

The Call to Relevance in Ministry

I. THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: CORE VALUES OF THE KINGDOM

- A. The Sermon on the Mount is the constitution of God's Kingdom. It is the litmus test to measure spiritual development and ministry impact. We measure our impact by how much people walk out the Sermon on the Mount values (not by the size of our congregation or ministry budget). These values are to be the themes that we are to emphasize most in our ministries.
- B. My heart is burdened over the vast numbers of leaders who are quitting the full-time ministry due to discouragement and burn out. This is partially rooted in their disappointment related to their sense of not being successful (as judged by the size of their ministry). This disappointment is influenced by having secular standards for evaluating what success is. We must define success from the Word, and not the Christian media which is often driven by secular values.
- C. The foundational call in the Sermon on the Mount is to live out the 8 beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-12) as we pursue 100-fold obedience (Mt. 5:48; 6:22). The beatitudes are like 8 beautiful flowers in the "garden in our heart" that God wants to fully blossom. They define love, godliness and spiritual maturity that pleases God. They describe the lifestyle that is the core reality of God's Kingdom. These 8 flowers need to be carefully and continually cultivated as we "weed our garden" by ***resisting the 6 negative influences*** (toxins/poisons) related to our natural lusts (Mt. 5:21-48) and as we "water our garden" by ***pursuing the 5 positive nutrients*** (prayer, fasting, giving, serving and blessing enemies, Mt. 6:1-18) that position us to receive the Spirit's impartation of grace.
- D. Mt. 5-7 describes the process that allows the 8 beatitudes to flourish to full maturity. Implied in all of God's commands is His promise to empower us to walk them out. Thus, the beatitudes are a part of our destiny and inheritance. They are the work of supernatural grace (Eph. 3:16).
- E. Jesus the good shepherd is being helpful to His beloved. He is not railing nor rebuking His people but giving revelation that will deliver us. Jesus is not intending to give comprehensive teaching on freedom of the heart, but rather focuses on the need to make quality (deep and continual) decisions to attack the weeds in the garden of our heart as we nurture it with nutrients.
- F. A wise man builds his life on the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. There is a 3-fold application of the winds that shake and test our ministry foundations. First, the winds that every ministry experiences periodically throughout decades of ministry. Second, the eschatological winds at the end of the age. Third, the evaluation at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:11-15).
- ²⁴ ***"Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine (Sermon on the Mount), and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock; 25 and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. 26 Everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: 27 and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."*** (Mt. 7:24-27)

- G. The Lord will shake all things at the end of the age.
²⁶ He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven." ²⁷ Now this, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken...that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore...let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. (Heb. 12:26-28)
- H. The falling away at the end of the age (Mt. 24:9-13; 2 Thes. 2:3; 1 Tim. 4:1-2; 2 Tim. 3:1-7; 4:3-5; 2 Pet. 2:1-3). We endure until the end (Mt. 10:22; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31; Rev. 2:26; 3:5, 11).
¹ Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons... (1 Tim. 4:1)
³ Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin (Antichrist) is revealed, the son of perdition... (2 Thes. 2:3)
³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth. (2 Tim. 4:3-4)
¹⁰ Then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. ¹¹ Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. ¹² And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ He who endures to the end shall be saved. (Mt. 24:10-13)
- I. In our quest to be “sensitive to seekers” we must remember that God is the ultimate One who is seeking. We must focus on “attracting” the Divine seeker whose eyes look for faithfulness.
²³ True worshipers will worship...in spirit and truth; the Father is seeking such... (Jn. 4:23)
¹⁴ The LORD has sought for Himself a man (David) after His own heart... (1 Sam. 13:14)
⁹ For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him. (2 Chr. 16:9)

II. “PROPHETIC UNTIMELINESS” (BOOK WRITTEN BY OS GUINNESS)

Never have Christians pursued relevance more strenuously; never have Christians been more irrelevant

- A. *By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have courted irrelevance*; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become unfaithful and irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways more compelling to the modern world than in being faithful to Christ, we have lost our identity, authority and relevance.

- B. ***How have we Christians become so irrelevant when we have tried so hard to be relevant?*** By what logic is it possible to steer determinedly in one direction, but end up in completely the opposite direction? Many leaders in the Church today are solemnly presenting the faith in public in so many weak, trite, foolish and disloyal ways. How has this self-inflicted stupidity happened? This monumental and destructive carelessness has coincided exactly with a mania for relevance.
- C. The media exerts great pressure in urging today's leaders in the Church to fulfill stereotypes rather than to represent serious positions. This is an extraordinary moment in history, ***it is time to challenge the idol of relevance, to work out what it means to be faithful*** so to become truly relevant without ending up trendy, trivial, and unfaithful.
- D. ***Relevance is right.*** It is the quality of relating to a matter with pertinence and appropriateness. There is no merit whatsoever in irrelevance or being out of date. ***Relevance is at the heart of the gospel.*** It is the best news ever because it addresses our condition appropriately, pertinently, and effectively as nothing else can. The Church is making the gospel irrelevant by shrinking and distorting it. Rather, we are to be shaped by the unique biblical view of life with its decisive difference from secularist views.

III. HOW DO WE ACHIEVE RELEVANCE? THE STAKES ARE HIGH.

- A. First, we need leaders who embrace "***resistance thinking***" (term used by C. S. Lewis). It is a way of thinking that balances the pursuit of relevance on the one hand with a tenacious awareness that the gospel will not fit in with the spirit of this age. It is offensive to the carnal mind. It is time for courage to develop "***resistance thinking***" as true followers of Jesus who resist the mesmerizing lure of the present age. By seeking to make the gospel fit with the spirit of our age, we end up with an easy, comfortable gospel that is not the real gospel.
- B. Today, the emphasis is one sided in emphasizing issues of human aspirations without mention of self-denial and sacrifice. But we must also ***emphasize the difficult and even the repellent themes of the gospel.*** True believers have confidence that they are relevant. We must remain true in proclaiming these. Resistance thinking is the way of relevance with faithfulness.
- C. A secret of the Church's power through history lies in its calling to be "***against the world, for the world.***" C. S. Lewis calls this "two-edged character" of the Christian faith. As Christians we view reality in terms of what the world was created to be (*our dignity, destiny*), and also in what it has become in the fall (*our depravity*). As a result, the Christian faith is ***simultaneously both world-affirming and world-denying.*** The gospel stresses self-denial and fulfillment at its heart is the ***scandal of the cross*** and the hope of glory. Taking seriously the biblical warning to "flee the world," she has a realistic assessment of the dangers of the world and of worldliness.
- D. When the church is weak or careless in maintaining this dual stance, ***it leads directly to cowardice and corruption, decadence and decline.*** But when the church is faithful to this she is at her best with power to transform culture and is once again relevant.

- E. Conclusion: often the claim to pursue gospel relevance is driven by the *fear of man* (dressed up in dignified language). Yes, there is a measure of genuine concern for people in this, yet often, there is also a *deeper desire for the growth of one's personal ministry*. In this we seek to validate our importance and value through "successful ministry." This is one new "ministry cult" today in the Western Church.

IV. HOW DO WE PURSUE GREATNESS AND STRENGTH?

- A. The Church is greatly influenced by a secular view of greatness and strength. In other words, it emphasizes success as measured by the size of outward achievements and how many people applaud us in this age. The kingdom view of success emphasizes first the size of our heart and God's applause.
- B. Church growth is not in itself a sign of God's pleasure and presence. We must not assume the ability to move people's hearts to God is synonymous with moving them to join our ministry organization.

V. THE REVELATION OF THE EYES OF GOD

- A. The revelation that God sees our heart and labors gives us a great sense of relevance.
- ¹³ *All things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. (Heb. 4:13)*
- ³ *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you...⁴ He who judges me is the Lord ⁵ ...who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels (intentions) of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God. (1 Cor. 4:3-5)*
- B. The Lord sees our heart as well as our labors in ministry.
- ¹⁰ *For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. (Heb. 6:10)*
- ⁴² *Whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward. (Mt. 10:42)*