Agents of Healing

Fifth in the series: Doing Our Part to Change the World

# Scripture: Matt. 9:35-10:8; James 4:1-12

# Key thought: Disciples of Jesus bring transformation by being agents of healing, reconciliation and peace.

# Intro:

## Review

We are nearing the end of a message series called, “Doing Our Part to Change the World.” We began the series a few weeks ago by emphasizing that if we are going to really make a difference in our world, we need to catch the big vision Jesus had for the transformation of society through his church. Jesus intended and expected that his church would make a big difference in a suffering and broken world. Once we see that, we become eager to get on board and be a part of that mission. The following week we talked about the fact that if we attempt this kind of mission on our own, it will be fruitless. Instead, the first activity in which we must engage is intercession for the needs of our world. God’s ordained to work through the prayers of his people. Making a difference begins with prayer. The third week we reminded one another of Jesus’ teaching that making a difference will also cost us something as it did him. It will require generosity and even sacrifice on our part if we are to truly make a difference in our world. Last week we talked about making a difference through volunteer service to others, following the example of Jesus.

## This week

This morning, I would like to talk about a way that we as Jesus’ body, his church, can especially make a difference in our present society. Today we live in a time when people wear their anger on their shirtsleeves, literally. Language is ruder. People are way less inhibited in becoming publicly angry at another driver for instance, or at a coworker or boss, or teacher, or even a policeman. Politics is more divisive. How can we as the people of God make a difference in this culture of anger and division? I believe Christians have a message and an answer for today through the work of the Spirit of God in us! Jesus has commissioned us to make a difference!

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9).

So how do we do the work he has called us to do?

# We become agents of healing by seeking God's compassion and preparation for reconciliation.

## Confess our need

The first thing we need to admit is that we cannot accomplish this mission of spreading peace and reconciliation and healing in our community and in our nation and in our world on our own. Left to our own devices, we are quickly upset, occasionally even enraged. We are easily drawn into the divisions and angry arguments of our day. On our own, we can become a part of the problem instead of the solution. So we confess our need and ask God for help. We reach out in prayer to God for supernatural ability to reflect who he is in our world today. We need God’s Spirit’s compassion and power to spark reconciliation in relationships, and God’s ability to give a gentle answer. This does not mean we cannot be direct in our speech. It does not mean we have to be wishy-washy and fail to take a firm position. Rather it has everything to do with our attitudes, our tones and our words. They need to be infused with a divine touch.

## Ask God for a change of heart toward others

People noted the compassion of Jesus. The word translated compassion is actually a Greek idiom that refers to the bowels. The literal expression is “bowels of mercies.” So we could say that compassion is a visceral reaction, a gut feeling that we have that we just have to help. Is that one of the characteristics others speak of when they talk about us?

You know, love is listed as the first one of the fruits of the spirit (Gal. 5:22). Love and compassion are closely related. One of Paul’s great prayers for the Ephesian church focused on the need for them to learn to love.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Eph 3:17-19 NIV

Paul also reminded us that in order to be the peacemakers that God wants us to be we must go even a little further. As followers of Jesus, we can’t just show love and compassion when it is easy and makes sense. We must ask of God the extraordinary ability to bless those who persecute us. This means three things.

1. It means that we have allowed God to change our hearts from human vengeance to actually caring about those who misuse us.
2. It means that we speak words of blessing rather than words of cursing and anger toward those we might consider enemies or who consider us their enemy.
3. It also means that we act in ways that bring good to the person who has hurt us.

Once again, this is not going to happen unless we have allowed the Holy Spirit to take over our reactions and work his will through us. This is a high bar. We have a difficult enough time living up to Jesus’ standards toward those with whom we disagree, to say nothing of those who might actually misuse us.

For example, take the challenge of Muslim refugee immigration. Nothing like choosing a hot button to talk about. Certainly Muslim immigration of any kind has been an uncomfortable subject at least since 9/11. But, for example, how should we respond to the Rohingya situation developing in our world at the present time? Here we have a pretty clear example of ethnic cleansing, murder, and wholesale expulsion of a group from the country of Myanmar. It is creating a huge refugee crisis. Will we ignore it?

If we try to, as Christians, I think we will hear in our souls the echo of the story of Jesus, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” Matt. 9:36-38

In the early days of the AIDS epidemic, when fear was rampant, a pastor was visited by a homosexual who was dying of AIDS. Without disclosing his illness, the homosexual invited the pastor to have lunch, and they went out to a restaurant. Halfway through their meal, the homosexual paused, look the pastor in the eye and blurted out, “I am dying of AIDS,” while tensely waiting for the pastor’s reaction. With tear filled eyes, the pastor reached across the table and touched the homosexual’s arm while saying, “I am sorry. I am truly sorry.”

Later that man decided to receive Jesus as his Savior and explained his decision to the pastor this way. “Do you want to know why I decided to receive Jesus? When I told you I was dying of AIDS, I was watching your body language. I wondered if you would quickly lean back, away from my face, or if you would surreptitiously move your glass and your plate toward you. I was not listening to your words, but I was watching the language of your body. Instead of rejecting me, you reached out and touched me. Your eyes filled with tears. You empathized with me. You accepted me. Then and there, I decided that your God is the God I want to meet when I die.” (told by Ed Silvoso in That None Should Perish p. 82)

You see, compassion is the beginning of a life that is able to bring healing and peace to others. We learn it from Jesus and receive it from God’s Spirit. Compassion crosses barriers.

## Ask God to work in others

But even if we allow God to work in us, there still is another reason why we cannot do this job of peacemaking and healing broken relationships on our own. There’s another rationale why prayer is an essential part of peacemaking and a ministry of reconciliation. It is this. We need God to prepare the hearts of other people. We need for God to till the soil in their lives as well as our own so that the seed of peace, this tender plant of healing can find a place to grow. Unless God is at work, our finest words are likely to fall upon deaf ears. But remember, we serve the God who is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Eph. 3:20-21 NIV)

# We become agents of healing by examining our own motives and attitudes.

## Check your motive

Then after we have prayed, we still must be very careful about our own motives if we are to be instruments of God’s healing in our divided world. Here is where the apostle James helps us so much. He helps us understand the underlying reasons for much of the anger and arguing that we find in our world. The problem is, it’s easy to see the problems in other people, but difficult to see when we have similar issues as well. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us see our own motives.

As Jesus put it,

How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye. Matt 7:4-5 NIV

Quarrelling is so much a part of our human situation. Jesus’ own disciples quarreled over who was the greatest. The Corinthian church was very divided by differing loyalties to whichever Christian leader each group thought was the greatest. Children are naturally jealous of one another, wanting all the attention upon themselves. Many people grow up without outgrowing that childish self-centeredness. In James 4, both the word desire in v. 1 and the word pleasure in v. 3 come from the Greek root from which we get the word hedonism. Hedonism is the love and pursuit of personal pleasure. It is the ultimate selfishness. The root of quarrelling is selfishness. This desire to be first is one of the biggest desires that battles within us. When it is in control, we will be unlikely to be successful as peacemakers.

If two mountain goats meet on a narrow ledge high on a cliff, what will happen? If they fight, death will result. They can't back up; they can't pass. Here’s what happens. One will lie down. The other will go over his body without harm. They both continue on their way. Cooperation rather than butting heads wins the day. Too bad humans can’t learn that lesson.

How can you tell when self-centeredness -- this desire to be first-- is in control? Ask some simple questions.

* Are you willing for the good thing to happen to the other person?
* Do you put the other person down in your language when you talk to third parties?
* When the other person is honored, are you really jealous?
* Is it hard for you to give this other person a compliment?

If most of these are true, beware.  Love is not in control. Ask God for a change of your own motives.

1. W. Tozer in Leaning into The Wind p. 76 "It is always more important that we retain a right spirit toward others than that we bring them to our way of thinking, even if our way is right."

## Check Your Attitude - James 4:7-10

The second thing we need to check in order to function as a peacemaker is our attitude. James puts his message in a nutshell in the phrase, "Submit yourselves, then to God." When we are in an attitude of submission to God, we show humility. An attitude of humility before God keeps other things in proper perspective.

In verses 7-10 James suggests 7 steps for checking up on our attitude.

(1) Submit to God v. 7 - This forces us to ask ourselves the question, what is God's will in the matter? Peacemaking is never about what we want to happen. It dwells on higher questions.

(2) Resist the devil v. 7 - We should ask ourselves, "Is our attitude advancing Satan's cause or resisting his ways?” I have seen Christians in church meetings whose attitudes were not advancing God’s cause.

(3) Come near to God v. 8 - If we are seeking to walk with God, He will keep us on the right path.

(4) Wash your hands v. 8 – This one is not about cleaning the outward appearance, but about changing actions and thought habits that you know are dirtying your conscience.

(5) Purify our hearts v. 8 – This is about loyalty. Are we ultimately working for God’s cause or our own?

(6) Mourning v. 9 – This is not about thinking sadness is holy. Rather the verse is lifting up the idea is that repentance is serious, it may involve some losses; repentance involves being genuinely sorry for our wrongdoing.

(7) Humble ourselves before God v. 10 – Here I think of Isaiah 6. “Woe is me.” I think of Peter asking Jesus to go away because he had become conscious of his sinfulness (Luke 5:8). This kind of realization of our ungodliness is the natural result of drawing close to God. When we are truly humble before God, we have a hard time not also being humble before others.

It’s that kind of Christian attitude that makes a person a peacemaker. That kind of grace is not normal in human reactions unless we are following Jesus and are schooled under the Holy Spirit’s instruction.

# We become agents of healing by speaking and acting as peacemakers.

## Your words make a difference

John Maxwell used to admonish his church board members with this illustration. By the words you use and the attitudes you show, it will be as if you have either a can of gasoline or a can of water. When you see a spark of conflict in our church, which one are you going to use? Are you going to be a catalyst for conflict, one who inflames tensions, and makes matters worse? Or will you be one who smooths things out, dampens conflict, and levels the way so the work of God can go on unhindered? Which will it be?

When we are self-centered, our speech betrays us. We talk about ourselves, our interests, our opinions. When our loyalty has strayed from God, our choice of words betrays our hidden thoughts. A sensuous comment reveals our hidden lusts. A ethnic slur reveals our inner prejudices, etc.

When we are proud and too independent, when we get that chip on our shoulder, our words let others know.

"Surely what a man does when he is taken off guard is the best evidence for what sort of a man he is. Surely what pops out before the man has time to put on a disguise is the truth. If there are rats in the cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats, it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way the suddenness of a provocation does not make me an ill-tempered man; it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am."   
(C. S. Lewis in Mere Christianity)

So our speech is a sure indicator of our motives, our loyalties and our attitudes.

## Your actions make a difference

Peacemakers are often second-mile people. Remember Jesus’ words.

“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.” Matt 5:41

Paul admonishes us, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21)

Those who would truly make a difference in the hurting world we live in combine compassion, humility, and courage. They put faith into practice by doing something loving that helps to bridge the gap between people.

A single woman that I know who is about my age goes out of her way to invite a little neighborhood girl who is of a different ethnic and economic background into her apartment regularly just to be a friend.

# Conclusion

At the time of the Persian Gulf war, one American city nearly turned into a war zone itself (LI-FR-PE). Demonstrators took to the streets. On one side were peace protesters, with posters, candles and peace signs; on the other side were green-bereted young people with flags and signs reading "support our troops." The chanting became jostling and yelling. The slogans became insults and the words became injuries until the police arrived and dispersed the crowd, arresting several.

After nearly everyone had left, two Quaker women arrived with brooms. They picked up the torn posters and the pop cans, swept the sidewalks clean and then they knelt to pray. They stayed there on site all night in silence, without flags, without posters, without shouts. By morning, many people were kneeling with them in unspoken prayer.

Where does fighting come from? James reminds us that it comes from selfish motives, from loyalty to this world above God, and from proud attitudes in our hearts.

Where does peace come from? It is a gift from the Spirit of God whose word purifies our motives, whose covenant calls us to loyalty to the ways of Jesus, and whose Spirit gives us humility and compassion.

Come near to God, submit to him, and he will grow you in love and make you a peacemaker.