

“The Secular Society/The Spiritual Culture”

Mark 13:1-8

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+13:1-8)

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Spiritual Truth is still sought for in America today!

Al Winseman, an Omaha pastor, tells his congregation that “we are living in a secular society but a spiritual culture.” Indeed, America is one of the most religious nations in the industrial world, yet at the same time we are one of the most secular.

Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps predict that “the search for soul will accelerate and move from the individual and family to organizations of all sorts and sizes” (*The Age of Network Organizing Principles for the 21st Century* Essex Junction, VT.: Omneo, 1995, 232)

Jeff Woods adds a voice that should make Christians who call the church their home sit up and take notice; “Society is not disinterested in God; society is disinterested in the institutionalized church....Society has not detached itself from spirituality; it is just rebelling against the ways that the church has sought to guide spiritual experiences.” (C. Jeff Woods, *Congregational Megatrends*. Maryland: Alban Institute, 1995, p.88)

George Barna in his disturbing little book, *Revolution*, points out that the trends in church connections are drastically turning downward. In 2000 Barna reports that 65% of Christ followers find their spiritual home in a local church. By 2025, Barna projects that number to be around 33%. People will still be Christ followers, just not in an organized church.

In this media saturated, internet culture we need to listen carefully to Jesus’ words recorded in Mark’s Gospel:

“Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.” (vs.5-6) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+5:6)

Let’s affirm Jesus’ prophetic statement. He said that there would be many. He was right! And, more importantly, let’s affirm Jesus’ challenge to be discerning because many of these false teachers are slick, they sound reasonable, and they can seduce us with their well marketed message. Jesus urges you not to be deceived.

We cannot trust solely in the name of Christ for this discernment. Jesus tells us so. Just a few verses down in this chapter Jesus tells us that:

“False Christ’s and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect...” (v.22) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+22)

If we are to stay faithful to Christ Jesus, using the spiritual gift of discernment, then we will need some faithful criteria to identify truth. Let me suggest that the Scripture you read last week in the daily devotionals provided you with just such criteria. In I Samuel, Hanna taught us about the eternal, spiritual truth that God is involved with life. The Letter to the Hebrews stressed the importance of accountability and responsibility while living in God’s family. And, Mark’s Gospel reminds us of the importance of hope based in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Let’s look at each of these critical discernment truths.

Only God creates life and gives eternal life!

In I Samuel, Hannah is oppressed. She is the favorite wife who is unable to become pregnant. All the women of the village make fun of her. She prays to God out of the anguish of her situation. God answers her prayer. Samuel is God’s gift of life to an oppressed woman. In return, Hannah gives Samuel back to the Lord as she promised. In her song to God she, **“rejoices in the Lord... There is no one holy like You, Lord;... The Lord brings death and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and raises up...”**

Throughout the Bible the eternal truth of God the creator of all life is affirmed and lifted up. Our God, the Holy One, creates life. Jesus Christ affirmed life. In **John 10:10** (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+10:10), Jesus said that He came to bring abundant life for all of God's creation. In **John 14:3** (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+14:3), Jesus promised that he was preparing a home in heaven for each of God's family members. Through Jesus Christ we have eternal life. Abundant life now. Eternal life with God. "To life!" is the victorious shout of all authentic followers of Jesus Christ.

Robert Macauley, founder of AmeriCares Foundation tells of an important lesson in living life came from a waiter in an Italian monastery. On his last night in Italy Macauley spent time in conversation with the waiter. Macauley gave him some money for his family and as they looked over the bay, he asked the man about his wife and children. The waiter told Macauley he had nine children and his wife and her father and his mother living with them. Macauley asked if he had enough money to buy food for dinner that night; and the waiter told him no. And when Macauley asked if he ever felt angry or bitter about his luck in life, the waiter shook his head. "How can I be sad or bitter," asked the waiter, "when I have this beautiful view and the breeze caressing me and the flowers and the trees? To be sad or bitter when I have all this, then I would have a *core un'grato*, an ungrateful heart." (World Traveler, November, 1995)

We find God's truth when we celebrate life. There are many ways that life is denigrated in this culture. If you remember my metaphor of climbing up Grace Mountain on the narrow path, then you will be aware that the legalistic religious camp as well as the cheap grace camp can be guilty of demeaning life. I think of a Pro-life activist who murders a doctor. His cause is life. His actions bring death. I think of persons who live negative, bitter, judgmental lives. I think of persons who have no values except their own pleasure. I think of wealthy religious media personalities who live large while collecting money that supposedly goes to feed the hungry of the world. What we say; what we do; who we are; and how we live must coordinate with the Great Creator and Sustainer of life. God is the God of life and anyone who speaks God's message must speak words of life!

Authentic Christ Followers live within an accountable community.

The writer to the Hebrews encourages followers of the true Christ to:

"consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (10:24-25) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=hebrews+10:24-25)

The followers of the True Christ live within and value a community of brothers and sisters. An authentic Christ follower recognizes her/his accountability to Christ and to each other. Jesus called this community the Kingdom of God. He said that it was available to us right now. Within this community we are responsible to each other as to God. We are also accountable to each other and to God. We live within this community of God's grace as one member along with many other members. We are not individuals living for ourselves alone. We are family members. Our uniqueness as individuals grows out of our relationships in God's family.

A false Christ and a false prophet will teach opposite of this basic Biblical truth. In our culture individualism is the rampant disease. "I can do anything I wish as long as it doesn't hurt someone," else is the basic philosophy. The proponents of this anything goes religion say that anyone has a right to kill themselves as long as no one else is hurt. But, what about the family who is left behind? What about the community that is lessened? What about the implicit message to other persons.

Individualism is a myth. We are not born by ourselves. We do not grow and learn by ourselves. We do not live by and for ourselves. God created us to live in community. God's great vision for us all is that we will live within a community called The Kingdom of Heaven while we are still on this earth. As members of God's Heavenly Kingdom we will grow to be the very best persons we could ever become. God created community so that we might grow to be responsible, accountable citizens of heaven while we still live on earth.

This Biblical truth is most amply seen in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. He spent three years building a group of men and women who would change the world when he was gone. He did not invest His time in teaching the masses. He opened up the possibility of heavenly living while still on earth. Heavenly living is a community of God loved people living out and giving out God's amazing grace. Anything less than this vision is not truly of Jesus Christ.

Authentic Christ followers live with resurrection hope!

The third key characteristic of a follower of the true Christ is hope filled, daily living through the power of Jesus Christ's resurrection. In the 13th chapter of Mark's Gospel Jesus spells out the reality of the end of the earth. Let us not get side tracked with the minutia of the vision. Rather, let us hear Christ's clear trumpet call. We will all die. The created universe will end. God will call us all to account for how we lived. God's Day of Judgment will happen. Jesus says about that day:

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.” (Mark 13:32-33)

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+13:32-33)

Anyone who tells you a different message than Jesus' message is not a truth speaker! Avoid them like you avoid the swine flu! Jesus says don't waste your time attempting to determine the unknowable! Rather spend your time living in hope, sharing God's joy, and spreading God's grace.

- We can live with hope because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.
- We can face death with hope, even an ugly, pain filled death, because Jesus Christ was raised from death, even the death of the cross.
- We can live with hope knowing that God will call us to account for our lives, because Jesus Christ who is alive with God is our Attorney of record.
- We can face reality in the here and now, because Jesus Christ brings us courage and strength to face anything.

The Apostle Paul reminds us in **I Corinthians 15** (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+15) that Jesus' resurrection opens the gates of heaven for us now and after death. We do not have to earn God's love through life after life experiences. We do not have to drag ourselves over the wheel of karma through one reincarnation after another until we finally get good enough to be absorbed into the Divine Spirit. In Christ Jesus we have the gift of living and growing in a Heavenly community now and for all eternity. God's grace is available to us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We cannot earn it. We cannot be good enough to deserve it. God loves us first. God accepts us just the way we are. Our love is a response to God's love and acceptance. When we allow God's Spirit to touch us, then we are ready to grow to be the fully alive, heavenly children of the living God.

The challenge is living a Christ filled life together!

In the movie Apollo 13, the astronauts discover that they are quickly running out of breathable air. The round filter that scrubs their oxygen has reached its capacity, and the only replacement is square in shape. Responding to this crisis at mission control, the director of operations grabs a box of everything that the astronauts have available to them in their capsule (things like duct tape, socks and plastic notebook covers) and runs to a room where several engineers wait. Folks he says holding up a version of the square filter and the round receptacle, you have one hour to make this fit into this using only these materials. As you know, they succeeded.

God is challenging us in our time and place. We live in a suffocating world. People are searching for a community where their souls can grow and flourish. The true Christ has a message to this secular, individualized world that true life, true community, and resurrection hope is available. Unfortunately, Christ's message is often captured within a square building, with a 1950's style agenda, and a three hundred year old theology.

I can imagine the Director of Heaven's Mission Control is yelling out to us, "People will suffocate out there unless you can create a new way of living and sharing the true grace of God." Here at Chilson our response is "We hear your challenge!"

- Let us today commit ourselves to living the life God gives us abundantly.
- Let us commit ourselves to growing in the community of God's grace that is manifest here.
- And,
- Let us commit ourselves to sharing the hope of Jesus Christ our Risen Lord each day.

How we respond to Christ's call right here and right now makes all the difference for work and school associates, friends, family members, and neighbors who do not yet know Christ!