

7.45am & 9.30am

‘Luke - The Doctor Is In’

30 October 2016

Finding the Right Balance

Luke 4:31-44

Prayer

Reformation Day, prayer by John Calvin (1509 - 1564)

Our God and Father, we humbly and fervently ask you, since all fullness of wisdom and light is found in You, to mercifully to enlighten us by your Holy Spirit in the true understanding of your word, and to give us grace to receive it in true fear and humility.

May we be taught by Your word to place our trust only in You and to serve and honour You as we ought, so that we may glorify Your holy name in all our living and edify our neighbour by our good example, rendering to You the love and the obedience which faithful servants owe their masters, and children, their parents, since it has pleased You graciously to receive us among the number of Your servants and children. Amen.

Introduction - Evangelism vs. Social Action

Tension

It should come as no surprise to many of us that a tension exists for Christians between a concern for our neighbour’s present suffering, and a concern for our neighbour’s eternal suffering. There appears to be a tension between the physical and the spiritual.

In other, more clichéd words, there is a tension between evangelism, on the one hand, and what’s called social action, social justice, or social responsibility, on the other.

After all, didn't Jesus say in Mark 12:

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.’”

(Mark 12:30–31 ESV)

But love how?

There is a history to this tension that really came to a peak in the last hundred years, but covering it all it is beyond our scope for today. However, the result of this history is that there exists today a spectrum of responses to this tension across the broad and varied landscape of Christianity.

Some have jettisoned traditional evangelism as an outdated and outmoded expression of Christian faith and practice, in favour of social action. How dare we force our truth on someone else? Everyone is called to walk their own faith-journey, and it is far more Christ-like to walk beside them and love them on that journey. As we do that, they will surely enrich our own faith-journey.

Some have fused the two into one activity, in the belief that evangelism is only truly expressed in the alleviation of worldly suffering. They talk about the the church having an ‘incarnational mission’, where it seeks to answer the burning questions of our world and bring people into a full expression of what it means to be created as human.

Others see the two as equally important, and context will determine which is to be pursued at any given time. To love someone as Jesus loved is to be concerned equally for their present and their future suffering.

There are those who do believe that evangelism is more important than social action, but find that doing good for someone as an expression of their Christian faith is less risky and scary than telling someone the good news of the gospel, and it gives them a sense of accomplishment in their walk with Jesus. Their motto is to misquote Francis of Assisi, “Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words.” He never said that, by the way.

There are those who only use social action to bait the hook of the gospel, to sugar coat the bitter pill, doing the minimum good possible, often insincerely, in order to draw in those who need to hear the good news of Jesus.

And finally, there are those who have jettisoned social action entirely, knowing that the world and all its troubles are going to hell anyway, and that the only thing that really matters is eternal destiny. So they preach the word, and withdraw from the world and it’s suffering.

You might be considering where you fit on this spectrum. Maybe you’re considering where we as a church fit on this spectrum.

If I had to ask you what our the greatest need was in our local community, I’m sure many would respond that the greatest need is for people to be reconciled to their Creator, placing their faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross for the forgiveness of their sin.

I was in talking to local government leaders this week, and they told me that the top three social issues on the Sunshine Coast today are cost of living, homelessness and alcohol and drugs.

Is the answer still so clear-cut? Can we, as Christians legitimately ignore these things, and still remain true to Jesus’ calling from Acts 1:8 to be his witnesses in the world?

What Would Jesus Do?

Well, if you were a young, teenage Christian around the time I was, back in the late 90's, you probably remember those bracelets that we used to wear with the letters W.W.J.D on them - "What Would Jesus Do?" It was meant to remind us ask that question when faced with a choice, and hopefully help us honour Jesus with our actions.

The idea has its issues, of course. For one, if you were out on the water in your boat and got caught in a cyclone, you're probably not going to get much joy out of standing up to rebuke the wind and the waves and commanding them to be still.

But it's a good question to ask when faced with this tension between what might be called "word ministry" and "mercy ministry". Our text from Luke 4 today should give us some answers.

Recap: A Proclamation of Liberation

If you were with us last week, you will remember that we looked at how Jesus started his ministry by reading from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He read:

““The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.””

(Luke 4:18–19 ESV)

Then he simply declared, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”” (Luke 4:21 ESV)

We discovered that Jesus' message wasn't so much to the materially poor, but to the spiritually poor. The poor are not necessarily those experiencing physical suffering, but those who spiritually suffering, those who have been shut off from God's promises.

And his suggestion that the people of Israel weren't the exclusive recipients of this message, but that it was a gospel for the whole world - that made Jesus' hearers so angry they wanted to kill him by throwing him down a cliff.

What we didn't touch on so much last week was a verb that comes up three times in Jesus's reading - "proclaim."

Jesus says he is sent to proclaim good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captives, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

To proclaim something is to make an official announcement.

In other words, Jesus is saying is that the coming of God's new Kingdom, and with it redemption and restoration, is initiated and established with a proclamation. And he goes further to say that the message he is speaking right now is that proclamation.

Is a proclamation all that is needed? Eternal suffering is an urgent need, but how do you proclaim recovery of sight to a blind man (even if you're talking about spiritual blindness), and leave that man physically blind?

God says in the letter from James:

"If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?"

(James 2:15-16 ESV)

Well, now that Jesus has proclaimed the coming of God's redemptive Kingdom, let's see what he actually does with it.

1. Jesus heals a man with a demon (4:31-37)

After Jesus evades the lynch mob of v30, we find him going to the city of Capernaum.

We're told

“And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority.”

(Luke 4:31–32 ESV)

So Jesus continues with the same ministry he was doing in Nazareth, that of teaching the Word of God in the local synagogue on the Sabbath, when the local Jewish community gathered for worship.

His teaching made an impact. Luke tells us that those who heard him were ‘astonished’. The word can also mean ‘amazed’, ‘overwhelmed’ or ‘astounded’. We could quite literally translated the old Greek word into contemporary English by saying that his teaching ‘blew their minds’.

Why such an impact? Luke tells us that the reason people were so astonished at his teaching was that “his word possessed authority” (v32).

What does this mean? Well, it was common in Jesus' day for teachers of God's Word to reference other teachers to give their words credibility and weight.

They would quote other teachers at length. Someone has said that they were “in bondage to quotation marks”, and that their sermons were a “chain of references” and “secondhand theology”.¹

Mark’s recording of the same event supports this idea. **Mark said:**

“And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”

(Mark 1:22 ESV)

When Jesus taught the Word of God, it had a power, and a weight, and a gravity, and an authority behind it that hadn’t been heard before. Jesus saw into the word of God with unprecedented insight.

Occasionally Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling makes some public explanation about things in her books (like love triangles, character backstories, etc.), and when she does everyone everyone goes into a complete tailspin. There are plenty of people trying to interpret things in her books all the time, but when the author behind the story explains something, people are especially attentive because they know there’s some authority behind what she’s saying.

I think something similar was going on here with Jesus. He explained the word of God was someone with authority and insight that was unprecedented, as if the one who penned the words himself was speaking.

As this teaching goes on, Jesus is heckled by an ‘unclean spirit’. Luke tells us:

¹ R. Kent Hughes, Luke Volume 1: That You May Know the Truth (Preaching the Word; Accordance electronic ed. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), 148.

“And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, “Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God.””

(Luke 4:33–34 ESV)

Just notice a few things here.

Firstly, it’s worth noticing that there was a man with an unclean spirit, or a demon-possessed man, in the congregation of the synagogue. It appears that in the New Testament, people were known as being possessed by demons. People came to Jesus to ask him to cast demons out of family members. But this man is still welcomed in the synagogue. As we go through Luke’s gospel, and the other gospels, we often see Jesus healing people in the synagogue - whether it’s a man with an unclean spirit here in Luke 4, a man with a deformed hand in Luke 6, or a woman with a demon that’s left her disabled for eighteen years in Luke 13.

These weekly local gatherings were for everybody, because everybody needed to hear the Word of God.

Secondly, notice how Jesus doesn’t initiate anything with the demon. Jesus comes to preach and teach. He must know about the evil spirit in the room, but he doesn’t engage the spirit until the spirit takes him on.

Thirdly, notice how Jesus authoritative, powerful and truthful teaching of God’s Word provokes opposition from the realm of the supernatural and evil. There is something greater going on here than what the eye can see.

Luke goes on:

“But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent and come out of him!” And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no

harm. And they were all amazed and said to one another, “What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!” And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.”

(Luke 4:35–37 ESV)

Jesus rebukes the demon, and the demon obeys completely.

But what is really interesting here is again what people are astonished at - it's Jesus' word. They once again recognise the power in Jesus' words to not only speak with unprecedented truth and insight into God's Word, but also to rebuke, command and subdue the supernatural and evil.

And Jesus' reputation continues to spread. This was unlike anything anyone had ever seen before.

2. Jesus Heals Simon's Mother-In-Law (Luke 4:38-41)

It seems in the next section that the guest preacher for the day gets invited back to one family's house for lunch. But all is not well in the Bar-Jonah household (that was actually Simon's surname that Jesus uses in Matthew 16:17). Remember also that Simon had not yet been called by Jesus to follow him - that happens in the next chapter.

“And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.”

(Luke 4:38–39 ESV)

Jesus gets to Simon's house, and I guess that as soon as he walks in the door some of the family begin to appeal to Jesus to heal Simon's mother-in-law. Most probably

she wasn't dying, but had that kind of fever that we associate with flu - where you feel like you're burning up, and everything is too much effort.

And Jesus demonstrates compassion by willingly answering these appeals. He went to where she lay, and notice that he "rebuked" the fever. Isn't that what Luke said Jesus did to the demon in the synagogue? Again, we notice Jesus words carrying great power and authority.

We're told that the fever immediately left her. It left her so quickly that she got up and immediately carried on with serving lunch! When I've felt sick like that, I find I still need sleep to recover from the assault on my body. Not this lady! She was healed instantly and completely.

Whether word got around about what happened in the synagogue, or what Jesus had done for Simon's mother-in-law, we don't know. What we do know is that, as soon as the sun started to go down, people came from all around to bring their sick and suffering for Jesus to heal.

Why did they come as the sun was setting? Well, simply because that signalled the end of the Sabbath, and a relaxing of rules restricting travel and work, such as healing.

The details Luke records here help us to see Jesus' heart for the suffering. His actions very much echo what he read that day in the synagogue in Nazareth. Luke tells us:

"Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ."

(Luke 4:40-41 ESV)

Notice here how Jesus healed willingly and indiscriminately. Luke says that “he laid hands on every one of them and healed them.” Jesus never rejected any who were brought to him, but took the time to personally engage and care for each one who was brought.

The demon possessed were also brought, and again he “rebuked” the demons. His word continued to carry authority over the supernatural realm.

Maybe it’s also worth noting that he healed those who wanted it - the sick - and those who didn’t - presumably those possessed by demons!

Just to comment briefly on the two occasions where the demons name Jesus, and then Jesus tells them to be silent. It’s as though, despite their unavoidable fate at the hands of the Son of God, they are trying to gain the upper hand by revealing his true identity before the right time.

For Jesus to be unmasked, as it were, would have invited too much suspicion and hostility, or ignited some sort of popular uprising, that would have compromised all the necessary ground work he had to lay before going to the cross.

That seems to be why Jesus commands the demons to be silent.

3. Jesus Departs (v42-44)

Finally, Jesus departs from Capernaum.

“And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, but he said to them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as

well; for I was sent for this purpose.”And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.”

(Luke 4:42–44 ESV)

If we read Mark’s gospel, he tells us that Jesus went out of town to spend some time in the early morning quiet praying.

Mark also tells us that it was Simon himself, Jesus’ host, who came up with the townspeople to find him!

I’m sure if you found a man who healed you of all your diseases and spoke the word of God with power, you wouldn’t want him to leave! What if you need him again?

And Jesus then makes a statement about his mission which brings what we began last week full-circle: “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.”

““The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.””

(Luke 4:18–19 ESV)

Just think, if Jesus had ended his mission in Capernaum as a healer and teacher, what good, ultimately, would it have done. Capernaum was all but destroyed by an earthquake in 749AD, and abandoned completely in the 11th century.

Jesus had to continue his road to the cross, or his preaching would have been in vain. The “year of the Lord’s” favour would never have come. People would have been physically healed, but still terminally ill with sin.

Conclusions

Let’s try and draw out of this text and the ministry of Jesus some conclusions to help us answer this question of how we hold evangelism and social action together.

1. Proclaiming Takes Priority

We’ve seen this in the way Jesus begins his ministry, citing Isaiah to show that the kingdom is established through proclamation (4:18-19)

We’ve also seen how when Jesus has to make the choice between remaining with those he has taught and healed, and moving on to preach elsewhere, he moves on to preach. He says quite clearly that he was sent to “preach the good news of the kingdom of God” (4:43).

2. Mercy Never Avoided

Though Jesus’s prioritises his ministry of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, when there is a need to meet with mercy he never avoids it.

When a demon-possessed man calls out in the synagogue, Jesus restores him. When Simon’s mother-in-law has a fever, he heals her. When all the townspeople bring their sick and suffering to Jesus, he engages each one personally and heals them.

I don’t believe the Son of God could do otherwise, or that the coming Kingdom could not have such an effect. The new heaven and new earth are breaking into the old as Jesus engages with his mission, and the dawn of renewal and restoration is already beginning to shine in the physical world.

3. Action Consistent With Message

The mercy Jesus shows to the sick, the demon-possessed, the suffering, the marginalised and the vulnerable is not something wholly different to the message he has been sent to proclaim.

Remember, he has proclaimed good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and liberty to the oppressed. Then his actions have quite literally backed up his words.

Jesus might ultimately be speaking of good news for the spiritually poor, of freedom from eternal suffering, but in no way does that exclude mercy for present suffering. In fact, it supports it as being consistent with the kingdom that Jesus is proclaiming - the same authoritative word at work giving a physical foretaste of the heavenly realities.

To Jesus, though proclamation and acts of mercy are different activities, and though preaching may of necessity take precedence over acts of mercy, they are not mutually exclusive activities. They belong to one-another. Mercy for the suffering and the proclamation of the Kingdom are actually inseparable.

And it's this final point that should really help us make sense of how we balance evangelism, or proclamation, or 'word ministry', and social action, or social responsibility or 'mercy ministry'.

Of course, we're not Jesus, so we can't just put ourselves directly in Jesus shoes and do exactly what he did.

But if we, like Jesus, see our acts of mercy as less of a separate activity and more like action that is consistent with our message, the question becomes whole lot easier to answer. It may be more demanding, and give us fewer loopholes to wriggle through, but it does simplify things a whole lot.

The preached word is essential to salvation. A good news that is not verbalised is not good news.

“For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”

(Romans 10:13–14 ESV)

“For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. [...]

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.”

(1 Corinthians 1:17–21 ESV)

But to fail in love, charity, kindness, selflessness, gentleness, goodness, then have we failed to hear the good news ourselves?

That’s why Paul could write:

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

(1 Corinthians 13:1 ESV)

A few years ago, two Bible scholars wrote an article in an Australian Christian magazine on this very question. They suggested that we should avoid using the loaded terms ‘social involvement’, or ‘social action’, and rather just stick the word ‘godliness’.

They wrote:

“If we see social involvement as an expression of Christian godliness, in response to the character of God, the reign of God and the grace of God ... then the relationship between evangelism and social involvement is not so fraught or so complicated.”²

O that our actions would back up our words, and our words would back up our actions. O that we would love like Jesus loves, even the suffering, the vulnerable and oppressed, those who can give us nothing in return, and love them enough to tell them the best news ever. We are not called to make a choice between whether we proclaim the gospel, or we just do charitable and merciful acts for the suffering. Christians are called to all of it - because that's the way Jesus taught us to follow him.

We'll see next week how Jesus heals a paralytic. He first forgives his sin, showing mercy to his soul, and then heals his paralysis, showing mercy to his body.

I mentioned earlier what some of the top social issues are in our community. Can you imagine what would happen if a Christian helped someone a neighbour who was struggling to pay their bills? Not with an agenda to preach the gospel at them, but simply out of a true appreciation of the abundance that God had given them, and a right understanding of the ultimate value of material wealth, and desire to love the way Christ had loved them. And then, what if they took the time to ask them about their struggles, their issues, and in response shared with them the gospel of Jesus Christ of forgiveness for sin and reconciliation with God?

I read once about chaplains in the South Sudanese army who worked tirelessly among the soldiers to teach them the gospel, and train them to engage the enemy appropriately, protect civilians, and treat POW's with dignity and respect. Many of these chaplains would put their own lives on the line - diving onto grenades, or

² <http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2005/02/social-involvement-and-evangelism-part-ii-how-they-relate/> (Accessed 26 Oct 2016)

shielding others from mortar blasts - because they knew where they were going, but those they were serving didn't yet. Jesus said:

“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

(John 15:11–13 ESV)

As we close, I'd like to share with you an excellent summing up of this issue from American pastor John Piper. He's said it a few times, but I think the way he tweeted it in 2011 is probably the clearest and most profound, and most reflective of the heart of Jesus himself. He said:

“Christians care about all suffering, especially eternal suffering. Else they have a defective heart or a flameless hell.”³

Why don't we make that our big idea today? Certainly something to reflect on.

Let's pray.

³ <https://twitter.com/johnpiper/status/29236976884383744> (Accessed: 29 Oct 2016)