

Week Seven Reading

HOLISTIC



OR

Consider a useful, but all-too-often dangerously misapplied, little word. Consider...

OR

Yes, we need it...

Do you want to travel to this city OR that city?

We can't be in two places at the same time.

Do you want to marry this person OR that person?

We can't marry both people, at least not legally.

Do you want to have a child OR not?

We can't get pregnant and not get pregnant at the same time.

Or is a needed and important little word. Life has its moments of distinction, times when choices must be made, and those choices are mutually exclusive. Danger arises, though, when we carelessly apply the little *OR* word and create a false choice.

Do you want to be honest OR do you want to make money?

Must we make a choice? Can we not find a way to do both?

Is our company about quality OR quantity?

Maybe sometimes this choice must be made, but certainly not always.

Do you like this friend OR that friend?

Really? Can't we like both?

It's not uncommon to misapply *OR*. Choices are presented, and at first glance, the choices feel absolute. The wise detect false choices. They see how they are embedded in habit, culture, and expectations. They also recognize that our own dispositions have propensities toward certain desires, and we then take these propensities and make them absolute. We take a preference and turn it into a choice. Such thinking is dangerous in many settings, but it is especially dangerous in the body of Christ.

TRUE SERVICE

Consider service, the meeting of needs. What does it look like to *truly* love and serve another person? This question seems straight forward enough, but apply it to a specific scenario.

HOLISTIC

The woman stands at the intersection holding a tattered sign. Her eyes are fixed on seemingly nothing. The sign speaks of hungry children and a willingness to work, but children are not in sight, and the cup in her hand makes it clear she's asking for money.

What does she need? How might we love her? What would true service look like to this woman in need? No doubt her needs are abundant, but what would truly help her?

She needs a job! She needs dinner! She needs a way to put a roof over her head and food on the table! Does she have the skills to work? If no, she needs training; and if yes, she needs opportunity. Does she lack motivation? She needs encouragement. Is she lonely? She needs someone to befriend her, to be an advocate for her, to talk with her and listen to her. Clearly, this woman is in a predicament, and her needs are readily apparent.

So, let's say we do all that. Let's say we step in, and to our surprise, she responds. Let's say she gets the training, gets the job, gets off the street, and gets it all together. We didn't expect that she'd really do all that, but she does. It takes time, maybe months, or more likely years, but she responds to our encouragement and advocacy. Then what? Is she okay? Is all well in her world? Did we truly serve her?

Maybe, but let's say we did all that and never addressed her soul. Let's say she gets the job and gets off the street, but she continues to curse her Creator. Let's say time passes, and she really did make changes, but let's say it ends. She ends. She gets cancer, and in a matter of months, she's gone. Yes, she got off the street and became a fully-functioning member of society, but she never truly trusted God; and to be perfectly honest, we never really talked to her about it. What then? Did we truly serve her?

Let's not stop with that. Let's flip it around and make it a bit more challenging. Rewind the story, and let's do this differently. Let's say we don't get her training, don't get her a job, don't get her off the streets, and don't help her become a fully-functioning member of society. Let's say we avoid all that, and rather than engage those physical needs, we engage her in conversation. That conversation turns to spiritual matters, and ultimately the woman entrusts herself to Christ. Even more, let's say all indicators are that her choice is genuine. She breaks an addiction to drugs, she gets baptized, she gets involved in a church, and she herself even reaches out to other hurting people. She does all of this, but let's say she never gets the job-thing figured out. She makes zero progress on this and continues to bounce from shelter to shelter and is perpetually dependent upon others. She never breaks out of this, and to be perfectly honest, we never attempt to help her with this. We don't talk with her about job training; we don't give her guidance, support, and encouragement in these matters. We pray with her. We help her discover the grace of God. We don't dirty ourselves with day-to-day matters, though. We keep things spiritual. What then? Did we truly serve her?

PROPENSITY

Let's make an observation. It's admittedly oversimplified, but let's make it anyway. There's truth in it that's helpful to note. The observation is this...

Some have a propensity toward physical service.

Others have a propensity toward spiritual service.

Those with a propensity toward physical service like to meet tangible needs. They want to fix the person's car or make her a meal. They want to roll up their sleeves, get their hands dirty, and really help people. They'll build wells, supply medicine, and construct housing. Yes, they may recognize the need for spiritual and emotional matters, but they don't want to wade too deep into these waters.

HOLISTIC

They'll leave that to others, and to be honest, that other stuff doesn't feel like *real* service. They're meeting *real* needs, *tangible* needs, needs that are going to better a person's life in the moment.

Those with a propensity toward spiritual service take a different approach. They want to teach, to pray, and to heal. They want to help people discover the love and grace of Christ. They want to take people into the depths of Scripture and help them experience the liberating presence of the Spirit of God. Yes, they may recognize the need for physical service—matters of food, drink, and shelter—but they're frustrated by the distraction of temporal needs in the face of such significant and eternal matters. They're meeting *real* needs, *lasting* needs, needs that are going to better a person's eternity.

So which is it? How are we to make a difference? Which is the real act of service the body of Christ is called upon to engage? Are we to focus on physical acts of service OR are we to focus on spiritual acts of service?

PAUL

Hear carefully how Paul described his work.

This grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. (Ephesians 3:8-9)

Paul's work was profoundly spiritual. Among other things, he was a teacher. He sought to bring clarity to a mystery. He traveled the known world to make known the "*unsearchable riches of Christ*." In another place, Paul tells the Corinthians,

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Here as well, Paul's work is described in deeply spiritual terms. He's working as Christ's ambassador urging the Corinthians to "*Be reconciled to God*." This man understood the spiritual and eternal implications of remaining unreconciled to God, and he worked tirelessly to help others discover the grace available to them through Christ.

Considering the spiritual weight of Paul's work, it would be easy to conclude that he did not concern himself with physical matters. How could this man who traveled the world proclaiming the mysteries of Christ, a man who worked night and day to draw people's attention to eternal and spiritual matters, have time and energy to concern himself with more immediate needs like poverty and hunger?

Listen to a letter from Paul to the church in Corinth:

Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me. (1 Corinthians 16:1-4)

Paul is bold. He asks the church in Corinth to set aside weekly donations that will then be sent to Jerusalem. Why? What is Paul doing? Clarity is gained by another letter written by Paul, likely at a later date. Hear carefully what he says to the church in Rome.

I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. (Romans 15:25-26)

HOLISTIC

Did you catch that? First, Paul writes to the church in Corinth asking that on a weekly basis they set money aside to send as gifts to Jerusalem. He then writes the church in Rome letting them know that he is on his way to Jerusalem because the churches in the regions of Macedonia and Achaia—which includes the church in Corinth—had made contributions “*for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.*”

With all that in mind, consider Paul’s commitment to poverty relief. Not only was he an active advocate for the poor in Jerusalem—it’s believed Jerusalem was experiencing a famine at this time—but he willingly traveled back to Jerusalem to deliver their support. This is a walking distance of about eight hundred miles, or a treacherous sail through the tumultuous Mediterranean Sea. This man whose passion it was to preach the “*unsearchable riches of Christ*” worked tirelessly, at great personal sacrifice, to make a highly practical difference in the lives of those hurting in the most physical of ways.

Could Paul have just prayed for the people in Jerusalem? Could he not have said, “Yes, that’s a need but not my calling”? He had plenty to do. He didn’t need a broader job description. God had made it clear that it was his role to take the good news of Christ to the Gentiles. Wouldn’t a trip back to Jerusalem be a major distraction from his primary calling? And yet, we don’t sense any hesitation from Paul. Paul’s work served both spiritual and physical needs.

In a word, Paul’s love was *holistic*.

HOLISTIC

People have needs. Injustice abounds. Oppression flourishes in countless ways. Some are oppressed by poverty. Others are oppressed by abuse. Circle the globe and find countless people oppressed by dark and self-serving political regimes. The authentic follower of Christ is a liberator, a freedom fighter, a lover of those in need. John stated this plainly.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:16-18)

The cross of Christ is not only our salvation, but it is also our example. To love our neighbor means that we actively engage the world around us by making a highly practical difference in the lives of others. We are exhorted to “*Love [our] enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Matthew 5:44). This love and passion will, at times, be of a more spiritual nature...

We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Those who follow Christ will risk ridicule and, in some places of the world, persecution to tell others about Christ. Peter’s exhortation to the church states this well.

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3:15)

We are called to give reason for the hope that we have, and we are to do this with gentleness and respect. To shrink from this, or to ignore this, is to minimize for others and to mislead others from the most profound opportunity availability to humanity, the opportunity to know and walk with our God.

But that’s not all we are to do. When speaking of these very things, Jesus predicted a day when his followers would stand before him and hear him say,

HOLISTIC

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Matthew 25:35-36)

This will be followed by some confusion...

Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? (Matthew 25:37-39)

To which Christ will respond...

I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. (Matthew 25:40)

It's as if he's saying, "That widow you served, she is my daughter. I created her and delight in her. To love my daughter is to love me. And that impoverished man that you fed, he is my son. I created and crafted him. I love him and to love him is to love me."

The love mandate is not satisfied with "this OR that" kind of love. The love mandate propels our passion to simply meet needs—all of them.

Which can be a bit daunting, and leads to a critical distinction.

HARMFUL HELPING

Consider a self-evident reality. Physical needs will at times be more deeply rooted than the physical problem of finances or food. The person asking for food or money may in fact need food or money, but it's not uncommon for there to be deeper needs driving the presenting need. This is not to say that there are no victims and that physical needs are always of a person's own doing. Such sweeping perspectives are grossly misguided. But it is to say that there are times this is true, and that what a person may need is not just guidance for his next meal, but proverbial wisdom, or even loving correction. Paul made this clear when we wrote the Thessalonians.

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." (2 Thessalonians 3:10)

The follower of Christ is called to meet both spiritual and physical needs, to serve holistically, but this could be misrepresented to make us think we are to meet every request, or that we must serve foolishly and without regard to discerning real issues. Yes, we sacrifice, but true service, loving service, is done with the whole person in mind. The oppressed may simply need a meal, but not so the lazy or irresponsible. These will need loving correction or proverbial guidance. The body of Christ is called to sacrifice, but is not called to support and enable foolishness. Acts of service that disregard this, as well meaning as they may be, run the risk of doing more harm than good and leaving people in perpetual dependency. Such actions are neither wise nor truly loving.

For some, this is the loophole for which they are searching in an effort to justify their exclusively "spiritual" service. Those with physical needs are viewed as lazy and irresponsible, and practical help is consistently withheld. Such thinking is unfortunate and misguided. True service, holistic service driven by love, will not look for a way out but a way in, which will no doubt lead to circumstances where the person doing the serving is in way over his or her head. They are in a situation beyond their capacity, and they're uncertain if they're able to truly do much good. It's at this place that we discover the strength of body-life.

HOLISTIC

THE BODY OF CHRIST

Consider Paul's approach to poverty in famine-stricken Jerusalem. What does he do to bring relief to the problem? Does he dig into his own purse? It's likely that he did. But does he carry this burden alone? Not at all. Rather, he rallies the larger body of Christ. Collectively, the churches throughout the Macedonia and Achaia are able to make a contribution worthy of Paul trekking all the way back to Jerusalem to deliver it. Fund-raising and poverty relief may or may not have been directly related to Paul's giftedness, but he still leaned heavily into the larger body of Christ.

By engaging the body of Christ, our own service is not limited to our own gifts, which underscores the critical nature of full participation. A person marginally connected to the body of Christ is not able to marshal other aspects of the body of Christ with much effectiveness. It is the person who truly engages who is more fully aware of the resources available. Participation in the body of Christ is not defined by periodic attendance at a weekly worship service. Participation in the body of Christ is people relationally engaged so they are not only able to call upon the organizations of the church, but they are able to do ministry with those they truly know.

Reluctance to engage the needs that surround us diminishes as we are increasingly familiar with the opportunity presented by the body of Christ and its many participants. If we're alone, our limitations are blaring, so why reach out? But when we collectively pool our experience, giftedness, and resources, we discover a powerful opportunity. No longer is our service limited to the dimensions of our own resources. Our service can work collectively with others to bring the holistic service we genuinely would like to bring.

Which underscores the unique opportunity found in the body of Christ.

UNIQUELY EQUIPPED

Consider again our scenario above, the woman holding the sign on the side of the road. Because we have either been this person or interacted with this person, we know the high likelihood that her needs are many. Maybe she was abused. Maybe she has mental health problems. Maybe she's an addict. We don't know the issues, but we are relatively confident that there's more to it than simply getting a few dollars for her next meal. As we pass her on the road, we struggle. Yes, we want to help her, but we quietly wonder if we really can. At times, we may bring her a meal. At other times, we drive on wondering if there is something we could do that would truly help.

Complement that scenario with a different scenario. Consider the young couple struggling in their marriage. They may be friends or acquaintances, but the need is readily apparent. The marriage is unraveling. As with the first scenario with the woman, because we have either been in a relationship like this or interacted with couples like this, we know the high likelihood that the couple's needs are many. Maybe one of them is haunted by past events. Maybe the other has addictions to pornography. Maybe neither knows a thing about managing money, and they are drowning in debt and unaddressed bills. As we consider the couple, we'd like to help, know a few things that might help, but we quietly wonder if we truly can make a difference, and consequently only mildly engage.

Both of these scenarios generate pause in our actions. The issues are not one-dimensional. How easy it would be if the woman just needed dinner and the couple just needed training on communication skills. If that's all this is, then maybe we could help. But it's rarely, if ever, just that. Situations are complicated. The needs abound. They are not just physical. They are not just spiritual. They are not just emotional or relational. They are far more complex than that, which highlights the demanding need for a holistic solution and the unique opportunity for a uniquely equipped body of people.

HOLISTIC

One of the driving reasons that our service is not one-dimensional is that needs are rarely one-dimensional. The body of Christ is uniquely equipped in this manner. When we follow Christ and participate in his body, we are uniquely equipped. We are not limited to spiritual impact, and we are not limited to physical impact. We are uniquely equipped to serve the whole person. This differentiates participation in the body of Christ from any other opportunity. We are able to go deep, very deep, into the deepest matters of humanity. And we are able to be highly practical, nuts and bolts kind of practical, and meet the demanding needs of the hour. The service we offer is not of the kind where we can feed the body but must neglect the soul or feed the soul but neglect the body. Ours is a service that is uniquely equipped to bring holistic healing to the entirety of a person.

LOVE

Throughout this experience, we've referenced several critical passages. We started in Isaiah.

Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)

This very objective, we noted, is echoed in the New Testament.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27)

A similar message is heard in the passage we referenced as Christ's job description.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19 / Isaiah 61:1-2)

The mission of Jesus, the reason he was sent, was to preach good news to the poor and to proclaim freedom for the prisoners. He would recover the sight for the blind and liberate the oppressed from their oppressors. It is a noble cause, but the cause is most piercing when we discovered that his very purpose, the exact same cause, has been passed from Christ to us.

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. (John 20:21)

So just as Christ was sent to bring good news to the impoverished, we too are sent to bring good news to the impoverished. And just as Christ was sent to bring freedom to the prisoners, we too are sent to fight for freedom. And just as Christ was sent to bring sight to the blind and liberation to the oppressed, we too are called to be healers and liberators.

When asked what was most important in all of Scripture, Jesus responded with the two greatest commands: *Love God and love people*. What's most helpful for our purposes here is the way he underscored the importance of these words.

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:40)

All of these commands, the commands to *plead the case of the widow*, to *preach good news to the poor*, to *liberate the oppressed*, to *proclaim the year of God's favor*, each and every one of these, and all the others in Scripture, hang on the simple and profound hook of the commandment to *love your neighbor as yourself*. That's what we do in this world. We love people.

To do this, we must not succumb to a false choice, that misleading and dangerous dichotomy that Scripture doesn't embrace. We must be a people who love those who are suffering, and humanity struggles and suffers in a multitude of ways. We are called and exhorted to love our neighbors. If our neighbors have physical needs, then we serve them physically. If our neighbors have spiritual needs,

HOLISTIC

then we serve them spiritually. Ours is not an either-or love because we are not surrounded by either-or needs. Ours is a love that meets the physical and spiritual needs that abound around us. Or put another way, our love is *holistic*.

HOLISTIC