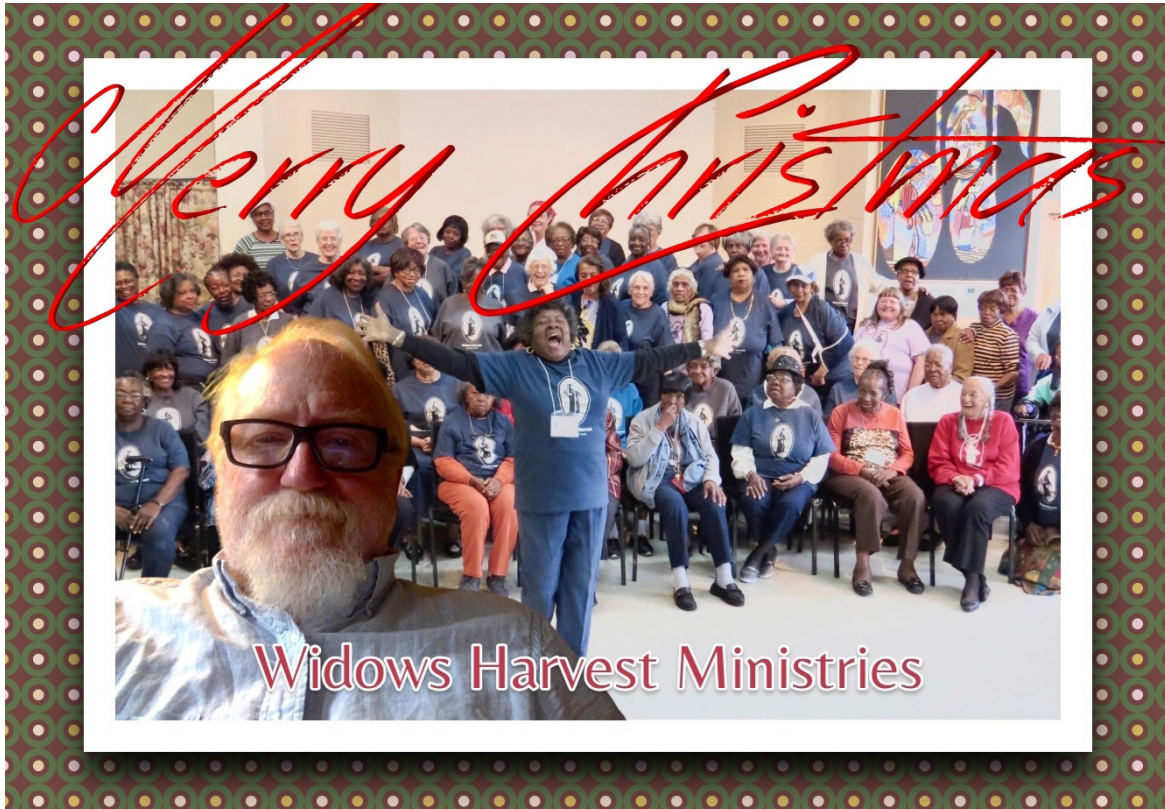




Widows Harvest MINISTRIES

In All Things Give Thanks to Our Heavenly Father In Christ Jesus Name | END-OF-THE-YEAR UPDATE 2024



End-Of-The Year Update 2024

Dear Friends and Supporters:

Widows Harvest Ministries mission statement is: "To Plead The Case Of, To Provide Assistance To and To Promote The Spiritual Growth and Ministries of Widows.

"Plead The Case of Widows"

From Isaiah 1:17 "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; *plead the case of the widow.*"

"Providing Assistance"

From I Timothy 5:3, "Give proper recognition to *those widows who are really in need*" and James 1:27 "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of (our) God and Father is this: *to visit orphans and widows in their distress*, (in order) to keep oneself unstained by the world."

“Promote the Spiritual Growth and Ministries of Widows”

From Luke 2:36-37 “There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. *She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.*” And I Timothy 5:5 “*The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help.*” And finally I Timothy 5:9-10 “*No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the Lord’s people, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.*”

EARLY HISTORY

Since Starting Widows Harvest in 1987 our mission has remained the same. Despite the pressure one feels to justify one’s existence by padding a ministry with more programs than can be effectively undertaken, the reality is most ministries, including churches are only able to do one or two things really well. The more ministry programs undertaken, the less effective they generally will be. Yet, when trying to raise support, especially when first starting out, it is often hard to resist the temptation for overinflating the number of initiatives and their outcomes. This practice is not just limited to a ministry’s early days and years of establishment, but may even continue on for many years beyond.

COST OF MINISTRY

What is ministry, though, and how much does it really cost. And what is the real measure of success according to God as opposed to man. After all God judges the heart, but man judges based on outward appearances. For instance, the size of a budget, a building and membership etc. become the measure of our success as well as a sure sign of God’s favor. And the greater each of these becomes the more this belief is confirmed. As if outward appearances, based on “material prosperity” has ever been proof of God’s blessings under the new covenant of grace. And it certainly is not an indication that those with a lot are more blessed than those with a little. We are all equally blessed because of God’s gift to us of his son, Jesus, who is now our bridegroom and savior.

In the beginning days and years of Widows Harvest, when support was coming in at less than a drizzle, not affording us the financial ability to buy those things like a copier, computer and van, that were wrongly believed to be necessities in order to effectively carry out ministry.

One day, while sitting alone and probably bemoaning the fact that the things I believed were needed, when it suddenly hit me how wrong it was for me to believe this. That the true cost of ministry is to self, and our willingness to unconditionally invest ourselves into the life of at least one other person that God places in our path.



MEASUREMENT OF MINISTRY

And the true measure of ministry success is that lives are being transformed on both sides of the equation. In other words, when it comes to being the one ministering and the one being ministered to, ministry/discipleship flows both ways. Both the served and the one serving are equally valued by God, but it is the needs of others that God puts in our path, I am convinced, that most transforms us into the character of Jesus for the ways that we grow in our unconditional love and acceptance of others. In effect always making us, as the one serving, most in need for being more Christ-like through the denial of self, regardless of how great the physical needs are of the person being served. Additionally, the one being served will be seen more as a person of equal value in God's eyes instead. Having less material wealth and means does not equal being a person of lesser value and worth. And it definitely is no measure of a persons' depth of trust and faith in God based on my experiences.

STRUGGLING WITH JEALOUSY

Another significant struggle for me in those days and years was jealousy. It was hard for me to accept, much less be happy for, when other ministries seemed to be receiving more attention and financial support than I was even though these ministries were many years older than this one. Again, in another one of those alone times I was struck by the fact that too much financial support too soon can be far more detrimental to a ministry than not enough support.

PROSPERITY TRAP

There are many reasons early financial prosperity can be a trap for ministries, especially in their early days. One reason is that we tend to measure our success and favor with God based more on financial and outwardly appearing material success. Another reason is that too much funding may be unnecessary for accomplishing God's purposes according to his timing. The temptations are just too great for veering off the path that God has been leading us down and onto paths that will eventually lead to dead ends having wasted time, energy and resources. And whatever fruit was produced (if any) would have been inferior and soon dried up and died on the vine before it could be harvested. Although, this can be particularly harmful in the formative years of a ministry, it can actually happen anytime in the life of a ministry when success is being measured by the wrong standards.

ANOTHER LESSON LEARNED

What this taught me was to never be in a hurry. Even when the needs are great of those God has called us to minister with. That in the same way an infant cannot be and cannot do what a 3 year old can do, so it is for us, especially when it comes to establishing a ministry. Before God will entrust us with more he must trust us more. "Those who can be trusted with a little, can be trusted with more, but those who cannot even be trusted with a little, what little they have will be taken away from them."

In any relationship one of the most critical dynamics that needs to be established is trust. Once trust has been broken it is hard to restore a relationship back to the way it was before it occurred. Thankfully, unlike us, God is quick to forgive even when we "break" the bond of trust that we have established with him. "He has promised to never leave nor forsake us." Yet he desires an unbroken trust relationship with us as we faithfully serve those he has called us to. And according to his will and timing the things he knows we need he will provide.

"Those who can be trusted with a little, can be trusted with more, but those who cannot even be trusted with a little, what little they have will be taken away from them."

GREATEST CHALLENGE

Perhaps the greatest challenge, though, when starting this ministry was the fact that I had never heard of another widow's ministry either in a church setting or as a non-profit operating in a city. As much as this only added to the challenge because there were no other models to learn from, I also found myself being deeply troubled by this fact especially after first reading James 1:27. Based on this passage, which is our founding verse, I just could not understand why ministries with widows were not well established and thriving ministries in every church. Especially considering there are so many programs in churches that are well established and thriving that have no scriptural basis whatsoever. Which is "why," beginning in 1987, I began a 25 + years long study of James 1:27 (culminating in a book) searching for an answer. And the answer ultimately came down to Paul's expressed fear to the Corinthian church in II Cor. 11:3 "But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ."

THE DECEPTIVENESS OF DECEPTION

As hard as it might be to believe or accept, I have long been convinced that deception is at the root and heart of the invisibility of widows. An invisibility that has resulted in their almost universal neglect by the church. Which, incidentally, was also true of Israel throughout their history right up until the time of Jesus. Of course, one of the greatest obstacles for even accepting that we might have fallen prey to deception is our own denial. That as long as the truth of the "gospel" is being preached, taught and accepted with Jesus being the only means for salvation, we have come to believe that we are deception proof. Thus, knowing and believing this truth then becomes the justification for so many other "ministry" pursuits that are often far more man inspired than God's leading. As Jesus said, quoting Isaiah in Mat. 15:7-9 "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy about you, by saying: 'This people honors me with their lips, But their heart is far away from me. And in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' "

GOSPEL JUSTIFICATION

What if the emphasis placed on the "gospel" that is taught and accepted, though, is based on a partial definition? What if the message of salvation and the mandate for each of us to share the plan of salvation with others is only part of the meaning of the word "gospel?" For one thing, it supplants everything else to the point of near exclusivity. Often compelling us out of a sense of duty or guilt to evangelize others rather than out of sincere love for others. Even evangelizing is an impure motive and as such can often become an impediment to our own transformational process towards Christ-likeness as reflections of his unconditional love for us as we serve others.

Like any gift of the spirit that has not been assigned to us by God, when we try and exercise it, there won't be much if any lasting fruit. Yet, it seems like when it comes to the gift of evangelism it is the one gift that all believers are to both exercise and prioritize almost to the exclusion of all other gifts. According to Strong's concordance (Blue Letter Bible website), the complete definition of the word "gospel" is actually, "As the messianic rank of Jesus was proved by his words, his deeds, and his death, the narrative of the saying, deeds, and death of Jesus Christ came to be called the gospel or glad tidings."

GIFT OF LOVE

Love is the one and only gift that all of us receive through Jesus that we are all equally called to share with others through acts of mercy and compassion. The commands to love God with all our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves is commanded of all believers regardless of the spiritual gifts we have been assigned, or offices we might hold. Which Paul confirms in I Corinthians 13, as any act or offering done in the absence of love is like to a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. And furthermore, after all is said and done, all that will remain is "faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love."

Interestingly, though, a Google search for the question, “Why is the gospel only defined as evangelistic and not acts/deeds of mercy,” brings up this answer: “While acts of mercy are certainly a vital part of Christian living, the “gospel” is primarily defined as “evangelical” because it refers specifically to the core message of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, which offers salvation from sin through faith, and this central message is considered the “good news” that needs to be actively proclaimed and shared with others, hence the emphasis on “evangelism.”

THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

In the “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus’ lists 9 “Blessed Are’s as: The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted for righteousness sake and the persecuted because of him.”

Then in Matthew 25 Jesus lists his criteria for separating the sheep and the goats as: “I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison,” and you responded with acts of love, mercy and compassion.

In neither list does Jesus include evangelism as a “blessed are” or a criteria for separating the sheep and the goats. Jesus own life’s example modeled for us all of these. His life’s deeds were a reflection of his spoken words. Which was in stark contrast to the lives of the religious leaders he confronted for their lives not being a reflection of their own teachings and instructions. Matthew 23:3-4, “speaking to a crowd, Jesus tells them ‘you must be careful to do everything they (religious leaders) tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.’ ”

WOE IS ME

Beginning in Matthew 23:13 Jesus launches into his “7 Woes” indictment of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees for the consequences to others for their false representation of the kingdom of God. One of the most disturbing indictments, perhaps, is found in verse 15, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.”

First, the word “hypocrites” means “a pretender, an actor under an assumed character.” One of the most common excuses often heard from unbelievers when it comes to the Christian faith is that churches are all full of hypocrites (an excuse I often used myself). The answer generally given to counter this excuse, based on my experience, was generally one of agreement that would go something like this, “Yes, churches are filled with hypocrites, but God still loves and forgives us. According to the meaning of this word, though, especially when viewed in the context of Jesus’ indictment of the religious leaders, the last thing we should be are pretenders (i.e. actors). Even though it seems to be implied that they should know better, it is doubtful that they recognize their own hypocrisies, but it is doubtful they would admit it even if they did. Based on Jesus’ own words, churches should not be filled with hypocrites, nor should we be so matter of fact in our acceptance of it.

Secondly, “how can a convert (believer) be made twice as much a child of hell as the religious leaders are?” This is something that we don’t believe can happen in the Christian faith, because the Jewish faith was based on a system of works based on obedience to the law. Not just 10 laws, but 613 laws. Those who kept the most laws were considered the greatest in the kingdom of God, and those who kept the least were considered to be the least in the kingdom of God.

Our salvation, though, is based on Jesus and only Jesus under the new covenant of grace and not the old covenant under the law. Therefore, they didn't know the same truth of salvation that we know today. So, given this difference can an equal comparison be made when Jesus had not yet fulfilled God's promise to send a savior?

TRUTH VS. TRUTH

The law was handed down by God through Moses because of Israel's transgressions in order to give them a standard for comparing what God considered sinful behavior and a life devoted to loving him and loving our neighbors with our heart, minds and souls. Perhaps, there is no better example of this than Jesus' interaction with the interpreter of the law that led up to his telling of the "Parable of the Good Samaritan." This interaction begins with the interpreter of the law asking Jesus what must be done to inherit eternal life? Jesus response, as was often the case, was in the form of a question: "What is written in the law? How do you read it (understand it)?" Then, according to Jesus, the interpreter of the law's answer was a correct one, "To love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and to love your neighbors as yourself." The interpreter of the law's response, based on Jesus' own affirmation, undeniably confirms that the truth was known for both the bases as well as the evidence by which those who have inherited eternal life will be recognized.

LEGISLATION VS LOVE ETERNAL

Love cannot be legislated and so it should never be prosecuted, at least, not in a civil court under civil authorities. Love's actions are always a choice as matters of our hearts that only God can be the judge of our motives. The interpreter of the law, though, got caught up in himself for proving to those around him that he knew the law and was, therefore, a credible religious authority and leader. Blinded by his own pride he pressed Jesus for more affirmation, which led Jesus to answer with the all too familiar "Parable of the Good Samaritan." In order to fully understand one of the key points that Jesus makes, when we read his last follow up question after this recitation, it is necessary to understand it in the context of the interpreter of the law's first question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

When Jesus asks the Interpreter of the law in Luke 10:38 "Which of these three (The Priest, the Levite and the Samaritan) do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? The expert in the law replied, 'the one who had mercy on him.'" Jesus told, 'Go and do likewise.' "

Again, the Jews were not under a covenant of Grace, but under the law, and to that end this expert in the law knew the truth of what he laid claimed was necessary in order to inherit eternal life. Similarly, we also stand on the truth today for inheriting eternal live under a covenant of grace through faith in Jesus. The issue wasn't one of ignorance of the truth, but it was one of knowing the truth without any signs that they lived it out. The same could be said for us today, essentially for the same reason.

After looking at Jesus' last question in this parable along with the Interpreter's correct answer we must then understand that both question and answer are in the context of the first question the interpreter asked. Making the real issue not one of obedience to the two commandments he cites, the issue is that those whose lives reflect acts of mercy and compassion in service to their neighbors (neighbors in the sense that they are whoever God puts in our path with a need) at the cost of our own schedules, wants and even high calling, is evidence of our genuine love for God with all our being. Acts of mercy and compassion, I might add, can't be legislated by any law, and even if it could be, it would nullify the legitimacy of our "sincere and pure devotion to God."

Love cannot be legislated and so it should never be prosecuted, at least, not in a civil court under civil authorities. Love's actions are always a choice as matters of our hearts that only God can be the judge of our motives.

Or to put it another way, selfless acts/deeds in the service of others is far more credible evidence for those who love God with their entire beings. In that our definition of “the gospel” is an incomplete one, which has led us to believe is the truer measure of our love for God with all our being, how is this any different for us today than it was for the expert in the law at the time he posed the question to Jesus what must be done to inherit eternal life?

RICH IN MERCY VS RICH IN MATERIAL WEALTH

Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:4-5 “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-it is by grace you have been saved.” If God’s great love for us is proof that he is “rich in mercy” because of his gift of life with Christ when we were dead as fallen sinful beings,” then shouldn’t our own lives, in turn, be ones that likewise desire to be rich in mercy? Based on Jesus’ own words the religious leaders in Israel, outwardly, appeared to be the greatest in the kingdom of God, but were inwardly completely bankrupt. Which is revealed to us when Jesus tells the religious leaders in Mat. 23:38, “Look, your house is left to you desolate.” God had already left the building, so to speak, and they didn’t even realize he was gone.

WIDOWS, MERCY, WORSHIP AND DESOLATION

In the OT the word “widow” mean’s “desolate,” and similarly, in the NT the word “widow” means “bereft” (of a husband). One of the meanings of the word “desolate” in Mat. 23:38 (above) “is a woman whose husband has withheld himself from her.” What Jesus is literally saying is Israel’s house has become like the widow: desolate.

One of the first, and earliest, warnings God gives to Israel concerning the treatment of widows and the fatherless is in Exodus 22:21-24 “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner for you were foreigners in Egypt. Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.”

Next, in Deut. 24:17 God tells Israel “Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge (don’t put her in debt).” And finally in Zechariah 7, God tells the prophet that he does not believe Israel’s religious observances (worship) is being done unto him and the basis for this is found in verses 7:9-10 “This is what the Lord Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’



And the consequences Israel suffers are described in verses 13-14 “ ‘When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen, (call and response) ‘ says the Lord Almighty. ‘I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers. The land they left behind them was so desolate that no one traveled through it. This is how they made the pleasant land desolate.’ “

In the same way that Israel “made the pleasant land desolate” (like the widow) in Zechariah 7, they were also responsible for “their house left to them desolate,” (Mat 23:38) for the same causes. In Mark 12:38-40 Jesus confirms this while in the temple with his disciples, “...Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. ***They devour widows’ houses*** and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

It is not a coincidence that in the verses to follow Jesus calls attention to a poor widow putting all that she had, 2 mites, into the temple treasury, when those around her were putting in out of their wealth (or surplus), but she was giving out of her “poverty.” This widow is representative of the condition of the church/bride that Jesus came to redeem as well as serving as a model of the church/bride he desires her to be once redeemed.

CONSEQUENCES

Luke’s account in chapter 21:2, where Jesus describes for his disciples what signs will precede the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple he tells them, “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near.” Which was actually fulfilled 40 years later in 70 AD when a Roman army led by Titus, a general and future emperor, destroyed much of the city of Jerusalem as well as the Second Temple.

Mar 13:14 and Mat 24:15 are cross-references for this passage in Luke 21:20. And even though the accounts in Mark and Matthew are the same, they differ from Jesus’ account in Luke, “So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel – let the reader understand...” The word “Abomination” used in the Mark and Matthew accounts means “pertaining to idolatry,” which in the context of our relationship with God is considered to be the same as adultery.

In that in all three Gospel accounts the context is the same and begins with Jesus inside the temple along with his disciples where he points out the religious leader’s heart condition that has contributed to “their house being left to them desolate,” in no small part for “devouring the widows’ houses.” Causing harm to those such as the widow whose identity is already that for being desolate, according to these 3 accounts, was a significant factor in “their own house being left to them desolate.”

SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH

The word “religion” in James 1:27, considered by God to be “pure and undefiled through the visitation of the widows and the fatherless in their distress,” is meant to be understood in the context of worship, in the same way Zechariah 7 is meant to be understood. Also in James 1:27, the word “keep” in the 2nd part of this verse, figuratively means, “to keep unmarried.” In other words, as Christ’s bride, God’s desire is for our worship to be “pure and undefiled.” When it is impure and defiled, God considers it to be adultery/idolatry, which at some point will reach a critical mass and lead to our own desolation, or “the abomination that leads to desolation standing where it should not.” And where it should not stand is with us, as the church, both individually as well as corporately. We are made holy because the Holy Spirit dwells within us making each one of us a temple of God.



It is important to note that the word “and” that precedes “to keep” is not in the original text. In some translation the word “and” is in parenthesis as an acknowledgement of this fact, but is not true for all translations. What is implied, though, especially when cross referencing this passage with I Timothy 5:8, would be the phrase “in order to.” Otherwise, when “and” is added to the second part of James 1:27, we come away with the belief that “pure and undefiled worship” is more than “visiting the widows and the fatherless in their distress.” That it includes “keeping ourselves unstained by the world.” Why would James be so specific in the first part of this verse and so ambiguous in the second part. What it means “to keep ourselves unstained by the world” is completely subjective. In fact,

there have been theological movements throughout church history that have based living out their faith in Jesus based on their beliefs for what should be included in the list of observances that will insure the “keeping ourselves unstained by the world.” Actually, all denominations and church movements, to some degree, have their own lists for living out their faith in order to “keep ourselves pure.” The exception to all these lists though, is what James tells us in the first part of this passage “the visiting of the widows and the fatherless in their distress.”

This is how I Timothy 5:8 confirms this which should leave us with no doubts for the above interpretation. . I Timothy 5:8 “Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” In the context that this is written, it is meant to include the recognition and care of widows, especially widows in both our immediate and extended families. In that I Timothy has been characterized as a “pastoral book” because of the qualifications for serving as a church leader verse 8 would also apply to church settings as well. Acts 6:1-7 would also seem to confirm this.

STEALING FROM GOD

Ephesians 2:10
“For we are
His workmanship,
created in Christ
Jesus for good works,
which God prepared
beforehand so that we
would walk in them.”

My deep and fervent prayer is that Jesus’ accusation against the religious leaders in Mat 23:13 for “making new converts twice as much sons of hell as they are” will be understood, perhaps, for the implications it might still have for us today. This is in no way meant to question anyone’s salvation based on faith in Jesus. However, being saved through faith in Jesus does not mean that we cannot be deceived. Something that Paul makes abundantly clear In II Cor. 11:1-4, when he says that not only can we be deceived, but we don’t even put up much resistance to prevent it from happening.

Not unlike the way things typically function in churches today, converts were being led to believe that a temple centered lived out faith was the same as a God centered lived out faith. They came to believe that proof of faith meant complete obedience, loyalty and support to the temple system.

When Jesus turns over the money changers tables he accuses them of “turning his father’s house of prayer to all the nations into a den of thieves.” The Money Changers and merchants are no different than the robbers in the “Parable of the Good Samaritan” nor are the religious leaders, including the Priests and the Levites. In the case of the religious leaders, though, they are not just stealing from God, but they are also stealing from the people under their care. And in turn the religious leaders, perhaps unknowingly, have also caused these same people to be guilty of stealing from God.

Much like today worship was defined based more on participation and support of temple/church centered practices to the exclusion of worship in the form of acts/deeds of mercy and compassion in the service of others as offerings that God most desires from us. Ephesians 2:10 “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” When we do not walk in them, we are withholding from God what he has already prepared for us to do. Which, in effect, means we are holding onto them for our own benefit, and as such, we are guilty of committing acts of idolatry/adultery instead.

WOMAN AT THE WELL OR WIDOW IN DISTRESS

Jesus’ encounter with the “Woman at the Well” in John 4, beginning with verse 3, provides the scriptural bases for the substantiation of the above claim. First, it is important to note that the Samaritan woman is not only a

figurative representation of Israel's spiritual condition, but she is also a widow according to the definition of a widow based on her condition and not the circumstances that brought it about. In other words, what scripturally defines a widow is not whether her husband died or divorced her, but on her condition for being bereft of or without a husband. She, in fact, had been married 5 times and the man she was with was not her husband, which is not unlike Israel who was repeatedly divorced by God for her unfaithfulness. And finally, the Samaritan woman serves as another example, much like the widow in the temple who gave all that she had, for being a representation of the church/bride that Jesus came to redeem.

It is not until verse 4:20, though, that "worship" is brought up in their conversation and surprisingly she is the one that brings it up: "Our ancestors worship on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus' response is profound, and yet, seemingly overlooked or misunderstood. "Woman," Jesus replied, 'believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.' "

What Jesus is saying is that worship will no longer be identified and reduced to a specific time and/or place, but should be anywhere and everywhere at any time and any place. That the worshipers God desires are those who will worship him in "spirit and truth." What is, perhaps, one of the most important takeaways from Jesus' statement is that his encounter with the woman at the well is an actual illustration for us of what worship in "Spirit and truth" looks like. Which is neither in a church/temple during a "worship" service, nor are any of the practices that we have come to believe is "worship" that God desires a part of this encounter.

WORSHIP OUTSIDE THE WALLS

The author of Hebrews, in chapter 13 verses 13-16, put's it as plainly as one might imagine that worship in Spirit and truth is to be just as Jesus reveals with both his words and his actions to the Samaritan woman: "Let us, then go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise-the fruit of the lips that openly profess his name (thank offerings). And do not forget to do good and to share with others for with such sacrifices God is pleased (deed offerings).

What differentiates the book of Hebrews from other books, like Ephesians is that it was written to Jewish converts, whereas, Ephesians was written to gentile converts.

Which explains why the language that is used as well as the subject matter is specific to their cultural orientations and history. For instance, the word "sacrifices" used in Hebrews 13:15 is terminology that Jews would have understood in the context of their Jewish faith. Likewise, in Ephesians the gentile converts would have had no context for understanding an application for the word "sacrifice," so Paul (who did understand it) wisely substitutes the word "works".

And if we do not understand sacrifices/works/deeds in the context of worship as offerings being offered up to God outside of a "worship service," then we may not fully understand the implications for us in James 2:17-22, "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one

God. Good! Even the demons believe that and shudder. You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.’ “

WRAPPING UP

Again, the word “gospel” includes both the “deeds and death” of Jesus equally. Placing our faith in Jesus based on his death and resurrection means that our lives going forward should then be an accurate reflection of Jesus’ own life deeds: Serving and not being served and thinking as highly of others as he did of himself. With a particular focus on family, both biological as well as those we are spiritually bonded with through Christ, including as a priority the widows and the fatherless.

Perhaps our failure to understand this, at least in part, has caused many of us as Jesus’ betrothed to focus more on the condition of our nation rather than on ourselves as the Church. Which has led many to the conclusion that our nation and the Church are considered by God to be the same. That it is a nation’s guilt for certain practices, though, that will ultimately be the cause of all of our downfalls. Therefore, it is up to us, as the Church, to attain positions of political power in order to stave off what is believed to be God’s impending judgment.

Why is it, I wonder, as Christians we seem to have far more concern for the condition of our nation than we do for the Church, or even ourselves for that matter? Especially when we look to Jesus’ as our model whose concern was for “The Church” and its leaders and not the state and its civil authorities. At the time Jerusalem was under Roman occupation and the persecution of Jews was an everyday occurrence. Yet, Jesus never utters a word about the Romans or their occupation and persecution. In fact, the only time anything is brought up about the civil authorities is when he is asked about paying taxes and replies “render unto Caesar what is Caesars.”

Jesus tells the religious leaders that “their house has been left unto you desolate,” and they alone were responsible, not Rome or any of Rome’s appointed representatives that ruled over them. When the unseen desolate condition of Israel’s house becomes a reality 40 years later which is evidenced when the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is carried out by the Roman army, Rome does not also become desolate. In fact, by “350 AD 56% of the Roman Empire were Christian,” which was 40% per decade”. And until Christianity was made a legal religion by the Emperor Constantine, a Christian convert, in 312 AD the Church was forced to operate underground. And yet it thrived and increased in numbers because of their ongoing worship being offered up through acts of mercy and compassion.

I find myself asking more and more every day, why we as the Church are no longer known for being rich in mercy and compassion demonstrated through acts of love for our neighbors, but are instead far more known for our political pursuits, which are perceived as being void of mercy and compassion. Or to put it as Paul did in I Corinthians 13, that all such pursuits, in the absence of love he likens them to “a noisy gong, or clanging symbol.”

Do we really recognize the log in our own eye as the church? Have we so blurred the lines between the Church and our nation that we see them as being the same? That when it serves our purposes we stand on the Constitution of our

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nation even if it conflicts with what we know to be true based on Jesus own words and life's example? It is as if we have come to a time and place where the Constitution and the Bible have equal authority. Even if we don't confess it to be the case, our actions/deeds would indicate otherwise.

Finally, why do we continue to overlook and, thus, discount the significance of Jesus' last act on the cross before he breathed his last breath, which was to place his own widowed mother in the care of John, the disciple whom he loved? And equally so, in Acts 6, when the minority Greek widows were being left out of the daily distribution of food and an immediate response was carried out by the Apostles?

The answers to both of these questions should really be obvious, but the fact that they are not is why this ministry exists. It is also why I have devoted 37 years of my life serving with widows as well as having spent over 25 of those years in the study of James 1:27. It has all been in the hope that these answers will one day become so abundantly obvious that they will need no prompting or reminders, because they will have become our way of life as a matter of worship. Until then the prayers of the widows will continue to be for the Church to be the "pure and undefiled bride" that God desires her to be.

Humbly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andy Mendonsa', followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Andy Mendonsa
Director