

Week 8 - This World Has Nothing for Me - Jeremiah 29:4-7

Scripture Reading: John 15:18-23

Introduction

This morning we are taking on a topic that has proven to be quite divisive in the Christian community because it's one that engenders great passion - the Christian's role in society

Our tendency is to hold one opinion or the other on the extremes of the issue and to believe that our viewpoint is the "Christian" one

One group points to the gospels and says that Jesus wasn't a social warrior so neither should we be

And the other points to devout Christians like William Wilberforce who is best known for being instrumental in ending the slave trade in England among other "moral" victories realized while he was active in Parliament

Then when we fast forward to more contemporary movements like Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and the Tea Party movement that was embraced by many Christians and the success those movements and others like them had in impacting politics and policies, we can't help but see some good coming from Christian activism

And we look at people and movements like Randall Terry and his Operation Rescue whose purpose is to create social upheaval and thereby pressure government into changing abortion laws and we wonder how that could be wrong

But not all such movements are widely viewed as positive across Christianity

Because we also have to consider examples like the rebirth of the 19th Century Social Gospel movement that has become more a haven for liberal-minded civil activists and less distinctively Christian as they have become more interested in promoting social justice than spreading the gospel

So, what are we to do?

The Bible clearly teaches that the church and civil government are both institutions established by God

Typically, we think of the church as dealing with spiritual matters and eternity while the government deals with temporal matters that relate to the functioning of society

And the questions we must consider are whether the Christian has a responsibility to be involved in civic matters and, if so, what the role of the Christian should be

If you are taking notes, we are first going to define **the dilemma** we face in sorting out the biblical answer to these questions

Then we will look at **our commission** and how the commands given to Christ-followers impact our involvement in civic affairs

And then we will look at some **best practices** for whatever involvement we undertake

I. The Dilemma

It would be great if Scripture was crystal clear on whether or not a Christian should get involved in the affairs of this world

However, a case can be made for either position

John gives us the following admonition in **1John 2:15**

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

And James tells us in **James 4:4**

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

And the apostle Paul writes in **2Timothy 2:4**

No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.

Many people also cite the fact that Jesus lived in a society every bit as corrupt as ours but never advocated for political change and Jesus himself said in **John 18:36** - *“My kingdom is not of this world”*

So there seems to be a sound basis for saying that Christ-followers shouldn't get involved in civic affairs

After all, when you go on a vacation you don't get involved with the day to day goings on in your vacation spot

So, if we're just passing through why should we get enmeshed in civic concerns of a home that isn't ours?

Those arguments make a lot of sense

But when we look at our focus passage for today we see something different

If you haven't done so already, please join me in Jeremiah 29 (page 656) and follow along as I read verses 4-7 [**Jer 29:4-7**] where we find a clue as to what God thinks about the material world and its culture

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

The context of our passage is very important because just prior to Jeremiah's command, the people had been told by the prophet Hananiah that their sojourn in Babylon would be a short one

We read about his prophecy in Jeremiah 28:1-11

But then in verse 12 the Lord told Jeremiah that Hananiah was prophesying falsely and gave Jeremiah the message that not only would the Israelites be in Babylon for some time but that Hananiah would die because of his lie

And rather than telling the people to keep their bags packed Jeremiah told them to settle in and raise their families and to seek the prosperity of Babylon in order to personally prosper

Clearly, God cares about this world and its affairs and desires for his people to be good citizens in the world

The Hebrew word translated “welfare” is *shalom* and a person focused on shalom seeks the good of every person in every relationship

And God is the ultimate example of shalom as he provided a way of reconciliation through his Son

So, we are left to question how it could be proper for Christ-followers to hide away in a holy huddle insulated from the world

How could the right course of action be for us to be looking to head for the exit and escape from the world rather than engaging with it for its benefit and ours?

After all, God doesn't whisk us up to heaven the instant we believe

Instead he has instructed us in what he wants us to do until it's time for us to go home

And it isn't to bring about utopia on earth through forcing our pagan society to live according to biblical standards

But neither is it to cloister ourselves away and let this world go to hell in a handbasket

Jesus did more to influence the affairs of men than anyone else ever has

And, as his followers, we can also have a tremendous influence

But we have to do it in the right way so let's take some time to consider our commission or what Jesus would have us do

II. Our Commission

Of course, when we mention the word “commission” our minds automatically go to the Great Commission of Matthew 28 [Matthew 28:19-20]

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

That’s our first duty to our fellow man and it stems from the second great commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves

Making disciples of those we encounter in our daily lives is our primary mission and we mustn’t let anything else intrude upon it or derail it

Remember that because it’s going to be important

Then in **Acts 1:8**, Jesus told his disciples that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they would be carrying on the work he began during his earthly ministry

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Since we are carrying on the work Jesus began and doing it in his name, as his witnesses, we should make every attempt to do the work as he would do the work if he were still here bodily

That is to say we should seek to be Christ-like as we make disciples - also very important and clearly it involves the world around us

Then we have to consider **Matthew 5:13-16**

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Jesus here is teaching us about our nature as his followers and how our nature should affect the society around us

We are to have an influence on the people around us - it’s our responsibility

Salt preserves and this world is like a decaying hunk of meat in need of preservation but it won’t receive any benefit from the salt unless they come into contact with one another

The salt has to get out of the salt shaker

The world is in spiritual darkness and in need of illumination

But a light is of no use to the world if it is place under a basket - it has to be in the open and even on a lampstand to provide the needed illumination

If you think that sounds like getting involved with the world, you’re right

In **Matthew 10:16**, Jesus told his disciples

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

And in **John 17:14** we read how we are to live as sheep in the midst of wolves

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

It's from this verse we get the idea of being in the world but not of the world - in it but set apart from it
 Of course, being set apart means to be holy and to live a righteous life even in the midst of unrighteousness
 But it also means to have different motivations and different goals

As Christ-followers, our motivation should be to do the will of our heavenly Father and our goal should be to successfully carry out the work that he has given us to do

- Demonstrate our love for God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength
- Love our neighbor as much we love ourselves
- Make disciples and be witnesses for Jesus in this world

We have to make those duties the priorities of our lives and that means getting involved in and with the world while remaining set apart, or different, from the world

So, where does social and political activism fit into this paradigm?

I'm not sure that it does fit as people typically understand and practice it

Looking through the pages of the Bible I don't see any instances of overt political or social activism being carried out by God's people

But God's people are far from powerless and I do see a great deal of influence on the society and political structures

However, the influence we see in the pages of the Bible came about by those who steadfastly demonstrated love for God and their fellow man

Those who determined to remain holy and do what God wanted them to do - not by activists who set out to bring about upheaval

Still, we aren't called by God to simply keep our heads down and survive as we travel through this world to our heavenly home

God doesn't want us to be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good

And when we refuse to engage in the life of this world we leave things that are very important to our quality of life in this world such as politics, economics, education, and so on in the hands of secular, and even anti-Christian, control

Many people who reject the Christian worldview hope that Christians will ignore the world around them, leaving secular leaders to take things wherever they wish

No, we are called to make a difference in this world – Ephesians 6:10-18 tells Christ-followers to armor up and take their stand against evil – but how we make that difference is very important

Remember, Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth belongs to Jesus [**Matthew 28:17**] and he has commissioned us to teach everyone in the world to obey him in every areas in which he has authority

And we must engage the world in a way that is true to our commission

So let's turn our attention to some best practices that will help us to have an impact on our world

III. Best Practices

The **first**, best practice that you can engage in is to pray for your unsaved neighbors and those in positions of power

1Timothy 2:1-2 tells us –

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

Don't dismiss this as just a pious platitude that has to be said because we're in church

Many people want to rush in and “make a difference” without ever stopping to pray thinking that action is better than prayer

But prayer is taking action as we call upon the power of heaven to act

Prayer is actually our first duty to our society and those who lead in it’

If you want to make a difference in this world prayer is indispensable and of first priority

Second, develop the skill of communicating God’s truth as it is found in the Bible because truth has power and we have the truth as **Romans 1:16-17** tells us –

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

The gospel has the power to lead people to salvation and as people are saved, society feels the impact

So every Christ-follower needs to develop a conversation-friendly explanation of the gospel - a way to naturally engage people with the truth of every person’s need and how they can be reconciled to God

But it’s not only the truth of the gospel that is powerful but all truth

So we need to also take steps to be prepared to share all of God’s truth

We must be, as **2Timothy 3:17** puts it, “*equipped for every good work*” so that we can inject heaven’s viewpoint into the social questions and quagmires of our day and show the logic of the biblical worldview

Third, we must live like Christ-followers

Truth is very powerful when it is expounded and argued but it is even more powerful and persuasive when it’s demonstrated

When we engage with the world while living a god-honoring lifestyle – that is to say when we are in the world but not of the world – it’s powerful

An interesting fact concerning our passage from Jeremiah is that the Babylonians used to remove the inhabitants from a conquered land so as to break their cultural ties in the hope of changing them through adaptation

But, what typically happened with God’s people is that they had a profound impact on their new culture when they continued to live as God’s people

People notice differences and when you live as a Christ-follower in a pagan environment, you can’t help but stand out

And a really successful way to change society is by introducing God’s values and standards into it and hope that those who are watching will find our lifestyle attractive

Fourth, we actually need to engage with the world around us

Remember, Jesus didn’t call his disciples to live secluded and insulated lives

He sent them into the world as sheep among wolves telling them to be both gentle and wise

He characterized his followers as salt and light which are both meant to change their environment by making contact with it

Salt does no good if it remains in the shaker and light doesn’t illuminate if it’s covered up

And society won’t be changed for the better by Christ-followers who aren’t involved in the world

So we need to find ways to get out into the world like serving on local boards or committees, volunteering in non-ministry organizations, getting involved with our neighbors, and cultivating friendships with non-Christians

Conclusion

We need to recognize that our commission isn't to make the world a nicer place to live by forcing Christian values on our pagan world

We aren't called to implement utopia on earth

We are called and sent to make disciples - to lead people to the Lord and to train them in godliness

And when we do that, we will change the world one person at a time

It's quite difficult these days to refrain from despair as we look at the world around us

We're grossly outnumbered and it's demoralizing to see the world continually getting worse

But we aren't without influence in our society and we have the power of heaven at our disposal

Imagine what we could do if we were all fully committed to live out our commission

Let's pray

John 15:18-23 (page 902)

18“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. **19**If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. **20**Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. **21**But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. **22**If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. **23**Whoever hates me hates my Father also.