basic necessities that a family needs. Many of these families have small children which is why statistically the average age of a homeless person in Alaska **is only 9 years old.**

Or say a homeless family is finally able to get a low rent apartment. They now have four walls and a roof over their head but the place is bare. Most likely there is no furniture of any kind. No beds, no chairs, no table. The agency found them the place but there is a gap that no agency is going to cover.

There are many ways you can get involved. There is a "Gap" ministry flyer in your bulletin. In there you see some ways you can help fill a gap for:

- kitchen supplies and small appliances like a toaster, etc.
- Bathroom Baskets
- Personal Care Kits

And when you get involved with "hands on" helping the poor and oppressed don't be surprised if you see Jesus looking back at you out of their eyes.