

The Externally Focused Church

From Mercy to Justice

Frankton – 5/15/16

Scripture: Matthew 9.9-13

Proposition: We need to move from just giving mercy to seeking justice.

Today we finish a series of sermons I am calling [SLIDE] “The Externally Focused Church”. Remember, I am using a book of the same name for the backbone of this series. I read it and was totally enamored with the book, and I hope you will be enamored with some of the things I bring to you from the book. We began by defining a few terms. Internally focused churches concentrate on getting people into the church and generating activity there. Externally focused churches are internally strong, but they are externally oriented. These churches look for ways to be useful to their communities; to be a part of their hopes and dreams. Two weeks ago we talked about the power of service and looked at service through the eyes of the Good Samaritan. Last week talked about Good news and its relationship to good deeds. Today we’re going to talk about the path from giving mercy to seeking justice.

I read the scripture just a moment ago in which Matthew, also known as Levi, recorded his first meeting with Jesus. Matthew wrote that he was sitting in his tax collecting booth (which tells us something about Matthew), when Jesus approached him and said to him, “Follow me.” Surprisingly, Matthew left the booth and followed Jesus, much like Andrew and Simon, James and John had done when Jesus asked them to follow him. Shortly thereafter, Matthew decides to throw a party for his new friend Jesus. In fact, Luke calls it a “great banquet.” [5.29] So it must have been a party of some magnitude. So who else, besides his new friend Jesus and Jesus’ disciples, who else would Matthew have invited to his party? That’s right, he invited all his old friends and cronies – many tax collectors and sinners. Matthew wanted his old friends to meet his new friend Jesus.

However, there was another group present, certainly not inside the house, but rather safely outside the house, looking through the windows, standing outside and peering through the open doors or onto the open patio where part of the party would have taken place. They were the Pharisees, always following Jesus trying to upend his ministry. They would never have thought of associating with those “sinners” who were attending the party because they themselves would have become unclean. They were big on separating themselves from anyone or anything that would defile them, therefore they didn’t get many invitations to parties. A Pharisee could sense the difference between clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous from a mile away. They knew they had it all figured out; they were right and everyone else was wrong.

Seeing Jesus eat with such, in their eyes, scum of the earth, was a major problem for them. So they cornered one of Jesus’ disciples and asked why Jesus would defile himself by eating with such sinners. Jesus heard about the question and answered it himself: *Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do.* [12] Then he adds this pearl of wisdom from the Old Testament: [SLIDE] *I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.* [13] If we are to live our lives as Jesus lived his and as he wants us to live ours, we need to understand his words here: *I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.*

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Remember what I just said. If you all had your Bibles, I'd tell you to put your finger there in Matthew 9 and flip over a few pages to Matthew 12 where Jesus' disciples were hungry and picked some grain for a ready-made snack. Not a big deal, except it was the Sabbath and to pick grain on the Sabbath was a big no-no. It was considered work and you couldn't work on the Sabbath. Again, the ever-present Pharisees questioned Jesus on why he let his disciples perform work on the Sabbath. Jesus chastised the Pharisees saying that they would not have condemned the innocent disciples if they had known the meaning just of one scripture. Can you guess which one it is? That's right it's the same Old Testament passage Jesus quoted at Matthew's party: *I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices*. Clearly the Pharisees had not learned the lesson that Jesus had told them about at Matthew's house.

So, this Old Testament passage that Jesus refers to is from the book of Hosea. *I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices*. So what is mercy? Simply put, [SLIDE] mercy is God's attitude and action toward those in need or distress. Mercy goes beyond pity (which means to feel sorry for) and compassion (which means to feel sorry with). Mercy is always expressed in actions. The story of the Good Samaritan, which we talked about a couple of weeks ago, illustrates the difference between pity and mercy. The Samaritan distinguished himself from the priest and the Levite because he took action on the man's behalf. He showed the beaten man mercy. Mercy is love with legs on it.

Mercy is giving a person a fish so he can eat today. It's not attacking the problems at the systemic level. It's just making someone's life better, if only for today. Mercy explains why Jesus so willingly fed 5000 people with five loaves two fish. He didn't solve the world's hunger problem, but he did make those people's lives better for that afternoon. Sometimes the big problems paralyze us to inaction. Faced with enormous problems, we are overwhelmed and wonder, "What good will my little act of kindness really have?" But Jesus called us to be merciful: *Be merciful, just as your father is merciful*. [LK 6.36, NIV] Mother Teresa said this: [SLIDE] "We can do no great things; only small things with great love."

I think mercy differs from justice just as democracy differs from liberty. Here's an illustration to support my point. Suppose you wake up one morning and you look out your window looking over the creek that runs behind your house. This particular morning you see a man lying next creek who is unconscious, wet, and bleeding. Of course, you would rush out to him and give him some medical attention, or call an ambulance or take him to the hospital if needed. That's mercy. What if the next day you wake up and find another man in the creek unconscious, wet, and bleeding? You'd do the same thing over again. What if it happened a third time that you woke up and found a man in the creek unconscious, wet, and bleeding? I'm guessing that after you helping the third man, you'd start walking upstream to find out how the men are ending up in the creek unconscious, wet, and bleeding. That's justice.

To take care of the unconscious, wet, and bleeding men is charity. To walk up the creek to see why the men are unconscious, wet, and bleeding is to begin the search for justice. Justice is [SLIDE] "conformity to moral rightness in action or attitude." Even in the early days of the faith, the church made the distinction between mercy and justice. The first deacons were selected to rectify an injustice – the Grecian widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of bread. [AC 6] The apostles appointed seven men to identify and implement a solution to ensure that the widows were treated justly. Mercy is episodic; justice is ongoing. Mercy brings consolation; justice brings correction. Mercy aims at symptoms; justice aims at causes. Mercy changes individuals; justice changes societies.

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I'm sure many of you have heard, and used, that old Chinese proverb that says: "Give a man a fish and you will feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you will feed him for a lifetime." Giving a man a fish is an act of mercy. Teaching a man to fish is to move toward justice. There are many churches that are satisfied with giving people what they need for their daily sustenance – showing mercy. There are a lot less churches who take the time to teach a man to fish – doing justice. Yet, helping people become more self-sustaining is nothing short of transformational.

Think of the people that Jesus encountered. Among them were the blind, the lame, the deaf, the lepers, and the demon possessed. Apart from their physical infirmities, those with compelling physical needs faced at least two other problems. First, they were most often unable to work. This was long before the days of welfare and social security. If you didn't work, you didn't eat. These people were totally dependent on others to provide for them. Second, because of their infirmities, these folks were excluded from the social and spiritual life of the community. They were disenfranchised because they were sinners being punished by God. They were unclean and therefore outcast. I'm sure they wanted to be back in the mainstream of the community; wouldn't you? Every time Jesus healed someone of a debilitating disease, he was empowering them not just for a day, but also for a lifetime. It was Jesus' way of teaching these people how to fish – to move from dependence (in constant need of mercy) to self-sufficiency.

Vaughn McLaughlin is the pastor the Potter's House Christian Fellowship in Jacksonville, FL. He started the church with himself and his wife. Today it's a very large church. Granted Jacksonville has over a million people to draw from, but that isn't why Rev. McLaughlin's church grew. If so, every church in Jacksonville or any large city would be a large church. And we know that not every urban church is large; there are many small churches and many churches that just die out. Rev. McLaughlin's church grew because they reached out to the community and provided what it needed. They provided a place for small businesses to incubate. By providing space for the businesses grow, they helped the community with its unemployment problem. More people had jobs and more people had money which ended their individual cycle of poverty. They also support a jail ministry, an ex-con ministry, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and free car-repair services.

Because of his efforts and his church's efforts to help the community build its economic base, Rev. McLaughlin was named the Entrepreneur of the Year by Florida State University a few years ago. Rev. McLaughlin is also an excellent preacher, but he believes that ministry is what happens outside the four walls of the church. His theory is that if you're not making an impact outside the church, then you're not really making an impact at all. He challenges those pastors he mentors by asking just a few questions: **[SLIDE]** If your church left, how would the city feel? Would they weep? Would they notice? Would they care?

I ask the same of this congregation. If our church left Frankton, how would the town feel? Would they weep? Would they notice? Would they care? Are there people who are hungry in Frankton? How can we give them a fish? How can we teach them to fish? Are there any who are strangers? How can we make them feel welcome? Are there any who lack clothing? How can we give them clothes? Are there any who are sick? How can we give them care? How can we ensure that they get the medicines they need? When we can answer these questions, and then we actually do the things that answer the questions, Frankton will be transformed – and God will smile and say, "Well done my good and faithful servants."