

God's First Responders

Luke 5:12-16

(Discussion Guide pg. 11)

Have you noticed that people seem to be more socially isolated today than ever before? According to a study by Cigna, forty percent of “survey participants” reported they sometimes or always feel that their relationships are not meaningful and that they feel isolated.

(www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation)

A professor of psychology and neuroscience involved in this research explained that “such numbers are alarming because of the health and mental health risks associated with loneliness. According to her research, the lack of social connection heightens health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or having alcohol use disorder.

(*Perspectives on Psychological Science* , Vol. 10, No. 2, 2015).

The professor concludes: "Regardless of whether loneliness is increasing or remaining stable, we have lots of evidence that a significant portion of the population is affected by it. Being connected to others socially is widely considered a fundamental human need—crucial to both well-being and survival."

Now, when you study the life of Jesus, you will find that He not only got close to people to heal them physically and spiritually, but people who were social outcasts saw something in Jesus that gave them confidence to get close to Him.

Keep in mind, that although Jesus was moved by the physical needs of others, meeting physical needs was not the primary focus of His mission. Jesus came from heaven to earth in the flesh to respond to a much greater call, namely to give His life so that people can be reconciled to God.

In light of this, I want to suggest to you that Jesus was heaven’s original first responder. As you know, a first responder is a person, like a police officer or an EMT, who is authorized, responsible, and equipped to respond to an emergency and render aid.

What's unique about a first responder is that in addition to being specially trained, they are called upon to do the opposite of what the average person will instinctively do in an emergency. When gun shots are heard or a house is on fire, the average person will run away from the danger, whereas a first responder will run to the danger to rescue people.

So, what I want us to consider this morning is that like a first responder serves society, God has ordained believers to be His first responders of mercy to a world in spiritual crisis.

Main idea: Christians are equipped through intimacy with Christ to be His first responders to a world in spiritual crisis.

To unfold this theme, we are going to learn from Jesus some lessons about being God's first responders in a world of hurt.

1. God's first responders are inclusive

The first lesson I want us to learn about God's first responders is that they are **inclusive** and non-discriminate in responding to people in crisis.

Notice how Jesus responded to a man in desperate need:

“While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” 13 And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him.” Luke 5:12-13

This leper, who in desperation came to Jesus, was in the advance stages of the disease of leprosy. He was full of leprosy. And in Jesus' day a person with visible leprosy not only suffered great physical limitations, but they suffered from social isolation.

It's important to note that leprosy and how it impacted those affected by it is a picture of the spiritual disease of sin that has affected every man.

Apart from Christ, man has an inner condition, a rotting away of the soul, an internal malady called sin that only Jesus can take away. Unless we've been touched by the cleansing power of Jesus, we are alienated from the life of God and without hope in this world.

Now, did you know that although the disease of leprosy causes horrific outward physical deformities, the rotting flesh is a symptom of the disease? Leprosy, or Hansen's disease, as it is better known today, is a disease that attacks the body's ability to feel pain.

"The disease," explains one commentator, "acts as an anesthetic, bringing numbness to the extremities as well as to the ears, eyes, and nose. The devastation that follows comes from such incidents as reaching one's hand into a charcoal fire to retrieve a dropped potato, or washing one's face with scalding water, or gripping a tool so tightly that the hands become traumatized and eventually stump-like. In Third-World countries, vermin sometimes chew on sleeping lepers... The poor man in our story had not been able to feel for years, and his body was full of leprosy, mutilated from head to foot, rotten, stinking, repulsive." Kent Hughes

So those were his physical debilities, but, as I mentioned earlier, that was not his only problem. To compound his physical debilities, he also suffered from social isolation.

According to Leviticus 13:45-46, a leper was considered unclean. Anyone who came into contact with a leper would also be considered unclean.

Therefore, a leper was excluded and ostracized from society, which would include his loved ones. They were made to live outside the community. And even more humiliating, whenever a leper saw people off in a distance coming in his direction, he was to cry out, "unclean, unclean."

One can only imagine the emotional trauma, humiliation, and loneliness that he must have felt in his life. He was desperate not only for physical healing, but to be loved and embraced by others.

But none of that seemed possible; that is until he heard about Jesus. He heard that Jesus not only had the power to rescue him from his crisis, but the inclusionary mercy that compelled Him to do so.

Normally when a person approached the leper, he would cry unclean, unclean and the person would run away. But when this leper saw Jesus coming, when he saw His loving countenance and the look of mercy in His eyes, he didn't shout unclean. Instead, he fell on his knees and said:

“Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”

And while others would have turned away in disgust, we read in Luke 5:13: *“And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.”*

On September 11, 2001, the day when the United States suffered the worst terrorist attack in its history, approximately 3000 people tragically lost their lives. Most of those deaths occurred at the world trade center, where the twin towers collapsed.

Of the almost 3000 victims killed, 412 were emergency first responders. This included 343 firefighters, 60 Police officers, and 8 emergency medical technicians and paramedics from private emergency medical services.

Let me ask you, when the firefighters were climbing up the stairs of the twin towers to rescue those trapped on the top floors, as civilians were coming down the stairs, what were they thinking about the victims that needed rescue?

Were they thinking about their race? Were they thinking about whether they were bankers or bakers or whether they were Muslim,

Jewish or Catholic? Were they thinking about whether they had criminal backgrounds or not?

No! Their mission, which required urgency, was to rescue whosoever and whomever they could reach before it was too late.

“A first responder,” says Paul Tripp, “doesn't enter a burning building to judge the residents for starting the fire. A first responder doesn't enter a burning building to critique how the residents could have exited safely on their own. No, a first responder risks everything on a mission of rescue. They're employed to save those who can't save themselves...Now, don't misunderstand mercy. Mercy doesn't turn a blind eye to sin, nor does it accept moral failure and rebellion as okay. Rather, mercy drives first responders to run towards the person who needs rescue, rather than away from them.”

Beloved, God's first responders don't just do what they do out of a sense of duty. They are moved by the mercy of God that they have personally experienced. And God like mercy doesn't just reach out to people who we think deserve it. Our mission is to non-discriminately seek to rescue whomever God puts in our path in a crisis, especially the kind caused by the ruin of sin.

You see, the greatest crisis in our world is the problem of sin which entered through man's decision to rule their own lives. Many in our world are lovers of self, more than lovers of God. They're captive to pornography, greed, and prescription drugs. Their marriages have been devastated by marital infidelity. Because they're living to please themselves, their lives have no meaning or purpose. They're filled with bitterness, anger, and hate. Worst of all, they are on a wide road to eternal destruction. It's just a matter of time.

Therefore, God has spiritually deputized believers to be His first responder of mercy on earth. And we are not to require lost people to clean up their act first before we show them the kindness and mercy of God. We are to meet people where they are no matter how complicated their lives may be and seek to bring them to the rescuing grace of Jesus Christ.

“What attracted Jesus to people was not how attractive they were or how well off they were or what they could do for Him. No, in any crowd, Jesus walked past multitudes to the person who had the greatest need. Are you like that? One of the measures of how much your heart is becoming like your Master's is how much your heart is moved and how attracted you are to the people who are hurting the most.” Ron Hutchcraft

2. God's first responders get involved

Secondly, like Jesus, God's first responders are not only **inclusive**, they get **involved**. Remember that after the hopeless leper cried out to Jesus for cleansing, in verse 13 we read:

“And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him.” Luke 5:13

As I've noted before, Jesus could have with a word alone cleansed the desperate man without making any physical contact. But instead, He choose to stretch out His hand of mercy to personally touch the leper.

Why did Jesus take the time to physically touch him? He wanted him to know that although no one seemed to care, He cared. With His touch He was saying, "although others won't have anything to do with you, I'm here for you, I'm with you, and I love you."

Can I ask you a question? Who are you personally reaching out to and seeking to touch with the mercy and love of Jesus? And I'm not just speaking about your loved ones.

Jesus said, *“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”* (Matthew 5:46).

Do you seek to personally get involved in the lives of people who need to know through your witness and physical presence that although no one seems to care, God cares?

Sometime ago I heard this story from a newspaper about a soldier who fought in Vietnam. When his tour was over he called his parents as he was making his way back from the war. He said, "Mom and dad, I'm coming home, but I need you to do me a big favor. I have a friend who fought with me that I want to bring home to stay with us for a while." His parents responded, "Sure son, we would love to meet him. And the son said, "Before we come, there's something that I believe you need to know. While in the war, my friend stepped on a "land mine" and lost an arm and a leg. He has nowhere else to go and I want him to come stay with us." "I'm sorry to hear that son, but maybe we can find somewhere else for him to live." "No mom and dad. I want him to live with us." The father said, "Son you don't know what you're asking. A person with such a handicap can be a terrible burden to us. We have our own lives, we are getting older and we can't allow something like this to interfere with our lives. I think you should just come home and forget about this guy. He will find a place to live on his own. But we can't inconvenience everyone." At that point they hung up the phone and the parents heard nothing more from him.

However, a few days later they received a call from a Police Department that their son had committed suicide. The grief-stricken parents flew to the city where their son had taken his life. When they arrived, they were directed to the city morgue to identify the body of their son. The last time they saw him was a few years before when he went off to the war.

They looked at the body of their son and were able to positively identify him. But to their horror they also discovered that he was the one without an arm and without a leg.

Beloved, we live in a world where there are people that because of the consequences of personal sin or even circumstances beyond their control, feel like lepers. They feel alone, isolated, and without hope in this world.

And as heaven's first responders, our merciful Father wants them to know through our personal witness that no matter where they find

themselves today, God can turn their **awful tragedy of sin**, into an **awesome testimony of salvation**.

But to do so, we must do more than talk about God's mercy, we must selflessly and sacrificially get involved. Or like a Pastor friend of mine said, "We must get in their mess."

"We will never affect others as Christ did," says Kent Hughes, "unless there is contact and identification. We have to be willing to take the hand of those whom we would help. Sometimes a touch, caring involvement, will do a thousand times more than our theology. This is what all churches need to do. We are great in theory. We are careful about our doctrine. But we need to lay our hands on some rotting flesh in our neighborhood, in the place where we work, in the city streets. We cannot expect this to be only the job of missionaries because a church that does not regularly place its hand on the rotting humanity around it will not be sending missionaries to do so either." Kent Hughes

3. **God's first responders are intimate**

Finally, God's first responders are not only **inclusive** and **involved**, they are **intimate**. After Jesus cleansed the leper, He gave him some very clear and intentional orders:

"And he charged him to tell no one, but "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them." ¹⁵ But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. ¹⁶ But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray." Luke 5:14-16

In Mark's gospel, which also records the healing of the leper, we learn that he didn't obey Jesus' charge not to tell anyone about his healing, except the priest. And because of this, as we read in verse 15, great crowds gathered around Jesus. Some wanted to hear Him, and others wanted to be healed of their infirmities.

You know, the charge that Jesus gave to the cleansed leper can be confusing. It can be confusing because as Christians we are called to tell people about what Jesus has done for us.

So why did Jesus charge the leper not to tell anybody He healed him? It appears Jesus knew that when the word got out, He would be mobbed by people seeking a physical miracle, rather than to hear His message of salvation. Again, Jesus' main mission, the purpose for why He took on flesh, was to reconcile sinners to God.

The highest gift of salvation is not physical healing, which is not guaranteed for believers this side of heaven. The highest gift is an intimate relationship with God that gives us peace and transforms us from the inside out.

This is also why Jesus wanted the cleansed leper to tell no one but the priest only and give an offering as proof of the cleansing He received. Remember, the greater purpose for why Jesus performed miracles was to authenticate that He was the Son of God who had power to forgive sins and reconcile penitent believers to God.

Notice also that after pointing out in verse 16 that many were coming to Jesus for healing, Luke records: *"But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray."* Luke 5:16

Jesus was not being anti-social. Neither did His actions of retreating to desolate places mean He didn't care about the people coming to Him for physical healing. Jesus loved people and during His earthly ministry He made time to cultivate intimate relationships with His followers, men and women.

Jesus intentionally retreated from the crowd so that He could be ministered to in the presence of God. Remember, "the great work that Jesus did in His ministry did not draw on the resource of His divine nature, but on His constant communion with God the Father and His empowering by God the Holy Spirit. The time in a desolate place was essential for that." Guzik

“In Luke’s gospel in particular, John Mark Comer observed, “you can chart Jesus’ life along two axis points: the busier and more in demand and famous Jesus became, the more He withdrew to His quiet place to pray.” John Mark Comer

And if we desire to make an eternal difference in this world, the same must be true in our own lives. No matter how busy we may be, it is essential for God’s first responders to frequently pray and commune with the Father in silence and solitude. Our service will have the touch of Jesus only if it is the outflow of intimacy with God.

You know, in my 20 years of service as a Police Officer in Chicago, I learned first-hand that the most effective first responders are those who are intentional about getting better equipped to do the job they swore to do.

A career first responder, who’s also a Christian, elaborates: “[Effective] first responders are *habitual trainers*. Our training schedule is rigorous and it requires us to retreat from those we serve, at least long enough to acquire and refine the skills necessary to do the job. We usually begin with an intensive introductory training period (an academy or certification process), followed by regularly scheduled updates. Over the next twenty-five to thirty years, we’ll spend thousands of hours training, separated from the very community we are sworn to serve. Our training sets us apart, but it doesn’t alienate us from the culture. Just the opposite: this regular separation only *better* equips us to be *in the world*. An untrained first responder only makes a difficult situation more dangerous.”

Similarly, to be equipped as God’s first responders, we need to retreat alone and together so that we can better serve a society in crisis. We need to be part of the life of the church. We need to be in committed and accountable relationships with other believers so that we can serve, strengthen, and encourage one another in the Lord.

Conclusion

If you're a follower of Jesus, you're one of heaven's first responders. As such, you have been strategically assigned to respond to people in crisis on your beat—in your circle of influence. You're in the best position to reach them, to love them, to listen to them, to encourage them, to pray with them, and to help get them to the spiritual hospital, the church, where they can find more trained help. But you are their first responder.

Again, to be effective, we must, as Jesus did, be intentional about retreating to commune with God alone and with God's people to be renewed, to report for duty, and to be equipped. As we seek His face and behold His glory, we take on His heart—we receive His eyes of mercy to look beyond the mess of people's lives and see instead their grace potential. What's more, in His presence, we receive grace and guidance to get involved in the lives of people who desperately need the touch of Jesus.

God's first responder will be the first on the scene. Jesus' mission of rescue begins with you!

Discussion Guide

Read Luke 5:12-13.

- How does Leprosy picture the problem of sin?
- How is Jesus' healing of the leper an example of how believers today are to be His first responders to a world in spiritual crisis?
- What are some qualities of a first responder (like those who perished on 911) that are characteristic of God's first responders?

Read Luke 5:13.

- Why did Jesus physically touch the leper who wanted to be healed?
- How can we show people who may feel abandoned, hopeless, and unforgivable the kindness and mercy of Jesus?
- Are you seeking to personally get involved in the lives of people who need to know through your witness and physical presence that although no one seems to care, God cares? Why or why not?
- Why is personal presence, contact, and identification vital in reaching people for Christ?

Read Luke 5:14-16.

- At a time when people in great number were coming to Jesus for healing and His fame was increasing, why did Jesus withdraw to desolate places?
- Why did Jesus tell the cleansed leper not to tell anyone that He healed Him, except for the Priest?
- What do these actions teach us about being effective first responders for Christ?
- How can we be more effective as God's first responders to a world in spiritual crisis?