

CG Leaders' Notes

Week of January 27, 2008

In Focus

If we want to get on board with what God wants to do through Hopevale Church, we must care about people on the margins – the widow, orphan, aliens, and poor.

Tips for This Week's Meeting

1. Help your group experience how often God talks about His care for people on the margins of life. You might write references of the verses under "A Special Place" below on 3x5 cards, pass them out, and read them one after another without stopping to comment.
2. This sermon gives you a natural opportunity to talk about a community service project on February 23. Pray together about this opportunity to care for those on the margins.
3. What could your group do beyond February 23? You can't do everything, but you can do something consistently to help marginalized people. Some of you already are. Open up that discussion in your group.

Study Notes

Precious to God

There's just no way around it: People are precious to God, but sometimes not to us. To Him, people aren't statistics or "those people." They're His crowning creation, image-bearers who will live forever, ruined by sin, whom God the Son gave His life for. God takes our treatment of *every* person seriously; His Word makes it clear that He will hold us accountable for how we treat people. "Every time you treat the least of my brothers badly," Jesus is saying in Matthew 25:45, "you're treat me the same way, and I won't stand for it."

From my study of the four Gospels that the Lord Jesus wants us to major on two truths: 1) who God really is and 2) how precious people are to Him. If airtime in Matthew through John is evidence, we have plenty of proof. Here are two clear examples:

And a man [was there] whose hand was withered. And they questioned Jesus, asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"--so that they might accuse Him. And He said to them, "What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? How **much more valuable** then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." (Matt 12:10-12)

For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they have no storeroom nor barn, and [yet] God feeds them; how **much more valuable** you are than the birds! (Luke 12:23-24)

His light night on earth, Jesus takes time to wash his disciples' feet (John 13:3-17) and then commands them to wash one another's feet. He explains a profound truth that many Christians miss today: *No servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.* Everyone has equal value in God's eyes. God just doesn't view people the way we typically do. He doesn't categorize people by wealth, education, talent, culture, personality, or productiveness. Everyone has equal value in God's eyes, and we have no right to treat anyone as if he or she doesn't. If anything, people on the margins (see notes below) are on the Father's mind more than those of us

doing better in this life. The Lord Jesus demonstrated the value of each person, regardless of their education or attainments by choosing to subject himself to the world's worst hate-crime – death by crucifixion. That settles it!

A Special Place

Mike walked on arm crutches across the platform to receive his degree. We started to applaud spontaneously. Then we stood and whooped and applauded for two minutes. Mike had cerebral palsy. He had trouble communicating and getting from class to class. So we helped him. And we encouraged him. And we found that he appreciated our friendship but rejected our pity. So by graduation day, he held a special place in our hearts. We couldn't help loving him and honoring him.

God's heart is moved with compassion toward those who live hand-to-mouth, those who struggle to maintain hope, those who wake up at night in tears because of loneliness. People like this have a special place in God's heart. Isn't that awesome? You'll find nearly 400 verses throughout the Bible showing God's concern for widows, orphans, prisoners, aliens, the hungry, sick, poor, and disabled. Here are some:

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. (Psalm 68:5)

He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor, his righteousness endures forever; his horn will be lifted high in honor. (Psalm 112:9)

I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy. (Psalm 140:12)

He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. (Psalm 146:7-9)

A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor. (Proverbs 22:9)

Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the LORD will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them. (Proverbs 22:22-23)

He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. (Isaiah 2:8)

You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. (Isaiah 25:4)

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, (Isaiah 61:1; Jesus applies this verse to himself in Luke 4:17-19)

God holds a special place in His heart for the poor.

Common Ground

A few weeks ago, someone robbed our cars. Late Sunday night. Right in our driveway. We felt violated. I rafted through a torrent of other emotions and thoughts – many of them ugly. You have to understand: I've been moved by what Jesus taught about the equality and preciousness of people. I've taught and disciplined rich and poor, white, black, Hispanic, Asian, Jew and Greek. I've prayed with inner city pastors and am moved beyond words by this sermon series and what we believe God is calling Hopevale to do.

Then someone robbed our cars. Honestly, I thought in racial terms. In my mind, I categorized "those people." I wanted not only justice, but revenge. For a few days, I was like the Pharisee thanking God that he wasn't like a dirty "tax collector", the "sinner." The Lord had to soften my heart and remind me that I'm not so different from "those people." I am like a tax collector. I am a sinner. And God does put revenge and robbery in different categories. He doesn't wink at pride and bring His fist down on theft. That's just not who God is. Notice in these Scriptures (a few of many in the Bible) *why* God wants us to care for people on the margins:

Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, **for you were aliens in Egypt.** (Exodus 22:21)

When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, **for you were aliens in Egypt.** I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:33-34)

Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. **Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.** (Deuteronomy 24:17-18)

Blessed are the **poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a **rich man** to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell 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 19:23-24)

So caring for people on the margins of life reminds us that we're no better, that God is bringing us out of similar places of need, sin, and destructive life-patterns. When we forget this, we get proud and begin to "glorify" ourselves rather than God. Yes, the poor need us, but perhaps *we need them* even more.

Our Call

So what should we do? John Perkins said, "Not everyone is called to move to the inner-city to minister there [some of us may be!], but everyone is called to have a heart for hurting people." Are there people in your community who need an extra dose of mercy? Are there any hurting, broken people who long to be noticed and cared for?

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. (Deuteronomy 15:7-8)

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:11)

How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? *Selah* Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (Psalm 82:2-4)

He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. (Proverbs 14:31)

He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done. (Proverbs 19:17)

If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered. (Proverbs 21:13)

A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor. (Proverbs 22:9)

Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the LORD will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them. (Proverbs 22:22-23)

He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses. (Proverbs 28:27)

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy." (Proverbs 31:8-9)

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Matthew 19:21)

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14:12-14)

There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (Acts 4:34-35)

Be generous and willing to share. (1 Timothy 6:18)

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27)

Dan will spend time with this last verse, James 1:27. We believers often do better with the last part of this Scripture (keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world) than with the first part (looking after orphans and widows). Both make our "religion" pure and faultless.

John Perkins

John Perkins is a courageous pioneer in working out good news and good deeds in Jackson, Mississippi, and now around the world. You can look through his website at www.jmpf.org. Perkins wrote

It is time for the church, yes, the whole church, to take a whole gospel on a whole mission to the whole world. It is time for us to exhibit by our very lives that we believe in the oneness of the Body of Christ. It is time for us to prove that the purpose of the gospel is to reconcile alienated people to God and to each other, across racial, cultural, social and economic barriers. It is time for the reconciling love of God that has touched each individual heart to spill over into love for our neighbor. (In his book *Beyond Charity*)

Get Outside Saturday

Our study this week gives you a good opportunity to talk as a group about a community service project on Saturday, February 23. Here's an example of what some Community Groups have committed to do already:

- Clean and re-cover two pool tables at the Boys and Girls Club – Merrill Park
- Paint an activity room at the same Club
- Clean light fixtures at Colter Elementary on the east side. (Colter is considered the poorest school in Saginaw. Many of its 125 students live in the projects and suffer from depression.)
- Paint three bedrooms for women at the City Rescue Mission

We have projects with Good Samaritan Mission, Underground Railroad, Big Brothers and Big Sisters. They're coming out of the woodwork right now! Talk together about what you'd like to do, and pray together for your day together.

This will be awesome Kingdom work, and the Lord will work in us and through us as we do it.

The Link

God constantly links our love for Him *and* our love for people, especially those on the margins. "I love you, Lord," we sing, and God asks, "Do you love people that I love?" The two always go together.

He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. (Proverbs 14:31)

He defended the cause of the poor and needy. Is that not what it means to know me? (Jeremiah 22:15,16)

Whatever you did to the least of these, my brothers, you did it to me. (Matthew 25:35-40)

and said, `Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. (Acts 10:31)

All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Galatians 2:10)

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27)

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. (James 2:1-10)

It couldn't be any clearer.

Resources

U.S. Census Bureau information about Saginaw “urbanized area” (includes Township and outlying towns):
<http://factfinder.census.gov/>

<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html>

<http://www.muninetguide.com/states/michigan/municipality/Saginaw.php>

www.jmpf.org (The John Perkins Foundation – check out what one church as done over the years!)

The Externally Focused Church by Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson. This book provides the basis for much of this sermon series and is now available for purchase from our Resource Center.

The Church of Irresistible Influence by Robert Lewis and Rob Wilkins

Becoming a World Changing Church by David Mays (brochure)