

HOW CAN WE BRING WHOLENESS TO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

Three years ago I married a non-Christian couple who lived and worked in our town, and in time we had the opportunity to meet most of their family and friends. Since the bride's brother was in the wedding party it seemed fitting a year later when he asked me to marry him and his fiancée. I told him I would marry them if they were open to the same Christian pre-marital counseling I had offered his sister and brother-in-law. He agreed, and we subsequently met at our home on several occasions to go through what the scriptures say about marriage.

The wedding was held on the grounds of a large estate with about 250 people in attendance. As I walked through the crowd I realized I had been given a wonderful opportunity to share with this couple and the audience the good news of Jesus Christ! The Holy Spirit was involved in that ceremony, and I had more opportunities than I had time to share the love of Christ at the reception.

The best part of this story, however, was yet to come. About a month after the wedding I received a phone call from the new husband asking my wife Anne Marie and me to come to their house for a quiet, intimate dinner and a time to view the videotape of the wedding. When we arrived at the house, we were met by a wonderful aroma of Italian sauces coming from the kitchen. Then we discovered that 21 of their relatives had been invited to our "intimate" dinner! I was asked to sit at the head of the table and give the blessing before the meal was served. The prayer prompted several of the relatives to ask me spiritual questions, and we talked about the Lord throughout dinner. Afterwards, we arranged our chairs in front of a big screen television they had rented for the occasion to watch me once again present the gospel to this captive audience. This sparked more questions about Jesus Christ, and several wanted copies of the videotape.

As Anne Marie and I drove home we rejoiced over the many opportunities the Lord had given us, and would continue to give us, each time we are willing to show up and participate in God's wonderful plan of redemption in the Age of the Spirit. It is a plan of redemption in which God wants to call people out from among the Gentiles through you and me by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:14).

This is but one of a number of experiences that many who are available to be used by his Holy Spirit can relate as to how God is using them to bring spiritual wholeness to our neighborhoods. We are not called to address the emotional and spiritual problems that are weighing down the families in our neighborhood by merely offering money and programs. God has called us to be available to allow his sensitive and loving Spirit to flow through us, bringing wholeness to our neighborhood by introducing people to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

How do we go about bringing wholeness to our own neighborhood?

I. Have eyes to see those who are sick, Luke 5:27-32

And after that He went out, and noticed a tax-gatherer named Levi, sitting in the tax office, and He said to him, "Follow Me." And he left everything behind, and rose and began to follow Him. And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax-gatherers and other people who were reclining at the table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax-gatherers and sinners?" And Jesus answered and said to them, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.

Our Lord had just taught the Pharisees, and a crowd who had gathered in a home in Capernaum, that he was the Messiah. As he taught he was able to prove his claim. A paralytic was lowered through the roof by four friends whose hope was that Jesus would have compassion on him and heal him. Based on their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you" (5: 20).

The Pharisees judged Jesus to be a blasphemer, for it was only God who could forgive sins. Thus, they reasoned that Jesus was declaring himself to be God, an offense punishable by stoning. Jesus then proved that he was God incarnate, the Son of Man who had authority on earth to forgive sins, when he said to the paralytic, "I say to you, rise and take up your stretcher and go home." According to Matthew 9:8, all were filled with awe except the scribes and Pharisees, although Christ had demonstrated his authority over demons, sickness, and sin. In our passage today, he will demonstrate his authority over the traditions in Judaism that were weighing down the people of Israel.

Note how the Lord reacted to the crowd that was glorifying God in 5:26. He did not stay around for personal praise. He did not follow the healed man home, nor did he stay and argue with the stunned Pharisees and scribes. Rather, he was motivated by his Father to continue ministering to those suffering from illness or disability to whom his Father directed him.

All three synoptic gospel writers--Matthew, Mark, and Luke--place the calling of Levi as the next pearl on the string of redemption stories. This passage takes place in Capernaum as Jesus walked along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum had a Roman garrison and an "IRS" office because of the heavy flow of commercial goods in and through this seaport.

There were many tax collectors in Palestine, and Jesus had seen several of them during the year he spent in the small town of Capernaum. Yet the Spirit led Jesus to notice this man Levi, a local Jewish tax collector. His name in the other two synoptic gospels is given as Matthew, meaning "gift of God." This gift of God had become one of the hated tax collectors, Jews who were hired by the Roman government under the leadership of Herod Antipas. They needed to speak the three current languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. Once hired they were known as "publicans," or public servants, and were considered to be on the lowest rung of the social ladder because of their unscrupulous methods. The tax collectors would estimate the worth of merchants' goods that flowed through the three major cities in Israel, Caesarea, Jericho and Capernaum. Unfortunately, the estimated tax was usually much higher than the goods were worth, so in time the tax collectors acquired the reputation of being extortionists. In Luke 3:12-13, the tax collectors came to John the Baptist to be baptized and asked, "Teacher, what should we do?" And he said them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to."

As a Jew, Levi was regarded by his fellow countrymen as being a publican and sinner, as well as a renegade or traitor, for he was in the service of the foreign oppressors. To make matters worse, tax collectors were hated by their Roman employers as well. So their only friends were fellow tax collectors and others on the same social scale--thieves, harlots and herdsmen--people who were similarly hated by both the Jews and Romans.

In the seaport city of Capernaum, Levi was one of many who worked as a hired hand for the chief tax collector. He was assigned a booth down by the port, and thus was called a "custom house official" who collected duty on imports and exports and tolls on roads, bridges and harbors from all who passed through Capernaum on the Roman roads connecting Damascus to points north, east, and west.

Although Levi must have heard of Jesus' ministry within the town limits during that year, he was about to meet Jesus face-to-face. Levi's tax booth was a picture of his physical, emotional, and spiritual life. Isolated by the Romans and Jews alike, he was materially rich, but spiritually bankrupt--a big house filled with fine furnishings; an empty heart filled with the memories of unkept promises. He worked for a political enemy who held him in contempt and cut him off from his spiritual family. In the midst of that mine-infested no-man's land the Lord Jesus walked out of the home where a healing had taken place and walked into the heart of Levi. With the same gracious invitation he had offered his first disciples on the shores of Galilee, he called out to Levi's waiting heart: "Follow me." It is obvious that Levi was ready, for he left everything that was important

to him, and began to follow Jesus.

How do you bring wholeness to a neighborhood? First, you have to ask God to give you eyes to see the people he wants you to minister to. Secondly, you have to be willing to show up at the party! In response to Jesus' invitation to him, Levi gave a big reception, and Jesus and his four disciples went into the house where a great crowd was gathered. It was made up of people who likewise were hated by the Romans and the Jews: other tax collectors, harlots, shepherds, extortionists and thieves. This was Levi's social circle.

One of the most exciting things in God's plan of redemption is the fact that whenever we have the privilege of encouraging someone to follow Jesus, most new followers have families and friends who also need to hear about the love the Lord has for them too! The wonderful thing about this story is that our Lord was willing to show up at the party, for he had declared on several occasions, "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Here was a rich man who was willing to give a big reception so as to introduce his new Lord and master to his fellow tax collectors. The "old gang" would first be fed by Levi and then the main speaker of the evening, "the very source of eternal life," would be introduced and given opportunity to share his message of salvation.

I had a similar experience a few years ago. We lived across the street from John, a Mafia-type individual who was curious about our faith in Christ. We developed a relationship with him and his "woman," and on several occasions had them over for a meal. John knew we were followers of the Lord Jesus, but he also had experienced the love of Christ through us during some times of crises. One evening when he knew that his "woman" and my wife were out of town, he invited me over to his house for dinner. I thought that the Lord had set up a great opportunity to introduce him to Jesus and to the gift of eternal life. So I looked forward to dinner.

When I arrived, the front door was open so I went into his home and was immediately confronted with 10 rough-looking characters. They looked like they had been in the house an hour before I arrived, and the smell of smoke, wine and drugs was in the air. John told me to make myself at home while he finished mixing the salad in the kitchen, so I went out to the living room again and introduced myself to several of the men who were checking me out. As we waited for the meal to be cooked my friend said in a loud voice, "Hey, guys, be quiet a minute. I want you guys to meet my Jesus Christ. Go ahead, Ron. Tell them." Stunned, I looked at him, and said "Tell them what?" "Tell them about Jesus Christ like you told me under the street light last week," he replied.

I knew what he was saying. Through Anne Marie and me he had seen the love of Jesus Christ, not as perfect people, but as containers of the living Christ. I was humbled by that evening. I left the home with my knees shaking because I had shared the gospel with 11 people who needed to hear. I would call them 11 tax collectors, those who are unacceptable in our society. In John's society, however, they were just like him, needing the gospel of Jesus Christ. What a moment! Depending on the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit I was able to share of God's love, grace, and mercy to a room full of publicans, sinners, and wine-bibbers. I do not know the end of the story, but what a joy to be a page in their book of life within my own neighborhood!

Like all parties of this type, you find those who will rejoice with you, but then there are the critics. The tax collectors and sinners were rejoicing with Levi in his home while the Pharisees, who had not been invited, were there to challenge some basic Jewish theology. These were the same people who were in the house when the Lord healed the paralytic, and had not yet gone home.

In his book, *The Christ of the Gospels*, Dr. J. W. Sheperd wrote:

The Jews detested these publicans not only on account of their frequent abuses and tyrannical spirit, but because the very taxes they were forced to collect by the Roman government were a badge of servitude and a constant reminder that God had forsaken His people and land in spite of the Messianic hope, founded on the many promises of the ancient prophets. The publicans were classed by the people with harlots, usurers, gamblers, thieves and dishonest herdsmen, who lived hard, lawless lives. They were just 'licensed robbers' and 'beasts in human shape.' According to rabbinism there was no hope for a man like Levi. He was excluded from all

religious fellowship. His money was considered tainted and defiled anyone who accepted it. He could not serve as a witness. The rabbis had no word of help for the publican, because they expected him by external conformity to the law to be justified before God.

This kind of thinking by the rabbis resulted in Levi being considered unclean and unfit to fellowship in Jewish society.

The Pharisees' question was underlined with a challenge: "If Jesus is really the Messiah, why is he associating with those hopeless sinners instead of the religious community, namely us?" Jesus heard the question and answered, "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." The Lord came not as a person who desired to associate with sinners for the fun of being with them. He came to them and was as close as a doctor to a patient suffering from a disease. His motive was not to catch the disease, but to heal the patient. That should be our calling as well.

Matthew 9:13 gives us more insight into what Jesus was saying: "But go and learn what this means, 'I desire compassion and not sacrifice' (Hosea 6:6) for I did not come to call the righteous [self righteous] but sinners to repent." The prophet Hosea was calling the adulterous nation of Israel back to the Lord. It was a nation filled with such abominations as robbery and murder (6:9, 7:1,7) and these murderers and thieves would still bring sacrifices to the temple, making them acts of pure mockery. Goodness with respect to both God and man was what God desired, rather than merely burnt offerings.

In the immediate situation our Lord was saying "there is none righteous, no not one." Those who think they are righteous because they keep the law are what the Lord called "self-righteous." Thus, he was essentially saying, "I have called sinners to repent, and that includes you Pharisees who are willing to see your sin of self-righteousness." The moment they were willing to confess that sin they would be made righteous in Christ. However, those Pharisees who refused to repent of their self-righteousness remained sinners. The apostle Paul proclaimed, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

For several years my wife has poured the love of Christ into the hearts of a "religious" couple in our neighborhood. As part of our ongoing relationship with them, they have invited us to a black-tie Christmas party at a large hotel in the city, an event with food, drink, and dancing to a live band for about 200 of his friends who come from every walk of life. I doubt that anyone at that party will be a follower of Jesus Christ, even though his name may be used in vain a score of times during the evening. The question is, should we go to such a party? You bet your lobster bib we'll be there! Why? Because Jesus loves those people and he wants to reach out to them during this season of redemption in and through people just like us. Each time I hear his name sworn, it will allow me to tell them that Jesus is alive and well, that he loves them, and has a wonderful plan for their lives. What an opportunity!

How can we bring wholeness to our neighbors? Ask Christ to give you eyes to see those who are sick and willing to get well.

II. Have a heart to teach those who are open to hearing, Luke 5:33-39

And they [Pharisees] said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers; the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but yours eat and drink.

These Pharisees had occasion to watch the disciples of John the Baptist down in the wilderness of Jericho. What they saw was a group of men who reminded them of their own disciples, men who understood the value of fasting and prayers in the midst of an oppressed and corrupt society. John's disciples fasted in repentance for their sins, and the Pharisees may have done the same. But they saw Jesus' disciples eating and drinking. It seemed to them a strange way to disciple men who had just come into a relationship with the Messiah. In reality, Jesus was not opposed to fasting and praying. Had the Pharisees known who he was they would have realized that he was a man of prayer and fasting.

According to the Law, the Jewish calendar observed only one fast a year, the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-34). The Jews forsook eating and drinking in order to spend uninterrupted time with God, and to promote faith and good works. In time, however, they had added to the law and developed a tradition of setting aside fasts every Monday and Friday. During the days of the prophet Isaiah, some 700 years earlier, the Jews wanted to know why God would not accept their fasting and answer their prayers. God answered them through the prophet, essentially saying that their fasts were an outward show, but their heart was far from him. He then defined for them the content of a true fast: "Is this not the fast which I chose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked to cover him; . . . then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you. The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call and the Lord will answer" (Isaiah 58:6f).

Jesus then used an illustration to differentiate between the old, current Judaism and the new life one can experience in a personal relationship with him:

And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days. (5:34-35)

Why would you want to fast at a celebration? You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? David Gooding wrote in his book, "According to Luke":

For his disciples, his presence, his forgiveness, their release from spiritual bondage, and the new vistas he opened up before them, made their joy like that of a wedding banquet. To have imposed fasting on them at that stage in their spiritual experience would have been highly incongruous and artificial. There is no point in fasting just for the sake of fasting.

The Lord Jesus was saying to the Jews that he was the bridegroom, but he would not always be there. Fasting was for the day when the bridegroom would be taken away. Proclaiming our Lord's violent death on the cross, Isaiah 53:8 says, "By oppression and judgment he was taken away." This resulted in days of mourning for his disciples (John 16:16-22) until the joy of the resurrection, the season of Pentecost some 50 days later, and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Fortunately for the believer today, our bridegroom is in us and with us, filling our hearts with righteousness, peace and joy by the Holy Spirit. "For we know we have been saved by grace and not by works, and we have been born again to a living hope" (I Peter 1:3).

Jesus subsequently gave two parables, illustrations from life experiences which he used for two reasons. First, the parables were given to men with open hearts towards the Lord and his ministry so that they might know and understand the deeper mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. Parables were the open door to deeper spiritual truth: "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the glory of kings is to search out a matter," says Proverbs. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever" (Deut. 29:29). God has revealed himself, and supremely so in his Son. The Son, therefore, becomes the picture, the parable, where God himself is found upon investigation.

Secondly, as the Jewish leadership became more intent upon killing Jesus and discouraging his followers, they were also demonstrating the truth of Isaiah 6:9-10: "You will keep on hearing but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear; and they have closed their eyes lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their heart and return and I should heal them." G. Campbell Morgan wrote:

Our Lord did not intend then in the use of the parable to prevent men seeing, but to help them to see. He did not want to prevent them hearing, but to quicken their power of hearing. He did not keep men away from the forgiveness and the mercy of God, but He lured them towards it. . . . He is not hiding, but veiling.

And He was also telling them a parable: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old." (5:36)

Jesus used a parable of patching old clothes to illustrate that the mix of old and new ruins both. The new is ruined because it has been torn to make a patch for another garment; the old is ruined because it cannot be matched. In this case the new garment is the new life people can have when they place their faith in Jesus as Messiah, Son of Man, Lord and Savior. That simple faith, rather than all the works required in the law and current traditions developed by the Pharisees, would produce new hearts for the believers. These new hearts would express themselves with the joy, love, life and celebration, but certainly not fasting, that takes place at a wedding. The old garment was and is Judaism and its traditions, while the new is life lived in the Spirit and by the power of the Spirit. Once we come into a relationship with the Lord Jesus, God the Father makes us "adequate servants of a new covenant; not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life" (II Cor. 3:6) To tear a new piece of cloth from a new garment and try to patch an old piece of cloth is like trying to mix traditionalism with the freedom of the Spirit which a new believer has in Christ. It cannot be done.

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins, and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, "The old is good enough." (5:37-39)

Wineskins were made of tanned sheep or goat skins. The hair was cut close to the skin, and then it was turned inside out, with the neck opening as the spout. If old skins were used for new wine, the fermentation process would burst the skins, resulting in a loss of both wine and skin. New wine must be put into new wineskins. The new is the life of Christ poured into the sinner who has repented; now his life is full of newness, joy, and freedom. Again, the old wine is legalism and tradition. Joyless fasting is not in line with the salvation Jesus was bringing. The Pharisees' argument was that the old was good enough, so they rejected the new, fresh, life-giving teaching of Jesus. On the other hand, Matthew and many of his friends were open to hearing the good news of salvation.

The Lord was not attacking the pure law of God as given through Moses, but rather the Jewish traditionalism that covered the Law so that the Jews could hardly find the truth. Dwight Pentecost writes, ". . . if men would taste His wine, that is, if they would accept what He was offering them, they would not want the old. However, the Pharisees, having tasted the old, were satisfied with it, they had no desire for what He was offering them."

Jesus taught those who were willing to listen: Rejoice in the bridegroom, your long-awaited Messiah is in your midst; there will be enough time for fasting when he is taken away to the cross. Rejoice, for he has good news: The old Judaism and its traditionalism is over and the new freedom in Jesus the Messiah has arrived. The two different cloths cannot be sewn together. The new wine and old wine will not mix; legalism and freedom in Christ will not mix. You cannot have both, so choose one or the other; the issue is the difference between death and life.

Unfortunately, when we look at verse 39, we see that the Pharisees chose the old. They were continually saying, "We like the old way and we do not want the new wine. We are used to the old wine. We do not want to change." Making that kind of choice results in destruction because old wine produces death.

While vacationing in southern France in October, Anne Marie and I were invited by a French friend to have appetizers with his wife and her parents who lived in the immediate neighborhood. It was clearly understood that it was only for the appetizer between 7-8 p.m., not for dinner afterwards. These people were going through the formality of being hospitable because we were related to a friend, so they were putting up with us for an hour. After some formal introductions and an initial period of coldness, the food and drink were placed on the table and the conversation began to flow. They all had been raised Catholic, but now were agnostics.

They loved a different god, not Jesus, and they were very interested in reincarnation. They had heard that there were many Christians in the United States, and contrasted us with the current French philosophy, which they expressed in the words, "We are a nation running towards Sodom and Gomorrah."

I looked at my watch and it was 8 p.m. We knew that our time was up; we had been dismissed before we even arrived. Then something wonderful happened. The daughter said that her mother (who had been listening to the conversation from the kitchen) wanted us to stay for dinner. For the next four and a half hours my wife and I talked about God and Jesus Christ, the Common Market, and 1992! They wanted to know my opinion about what was happening in Europe and Russia, which led us into the topic of prophecy. With my wife interpreting my English into French we swept back the dishes, and I arranged the salt shakers and water glasses to help illustrate, beginning in Daniel, through Matthew 24, and ending up in Revelation, God's great plan of redemption that can only be experienced in Jesus Christ. At 12:30 a.m. they expressed the desire to have some written material on this prophecy. After three kisses on both cheeks per person and six kisses from their little daughter, we finally began walking towards our car. The father gave me his address and phone number and said, "I wish you lived in this neighborhood. I have so many questions. Please send the books."

How can we bring spiritual health to our neighborhoods? Ask Jesus to give us eyes to notice the sick and dying, and hearts to be willing to teach the plan of salvation to open hearts.

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