

**A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Bringing Good News to the Poor”**

**By Eric Howell
Luke 4:14-21
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Living in Charlottesville, Virginia for several years, we got an eyeful of Thomas Jefferson. Monticello, our third president’s mansion home, full of his eccentric, imaginative inventions was up on the hill just outside of town. After the leaves fell off the trees each year, you could see the back of a nickel just by looking up. When it snowed in the winter, the bright white roof and brilliant red bricks stood out in the gleaming white hillside. Every friend and family member who visited wanted to tour Monticello. After about six times, we just pointed the way and told them to have fun.

His name was on everything, from Mr. Jefferson’s University, University of Virginia right in town, to streets and administrative districts named after him. It made you feel a little sorry for Madison, Monroe, and Wilson . . . all of whom also have houses in the surrounding area. They got some attention, but it was Mr. Jefferson’s town. Even the local Unitarian congregation was named as a memorial to him and had quotes from Jefferson all around its entryway.

You got an eyeful of Jefferson. You also got an earful. Jefferson’s powerful words in the Declaration of Independence and his thoughts on various subjects just sort of seemed to hang around conversations. It’s not like people talk about Jefferson all the time, but it’s like people do politics, architecture, history, philosophy with a Jeffersonian accent. We have someone like that here in Central Texas—a strong leader who rose to power and still influences the identity of what it means to be a Texan. John Wayne, of course. His inspirational words are always there somewhere in our consciences. “Get off your horse and drink your milk” for example. I don’t know what that means, or if he actually said it, but I think I could live my life by it.

Anyway, spend any time around Jefferson and have any interest in religious things and pretty soon you hear the story of Jefferson’s Bible. Heard this story? Jefferson was what we would call a “deist.” That is a general word that described a person who believed generally in a higher power, a deity, but stopped short of believing in anything much supernatural. He didn’t believe that Jesus was divine, turned water into wine, made the lame to walk, the blind to see, and Himself was resurrected. He could accept the stories of Jesus as someone who was a good person with good teachings, and church-going Christians as the raw material for good citizens of an emerging democracy—the church people tended to behave a little better—but forget all the messy miracle stuff. Jefferson took it a step farther than most deists. Famously, Jefferson took a razor and a Bible and cut out every verse in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that contained supernatural events. So in Jefferson’s Bible, Jesus is born with no angels, no genealogy, no prophesy. Absent are any miracles, references to the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. There’s no resurrection. By carving out all the supernatural parts, Jefferson had a Jesus he could be comfortable with.

People of faith will protest attempts like this to refashion Christianity for our own comfort. We will say that we should take the scripture at its word, deal with it as it stands, and let it change us rather than the other way around. But if we are honest, don't most of us have our own personalized version of the Jefferson Bible on our shelves? Don't most of us cut parts out of the Bible's religion, if not with a razor, then with our minds and hearts, and if not with our minds and hearts, then with the way we actually live? We cut out the parts that are a problem for us. And that brings us to Jesus' reading of Isaiah 61 in His hometown synagogue on that otherwise regular Sabbath evening.

Jesus opens a scroll and reads some powerful words from Isaiah. Maybe He chose this reading. Maybe it was an assigned reading for that particular day. Either way, these were powerful words, originally written over 500 years before, for exiles who longed for someone to rescue them from their captors and restore the nation of Israel. These words were over 500 years old by the time Jesus read them, but the yearning was still there in the people gathered in the synagogue that night. Though their ancestors had returned back to the land a long time ago, they were never really free. If it wasn't the Babylonians from the east, it was the Persians. If it wasn't them, it was the Greeks from the west. If it wasn't the Greeks, it was the Romans. Wave after wave of oppressing, occupying, foreign forces marched through their land and took charge. A people created by God to be free to worship, to live, to witness, to enjoy the presence of their God were still . . . after all these years . . . still waiting. They would have known this Isaiah passage. It would be very familiar to them, not just because they knew the Bible better than most of us do, but because this was one of those ones you underline in your scroll. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." That's an underline passage. A highlight passage. It's one they remembered and prayed for . . . the day when an anointed one, literally, a messiah, would come and bring good news to their poor condition, and set them free, bring mercy and justice.

They would have highlighted this passage as a hopeful promise. In contrast, many of us, far removed from exile and poverty, take scissors and cut it right out as an uncomfortable proposition. Jesus, in claiming to be the one who fulfills this prophesy, says that He is the one who brings good news to the poor, the imprisoned, and the oppressed. And, doesn't that make us more than a little uncomfortable to talk about? Unlike deists, most Christians today are comfortable with the miracle stories. We'd leave those in—the ones about Jesus healing a leper, or using a little mud and spit to give a man his sight back. The story about Jesus walking on water is amazing, we like that story. We really like the one about water into wine. We'd certainly leave in the stories of resurrection.

The ones we cut out, we might not literally cut them out of our Bibles, but we cut them out of our faith, out of our prayers, out of our consciences. What we tend to cut out are passages that, were we to really take them seriously, might alter the way we understand what Jesus is all about and then change the way we live and bring prophetic challenge to our natural tendencies toward self-interest, getting what is mine, looking out for number one. It's actually quite easy to have a version of Christianity that is about

number one, and by that I mean not the first person of the Trinity. I mean, it's about me and only about me: God loves me so much that God sent His Son to save me from my sins so that I can be saved and live abundantly and have peace. Now I can pray for what I want and have faith that my prayers will be answered. I can have health and wealth, peace and prosperity. Safe and secure from eternal damnation, I can live with confidence that I am right and righteous. I don't need anyone else, and no one else needs me.

If we were to literally cut the passages out that challenge the me-first, me-only version of Christianity, we'd probably start with carving a hole around biblical teachings about the poor because those can be the hard ones . . . not just for me-first people, but also for people who take the life of Jesus seriously and whose hearts are genuinely searching for God's truth and who are sincerely convicted about the things of the Spirit. Just caring about the poor doesn't mean we know what we should do about it or how to intersect our idealistic values with hard-earned experiences, much less how to negotiate our idealism with the complex realities of economics and society. It's not just the hard hearts in us that cut these passages out. It's just as often the kind-hearted among us that just get overwhelmed with the painful reality of the great needs all around us. For all sorts of reasons, it's just easier to have a holey bible.

What would be different about us and about the way we understood and lived the gospel if we didn't cut today's passage out, but left it in and were open to this Word?

The first thing we might notice is that this sort of message is by no means isolated. Much of the Bible is about the poor and about the responsibility that the people of God have to give mercy, kindness, and justice for those who need help. The prophets are chocked full of God's message to those who abuse their privilege and look out for number one rather than the helpless. The gospels and the epistles follow suit. All through scripture, there is a theme if you notice it . . . God expects God's people to care deeply about the troubles of other people. So we might notice that a lot of the Bible is about this subject.

We might also notice that the poor to whom the good news is brought are not just the financially and materially disadvantaged. When considered in light of the descriptions that follow—captives, blind, oppressed—we might genuinely ask, “Who are the poor? Who are the ones so broken by life that they have no more heart to try? Who feel exile, estrangement from anyone who might care about them; who are those so bound in their addictions that liberty and release are a cruel mirage; who think they will never again experience the favor of the Lord; who have lost hope of seeing justice for those who have mistreated them; who imagine that life has nothing but sackcloth and ashes? Who are those who believe that their existence is worthless; who are those who are convinced that they are so unworthy, so unlovable, so undesirable that they have nothing of value to offer to anyone else?”

This passage speaks of all people who are distressed and in trouble for any reason, including financial hardship, including sin. The prayer of Psalm 25 must stand nearby, “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart are enlarged; bring me out of my distress. Consider my afflictions and my trouble and forgive all my sins. Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred

they hate me. Oh guard my soul and deliver me! Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in You. . . . I wait for You.” The deliverance from Babylon that Isaiah dreams of, the freedom from Rome that first-century Jews hoped for are real human experiences. So is that of a single mom with sick kids who can’t pay her bills, doesn’t have anyone she can lean on, and sees ahead of her an endless string of days full of struggle with no light at the end of the tunnel. This is the sort of striving that at one time or another afflicts most people in some way. We all desire freedom. We all hope for forgiveness. We all want a clearer vision of our lives and our futures. To these people, the Messiah announces, Good News!

By leaving this passage and others like it in our Bibles, we might find Jesus as a miracle-working, liberating, forgiving, healing Savior into the places of poverty—spiritual and otherwise—of all of our lives.

And we might find ourselves asking, if I am a Christian, then in what way, to what extent is my life and my church good news to the poor—to people in deep distress, whatever the circumstances?

And when we start asking that question and have a real openness to the journey of relationships and ministry it leads to, we may find that the poverty Isaiah and Jesus speak of is one we most acutely experience when we isolate ourselves from one another’s messy, messy lives and hunker down in whitewashed theological bunkers of our own making. When we refuse to see the other—we are most captive to our selfishness, blind to the real world around us, and oppressed by our own isolation.

In Christ we find that the good news is surprisingly good news exactly for this poverty of heart and soul —the good news is an invitation to a life-transforming discipleship of this preacher Jesus, whose good news changes all of our lives, one day and one relationship at a time as we join him on His mission of redemption.

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