

# PLAIN TRUTH®

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

## The Overlooked and Ignored

By Greg Albrecht



**F**iorello LaGuardia was the mayor of New York City during dark, dismal and difficult times—he served for an unprecedented three terms from 1934 until 1945, during the Great Depression continuing through World War 2.

LaGuardia was respected and loved for mingling with the people he served, experiencing firsthand how they lived and the challenges they faced. One legendary story (which cannot be documented to be absolutely historically accurate) recalls Mayor LaGuardia showing up at night court one cold night in January 1935. An obscure law allowed the Mayor to sit as judge, so LaGuardia exercised that right, dismissed the night court judge and took the bench himself.

An old woman, dressed in raggedy and tattered clothing, was brought before the court, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She

told Mayor LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had left her, her daughter was sick and she, the old woman, had two grandchildren who were starving.

After hearing the woman say she had stolen the bread to feed her starving grandchildren, the shopkeeper, from whom the woman had stolen the loaf of bread, still refused to drop the charges. He said, "This woman needs to obey the law—she needs to learn her lesson."

LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you. That's the law—ten dollars or ten days in jail." As he pronounced the sentence the mayor, in a Christ-like gesture of self-sacrificial love, was reaching into his pocket.

He took out ten dollars saying, "Here is the ten-dollar fine which I now remit: in addition, I am going to pass my hat around this

courtroom. I am fining everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a city where a person has to steal bread so her grandchildren can eat. Bailiff—collect the fines and give the total to the defendant."

According to the story, \$47.50 (equivalent to something like \$850 in buying power today) was turned over to a bewildered but enormously relieved senior citizen who had stolen a loaf

of bread to feed her starving grandchildren.

The store owner who took the woman to court contributed 50 cents, 70 others who had committed misdemeanors and traffic violations did the same, and they were joined by a number of New York City policemen who chipped in the rest—and then they all gave the mayor a standing ovation.

*I was hungry and you fed me,  
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,  
I was homeless and you gave me a room,  
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,  
I was sick and you stopped to visit,  
I was sick and you came to me.*

*Then those 'sheep' are going to say,  
'Master, what are you talking about?  
When did we ever see you hungry and  
feed you, thirsty and give you a drink?  
And when did we ever see you sick or  
in prison and come to you?'*

*Then the King will say, 'I'm telling*

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*you the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.*”—Matthew 25:35-40, The Message Bible, my emphasis

### **Thieves and Shepherds**

Shepherds were the first audience to whom God chose to announce the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:8-15). When Jesus was born, shepherds were people of extremely low social standing—they were among the lowest of the low. They were *overlooked and ignored*. Shepherds were often in that profession because they had no other options—we can safely assume most of them weren't doing what they were doing because they just loved cute little adorable sheep.

Their testimony, by virtue of the kind of work they performed, was not admissible in court—they were thought of as untrustworthy—assumed to be unworthy in virtually every way. There was some truth to that stereotype. Many shepherds were petty thieves—itinerant, moving with their flocks and thus were regarded, by polite society, as crooks, swindlers and thieves.

The fact that a group of blue-collar working shepherds, who were barely making ends meet, were the first to receive the breaking news about the birth of Jesus offers a huge insight into the nature of the kingdom of God. From the very beginning Jesus revealed the love of God to everyone, without excluding the *overlooked and ignored*.

**Just as lowly shepherds received front row seats to the miraculous, angelic, heavenly choral performance (Luke 2:13-14) the lost, the least and the last—the overlooked and the ignored—the alienated and left behind—the poor and the impoverished—were continually attended to by Jesus.**

As Christ-followers, we say loudly and clearly: any and all who sell

out the poor, who step on the impoverished, who use the less advantaged to their own advantage and who take from the poor to augment their own wealth completely miss the entire message of the gospel. By wittingly or unwittingly *overlooking and ignoring*, they trample on the heart of God.

### **The Economy of Grace**

Jesus did not believe the poor were more worthy of his time than the rich—all were equal and just as worthy of his time. Still, probably because of the vast numbers of the poor in his day, in contrast to the “well off,” we find many examples of Jesus' care for those in need.

Some would say that Christians should not besmirch the gospel by talking about economic issues—some would say that the spiritual things of life should never be corrupted by talk of money or riches or poverty.

But Jesus begs to differ—16 of the 38 parables Jesus gave were all about money and possessions. Approximately one-tenth of all the verses in the Gospels deal with the subject of money. The Bible at large gives us more than 500 individual verses about prayer, and just less than 500 on the topic of faith—but more than 2,000 verses that discuss money and possessions.

The gospel of the kingdom of God is about an entirely different way of getting and giving. The economy of the kingdom of God is grace—on the other hand *the history of humanity is a long history of various economic theories having to do with either one getting at the very least what one earns or one receiving far more than one deserves.*

The economy of grace says that what we do in our lives—in terms of what we accumulate, possess or gain—is of little interest to God.

What God is most interested in is our debt—**God's grace says that God cooks the books of all indebtedness.** He wipes away any

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and all debt. God does not judge anyone of being worthy or unworthy of grace—grace is given to all, without discrimination. God does not *overlook or ignore* anyone!

Our Western world is awash with the definition of success as excess. Those who amass incredible wealth are seen to be visionaries, servants, pioneers and leaders of our world. Perhaps some rich individuals are visionaries, servants, pioneers and leaders, but in his economy of grace all are seen to be equal before God.

By the values and perspectives of success and excess, Jesus was an absolute failure. He never owned a house. He never received an advanced degree. He wasn't wealthy in worldly goods, but instead, as we read in 2 Corinthians 8:9—*though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

In God's economy of grace, no one is more righteous or moral because they have more belongings, property and worldly wealth. God does not show favoritism to those whose check books have more money in them than those who are less prosperous, or those who have no checkbooks at all.

There's nothing political at all when speaking of the message of

Jesus and the economy of grace and how it reaches out and offers hope to the disenfranchised, the oppressed and the alienated.

### **Equality in the Kingdom of Grace**

God loves each of us just the same. That's part of what it means to live in an economy of grace.

In Luke 12:20, at the conclusion of what is called the parable of the rich fool whose only concerns were providing for himself, Jesus says, *"God said to him, You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"*

In Mark 8:36 Jesus asks, *"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"*

Recent news reports have detailed the enormous efforts undertaken by the uber-rich to prepare for an apocalyptic doomsday. Articles speak of the super-rich acquiring "apocalypse insurance" in the forms of private jets and farms with air strips in New Zealand—which is thought to be the ultimate place of security and safety to which the rich and privileged might escape.

They are equipping underground shelters and bunkers with expensive air filtration systems in case of lingering radioactivity after a nuclear bomb. They are buying guns and freeze-dried foods, all to give them a sense of security and protection from a future disaster.

But when Jesus came to this polluted and sin infested world he did not arrive in a safe and secure place deemed to enable him to survive. He arrived as a vulnerable baby in occupied territory—born to working-class parents.

He befriended the lost, the least and the left behind—people who lived in desperate times and places—the poor, the sick and the diseased—hated tax collectors and despised prostitutes.

During these times when we are rightly concerned about "social distancing" and being "safe at home" we are amazed to read how Jesus made himself vulnerable.

Today we might think of his behavior as reckless, for Jesus touched lepers and washed the feet of his disciples without protecting his hands by wearing gloves.

It goes without saying that Jesus did not place a high priority on his own security and safety—physical survival was obviously not his ultimate goal.

### **Overlooked and Ignored—Those Living in Desperation**

Who are the people today to whom the angels might appear, as they did to the despised shepherds who were regarded as deplorable, untrustworthy and unreliable—who are the people today to whom the angels might appear, assuring

*"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"*

them that the Savior has come, bringing great joy?

**Aliens and refugees**—people who have been forced from their countries and from their families and from their cultures, through war, famine, or disease. Many are undocumented, with no legal standing and thus they are forced to live in the shadows.

**The sick, malnourished and diseased**—the ministry of Jesus makes it obvious that Jesus is our healer, our beloved Physician—who heals us most of all spiritually, even while standing, sitting and being with us in our physical battles and trials.

**The very young**—it is no coincidence that God, when he came to be one of us, and to experience all that we experience, started life just as we do—helpless and vulnerable. Jesus, the Son of God, God in the flesh, was targeted immediately for extermination when Herod heard that a new born king had arrived in Bethlehem, and out of his rage and insecurity decided to slaughter the innocent.

**The very old**—the way in which the aged and infirm are ignored, shunted aside, and mistreated in so many nations today is a crime against all humanity.

Jesus came and he still comes for **the poor, homeless, victims of war, accidents and crime and the slaves and sexually trafficked.**

### **Don't Forget Those Overlooked, Ignored and Oppressed by Religion**

*We must also always remember the religiously oppressed—those oppressed in the name of God.*

Before Jesus and his disciples visited the temple and observed a widow who gave an incredible offering, in terms of her abilities and means to give, Jesus warned his disciples about religious authorities who, as he said in Mark 12:40, *"devour widow's houses."*

He was speaking of highly respected, well-thought-of and pious men who may have appointed themselves as executors to the estates of widows who had just lost their husbands.

Were these religious authorities appropriating for themselves as much of the widow's assets as possible? I am not sure about these particular religious authorities—but I am absolutely certain that Christless religion has impoverished, both physically and certainly spiritually, hundreds of millions of people. These are predators who have fleeced the flock of God's pasture rather than serving and feeding it!

*Lord Jesus,*

*Live in us in such a way that you focus our attention and turn our hearts on those in great need. In this fragile world so vulnerable and susceptible to epidemics and pandemics, may we remember the oppressed and the abused—the impoverished and the diseased—the homeless, orphans and all those who feel alone in this world. May you in your gracious way make all who are overlooked and ignored know that you are with them, now and forevermore. □*