

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO A SICK SOCIETY?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

In many parts of the world, and especially in the United States, the church of Jesus Christ is spiritually ill. It is too weak, anemic and powerless to penetrate our dying society as the salt and light that Christ called it to be. One of the reasons for its spiritually weak condition is best described in Ezekiel 34:2-5:

"Thus says the Lord God: Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. And they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered."

Unfortunately, the church is weak because the shepherds are weak.

The disease in the church affects the homes in our communities. Although they look beautiful on the outside, the media and our personal experience tells us that there is much pain, suffering, abuse, and confusion up and down the block of any given neighborhood. Marriages are bankrupt; parents are irresponsible; children are left alone, confused, hurt, angry, and rebelling. On the home front, "there is real trouble in River City," as the song goes. Thus, when the church is not the salt and light it was meant to be, it affects the spiritual influence within the home as well as the society at large.

Our community is drowning in a sea of uncertainties. The only prevalent rule seems to be "No problem, be happy." The only wisdom is worldly and demonic. The only message of hope is like that written on a grave marker in the catacombs of first century Rome: "No Hope." Our society is best described in the writings of the apostle Paul when he said that the Roman, Greek, Jewish, and barbarian society of his day was nothing more than a graveyard made up of "breathing dead" men and women. It was a culture dead in their trespasses and sins, people controlled by emptiness, anger, and fear. In Ephesians 2 he tells us that the world was run by the "prince of the power of the air." It was a society whose people were encouraged to fulfill themselves by indulging in the desires of the flesh and the mind. By nature they were children of wrath; that is, they were suffering the full physical, emotional, and spiritual consequences of lives that were lived without a truth relationship with the one and only living God who has been revealed as Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:1-10). Sadly, nothing within the fallen heart of mankind has changed in 2000 years.

As followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, how should we react to our high-tech, fast-lane, "no problem, be happy," sick society? Should we all move to Montana and build bomb shelters to protect ourselves, like the New Age guru Mrs. Prophet and her followers? Should we be separate and refuse to associate with "sinners" as so many frightened Christians are encouraged to do by their confused shepherds? Or should we identify with our society so that in time it is hard to even know if one is a Christian? There is a delicate balance of struggle with our position in the world. Problems and tensions are in every arena, be it the church, the home, or our immediate community.

The answer to the question "How should we respond to our sick society?" will best be found by looking once again at the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, he who came to this earth ". . . to seek and save that which was lost."

I. Be Available in the Spiritual Community, Luke 4:31-37

And he came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath; and they were amazed at his teaching, for his message was with authority. And there was a man in the synagogue possessed by the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Ha! What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are-the Holy One of God!" And Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him without doing him any harm. And amazement came upon them all, and they began discussing with one another saying, "What is this message? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out." And the report about him was getting out into every locality in the surrounding district.

From our study in this series of messages, we know that the Lord Jesus came to earth in the form of man, knowing that the world was sick unto death. When the Pharisees criticized him for eating and drinking with tax-gatherers and sinners, Jesus said, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous men but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:29-32). In the synagogue of his home town of Nazareth, Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1-2, declaring himself to be the total fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies. The Jews responded in rage, and sought to kill him. Mark tells us of their rejection, saying, "And he could do no miracles there except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And he wondered at their unbelief" (Mark 6:5-6). The spiritual society into which our Lord walked should have rejoiced at the fact that the Messiah had finally come, but instead they tried to throw him off a hill.

Leaving his home town of Nazareth, Jesus and his five disciples- Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Nathaniel-walked east 20-25 miles to Capernaum, a city of Galilee on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. During Jesus' day it had grown into a city big enough to support a tax office (Matt. 9:9), a garrison for Roman soldiers (Matt.8:9), as well as a Jewish synagogue built by a Roman centurion (Luke 7: 5) who later requested that the Jewish elders ask Jesus to heal his terminally ill slave.

Our Lord lodged in Capernaum for several weeks, "and he was teaching them on the Sabbath [days]." In this passage we see how Jesus brings healing with the word of God. These people, who had not heard the voice of a prophet in over 400 years, needed to experience God's word anew. The Sabbath began with the sunset each Friday night, and the Lord would prepare his heart before his Father to attend the local synagogue service the following Saturday morning. His audience were those whom the prophet Isaiah had diagnosed when he wrote in the Spirit in 700 B.C.: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up of only rules taught by men" (Isaiah 29:13). Paul would later say to the Corinthians about the Jewish community: ". . .their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ, but to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart [a veil of pride, deceiving my mind with the lie that I can keep the law in my own power]. But whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (II Cor. 3:14-16).

Our Lord's desire was to teach the law in the true spirit in which it was given. Jesus sought to uphold the authority and validity of the law, while moving it off the stone tablets and into the hearts of men and women. In our day, we, too, need to hear the word of God by our teachers, to remind us that we cannot keep the law in the flesh. God has made provision by the Spirit so that if we place our faith in him, he says, ". . . I will put my law within them, and on their hearts and I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:31). Although the law was a grace given by God to keep us from destruction, the people were frustrated because they were unable to keep it in their own power.

Our text says that the people ". . . were continually amazed at his teaching; for his message was with authority." Jesus' teaching was not delegated authority from the scribes, but a message coming from God through him. He would simply say, "Thus saith the Lord." Jesus went into the temple and began to teach: "The Jews therefore marveled saying, 'How has this man become learned having never been educated?'" The Lord never went to school in the sense that the rabbis had. He said, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me" (John 7:14f).

The Jewish synagogue was spiritually sick. The community was seeking to live under the heavy burden of the law, but it imprisoned their spirit. Our Lord was available to teach them so that the word of God could set them free from the power of the flesh and the evil one. Paul would later write to the Jews in Galatia, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

You need to be encouraged that the shepherds of Peninsula Bible Church desire to submit to Jesus as Lord, and are continually seeking his mind so that we can present a balanced diet. We ask in our meetings, "What do God's people need now? How do they need to be fed from the word." We keep looking for a balanced diet, some basic food that we put on the table in three portions. The first portion is the New Covenant: "Everything from God, nothing from us." With the new covenant, God moved the law off of stones and into our hearts, giving us the Holy Spirit to keep that law. With the voice of the Spirit he says, "Don't depend on your flesh, your background, wealth, or schooling. Depend on me, for without me you cannot do anything." So we are constantly trying to present the New Covenant that teaches us about our relationship with the living God.

The second portion we want to present is Body Life, Christian community as God intended it to be. We are to live in unity, while using our spiritual gifts to function in harmony. While Satan would have us be individuals who go our own way, the life of Christ at work in the body results in oneness.

I made a thoughtless, cutting remark to one of our pastors in a meeting last week. Although I did not intend to hurt him, he wrote me a note that said, "You hurt me." I realized then that my insensitivity had wounded me as well. Right away, I wrote him a note back and said, "This rebuke from you, I take it as from the Lord." Why? I want to be one with my brother. I do not want anything to come between us. For some days last week we were estranged because of my careless speech, but the Lord used his Spirit to reconcile us.

The third part of the spiritual diet is based on teaching about Spiritual Warfare. Not only are we to know our relationship to God and with each other, but we need to know of our relationship to the evil one. We must learn who he is and his intentions towards us. Since he seeks to destroy us by his deceptions, we need to be armed with God's truth in order to counteract his lies.

For example, whenever the word of God is taught, there is more than one spirit present. In verse 33, we see a man in the synagogue "having a spirit of an unclean demon." This was an immoral man whom Satan was ruling through one of his demons. A demon is an invisible evil spirit, an intelligent created being. It had taken residence in this man's body and had full control over his mind and actions. Like his master Satan, his mission was to enslave this man and use him to deceive those around him.

Apparently, this synagogue was no threat to Satan because it was imprisoned by the law, and thus remained powerless to set others free. However, Jesus' teaching on freedom from the law through relationship with the Messiah endangered Satan's kingdom. So the demon started screaming: "Ha! What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of Israel!" The demon recognized and acknowledged our Lord's power, position, and person. The Jews, who heard the announcement, would be confused by our Lord's source of power. How best for Satan to strike back but in a religious setting where he hoped to get the Jews to think that Jesus and Satan were working together?

Why did Jesus respond, "Be muzzled!"? It was inappropriate that Jesus the Messiah should be proclaimed by representatives of the evil one. This would have given the Pharisees grounds for a charge brought against him later, that of being Satan's ally (Matt. 12:24; John 8:44f).

Jesus healed the man spiritually: "Come out of Him! And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he went out of him without doing him any harm." The Jews' reacted in amazement at the Lord's refreshing message and the power and authority displayed by him in casting out the demon. The report of his activities on that Sabbath morning traveled quickly like a voice over the waters of the lake outside the synagogue to all the surrounding districts.

Once when we were teaching in the Colombian prisons, we were asked to preach the word of God in an area for the criminally insane. When we came out, there was a naked man, foaming at the mouth and screaming at

us in a voice like I had never heard before. Unfortunately, we were not able to help this prisoner because the guard wanted us out of his section to teach elsewhere. We understood clearly that when the word of God is being taught there are pressures from the devil to distort and confuse it, even within the church itself.

How should we respond to a sick society? Be available in the spiritual community, as well as,

II. Be Available to the Private Community, Luke 4: 38-39

And he arose and left the synagogue, and entered Simon's home. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever; and they made request of him on her behalf. And standing over her, he rebuked the fever, and it left her; and she immediately arose and waited on them.

There are some ruins on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee in the ancient city of Capernaum that suggest that Peter's house was but a few yards to the left of the door of the ancient synagogue. According to Jewish custom the main Sabbath meal came immediately after the service at the sixth hour (12:00 noon). So Peter invited Jesus and the disciples to the home of his mother-in-law for lunch.

Upon entering the house with the full expectation of the sweet smell of a noon dinner, they received the news that Mom was suffering from a high fever and had been put to bed by those in the house. "They made request of Jesus to do something," for Peter and the other lunch guests had been in the morning service when the demonic was healed. Based on their faith, he rebuked the fever, not an evil spirit called "fever." Rather, he rebuked the fever in the same way he later rebuked the winds and waves on the stormy sea of Galilee (Luke 8:24). This woman experienced a complete physical healing, and immediately "arose and began to wait on them."

Here the Lord presents a beautiful model of availability to those in the private community. He cares about individuals, those servants who love him and want to be used to his honor and glory. Not only was Jesus available to perform a spiritual healing in the synagogue by the power of the Holy Spirit, but when he made himself available to enter the private community of Peter's mother-in-law's home he was free to minister to this physically sick woman.

Our sick society is made up of individuals who are extremely ill in one form or another. Although we are not always aware of the root cause of their illness, as followers of Christ we are to be available to minister to them. When we enter those homes we should be ready to turn to our Lord and ask him to use us to bring spiritual and emotional healing. As our Lord directs us, we are to pray for the physical healing of those who are sick.

Over the last 16 years our family has had the privilege of ministering to families within our immediate neighborhood, especially at times of illness and death. I am sure many of you have had similar opportunities. A wife came by one evening around dinner time to ask for prayer for her husband who had just suffered a heart attack. A distraught husband banged on our door late one evening to ask me to come over to "fix his wife" who was suffering from stress and anxiety. (She later accepted the Lord at a Christian conference). Another wife asked for prayer for her husband who had a heart attack; we visited and prayed for him in the hospital many times. A couple asked us to marry them; another asked us to counsel their rebellious child. We were there when one neighbor's husband died. We hunted for hours one evening for a missing child; another parent came and wanted counsel because his child had a nervous breakdown. The ministry goes on and on; it is provided by the Holy Spirit in one home and then another. There are many times that the Lord has led us into the home setting to be a word of encouragement, a prayer, a touch, or presence in the midst of an evil world.

Not only do we need to respond to our sick society by being available to the spiritual community and to the private community, we also must,

III. Be Available to the Public Community, Luke 4: 40-41

And when the sun was setting all who had any sick with various diseases brought them to him; and laying his hands on every one of them, he was healing them. And demons also were coming out of many, crying out and saying, "You are the Son of God!" And rebuking them, he would not allow them to speak, because they knew him to be the Christ.

The Jewish Sabbath began at sunset on Friday night and was over by sunset on Saturday night. Exodus 20:8-11 instructed the Jews to avoid "work" on the Sabbath or they would be stoned to death (Exodus 31:14). According to the Pharisees' understanding of this law, Jesus had worked on the Sabbath because he healed two persons. Once the Pharisees arrived on the scene, our Lord would address this tension.

The Jewish community was aware of these restrictions and did not want to break the Sabbath. So they waited until the Sabbath was over and "the sun had set," before they brought the sick and demon-possessed to Jesus for healing. The Lord touched each one of them and they were healed. Once again, he would not allow the demons to speak and announce his arrival as Messiah. Jesus did not want the people to associate him with the devil, for the demons were saying to the people that this healer was known in eternity as the Son of God, the Christ. Matthew tells us why our Lord was available to the public community, "in order what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled saying: 'He himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases'" (cf. Isaiah 53:4).

Rather than move away from the sick and demonic society, by the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus was available to bring personal healing to all those with diseases or demons, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Later, when Levi (renamed Matthew) left tax-collecting to follow Jesus, he gave a party to celebrate his new life in Christ. The Pharisees came to criticize Jesus, grumbling, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax-gatherers and sinners?" Jesus said "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call righteous men, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:29-32).

We have such an opportunity to move into our community the way Jesus did in his. We have a number of people involved in Backyard Bible Clubs this summer who are ministering to many children who will grow up as believers in Christ because of these leaders' availability. I know of men who out of their fellowship have become coaches to children in community sports programs, loving them and setting godly examples. Many of you have gotten involved in PTA, and are bringing truth to our educational system. There are ministries in many arenas that have nothing to do with "religion" or church, but reach out with the gospel to the sickly society in which we live. The encouragement from this passage as we witness the life of our Lord is: As it is reflected in your lives, keep going, you are on the right path, and traveling in the right direction. Move into your community. As our Lord directs you, it needs to hear about Jesus Christ.

How should we respond to a sick society? We need to be available in the spiritual, private, and public community. The key to availability is this:

IV. As Our Lord Directs Our Lives, Luke 4:42-44

And when day came, he departed and went to a lonely place [and was praying there, Mark 1:35] and the multitudes were searching for him, and came to him, and tried to keep him from going away from them. But he said to them, "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose." And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

When everyone was looking for Jesus after the Sabbath, they found him praying. That was the secret of his life which kept him from giving into the whims of every group. How was Jesus able to sort out which way to turn: Should he return to Capernaum on a wave of popularity as a healer, or should he plow new territory as a preacher? It is in this passage (see Mark 1:35f) that the Lord models how we all should live and minister to the community-in prayer. Knowing where to go, what to say, and what to do was determined by our Lord's communication with his beloved heavenly Father. Thus, on a given Sabbath our Lord was able to walk into a situation and offer spiritual and physical healing.

It was the secret of Jesus' life that he would pray. What that meant for him was that Jesus did nothing without first "checking in" with his Father: "For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38, 14:3, 17:4). Jesus said nothing without first checking in with his Father: "For I do not speak of my own initiative, but the Father himself who sent me has given me commandment what to say and what to speak" (John 12:49-50; 7:14-24). Jesus did not go anywhere without first checking in with his Father; for it was after he had prayed that he was able to say with such confidence to his disciples, "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach. . . ." (Mark 1:38).

We know that our churches, homes, and society are filled with physically, emotionally, and spiritually sick people. We should also know that we are not the savior of the world, but we are servants of the risen and living Lord who ministers to our world through us. Despite the "press of the crowd" we as servants of God need to check in with our Lord about where we should go, what we should do, and what we should say, moment by moment. When we are involved in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, it is hard to believe that we would be saying the wrong words, going the wrong places, or doing the wrong things in any given day.

Our lives and ministry should not be determined by the press of the crowd, by popularity, or availability. As servants of Jesus Christ we are called to have the same attitude our Lord had in his relationship with his Father and his ministry: "Not my will but your will be done." The secret to living a full day that will be pleasing to the Lord, one that will bring eternal consequences to all that we say and do, is contingent on our understanding of living a full life. And that secret was given by Jesus to his disciples ". . . he was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1f).

In his new book, *The Strength of a Man*, Dave Roper says in a chapter on the prayer life of our Lord:

. . . he prayed without ceasing. Prayer was the environment in which he lived, the air he breathed. Subject to continual interruptions, busy beyond comparison, resisted by friends and foes, hassled and harried, he managed to keep in touch with God. Every situation was an occasion for prayer. . . . His life was continuous prayer. No demands, only dependence; no clamoring for attention, only a quiet continual reliance on the Father who always heard him.

We should pray, wait, and listen for the answers that will come only from our risen Lord because he hears us. It is not like my wife's perpetual question, "Are you listening to me?" I answer, "Yes, but would you repeat it just for clarity?" Jesus never says that. Not only does he hear our words, but he sees the motives of our heart.

If we "pray without ceasing" we will be able to say, "The fact that everyone is looking for me will not determine my day, my ministry or my priorities; before I do anything, as a servant of Jesus Christ I will check in with my Lord about what I should do and say, and where I should minister in this sick and evil society."

How should we react to a sick society? We know that we are living in the age of the Spirit, and that our Lord has given us the clear purpose of being part of his plan of redemption. Each spiritually gifted member of Christ's body is to be available to the spiritual, private, and public community, calling out a people for his name's sake. Those who are spiritually healthy are called out to minister to those who are spiritually sick. Watch what God does. Watch him minister and bring life through you as his servant. As our Lord directs our lives, that direction will become more clear as we go to him in prayer.

"But he said to them, 'I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for that purpose.' And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea (the country of the Jews including Galilee)

Let's pray together for the mindset of Christ about our involvement in this sick and evil society.

Catalog No. 4125
Luke 4:31-44
Tenth Message
Ron R. Ritchie
July 30, 1989

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.