

## Meditations by Irene Jackson

### Meditation on *Matthew 3:1-6: The Good News is Simple but Profound!*

The church in mission is called to share the good news of God in Christ which includes both the bad news that we must repent and acknowledge our sins, but also the good, glorious, and profound news that through God in Christ our sins are forgiven! Just before Matthew introduces the adult Jesus, he presents John the baptizer in the “wilderness of Judea” announcing: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near[.]” (*Matthew 3:1-2*).<sup>1</sup> By using the word translated “repent” which comes from the Greek word *metanoeo* meaning “turn around,” John was asking for “...a decision by the whole person to turn around,”<sup>2</sup> but without any mention of forgiveness according to Matthew, contrary to the accounts in *Mark (1:4)*, and *Luke (3:3)*.<sup>3</sup> He was preaching outdoors with no air-conditioning, no power point presentation, no nursery and no refreshments.

Yet people came from Jerusalem, Judea and all the region along the Jordan river to hear this simple yet profound and demanding message, and were being baptized and confessing their sins (*Matthew 3:5*). They came and responded, not knowing whether they would be forgiven or not. It seems amazing that people would come for miles to hear such a simple basic message that demanded so much from them, delivered by a man strangely attired, perhaps a bit unkempt, (v. 4). Our mainline churches should change our mission message of the good news of God in Christ to clearly articulate repentance for sins and forgiveness. This simple but profound message is the only message that has ever been preached by Billy Graham, and yet many people continue to respond favorably to this message as the people did to John’s, because they know it to be true. We can be sure it is true, because Jesus confirmed it as the good news of God when he also said: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near[!]” (Mt. 4:17).

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> Verlyn D. Verbrugge, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 367.

<sup>3</sup> James L. Mays, ed., *The Harper Collins Bible Commentary*, Rev. ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 873, note on Mt. 3:1-12.

## **Meditation on *Luke 4:16-30*: God's Good News is for Everyone!**

Jesus' first message about his mission as recounted in the gospel of Luke demonstrates that God's good news in Christ is meant for everyone! Jesus announces his mission in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, reading from the portions of the *Isaiah* scroll and saying that he has been "anointed..to bring good news to the poor, ...proclaim release to...captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor[,] (*Luke 4:16-21*)."<sup>4</sup> The initial response to this good news is favorable, yet skeptical because those present see Jesus as Joseph's son, so Jesus admonishes them for failing to honor him as a prophet of God, yet wanting to claim for their own the blessings he has announced, (Lk. 4:22-24). Jesus recounts how the prophet Elijah assisted the widow of Zarapath in Sidon instead of any Israeli widows during a long famine, and how Elisha cleansed the Syrian Naaman from leprosy rather than any lepers in Israel, as examples of the nonexclusivity of God's blessings (v. 24-27).<sup>5</sup> The thought that Gentiles who were oppressing them would receive God's favor, just as the Gentile widows had from the long ago prophets of Israel; and perhaps Jesus' failure to complete the expected message of vengeance found in the *Isaiah* scroll; may have caused the congregation to become enraged and try (unsuccessfully) to hurl Jesus off of a cliff (v. 25-30), (Bosch, 89, 109-110).

This Lukan passage speaks to missions by demonstrating that the good news of God as proclaimed by Jesus was not and is not for a select group. Jesus' • hometown congregation did not have any special claim on the good news that Jesus brought for the poor, oppressed, captive and blind. Jesus spoke against exclusivity and in favor of God's impartiality as had been shown through the ministries of Elijah and Elisha to benefit Gentiles. As the church in mission we should remember that the good news of the Lord's favor is to be shared with everyone, especially the poor and oppressed, but also those who are, or may be viewed as the "oppressor," (Bosch, 112).

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<sup>4</sup> All quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise specified.

<sup>5</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 89.

## **Meditation on *Luke 15:1-10*: The Seekers of the Lost**

Christian mission can be compared to seeking after a lost sheep or thoroughly cleaning house to find a lost coin. Luke's accounts of Jesus telling stories of a shepherd leaving ninety-nine sheep to seek a lost one, and of a woman setting aside nine silver coins to search high and low for a lost coin, illustrate Christ's mission to seek and save those who are lost. In the stories Jesus also compares the joy expressed by the shepherd finding his lost sheep and the woman finding her lost coin, to the joy that occurs in heaven when one sinner repents, (*Luke 15:3-10, 5:32*). Jesus tells these parables in response to certain Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling because "...this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them, (Lk. 15:2),"<sup>6</sup> these "sinners," earlier described as "tax collectors and sinners" coming to listen to Jesus, (Lk.15:1).

Both the shepherd and the woman spend considerable effort in the recovery of their lost property. The shepherd takes risks, leaving behind ninety-nine sheep and searching for the one lost in the wilderness. The woman energetically cleans her house, which was likely to have a very small window and be dimly lit, having a dirt floor with dried reeds and rushes that would have made finding any coin dropped there especially difficult.<sup>7</sup> In both cases, once the searchers find their lost property, they call to neighbors and friends and have a great celebration over recovery of what was lost. Jesus says that there is as much, or even more joy in heaven when one sinner repents, (Lk. 15:7, 10).

These parables suggest that our church in mission may need to leave behind those already in the fold and venture out into risky territory to seek those lost sheep who may be far away geographically, or perhaps just seem remote by reason of their ethnicity or social status. Or perhaps we need to thoroughly "clean house" in our church, and shine the light of God's love where it has not shone in a while in order to "find" the church's mission, whether it be far away or among a marginal group within our own neighborhood or town.

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<sup>6</sup> All quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise specified.

<sup>7</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 202.

## **Meditation on *Matthew 13:1-9*: A Sower is Supposed to Sow!**

Matthew's recounting of the parable of the sower sowing seed presents an image of the mission of the church, i.e. sowing the word of God--the news of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, (*Matthew 13:1-9*; 1:23). Most sermons I have heard focus on the type of ground on which the seed is sown; however, I believe focusing on the sower's actions--the subject of one sermon I remember from a while ago--will tell us more about the work of missions than analyzing soil. The sower in this parable is sowing seed everywhere: on "the path;" on "rocky ground;" "among thorns;" and on "good soil," (Mt. 13:4,5,7,8<sup>8</sup>). The sower only obtained a harvest from the "good soil," but miraculously, the good soil produced a crop 30, 60 and 100 times the seed the sower had planted.

Matthew has Jesus explaining this parable by comparing the effect the quality of the soil had on the seed to how one responds to the word of the kingdom of God based on one's ability to hear and understand the word and then bear fruit, (Mt.13:18-22). Jesus talks about "what was sown" and/or the "one who hears the word," without mentioning the sower. In the Markan account, Jesus explains the parable by beginning: "The sower sows the word[,]" (*Mark 4:14*), and then mentioning sowing in each of the four instances, before he talks about the response to what was sown. (Mk.4:15-20). Mark's focus on sowing, which must come before any response can be expected is a more appropriate image for missions.

As the church pursues its mission of spreading the good news of the coming of God in Christ, it must do so by sowing seeds everywhere, lavishly, even indiscriminately.<sup>9</sup> Our churches sometimes focus too much on whether certain activity will bring certain numerical results, or worse undertake activity that bears no relation to spreading the good news. Imagining instead the church as a sower sowing seed everywhere, lavishly, even joyfully, but leaving the results to God, may be a liberating image of mission!

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<sup>8</sup> All quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise specified.

<sup>9</sup> James L. Mays, ed., *The Harper Collins Bible Commentary*, Rev. ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 886, note on Mt. 13:1-9.

## **Meditation on *Matthew 5:43-48*: The Church's Mission is to Shine!**

Immediately after delivering the Beatitudes, Jesus tells his disciples who will form his church, that they are to be salt to the earth and a light in the world, (*Matthew 5:13-14*). The Beatitudes, which have been described as a vision of "...what will happen as the rule of heaven becomes established on earth,"<sup>10</sup> begin with a stanza of the blessings that will come to the oppressed, i.e. those poor in spirit, mourning, meek, and hungry and thirsty for righteousness, (v. 3-6). The Beatitudes continue with a promise of reward for those "...who join God in alleviating the suffering of those [oppressed] described in the [first stanza]," with Jesus warning that those so acting will likely be persecuted for their efforts, (*ibid.*). When Jesus then declares that the church is salt and light, this may be viewed as the ideal that will transpire *if* the church is true to its mission to bless those oppressed persons, the poor in spirit, etc., by the church's actions in being merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and acting so righteously (v. 7-11), that its members will be persecuted. But Jesus' declaration comes with a warning! Those churches or disciples failing to be God's salt and light in the world, will be like ruined salt to be thrown out and trampled because it lost its saltiness, or like a lamp hiding under a bushel, which is worthless. Even though the Beatitudes set impossible standards, Christians together as the "church-in-mission" should pursue the "superior justice" of these standards<sup>11</sup> so that the world may see our "good works" and "give glory" to our Father in heaven (v.16).

In addition to persecution we may expect failure as did Paul when he was stoned and left for dead in Lystra after preaching the good news there, (*Acts 14:8-25*). Yet he continued on, preaching in other cities and even returning to Lystra, and then encouraging disciples in Antioch to "continue in the faith" by saying: "It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God[.]" (*Acts 14:8-25, NRSV*). Our churches in mission must be aware of the risks of being salt and light to the world, but we must take the risk anyway or suffer the alternative of being worthless and cast aside.

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<sup>10</sup> James L. Mays, ed., *The Harper Collins Bible Commentary*, Rev. ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 875.

<sup>11</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991),70.