

A CALL TO RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP

One biblical chapter that I think has been central to my spiritual growth over the past year is John 17. This is an intimate moment between Jesus and The Father that we are able to observe. Here as Jesus prays for his disciples, we see a characteristic of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ: ***“They are not of the world, even as I am not of it... As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.”*** (John 17: 16;18). This call for us as Chris followers to be in the world, but not of it, is a confusing dilemma.

If we belong to Jesus Christ, we have a double calling in relation to the world. On the one hand, we are to live, serve, and witness in the world, not trying to escape from it. On the other hand, we are to avoid being contaminated by the world. So we have no liberty either to preserve our holiness by escaping from the world or to sacrifice our holiness by conforming to the world.

Escapism and conformism are both forbidden to us. This is one of the major themes of the entire Bible, that is, God setting apart a people for Himself and is calling us to be different from outsiders. “Be holy”, He commands, “because I am Holy.”

This foundational theme recurs in all four main sections of Scripture—the law, the prophets, the teachings of Jesus and the teaching of the apostles:

In the law God said to people through Moses: ***“You must not do as they do in Egypt... and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan.... Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God.”*** (Lev. 18:3-4).

Similarly, through Ezekiel, God laments: ***“You have not followed my decrees, but have conformed to the standards of the nations around you.”*** (Ezek. 11:12).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out a lifestyle of standing up for the down trodden, and loving the unlovable, he then says in Matthew 5:48: ***“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”***

This seems like a high standard, but I think Jesus is telling us to look to God as a model rather than the world around us, because he goes on to say in chapter 6: ***“Do not be like them”*** referring to the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

And of course we know the famous verse in Romans 12:2 when Paul urges us ***“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed...”***

So this is God’s call to radical discipleship, to a radical nonconformism to the surrounding culture. It is a call to create a Christian counterculture. So followers of Jesus cannot give in to Pluralism, which denies the uniqueness and lordship of Jesus, nor be sucked into materialism or become led astray into ethical relativism, which claims there are no moral absolutes.

This is God’s call to his people being different. We are not to be like reeds shaken by the wind, as Jesus said, but to be like rocks in a mountain stream; not to be like fish floating with the stream, but to swim against it—even the cultural mainstream.

In fact, we are faced with two cultures, two value systems, two standards and two lifestyles. Which shall we choose? If we are not to be like chameleons, changing colour to suit our surroundings, what are we to be like?

The answer to that is that we are to be like Christ. The eternal and ultimate purpose of God by his Spirit is to make us like Christ. This answer seems both simplistic and incredibly challenging.

It is simplistic because most of us would nod and say “I knew that”. It is challenging because the model Jesus revealed to us through his 3+ year ministry on the earth is one of sacrificial, unconditional and radical love. A love that I can’t possibly reflect without engaging the culture around me. A love that seeks the lowest, the down trodden and those that appear unlovable. So often we look at Jesus and marvel that he healed lepers... but what was even more amazing is that He touched lepers, because nobody touched lepers.

Being like Jesus means my life will never be comfortable... but it will be incredible.

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