



GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR

BY THADDEUS WILLIAMS

Luke 4 is a cherished passage for many Christians in the legal profession. Jesus launches his public ministry by standing in a synagogue, unrolling the Isaiah scroll, and reading:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus' mission is not a Platonic quest to whisk us away from this world into some disembodied plain of spiritual forms. Yes, Jesus brings the hope of heaven and secures that hope for us through his redemptive work as our crucified, resurrected, and reigning King. He includes good news to the poor, freedom for slaves, and liberation of the oppressed within the scope of his vast redemptive mission. Jesus cares deeply about bringing justice in the here-and-now, that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. No wonder many Christian lawyers find inspiration and purpose in this passage, a red-letter credo for their justice-seeking vocations.

Nevertheless, we must be careful to not reduce this extraordinary passage as a kind of bumper sticker slogan, a sentimentalized Precious Moments proof text, or, worse, a forged divine signature of approval on whatever social causes we may personally champion. Indeed, there has been a growing trend in recent years to turn Luke 4 into a scriptural mandate for Christians to rally behind the cause of "social justice."

Whether we see that as a promising or pernicious trend will hinge largely on what meaning we pour into the word combination of "social" and "justice." For some, social justice would be an apt description for Christians abolishing the infanticidal human dumps of the Roman Empire, the efforts of Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce, and the Clapham sect in the

United Kingdom, or Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman in the United States to abolish the dehumanizing slave trade. It could describe the resistance movements of Bonhoeffer or Sophie Scholl's White Rose Society to combat Hitler's Third Reich. Nowadays, the same combination of two words could describe Christian efforts to abolish human trafficking, work with the inner-city poor, invest in micro-loans to help the destitute in the developing world, build hospitals and orphanages, upend racism, and so much more.

But for many, the identical configuration of 13 letters is packed with altogether non-Christian and even anti-Christian meanings. "Social justice" has become a waving banner over movements led by "trained Marxists" with a stated mission to "disrupt the western-prescribed nuclear family structure," movements seeking to advance the multi-billion dollar abortion industry, movements on college campuses that have resorted to violence to silence opposing voices, and movements that seek through force of law to shut down bakeries, crisis pregnancy centers, the Little Sisters of the Poor, and Christian universities that will not bow to their orthodoxy.

My goal in this article is not to unpack all the deeply incompatible worldview presuppositions behind these two very different renditions of social justice. I have done that elsewhere.¹ My aim here is more modest. I hope to bring clarity to the question of whether Luke 4 is best interpreted as a social justice proof text. In particular, we will engage the increasingly pervasive claim that, based on this passage, we cannot edit social justice out of the gospel without settling for a "truncated" or "incomplete" gospel at best, and a Gnostic, individualistic, White supremacist gospel at worst. Those are the charges made with increasing frequency in today's Christian circles, particularly in the West. Here are five helpful questions we should ask about such an interpretation of Luke 4 as we reflect on our own pursuits of justice in the legal profession and as we engage our heated cultural moment.

¹ See *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth: 12 Questions Christians Should Ask About Social Justice* (Zondervan, 2020).

1. THE NOSE OF WAX QUESTION.

Is it important to avoid reading our personal politics and perspectives into Scripture?

American slaveowners twisted the Bible's original meanings about the curse of Ham, Paul's charge to Philemon, words like *doulos*, and more, all in a self-serving effort to justify treating Africans like property instead of divine image-bearers. God's Word was co-opted to justify White supremacy. As has been noted again and again throughout church history, the Bible can be easily turned into "a nose of wax,"² a nose that can be fashioned to fit the profiles of some very ugly ideologies. We should be extremely careful to let the context of a passage determine its meaning rather than any extra-biblical ideology.

Take the prosperity gospel, the televangelists' doctrine that God promises health and wealth. Luke 4 is one of the televangelists' favorite passages. "See, it's right there in the text. The gospel is 'good news to the poor' and restoring 'sight to the blind.' If you edit financial blessing and physical healing out of the gospel, then you have an incomplete gospel. Jesus does not just want your soul to float off to heaven; he wants health and wealth for the sick and poor *now!*" The stakes are high with such textual twisting. Over the course of my career, I have received hundreds of letters from poor image-bearers around the world who have been exploited by the false gospel of Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, Fred Price, Creflo Dollar, and other religious con men. The letters are tear-jerking, and the impact of the false health and wealth gospel is nothing short of catastrophic, especially for the sickest and poorest among us.

We need to be extremely careful not to read into Jesus' words something He did not intend. Otherwise, we will end up with what Paul calls "a different gospel."³ As Sam Chan puts it, "In Romans 1:1, the apostle Paul tells us that the gospel is 'the gospel of God;' it is God's gospel. This means that the story belongs to God; it is not our story to invent, modify, or embellish."⁴ Do we believe it's not only possible to twist Scripture in general but this passage in particular to turn the gospel into a false ideology that hurts people, and that we must, therefore, take the context very seriously to avoid doing so? Hopefully we can all agree.

2. THE "TODAY" QUESTION.

If Luke 4 means that the gospel is about confronting social injustice then, we may ask, what social injustices did Jesus confront that day?

Let's look at the immediate context. Right after reading from the Isaiah scroll Jesus says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your presence" (Luke 4:21). Jesus goes on to set people free from sickness and demonic oppression. If justice is not merely an implication of a gospel-transformed life but intrinsic to the gospel itself, then we may ask: What social injustices did Jesus confront *that day*? If the Isaiah scroll was fulfilled "today in your presence," then what, if anything, resembling what people today call "social justice" did Jesus do *that day*?

Historian Margaret Killingray points out that when Jesus launched his ministry "[o]nly around two-percent of the population of a Roman town would be genuinely comfortably off. The vast majority would be destitute poor."⁵ Some historians estimate that upwards of two-thirds of the Roman Empire was enslaved in the first century. There was no shortage of social injustice when Jesus read from the Isaiah scroll. If we believe that social justice is the gospel or part of the gospel, then we must conclude that Jesus himself preached a truncated gospel that day.

Does this mean that justice is *optional* for Christians? Of course not. "Do justice" is a command of Scripture. Micah 6:8 does not ask what does the Lord *suggest* of you, but "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice . . ." I am simply arguing from the text that keeping the biblical command to "do justice" is not the same as the gospel any more than telling the truth, staying faithful to your spouse, loving your neighbor, or carrying out any other divine command is the gospel.

3. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JESUS QUESTION.

What does Jesus actually preach to the poor?

When Jesus declares His mission to "preach the gospel to the poor," He tells us a *community* He intended to bless with good news, not the *content* of the good news itself. CEO Frank says, "I came to give good news to the board." Professor Jill says, "I came to give good news to the students." Coach Bill says, "I came to give good

² Alain of Lille used this phrase to describe the abuse of Scripture in the 12th century, as did Johann Geiler von Kaisersberg in the 15th century and Albert Pighius in the 16th century.

³ See Galatians 1:6–10.

⁴ Sam Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World: How to Make the Unbelievable News about Jesus More Believable*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, (2018), 18.

⁵ Margaret Killingray, *The Bible, Slavery, and Onesimus, Anvil*, vol. 24, no. 2:85–96, 89 (2007).

news to the team.” We haven’t learned much about the actual content of their messages. The CEO’s boardroom briefing could be about a huge profit boost or a failing competitor. The professor’s lecture could be about an extra credit opportunity or the health benefits of green beans. The pep talk could be about rising to first place or an injury of the other team’s star player. Knowing who the *audience* is does not constitute knowing what the *announcement* is.

The phrase “good news to the poor” doesn’t spell out what precisely the good news is according to Jesus. We must be careful not to use Jesus’ words—“good news to the poor”—like a Rorschach ink blot to project our own meaning. Again, for the televangelists, the good news to the poor is that by believing hard enough (and proving that belief with large donations to the televangelists’ ministries) the poor can experience a hundredfold financial blessing.

Thankfully, we don’t have to dump our own definitions into Jesus’ good news. The New Testament records Jesus’ actual preaching to the poor. In Mark 1:14–15, we read that “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God. The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” Two verses later Jesus calls his first disciples with the invitation, “Follow me.” Those words held tremendous force in first-century Judaism. To become a disciple of a rabbi was a long and arduous task. Candidates for discipleship often had to shadow rabbis for years, proving their merit and moral fitness. And maybe, just maybe, if they proved themselves worthy, they would hear the rabbi utter those words, “Follow me.” Jesus flips that whole system on its head, launching his whole ministry with an act of grace that spoke those cherished words to men who had done absolutely nothing to prove themselves.

Later in Mark, Jesus makes his famous statement that a camel has an easier time fitting through the eye of a needle than the rich do entering God’s Kingdom. His disciples are shocked and ask, “‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God’” (10:25–27). A few verses later Jesus defines His mission on earth to “give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). After His resurrection Jesus commands his disciples to “Go into all the world and declare the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (16:15–16).

In Luke, we find the famous parable of the prodigal son, in which Jesus makes it clear that God runs to us, embraces us, and showers us with blessings as a divine act of free, ill-deserved grace. Then, in Luke 18:13–14, it is not the Pharisee flaunting his own righteousness and giving to the poor, but the tax collector beating his breast crying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” who goes home justified before God. At the first Lord’s supper, Jesus speaks of His death saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (22:20). Read up on the “new covenant” from Old to New Testaments and you will see

the good news of salvation by grace alone throughout. Later Jesus tells the poor thief on the cross, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise,” (23:43) though the thief had no time before his final breath to do any good works.⁶

Turning to John, Jesus addresses the poor on the shores of Capernaum. After Jesus brings up “eternal life,” the crowd asks, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” (6:28). Jesus did not say, “Go reform unjust systems.” Instead, “Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom He has

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⁶ In Luke 18, Jesus confronts those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” He tells them a story in which a Pharisee prays self-righteously, “thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even like this tax collector.” Then a tax collector—an oppressor who perpetrated social injustice against the poor—“beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ The second man ‘went down to his house justified.’” Note his justification was by grace through faith. It was not contingent on him righting the social wrongs he had done, though such just action would be an expected aftereffect of his justification, as in the case of Zacchaeus.

sent” (6:29). At Lazarus’s tomb Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (11:25-26). In sum, there is no shortage of red letters to help us discern what Jesus actually preached to the poor.

Salvation by God’s grace alone through Christ is good news for the poor for several reasons. Oppressive governments and societies send a loud and clear message to the poor: *Your life has no worth!* I have listened to many dear oppressed brothers and sisters around the world. They have shared with me just how liberating the good news is, how subversive and revolutionary it is for them to hear that, even as society treats them like garbage, the sovereign Creator of the universe deems them worth enough to die for. If society treats you like subhuman scum, then it is profoundly good news to hear that God—whose perspective is infinitely more authoritative than politicians or their minions—declares you His beloved. You are loved, cherished, valued so much that God Himself was willing to enter all the inconvenience and agony of time-space history to die for you, so He could be with you forever.

If, however, the “good news” includes social activism, then where, we may ask, does Jesus preach such news to the poor anywhere in the red letters of the four gospels? Nowhere. This is not to say working toward justice is unimportant or unbiblical; it is simply saying that such work is not equivalent to the “the gospel” as defined by Jesus in Luke 4 or anywhere else in the New Testament.

4. THE NEW TESTAMENT GOSPEL QUESTION.

How is “the gospel” defined in the rest of Scripture?

The good news Jesus preaches to the poor fits other New Testament passages that explicitly define the gospel for us. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says,

Now I would remind you, brothers of the gospel I preached to you. . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:1, 3-4).

Notice that “the gospel” is “of first importance.” And what is that gospel? It is the good news of free salvation by trusting in the sin-atonement death and bodily resurrection of Jesus. It shouldn’t surprise us that Paul understands the gospel this way, since he received it directly from Jesus.⁷ Unlike toppling social and economic systems through social activism, this good news of salvation by grace through faith in Christ is what Jesus actually proclaims to poor in the red letters. It is what the earliest missionaries declare with astonishing saving results throughout the book of Acts. It is the same good news declared throughout the New Testament epistles. Ask those who include social justice in their definition of the gospel: *How does the New Testament’s consistent message of salvation by God’s grace alone fit into your definition of the gospel?*

If social justice is not the gospel, then some may ask, Why should we give a rip about the poor? For the same reason we should care about telling the truth, being faithful to our spouses, and not stealing. Because God commands us to, and such obedience is evidence that we have truly been saved by grace. If God is willing to go to the great lengths of the incarnation and bloody crucifixion to prove His love for the poor, then certainly we should be willing to go to great lengths to dignify those whom culture treats as worthless. Such love for the poor is not the gospel, but it is something that ought to flow from our hearts (and wallets and purses) if we recognize just how spiritually bankrupt we were when God sovereignly decided to make us rich through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

5. THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES QUESTION.

Is it possible that redefining “the gospel” to include our own visions of social justice can prove harmful?

Most of my friends and colleagues who see a gospel of social justice in Luke 4 link their understanding of social justice to specific political and economic systems. This is where things can get particularly dicey.

Let us not forget Chile in the early 1970s. Many socially concerned Christians rallied behind Salvador Allende’s presidential candidacy. They believed his socialist policies would expand the Kingdom of God, bringing good news to the poor by combatting income inequality. In their own words, Allende’s “Socialism . . .

⁷ See Galatians 1:11–18. On the unity between Paul’s understanding of the gospel as Jesus’ gospel as laid out in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, see Simon Gathercole, “The Gospel of Paul and the Gospel of the Kingdom,” *God’s Power to Save*, ed. Chris Green (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 138–154, <https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/static-blogs/justin-taylor/files/2012/05/Gathercole-GODS-POWER-TO-SAVE-p138-154.pdf> (last retrieved March 4, 2020).

offers a possibility for the development of the country for the benefit of all, especially the most neglected." They believed his "Socialism generate[s] new values which make possible the emergence of a society of greater solidarity and brotherhood." "The profound reason for this commitment is our faith in Jesus Christ."⁸

With Christian support, Allende won. In the name of helping the poor, he instituted socialist policies. He collectivized land and agriculture. Inflation skyrocketed 600 percent. Poverty rates jumped by 50 percent. Even more people were forced into the sad ranks of the neglected. Let us learn the lessons of history: Conflating Jesus' gospel with political visions of social justice turns good news into bad news for the poor. Instead of misinterpreting Luke 4 as a proof text for our highly fallible political and legal ideologies, let us "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

OVERVIEW

This issue of the *Journal* was commissioned and composed to bring much needed clarity about how the historic Christian faith relates to some of the rising and dominant justice ideologies in the law and politics of our day. In "Do not Pervert Justice," Brian Mattson contrasts the traditional and ultimately biblical notion of justice as blind and impartial with the rising tide of progressive jurisprudence that bakes partiality into its very definition of justice, while divorcing itself from any transcendent standard by which to judge its own ever-evolving moral and legal agenda. Jeffery Ventrella then enters the conversation with "Are Law and Public Policy Gospel Issues?" Ventrella places questions of the proper relationship between politics and the gospel within the

framework of the overarching narrative of the Christian faith, including the cultural, cosmological, and consummational dimensions of the gospel. Next, P. Andrew Sandlin's piece "We're All Progressives Now" traces the historic evolution of progressivism as a comprehensive secular worldview. Sandlin argues that what he dubs a "Christian, biblical progressivism" offers far brighter prospects for our future. This issue closes with Anthony Costello's "Existentialism 'Logic,' Critical Theory, and the Law," which offers a trenchant philosophical and historical analysis and critique of the subjectivist epistemologies that are trending in contemporary American law and politics. It is our hope that this collection of articles equips our readership to better understand the ideological undercurrents of our times as we work to fulfill our legal callings with faithfulness and gospel clarity.

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⁸ Quoted in Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 112–113.