

Cars, Bars and Guitars

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Now that we've finished our series on First, Second and Third John, we are going to move into a new set of messages. We are titling this new series "In the World – Not of It." And let's face it – the world has not been an easy place to be in, right? Charlie Kirk was assassinated a little over a week ago, to silence his voice. Yes, he often said things that were controversial, even while sharing Christ, and inviting respectful interchange between those of differing beliefs, social customs and politics. Earlier in the summer Melissa Hortman, speaker of the house for the Minnesota, along with her husband, were killed by someone with vehement "pro-life" views – now there's a strange dichotomy! Children are shooting children in schools. As we look at all of this insanity, we are filled with deep unease, and even anger. So how do we relate to this upside-down world as Christians, knowing how we are personally impacted by it? That's what we intend to spend some weeks examining on Sunday morning. Some of these messages will likely cause me, and perhaps you, to do some serious self-reflection.

I'm going to start on a little lighter side, though. What's happening today? Car show? That's not a particularly "religious" activity, right? Nobody talked about cars in the Bible, for example. Well, except for this: What kind of car did Jesus drive? Well, it was a "Christler." No wait, it was a Plymouth. After all, when he encountered the money changers in the temple, "He drove them out in a Fury." Or maybe it was a Honda, which must have been embarrassing, since he said, "For I did not speak of my own Accord." Need a moment on any of these? Of course years earlier, David's Triumph could be heard throughout the land. And you may have heard of the guy who took his car in for a service – the preacher was not amused.

Cars aren't the only non-religious thing we have around here. All these guitars on stage certainly don't seem very traditional. Certainly not electric guitars and drums!

In a few words, why do we do things like car shows, contemporary music, ice cream socials, and more? Aren't these "worldly" things? I mean, these things can be therapeutic, but Christian? (I've been thinking of putting a bumper sticker on

my car that says, “Honk if you think I’m cute.” Then, whenever I’m feeling down about myself, I can stay stopped at a green light until I feel better.) We are simply using the things of the world to relate to the world, while remaining separate from the world. When we do the car show, we have people here that would otherwise never darken the door of a church. It’s our opportunity to reach out.

But isn’t it sinful to jump into secular society like this? That’s why we need to have some level of separateness. I’m not going to get too much into that today, but we’ll explore that more in future weeks. We’re often told that God cannot be around sin. But I’m not so sure. We read the story of Rahab from the book of Joshua today. A prostitute hid the spies of Israel on the roof of her house, covering them up with flax. Then she lied to the king of Jericho! Seems like there was plenty of sin to go around. And yet her actions enabled the Hebrew people to begin to occupy the Promised Land, as well as saving her own life and the lives of her family. A prostitute was part of God’s plan!

But wait, there’s more! Did you know that Rahab ended up marrying a Hebrew man named Salman? A non-Hebrew woman was brought into the nation of Israel. She became the mother (or possibly grandmother or great-grandmother) of a man named Boaz. He in turn married another non-Israelite woman, Ruth, who was from Moab. They became the great-grandparents of King David. And Jesus, who is of the line of David, is also descended from them. Imagine – there is a prostitute in Christ’s heritage!

So I’ve mentioned cars and guitars as examples of non-traditional, non-religious things the church gets engaged with on days like today. If you’ve read the title of the message today, you know that I skipped something – bars! And to set the record straight, I’m not talking about bars of gold, or bars on a window – I’m talking taverns, beer joints, nightclubs, and all kinds of “dens of iniquity!” Yes, we’re going to belly up to the bar. Why would I include this in today’s message? Well, I’m going to tell you. Jesus in fact pioneered going to non-religious or “sinful” places to meet people where they were.

Our passage from Matthew today tells of how Jesus called Matthew, a tax collector to be one of his disciples. I suspect you remember that these were people considered the lowest of the low in that time. They were known as cheats and thieves. They collaborated with the hated Romans against their own people

– yes, these were Jews filling this role. Jesus ended up coming to Matthew’s house for dinner then. The religious people of the day, the Pharisees, were highly offended, seeing that Jesus was essentially partying with these folks – tax collectors and sinners! The Pharisees were known for how they kept themselves apart from the world, apart from what they considered sin. They were known as religious heroes, from their role in the Maccabean revolt of a few hundred years before, when Judah threw off an earlier conqueror – the Greeks. So many aspired to be as “good” as the Pharisees. But not Jesus. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” The Greek word for the “well” is *ischyō*. It means healthy and strong in body. So it implies that Jesus is coming to the weak. Think of the Beatitudes – who are blessed in the Kingdom of God? He goes on to say “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” The word translated “desire is *thelō*, which means much more than just wishing for something. Jesus is instead saying “I will have mercy.” These tax collectors were not going to be found in the synagogues with the Pharisees – they wouldn’t be welcome! Christ has gone to where they are, where they are comfortable and at home to minister to them. He even said that He was there to CALL them, rather than the self-righteous.

What are some modern-day examples of this kind of mercy, this reaching out to people in the bars and taverns, so to speak? Well, there are many. To use Charlie Kirk as an example, he spoke the gospel message in an often-secular academic world, to reach people there. We’ve spoken before of the events dramatized in the movie “The Jesus Revolution.” It took long-haired guitar players, among others, to reach what was then a very lost generation, the hippies of the late sixties and early seventies. (By the way, there is now a show on Prime Video called “A Band called Love Song.” I encourage you to watch it, as it is a documentary about the musicians who were a big part of the Jesus Movement on the West Coast. It includes our friend Chuck Girard, who I told you about a few weeks ago, when he passed away. He and his wife were among the folks Pam and I got trapped on a Caribbean island with. I promise I’ll tell that story someday! Anyway, check that out if you have Prime Video.

So should we be going to the bars? Maybe. This is an important principle when it comes to ministering in the wider world – in the world but not of it. You will become aware of what you are called to be in. Some people should not go to the bars to minister. If you happened to be a recovering alcoholic, it might not be the

best idea. Your mission field could be just about anything – the local gun club, knitting circle, or whatever you are suited and prepared for. Wherever you are called, it's important what we say, and why.

I mentioned a moment ago that Jesus wanted to call sinners to Himself. As we move to our other New Testament passage, from Luke, Jesus speaks of John the Baptist and Himself, how they ministered to people. One was fasting, abstaining from wine and bread, and Jesus ate and drank right in the middle of everybody. The religious people of the day were calling John a demon, and Jesus a glutton and a drunkard. The truth is that both approaches are valid – John called people to a higher standard, and Jesus came with compassion and grace. Jesus then says, "Yet wisdom is justified by all her children." What did He mean? Think of wisdom as the instruction that both John the Baptist and Jesus taught on how to obtain salvation. In essence, wisdom is that which brings righteousness to men and women. That's our message as well.

When the church chooses to emphasize people's sinfulness over the grace of God, terrible things can happen. There is the sad story of the "maggies" of Ireland. They got that nickname from Mary Magdalene, a revealing story in itself. The gospels mentioned only one fact of Mary Magdalene's past, that Jesus had driven seven demons from her. Nevertheless, a tradition grew that Mary Magdalene must have been the same woman as the prostitute who washed Jesus' feet with her hair. Hence when a strict order of nuns agreed to take in young women who had become pregnant out of wedlock, they labeled the fallen girls "maggies."

The maggies came to public attention in the 1990s when the order sold its convent, bringing to light the existence of the graves of 133 maggies who had spent their lives working as virtual slaves in the convent laundry. The media soon scouted out a dozen such "Magdalen laundries" across Ireland—the last one closed in 1996—and soon relatives and survivors were spilling accounts of the slave-labor conditions inside. Thousands of young women spent time in the laundries, some put away just for being "temptresses," forced to work unpaid and in silence as a form of atonement for their sins. The nuns took away illegitimate children born to these women to be raised in other religious institutions.

Did this practice bring these unfortunates to Christ? Unlikely. Some may have called on Him in desperation because of the persecution that Christians were

putting them through. It's important to reflect on the sharp contrast between how Jesus treated moral failures and how we his followers often do. Jesus appointed the Samaritan woman as his first missionary. A woman who was currently, at that moment, "living in sin." She was living with a man she was not married to and had many former husbands. He defended the woman who anointed him with expensive perfume: "Wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." And Mary Magdalene, she of the seven demons, he honored as the very first witness of the Resurrection—a testimony at first discounted by his more prestigious followers. Where we shame, he elevates.

So let's take advantage of the wisdom of Christ. As we walk around the car show today, or listen to the guitars, or perhaps even visit the bars, remember that everyone is weak – everyone needs the saving grace of Christ. This is what we express in the face of a world gone crazy. Yes, we may be people set apart from the world, but we ourselves are called into this same world. Go in the grace of Jesus Christ and share His love with others!

Amen.