

An Epidemic of Good News #7

Welcome to the seventh instalment of, “An Epidemic of Good News,” a devotional Bible study on Paul’s letter to the Philippians. I’m Pastor Curtis Aguirre of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Penticton, British Columbia.

Let’s begin with a prayer.

O God, by the preaching of your apostle, Paul, you have caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world. Grant that we may follow his example and be witnesses to the truth of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 55)

In this video I will explore the relationship between Paul and the life and teaching of Jesus. Now, this is a huge topic and many books have been written about it. It is also a somewhat controversial topic. All I’m offering here is a thumbnail sketch of how I see that relationship, and I won’t be laying out all the different theories and so on.

As I have immersed myself in the Bible, learned more about Paul from various scholars, gone deeper into Paul’s letters, and then also looked at the life and person of Jesus through various lenses, it seems to me that Paul really “gets” Jesus. Paul understands Jesus at a deep level and tries to apply that understanding of Jesus to his situation.

And here is where I think a lot of misunderstanding arises. People who try to show how Paul and Jesus are somehow at odds with each other, or that Paul is making up something different than what Jesus was about miss the point that Paul and Jesus are addressing very different circumstances and audiences, and so each of them have to apply the same underlying spiritual understandings in different ways. And so, superficially it can look like two different things, but underneath, it is the same thing.

So, first, let’s look at Jesus. Based on what the Gospels tell us, Jesus was born into a poor family. We can deduce this from Luke 2:24 where the parents of Jesus make an offering prescribed for poor families in Leviticus 12:8. He grew up in Nazareth, which at the time (based on the most recent archaeological finds) was a village with about 400 inhabitants. His father, or stepfather, is called a “tekton”, which often gets translated as carpenter, but literally means “fabricator”. I like to think of his trade as “handy man”; the guy who makes or fixes stuff for you. This was not a high status trade; and besides, high status trades like gold and silver smiths, or glaziers, or mosaicists would have worked in larger cities like Sepphoris and Tiberias. A tiny place like Nazareth wouldn’t have been able to support much specialization.

Jesus did most of his ministry along the north western arc of the Sea of Galilee in smaller fishing towns like Capernaum, Magdala, Gennesaret, and Bethsaida, and avoided the big

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cities of Tiberias and Sepphoris. The only larger city he ever seems to have gone to was Jerusalem, which was and is the religious heart of Judaism.

Jesus ministered in an Israel that was divided into a part ruled directly by Rome (the regions of Samaria and Judea), and parts ruled by Roman puppet kings (Galilee, the Decapolis, and Perea). Economic exploitation and oppression were the order of the day, and in situations like that, it is the poor who suffer the most. And, as we see in the Gospels, Jesus conducted his ministry largely among the poor of the land: subsistence farmers, day labourers, slaves, and fishing families.

However, his healing and miraculous signs also attracted a lot of attention among the more well-to-do, and some of his followers seem to come from the higher echelons as well, such as the three Bethany siblings, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, and the women who supported his ministry from their own finances, such as the Mary whose husband worked for Herod Antipas, and Mary Magdalene.

But he also attracted the attention of those who saw themselves as the preservers of pure religion. (You've got to love the preservers of pure religion. Every religion and denomination has them, and they're always so dang sure of their own rightness...sigh.) Anyway, here is where Jesus ran up against opposition. In the Gospels, he is always criticised, questioned, and opposed by representatives of various elements of the religious establishment.

So what was Jesus' basic message? Complete trust in God; God is less like a king and more like a father; the Kingdom of God seeks out the people rejected by the religious establishment; it is a kingdom of mercy, grace and forgiveness...

But some of Jesus' parables and aphorisms also indicate that he was well of aware of the economic plight of his audience and understood that those in power were responsible. For example, Luke's version of the Parable of the Talents (Luke 19:11-27) is a pretty clear reference to Archelaus and Antipas, the two sons of Herod the Great who had to travel to Rome to be installed as kings. The hero of the story is the one who buried the money entrusted to him because he did not participate in the exploitive system that kept the Herodians in power and kept the people poor.

By the same token, the Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13) also seems to be an acknowledgment of the way that managers of large estates are corrupt in every way, cheating both their employers and their master's debtors.

Several times Jesus says, "To those who have, more will be given, but from those who have nothing, what little they have will be taken away," or something very similar (Matthew 13:12, 25:29; Mark 4:25; Luke 8:18, 12:48, 19:26). In some contexts, the meaning is spiritual, but in some it is his version of "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer."

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But Jesus is not promoting an armed uprising to overthrow the corrupt authorities or setting himself up to be the just king who will set everything straight. His is a revolution from within, built on an unwavering devotion to God. He is essentially reframing how we look at the world and re-prioritizing the different elements of our lives. The world will not change by tinkering with who is at the top, but by each person changing how they are in the world. The revolution starts in here, and in my relationships to the people around me—in other words, in the domain in which I do have some control.

Now that is a very crude thumbnail summary of where Jesus is coming from, but if we contrast the social setting of Jesus with that of Paul, we can see how Paul adapted Jesus to his situation.

In contrast to Jesus, Paul seems to have come from what we might call a “middle class” family in the city of Tarsus, on the south coast of what is now Turkey, but what was then very much a Greek speaking part of the world. Tarsus was a major city of the region, favoured by Roman Emperors, endowed with all of the public facilities a respectable Roman city would have: theatres, baths, and so on. It also boasted an academy and a respectable library containing some 200,000 books. Paul’s childhood was spent in a very different place than Nazareth.

Paul was a child of diaspora Jews: Jews who lived outside of the land of Israel, and who became partially enculturated to the society around them. So although Paul would have known Hebrew from his synagogue in Tarsus, on a day to day basis growing up he probably spoke Greek. But he was sent to Jerusalem to be educated under none other than the great teacher Gamaliel. Here he became part of the Jewish renewal movement called Pharisaism—in other words, he became a Pharisee.

We have to be careful about how we hear this term because in the Gospels it is used almost exclusively in a pejorative way. But there are indications that Jesus too grew up, if not in a family with Pharisees, then certainly with neighbours and friends who were Pharisees. In fact, the synagogue grew out of the efforts of the Pharisaic movement to spread the knowledge of the Law of Moses. Any town with a synagogue probably had adherents or at least sympathizers of the Pharisaic movement.

Jesus’ main arguments were with the Pharisees, but we have to understand this in the same way someone who grows up Lutheran might argue with his more legalistic Lutheran relatives for a more gracious Lutheranism, or someone who grew up Roman Catholic might argue with her Roman Catholic relatives about the defects in her church, and so on. It was an argument from within to try to lift up the more gracious parts of the tradition.

For Paul this was even more so because he was very active in the movement when he had his conversion experience, or awakening, or whatever you want to call it, and became a follower of Jesus. So, Paul “got” what Jesus was critiquing about Pharisaism in a very learned way, and he applied this in his teaching.

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But Paul was not ministering among subsistence farmers and fisherfolk. His ministry was to cities; and not cities in the land of Israel, but cities characterized by Greek and Roman culture.

At the same time, for Paul, the Gospel it is more than teaching. It is Jesus himself: the very person of Jesus means something. In fact, the teaching is important BECAUSE Jesus is who he is. And so, we come back to Philippians 2:5-11 that I looked at in the last video:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be taken advantage of, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

Jesus was more than a messenger, he is the very incarnation of God, come to earth not only to talk about how God intends us to be human, but to live it, setting the ultimate example. And at the heart of this way of being is letting go of my own stuff for the sake of being faithful to God. That's what Jesus talked about. That's what Paul talks about. It is how Jesus lived, and it is how Paul strives to live—but it's hard, and if you look at Paul's various letters, it seems that in every context you have to think a little differently about the best way to apply this message in practical terms.

In the next instalment of "An Epidemic of Good News," I will look at Paul's struggle to be faithful to the message he proclaims.

Let's close with the Lord's Prayer:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And for give us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**