

HUMANIZE ME



Sometimes people say a public figure needs to be humanized. What could this mean except that there are things in this world that make us less than human? Jesus is on a mission to make you more human—the kind of human who looks more like the Son of God. This series tackles the forces that keep us from being just as human as God always intended us to be. And it leads us to discover that when we are humanized, we get to humanize others.

We were made to eat. Amen? Don't you love to eat? I know you do. Look at these pictures of the Church Picnic. That's why they say, whenever three or more First Pressers gather, somewhere nearby a chicken dies. Or maybe it's a cow. We were made to eat. God made us humans to eat, grow hungry and eat again. Two or three or four times a day. Eat, grow hungry and eat again. Why? You know, the truth is I have never been hungry. Not really. But when I was a teenager, I believed I was hungry. Like a lot of teenage boys, I would stand in front of the open fridge, throw the kitchen cabinets open and slam them shut, and rummage through the cupboards before yelling at my mom, "I'm starving! There's nothing to eat!" Usually the problem was that my brother and I had eaten whole bags of Doritos in one sitting when they were supposed to last all week. One day after school, I was rooting around and came across a hidden treat. Chocolate! Who left this in here? Wow! I broke off a square and threw it in my mouth, but it was baker's chocolate. That's chocolate but without any sugar. It tastes kind of like dirt mixed with coffee grounds. I can still taste it right now. But I was never truly hungry.

We have entered a study called *Humanize Me*. Jesus is on a mission to make us fully human, just as God made us to be. He came and became human so we could become children of God. If you invest in this series, you will see that Jesus is a humanizing Savior, and that to follow Jesus is to help others be more human, too. But if we need to be humanized, that means something has dehumanized us. So what are these dehumanizing forces in the world? They are not all what you would assume. We are looking at a lot of different kinds of poverties, things that we are in that limit our human flourishing. You could have a poverty of money, sure. But you could also have a poverty of hope, or a poverty of relationships, or a poverty of justice, or a spiritual poverty. This morning we look at a poverty we would probably have thought of on our own—food poverty. There is little more dehumanizing than hunger. Real hunger. Malnutrition and starvation pull people away from feeling human, and threatens lives, and takes lives every day. This is what I think: No matter who is suffering malnutrition, its existence dehumanizes all of us. The saddest thing to realize is that there is plenty of food in the world—the world produces enough—but it's human actions and corrupt government that cause food poverty. So, what does Jesus say, what does the Bible say, and what does the church do, about food poverty?

Some years ago, I was in Kenya participating with a ministry that distributes a monthly ration of food to families in a rural area. My friend, Humphrey Kanga, runs the ministry. I asked him about the spiritual aspect. Are we reaching these families with the gospel, Humphrey? "Oh yes, of course we are Pastor Tim, but we share the food first. Otherwise, they can't hear the gospel over the rumbling of their stomachs." You can't hear the gospel on an empty stomach. Hunger eats away at a person from the inside until their humanity starts to collapse in on them. Elie Wiesel's autobiography, *Night*, is about when he and his family were taken by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Among all the unspeakable horrors and dehumanizing atrocities, his memory returns over and over to the hunger; the emptiness in his stomach, the tiny portions of weak soup or moldy bread. At one point, he remembers them all being so hungry in a train car being transported to Buchenwald, that when soldiers dropped pieces of bread into a cattle car, the men turned on one another like wild beasts. That's the dehumanization. That's food poverty. If Jesus is a humanizing Lord, what does He want His followers to think about dehumanizing hunger? We want to do something.

James tells us this is the natural and faithful response. Here's a letter written by Jesus' brother, James. It's convicting, isn't it? "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 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 2:14–17). I can't tell you how many times I've interacted with someone down and out to the tune of, "Hey, be well, man! Praying for ya!" This is the passage that rings in the back of my conscience. This is a passage about groceries, not philosophies. This is about donuts, not doctrines. The lasagna, not the liturgy. This is about a meal, not a meeting. Get it?

We over-spiritualize things sometimes (I know I do), but this is saying very literally: help hungry people eat. The gospel makes material change in the world when we not only understand it, but act on it. If you want to follow Jesus, feed the hungry. You might be familiar with the variants

between Matthew and Luke in their account of Jesus' famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6). But in Luke, it is recorded this way: "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied" (Luke 6:21a). Academics make a big deal out of this, as though it is some enormous discrepancy. "Luke's Jesus only cares about material things, but Matthew's Jesus only cares about spiritual things, so it's two different Jesuses and the Bible can't be trusted, and we should all walk out of here and go hit the casinos because that's just as good as wasting time in a church." Well. Hooey. First of all, it might have been two different talks entirely; it seems like it was. But it doesn't even have to be that to make sense. You just have to wrap your head around the fact that for Jesus, and for his followers, the spiritual impacts the material, and the material impacts the spiritual. The two verses say the same thing. The gospel changes the world. Righteousness feeds. What you believe will change things. Faith makes a difference. James says the gospel properly understood makes material change in the world.

Now, let's do understand the gospel properly. Listen, the gospel, the good news of Jesus, is that we are saved by grace through faith, not works. We don't earn our way into heaven by our behavior. Behavior follows belief. To sum up this passage: we are saved by faith not by works, and the faith that saves is a faith that works. What do I mean? If you believe something, you will act on it. James is saying here that if you believe the gospel, you will act out the gospel. I can't run you through the examples here of Abraham and Rahab. You'll need to look those up and study how James is applying them on your own, or in your Life Group. But the point of it is this: Rahab and Abraham acted on what they believed. They moved on what they knew, and actions make faith visible. Don't just stand at the crossroads and say, "This is the right way to go." If it's the right way to go, walk that way. Move out. Don't just stand there saying, "This boat will float." Get in. Don't just say, "the Jesus way is the good way." Walk in it. Go. That's how you show, and also verify, validate, that what you believe is true. That's what James says here.

"But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds" (James 2:18). You don't have one or the other, but both. Belief works. Faith that saves is faith that acts. In the

case of Abraham, "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend" (James 2:22-23). His faith and his actions worked together, in concert. The faith prompted the actions, and the actions confirmed the faith. "I love Jesus and Jesus loves me, and I believe Jesus loves all and has compassion on the hungry." Great. I mean truly, really great. But the question must eventually come around, "What are you going to do about it?" We want to do something.

If we take the Good Samaritan story from last week as our model, what does it look like for us to want to do something, to want to change something, to want to stop dehumanizing forces of food poverty and help? One of the, now sadly famous, illustrations of charity doing more harm than good has to do with food poverty. An earthquake in Haiti in 2010 prompted charities worldwide to send rice for relief, but the free distribution of rice meant no one was buying rice from the local farmers. The local farms shut down and the nation lost its means of production, prompting a request from the Haitian government to please stop sending rice. Please stop helping us! We can be smarter than that. We can help in wise ways. Creating dependency is nearly as dehumanizing as the food poverty itself. If we are going to do something (and we are), if we are going to enact our faith (and we will), let's do something wise to actually help.

We partner with another agency (an 'inn' if you were here last week) called the Marian House, operated by Catholic Charities. Now, I don't want to be prideful here, but I am proud. Do you know why? Because First Pres has run Tuesday's meal for almost 25 years, and the story around town is that Tuesday is the best meal served each week. Why? Because our people (and you're starting to see some pictures now) don't just warm up leftover food. Our people get there at 5 in the morning and start preparing a fresh meal. We have our own refrigerators and storage space, and the First Pres crew just hits it out of the park every week. Here's a short video hello from the team and Pastor Lydia, our Pastor of Mission Engagement. (Video greeting). Now, they don't only feed but they equip. The meal becomes an occasion for relationship, the relationship makes room for new resources and new possibilities and people are helped because they came to eat. They don't just feed, they humanize.

So, don't over-spiritualize hunger. Sometimes it's just about food. But don't under-spiritualize it either. One time, Jesus was teaching in a remote place with thousands of people gathered around. The disciples said he should shut it all down and send them home so they could go get something to eat. Jesus had compassion for them. "Jesus replied, 'They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat'" (Matthew 14:16). Five thousand men, plus uncounted women and children, were fed by five loaves of bread and two fish blessed and broken by Jesus' hands. He fed them all. Why? Because they were hungry! Don't over-spiritualize it! But don't under-spiritualize it either.

Humans were made to eat, grow hungry and eat again. We depend on food supply, food production, harvest. We depend on one another, and we gather and eat with one another. Eating together is at the very heart of human interaction. We eat depending on one another. We depend on God. Why did God make us so dependent? Couldn't we just plug into the wall while we sleep? Couldn't we just eat one meal and go for a week? Every day, three times a day. Eat, grow hungry and eat again. I want to suggest God made us this way to teach us something spiritual. We hunger physically, but we hunger spiritually, too. Are you eating what satisfies? Do you know where to go with your spiritual hunger? These hungers can destroy us. An alcoholic is hungry for a drink, an addict is hungry for pain pills, an abandoned inner child is hungry for attention, and on and on. What are you hungry for? There are good things to be hungry for, too. Hunger and thirst for righteousness and peace means there is something in us that wants to see things put right. Whatever your hunger, Jesus said, "They don't need to go away ... bring them here to me." On the night on which He was betrayed, the day before He went to the cross, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples. "This is My body. Feed on Me. Unless you eat of My flesh and drink of My blood, unless you ingest Me, unless you take Me into you and allow My life to become your food, My spirit to become your nourishment, My grace to be your satisfaction, we can have nothing to do with one another, and you continue in your hunger," he says. But if you see today that your hunger leads to Jesus, now is the moment to reach out your hand and receive.

STUDY GUIDE

HUMANIZE ME • "Those Who Hunger"

James 2:14–28

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: James 2:14–26.

Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note any words or phrases that seem meaningful.

- 1) Reread verse 14. When have you seen someone's words and actions not align?
- 2) When have your own words/actions not aligned?
- 3) Reread verses 15–16. This is a challenging thought experiment. To what extent do you think people's religious convictions should inform their actions in the workplace, their interactions with neighbors, etc.?
- 4) This is even more than a thought experiment. James identifies two of our most basic needs and determines that people being without these things is an issue. Whose responsibility is it to take care of these people who are without clothes and daily food?
- 5) What do you think the responsibilities of the government, the church and individuals are in responding to this sort of poverty?
- 6) What steps would you need to take to participate in this work?
- 7) How does this passage challenge you to think differently about what it means to be human?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

CityServe is coming up October 5. This event provides a fantastic opportunity to join in the humanizing work of Jesus in our city. Consider registering for a service site. Information can be found at firstprescos.org/cityserve.

IN: Connect with Each Other

Who do you know that needs assistance in order to escape the type of poverty described here? How might you help to alleviate their suffering?