

Read James 1:27

Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names.

Less than one per cent of what the world spent every year on weapons was needed to put every child into school by the year 2000 and yet it didn't happen.

Infectious diseases continue to blight the lives of the poor across the world. An estimated 40 million people are living with HIV/AIDS, with 3 million deaths in 2004. Every year there are 350–500 million cases of malaria, with 1 million fatalities: Africa accounts for 90 percent of malarial deaths and African children account for over 80 percent of malaria victims worldwide.

Some 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water, and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation.

Almost two in three people lacking access to clean water survive on less than \$2 a day, with one in three living on less than \$1 a day
(<http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>)

Let me bring it a little closer to home. 1 in 4 people living in Milwaukee are below the poverty line (10g's for a single and 20gs for a family of four).

With these heartbreaking, mindboggling, soul rending statistics, I have a question for you...are you practicing pure and undefiled religion?

Did you know that everyone in this room is among the very richest people who have ever walked the face of the earth?

Take a deep breath. I am not a preacher asking for money! I actually want to dig a bit deeper than your wallet...

Turn to Amos chapter 4 and get ready for God to call you names...

Amos 4:1-3

God calls the women of Israel, cows of Bashan! The cows of Bashan were the best and the fattest cows in all the land. All they did was graze and get fat. That is what these women were doing. They were living life in a totally self-centered way. They weren't persecuting the poor. They were simply living the FAT life and ignoring the plight of the poor. They were more than happy to have them around to make their lives comfortable—not caring about their suffering and about their pain. In response, God was going to send the Assyrians in to kill them and to rape them and to make them prisoners. The Assyrians had this practice of using actual metal hooks that they would jam through your lip or your nose and then attach it to a string to pull you wherever they wanted you to go. God was going to inflict pain on those selfish cows, Assyrian style. Are you and I out of

the target zone of this text? God was talking to His people...the religious people. I don't know about you, but I feel like God is calling me names and threatening me!

Isaiah 1:10-17

Do you get what God is saying here when he says he "cannot endure" Israel's worship? When he says his "soul hates" their feasts and that they are a "burden" and he is "weary of bearing them"? He is saying to Israel, your religion stinks! When you pray I just want you to shut up. You stink to me because of your hypocrisy. I cannot stand to look at you. Why? Because they did not proactively help widows and orphans and those oppressed by evil and poverty. Notice, God is talking to the people of God, not the pagans. He is saying, "You keep doing this religious stuff and you are missing the point. I don't need your songs or your prayers. Do you ever ask yourself, does God think my worship stinks? Does the singing and the prayer of Lighthouse Baptist make God sick and make him want to say, Just SHUT UP! I don't want to hear your hypocrisy anymore!!?"

Let's look at another text...

Matthew 25:31-46

Imagine this day of judgment...Everyone gathered before Christ and He will judge the WORLD. It will be an AMAZING and glorious day. But will it be terrifying? Shocking thing here is that Christ says the separation of sheep and goats can be based on how we treated the poor.

Jesus is not, here, referring to metaphorical water or clothing. He is not talking about giving people who are spiritually thirsty the gospel or spiritually naked the gospel. He is saying, when you feed the hungry and clothe the naked, you feed me and you clothe me. When you ignore them and pretend that they don't exist, you ignore me and I will punish you for this with everlasting torment.

This is everywhere in Scripture. The note is the same from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that you earn heaven by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. I am not saying that you get to heaven by doing justice. But the text seems to say that you get to hell by not doing it. I mean, that is what it says...right?

I cannot get these texts out of my head. They have wrecked me. Every time I start to get going with other things and just stop doing or thinking about those who are oppressed or suffering, these texts just keep screaming at me.

Confession: Fixer

Now it is at this point that I have to confess to you something about me. You see, I am a fixer...especially when it comes to my wife. I love her so much and whenever she has a problem I always want to fix it. You know how well this works, don't you guys? Well, it is even worse when I AM the problem. Let's say I forget something small, like Oh I don't know...Valentine's Day. She comes to me with this hurt look. Automatically I go

into Mr. Fix-it mode. “I am soo sorry honey. Umm. Let me make a few phone calls and I can get us a baby sitter and we can be gone on a little romantic getaway tonight!” I get this look of “death to you” from her. “She has lost that lovin’ feeling.” I am in deep weeds.

But my brain is starting to short-circuit. Something is not computing in my man brain.... I am doing a calculation in my head over and over going “romantic celebration forgotten + romantic celebration provided now = problem solved.” Why is Michelle reaching for the gun?

This is not a problem that you fix with God by simply doing something any more than forgetting to celebrate Valentine’s Day with my wife is something that can be solved by simply planning a romantic getaway. So what should I do. First and foremost Michelle just wants me to listen to her tell me about the problem and how it is affecting her. She wants me to FEEL the way that I have HURT her. That is what we need to do with God. We need to begin by LISTENING and then FEELING the pain that we are causing God.

These texts that we have been looking at aren’t so much about feeding the poor or doing justice really. They can’t be fundamentally. God can feed the poor and protect the oppressed and HE DOES NOT NEED OUR HELP. Really. Remember, he made the universe. He knows all things from the macro level to the micro level. He can put a chicken in every pot and kill every oppressor in a moment in time if he wants to without breaking a sweat. These texts are about God’s people, God’s children, reflecting his glory by acting like him in the world. God declares those he saves to be his sons and then he makes them to be like him in terms of his character- merciful, kind, compassionate, love for the weak and the suffering. When we don’t have this character; when we look merciless, unkind, and self-centered so as to step on the weak, it makes God furious because we are spreading lies about him by our non-action. We are telling the world that God doesn’t care, that he is unkind, and unwelcoming. He will not have this. He doesn’t care if you grew up in church, if you asked Jesus into your heart, if you read your bible every day, if you pray a lot...None of it matters if you blaspheme God’s name to the world by singing to him and ignoring people’s pain. None of it matters if you say you love Jesus, but you step over Jesus who is lying in the gutter and you walk past Jesus who is begging for money on the side of the road. You and I will go to hell if we live this way.

There is a huge gap between what evangelicalism says Christianity is and what the Bible says it is. I have noticed this gap more and more the more closely and thoughtfully I read the Scriptures and it is wrecking me. So what do we do? Must we all run out and start soup kitchens or adopt starving children? Those are good things, but that’s not it. That is not where it starts. Let this wreck you. Let God be bigger and more terrifying than you ever imagined.

Matthew 10:26-28

Do you get what this text is saying? God is saying you fear men rather than me. You are viewing me as far too small and far too tame. You hear the commands from your wife,

husband, boss, or whoever and you run to obey because you fear them but you don't fear me. That is crazy! My daughter Sydney used to scream this ear piercing nails on a chalk board scream and cry hysterically when a fly came within 2 feet of her and yet she would walk out into the street in front of a bus coming at her at 55 miles an hour without even an ounce of fear... "Bus daddy"

Do you remember the story of Uzzah? The ark of God was going to fall into the dirt and he touched the ark of God and dropped dead. Do you remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira? They lied to God and they dropped dead.

Where am I going with this?

So, where am I going with this? Well, I am NOT trying to grow the church numerically! Usually pointing out that God threatens eternal torment to religious people who ignore the poor and the suffering is not a great church growth strategy. If my goal were to grow the church numerically we would talk about sex! That always draws a crowd. Equally, I am NOT trying to get you to knuckle under and simply do moral things so you can check off the box of helping the poor and the oppressed so you can earn your get out of hell card.

Here is where I am going with all of this. These texts are crushing me and I want you to join me in being crushed by these texts. My heart is just too small. I am one of the fat cows of Bashan. I am the one who prays and God has to hold his nose and plug his ears because he cannot stand my hypocrisy. I pray for myself but I don't care about those suffering around me. OH GOD my heart is so hard and so small. I love me sooo much and I love God and others sooo little.

James says "Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." (James 4:9-10).

I don't want you to do anything. Just sit in the target zone of these texts and be blasted by the word of God. Let them show us how sinful and selfish we are. Let's spend a season of just repenting of self-centeredness. Let's spend a season just acknowledging the fact that these texts, these rebukes are to us. We stand ready to be condemned by an angry God and we deserve every ounce of his infinite wrath because we are the unjust ones. We are the ones who show no mercy.

Let me take you back two weeks...

Do you remember the story of Pastor Son? For those who weren't here let me tell the story again and then make a final application point from it. He was the Korean pastor 1902-1950 who was in that very turbulent time in Korean history getting squeezed between Japanese aggression and communist uprising from within. Pastor Son was saved and never could get over God's mercy to him. He always preached on forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation. His ministry was to his congregation and to the leper colonies that surround the city of Sunchon. Well, in 1948 there was the Yosu Sunchon Rebellion

which was a communist uprising. It was incredibly bloody with young soldiers and student radicals terrorizing the city. They even grabbed the chief of police, dragged him out into the streets, stripped him, wrapped him with barbed wire, and dragged him through the streets until he was bloody and unconscious and they left him to be eaten by the wild dogs that also roamed the city. At the time, Pastor Son's, two boys Matthew and John were in their teens. Matthew and John loved Jesus just like their dad. One of the students in the rebellion knew Matthew and John and suggested to the group of rioters to go get them and make them reject Christianity and join the communists. The group soon found Matthew and John and dragged them out into the streets. The group of five boys beat and tortured Matthew and John but they would not curse Christ. The rebels got tired and shot both boys in the head.

Soon afterward the Korean government sent in police forces to quell the rebellion and the five boys were actually caught and tried in court. There in court Pastor Son was allowed to speak and he gave a sermon! He spoke on forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation. He saved all five boys from the death sentence. But he had a special request concerning the boy responsible for suggesting that the group go and get his Matthew and John. He pleaded with the court to let him have that boy as his "replacement son." The court granted his request and Pastor Son loved the boy as his own son.

If you are thinking, wow. I am not sure I could ever be Pastor Son. If that is what is being asked of me, I might as well give up. Well, take a breath. That is not what I am saying. Don't hear this story and think about yourself as Pastor Son. You are not the one who can FIX this. There is nothing you can DO. God says that you and I have done enough. Think of yourself as the guilty boy who turned in Matthew and John. Who beat them in the streets and mercilessly shot them in the head. You need to think of yourself as the replacement son. You killed God's son. Your sin of mercilessness and small heartedness hung him on that tree. And when it came to the time of your trial, God, who is rich in mercy, took you as his replacement son. Do you feel it, that mercy? Does it break you? Pastor Son's replacement son did not continue in the communist party persecuting people. But how did that happen? Did he say to Pastor Son, I can FIX this. I'll quit the communist party and start doing church work for you! No! He listened and he felt real guilt. He repented and experienced real mercy. He was changed by that mercy and he lived out of the mercy shown to him. So too, if you feel this mercy of being forgiven of great sin and being taken in as a son, you won't continue ignoring the poor or the oppressed. That mercy will change you forever. It will change the kind of husband and wife that you are, it will change the kind of friend that you are, and it will push you out into a hurting world to pour out the mercy and love on others that God has poured out on you.