

Episode 12: Christmas and the Least of These

Paul Lawler: I'm delighted today to be with Al Henson, my dear friend. Al, we have a great topic we have the privilege of talking about today. Would you say a word about that as we begin?

Al Henson: Yes, Paul. The least of these, which is so near to the heart of God. And to you that are listening, Paul and I want to say thank you for listening in. We've enjoyed so much the positive feedback we're getting. We're learning, we're growing together in this. But especially in our hearts, is to help those and encourage those who have a hunger for God, thirsting for God. Maybe there's something we can say or some insight into God and his nature, or the word of God or the promises of God, that would encourage someone to move forward in transformation.

Today the topic, the least of these, we really believe that if you understand God's love and heart for the least of these, and you'll move toward them being the hands of God, the voice of God, the feet of God, into their lives, the provisions spiritually of God's grace as it flows through you into their lives, there you'll encounter Jesus and there you will learn more about God. And there you'll see great fruitfulness.

Matthew Chapter 25, have this beautiful scene out into the future of Christ sitting on the throne and before him are millions and millions of people. On the right he says are his sheep, and on the left he says are the goats. So, he invites the sheep to enter into him, into eternity with him, to live and abide and dwell in intimacy with him.

The sheep in humility respond and say, "Lord, why us? Why us?" And he says, "Oh, because when I was thirsty, you gave me water to drink. When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was in prison, you visited me. And when I was sick you came and cared for me." And they said, "Lord, Lord, when did we give you water to drink or food to eat?" And Jesus says this powerful statement, "When you've done it unto the least of these, you've done it unto me."

What a great privilege it would be to wash the feet of Jesus. And when we do wash the feet of the least of these, we're doing it as if we were doing it unto Jesus himself.

Paul Lawler: Al, that's such a rich, not only comment, but we all know this, a very rich passage of Scripture, that tells us so much. I remember when I was a young man in ministry, I was planting the first church Missy and I had an opportunity to be a part of, serving as a senior pastor there.

And I remember in my early thirties, I was struggling with a timidity. I may have referenced this in some earlier broadcasts, but really struggling with timidity.

Our church family had reached out to a homeless man. His name was Randy. He began attending our services. We had church members that went and picked him up, loved on him, helped provide needs for him.

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I want to state that Randy had a very unique personality. He sometimes would come up and interrupt conversations. So, it gave us an opportunity to practice love as patience, as a church family. And for our development as well, our relationship with Randy was beneficial.

But there was one particular Sunday when the worship team was already beginning to play worship music. Our service was getting ready to start. And Randy began ... walked over, pulled on my shirt sleeve. I was in the middle of a conversation. "Pastor Paul, Pastor Paul, Pastor Paul, Pastor Paul, I need to talk to you. I need to talk to you." So I looked at Randy and said, "Randy, I'll be there in just a moment." So, I wrapped up the conversation. I walked across the worship center floor and met Randy over in a corner of a room.

As I was walking across the room, Al, it was like the spirit of God just quickened my heart and I heard these words, "The least of these, the least of these, whatever you've done to the least of these, you've done unto me."

Al Henson: Do you think God was speaking to you about Randy?

Paul Lawler: "The least of these, the least of these." Yes, absolutely.

So, I got over in the corner of the room and I looked into Randy's eyes, and there was this sense in which I wasn't staring into the eyes of Randy. There was a sense in which I was staring into the eyes of Jesus. Randy looks at me with perfect clarity and he says, "Pastor Paul, do you not know that the spirit of God lives in you? And he wants to pour himself out among these people today and in this city. So brother, believe him." Then he looked at me and he went, "That's all," and walked off.

Al Henson: Wow.

Paul Lawler: I had this sense that I did not hear words from Randy, but I had heard from Jesus. I'm mindful that phrase, "Whatever you've done to the least of these, you've done it unto me." And when we're among and ministering to those that Jesus calls the least of these, that we are with him in a very unique way.

Al Henson: I think Paul, what a marvelous story, that authenticates one of my earlier comments. And that is that, often, when we come in contact with the least of these with an open heart, we find ourselves in contact with Jesus. It brings us in proximity, closer proximity and intimacy with Christ, because Christ has so set his love upon the least of these.

For me, I've learned more and more to define the least of these differently than I would have defined them 30 years ago. The least of these are really who are in need. And often God has used their circumstances around them to give them a sense of their need.

But I have had times, Paul, with God, that I've sat with a man whose income may be a half million a year. And I realize the spirits say, "Now, he's the least of these because he's gone through a divorce," or, "He's experiencing a broken family and broken

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relationships with his children, because he's been so focused on success and money and greedy and ambition. And now these things have got his attention, that there's something perhaps more." And he, in essence is becoming a least of these, one that the culture might sort of make fun of or laugh at.

So I think we need to ... When we're thinking about a ministry to the least of these and loving the way God wants us to love the least of these, we need to think about being always on mission with Christ.

Paul Lawler: Yeah. Sensitizing our hearts to the brokenness around us.

Al Henson: Absolutely. Because if we're being moved by the spirit, only God can bring around and about those Holy encounters, I call them. Sometimes, it may just be a word. Sometimes, it may be weeks of ministry that will initiate and start and move into the context of their lives. But it's in this that I think I have learned as much about Jesus and walking in the Spirit, prioritizing what he prioritizes, valuing what he values, people and their lives and their eternities and their spirits. And in the middle of that, sensing the heart of God and learning how to not live selfishly, but to live lovingly and caringly and wisely with others.

As some may be aware, Paul, you are the ... Eight or nine years ago, we birthed a ministry called Compassionate Hope Foundation. And this theme of the least of these became its mission. And that was that we might rescue ... rescuing the least of these, one disciple, a one leader at a time. In these last 10 years, I've had hundreds and hundreds of encounters, and I'd like to take time maybe and just share one-

Paul Lawler: Oh, please do.

Al Henson: ... just share one of those stories. In the Northern part of Thailand, we have a Village of Hope that we're developing, which has homes for the least of these and the rescued ones, and a school and agriculture.

Paul Lawler: You know I've been there. I've seen it.

Al Henson: Yes. And it's amazing, just to walk into that village, onto that campus, and sense the presence of God. But about two years or so ago, we had a lady in her late forties show up. She had in her hand ... holding hands with her eight year old girl named [Pau 00:09:17]. And with tears she said, "I've heard about this village," and she asked him questions. She said, "Would you take my daughter?" She shared that, "I don't have the money to take care of them."

I happened to actually be in the country next door, in Southeast Asia. And I got a call from the director, telling me a bit about the story and saying, "What should we do about this? We don't want to take this little girl away from her mother, but she's insisting." And I said, "I will be there in a couple of days."

His name was Pastor Pratuan There's more to this story. I just had a sense that God was in this and I said, "Please ask her can she meet with us?"

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So we went ... after a couple of days, went to her home in the village and this was the story that we heard. 33 years prior to this, she had been stolen out of her village. And had become, in essence the third wife, but really like a slave girl to this man, this man that had some means.

When we asked her what these 33 years were like, she said, "I lived as a slave in Hell. That's the only way I can explain it." But he'd gotten tired of her and her four daughters and having to care for them. So, a few months prior to this, he had taken her and her daughters and delivered them back into the same district or area that he had stolen her away from 33 years ago.

As a consequence of this, no place to live, no one to care for them, no food, then they began to try to make some decisions. [Sau 00:11:08], who was 15 at the time, a excellent top student in the ninth grade, because of her love for her siblings, made a decision to go to Bangkok and get a job.

When she was there, she went through a night in which she was multiply raped by a number of men. Just horrific, Paul. And out of that, for a few months, she hid and she began to experience some sickness. She had conceived. And she'd made a decision to keep the baby, but now she can no longer work and provide for the home.

So mom had already taken one of the daughters, Sau's sister to a Buddhist temple, and basically gave her over to the Buddhist temple to be taken care of. And there's some horrific stories that come out of that, but now she was bringing Pau to us.

Sau has already had the baby by this time. And long story short, we made a decision to take Sau and Pau and Sau's baby, who we now have named Peter. His name is Peter. And mom into the village.

Paul, when we got in the village, after everything had settled, and over this period of few days that all of this was taking place, I had felt Sau become very safe with me.

Paul Lawler: Yeah.

Al Henson: I had just received her into my heart, because now she was 17 years old with a baby, and had dropped out of school and no hope. But I felt, "God is in this." Just watching how God had been moving and orchestrating all of this.

So, I got a translator and I went and talked to Sau. I said, "Sau, can I ask you some questions?" She said, "Yes, Papa Al, you can." I said, "Is there any time in the last year or so that you cried out to God?" I wasn't surprised with her.

She started weeping, by the way. And I knew it had touched something sensitive. And then she said, "Yeah, on the night, the morning after my baby was born." She had had to have the baby at home with no real help. And apparently it had been a real painful birth and she was in a lot of pain. She said, "I woke up a bit the next morning and I was in

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such pain. And I just thought, 'We need help. I don't know what we're going to do. We got this baby.'"

She said, "I got it in the floor and I was going to pray my normal prayer to Buddha, as I normally would pray." And she says, "As I went to pray, I didn't have the strength. So, I just rolled over on the floor." She said, "I cried out. And I said this out loud, 'What have you ever done for us? If there is a real God, please help us.'"

And at that moment, I started weeping with her because I realized that God had heard her cry, and that our listening to God and being sensitive to God and creating Compassionate Hope and the people that we had, and the nationals that were working with, all of this, God had orchestrated all of this. And one of the reasons why He had was because He had loved her. He knew she was going to cry out and He knew that her heart would be open and He knew that we would listen.

So a part of this, Paul, is this sensitivity, to the least of these and to the heart of God for the least of these, and then how God moves. It's amazing how much, Paul, I've learned about God, and how much my faith has grown in the love of God, and that God hears and answers prayers. He hears the sincere cry when they come from our heart. "If there is a God, please help us."

Paul Lawler: Al, don't you think it's true, that when we're ministering among the least of these, that it not only heightens our understanding of how God has a heart for the least of these, but we also have the privilege of being with God in a very special way when we're ministering among the least of these.

Al Henson: Yes. As those who perhaps have been listening to some of our podcasts, one of the things that God has revealed to us and that we're trying to help others to see is that, not only is Christ in you, but you're in Christ.

If you just stop for a moment, if you're in Christ, that means you're in the person of love. You're in the person of peace, you're in the person of power, you're in the person of mercy and grace. So, it's possible then, for us to have the thoughts of God and to have the heart of God and to have the desires of God, and to see things in the priority and value things as God would want us to value things. And it's through that movement of the Spirit in your life, when we actually put that movement into action. Intimacy with God is not passivity.

Sometimes we overemphasize the prayer closet, and I certainly value the prayer closet. And I value, "Be still and know that I am God." But I think often, that being still is being still inwardly. There's an inward stillness. You're not at war with God. You're not struggling with God inwardly. That allows you to be sensitive to God. And like Peter, "Do you love me, Peter?" "Yes, Lord, I love you." "If you love me, then go care for my sheep. Go care for the least of these." And as I've been doing that, and as I watch others do that, as you shared, it's amazing the clarity that God gives.

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Paul Lawler: Yes. Al, this is anecdotal. I don't have any study to support this, but as a pastor, it's an observation I've seen. Not just in the church I pastor, but in churches that I have opportunity to serve in. It seems to me that the most joy-filled people are those who are ministering among the broken, among what Jesus would refer to as the least of these.

You notice a relationship between being with Jesus and the joy of Jesus. Would you comment on that?

Al Henson: Oh, absolutely. No question. Whether you are just summing that up as your own experience, I want to say Amen and Amen to that. There's something unique about when we become the hands of Christ and we become the voice of Christ. And you know, Paul, I've had the opportunity to hug the widow of a martyr.

Paul Lawler: Yes. Many times, matter of fact.

Al Henson: Yes. Words cannot express, that in the moment that I'm holding her and trying to comfort her in her great loss, not only the experience that he says, "Weep with those who weep," I experience her sadness and I grieve with her some. But at the same time, such a joy. Such a joy, because you know in that moment that you're doing something that really is meaningful. You're doing something that is eternal and something that has value in it.

If you study the Scriptures and you study the word joy that you mentioned, in the context of Scripture, joy comes in two things. Joy comes from intimacy, closeness. And when we go heart-to-heart in ministry, spirit-to-spirit in ministry, and we have relational intimacy and closeness with people, there's joy in that.

But the second is John 15, there's joy in fruitfulness, in fruitfulness. And when you are serving the Lord and that joy comes ... I remember once, a sister, she had a comfortable life and had everything that anyone could ever want. And she was going through some difficulties, a few difficulties.

They were huge to her. I've seen much worse. But she came in a little depressed and anxious and worrying, and wanted me to comfort her. I did some. So I listened. And she said, "You have any advice?" And I remember I wrote down the name of a lady. There was a widow that I knew, that lived in poverty and didn't have much. And I said, "Here's my advice." I said, "Here's her name and her address." I told her a little bit about her.

I said, "I want you to go home. Don't go to the store. I want you to go home and bake a cake. I want you to go over to her house and bring her the cake and tell her that you're coming in the name of Jesus, and here's a cake. She'll probably let you in and she'll probably like to have a buddy to talk to." And I said, "Then, come back and see me."

She came back and she said, "My depression has gone away. My anxiousness has gone away." Because often our depression, our anxiousness, we're so consumed with ourselves and our own needs, what I've really learned about God is, if I will care for him and others, then God will care for me.

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Paul Lawler: Perhaps that's a part of the theme that Jesus was addressing when he said, "It's more blessed. There's a greater blessing upon the one who gives than the one who receives."

Al Henson: Right. And Paul, that's where, in this least of these, and we're in the Christmas season here, we don't want to make this podcast ever about Compassionate. It's not about that. This is actually us having a passion to give as fathers in the faith or spiritual fathers to others.

But with Compassionate Hope, we have 43 homes, Paul. 800 plus rescued ones, and our desire's to provide a Christmas for them. If you're listening in, the Christmas that we'd like to provide for them is a beautiful day of celebration. A great meal, fun, activities, and a time in which they can celebrate the birth of Christ.

We also, on that day, would like to give them a gift. And so, Christmas for the least of these, for \$25 you can provide a Christmas for one of the least of these in one of our Homes of Hope in Southeast Asia.

Paul Lawler: That's excellent. That's excellent. I know the difference that that truly would make in each life on the front lines in Asia.

Al Henson: Yes, it would. So Paul, tell us, I'm a listener now, what would you like for me to take away from this podcast today?

Paul Lawler: Well, that's a very good question. The first thing that comes to mind is that, when you're ministering among the least of these, you're truly with Jesus. And then as you're with Jesus, there's joy in being with Jesus, as you minister to these that he loves deeply.

The second thing is that, let us be mindful that people are always precious to God, but brokenness in people matters to the heart of God. We draw near to the heart of God when we draw near to the broken-heartedness and brokenness in general around us. There may be more.

Al Henson: Yeah. My final thought on that Paul, and just in adding to what you've just shared is that, watching sometimes in my own life and watching in the lives of many others, our value system is really off. The things that we really value are often empty pleasure, things, possessions, titles, ambitions. These things are empty.

But I think we can take from the lesson of the least of these, that if we can value what God values, and that's people, and value that we live in it ... We live in an evil world, that's been infested by sin and lies and deception and darkness and corruption. And so people are needy, and some of those people don't see it, but many do.

Some don't really know what is the answer to their needs. And like Sau, the story that I just told, she thought her need was food and shelter. And she did. But as we gave her food and shelter, now it's two and a half years later, Paul, and she is now a leader in the village.

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Paul Lawler: Wow.

Al Henson: We've been able to help her. She has finished what would be equivalent to a GED, finished the high school. We've offered her the opportunity to go on to college because she's really brilliant. Right now she says, "No, I just want to serve in the village." To watch her grow ...

So, what I would say to people is, as we're coming toward the Christmas season, take time to stop and really ask the question, what is really valuable? What do I actually value? What does my checkbook say I value? What does my time say that I really value?

Our call, today, is for you to value what God values. And one of the things he values is people and their lives, as he values you. Invest your time and your treasure into the least of these. And a simple way to do that, in this season of the year with CHF, is to provide a Christmas for one or for two or for four. We have some that have provided as many as ... they've given \$1,000 and they've provided 40, Christmas for 40 of the least of these. And we'd love for you to make a difference in the life of one of the least of these on the other side of the world, in our Homes of Hope.

Paul Lawler: Amen. That's so well said. And so Al, as you share that today, we're going to take a moment to pray in to those things.

Al Henson: Amen.

Paul Lawler: And to pray for the least of these. But also pray for the ministry of Jesus through people, who have the opportunity to express ministry to the least of these. So, as we wrap up today, let's take a moment to pray.

So Father, we thank you for the wisdom that we've been able to express and experience in our interaction today. And we pray for those that are listening, that what you wish to impart to their hearts, God, that you make clear. And Lord, in the clearness, may we have hearts for the least of these? We hear your words, Jesus, "Whatever you did and have done to the least of these, you've done it unto me." So Lord, we pray, transform us into your image. Draw us to you and to the broken. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Al Henson: Amen. Amen.