

Impacting Our World for Christ

by BJ Rudge

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How do we effectively live for Jesus Christ in a hostile environment?

***“Let your light shine before others so they may give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”
Matthew 5:16***

As Christians we are called to impact our world for Jesus Christ. In His famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told His disciples:

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:13-16).

Jesus’ instruction to His disciples is a reminder to all of us that we have a particular purpose, function and duty to perform in this world. As salt, we are called to have a flavoring, preserving and purifying effect. As light, we are called to point others to Jesus Christ. The question before us is how to be salt and light. One good answer is to consider how the world views Christians.

Sadly, the common view is not very positive. If you asked the average non-believer on the street their opinion of Christians, you may get one of the following responses.

First, Christians are seen as judgmental. The image of people holding signs such as “God hates homosexuals” and “Repent or Perish” is often the impression the world has about followers of Jesus Christ. We are perceived as telling non-believers they are sinners and going to hell.

Second, Christians are seen as hypocritical. Believers are described as people who say one thing but do another – their actions not lining up with their words. As one bumper sticker noted, “I’ve got nothing against God. It’s his fan club I can’t stand.”

Third, Christians are often viewed as narrow-minded. Instead of being accepting and tolerant, Christians are often seen as being dogmatic and intolerant; as one person posted on Facebook, “Jesus Christ: The best excuse for a narrow-minded bigot to act like one.”

Fourth, Christians are sometimes described, especially in the media – as being ignorant; as anti-intellectual people who believe in fairy tales and myths. As comedian Bill Maher puts it, Christians [and others who are religious] suffer from a neurological disorder that “stops people from thinking.”

The apostle Paul accurately stated almost 2,000 years ago:

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Why are Christians viewed in a negative way?

We need to be mindful of the fact that we live in a fallen world which is in rebellion to God (1 John 2:15-17; 5:19). Jesus told His disciples that just as the world hated Him, it would also hate them (John 15:18, 19). The apostle John wrote, “Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you” (1 John 3:13).

Since the Fall, mankind and all of creation have been affected by the consequences of sin (Genesis 3; Romans 8:19-22). These consequences are compounded because Satan has authority over this world (1 John 5:19; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). He strives to blind people from the truth of the Gospel (2 Corinthians 4:3, 4).

The kind of tension we have as Christians within the world came to the forefront in a conversation I had with my eight-year-old son. He asked if he could watch a certain movie. Knowing the content, I told him he could not watch it. He responded that I was not being fair because his friend at school was allowed. I explained that we do not base our decisions on what other people do, but upon what the Word of God teaches. He then asked if he should tell his friend not to watch that movie because there were things in it that were bad. I told my son he could explain why he was not allowed to watch the movie, but to realize that his friend’s family lived by a different standard than ours so he should not expect his friend to agree with our view on this movie.

Just as it is with the case of my son and his friend, we need to understand that as Christians we live by different standards than the world. We are to look to the Word of God as our source of authority. In contrast, most people trust in themselves to decide what is right and wrong. Truth for them is not whether it lines up with God's Word, but rather is often dependent upon the circumstances one finds oneself in.

Besides living by a different standard, as Christians, we live for a different purpose. As citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20), we are not merely living for this life. Instead, as aliens and strangers in this world (1 Peter 2:11), we are seeking to glorify God as we wait for the day when Jesus Christ will return to establish His eternal kingdom (Revelation 20-22). In contrast, many people in the world around us live only for this life. For them, the purpose of life is not to glorify God, but to live a life of personal pleasure, enjoyment and accomplishment. Therefore, it should be of no surprise when we see the world around us engaging in behaviors that are condemned by Scripture.

Christians are also negatively viewed by the world because of false representation. While we all experience moments of spiritual failure, there are those whose actions are far removed from what Jesus taught. For example, a friend who works at a mill told me about a man who comes to work and turns on gospel music. He claims to be a Christian but uses profanity and vulgar language, and despite being married, likes to brag how he goes to the bar to "hook up" with other women. My friend said everyone at the mill looks at this guy as a joke and wants nothing to do with the Christian faith he professes. While only God knows this man's heart, his actions do not demonstrate the life of a true believer. Jesus warned, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

The sad reality is that part of the world's hatred of Christians has been brought on by Christians themselves. This is why we must be authentic in our faith! Sure, we may occasionally slip, but we need to strive every day to live a life that is pleasing before God. As Peter wrote to Christians facing opposition and persecution:

Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when He judges the world" (1 Peter 2:12).

All this being said, how do we effectively live for Jesus Christ in a hostile world environment? How can we be salt and light to impact our culture for Jesus Christ? This will be the focus of the next chapter.

Striving for Authentic Unity

“All people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.” John 13:34-35

Four essentials will impact our culture for Jesus Christ. In this article we deal with the first one: Strive for authentic unity. During the Last Supper Jesus makes this statement to His disciples:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you... By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34, 35).

When we are united and demonstrate love as brothers and sisters in Christ, we show that we truly are His followers. Unity among believers was at the core of Jesus' prayer prior to His crucifixion:

I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me (John 17:20, 21).

Authentic unity does not compromise the essentials of the faith. As a soccer coach, I realize the importance of team unity and build activities into our training to help us achieve the goals we have set. However, this unity cannot be achieved at the cost of the core values that make up who we are as a team. If we compromise them, we undermine the very purpose of what we are about.

So too, in the body of Christ, we must not compromise the core values of our Christian faith in the name of unity. Consider these words of the apostle John, which in a culture that valued hospitality, demonstrates this point:

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works (2 John 9-11).

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon was correct when he said, “To pursue union [unity] at the expense of truth is treason to Jesus.” If we want to be salt and light we must avoid compromising the fundamentals of our faith and strive for an authentic unity.

Authentic unity does not divide over non-essentials. We probably would all agree that we live in a divided world. People often segregate over issues such as race, social class, and economic status. However, this should not be true of the body of Christ. We should never allow non-essentials such as the color of our skin or the neighborhoods we live in to divide us. We need to always be mindful that we are all one in Christ Jesus:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

Authentic unity avoids gossip and jealousy toward other believers. My oldest daughter is in middle school, and often tells us about the daily “drama” of school – students gossiping and lying about one another. This may be normal behavior for the world, but it should never be normal behavior among true followers of Jesus Christ.

Sad to say, gossip has become an acceptable sin in the church today. Instead of living like the world, we should function as one body with many parts where “if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12:26). If instead of tearing one another down, we encourage and build each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:11), we will be more effective in impacting this world for Jesus.

Authentic unity reflects an attitude of humility. Humility compels us to look for ways to serve and put the needs of others – especially other believers – before our own. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:3, 4).

The greatest example of this is found in the remainder of Philippians chapter 2 – Jesus Himself. When we choose to live our lives as Jesus did, we will find ourselves being salt and light.

When I was a youth, I had the opportunity to go with my father on several missions trips to Haiti. While I was there, I developed a close relationship with a Haitian named Elage. He would often go with us when we went into the villages to share the Gospel. Despite our close relationship, we lost contact after my last visit to Haiti. Then out of nowhere, I received a message from him that he had married an American, and they would be coming through my area in the next few weeks.

When Elage walked into our house, although we had not seen each other for over 20 years, we broke into the biggest smiles as we embraced. The fact that he was Haitian and I was American, that he was black and I was white, meant nothing. All that mattered was that we were brothers in Christ who were elated to see each other again.

God desires all who love Him to strive for authentic unity so that we can demonstrate to the world we truly are His followers.

Staying Focused On Our True Mission

“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” Romans 10:15

What is the mission of every believer in Jesus Christ? Jesus clearly laid it out to His disciples before He ascended to heaven:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Like the disciples, we are called to be Jesus’ witnesses on this earth. Proclaiming the Gospel and sharing our faith in Christ is our true mission, but it’s easy to get sidetracked. One of the key issues for current discussion is the presidential election. This has taken center stage in the media and in many pulpits.

While we all agree on the importance of the upcoming election and recognize the responsibility we have as American citizens and as Christians in the political process, we must not lose sight of our true mission. The ultimate goal for the body of Christ is to reach this world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When we keep this biblical mandate in focus, we are reminded of two truths:

First, humanity’s greatest need is to be set free from sin. As the Scripture teaches, all of us are sinners (Romans 3:23) and are bound/enslaved by sin. The only solution to this desperate situation is the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf (Ephesians 1:7). Neither the political party which is in power nor the ethics of our culture can ever change our sinful hearts.

It is through the preaching of the Gospel that we are made aware of our sinful nature and realize the need to repent before our Creator. May we never forget, therefore, that sharing the good news of the Gospel is the only hope for the world's greatest need.

For whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" (Romans 10:13-15).

Second, unbelievers are not our enemies but our mission field. When we focus on preaching the Gospel, Christians are reminded that everyone is a sinner in need of God's grace. The person inside the church is no different than the person outside the church in that all of us desperately need God's grace to be set free from sin. We need to see those outside the church as people with whom we can share the very message that set us free from our former way of living. As Paul reminded the Corinthians:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Let us remain faithful to our true mission. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can bring forgiveness to the sinner and hope to our troubled world.

Living Out Our Hope in Difficult Times

“God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8

I recently read an interesting book on the theology of ISIS. One chapter in particular focused on techniques ISIS has used to recruit followers. An astrophysics student from Turkey, a computer programmer from London, a teenage boy from Southern California and two teenage girls from London serve as examples of how ISIS has been successful in drawing people from a variety of ethnic, educational and economic backgrounds.

One recruit was recorded by the FBI saying, “If you get shot, or you get killed it’s heaven straight away. Heaven, that’s what we’re here for, so why not take that route?”

How has ISIS succeeded in recruiting people to die fighting for the Islamic State? While I agree with the book’s recognition of the power of social media today, I also contend that at the core of ISIS’s success is their ability to understand the human condition. Through a propaganda campaign that anyone can have an important role in expanding the caliphate, ISIS has grown by exploiting people’s fear, anxiety, hopelessness and need for acceptance and worth.

While ISIS provides a false hope that leads to death, Christianity provides a true hope that leads to eternal life (John 3:16, 17). That true hope is first and foremost rooted in the God who loves us with a love which could not be earned. His love was rather an expression of God’s grace and mercy toward us even while we lived in rebellion to Him. As The Apostle Paul states:

God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners [enemies of God], Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

This is the Christian hope. It is not about us killing others and then dying for God, but rather about God’s Son dying for us.

The Christian hope is rooted in a God who walks with us through difficult times (Hebrews 13:5). A good friend of mine has been battling cancer for the past 11 years. The cancer has returned 12 times attacking his spine, ribs, lungs, pelvis and skull. After countless rounds of chemotherapy and radiation, he walks with a cane because his left pelvis had to be removed. To make the situation more devastating, his wife left because she could no longer handle the emotional stress. The two boys with whom he has been blessed have only known their father as being sick with cancer.

If you could speak to my friend, certainly he would admit to moments of depression, anger and fear. However, in his battle against cancer, he has remained a constant example of what it means to trust God in difficult times. He has chosen to use his situation as an opportunity to share with others the hope he has in Jesus Christ. In the midst of his pain, he has been such an inspiration and source of strength for so many. He is truly an example of how we can impact our world for Jesus Christ when we live out our hope in difficult times.

Chapter 5 – Preparing to Endure Persecution

“All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” 2 Timothy 3:12

We all are aware of the persecution going on in the Middle East where Christians have been tortured, raped and murdered by ISIS. There are also other regimes throughout the world which are hostile to Christians. While you may never experience extreme persecution, believers everywhere will face some level of persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus warned His disciples about this:

Remember the word that I said to you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you (John 15:20).

Every day we witness the truth of this statement. As Franklin Graham noted in the January 2016 issue of Decision magazine:

There now exists deep-seated antagonism and hostility toward Christianity in every seat of power in this nation—government, media, courts and education. It has become open season on Christians. Sin is openly celebrated and flaunted by the highest office in our land, and men and women of deep and sincere faith are publicly scorned.

Examples of this abound. One article reported a Christian Army Colonel being branded as a “religious extremist,” deserving discipline because on a government-run web site he recommended “increased prayer” to improve “spiritual fitness.”

As hostility and persecution against Christians increase worldwide, we wonder why God allows it. Is there any purpose for Jesus’ followers in facing persecution? Along with other reasons, I strongly believe persecution purifies and refines the church. It is an effective way

to separate those who are truly committed to Jesus Christ (wheat/sheep) from those who are merely going through the motions (chaff/goats).

The apostle Peter admonished the early Christians who were experiencing persecution and suffering for their faith:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ... For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:12-17).

I encourage you to read Foxe's Book of Martyrs. It highlights the persecution of Christians during the past two thousand years. One account concerns a Christian who faced persecution and imprisonment in the former Soviet Union. He made the following comment:

We would like an easing of our conditions, but not full ceasing of the oppression. We fear that liberty would make us lose the burning love [of Christ].

There is a cost for faith in Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:24-26). Perhaps this will come in the form of being rejected, enduring ridicule, facing hardships or even losing your life. Whatever its form, persecution will come to those who desire to impact this world for Jesus Christ:

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12).

Are You IMPACTING YOUR WORLD?

“Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death.” James 5:20

God is looking for men and women who will inspire others. People who will show, through the way they live, what it means to be totally committed to Jesus Christ, regardless of the cost. As Jesus said, “we are the light of the world,” so in all that we do we need to make sure we let our light shine before others so that they may “see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Ask yourself this question, “What am I doing right now to allow God to use me to inspire others for His glory?”

Is your life impacting this world for Jesus Christ? Are you making a difference in the lives of your family, friends, co-workers and neighbors? Maybe you are wondering how God could ever use “someone like me” to make a difference. Well, the key to being used by God is not merely based on your ability but your availability.

A friend of mine was approached one day about reaching out to someone who was going through a difficult time – facing financial problems and caught in an abusive relationship. Her first question was, “Who am I to help this man?” Yet, despite her hesitation she helped him find an apartment and furniture, and she was able to help him out of the abusive relationship. This enabled her, with her family, to begin building a relationship with him.

As the friendship grew he began to attend church. He committed his life to Jesus Christ and was baptized. On the day of his baptism he sent her a letter to thank her for all she had done to help him. My friend, who is a full-time mom, and part-time physical therapist, chose to be salt and light to this person. She never knew, until she read the letter, that on the very day she called him, he had been making final arrangements to take his life:

The day you called, I just finished writing some letters, had a long talk with my cat and was opening the bullets to make sure they were the right ones.... Fast forward to today and I will tell you that the thought of suicide never again has crossed my mind. I still question my ability and fret over things, but I am learning to let go and not waste time worrying. It is what it is, and I can stay financially low, but I am rich with people like you in my life and have now been given the gift of baptism. For me,

this is the official beginning of a new life.... Please don't take this as my everlasting pledge to you. It is a clearing of my conscience and an eternal thank you for, well...saving my life, and showing me I will have a good, new life.

My friend was willing to step outside her comfort zone to help someone in need and God used her willingness to make an eternal difference in that man's life.

Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins (James 5:20).

Just as my friend's choice made an eternal difference in someone's life, remember that you, too, can make a difference. Let us all go out and be salt and light and impact our world for Jesus Christ!

FOR MORE INFORMATION

BJ Rudge has produced numerous books, pamphlets and audio messages on a variety of timely topics. For a complete listing or a copy of his informative newsletter, visit www.billrudge.org or write to:

Bill Rudge Ministries

P.O. Box 108
Sharon, PA 16146
U.S.A.

www.billrudge.org