DIRTY FAITH

BRINGING THE LOVE OF CHRIST TO THE LEAST OF THESE

DAVID Z. NOWELL

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For Ileana, Carolena, Graziella, Tatiani,
Gleice, Yara, Alexandro, Calebe . . .

And the nameless, faceless millions of children
who have called the streets their home.

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Introduction

One billion children in our world live in poverty. That doesn't simply mean they have no Internet access or nice homes. It's more than the fact that they are hungry or have inadequate clothing. It means they're desperate; it means they are children being sold—or selling themselves. It means some are living in prison conditions more deplorable than you can imagine. It means twenty-one thousand children die of preventable causes *every* day.[1] Twenty-one thousand children.

Our God loves every one of them deeply, passionately, and he calls us to be the hands, feet, and heart of that love. He calls *all* of us to live out his love for them.

But getting there is not easy.

A refrain you will hear consistently throughout the following pages is that there are no super-Christians, but there certainly are some folks whose lives show they take Jesus very seriously. You'll never find a super-faith, but you may find a way of living that gives evidence to the presence of faith—and grace—in our lives.

This book is about a journey—a journey of faith and grace that is transformational to both the traveler and those

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encountered along the path. I hope you will sojourn here with me. The journey has a backstory, and telling it is the best way to introduce you to some people and some voices you will hear throughout this book.

The story begins over two decades ago. Actually, it starts many years before that, but for our purposes, we'll start in the late 1980s. At that time, reports began to filter out of South America that street children were being murdered in their sleep in some cities of Brazil. *Newsweek* magazine featured a story, "Who Is Killing Brazil's Street Children?"[2] The answer, it turned out, was the very people charged with protecting them: the police. Throughout the '80s, Brazil had faced a growing problem with street kids. Rapid changes in society, an exploding impoverished class, a collapse of family, and, for lack of a better term, a prevailing evil all melted into a maelstrom that drove uncountable numbers of children from their homes into the streets. Some estimates placed the mark as high as five million kids living on the streets, primarily in the big cities: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Campinas, Belo Horizonte.

And guess what? Kids don't last long living in that context: three to five years' life expectancy once they hit the streets.[3] They are exploited, abused, in constant danger. They are hungry, tired, afraid, angry. The boys become thieves to survive; almost all of the girls—and many of the boys—sell themselves. They all beg. By the late 1980s, the streets were populated by swarms of adolescent and preadolescent thieves, prostitutes, and beggars. Throwaway kids: filthy, disease-ridden, desperate. And yet they were all children God loves as much as he loves you and me, the kind of kids Jesus called his brothers and sisters.

These were not the kids next door; they were dangerous. Anyone on the streets was fair game for them. They harassed drivers. They snatched purses from women walking to their jobs. They robbed the patrons of shops and restaurants. *Children*

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God loves as much as he loves you and me. But businessmen didn't see it that way. No, these were not children created in the image of a loving Father. They were a pestilence, vermin, and they needed to be exterminated.

What happened next is well-documented. Businessmen began to hire vigilante gangs (whom the courts later determined to be off-duty local and federal police) to "sweep" the streets at night, killing the children as they slept. Over 4,600 assassinations of children are documented. And for the most part, Brazil turned a cold shoulder to the stories. Street vermin should expect no better. The body of one boy was found with a note stuck to his chest: "He lived on the streets. He would not go to school. He had no future. He deserved to die." On July 23, 1993, a vigilante group murdered eight sleeping children on the steps of the Candelária Church in Rio; red-colored outlines of eight bodies are permanently painted near where they died.[4]

But God loves these children. And if we are followers of Jesus, not just believers, we love them, too.

Back the story up a couple more decades and meet some serious followers. In the 1960s, Presbyterian missionaries Jack and Evangel Smith took their young family to Ethiopia. With hearts overwhelmed by the needs of the ever-present children of the streets, they started a job-training program for the kids. By the time the communist regime that had deposed Haile Selassie forced them out of the country in 1977, that backyard program called Hope Enterprises had legs of its own. Today, the indigenously run and supported program annually touches the lives of over ten thousand Ethiopian children.

By 1991, when the street-kid problem in Brazil was at its peak, the Smith family was in California. Jack and Evangel's son Philip was finishing college. David Swoap, President Reagan's deputy secretary of health and human services, knew of Jack's passion to transform the lives of children at mortal risk

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and Philip's calling to follow the same path as his dad. While Philip was thinking of work in Mozambique, Jack challenged him to consider Brazil instead, where the situation was so dire, so critical. They could not sit idly by while children died.

God loves these children. And when he tells us to defend the fatherless—that caring for the widow and orphan is the kind of religion he approves—he also promises to go there with us, to prepare our path, to make the provision.

So Philip and Jack cashed in their frequent-flyer miles and boarded a Pan Am flight to Brazil. No funding, didn't speak Portuguese, only a little experience working with mortal-risk children, but not really a plan. Just trusting a faithful God—and passionate about caring for his children. Before they ever touched down in Brazil, a casual conversation with a fellow passenger led to the donation of an orphanage property in Campinas, a major city of 1.2 million people about an hour's drive northwest of São Paulo. The abandoned orphanage, on a thirty-five-acre property known as the City of Youth, had closed in the late 1980s after several decades of operation, but now it was theirs. Once a place where children were warehoused, it was absolutely not the vision Jack and Philip had for their program—but it was a property with buildings, with potential, with promise. But remember: no understanding of the Portuguese language, and no money.

Jack returned to the U.S. hoping to secure operational funds. Philip stayed in Brazil, picking up a few words of Portuguese every day, learning the lay of the land, and trying to discern what they would do with this incredible gift that had been dropped in their laps. But the reality was that two years of abandonment to the jungles of Brazil will do a lot of damage to any facility, and the campus of the City of Youth was no exception to the rule. A local engineering firm donated the time to develop a firm bid on the cost of bringing the facility up to code. The

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number: $119,720, a sum far beyond the resources of the three men. Philip called Jack and David with the bad news.

But God (recurrent theme in the pages to follow) already had it all worked out.

As Isaiah puts it,

> If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
> with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
> and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
> and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
> then your light will rise in the darkness,
> and your night will become like the noonday.
> The Lord will guide you always;
> he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
> and will strengthen your frame.
>
> Isaiah 58:9–11

If you spend yourselves. God's not interested in our passive involvement. He wants us to immerse ourselves in being servants.

God was getting serious about making provision. Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in the Bay Area of California announced that the church would make a one-time grant to one start-up missions organization. The grant amount: $120,000. Jack was invited to apply, and, from among fifty applicants, their project was selected. Hope Unlimited for Children was born, with $280 left over to start work with the kids.

Another lesson on this journey: God promises provision, not ease of travel. *Manna and quail sound like a nice dinner, but would you really want to camp out in the desert for the next forty years?*

In the spring of 1992, Philip, beginning to get command of the foreign language, opened the doors of the City of Youth to receive the first boys who would call Hope home. Street kids were given a safe place to live with lots of love, educational

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and vocational programming, and recreational opportunities. A beautiful setting for beautiful children. What former street child would not love a place like this?

Every boy ran away.

Hugs were not enough. These children of the street needed discipline, structure, tough love. They needed a cultural current of their peers to sweep them in the right direction. They needed more than just a bed to sleep in at night and activities to keep them busy during the day.

The great change in Hope came with the hiring of a Brazilian policeman-turned-pastor, Uélide da Silva, whose years of experience on the streets had taught him how to command the respect of tough street boys. Soon the Hope model began to take shape. The City of Youth became a place where adolescent boys learned what it means to be part of a family, acquired educational and vocational skills, and had time for play, sports, and recreation. They learned that God loves them. It became a place with rules, expectations, and consequences. Kids started staying and calling the City of Youth home.

Now, over two decades later, it is evident God has been—and is—right in the middle of this thing. That initial boys' program is still going strong, but the campus is beautifully softened by the presence of a girls' counterpart. (Wait a few chapters until you hear how God pulled that one off.) Wonderful, godly young women who come from circumstances barely imaginable. Girls sold by their mothers as prostitutes when they were twelve, ten, nine years old. Girls abused, abandoned, exploited. Commodities. Giggling teenage girls whose lives have been transformed. *Precious children of God*. And Hope Unlimited has been blessed to be the agent of God's transformation in their lives. You'll read their stories as we wind our way along this journey.

Jack passed away after a battle with cancer in 1997, and Evangel claimed her heavenly crown a decade later. David still

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serves as a director emeritus on Hope's board. Philip has grown from the young man running the campus to the CEO of Hope, guiding our Brazilian leadership and the organization to envision new ways to minister, to live out love for God's kids. You'll see his name a lot in these pages.

I became the president of Hope in 2007. Partnering with Philip, we lead the U.S. component of the organization. The ministry—Christian *charity* as Paul uses the word in 1 Corinthians 13—continues to grow, evolve, and mature. There have been a lot of changes in twenty-plus years. A campus in a second city. A high-quality preschool ministering to hundreds of kids—and their parents—in a slum. Community-based homes for sibling groups. A transition program for graduates that actually works; documented employment and stable-living metrics for young adults two years out of our program consistently run in the high 70 to low 80 percentiles. A one-of-its-kind-in-the-world program for incarcerated kids—Jesus meant what he said when he called prisoners his brothers and sisters; I guess that makes them our brothers and sisters, too. A graduate church that is led, funded, and populated by Hope graduates, a beacon of God's light in an evilly dark Brazilian slum—and the place where we see our Hope grandchildren beginning to take their first steps down very different paths than their parents. Mission and vision programs that help churches from around the world begin to understand what it is to be light breaking forth in the darkness.

You will meet many of the kids of Hope in the pages to follow. I wish I could take every reader to Brazil with me and let the grace of God that spills out of these young lives absolutely soak you. To protect them, I've changed their names, but their stories are faithfully told.

As part of Hope, I've been blessed to get to know Philip, David, the incredible Brazilian team led by Pastor Derli Barbosa—who pour their lives into kids the world ignores—and, of course, the

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kids themselves. But I've also received a greater gift: a broader glimpse of followers of Christ who are really, *really*, serious about caring for peripheral people.

But I need to be very honest with you here. We—American churches, the Church, individual believers—are not there yet. Not where we need to be. Not where the love of Christ compels us to be. Usually not even close. Remember David's words in Psalm 23? "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows" (v. 5)? I fear we are not overflowing, spilling the grace of God on those Jesus called the "least of these, my brothers and sisters," because the dryness, superficiality, and sterility of our faith belies our ever having had our heads anointed with the extraordinary grace that is God's giving of himself to us. Scripture does not know an arm's length faith. Look what Paul says about Jesus himself:

> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.
>
> Philippians 2:6–7

And that is the way this faith business must work itself out in our lives. Followers of Christ become servants of others, especially those rejected by society, those living tertiary lives—the orphan, the child trafficked for her body, the child prisoner, the hungry child, the least of these.

This is a book about perspectives and possibilities. It is about looking at our world through the lens of grace, about seeing people as Christ does. It is about a different way of extending grace to and beyond the community of faith. It is about compassion—hurting alongside those in need.

But, again, it is not about a super-Christianity; I don't find that concept in the New Testament. It is about normative faith, the kind that lives out the life of Christ. The kind of faith our

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Lord expects of every one of us. A faith that embraces what society marginalizes; the kind that finds meaning and fulfillment in servanthood. A faith that rejects entitlement, status, privilege. A faith rarely clean and never sterile. It is a faith that lives life among the least of these, my brothers and my sisters. It is the embodiment of Christ in the midst of the darkest evil of our world.

I call it dirty faith.

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PART ONE

CONTEXT

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Throwaway Kids and Peripheral People

My name is Ileana.

When I was eight, my stepfather went to prison. My mother became a drug addict. We did not have much money, so she told me to go out and make some. I started collecting tin cans and other trash in the streets to recycle, but my mother always complained that I was not bringing home enough money.

One day the owner of the grocery store on the corner told me he thought I was beautiful. I told my mother, who became very quiet. That night she left the house very late, and I went to sleep before she returned. When she arrived back home, she woke me up and told me to go into the little plywood storage shed in our backyard. I did not understand, but when I got there, the grocery store owner was waiting for me, smiling and drunk. My mother asked me to

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lie down on the bed, and then she left. The grocery store owner tied my hands and feet to the old bunk bed that was there. I started to cry and asked him what he wanted. . . . He started to hit me, saying that I was useless, and then he began to abuse me.

The next day I was not allowed to leave the storage shed. I was locked up there for about three months, being abused two or three times a week. The first time they let me out I was terrified of everything. But then my mother stopped taking drugs and asked for my forgiveness. But my happiness did not last long. In less than two weeks the nightmare began again. This time I don't know how long I lived like this, being locked up for weeks at a time in the shed.

When I was thirteen, I stole some money my mother had hidden away that she had made from my prostitution. I ran away to my grandmother's house in São Paulo, where I had traveled a few times with my mother. I lived with my grandmother for one year, and then my mother came to visit, begging me to come back with her, saying that this time it would be better, and it was. But one night I slept at my older sister's house, and when I came back home my mother was completely high and started to beat me, and I was raped by her boyfriend.

I ran away again to live with my grandmother. While I was there, I went to Campinas to spend a few days with my cousin. One night I walked with her to the supermarket to buy some ingredients to make a cake. She told me to sit on a bench in a park down the street and wait for her. It was about ten o'clock. Suddenly two men came by in a car, pulled me inside, and stopped under a train overpass. They pulled me out of the car and tried to take my clothes off. I was able to get away and ran down the street to a taxi stand where a driver called the police.

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> From there, the police took me to the government emergency shelter. I could not go back to my cousin's house because she might have been involved in what had happened. They decided I should not go back to my mother's house, either. They had nowhere to send me. . . .

Cleana's story is unique but not exceptional.

In northeastern Brazil, in Thailand, in India, and in a thousand other places around our globe, adolescent prostitution plays a major role in regulated and unregulated commerce. Every year in Brazil, 250,000 adolescent and *preadolescent* girls enter the sex trade.[1] And child prostitution is just one face of the problem for those Jesus called "the least of these." Starvation, human slavery, entire people groups in refugee camps, profound generational poverty, imprisonment in subhuman conditions. Not exceptional; it is the normative for millions—perhaps billions—of people.

Take a look at the numbers:

2: Number of children murdered each month *inside* the walls of one children's prison in Brazil.

29: In the time it took you to read the previous page, twenty-nine children died of preventable causes.[2]

1,100,000: More than one million children are locked in prisons, usually in subhuman conditions: block-wall and steel-bar cells with little light or outside air. Their toilet, a hole cut in the concrete in a corner of the cell.[3]

153,000,000: The global economic collapse has pushed the number of social and biological orphans to (conservatively) 153 million. The vast majority of these children are left to survive on their own, without any significant adults in their lives.

200,000,000 and 27,000,000: Two hundred million children are exploited for labor; more than 27 million of the world's people are slaves.[4]

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1,100,000,000: If you were to line up all the children in the world side-by-side, every other one of the 2.2 billion children would be malnourished from lack of access to food. That's 1.1 billion (with a *b*) children who do not have sufficient food. More than 800 million people go to bed hungry every day, and 500 million people, more than two times the population of the United States, are on the verge of starvation.

It's hard to get worked up about numbers; when we see figures this big, they become meaningless. But the reality is that every one of these numbers represents a real person. Every one of the 21,000 children who will die of poverty today feels the pangs of hunger as surely as would our child or grandchild, or younger brother or sister. Every child soldier could have been a little boy playing with a toy truck in his front yard. Every girl sold to a man on the streets was someone's innocent daughter.

So what do we do about it?

If we read these numbers through the prism of pity, our first reaction is relief that no one we know is counted among the tragic numbers. Then we may give a few dollars or maybe even take a missions trip to try to make it nominally better for the generic "underprivileged." But the problem is, pity rarely sees the face beyond the number.

A good friend has a framed, embroidered motto on his desk: "*noblesse oblige*" (the obligation of the nobility). I sometimes give him a pretty hard time about it because it can symbolize all that is wrong about the Church's response to issues of poverty and need. It's like an uncomfortable line that was popular in the privileged class of the South in my childhood: "There but for the grace of God go I." Embedded within each phrase can be a subtle (or perhaps not so subtle) classism, elitism, usually with the unspoken undercurrent that we deserve all we have. God has looked on us with favor—and deep down, we know we deserved it.

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The condescending pity reflected in these phrases is the very opposite of Christian charity (using that word in the truest sense of 1 Corinthians 13). If you scratch most of us deeply enough, you will probably find a core belief that we somehow have a right to our stations in life. Doing for others is often less an act of grace than it is self-affirmation. By serving the "less fortunate," we confirm the rightness of our privileged status.

At the same time, if we can divorce these phrases from our self-righteousness and condescension, they speak to the very heart of the gospel. There *is* an obligation that comes with having been materially blessed, and it grows from the recognition that the blessing is unmerited. Deeply and profoundly understanding just how blessed we are can be a powerful motivation for blessing others.

That's where love comes into play, and we discover the difference between compassion and pity. Compassion takes a different track than does pity. Compassion is based on the recognition that we are all in this together. It could have worked out differently. What if you had been born in the slums of New Delhi? Would you have obtained your station in life if you had started in a hut in the African bush? What if home was North Korea? Bottom line here: You weren't born into affluence because God loves you more.

Compassion grows out of God-given and God-sanctioned love and demands a lifestyle of engagement, a conscious choice about consumption and generosity, a refusal to see those in need as "other." It means moving beyond our places of comfort and encountering a world that is dirty, ugly, and often painful.

It happened when I was a graduate student in theology and my friend was a senior in college. We were on one of those summer abroad trips that are now ubiquitous but were just then becoming popular. Making our way back from London's West End, I stepped over a drunk or addicted or mentally ill

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(take your pick) man lying in the subway passage. My friend stopped. "We've got to help."

"No."

"But, we've got to."

"No."

"But . . ."

"No," I said. "Your intervention would not help him anyway. He can go to a shelter; this is not our problem."

And so we walked away, a bit of anger in her eyes; self-certainty in mine. Never my problem, especially when the pain is self-inflicted. I prefer ouchless faith, clean grace.

Compassion.

Interesting word, that *compassion*. It means "to suffer alongside." I don't know how many times someone has said to me, "Your work must be very rewarding," or "This must make you feel really good." It's not, and it doesn't. I remember our first trip to Brazil, hearing the kids' stories, holding the dirty child of the sixteen-year-old prostitute, seeing the boys living under the overpass. My wife, Susan, and I returned home to the question, "Did you have a good time?"

No.

Taking seriously our Lord's command to care for the least of these is not about self-fulfillment or conscience-salving, and certainly not about having a good time. At its essence, it is about suffering alongside those who are hurting. As Paul says in Philippians: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:5–7 RSV). Suffering alongside those he came to redeem. Sharing our self-inflicted wounds.

Compassion. It means we don't get to step over those lying in our path.

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The Edict

Here's a bit of Bible trivia for you: Only one person in the parables of Jesus is given a name. Do you know who it is? Think about it for a minute.

Lazarus.

Lazarus is a poor beggar who lies at the gate of a rich man's home, hungry, diseased, ignored. The description of Lazarus that Jesus gives in Luke 16 is not very appealing: He was "covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores" (vv. 20–21). Recurring theme here: He didn't look like you and me. Not the kind of guy most of us would want to befriend or invite home for dinner. Why don't the heroes in Jesus' stories *look* like heroes?

Interesting turn here. It is not the rich man who has a name, but the poor, crippled beggar. Even more interesting, the name Lazarus means "the one whom God helps."

Did Jesus get the names mixed up? At least at first glance, the rich man is the one God helps and Lazarus is the one God forgot. "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day," we're told in verse 19. By virtually any standard, this rich man has found favor with God. Or has he?

The story takes a twist and the tables get reversed. Lazarus dies and the angels carry him to Abraham's side.

Get this picture. In Jesus' day, a formal dinner was held around a low table, and the guests reclined on their left sides, eating with their right hands, essentially leaning against the person on their left—in their bosom, if you will. That means that the guest of honor, the person to the host's right, was resting on the host's side. Now see it? In the Jewish hierarchy, Abraham was heaven's elite of the elite, the patriarch of the Jewish nation. And in this picture, Lazarus was not just some nameless beggar, lying at a

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rich man's gate; he was the guest of honor at a heavenly feast. Make that *the* heavenly feast.

But the rich man dies and winds up "in Hades, where he was in torment" (Luke 16:23).

Oh. I guess Lazarus *was* the one who God helped.

When we focus on the big picture, this is subversive stuff. You may have the money, the power, and the position now, but that is not how it will work out in the cosmic play. Subversive. Have you heard the old African American spiritual "Rock My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham"? This is where it comes from. The poor slave in the field could sing this song, essentially saying, "I may be the slave now, and you may be the master, but one of these days, one of these days . . ." Do you think the slave owner got it?

Here is a question, though: How does Jesus know the rich man is going to end up in hell? Why is this a foregone conclusion? Obviously God liked him enough to let him be wealthy on earth. He wore all the trappings of blessing. Shouldn't there have been some carry-over? Why hell? Is it just because he is rich? I certainly hope not, because if that's the case, we're all in trouble. If you are wealthy enough to have purchased this book, you are almost certainly among the wealthiest 2 percent of all the people who have ever lived in the world. We are the purple and fine-linen crowd. If wealth condemns to hell, then that's where we are all headed.

The answer has to be something else. Maybe it can be found in some other words of Jesus:

> Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me." They also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or

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> thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" He will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."
>
> Matthew 25:41–45

The least of these. The Lazaruses of the world. Maybe the kid under the overpass. Or the man in the subway. Peripheral people. Tertiary lives.

You did not do for me. Tough words.

I have a friend who relates the story of a Sunday school class he was teaching. On one Sunday they studied a particularly difficult passage. A businessman in the class reflected for a moment on the Scripture and then said, "I bet Jesus wished he hadn't said that."

I don't know about your theology, but my understanding of Scripture is that it is a lot more likely that Jesus meant to say exactly what he said in this passage, and if we wish he had not said these words, it's our problem, not his. There are times in God's Word when we're demanded to call on a faith that pushes us to step beyond our level of comfort and encounter a world that is not always pretty, not always easy, not always nice.

Dirty faith, if you will.

Jesus certainly seems to be pretty serious about it. He doesn't toss around words like *depart*, *cursed*, and *eternal fire* for effect. He's not given to hyperbole. Hear what he has to say: It is not just our attitude, but also our action toward the least of these that is the standard of what he deems to be righteous or unrighteous. If we understand righteousness to be the product of God's grace, then what Jesus is telling us here is that it is very easy to determine who has experienced the grace of God that transforms the unrighteous into the righteous. You can always identify the righteous by their attitude and activity toward the least of these.

Always.

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It is not an indicator, it is not a sign, there is no gray area here. It is a determinant. According to Jesus, if you have experienced God's grace, this is how you will live in relationship to those in need. So it is easy to know where the rich man winds up. He knew Lazarus—he called him by name—but he really couldn't be bothered to care about him, "to do unto him." So that's where James gets it: "Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:15–17).

A question: Do we take Jesus seriously today? When the least of these are hoping to pick up the crumbs that fall from the Church's table, I wonder what kind of gospel we are preaching. Let me say this as clearly as I can: The gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be separated from caring for the widow, the orphan, the hungry, the sick, the prisoner.

John says it a bit differently: "But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did" (1 John 2:5–6).

Must live as Jesus did. That's a tough one—one I'm not sure I have completely worked out. But I do know it starts with relationships, both with God and with others—and not just those who look like us. John's point is that we cannot claim that our walk with God is where it should be, or perhaps even that we have a walk with him at all, if every other part of our life doesn't reflect that relationship. Preaching the good news of eternal life while ignoring present pain is an emaciated and impoverished gospel. True righteousness means that we feed, we heal, we touch.

Dirty faith.

It's the kind of faith that cannot be practiced in isolation. To truly love the orphan, the child prostitute, the widow, and

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the prisoner requires relationships, and perhaps this relationship aspect is what we have lost as a Church. Far too often we want to hire someone to do our Christianity for us, to pay the pastors and missionaries—the "professional" Christians—to do the work we are all called to do. Our financial gifts are the salve for our consciences that tell us we are really being faithful to our Lord's commands. We live in comfortable homes and rarely encounter the lives of the least of these. We are practitioners of a sanitized faith.

Is that the way God designed his work? I remember a line in one of my Christology texts from seminary. The author is long gone from my memory, but his words stay with me: "Wasn't it just like God to become man?"

Yeah, it was.

Because even for God, coming face-to-face with the reality of our humanity—struggling alongside us, feeling the pain we feel, feeling need—was absolutely essential to the gift of himself. How much more true must this be for us?

Living as Jesus did demands relationship with those we are called to serve. Isolation, even if we write big checks to support a ministry, cannot be an option for us. True biblical Christianity means that we get down—in the dirt, if necessary; that we experience life as they experience it; that we view the world from their perspective. *How does it feel when the world steps over you, when the only eye contact you make with the drive-by people is when they are trying to pick you up?* The New Testament knows nothing of an arm's-length Christianity.

Truth be known, my experience is that those who have met the child of the streets face-to-face, those who have hugged the orphan in the slum, those who have looked into hungry eyes, those who have held the child of the prostitute become far more generous. I know it impacted me that way; tithing simply wasn't enough anymore. But true Christian charity—in

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the 1 Corinthians 13 usage—begins not with our pocketbooks, but with our hearts. Bottom line: You cannot be intimate with God and distant from those he loves.

It's My Problem

Erin is in the back of the car sobbing; it is her first encounter with true poverty.

"Just give me a minute and then I can talk." A few minutes before, she had been sitting on a ragged bed while a little girl and a little boy climbed over her. The little girl was beautiful by any standards, even in her filth, but the three-year-old boy, naked except for a tattered T-shirt, already had the vacant stare so common in the *favela* (slum). We had walked from the girl's sagging scrap sheet-metal home to the boy's shack a few yards behind. A man sat rocking in a straight-legged wooden chair, obviously high; the mother was nowhere in sight.

But now we were back in the car. Erin knows the odds are against these kids. She knows they will probably run away from home to live on the streets, become involved with gangs, and beg or steal to buy food and drugs. She knows the girl will probably sell her body and the boy will probably end up in jail, and they'll both be lucky to survive five years on the streets.

Getting control of her tears, she asks, "I don't get this. Isn't Brazil one of the wealthiest countries in the world?"

"Yes."

"Isn't there enough money for them to take care of their own? Shouldn't this be their problem and not ours?"

Philip, Hope's CEO, turns to look at her, a bit of a hard edge to his response. "You're absolutely right; there's enough money here to fix the problem. There are incredibly wealthy people in this city who ought to be right here, right now, taking care of these kids." He pauses, then says more gently, "Why don't you

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get out of the car, go back inside, and tell Franciella and Lucas that we're not going to do anything for them because it's not our problem."

Not *my* problem.

The problem is greater than society's unwillingness to intervene; more often than not, the ones who ought to love the child the most are hurting him or her. For the great majority of the world, *orphaned* does not mean parentless. In fact, about 10 percent of orphans are without either parent; the vast majority of children we call orphans have at least one parent.[5] But they have been abandoned, have run away to escape abuse, or have been removed from their homes because of abuse, exploitation, or neglect.

I don't like these parents—and that is really not strong enough to express how I feel. In the one critical task they have been given in life—TAKE CARE OF YOUR CHILD—they have failed. And more often than not, the reality is more grave than not doing well by their kids; very often, those parents actively choose to hurt their children. We all have a problem when we see this.

And so we have a tailor-made excuse to keep our hands clean: not my problem.

Must live as Jesus did.

Here's the point: There are children all over the world whose lives will not change if we—you and I—do not change them. Kids like Franciella and Lucas won't make it unless we get serious about faithfulness to our commission as Christians. This is not clean faith; this is not easy church. It's unpleasant, it's difficult, but it is absolutely necessary.

Dirty faith means their stories can turn out like Ileana's:

> . . . so they brought me to Hope Unlimited. Today I believe in transformation. And I am sure that my mother can change. I have not seen her since I ran away, but

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I have forgiven her and ask God every day for her salvation.

Today I have found Jesus and am very happy. I have the chance to study, and I hope to achieve my dream of becoming a nurse so I can come back to help the children here at this place, where I learned to walk with my head held high.

It's beautiful, difficult, transformative.
It's dirty faith.

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