

Social Action and the Church (Part 1)

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Very nice to be here. Let me just pray and then I'll speak to you. Father, I just pray for your help as I bring your word now.

Help me to be faithful to your word. Help me to deliver it clearly and eloquently, Lord, in a way that can be understood. I just pray, Lord, for your spirit's help, not only for me as I speak, but also for the congregation as they hear and heed your word for Jesus' sake and for his glory. Amen.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells us who's going to make it into heaven and who is going to hear these dreadful words, depart from me, you curse it, into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

The scene there is the final judgment. All the nations of the world, all the people who've ever lived, are standing before the glorious throne of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And he, as a shepherd, is going to separate the sheep from the goats. And Jesus will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left hand.

[1 : 25] I think I've got it right. And he'll say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me.

I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him and ask, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you and thirsty and give you something to drink?

And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you and naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And King Jesus will answer, Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.

Then Jesus will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you cursed, for I was hungry and you gave me no food. I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you didn't welcome me.

[2 : 37] I was naked, you didn't clothe me. I was sick and in prison and you didn't visit me. And they will answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or strange or naked or sick or in prison and not minister to you?

And Jesus will answer them and say, Truly I say to you, as you did not do to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And they will go away into eternal punishment and the righteous into eternal life.

Very sobering words for Father's Day. Who will find eternal life and who will go to eternal punishment?

These are not my words. This is not my theology. These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is our Savior and who is King. And he determines who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. What is interesting here is that Jesus didn't ask, Well, who put up your hand in church and asked Jesus to come into your heart, into their heart?

[3 : 46] Who said the sinner's prayer? Jesus didn't ask, Well, who was baptized? Who made a commitment to me? Now, did Jesus get it wrong?

Did Jesus not read Paul? Who said there, With the heart one believes and is justified, Romans 10, We know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, from Galatians 2.

Did Luther and Calvin and the Reformation get it wrong when they taught that we say by faith alone in Jesus? No, Jesus didn't get it wrong, nor did Luther and Calvin, the Reformation or the Puritans or even our 39 articles didn't get it wrong.

You see, what Jesus was doing there at the last judgment, he was basing his judgment on evidence, not on profession. People say things. He went and he looked to see who was a Christian and who was not.

There are millions of people who've said the sinner's prayer and people who profess faith in Jesus and go to church regularly and people who say that they're Christian.

[5 : 01] I mean, something like 80% of people in South Africa and the census confess to be Christian and 90% in Mitchell's Plain confess to be Christian, but most of them aren't.

And these people who say these things and profess these things, they may say them, but when you look at their lives, they are no different from the non-Christians around them at all.

But the Bible teaches then when someone becomes a Christian, his or her life changes radically. They are born again by the Spirit.

They have a new heart and a new nature, a new center of being, a center of being where there's love for God, love for Jesus Christ. The Spirit works in them.

The Spirit uses the Word to change their thinking, their loves, their priorities, their lives. People are different when they become Christian. And that is what Jesus is looking for in the day of judgment.

[6 : 09] He is looking for those people who love God, who love the Lord Jesus Christ. And the way that he determines that is to see whether they love Jesus' followers.

Do you love my people? Do you care for my people? The needy of my people? And Jesus bases his judgment on what he sees, not just an empty profession, but a profession that is manifested, that has evidence behind it.

Who feeds the hungry or gives a drink to the thirsty? Who welcomes the stranger or the foreigner? Who cares for the refugees and the aliens, the poor and the enemies?

And those are the people who are going to come into his kingdom, into the new creation on that day of judgment. Now, why am I telling you this this morning?

I mean, after all, it's Trinity Sunday, it's Father's Day, but Nick asked me not to preach about Father's Day or Trinity. In fact, when he asked me months ago, I didn't even know it was going to be Father's Day or Trinity Sunday or anything like that.

[7 : 23] And he asked me to preach two sermons, what he calls social action, what I'm calling this morning social concern. And I'm using the words social concern in preference to social action.

And the reason is social action, and I'm not against social action at all, and I'm very pleased that Dylan is coming here and you guys are getting involved. But when we think of social action, we tend to think of political involvement, at least this is the way I think, you know, changing laws, dealing with justice issues.

We think of William Wilberforce as he got rid of slavery and Lord Shaftesbury as he got rid of all the child labor laws in England and Elizabeth Fry and her prison ministry, and it can go on and on and on like that.

We think of NGOs. My daughter is involved in A21, which is ministering to the prostitutes, people who escape from sex slavery and things like that.

We think of U-Turn and Arise and all those things. And those things are good. But most of us cannot get involved in those things. Our lives are busy and we're working, we're providing for our families and we have various ministries.

[8 : 40] And so social action tends to be just for them. And what I'm going to say, social concern is for all of us. We're all going to be judged on that day. Did you give the hungry something to eat?

Did you feed the beggar? Did you, you know, welcome the stranger? Or whatever it might be. It involves every single one of us. And we, all of us, should be involved in helping those who are poor and needy, like the Good Samaritan.

And that is traditionally called the Ministry of Mercy. And that's what I'm going to be looking at today and next week. And I want to show you a biblical basis for showing mercy or for showing social concern, for helping those in need, for assisting the poor, for being good Samaritans.

We all have to be good Samaritans. Jesus said, be like the good Samaritan. And then I want to, at the end, briefly relate that to evangelism because Nick said, you know, we need to look at how, in our circles, you know, we tend to say it's either evangelism or social action or this one is more important than that one.

And so I'm going to look at that relationship briefly at the end. And then next week, what I'm going to do is look at the role of the church and the Ministry of Mercy.

[10:16] And that has a long history in the church. It's something where most of you are completely unaware of. And in our circles, in reach South Africa, we tend to ignore it completely. And we'll look at that and maybe I'll say some radical things next week.

But I'm not going to say anything radical today. Anyway. So let's look then, firstly, at the biblical basis for the Ministry of Mercy. So when God called his people out of Egypt, they were his treasured possession.

And they had to obey his voice and keep his covenant. And the covenant stipulated how they were to live. And the covenant was summed up in the Ten Commandments and what you had to do and what you had to not do.

And then, of course, the Ten Commandments were expounded in the rest of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And there were many laws. And Alan read a few of those this morning.

All right. Now, the Mosaic Law says a lot about how Israel should look, the Israelites should look after one another. And especially with regard to the widows, the fatherless, the fatherless, those who didn't have a father or those who were orphaned, the poor and the foreigners, the aliens.

[11:43] Now, in those days, as mainly today, too, the men, the fathers, were the main breadwinners. I mean, women did do work in the home and did make, if you read Proverbs 31, they made cloths and clothes and all sorts of things like that.

But women and families were largely dependent on the father who was working in the agricultural field or was an artisan or whatever he may be doing.

So when a husband died, what usually happened is the family was penniless. The family was destitute. And so the wife had to go back to her parents or to her parents-in-law or to an uncle or to a brother or somebody else who could actually support her and her family or she had to marry again, which was another option.

It wasn't like today where you can go out and work and, in fact, maybe even earn more than your husband often these days at all. And so the widows, God had a special concern for the widows and Israel had to have a special concern for the widows because, you know, they were people. God loved them. They had families. They had children to feed. And the same goes for the fatherless. You know, orphans, how can they look after themselves? Someone else must look after them.

[13:15] And often strangers coming in, foreigners, you know, they may be fleeing persecution or whatever the case might be. And they too need help and need. And so God has a special concern for these groups of people.

And God gave commandments in order to show, to help. There wasn't a state to assist and it's not really the job of the state to assist us at all in those ways.

And so we read, you know, some of these laws here. Here is one of them. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge.

Neither shall you gather the cleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare. Neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner or the foreigner.

I am the Lord your God. There was also a law that Alan read out there, you know, that you could eat the fruit of your neighbor.

[14:20] You're hungry and you're going through the fields because it was mainly an agricultural country and so you lived in the country and you were hungry and there was an apple tree. You could go and eat an apple tree but you couldn't put any in your pockets or in your bag.

You had to eat it there if you were hungry and you go on. So there were these provisions that God did. It's a bit like Woolworths. They have their date stamp food and they give that away to orphanages and other places like that and that's good.

It's following God's law there. And there was also a law, it wasn't read this morning, that, you know, if the Israelites, if some Israelites couldn't look after themselves, someone had to take him in, a neighbor or a friend or a relative and give him free board or her free board and lodging and they couldn't charge them any interest and they couldn't charge them for the food.

And then there were other laws, for instance, if a Hebrew was penniless, a father, sometimes they would sell themselves into slavery. But then the law said, God said, after six years, you've got to release them and when they go out, you must give them some sheep so they can start farming

again and provide for themselves and give them some grain to eat and some wine to drink. Job, who was a righteous man, says in chapter, whatever it is, 20, 29 here, he says here, I delivered the poor who cried for help, the fatherless who had none to help him.

[15:57] I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. Isn't that lovely? The widow's heart to sing for joy. My justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame.

I was a father to the needy. That is a picture of the ideal Israelite and that's what we should be like that. In Isaiah 58, God says, Is this not the fast that I choose to loose the bonds of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house when you see the naked to cover him?

This is what God desires of his people. So to sum up at this point, God's people, Israel, had the responsibility to look after one another, to care for the widows and orphans, to feed the poor and if necessary even offer them shelter.

They too had to welcome the alien. And we see this in Boaz. He was a righteous man and Ruth came to his field there and he let her harvest the field because she had nothing and Naomi had nothing.

[17:17] She was a widow and we see eventually she marries Boaz and she becomes the grandfather of David. And to this day, the Jews still look after one another and we should be like that.

And now when we turn to the New Testament, we see the women who looked after Jesus. He left his carpentry and he wandered around preaching and healing and doing all those things here. We see Jesus feeds the 4,000, feeds the 5,000, heals people who are sick, gives sight to the blind, legs to the lame, raises the dead.

We go on in the New Testament, we see that in the Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and following there, the Spirit came down and these 3,000 people were converted and they helped one another and they sold properties and fields and collected the money to feed the poor.

And we see Paul collecting this whole big rodenta, Paul going around collecting money for the Jerusalem church that was very poor and they sent this big delegation with this money.

[18:42] Paul cared for the Jewish believers. And James says, mercy triumphs over judgment. What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?

Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food and one of you says to him, go in peace, be warmed and filled without giving the things needed for the body. What good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. It's not true faith. It's not saving faith at all. And as we read from John today, if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, it closes his heart against him.

How does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. Now there's much, much more of that in the New Testament and next week, as I said, I'm going to look at the role of the church in all of this.

But what we see here is that under the old covenant, God legislates. He makes laws that his people Israel must obey.

[19:58] They must look after the immigrant, care for the poor, care for the needy. And in the New Testament, were we not a nation? It's a very different setting.

But we still see the same commands that we have to care for one another. We must be like the good Samaritan. Faith without works is dead, says James.

And then there's a whole thing in the church about deacons and all that which we will look at. Now what I want to do now is how does this relate?

I think it's quite clear. I've just given you, you know, a few verses here and there about caring for the poor and caring for the needy and providing for, well I didn't talk about providing for one's family and things like that, but that's all part of it.

How do we relate social concern to evangelism or social action to evangelism? Now when I read the New Testament, I do not see this question raised at all.

[21:03] I don't find it. When I read the history of the Christian church, I don't find this question raised before the beginning or the end of the 19th century, the beginning of the 20th century.

Towards the end of the 19th century, particularly in the United States, theological liberalism from Germany, from Europe, entered the Evangelical Seminaries like Princeton and others.

And the Seminaries is like a Bible college or theological college. And the authority of the Bible was being questioned and undermined.

And what happened in the churches that were influenced by what we would call theological liberalism is they started to turn away from the gospel. And they saw human need.

And they said, well, the church, what we need now is not just talking about evangelism and all that, you know, about heaven and things. What people need is people need to be helped.

[22 : 10] They're poor, they're needy. And so the mission of the church now is to help people.

Okay. So that's what, so there was a shift away from the gospel to social action and concern and fighting for justice and release of the oppressed and all that sort of thing came up.

and so what, so with the churches moving that way, those who were evangelical and those who, who called themselves fundamentalists, they actually produced a whole sort of series of books called the fundamentals, just trying to basically teach people the basics of the gospel, the basic doctrines.

And out of that word, these books, I think there were about, I can't remember, ten of them or something like that. The fundamentals, the word fundamentalism came about from there and it's got a bit of a bad connotation, but there was this whole move.

All right. And so the evangelicals reacted against this and so what happened then in the aftermath of that was this sort of pitting of evangelism against social action and the two things were opposed where together before it had never been a question.

I mean, they were both done but now there was this thing. Now it's quite clear from the gospels and the Acts, the book of Acts, that the mission of this church is to make disciples of all nations.

[23 : 47] Preaching the gospel is a priority and the priority. People need to be saved. They need to put their faith in Jesus Christ. But making disciples is far more than evangelism.

Disciples need to be taught the word. Disciples need to live the Christian life. They need to love God with all their heart and mind and soul and their neighbor as themselves. And so there was this conflict between, with the liberal Christians and the evangelicals.

Okay. So that was the position at the end of the 19th century, beginning of the 20th century there. Let me just get my bearings here.

And so what's happened is that in that sort of conflict, evangelicals questioned the importance of social concern, caring for the poor and needy, getting involved in justice issues, human rights abuse and so on.

So they said then, well to get involved in these things is distracting us from the gospel, distracting us from evangelism, it's taking away from the missionary budget and it's focusing on the world and not on eternity.

[25 : 11] And so there's this conflict. Now how do we resolve that? Okay. So I'm going to say a few things here. And there are various answers have been given to this question and I'm not going to go into any detail and bore you at all.

So you've got the first, the first one is this. Well the ministry of mercy and social justice is the only legitimate concern of the church.

So some people are saying that, particularly the liberal we. Now that is clearly wrong. I mean it's very clear in the New Testament that we're to go out and preach the gospel.

We're to make disciples of all people. Okay. So I don't think we even need to debate that. It's fundamental. Okay. All right.

Then there are others who say, well, we actually have to do both but social concern is of more importance. That too is clearly wrong because I mean Paul's whole mission is to go and preach the gospel and to plant churches.

[26 : 18] that's vital. And then some people say, well, they're of equal. Evangelism and social concern are of equal concern. Well, I'm not going to talk about that now.

We'll come back to that. And then you've got another view. Evangelism is most important and social concern is secondary. And that probably is the position of our denomination.

And then others say, well, social concern is not the job of the church at all. Our job is only evangelism to preach the gospel and we don't need to worry about it at all.

Now, that is also clearly wrong because you've seen some of the scriptures that I've read. We do have to look after the people of God. Yeah. So how do we answer this question of importance?

Word ministry versus deed ministry. Evangelism versus social concern or social action. Now, Tim Keller in this book, which I will recommend to you, which is really good, it's called Ministries of Mercy, the second edition.

[27 : 24] Yeah, it's really worth having it. I know Nick's got a copy and I'm sure CBD have got lots of copies or can order them for you if they're out of print or they don't have stock at all.

Now, he says this, you know, this question is misguided. The question is wrong. We don't need to ask which is most important at all. They're both there in scripture.

Okay. We don't ask the question, well, what is more important, to put my faith in Christ or to repent? I mean, you've got to repent and believe.

You don't ask, well, which is more important, to repent or to be baptized? I mean, you show your repentance by being baptized. You've got to do both.

You know, it's not an either or. It's a both and. They go together. That's the same with evangelism and social concern. We go out and we preach the gospel and we must do that.

[28 : 24] When people respond, we look after those people. You know, we don't just take them off and we send them away. They come into a church, they come into a community, into a family and we look after families.

We look after the people of God. For instance, I mean, you don't ask in your family, you know, should I give, you know, give my children, stop giving my children food because it's more important for them to believe the gospel, you know, and so we neglect the food.

You do both. I mean, life is full of duties and things. We don't just do one thing or two things at all. Tim Keller says, and I agree with him, that the ministry of deed and the ministry of word are both important.

They're equally necessary ministries. Social evangelism and preaching the gospel and social content are both necessary. We don't have to say which one is more important.

Yes, the mission, I mean, if you want to look at what we call the mission of the church, the mission of the church is clear from the book of Acts and from the four gospels that we are to go and make disciples.

[29 : 46] That is true. The mission of the church is not primarily political change or freedom from oppression and all that sort of stuff at all. But we do have to look after the people of God.

We do have to look after our families. They're equally necessary and we see that some people in the church are elders and their job is to teach the word and to evangelize.

They preach the gospel and others are deacons and we'll teach that next week and the job of the deacons is to look after the poor and those things, ministries.

Sometimes we say, well, you know, we're short of time. We don't have time to get involved in social concern.

We don't have the money to do that. Keller says here, the average church cannot afford to help the poor. Some people say that. The average church cannot afford to help the poor.

[30 : 52] But if we look at the New Testament, we see the Macedonian churches. The Macedonian churches were on the eastern side of Greece, Thessalonica, Athens, those side, there, Philippi.

They were very poor and yet they supported Paul in his mission and they, out of their poverty, sent a gift, a generous gift to the church in Jerusalem.

So they didn't turn a blind eye and say, well, we can't do that at all. And we are to give sacrificially. That's what Christ did. He gave up his life for us.

He took our burden upon himself. Paul in Galatians says, he said, we're to bear one another's burdens. And that means, says Jonathan Edwards, that we're to help the poor and needy, we're to take, when we help the poor and needy, we take on a burden.

We share their burden. We feel their burden. We feel what it is like to sacrifice, to take away from ourselves and to give to someone who is in more need than we do.

[32 : 01] That's what it means to share burdens, to take one another's burden. It's something that costs us. It's an additional responsibility. But that's what we're to do.

And our example is Jesus. He gave up his life for us. He paid the penalty for our sins on the cross. Word and deed ministry, evangelism and showing mercy are distinct, but they're inseparable.

They go together. We don't separate them. And Keller says, they have a single end to spread the kingdom of God.

Social concern without evangelism means that the poor don't hear the good news. That's not helpful. I mean, you help them for a short time, but you've got to help them for eternity. They need the good news. And evangelism without social concern fails to display the nature of the kingdom. It's a kingdom of love. It's a kingdom of care.

[33 : 05] And love and peace. So we must never put evangelism against social action. The gospel against caring for others at all.

They are both necessary. And God has given us different gifts. Some of us are skilled in evangelism or skilled in word ministry teaching or making disciples.

Others of us really have a heart for people, for providing food for them, for visiting the sick, for binding wounds or whatever it might be.

We have different gifts and we must use the gifts that God has given us. Jesus gave us the great commission to make disciples of all nations.

But Jesus also gave us the great commandments to love God with all our heart and soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

[34 : 13] We are to both obey the great commission and the great commandments. Who are we to choose the one and not the other when Jesus has told us to do both?

the church is to fulfill the great commission and the church is to be a community that loves God and one another.

And as we saw in the beginning of this sermon, the consequence of preaching of true evangelism, of preaching the gospel is love for Jesus and a love for Jesus that is demonstrated by loving his people, by caring for his people in need.

And if we do not love, Jesus follows. We don't love Jesus and we're not true Christians. And Jesus says we won't receive eternal life.

And so we must preach the gospel evangelize people and we must look after them in the church. Amen.