



FOUNDATIONS FOR HOLISTIC MINISTRY

LESSON SIX - "THE EARLY CHURCH: HOW DO WE RESPOND?"

Introduction to the Lesson -

In the last lesson we ended with Jesus quoting Isaiah 42:5-9 while declaring a new day and grounding his ministry in justice. Isaiah gives some hopeful words as he looks forward to the coming of a greater fulfillment of God's revelation for all people. We have focused on the particular Covenant relationship God had with the people of Israel. With Isaiah's teachings, we see an inclusivity and forward look to a fuller revelation of God's work in the world through the promised Messiah that will encompass all people of the world. In the passage we see somewhat of a summation of what we have learned about the God of Creation, who gave special attention and purpose to humankind in the created order, and the God of the Covenant, who favors the oppressed and expects us to deal with them in justice and righteousness, and now to the the promised One to be a light for all nations. Let's look at Isaiah 42:5-9.

We see from Jesus' demonstrations of mercy, healing, and teaching how it is that we, his followers, are to respond to our world with hope. This lesson will examine the greatest commandment, how the early church lived out this commandment, and how we, today, can live out this commandment.

Key Scripture: Matthew 22:34-40; Acts 2:44-47

Key points:

- o **Jesus made it clear what he expects of his followers: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.**
- o **The early Church lived as an alternative community to their larger society**
- o **Early believers did not separate their individual conversion to faith in Jesus Christ from the way they responded to their world**

Lesson

In Matthew 22:34-40 Jesus unites all the ideas we have explored throughout this series. Over and over, Jesus made it clear what he expects out of us. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, we know that the disciples and apostles began to teach all that they had learned about how to live out this greatest commandment. Followers of Christ gathered together in groups of believers. The group grew larger because of how these believers related to one another and to others in the community.

The book of Acts documents this early Church history. Acts 2: 44-47 outlines how the early church lived as an alternative community. The early church knew it was called to be an alternative community, much like the "peculiar community" the nation of Israel was called to be. Much like Jesus had pulled together outcasts from his society: tax collectors, women, sinners, the poor; the early church represents an alternative community to the social ideal of its day. About this community, one Biblical scholar writes:

Most important about Luke's [the author of Acts] picture of the earliest church is his insistence that it was a community in which physical need was cared for... That Luke understood this communal life to be an effective witness to the society in which the

church lived is suggested by the way he speaks of the conversions to faith aroused by the life of the community. The alternative community formed by Christian believers attracted others and pulled them away from the societal values with which they lived. ¹

Early believers did not separate their individual conversion to faith in Jesus Christ from the way they responded to their world. Faith in Christ changed everything, even social order. This can be most profoundly seen in Paul's writing to the Galatian believers with, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus, (Gal.3:28). This was a radical world view.; completely counter-cultural in the day of the early Church and counter-cultural for us today..

Reflection questions:

o What social categorizations separate us today?

o Does the church work to overcome this or does the church perpetuate these separations?

In many ways, churches today reflect more of the surrounding cultural views of our society, especially in terms of wealth and social status, rather than embracing this notion of being a radically different, alternative community. In this environment, it becomes tempting for churches to exist for their own self-perpetuation rather than as a community of joyful believers fully committed to demonstrating the whole Gospel for the world.

When churches draw this narrow focus, evangelism becomes narrow too. Evangelism is relegated only to the personal and private, and never to the social and structural. Reading the book of Acts clearly shows us that the early believers didn't see it that way. They lived in a way that was alternative and contradictory to their culture: living in community, holding all things in common, and selling their possessions to help those less fortunate.

Reflection Questions

o Does the church today serve as an alternative community or do we embrace much of what society values today? Are churches keepers of the status quo?

These notions about the nature and function of the Church bring us full circle back to where we began with an exploration of evangelism vs. social involvement. Let's take a moment to take the **Theological Foundations Survey** again. Compare your before and after surveys to determine if the explorations of these Scripture passages and contemporary issues has changed your scores this time. Discuss this with your group or the people at your table.

Were your answers different this time? To truly practice holistic ministry, we do need to acknowledge and deal with the "lopsidedness" with which many of us have approached our understanding of how to live as Christians. We need to wrestle with our theological and scriptural biases and learn to be balanced in our approach. We need both the traditional and progressive expression of our faith to be balance. Scholars have said that evangelism and social ministry are "two sides of the same coin" or "two wings of the same bird." ² Rather than separating the imperatives of the Christian faith as it is to be lived out into categories of the spiritual in evangelism and the physical, emotional, and communal in social action, we must learn to embody a more holistic approach to the sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Benediction

“The work of Jesus was not a new set of ideals or principles for reforming or even revolutionizing society, but the establishment of a new community, a people that embodied forgiveness, sharing and self-sacrificing love in its rituals and discipline. In that sense, the visible church is not to be the bearer of Christ’s message, but to be the message.”- Stanley Hauerwas



Call To Be Attentive

Spend time this week comparing your two Theological Foundations Surveys. Note what has changed and what has stayed the same. Reflect on what has changed, why you think it has changed and what this means for your ministry in the future. Also note what has stayed the same, why, and what this

Sources

¹Kysar, Robert. Called To Care: Biblical Images For Social Ministry. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

²Miles, Delos. Evangelism and Social Involvement. Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1986.

Sider, Ronald J. Good News and Good Works: A theology for the Whole Gospel. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999.



