

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 22 June 2003

No. T0271

Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

The Christian Servant: In the Community

This morning we come to our fourth look at the Christian servant. We have seen already that, as Christians, we have many opportunities to serve the Lord Jesus - at home and at work, as well as in our local fellowship, and the church more generally. Today we conclude our studies of the servant by observing the role we have in our communities. For our purposes this morning, this may be at a local level or, more generally, at national level. Probably all believers would agree that we ought to be model citizens, usefully reaching out to the world around us. Sadly, whilst we may all agree on the theory, there are often quite sharp differences as to how we can best put theory into practice. Let us then begin by considering some first principles from the Bible, before we then look at four areas where the Christian has a role today.

Let us begin by considering what Paul had to say to the first European Christians, at Philippi, in Philippians 1:21-27. "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labour; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again. Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ."

Some of you may be familiar with the story of the Lion King. In it Simba runs away from his pride, believing himself responsible for the death of his father, the king. He grows up following a philosophy of "hakuna matata", "why worry". It is not until he meets an old friend, and the words "remember who you are" ring in his ears, that he realises that though he may run away, he is still the king, and responsible for the pride back home. So he returns, and eventually puts everything right.

Sometimes I think that we, as Christians, forget who we are. In the daily rush of work and family, of church and leisure, we forget what we are here for. When we accepted Jesus as our Saviour, why did He not just take us to be with Him in heaven straight away? Certainly, this would be much nicer for us. But no, God leaves us here for a purpose. I believe that this is twofold. Firstly, so that we can share in His sufferings. It is only while we are here on earth that we can, in some small way, begin to understand His sufferings for us. Secondly, it is to be His ambassadors, to represent Him, and His interests, here and now. Paul could write to the Corinthians, in 2 Corinthians 5:20: "Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us." It is this thought that we need to focus on this morning. I am here to represent Christ in my community. Those around me should be able to see what Jesus is like when they see my actions, or listen to my words. In the decisions I make and in the influence that I may have, I am to further the kingdom of God. Whatever else I may do is merely a dangerous diversion. If the French ambassador was to start saying which laws should be passed here, or how much I should be paid etc, I might justifiably feel that he was overstepping the mark, and meddling. So too, we are to represent Christ to the world. We are not here to join its societies and run its systems. Once we go beyond His interests, we tend to lose sight of our reason for being here, and it is then that conflict is likely to arise.

So then, as ambassadors for Christ, what is our role? Well, in Matthew 5:13-14 Jesus Himself says that we are to be salt and light! In Bible times, salt was used to preserve food, as it is today. We are to have a preserving effect on the communities in which we find ourselves. Perhaps, like me, you have been in the company of someone who has sworn and then immediately apologized, usually with a reference to the "God squad", or something like that. Well in a very small way, that is being salty salt. By the things that we don't do, as well as the things that we do do, we are to show the world how much better the Christian life can be, compared to a life without Christ. In Mark 4: 21 two dangers are presented: "Is a lamp brought to be put under a basket or under a bed? Is it not to be set on a lampstand?" The basket, used for gathering food, speaks about the world of work, whilst the bed speaks about our leisure. Neither work nor leisure is to dim the light that we display to the world. We need to carefully ask ourselves to what extent have I retained a salty character, and just how much light do I give to those around about me? FB Hole has written, "Salt preserves, and light illuminates. We cannot be like healthful salt in the earth if we are of the earth. We cannot be as a light lifted up in the world if we are of the world. Now nothing more helps to keep us distinct and separate from the earth and world than persecution from the world, no matter what form it takes. Persecuted for Christ's sake, the disciple is real salty salt and he also emits a maximum of light. Does not this word of our Lord reveal to us the secret

of much of our feebleness?" As Christians we have so wanted to associate with the world, to fit in, that we have lost much of the distinctiveness of Christianity.

Before we leave the Lord's words, we should just read John 18:36: "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now my kingdom is not from here." We need to be quite clear about the warfare we are involved in. It is spiritual warfare for a heavenly kingdom. We are not trying to create a Christian society here on earth. During the time of Oliver Cromwell, England came as close to becoming a "Christian" state as we ever shall. It failed and did so miserably because whilst outwardly changing the laws it did nothing to change the inward person. If we want to change society then we must change the individual, starting with ourselves. To believe that by Christianising the government or the laws that are passed, we would improve our society is simply misguided. It is a failed historical experiment, and yet so often this is the first thing that we feel we ought to do when we consider our role in the community. Changing the world to make it a better place is simply not our fight, but it is a by-product of the fight we are engaged in. There is an object lesson for us in the short book of Philemon.

Onesimus was a slave who had run away. He had been saved by Paul's preaching, and though Paul loved him very much, he decided to send Onesimus back to his master, Philemon. This could have meant death for Onesimus. Now Philemon was a Christian, so Paul wrote to him on behalf of Onesimus. Paul did not harangue Philemon about the immorality of slavery, or organise a petition to get it banned. He accepts the world as it was, but pleads with Philemon, as his brother, that Onesimus would be a real asset to Paul, if Philemon could see his way to setting Onesimus free.

When Jesus healed the centurion's servant, He didn't make freedom for the servant a precondition of His blessing, but He does emphasize the need for personal change.

But there are two other verses that we ought to read together. Firstly Galatians 6:10: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith." A valuable order is set out here. It is first of all our responsibility to give our time, our money, our emotional strength and support to our brothers and sisters in Christ, and then to all people. So it is all very well me giving my time and money to the English castles restoration society, but if that means some housebound person in my church is not visited, or some disadvantaged children from our Sunday school cannot go to camp then clearly my priorities are wrong. Secondly we read in James 2:15-16: "If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?" Here we have the clear principle that our words must be backed up by appropriate actions. It is no good me telling a poor beggar that Jesus loves him, only for him to go away and starve to death. Similarly, it is no good me feeding him well, only so he can die full and go to hell! No I need to feed both body and soul! My involvement in the community should always have the goal of representing Christ to those I come into contact with.

So to summarise our basic principles. We are ambassadors for Christ, so we are to represent Him, to ensure His interests are promoted in this world. We are first of all responsible to our brothers and sisters in Christ and then to all mankind. Our actions and our words need to match.

Let us then look at four areas where the Christian life interfaces with the communities in which we live.

The Christian and the law.

As a Christian, I should be a law keeper. I could not believe it, during the poll tax era, when some prominent local Christians claimed that they would not pay their tax. We could argue for years about the fairness of a particular system, but the law said it must be paid, and until the law was changed, so it should have been paid. Such Christians could not teach about the importance of obeying God's word, when they could not even obey the words of men.

How about speeding? According to a recent survey 99% of all male drivers admit to breaking the speed limit. I hold my hands up to this one occasionally. But how could I ever speak of the love of God to the parents of the child I had injured when I was speeding? I cannot expect to be a help at the church service I am at, when I have broken the law to be there!

Do I pay my bills on time? Do I pay tax on everything that I should, or do I use some convenient loophole to save me money? And how about taking days off sick when I am not really ill? There are many things that may not be a criminal offence, but are clearly wrong. The Christian servant is to keep a million miles from these. It is important not only to be a law keeper but to be seen to be a law keeper.

The Christian servant and morality.

This very much overlaps with the above in many circumstances, but there are others where the Christian must represent God in an increasingly amoral society. When I was engaged to my fiancée, she would often come to stay at

my parents' home. However, if for some reason they were away, then she was not allowed to stay. It was not that they didn't trust us, but rather they didn't want the neighbours thinking that any form of living together before marriage was acceptable. Whilst that may have been hard for us, what a tremendous way to represent what God clearly teaches about sexual morality. Today, almost all shame about sexual immorality has been lost. Here, if nowhere else, the Christian servant's voice must be heard. So far as I know, my parents never tried to have the law changed, nor did they ever tell the neighbours that what they allowed their sons to do was wrong. Nevertheless God's voice was heard in our street, clearly but without confrontation.

Everything today is relative. God's standards are absolute. We need to maintain His standards in our own lives. We need to be absolutely upright in our dealings with the community in which we live. Some time ago my wife had been shopping and bought several pairs of shoes for the family. Like a dutiful husband I had signed the credit card receipt. It was not until we got home, and she checked the bill that she spotted that we hadn't been charged for one pair of shoes, and the shop was eighty miles away! Still, she sent a cheque for the difference with a letter explaining that as a Christian it would be wrong to steal. She got a letter back in which the shop were surprised that God still made a difference in people's lives. What a tremendous way of representing the interests of God!

The Christian servant and charity.

As we have seen already the Christian needs to ensure that actions and words go together. There are so many opportunities to give to the Lord's work. This may range from looking after a sick neighbour's child, to giving old clothes to others. Several years ago my children learnt an important lesson in giving. They had reluctantly parted with a few old clothes and teddies that they had grown out of plus some novelty soaps they hadn't used. These were sent abroad to help some Christians in real poverty. Sometime later we heard that one lady had been to church for the first time in months as she had been too ashamed to go out without washing with soap! Such a tiny gesture, such big consequences. Does our obsession with materialism truly represent the interests of God?

Perhaps you have time to give to help out in the local school, encouraging children to read, so they can read the Bible for themselves. Maybe there is space in your house to invite someone round for a meal, and share the love of God with.

The Christian servant and politics.

This has always been a contentious subject, if for no other reason than politics can cause very strong opinions and differences in otherwise similar people. I have never voted because I have never felt the Lord leading me to do so and I cannot imagine ever doing so. As a citizen of heaven, and ambassador for Someone whose kingdom is not of this world, I do not feel it right to involve myself directly in the choice of government. We will get the government that God chooses, whatever I may do. Also, if I was to support one particular party, then I know that some, who support a quite different party, may think less of what I have to say about the Bible because of it. It is a source of potential conflict that I don't need. However, I realise that some see it as their duty as a model citizen to vote, and so do so. The Bible allows for differences in matters of conscience. However, there is so much more that we can be doing, when we consider our role in politics.

Paul, in 1 Timothy 2:1-2 says, "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence." As I write, we face the prospect of war against Iraq. Politicians have had their say, as have big business and the oil companies. Military hawks and doves have had their say. As Christians have we had our say about such important events? And how can we best find our voice? By getting on our knees and praying! How long do I set aside to pray for all those in authority? We desperately need to be busy in prayer as regards our government, that God would enable them to do what is right before Him. Prayer should be our first thought when we consider our political role, and to pray effectively we should be well informed. There may be times when a letter to a politician or even lawful, peaceful protest may be required but these are a poor afterthought to a vibrant prayer life. But we need to be doubly careful here. It is not what issues do I care about; it is where do God's interests lie in a particular issue. We are here to represent Him, to speak out for Him.

In conclusion, then, we have seen so many areas that we are legitimately concerned in. There is so much that can be done. But in all that we do, let us remember that we are His ambassadors. Our actions should not, must not, hinder someone else from coming to know God more fully. We are here to represent His interests, to speak up for Him. May God give us all the courage to do so, in word and action, in the time left to us.

Please Note: We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.