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Chapter 1

IS DOING GOOD, **GOOD** ENOUGH?

Buckled to the ground, covered in dirt, aching from a life of sickness and desperation; frantic for healing from a disease you don't understand, but know has killed your children, killed your family, killed your people, and is killing you.

Thirsty to your core, sun pounding down, willing to give all you have for a solitary drop of clean water. Praying that a well can be dug, water can be found, life can go on.

It's just another cold night on the concrete, getting harder by the day, but there's nowhere to go. The rain starts to fall and the wind picks up, but there's nowhere to go. You beg for food, for money, for hope.

Legs raw with welts from infected mosquitoes. You can hear your baby scream and know she is dying but are helpless to change her malaria-induced destiny. You desperately swat and brush the bugs away, but you know your other children will be bitten too.

You're still lying on the ground, covered in dirt, desperate for healing. Another year goes by; still no clean water, still no hope for life. Two more children gone, your welt-scarred legs a constant reminder of their fate . . .

Your life is draining out and deliverance doesn't come. You cling to the last bit, grip it in your fingers, because you fear the end and what waits beyond your last breath. You know there is something greater, but you don't know what. You pray that God, if there is a God, will reach out and speak. You pray for an answer to forever, but it doesn't come. Just one more shot, one more pill, one more glass of dirty water, one more lonely, hungry night, and then it is all over. You reach your last breath and then eternity.

Some two thousand years ago, while leaving a town filled with broken, hurting, hungry people, Jesus paused along the road to Jerusalem in response to a cry for mercy from Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. Jesus engaged him with a question: "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus responded with a request for sight, which Christ granted.[1]

On the surface, the encounter seems ordinary—a reasonable question with an obvious answer. But Bartimaeus was poor and blind; his life was unmistakably marked by his affliction, and Christ knew that before the encounter ever occurred. So why did He ask the question?

Bartimaeus lived with the seen and the unseen—the transient and the eternal. But for Christ, everything was seen—everything was eternal. Christ understood the reality that we see with physical eyes, the visible consequences of a broken world in our lives, but we often fail to see with spiritual eyes the eternal consequences that go with them. Christ said to people, "Your sins are forgiven," and they responded, "Yes, Lord, but I can't see." He said, "Your sins are forgiven," and they said, "Yes, Lord, but I'm hungry." "Your sins are forgiven . . ." "Yes, Lord, but I'm dying."

Today around our world, people just like Bartimaeus have real physical needs. But like you and me, they also have spiritual needs. Each of us, whether we realize it or not, needs to see Christ for who He really is. We need to have a powerful encounter with our Creator that can trans-

form our eternal destinies, not just our physical circumstances.

PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL NEEDS

In 1854, Charles Spurgeon began preaching in London. The city was engulfed in such poverty and social injustice that just a decade later, another London minister, William Booth, left his pulpit and walked out into the streets, founding what would become the Salvation Army to reach the poor, homeless, hungry, and destitute. It was in this London that on June 18, 1876, Spurgeon preached the following words:

> Men have enough practical sense always to judge that if professed Christians do not care for their bodily wants, there cannot be much sincerity in their zeal for men's souls. If a man will give me spiritual bread in the form of a tract, but would not give me a piece of bread for my body, how can I think much of him? Let practical help to the poor go with the spiritual help which you render to them. If you would help to keep a brother's soul alive in the higher sense, be not backward to do it in the more ordinary way.[2]

Perhaps from these words, Spurgeon was believed to have said, "If you want to give a hungry man a tract, then wrap it up in a sandwich." Many since that time have struggled with this idea and have reflected that it might be better said that if you want to give a hungry man a sandwich, you should wrap it up in a tract.

The sandwich-and-tract debate highlights the basic reality of Christ's encounter with each of us. The hungry need food, but we all need redemption. The blind need sight, but we all need to see our condition and separation from God. Every encounter between God and us has these two dimensions—the physical and the spiritual.

Christ came to seek and to save the lost. He moved through the world reaching out in perfect love to bring people to Himself and His offer of eternal life. The focus of Christ's life, as given by His father, was to provide a singular opportunity for whosoever might believe in Him to not perish but have everlasting, reconciled life with Him. This fact is the cornerstone of Scripture.

Yet on His way to the cross, Christ invested His life in people. Not just twelve people, but countless thousands of men, women, and children. He fed, healed, and raised them from the dead. He demonstrated the purest form of selfless love the world has ever seen. And incredibly, He did this for both those who would come to follow Him and those who would not.

Even though He knew that the world was passing away and that all of the temporal afflictions He encountered would pass away with it, He provided temporal solutions for thousands of people who primarily had an eternal, spiritual need. Stated simply, Christ "did good" and instructed us to do the same.

Christ's attention to both spiritual and physical needs is illustrated for us frequently in the Gospels, but with no greater simplicity than in Mark 1:32–39, where after healing Simon's mother-in-law and teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, word of His power and authority began to spread through Galilee, attracting the masses:

> That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. . . .
>
> And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Because of Christ's compassion and healing ministry, the entire city gathered at His door and brought Him *all* who were sick and oppressed, but He healed and delivered only *many* of them. When they returned the next morning looking for Him to finish His work, He was gone to spend time with His Father. When they finally found Him, instead of healing and delivering the remaining sick and oppressed who needed His touch, He left the town to go elsewhere to preach because that is why He came.

Christ didn't minimize His compassionate work of healing and delivering the oppressed, but He also made clear that He came to *preach*, to proclaim a message as a herald with authority and gravity such that people would listen to and obey His words.[3] Christ did both things with clarity, harmony, and purpose.

AN EMERGING OPPORTUNITY

For perhaps the first time in human history the question of "can" in relation to humanitarian and social investment has been rendered largely irrelevant. Modern technologies in the areas of travel, communication, science, and medicine have provided mankind with an amazing capacity to identify global need and respond in ways that were unattainable even fifty years ago. Science and technology have given mankind the practical capacity to "do good" on an unprecedented scale.

In 1907, Walter Rauschenbusch, in his incendiary work *Christianity and the Social Crisis,* opined that "the world is getting small."[4] We can now say with confidence that he was right. Consider that in 1950, widespread international air travel was yet to be developed. In 1960, consumer debt was just emerging as an idea, let alone a tool for personal commerce and global influence. In 1975, most American families had no computer in their home. In 1990, most American families had never used a cell phone. In 1994, most American families had never used the Internet.

In just fifty years, the landscapes of information, communication, consumer debt, and travel have changed forever. If you wanted, you could find a village in Africa today, board an airplane tomorrow, and within a few days be sending photos, emails, and telephone calls home about the needs you are encountering. Even fifteen years ago, this would have been difficult, if not impossible.

Closer to home, we can make donations with the click of a mouse, provide shoes for children by shopping online, support AIDS relief by buying a T-shirt, and raise awareness of almost anything by wearing the right colored rubber wristband or lapel pin.

Individuals like Bill Clinton, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates, Bono, Oprah Winfrey, Caroline Kennedy, and others are leading a growing number of

influential men and women in a discussion about giving, charitable investment, and social entrepreneurship. There can be no question that, at least in part, the latter half of the first decade of the twenty-first century is marked by an emphasis on our individual and collective need to "do good."

The political and social dialogue concerning religion is largely refocusing on the idea that we can be united in love, compassion, and the betterment of mankind. Not surprisingly, the Christian church is experiencing a resurgence of the social gospel with congregations, leaders, individuals, and nonprofit groups seeking to make significant social investments in their communities and around the world. "Doing good" is a new commodity within the corporate and philanthropic worlds. But for the Christian, the concept is more complex.

Now, more than ever, because of the almost limitless possibilities for global interaction and social investment, we need to start asking, "Of all the good that can be done in the world, what good *should* be done and *why*?" Is "doing good, good enough," or are we called to something more?

A SPECTRUM OF RESPONSES

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his 1928 lecture "Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity," gave a profound explanation of Christ's call to the lost. Christ demands an answer to one question: "Will you follow Me wholeheartedly or not all?" There is no room in the answer to mix our own causes with His.

Bonhoeffer went on to conclude that "Christianity preaches the unending worth of the apparently worthless and the unending worthlessness of what is apparently so valuable. The weak shall be made strong through God and the dying shall live."[5]

His comments reaffirmed that Christ and His relationship to us is all consuming and countercultural in its values and perspectives. When reading Bonhoeffer and those influenced by his writing, it is difficult to miss the point that Christ does not invite us to share our lives and agendas with Him, but rather to totally give our lives and agendas to Him.

Somewhat paradoxically, Bonhoeffer, who was resolutely focused on eternity and fundamentally committed to discipleship for the Christian, was executed in 1945 by the Nazis for his role in the revolutionary cause of over-

throwing Hitler and the Nazi regime. In 1944, just prior to his execution and in preparation for a book, he observed that "the church is the church only when it exists for others. . . . To make a start, it could give away all its property for those in need."[6]

Bonhoeffer was doggedly committed to following Christ with an eternal perspective, but stood up for justice and the oppressed, making the investment that he believed was required of him—even to the point of death.

In his work *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer may have provided a solution to the dilemma he faced:

> The way of Jesus Christ, and thus the way of all Christian thought, is not the way from the world to God but from God to the world. This means that the essence of the gospel does not consist in solving worldly problems, and also that this cannot be the essential task of the church. However, it does not follow from this that the church would have no task at all in this regard. But we will not recognize its legitimate task unless we first find the correct starting point.[7]

Much like Bonhoeffer, Christians in the twenty-first century are confronted with the complexities of engaging the topic of social investment and the Christian life. On the one hand, we may be tempted to totally abandon social investment in furtherance of the message of salvation and resolutely focus on the pre-eminence of eternity, choosing to center on Christ's death and resurrection and the need for spiritual rebirth. On the other hand, we may be tempted to dilute, if not abandon, the gospel for the achievement of temporal social goods, choosing to focus on Christ's acts of love and call to care for the poor and needy.

Not many people would define themselves as being aligned with either extreme, but we are all somewhere on the spectrum between them. Some of us resist or diminish temporal engagement because we are focused on the call of Scripture to proclaim the gospel, and see this life as a mere momentary passing. Others resist the gospel and the scriptural implications of death, heaven, and hell, and focus instead on the good that can be done on earth by being living illustrations of God's great love.

The New Testament undeniably teaches that the concerns of a revisited social gospel—poverty, hunger, water, homelessness, medical epidemics, social justice, equality, and environmentalism—ought to be concerns of the redeemed. Social investment ought to be important to every follower of Christ because our love must emulate God's love and our lives must emulate Christ's life.

It is equally undeniable that the Scripture proclaims that Christ was and is principally concerned with eternity and the reconciliation of the lost. Fundamentally, Christ came to earth to seek and to save, not to heal and feed. Just as Christ came to provide the only means for spiritual reconciliation with the Father, He calls the redeemed to the specific task of continuing His ministry of reconciliation.

Jesus was a humanitarian, but of a unique kind. He healed to reveal true healing. He fed to reveal true food. He quenched thirst to reveal everlasting water. Christ's actions were temporal, but His intended impact was for His every word and deed to be eternally transforming.

Christ understood that His life and our lives are rooted in the freedom of spiritual eternity, not the slavery of physical time and circumstances. This is precisely why He was so focused on what was unseen, the things above. Either eternity hung in the balance of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, or it did not. Either eternity hangs in the balance for each of us, irrespective of the quality or durations of our lives, or it does not.

If it doesn't, then you should stop reading this book. But if it does, if our lives are merely a drop of water in the oceans of eternity, then perhaps we should ask ourselves in the realms of evangelism and social justice, "What on earth are we doing?"