

#239 "The Social Mandate"

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The Lord has given us a Great Commission, to go into all the world and preach the gospel and teach all men the commandments of Christ, thereby making disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). He wants the church to multiply through true regeneration as people put their faith in Christ for forgiveness and turn from their wicked ways. The gospel must always be forefront in what we do and say. It is the main thing we are called to advance, speak about, and proclaim. It is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16), and it is how faith comes to the unsaved (Romans 10:17). We are to shod our feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace, preparing our hearts and minds to share the good news as we go about our days (Ephesians 6:15). But let us not forget the outflow that comes from lives that have been changed by the gospel. There is a place for caring about the less fortunate, those who are hurting, and those who are in need. Either, they will suffer and die, the government can hand them money (if it has any left), or the church can take on at least some of the challenge. The objective is not to rid the world entirely of those who are poor, for Jesus said that we will always have the poor among us along with the chance to do good to them (Mark 14:7). That there will always be poor people is part of living in a world of inequality, selfishness, discrimination, food shortages, work shortages, etc. But the church is to contrast drastically with the ways of the world by being sacrificial, by caring for the needy, and by laboring among the least of these. Jesus said that giving the thirsty a drink, the hungry some food, the homeless a shelter, the sick some help, a stranger some hospitality, and those in prison a visit was actually doing an act of love to Him personally. As Matthew 25:40 says, "The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'"

Galatians 6:10 makes the point that Christians must care first and foremost about our own within the body, even the least of our brothers and sisters, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ. But our calling doesn't end there, for Galatians 6:10 also says that we are to do good to all as we have opportunity. Our care, compassion, and kindness must extend to the unsaved. This sounds rudimentary, elementary, and almost beyond the obvious, but there are some who so emphasize preaching the gospel that they neglect those around them. This is not right. "But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17). We cannot give what we don't have, but as we are able to help, we should. We must be sure we don't neglect our own brothers and sisters, but we cannot let our love stop at the church door. That is not how Christ operated (John 10:32), and it is totally inconsistent with the definition of love (1 John 4:7-8). Love, by definition, must care about others, and doing good works is part of the outworking of the gospel in our lives (John 13:34-35). It is not enough merely to feed empty stomachs and donate clothes while abandoning the gospel, but it is contrary to the gospel to refuse to do good on the grounds that the gospel is more important. Rather, we need to be flavorful salt and convicting light as we love those in the world. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

There are those in Christianity who are content to pound the pulpit, but they would not bother themselves with a soup kitchen, a shelter, or things such as free medical care. If all the world sees as being the church is a rectangular box of wood and nails with cold, preachy people inside, why would they believe? But if they see a church that is alive, a living, breathing organic mix of people who care and are actively looking for needs to meet, a whole different picture is presented. It is a picture of good works that will move men to glorify God because they will see His love through His people. I am not advocating the social gospel which minimizes or even neglects the gospel for the sake of economic improvement. I am simply saying that part of Christianity is looking after the basic needs of our fellow man. Love for God is the greatest commandment, and we must call people to that end. But the second is like it, loving our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). Wouldn't we want the church to care about our need for food and shelter if we were on the outside looking in? Wouldn't it be more likely that we would listen openly to the gospel when it is clear that something different is present among God's people? Our light will be brightest and our salt the most tasteful when we love those around us not in word only but also in deed.

The church that can balance the value of doing social acts of kindness while not abandoning the preeminence of Christ and the gospel is far rarer than it should be. Speaking of the materially rich in this world, Paul says to Timothy, "*Instruct them* to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share" (1 Timothy 6:18). There are good works in the Bible that go beyond just preaching the gospel. In fact, they give credibility to the gospel and even create a huge open door for it. The gospel changes us so that we love others, and this love of Christ within us compels us to act. We might even say that there is such a thing as a social mandate, for Christian love requires that we care about the basic needs of our fellow man. This is not to say that we have to have the world's resources in order to be able to advance the gospel, but it is to say that we are sending mixed signals about the Jesus of the gospel if we have resources and fail to care or share with those in need.

Some get caught up with trying to improve society without giving it the one thing that is its sole hope, the gospel. That is an epic fail. However, failing to care about those around us and claiming to love Jesus is also majorly off base. Frankly speaking, some churches need fewer coffee shops and more soup kitchens. Others need to learn how to go out to people who aren't part of their "holy huddle". As economies falter and more people need more things, the church may have a wider and more open door for the gospel if it is willing to care about those in need.