



The Gospel and Mass Incarceration

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It's always dangerous to end the night with a preacher. Y'all doing all right? Good, I want to thank you brother for having me. The Billy Graham and the Institute for Prison Ministry for having me, it's a privilege to be with you guys. I have been getting to know Ed a little bit over the last few years, and several things are just obvious about him.

One is he's a New Yorker. For all the good and wonderful that that is, but also he is a man of strong opinion. Like did you see just a moment ago how he introduced me? He says, Thabiti, in his own mind thinks he's been doing this, but the rest of us, we know, right. That's my relationship with Ed. So he keeps me on track, and I'm grateful brother to be sharing with you.

A confession. I don't feel particularly equipped to address you, particularly after the parade of seasoned, scholarly, involved practitioners and researchers that we've had today. So we probably should've ended with Glenn's presentation. I don't have great White House stories, or at least the one White House story I have doesn't have as meaningful a punchline as Glenn's. I got invited by a brother who worked for Aren, who worked in the department of education. They had a sort of staff picnic on the south lawn, and he got to bring somebody with him.

His wife was out of town so I got to be his date, and so we go to the White House, and I have an arrest as well, I got arrested when I was about 17, North Carolina, on a felony. The only reason why my life looked different from that point honestly was because the pastor of my mother's church came into the courtroom, sitting there, facing this charge, scared to death, and he comes to the courtroom, and the judge acknowledges him, and calls him up to the bench. He walks up to the bench and they have this two-minute conversation, seemed like an hour to me, in hushed tones.

He walked by, and I got a whiff of his aftershave, and he was an older man. He looked at me with sort of grayish blue eyes, and gave me a sad little smile, and walked out, and the judge asked me to stand, and he says on the strength of that pastor's testimony, he gave me what I think was called a prayer for judgment continuance, he just sort of dismissed the case.

In that moment, all the sort of wonder, and shock, and awe of what just happened, because I was guilty. I had admitted to it, and yet on the testimony of this Christian pastor, this judge was giving this young man, who had not been in trouble before, another chance. So, beyond that I

don't have great experience here. I don't have great White House stories, the one time I go to the White House, on the south lawn, the president comes out, President Obama, and he gives a little 10 minute stump speech, and I have two impressions.

The first impression, I formed immediately upon seeing him, I thought he was taller. Fifty pounds ago I used to be a good basketball player, so I'm thinking I think I can cross him up, I can take him. He starts to work the line after his speech, and I'm trying to get close enough to shake his hands, but I'm trying not to be a fan boy, or anything like that. Trying to be cool about it, but I'm bumping little women out of the way, trying to get close. I'm working my way up the line, I see he's going to go all the way back up to the White House, and the line is sort of thinning.

So I'm trying to get ahead of him, and I try to get up close. I'm still trying to be gentlemanly, there's a little petite woman trying to get a selfie. I said here dear let me take that for you. I missed the president, so I go up further. He locks eyes on me, and he looks at me with this knowing kind of look, like he'd seen me before. I panic a little bit, because I do realize my history isn't spotless, I thought I could get kicked out or worse, right.

It's like this welcoming look, this knowing look, and I'm reaching for him to shake his hand, and he stretches to shake my hand, and just like the fingertips, we shake hands. And, my second impression is, these are the softest hands I've ever felt in my life.

My White House story. So I should probably do what preachers do and talk about Jesus, right. If you have your Bibles, turn them on to Luke chapter four. Luke four verses 18 and 19. And, I want to spend a little bit of time in a text that we could preach on forever, but I promise not to preach on forever. I just want to draw out of this text a few implications for those of us who are Christians, on this question of the relationship between the gospel and mass incarceration. I want to give a little bit of particular attention to this text, and some of the implications in this text for those of you who consider yourself evangelicals in particular, because I do think that in the world of the Christian church, this conversation has some unique challenges, some unique sort of fingers in the eye for evangelicalism as a movement.

You'll note this text, the Lord is preaching his inaugural sermon. He requests the scroll, it's the book of Isaiah, it's a dramatic scene. He's sitting in the temple, and you can imagine the Jewish elders there in his hometown are looking at him like, isn't this Mary's boy? And he's surely grown up to be a fine lad, what word does he have from us? He unrolls the scroll, and I imagine Isaiah is a long book, it took some time to unroll that scroll, and the drama is building.

Finds the place he's looking for, what we would call Isaiah 61, and reads these words. 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 recovery of sight to the blind. To set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. I imagine he read it patiently, articulated it clearly, and rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant I imagine that the entire synagogue is leaning forward to hear what he will do with this text.

And the next words are profound explosion. The Lord says to those assembled, this day is this text, this prophecy, these words fulfilled in your hearing. Now the text tells us that the crowd responded rather positively to Jesus, but it's obvious as you read the gospel that they didn't quite get it. That here he was announcing his messianic credentials. Here the Lord Jesus was proclaiming to be the fulfillment of a prophecy some 700 years earlier, to be bringing in the messianic kingdom with all that it promised in terms of God's blessing to his covenant people.

It's striking that his words are actually rather precise. This day in your hearing is this text fulfilled. All of the anticipation of Israel, in other words, had a body. All of its spiritual hopes was there, packaged, in incarnate form, in the Son of God. And the text that he chose is actually rather remarkable for us as we think about this question of the gospel and mass incarceration. Think about the announcement in this text.

He says he's come to proclaim good news. To proclaim liberty. The recovering of sight to the blind. The year of the Lord's favor. Now, evangelicalism is a religion of the heart. It rises up out of puritanism, it rises up out of some strands of high church Anglicanism, it rises up out of German pietism, and it streams that flow into it. All these kind of reform movements, all with a sort of aim of escaping kind of dead, orthodox religion, and cultivating a vital piety, cultivating a religion of the heart. Encouraging and exhorting people to live well spiritually, to commune with Christ.

That emphasis I want to suggest to you has created a kind of squint, when many evangelicals read the Bible. So for example, in a text like this, many evangelicals will speak to Luke 4:18 and 19, and rightly draw out of the spiritual implications. But wrongly over spiritualize the text. Such that everything that Jesus said is fulfilled in that day in their hearing, becomes about spiritual salvation. All of this sort of rather earthy and grimy, and gritty, and even challenging things in this text, all again gets sort of over spiritualized, and under physicalized.

So recovery of sight to the blind, well that's about the kind of blindness that sin creates, or setting loose the captive, well that's about the way in which sin enslaves us, and we need to be set free from that. Or good news to the poor, well that's the poor in spirit, or the poverty in our soul that sin creates. I think beloved, when we do that, we actually do something to the gospel itself. That the gospel is principally this message that the Son of God has come into the world incarnate, wrapped in human flesh. He's taken upon himself our likeness.

He did that to take our place, to die on the cross as an atonement for sin, as an offering to God, to appease God, who is angry with us because of our sin. But he also took upon himself our flesh, in order to live before God, perfectly, righteously in order to supply to God the righteousness that we could never supply, to be as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:30, to become wisdom from God. That is our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. But he is, you realize, doing that in our flesh, fully God and fully man. And he is, you realize, if you follow the gospel, spending a lot of time not with the spiritual savants, but with precisely the people who were named here, the poor, the blind, the marginalized, the outcasts, women, beggars, and so on.

That we need not just the religion of the heart, as evangelicalism has so wonderfully given to the world, but we need a body and soul religion. We need a faith that is at once captivated by the world to come, but also active in the world that is. That is at once concerned about the souls of men, but also about the bodies of men. We need to have those things rightly sort of related for Jesus to ask these profound questions like, what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to lose his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? Rhetorical questions whose answers are obvious, that there is nothing, even the entire world that is worth your soul.

That can be offered as a ransom for your soul. That could come close to the value of your soul. So the soul is exceedingly precious, and if we had to do business only with one thing, we must do business with our souls. That we might find a righteousness with God, and forgiveness with God, and eternal life with God, and Christ has come to give it. Yet those questions haven't established a priority of the relationship between body and soul, are not at all meant to suggest that the body, that this lived life is unimportant.

This is why Jesus can say to the Pharisees things like this, in Matthew 23:23. The Pharisees are on about tithing, even down to mint, and things of that sort. Jesus says hey that's cool, good that you did that. You should've did that. But you should also not neglect the weightier matters of the law. Mercy, and justice, and faithfulness. Do your duty to God, but do your duty to man as well. We preach a gospel that saws that in half, and sort of leaves us unconcerned about questions of justice, unconcerned about this embodied life that we live, then we are only preaching half a gospel, we're only preaching a part of the truth, a part of the kingdom that Christ has brought.

Notice there are two actions in this text. Three times the Lord says he's been sent to proclaim, to proclaim, to proclaim. But then I wonder if you notice that the end of verse 18, it says they're not to proclaim, but to set at liberty those who are oppressed. Again, we recognize the unique historical redemptive context of this text, we know there are some unique things going on here. We know that this text applies to Jesus in ways that it doesn't apply directly to us.

However, if we're to follow the Lord's example in Christian ministry and witness, then I think we must also commit ourselves to these same two strategies. Proclaiming, and liberation. Proclaiming, or preaching, and setting free. I don't mean simply the preaching of liberation, but preaching in addition to efforts at liberation. At setting the oppressed free, of setting the captive free. In this context, and what we're discussing particularly those who are unjustly or disproportionately criminalized and incarcerated.

Of course Jesus quotes here from Isaiah that Jewish prophet, and if we wonder if he's really talking about liberty, actual physical liberty, and setting people free, we only need to go back to Isaiah and to read the context of the original quote, and you'll see that in Luke, sort of quotation, he stops just short of something else that Isaiah writes when he says and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. Indeed this is a constant thing throughout the

book of Isaiah. Just in the opening chapter Isaiah comes to Israel with this prophecy from God, really up braiding Israel for their unfaithfulness to God, and their unfaithfulness to each other.

The principal concern seems to be that they are oppressing one another, and being unjust with one another, and so Isaiah writes to them, Isaiah one verses 16 and 17, wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Well what evil? He goes on, he says cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widows cause.

We could multiply the Biblical references to justice for widows, orphans, sojourners, and the oppressed. There are too many to recount. So maybe what we might do is just summarize it with James understanding of a religion that's pure and undefiled. What does it do? Well it cares for the widows, and the orphans, and their affliction. In other words, the pure religion, undefiled, is concerned for the oppressed, for the afflicted, for the suffering, for the marginalized, for the vulnerable, for persons who have been incarcerated, rather justly or unjustly. Rather with an appropriate sentence or an inordinate sentence. Pure religion, pure and undefiled, expresses itself in embodied practical concern, and efforts at relieving suffering and oppression.

Our Lord himself puts it even more dramatically in Matthew 25, which has been referenced already earlier today. You remember what he says to his disciples, that when they visited those in prison, they were visiting as it were, him. So identify as Christ, with the prisoner that to serve the prisoner out of faith, and a concern for justice, is to serve Christ.

If we're going to be Christians, Christ like ones, than we must take seriously the Biblical commands to do justice. Never skip the two letter words in scripture. To D, O, do justice. Not merely talk about it and attend conferences about it, all that's good, but to set yourself to the doing of it. And taking these commands seriously will require us to swim again against the strong historical tide of not all of evangelicalism, but certainly much of evangelicalism, conservative protestant Christians have been getting this wrong for so long, that a suggestion that Christians should be positively engaged in causes like ending mass incarceration feels like a lot of Christians, feels like heresy.

I don't doubt that there are Christians maybe watching online who are surprised that the Billy Graham Center is hosting a summit on mass incarceration. That these kinds of things feel like different worlds to us. It's an indication that our sort of spiritual outlook is shaped less by the Bible, and more by things we've just inherited historically and culturally. So that you don't think that's merely my opinion, one of my favorite historians, Mark Knoll, a Wheaton grad I think, Wheaton grad, was at Notre Dame. His wonderful book *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, has some things to say about evangelicalism, and the mass incarceration that was going on in the 1700s as evangelicalism is arising in Britain and England, and that mass incarceration we better known as the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Knoll is sort of thinking about, why do evangelicals seem to have missed this? I'll give you four short quotes from that book. Number one he says, in America, evangelical anti-slavery failed because there were so many slave holders, and so many of them were evangelicals.

Here's a second quote. The limitations of evangelicalism appeared most clearly in challenges requiring notice, either systematic and comprehensive analysis, or cooperative and coercive actions. In other words, evangelicalism historically broke down as a world view and broke down as sort of guidance to a Christian life, precisely where evangelicals most needed to be able to think systemically, and to respond to systemic problems, like mass incarceration, or like the complex of laws that gave us the slave trade, and child slavery.

So we're not surprised for example that when you are on blogs as I am sometimes, or on Twitter as I am sometimes, and you use the language of systematic injustice or things like that, you get this fierce blow back from some quarters of evangelicalism who think that's just anathema, and not merely trying to think carefully about a complex world, and then live out the ethics of the Bible in it.

Another quote from Mark Knoll. Changing the world was never as important for the early evangelicals as changing the self, or as fashioning spiritual communities in which changed selves could grow in grace. You hear that expressed when we think about the gospel and mass incarceration in little sort of phrases like this. Bring up a subject like this, and folks say just preach the gospel, just preach the gospel. My sister said it so wonderful earlier, it is wonderful and necessary, and it's an irreducible minimum in my mind that we should be ministering God's word to people, and as Harold Trulear pointed out earlier, I think we find healthier churches inside of prison than some of the churches that we attend outside of prison.

So we're not doing less than the ministry of the word, but I do think when we're dealing with these sort of complex issues, we have to do more than the ministry of the word. We want a kind of Christian faith that is robust enough intellectually, and Biblically to engage the world in its complexity, rather than to be reductionistic and simplistic. So, we yes want to see selves changed, we also want to see in the best sense of the phrase, societies change.

Last quote from Mark Knoll. Referring to evangelicals in the 1700s. They could turn so obsessively inward as to ignore the structures of social evil. Most important, evangelicals could trivialize the Christian gospel by treating it as a ballyhooed commodity to be hocked for its power to soothe a nervous, dislocated people in the opening cultural markets of the expanding British empire. Let's see what he's saying there.

To be so concerned about a religion of the heart, that you just blind to social structures. Things like mass incarceration. These early evangelicals could, in the words of Knoll, wind up effectively trivializing the gospel, by sort of offering the gospel as a salve to this nervousness in the new world, and the burgeoning economies of the new world. If you've been around evangelical discourse for any length of time, you've heard many evangelicals lament what Christian Smith and others call therapeutic moral deism, as a substitute for Christianity. I think

Mark Knoll is saying effectively one of the earliest forms of the prosperity gospel, and therapeutic moral deism is right here in the 1700s in the way the evangelicals use the gospel as a sort of salve for this nervousness rather than understanding the gospel as this divine force that's broken into the world compelling men to be born again, and compelling them to serve their fellow man in the same gospel.

So, there's been this corruption from inception. I think we want to be aware of as people called to a body and soul religion. Evangelicalism has been ethically and morally compromised since George Whitfield decided he could acceptably run an orphanage while using slaves. Evangelicalism has been theologically and ethically compromised since Jonathan Edwards decided to defend the revivals but not defend the release of Africans enslaved. An example of some of our greatest figures. We see this catastrophic inconsistency, that sort of reveals a willingness to divide the gospel message from the gospel life. To divide body and soul.

So, when our Lord takes these two actions to both proclaim and set free, I think it's calling us into that same basic MO. Proclamation of the gospel, and this sort of moving deliberative agenda toward those who oppress, and imprison, and marginalize. Just a final word here. Notice the audience for our Lord's preaching in this text. Again it's the poor, the captives, the blind. It's not an exhaustive list but representative, and it does seem to be though a preferential list. Poverty, captivity, and blindness all represent again the marginalized and the broken, again the typical evangelical treatment of this is to spiritualize the text.

But what if Jesus really meant the poor, and the captive, and the blind? I think there's good reason to believe that when we look at who Jesus spent the most time with, as precisely who he meant. The poor, the blind, the oppressed. Arguably, in a spiritual sense, the most blind people, captive people in Jesus' day were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. There's an odd dinner party or two that he's invited to, that he attends. But by and large, there are crippled people, and people with blindness, and people who are deaf, thronging to him. There are marginalized communities who are coming to him, and those seem to be the people that he delights to spend time with. Long, extended sessions with. All night sessions of healing, and teaching, and caring for them.

The question becomes, are those the folks we as gospel Christians spend the most time with? That we move to, that we instinctively serve. Or are we more excited that there's some celebrity who has recently confessed faith in Christ? Are we more enamored with power? Wanting to be close to the power brokers. There's something about this sort of directional energy of American Christianity that just feels utterly contrary to the directional energy of Jesus Christ. Think about the questions we've heard in some of the panels today, or comments today.

Our brother Vince Bacote was up here earlier and he asked us this really helpful question. Are we thinking about forming people so that they are really thinking about being better neighbors? This is where a lot of this just gets fleshed out in neighbor love isn't it? He asked this question, are churches even asking their members about any members of their families that are

being effected by incarceration? Or are we more or less silent and deaf to it? Or that wonderful testimony we heard from John Kelly, wasn't that encouraging?

You remember how our brother exhorted us? He says, if we're going to talk about mass incarceration but not make our dinner tables available, that's a fail. When he says, be twice as aggressive in meeting people, hitting the front door of reentry, into the community, as we are about going into the prisons and ministering. That's a really good reorienting of our thinking wasn't it? And in that question he asked, can I disciple a convicted murderer?

Jesus certainly would have. His apostles certainly spent time in such company, and those of us who would follow him need to spend time with the people that he would spend time with. So we think about the gospel, and mass incarceration, I want to suggest to you that there's a ... I'm going to be misusing this, I'm no economist, but there's a supply side and a demand side. That most of our thinking has been on the supply side, we wish to go and supply the gospel to those that we think of as sort of needing it, which is every creature.

But we don't often think about the demands the gospel makes on us. The demands to go to the captive, to set the prisoner free. To do that in the very tangible and practical ways that we've been hearing throughout the day. So may the Lord help us. May the Lord help us to be faithful, to call people to repent sin, to believe in Jesus, crucified, buried, and resurrected for our salvation. May he also compel us to live like Jesus, and to go into the highways, and the hedges, and to call those who have been cast out into the feast. To call them into the kingdom. To meet the father in his love, and may we lay down our own lives just as he did to do that.

Let's pray together. Father we have so much learning to do, in how to live for you, and how to serve oh Lord in your world. Free us from that conceit, free us from that hubris that sometimes leads us to think that we have it all together. We don't, there's more gospel for us to understand, and there certainly is more Bible for us to live out. Particularly when it comes to justice, and righteousness, and mercy, and equity, and all those good things that are really echoes of love. Help us to love well. Help us to serve well. And grant oh Lord that the objects of your love, the poor, the blind, the broken, the oppressed would know your love through your people. We ask this father in Jesus name, amen.