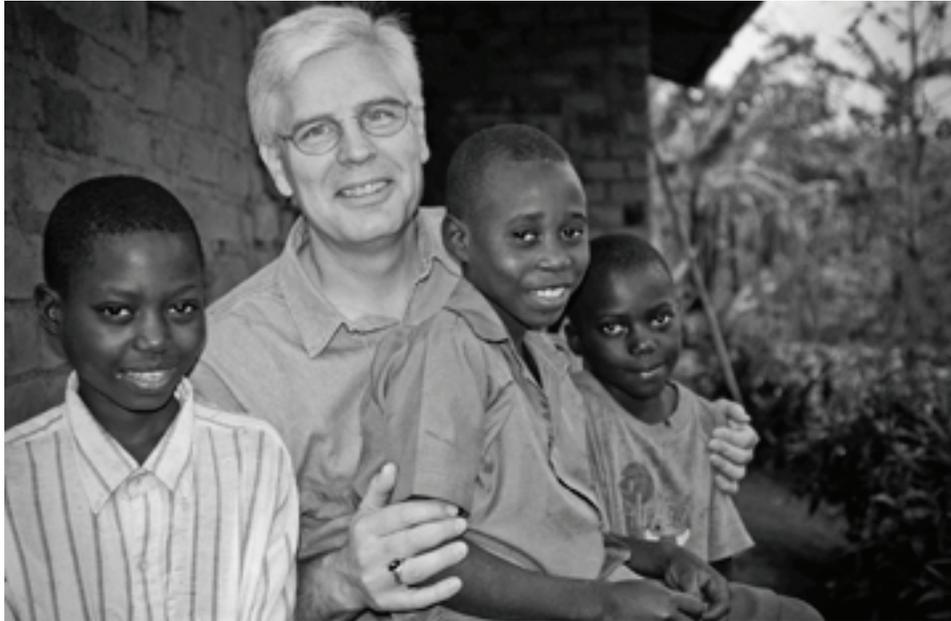


WEEK ONE



Rich in Uganda with Richard (center) and his brothers, who were orphaned by AIDS.

Karen Homer/WorldVision 1998

Week 1:

BASED ON

THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL: PROLOGUE



FACT

Every day, more than 6,800 people are newly infected with HIV and more than 5,700 die from the disease; that equals 2.5 million new infections per year and 2 million deaths. Perhaps the most disturbing fact of all is that AIDS has now left 15 million children behind as orphans. (*The Hole in Our Gospel*, p. 148)



SCRIPTURE | JAMES 2:14-26

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

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Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 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. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.



RICHARD’S STORY

Excerpt from The Hole in Our Gospel by Rich Stearns

His name was Richard, the same as mine. I sat inside his meager thatch hut, listening to his story, told through the tears of an orphan whose parents had died of AIDS. At 13, Richard was trying to raise his two younger brothers by himself in this small shack with no running water, electricity, or even beds to sleep in. There were no adults in their lives—no one to care for them, feed them, love them, or teach them how to become men. There was no one to hug them either, or to tuck them in at night. Other than his siblings, Richard was alone, as no child should be. I try to picture my own children abandoned in this kind of deprivation, fending for themselves without parents to protect them, and I cannot.

I didn’t want to be there. I wasn’t supposed to be there, so far out of my comfort zone—not in that place where orphaned children live by themselves in their agony. There, poverty, disease, and squalor had eyes and faces that stared back, and I had to see and smell and touch the pain of the poor. That particular district, Rakai, is believed to be ground zero for the Ugandan AIDS pandemic. There, the deadly virus has stalked its victims in the dark for decades. Sweat trickled down my face as I sat awkwardly with Richard and his brothers while a film crew captured every tear—mine and theirs.

I much preferred living in my bubble, the one that, until that moment, had safely contained my life, family, and career. It kept difficult things like this out, insulating me from anything too raw or upsetting. When such things intruded, as they rarely did, a channel could be changed, a newspaper page turned, or a check written to

keep the poor at a safe distance. But not in Rakai. There, “such things” had faces and names—even my name, Richard.

Not 60 days earlier I had been CEO of Lenox, America’s finest tableware company, producing and selling luxury goods to those who could afford them. I lived with my wife and five children in a 10-bedroom house on five acres just outside of Philadelphia. I drove a Jaguar to work every day, and

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my business travel took me to places such as Paris, Tokyo, London, and Florence. I flew first-class and stayed in the best hotels. I was respected in my community, attended a venerable suburban church, and sat on the board of my kids' Christian school. I was one of the good guys—you might say a “poster child” for the successful Christian life. I had never heard of Rakai, the place where my bubble would burst. But in just 60 days, God turned my life inside out, and it would never be the same ...

Two crude piles of stones just outside the door mark the graves of Richard's parents. It disturbs me that he must walk past them every day. He and his brothers must have watched first their father and then their mother die slow and horrible deaths. I wondered if the boys were the ones who fed them and bathed them in their last days. Whatever the case, Richard, a child himself, is now the head of his household.

Child-headed household, words never meant to be strung together. I tried to wrap my mind around this new phrase, one that describes not only Richard's plight but that of tens of thousands, even millions more. I'm told that there are 60,000 orphans just in Rakai, 12 million orphans due to AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. How can this be true? Awkwardly I asked Richard what he hopes to be when he grows up, a ridiculous question to ask a child who has lost his childhood. “A doctor,” he said, “so I can help people who have the disease.”

“Do you have a Bible?” I asked. He ran to the other room and returned with his treasured book with gold-gilt pages. “Can you read it?”

“I love to read the book of John, because it says that Jesus loves the children.”

This overwhelmed me, and my tears started to flow. Forgive me, Lord, forgive me. I didn't know. But I did know. I knew about poverty and suffering in the world. I was aware that children die daily from starvation and lack of clean water. I also knew about AIDS and the orphans it leaves behind, but I kept these things outside of my insulating bubble and looked the other way.

Yet this was to be the moment that would ever after define me. Rakai was what God wanted me to see. My sadness that day was replaced by repentance. Despite what the Bible had told me so clearly, I had turned a blind eye to the poor. Now my heart was filled with anger, first at myself, and then toward the world. Why wasn't Richard's story being told? The media overflowed with celebrity dramas, stock market updates, and Bill Clinton's impending impeachment hearings. But where were the headlines and magazine covers about Africa? Twelve million orphans, and no one noticed? But what sickened me most was this question: Where was the Church? Indeed, where were the followers of Jesus Christ in the midst of perhaps the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time? Surely the Church should have been caring for these “orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27). Shouldn't the pulpits across America have flamed with exhortations to rush to the front lines of compassion? Shouldn't they be flaming today? Shouldn't churches be reaching out to care for children in such desperate need? How could the great tragedy of these orphans get drowned out by choruses of praise music in hundreds of thousands of churches across our country? (pp. 7-11)

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REFLECTIONS

“Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.”

—*Bob Pierce, founder of World Vision* (p. 9)

“We are the carriers of the gospel—the good news that was meant to change the world. Belief is not enough. Worship is not enough. Personal morality is not enough. And Christian community is not enough. God has always demanded more. When we committed ourselves to following Christ, we also committed to living our lives in such a way that a watching world would catch a glimpse of God’s character—His love, justice, and mercy—through our words, actions, and behavior. ‘We are . . . Christ’s ambassadors,’ wrote the apostle Paul, ‘as though God were making his appeal through us’ (2 Cor. 5:20). God chose us to be His representatives. He called us to go out, to proclaim the ‘good news’—to be the ‘good news’—and to change the world. Living out our faith privately was never meant to be an option.”

—*Rich Stearns* (p. 3)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think about a time or place that completely overwhelmed you and forced you to think about life differently. Share that experience.
2. Rich talks about his privileged life at home and how this “bubble” he lived in insulated him from “anything too raw or upsetting.” How do you relate to his desire to keep “the poor at a safe distance”? What fears perpetuate this desire?
3. Do you believe that faith without deeds is dead? Why or why not? How would you describe faith devoid of actions? How would you describe deeds without faith? How does your life reflect the reality that true faith is accompanied by action?
4. Ephesians 2:8 tells us, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God,— not by works, so that no one can boast.” How does this verse complement or contradict James 2? Some would say that this verse has been used by Christians to justify faith as simply being a state of mind or a one-time prayer. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.
5. Were you surprised to learn that there are so many children orphaned by AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa? Does this fact motivate you to do something? If so, what?
6. What actions has your church or community taken to address the needs of our brothers and sisters around the world? Is there something more they should be doing? If so, what?
7. Re-read the quote by Bob Pierce. Has this ever been the cry of your heart? What would it feel like to have your heart broken by the things that break God’s heart?

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8. What do you think it means to be an ambassador for Christ? Is being an ambassador something that you do or something that you are? Explain your answer. In what ways have you been an ambassador of Christ?



TAKE ACTION

This week, look for ways to put your faith into action. Every day there are thousands of opportunities to reflect God's love. Maybe you offer to watch your neighbor's children for the afternoon, volunteer at a local shelter, call someone you know who needs a friend, advocate for a child in need, or donate money to an organization that cares for the poor. The goal is to become transformed people whose actions are a result of faith rather than trying to prove something to God or to the world. It is normal to feel outside your comfort zone in your acts of compassion, but as you spend time with God and trust in His love, action will begin to naturally flow out of your faith.

Keep a journal of your efforts, and consider sharing your experiences with your study group or friends. You can also contribute your story on www.theholeinourgospel.com—look for the section called “The Buzz.”



CHALLENGE

Skip a weekly trip to the grocery store and donate the money saved to a local food bank. During that week, eat only what is left in the pantry or fridge. By the end of the week, choices are often limited and your family may get a feel for what it's like to have few food choices.



SCRIPTURE FOR FURTHER STUDY

- James 1:22–27
- Job 29:11–17
- 2 Corinthians 5:16–21
- Luke 4:14–21
- 1 Chronicles 29:11–16
- Luke 12:32–34



PRAYER

Pray for the Ugandan orphan, Richard, and all those who share his story. Ask God for wisdom and obedience in following His call to care for orphans and widows. Maybe you need to repent for turning a blind eye to the poor. Maybe you need to ask God to break your heart with the things that break His heart. This prayer of asking God to break your heart should not be taken lightly; it may take you places far beyond your comfort zone, but take heart, for Christ has gone ahead of you.