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Jesus Revolution, No. 3

Of Pigs and Persons

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There are a lot of “-isms” being batted around in our world these days. The Democratic primaries have raised questions and concerns that I’d guess a majority of people in our nation likely never thought they’d have to consider...and it’s bringing up a lot of uncertainty.

We’ve heard more about what people like Bernie Sanders are calling “Democratic Socialism” than I’d imagine most of us ever thought possible, although I think we have yet to really, fully understand what he means by that...and how it’s effectively different, or not, from just plain “socialism.”

Let me just say, socialism...as a national economic program, in its simplest terms, is “government control of a nation’s means of production.” That is different from communism in that communism is “government *ownership* (and consequent *control*, of course) of a nation’s means of production.”

Just so we’re clear on our definitions.

In response to all that, we have people like the president and others...even other democratic presidential candidates...discussing capitalism, another of the world’s isms, which is defined as “private or corporate ownership and control of a nation’s means of production.”

Now, the discussion or debate of these and other sorts of isms has gone on in our world for a long time. “By which sort of program will this nation, this kingdom, this collection of people, operate?” That’s been the question from place to place and age to age, although it’s never really been the question here in the states before...at least since the writing and adoption of the Constitution, which is why this whole discussion is a new thing to most of us.

Now, if you’re from somewhere else – an African nation, a south or Latin American nation, China, actually many other places around the world, you know something far more than we Americans do about the ideas about, and the consequences of, “regime change,” or a national change in isms. In many of those places, the elite of the nation, those who already hold power, just choose one and do it.

Here...again, at least for now...we can still elect it...we can elect our ism.

All that simply to say, the arguments over the world’s isms go back a long way.

Asbury College graduate and missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones, wrote a book, *Christ’s Alternative to Communism*, out of his experience with, and observation of, regime change, and all the different isms that were at play in the world in his day.

He wrote it in 1935, when, as we’ve mentioned, much of the world was in a period of evaluation regarding its different isms:

- It was still reeling following the U.S. stock market crash, and the nation was devastated, economically, in many ways, and so capitalism was in question.
- Ancient kingdoms of monarchs and czars were collapsing in other places.
- War clouds were gathering in Western Europe, for a second time.
- And big parts of the world were either engaged in or courting Marxist communism as their solution.

In response to all that, and particularly in response to Jones’ deep concern over the dangers of communism as he observed it in Russia, Jones wrote to declare that Jesus had His own program for His people to follow – a unique program that does not really follow, but instead, cuts across the isms of our world.

And what is that program?

Well, the thing is, if we look to the gospels for its details...as we’d like them to be spelled out in a manifesto or something like that, we will wind up disappointed, because Jesus does not give us those sorts of point by point details or rules.

And this is because of the very nature of God. You see, in any program founded on rules, as Jones writes, “one of two things happens: either the people, in growing and developing, will break the rules, or the rules are so strong, they wind up breaking the people.”

Instead of rules, God typically gives us principles, and especially so in this age of the Holy Spirit. Jesus gave us principles, so they would not be outgrown, but would adapt from place to place and age to age...His age, our age, and every earthly age to come.

So then, the question is, “Where’s the best place to find Jesus’ program’s principles?”

There are several good options.

One might guess the “Sermon on the Mount.”

Someone else might say, “The Great Commandment and the Great Commission.”

But the place Jones looks to is Luke, Chapter 4...you could turn there, if you like.

Why does Jones pick this place?

Well, consider this time in Jesus’ life:

At this point, He has spent years, 30 years, in silent thinking and observing and planning, but then realizes that His time has come, so He escapes to the desert for clarification.

Clarification about what?

Well, maybe about what sort of program His will be? What sort of leader will He be? What kind of announcement will He make? Where will He turn to gain His power?

In His 30 years or so of life to this point, He'd witnessed the place of earthly power and what it accomplished.

So...could it be that this was the decision that had to be made in the desert: Would Jesus' kingdom be a kingdom like the world's...a kingdom of force...a kingdom imposed from without...a kingdom that *makes* people do and act and think this way or that? Would Jesus choose to institute a "Kingdom of the club [bludgeon]," as Jones puts it, as all earthly kingdoms were in His day?

Or, would Jesus choose to institute a very different kind of Kingdom...a Kingdom that calls people to itself by rising up from within...a Kingdom, not of *external* force, but of such an *internal* force that literally changes people and their perspectives and outlooks...changes the way they think, and in so doing, changes the way they speak and act and live? Would Jesus' be a new sort of kingdom...one that grows out of hearts and motives have been recreated to think of others' best interests even beyond their own?

A kingdom not of a club, but of...a cross?

I think we can tell that this was the great question before Jesus - because of the temptations He faced.

What were they? Satan tempted Him with all the trappings of earthly Kingdoms, earthly powers, earthly authorities. "With your power, Jesus, you could be most dominant force in the world! If only you would choose a traditional, earthly ism!"

But Jesus overcame...with the help of the Father and the presence of the Spirit.

And it is interesting here, how Luke repeats over and over again, the influence of the Spirit in this time. Luke 4, there in verse 1, "*Jesus, full of the Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert.*" Then after it was over, in verse 14, Luke says, "*Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit.*"

You see the Spirit all over this time, this event...because a kingdom conceived by the Spirit would be a Kingdom dependent on the Spirit for success. Earthly kingdoms use earthly tools, but divine kingdoms use divine tools - a very important thing to remember.

And so, once the temptations were overcome and the decision made, Jesus came back to Nazareth, very intentionally it seems, to make His announcement, which we find in Luke 4.

In verse 16, "*Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:*

¹⁸ "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised;*

¹⁹ *To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.*"

²⁰ *Then He rolled up the scroll, returned it to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on Him, ²¹and He began by saying, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

This proclamation, through the reading of the scroll of what is to us Isaiah 61, is what Jones suggests is the outline of Jesus' program...the main principles of the Kingdom of God.

Now of course, Jesus invests the rest of His life working these out...revealing what they look like in the life of a Spirit-transformed and empowered person. But in short, this is, Jones claims, the Kingdom program.

Which makes sense, you know? It fits well with what we understand about the life cycle of ideas, movements and institutions in that they're always the most focused, the most energized and on-task, at their beginnings.

This is what we have at Jesus' beginning...just back from the desert...fresh in its development. Six parts:

1. Preach good news to the poor.
2. Heal the brokenhearted.
3. Proclaim deliverance to captives.
4. Restore sight to the blind.
5. Free those who are bruised.
6. Proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

Six points...and I'm thinking we'll take one a week here.

Preaching Good News to the Poor

Who are the poor? That's the first question.

Most of the time, this question is answered in a spiritualized way.

But Jones argues against that. Actually, he says, "When we do not know what else to do with a thing, we spiritualize it." And that's really true! We spiritualize things that make us uncomfortable to deal with on their face. Jones gives this example...he writes, "When I was about to go to Manchuria, the Chinese pastors there wrote to me saying, 'Please do not preach to us to love our enemies, but preach to us spirituality.'"

You see how easy it is to spiritualize away the real meaning of things that we'd rather not hear?

This statement of preaching good news to the poor really doesn't need be spiritualized. Everyone, both in Isaiah's day and in Jesus' day, knew what "the poor" meant...who the poor were. They passed them every day. They were not as segregated as we tend to be...and probably, honestly, as we prefer to be, today.

To Jones, the poor are, literally, the economically disadvantaged of the world.

And what is the good news for them?

Well, if you were up against the wall, financially, what would be the best news you could receive?

That relief is at hand, right? That someone is there to help you...to give you, not just a break for today, but a hope for a comprehensively better tomorrow, financially.

So why wouldn't this good news be that "In Christ's Kingdom, there is something to help you...to relieve you from the grinding poverty that you know?"

But what does that look like? Does that mean free hand outs? Does it mean a Robin Hood type of stealing from some to give to others? Does it mean the end of individualization...the end of private property? If so, who winds up in charge? If not, how does the help come?

Jones appeals to several more passages that work this out, beginning with Mary's song in Luke 1, where, in speaking of the promised Kingdom, she said in verse 51 and following:

...he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts,

⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

What we see here is a purification of all that is false. In God's Kingdom, pride will be exposed. No one would exalt themselves over others. People would not experience preference and wealth based on position or station in life.

What we also see here, especially in that last line, verse 53, is that in Christ's Kingdom there would be an equity...not necessarily all perfectly equal, but a certainty that all would have enough.

Jones says, "This proposal is astounding and far-reaching, and we have lost its significance, because instead of taking it at face value, we have set it to music in our liturgies. We have put this verse into our services instead of putting it into service. Translated into modern terms, this verse would mean that in Christ's order, **everyone will have enough before any have excess.**"

Think about that for a minute. Do we see this, really, as part of God's economic order for our lives? How are we putting this into practice, personally?

Jones sees this same sort of sentiment in John the Baptist. In Luke 3, we read Isaiah's words as being fulfilled in John: "*A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.'*"¹

You see, in Christ's kingdom, there is a moral straightness and honesty, a human equity, and a humaneness to all human life. And this is a change...a tremendous change from the world's isms, because Jesus did not come to fit into what we have in the world...we talked about this last Sunday night. Jesus does not conform to the mountains and valleys as they are...even economic ones...in our world. Jesus is concerned with making things good and suitable for all.

Now, some capitalists, at this point, would say, "Ah, but some richness is fine and even necessary in order to give work to others."

Well, yes, a certain amount of capital has to be raised to build a factory, for example.

But when capitalism is unchecked by a Christ-like concern for the poor, what always happens? The rich get richer...and far richer... than the poor. Apart from that Christ element of Spirit-fueled compassion and concern, you see, you wind up with sweat-shop workers with nothing, working so the owners can live in luxury.

That is not to say capitalism is a zero-sum game, where there is only so much. That is not so.

But with the money comes the power, and unless there is an infusion of Christian compassion into the place and people who hold the power, the rich will disregard the poor as machines every time.

It's the influence of Christ that makes humans humane.

Now, it is here that some socialists and communists have said in ages past, and would say, today, "Yes, this is the issue, and we have the solution. Force the rich to give away their wealth to the poor."

But Jones, in looking at those isms in his day, writes, "By the way, this is in deep contrast to the methods of both fascism and communism, which sustain themselves...by suppressing all that would question their system."

You see, it doesn't really matter the ism, because all these sorts of isms, implemented by the world, without the pervasive, transformative influence of the Holy Spirit, are isms of the club. They are isms of force.

But this was the very temptation Jesus faced, and overcame in the desert. Jesus' program, Jesus' Kingdom, would not come about by the club, but instead by the cross.

In Christ's Kingdom, the equalizations don't come about from the application of external force. They come about by volition from within, from a heart that is transformed such that compassion and care for the poor are its priority.

And yet in the church, which is supposed to be the community of people whose hearts have been transformed and who see the injustices and work to erase them in our world, the world should see people who do all they can to level the grounds, to make rough places easier to travel upon.

In the church, the world should see an army of Samaritans, as Jesus described in his parable, people who see the human need above all else, above the demands of their time, above the financial cost, above the prejudices of society, above the pressures to look the other way and get on with our lives.

This kind of awareness of the needs of others, and the decision made ahead of time to do all we can about them...to correct them...to bring equity and justice, not at the expense of someone else, but at our own expense, this is what should characterize the people of Jesus' Kingdom.

You see the hypocrisy in so much of our politics. Someone running for office says: "We need to give this or that to them."

Far more often than not, what is really being said is, "Someone else, not me, needs to do without so that *they* might have *this*."

That is the way of the club, you see? It's not the Christian way. The Christian way says, "I am willing to do without so they can have."

The Christian program starts here...with a Spirit-fueled transformation in the way we determine what's important in the world. This really comes down to one question,

¹ Luke 3:4-6

“What is really more important to me: the welfare of real people...people God loves...made in God’s image? Or my stuff? My possessions? My rights? My comfort? My luxury?”

What’s more important?

What was more important to Jesus? Persons, or property?

Jones illustrates this by appealing to Jesus’ healing of the demon-possessed men at the end of Matthew 8. You know the account – how Jesus cast the demons out of the men and into the pigs, and the whole herd of pigs ran down the bank and drowned in the lake.

Then it says, “Those tending the pigs ran off, went into town and reported all this, including what had happened to the possessed men.”

They told the people what happened to all those pigs. They told about that which determined their livelihood first, and then, about the healing of the men.

This is what a real encounter with Jesus should change about a person, you see. Don’t you think, if Jesus had been

the one to go into town, that He would have told the people about all that happened in the healing of the men first, and then maybe about the death of the pigs?

Why did whole town come out, in fear, and tell Jesus to leave? Because they were more concerned about the welfare of the rest of their pigs than they were for the welfare of those men and other people there who needed Jesus’ healing.

What is it that captures our attention about this event: the death of the pigs or the healing of the persons? That’s probably where our heart is. Our hearts must be for persons before property if we’ll ever see God’s Kingdom come.

That is what’s revolutionary about Jesus, and what’s to be revolutionary about His people.

It cuts across the lines of the world’s isms with divine compassion...and that is a change that the Spirit has to make in here [the heart].

Will you invite Him to make that change in you?