

Pillar V

Equip and send out disciples to love our community with the mercy and hospitality of Jesus Christ.

The church is failing if she is not committed to exercising the mercy and hospitality of Jesus Christ. The church speaks well of mercy and commends hospitality. But our practice of such ministries is wanting. Metro East has a history of giving well to missions and ministry. But we have not yet effectively engaged our community through ministries of mercy. For Metro East to be more faithful to demonstrating the mercy and hospitality of Christ we will need to do two things:

1. Metro East must be fully committed to obeying the biblical standard of mercy. It is quite possible that many are not fully aware of what the Scriptures call God's people to in relation to loving our neighbor in a Christ-like way. Preaching and teaching on the biblical standard of mercy will certainly play a role in our growing more faithful. However, one of the primary impediments to effective and biblical mercy ministries is our own disregard to the call of Christ to join Him in showing mercy to our neighbors.

2.

2. Metro East must be able to understand the cultural realities. We must know our city well. Do we know what the most pressing needs are in Wichita, Andover, Rose Hill, Bel Air, etc.? Are there ministries and churches that we can partner with who are already well engaged in mercy ministries? How can Metro East develop a culture of hospitality not only at our church facility but, more importantly, in our own homes?

Obeying the Biblical Standard

Once, when Jesus was debating with the Sadducees about the resurrection He was asked by a scribe, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" (Mk. 12:28). At first glance this would seem to be a very difficult question to answer? After all, how does one rank God's law in such a way? But Jesus, possessing all of the fullness and wisdom of God effectively sums up the entire moral law. He answered the scribe by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" Then Jesus quotes from Leviticus 19:18: "The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mk. 12:29-31).

Inevitably, the second greatest command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves raised questions in the minds of some of Jesus' hearers as it certainly does today. For instance, who exactly is our neighbor? When confronted with that question Jesus responded by telling a story:

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? How shall you read it?' And he answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with

all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.’

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You go, and do likewise.’

- Luke 10:25-37

Tim Keller points out several shattering questions that are raised in this parable.¹

“First, there is the question of the necessity of mercy to our very existence as Christians.” Remember, that the parable of the Good Samaritan is an answer to the question, ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life.’ Jesus points the teachers of the law to the example of this one who risked his safety and spent his own resources for the good of a stranger. Clearly, we know from the whole scope of God’s Word that good works, no matter how merciful do not earn one a place in heaven. However, it is clear that Jesus considered acts of mercy to be inseparable from the very meaning of “Christian.”

“Second, there is the question of the scope and dimension of the ministry of mercy.” Notice that the expert in the law to whom Jesus addresses the parable does not question the requirement to care for those in need. Nevertheless, his concern is to somehow limit the number of those he is responsible to – “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus demonstrates that the flaw in this question is that it limits the scope of our mercy giving. The right question is not “Who is my neighbor?” Rather the question should be turned inward so that it becomes “Am I a good neighbor to whomever the Lord places in my path?” It becomes an expression of the second greatest commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Third, there is the question of the motive or dynamic of the ministry of mercy.” In Jesus’ parable the priest and the Levite had all the essential biblical knowledge and ethical principles necessary to render right action in the situation described. Not only that, they had ethnic and religious affinity with the man who had been beaten and left for dead. The irony is that while the Samaritan had none of these things, what he did have was compassion. Jesus was pointing out that religious training and knowledge are not enough to make us truly merciful. We can have all

¹ Keller, Timothy, *Ministries of Mercy*, 2nd Ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997) pp. 11ff.

the right opinions and hold to all the right beliefs but still have cold and merciless hearts. Right theology is nothing more than religious sentiment if not accompanied by a compassionate heart.

Understanding the Cultural Realities

Do middle and upper class American Christians know who the needy are among them? Do they know anyone who is needy? Do they worship and fellowship with anyone who is truly needy? This is where we need to begin in our quest to know the realities of our city. Once we establish that most of us have far too little interaction with those who are needy the next issues to address are 1) who are the needy in our city, 2) what exactly are their needs and 3) how can Metro East most effectively demonstrate for them the mercy of Christ?

Answers to these questions will require demographic studies of our city, surveys of current mercy ministries, identifying “gaps” where needs are going unmet, mobilizing the church for action, and training in evangelism. We will also need to ask questions about our current schedule of programs. Does our current schedule allow church members the time and resources to be engaged in our city in a redemptive way? Does our slate of ministries indicate a clear commitment to showing off the mercy and hospitality of Christ to our community?

It also needs to be understood that mercy ministries must not be limited to helping the poor. We are to show hospitality to those whom the Lord has “planted” nearest to us. Metro East must seek to develop a culture where our homes become seen as centers for ministry. How many times has the gospel been shared in our living rooms or around the kitchen table? The greatest mercy we can demonstrate to anyone is the mercy of sharing Christ with a lost person. We must move from a posture of insulation to one of engagement.

Tim Keller writes:

Only a small number of people in the history of the world have lived in relatively ‘safe’ conditions. War, injustice, oppression, famine, natural disaster, family breakdown, disease, mental illness, physical disability, racism, crime, scarcity of resources, class struggles – these ‘social problems’ are the results of our alienation from God. They bring deep misery and violence to the lives of most of humanity. The majority of [American Christians] however probably belong to the relatively small group of folk who, through God’s kindness, lead an existence generally free from these forces.

This comparative comfort can isolate us in a fictitious world where suffering is difficult to find. But this isolation is fragile, for suffering surrounds us – even in the suburbs! We need an accurate view of the world in which we live. Perhaps we need to see that instead of living on islands of ease, we are all living on the Jericho Road.²

² Ibid, p. 13