

Beyond John 3:16

Memory Verse for the Week:

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 5:16

Jesus came into the world preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, not the Gospel of my personal salvation. His agenda is far bigger than just my personal redemption. The proclamation of personal redemption is essential and Biblical (John 3:16) but we must not stop there. Our personal spiritual journey is only part of the picture. God wants to transform our lives for our good *and* for His glory. We put His Kingdom rule on display before a watching world. The Gospel of the Kingdom is the *good news* of God's rule. It is the *good news* that the true Sovereign is working to redeem this world and the people in it. As citizens of His Kingdom we join Him as we are people "ready for *every* good deed" (Titus 3:1, emphasis added). We must do the good deed of proclaiming the message of salvation and the good deeds of serving and meeting needs.

Day #1 [Read 2 Kings 5:1-19; John 1:35-51]

Preach the gospel at all times -- If necessary, use words.

St. Francis of Assisi

Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.

Mark 5:19

“Robert, I’ve got to talk to your Dad right now.” My best friend spoke with a real sense of urgency. Tom and I had been close since junior high, and now, as high school seniors, we were very tight. He looked really troubled. “What’s the matter?” I asked. “You don’t look good.” “I had a dream last night. I dreamt about the rapture. You and your family and everyone at church just disappeared and that I didn’t go with you. It was *not* a good dream. I need to talk to your Dad right away!” My dad was in the den and as Tom entered he closed the door... leaving me outside. After an hour, they emerged from the room with big smiles on their faces. My best friend had become my brother in Christ!

Our family had not been working some “agenda” to bring Tom to this point. I am sure my parents prayed for his salvation regularly and looked for opportunities, but they really just loved him. He was welcomed as part of our family... and our family followed and loved Christ. When my mother invited Tom to church I was shocked that he agreed to come. His family was not spiritually minded and a number of his older brothers were very antagonistic towards Christianity. Yet, Tom was drawn to something in our family.

My parents lived a redemptive life. They were always looking for opportunities to share the gospel... but they shared more than just the story of personal redemption. They shared the love and service of Christ in countless lives over the years. After I moved out of their home, a single mom and her teenaged children moved in next door. My brother, who still lived at home, became friends with them. My parents reached out to show love in many, practical ways. Some of the family were had made professions of faith, but not all, and none were walking with Christ. My parents worked at encouraging the Christians and leading the others to Christ. The fact that this family accepted Jesus was a joy to their hearts, especially because in typical “girl next door” style, my brother eventually fell in love with and married one of the girls. My parents wound up with a daughter-in-law and sister in Christ.

Living redemptively and loving people in practical ways while seeking to share the most practical love, the salvation that Christ offers, is why we are here. Our lives are to make a dramatic difference in this world by making a dramatic difference in the lives of others. I was reminded of this a couple of years ago when I had the privilege to spend the day with Tom, who is now an elder in his church. His daughter was getting married (He must be *way* older than me). He looked very distinguished walking Danielle down the aisle in

his smart tuxedo and silver hair (I told you he was way older than me!). After he “gave her away” he spoke a blessing and a challenge to her and her husband. He gave a powerful testimony to the grace of God in his life and an urgent plea to them to build their lives around Christ above all else. It was obvious that these were not just words. They were the deep passions of his heart and the substance of his prayers for his daughter and son-in-law. Tom and his wife have 7 children. Like every family they face challenges, but it is obvious they seek to God’s Kingdom the center of their lives. At the reception I sat at the table with Tom’s sister and her family. They are also Christians because of Tom’s influence. My parents would have been so pleased... as I am sure the Lord Himself is. The impact of one family that loved a teenage boy (and of a dream that I have to think came from God) continues to be felt today.

A central focus of our lives must be to share the Gospel. Not to do this is to sin. We can rationalize and squirm, but this is a command. The essence of Christ’s incarnation is to serve and reach the lost. The essence of discipleship is to be just like Jesus. He said we are the light of the world and said it is foolish to light a lamp and hide it (Matthew 5:14-16). How many of us are hiding our light? Are you moving away from the world or towards it? Are you raising your children to hide from the lost or to love them to Christ? How this must break the Father’s heart. Some of us aren’t hiding, we’re just unavailable. Our lives are too full of... well, our lives. Do you have so many things going on that you don’t have anything left for others? How many of us satisfy ourselves with occasional forays “into the darkness” but like traveling salesman, we only want to be there long enough to close the deal and then fly back to our lives far away from the people we preach to. The Gospel of the Kingdom is a holistic answer to the problems in this world. Even though the full expression of God’s redemption waits for the return of Christ, we are to preview it now. We must get to know people and love them in practical ways. This is the context for sharing the good news of personal salvation. We have to stop holding up signs that say “John 3:16” in the stadiums of the world and start holding up lives that say it in the midst of day-to-day reality. Strangers on airplanes and park benches need to hear of Christ’s love and we should tell them at every opportunity, but the normal way of spreading the Kingdom news is life-on-life.

As you read today’s passages notice how God works through relationships. The slave girl has every reason to be bitter and resentful, but instead she has endeared herself to the family and she longs to see her master be blessed by God. John the Baptist points his disciples to Jesus, and Andrew then brings his brother. Philip is called by Christ and goes to find his friend Nathaniel to bring him to the Savior.

Are you deliberately letting your light shine in the world? Do you live life “moving outward”? We cannot afford to ignore this most urgent command from our Lord. We must develop relationships with people who don’t know Jesus... not shallow ones to “buy” a hearing, real ones that “earn” it through integrity and love. You may already have relationships that God wants you to see differently. You may need to rearrange your

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schedule, or change the focus of some of the things that are already in your schedule. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thinking and deeply transform your life. Share your journey with your Life Group. Invite them to pray for and encourage you.

Day #2 [Read Isaiah 58:1-12; Acts 9:36-43]

Some wish to live within the sound of a chapel bell, I wish to run a rescue mission within a yard of hell.

C. T. Studd

\$500,000. That's what was printed on the bill my friend has just handed me. It wasn't play money, it was real... at least as real as the Romanian Lei can be when it is so deeply devalued. "What's it worth?" I asked. "Twenty bucks".

That was my introduction to the difficult life of people in Romania. It was a sobering and grim reality that I saw there. Life was hard. Freedom from oppressive rule did not free them from physical lack. I was on a missions trip with a friend to see what could be done to help the orphans there. We met up with another friend who is Romanian by birth who had been in the country a couple of weeks before us. He gave us the money at the airport as a way of introducing us to the country.

Over the next week we saw many things and met many people. We met government officials, toured orphanages and worshipped with the believers there. We fell in love with these people. Warm, hospitable, friendly... and struggling. On Sunday we attended a communion service at one of the local churches. The believers were passionate in their singing, and although we could not understand it, the message was delivered with great earnestness. As they took their benevolence offering to help the needy I was struck by the great disparity in the room. Here were three Americans amongst a sea of Romanians, and although none of us were carrying large sums of money by our standards, the poorest of us was carrying a couple of *months* income for any of the Romanians in the room. After they received the offering they set the plates on the front pew and continued the service. We were in the second pew... immediately behind the offering plates. As I stood there listening to the music I could not help but look down at the offering. The plate was overflowing, mostly with 100 and 500 lei bills and coins. These amounted to pennies. The single bill that I had in my wallet exceeded the entire mound of money in front of me! I had intended to keep the bill as a souvenir, after all, how often do you have a real "\$500,000" bill? But as I stood there I felt convicted. God had given me much and I had a stewardship responsibility. Here were people who were in need. How could I keep a curiosity and let their needs go unaddressed? I took the bill from my wallet and dropped it in the plate.

I felt content that I had followed the heart of God, but was somewhat disappointed that I had to give up my memento to do it. Later in the day I was speaking with one of my friends. He had noticed the meager offering and had been affected by it as well. I told him what I had done, expecting to hear that he had done the same. I was surprised when he pulled his bill out and shook his head at me... "I wasn't going to give this up," he said.

“I gave them a \$20. They can exchange it.” Aaargh! Why didn’t I think of that? Sometimes there is more than one way to meet a need.

As our time in Romania came to a close we didn’t want to leave. There were so many great people to know and so many great needs to help meet. We made plans to bring longer term help to the church and to the orphans. In the end, one of my friends left nearly all of the money he had and all but the clothes he was wearing for the people there. Upon returning to the U.S. we shared the needs and got others involved as well. Many people were touched by the needs and took the opportunity God gave them to reach out and help. Galatians 6:10 says, “... while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.”

Living Kingdom lives means that we are to be absorbed in showing love whenever, wherever, and however we can. We are to give special attention to those who are on the margins of life... those who have pressing needs. God has a special heart for widows, orphans, the poor, the oppressed, the outsiders, the prisoners, the ones who are passed over by the rest of the world... and He wants us to share that heart. In Isaiah he is rebuking the people for the emptiness of their worship. They are good at ritual, but lack the heart of God. If they had His heart it would show in how they dealt with such people. This sin is hindering their spiritual lives. God lists a whole series of people that he wants them to love on His behalf. In Acts, we find a dear old woman of God who has died. Her ministry and heart for the poor and downcast was so significant that the church sends for Peter to ask him to resurrect her. What a ministry she must have had for them to go to such an extreme. If you were somehow taken away, what would the reaction of those around you be? Would there be anyone desperate to have you back because of the Kingdom impact your life held? Would there be an outcry to God from people who are on the margins? How are you investing your time? Your money? Your skills? Your heart? Are you doing anything to relieve suffering and bring good into the lives of those less fortunate? Are you loving them in Jesus name?

Day #3 [Read Isaiah 1:16-23; Luke 10:25-37]

*She calls out to the man on the street
Sir, can you help me?
Its cold and I've nowhere to sleep,
Is there somewhere you can tell me?
He walks on, doesn't look back
He pretends he can't hear her
Starts to whistle as he crosses the street
Seems embarrassed to be there
Oh think twice, it's another day for
You and me in paradise
Oh think twice, it's just another day for you,
You and me in paradise*

Phil Collins

*Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
When it is in your power to do it.*

Proverbs 3:27

“It’s not my problem.” “There’s nothing I can do” “I’m sure someone will do something... I can’t get involved.” There are lots of excuses, lots of rationalizations, lots of ways we see needs and move past them. Yet this is so obviously wrong that popular music by people who don’t know Christ at all calls us on it. God expects his followers to meet needs and give aid. We cannot live as Kingdom citizens and turn our head from needs. Yet we do so with surprising ease. We must learn not to withdraw. We must live a life of compassionate engagement.

On a February night in 1911 Lillian Thrasher* was gathered with other missionaries in their house in Assiout, Egypt when a loud knock changed the course of her life.

She opened the door to find a breathless man with desperation in his eyes. A young mother was dying and needed help and he wanted help, urgently. The rest of the missionaries in the room did not want to leave the house so close to bed time, so Lillian, though brand new to the team, asked Reverend Brelsford if she could go. He consented. She took two national helpers with her and scurried through the dark back streets of the city to a mud hut in a strange area of town. Once inside she was confronted with a young woman, no more than 15 or 16 who was in her final moments in life. She begged Lillian to take care of her baby before she died. The skeleton of a child was cradled in the lap of a wizened old lady. Lillian hesitated until the grandmother said, “It’s only a girl anyway. What does it matter if she dies.” The old woman looked ominously toward the Nile River a few yards away. This galvanized Lillian’s hesitating heart. She scooped up the baby and strode back to the mission house. “Surely Reverend Brelsford would want me to care for this child,” she thought. For the next two weeks she cared for the baby girl around the clock. The child narrowly clung to life. She slept only for brief intervals in

the midst of constant screaming. As the days went by, the missionaries began to show the strain of little sleep. Finally, at the end of two weeks, Reverend Brelsford called Lillian into his study. “You have to take the baby back. You cannot keep it here.” He spoke resolutely and curtly. Lillian was stunned. “Back... back where? She has no one to care for her.” She shuddered to think of what the old lady would do to the child. “Is there an orphanage nearby that could take her?” Reverend Brelsford laughed harshly, “There is no such thing as an orphanage in Egypt. Just think how many children would be clamoring to get in if there were one.”

Lillian could hardly believe his harshness, but he was resolved. She did the only thing she could. She left the mission house with the baby, trusting God to sustain her, a single woman, just three months into life in a Muslim culture, friendless and with no support network. She could not do otherwise. She was certain that God wanted her to care for this baby as long as it had life. She would not turn her face and look the other way. Out of this conviction came the first orphanage in Egypt and eventually to a life of caring for thousands of widows and orphans through extreme sacrifice and danger, through two world wars, changes in government and despite debilitating personal sickness. Lillian had such an impact that her story became known world-wide. Late in life, the provincial governor declared an annual ‘Lillian Thrasher’ day where Muslim merchants were encouraged to donate to a Christian orphanage housing nearly 1,000 children... and they gladly did. In 1953 the Prime Minister toured her orphanage and wrote of his visit, “Nothing has ever given me more pleasure than what I have seen today. It is as though I were dreaming of a paradise of humanity, exactly as I have always imagined it to be. It today has become a realization.” When Lillian died in 1961, she was mourned all over the world. A newspaper article said this, “Lillian Thrasher, whom the press once described as the ‘greatest American woman living outside the United States,’ ranked high among the missionary heroines of her time. During her fifty years of orphanage work in Egypt, she cared for nearly ten thousand children, the homeless, the helpless, and the blind. They called her ‘The Nile Mother.’”

As you read today’s passages, ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart. Are you more like Lillian Thrasher or Reverend Brelsford. Both served God in a hard place. Both wanted to see people come to know Him. Both read the same Bible and offered similar prayers. Yet one had a great blind spot. He found it easy to turn his head from a pressing need that was before him. Lillian understood to be exposed to a need is often God’s summons to meet it. She understood that God is a God of compassion and His followers must cultivate this same heart.

In Isaiah, God urges his people to take off their blinders and turn from their deliberate injustice and hardness of heart. In Luke we find a man who wants to put “comfort qualifiers” on the Great Commandment. Jesus closes his loophole by teaching that whoever is in need is the neighbor we must love. In this exchange, Jesus unmask our self-justification and leaves us face-to-face with a stark reality. To turn our heads away

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from need is sin. This is not a tyrannizing rule... we cannot meet every need (see for instance Mark 14:3-9), but we can't live by the loophole. We must cultivate active compassion. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you feel the full weight of this story and responsibility, then ask His help to change where you are convicted.

*Taken from *Lillian Thrasher*, by Janet and Geoff Benge

Day #4 [Read 1 Samuel 25:2-38; Titus 1:10-16; 2:6-14; 3:1-2, 8,
14]

The impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their poor, but ours as well.
Julian the Apostate

It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents.

Tertullian

“Do good.” These were the last words I heard my boss say every day I left the office for years. Bad grammar aside, I think it was his way of encouraging me to be successful. That was his big aim in life: success... as measured against the American dream. I was young and he had a rather paternal outlook toward me. He was always trying to shape me to be the best person I could be. All in all, a good thing, and those are good words to keep in mind when heading out into the world... at least if we define good the way that God does.

Several years ago, our life group wanted to do an act of service – we wanted to “do good”. It was Christmas, and we wanted to help someone in the community. I ran into an acquaintance repeatedly at a community function, and every time I saw him, I noticed his shoes. They had seen far too many miles and were clinging to life by the power of wishful thinking and a touch of duct tape. This man was always neat in his appearance, so I knew this was not his choice. If his shoes were ragged it was because he couldn’t afford another pair. He was a kind, family man with several children. A work injury had disabled him so that he could no longer work. His family seemed like a perfect opportunity to show the love of Christ and meet a need. I asked a trusted friend who was involved in the same community group if she thought he was in need and if she could give me more details about his family and what she thought his needs might be. She happily replied “yes” to both of my questions, and our course was set.

We collected food and gift cards for the family. We tried to get some “practical” things and some “fun” things for Christmas shopping... and of course, we hoped he would buy new shoes. The final total amounted to several hundred dollars. Everyone, adults and children, got involved in the process. It brought us great joy to give this way, knowing that we all had more than enough and that we could bless a family that could use a little help. We put together a couple of big gift boxes of food and other goodies and decided to deliver them in person. Because it was the Christmas season, this was surprisingly easy to do. We simply showed up at the door as carolers, sang a few songs and gave them the gifts. Because the man knew my family, we waited in our car, down the street, where we could see and not be seen. The man was the first to the door, but before the first carol was over, the whole family stood listening. Their faces registered utter disbelief when the

group concluded the serenade by presenting the gifts. We were too far away to hear any of the conversation, but that didn't matter. Surprise, bewilderment and gratitude are easy to read, even from a distance.

Later that same week I saw the man again. We had a short, cordial conversation. He obviously had no clue about my role in what happened a few nights before. In fact nothing was different from any number of interactions we had previously... except that as I left I happened to notice he was wearing a brand new pair of shoes.

“Do good.” What would the world look like if all of God's children didn't leave their homes or offices without repeating these words as a prayer for God's enablement? What would our own country or city look like? With estimates conservatively hovering around 20% of the U. S. population being “born again” what would such a force for good accomplish? It is easy to withdraw into our Christian enclave, or to make questionable theological rationalizations to avoid it, but the truth is, God has a lot to say about doing good works. Clearly He expects us to continually pursue myriad activities that add value to the world around us, whether we ever get to share the Gospel or not. God's love extends to all people and it extends to all circumstances in life... whenever we can work for justice, relieve suffering, foster truth and beauty, or just encourage someone's heart, we need to do it.

As you read today's passages notice how important good deeds are to God and the power they have. Abigail does what her husband should have done, and not only shows kindness, she averts a disaster. In the book of Titus, a book written to instruct a pastor on how to lead the people entrusted to his care, the importance of doing good deeds and meeting pressing needs is a constant refrain. How much emphasis do you give to simple acts of kindness and goodness to people around you? Do you stop for people on the side of the road? Do you help an elderly neighbor hang their Christmas lights or pick their oranges? Could you take time to tutor kids at a local school? Could you create time to coach a sports team and deliberately use it as an opportunity to show the love of Christ? How about getting involved with a key compassion ministry like Whittier Pregnancy Care Center or Come to Him ministries? Could you go to Starbucks one less time a month and use the money to support a Compassion child or give to Samaritan's purse? Could your family support a needy student training to reach Muslims at the Life Resources Foundation in the Philippines? What kinds of things might God want you to do? As you pray, ask God to guide you to some specific action you can take right now and some focus you can have longer term. Pray that God will sensitize you to opportunities to show practical love daily... and then DO GOOD.

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