

7-11 Where People Live In a Bubble of Personal Piety Isaiah 58:5-10; Matt 12:15-21

I'm so glad that we can give our undivided attention to worship today, now that King James, that's LeBron James, has finally chosen his new NBA team. For weeks, I know this has captivated our thoughts as much as Lindsey Lohan's new experiences with our legal system.

We are in a sermon series addressing why many skeptics not only refuse to enter our doors but why they refuse Christianity in general and the Baptist version in particular. We are trying to become aware of the ways that we as Christians contribute to this enlarging gap or disconnect between unbelievers and the gospel. We've already named some of the stumbling blocks we have put in the paths of skeptics such as hypocrisy and judgmentalism.

Clearly, I have bitten off more than we can chew in this series. So to help me make sure that I'm not moving too quickly, I will from time to time ask, "*Are you with me?*" This does not mean do you agree, only that you're keeping up. If I see heads nodding up and down, I'll know I'm not moving too fast. If I don't see heads nodding, I'll simply go back a start from the beginning. *Are you with me?* I thought so.

Historian Bill Leonard has written two articles about the future of Baptists in this country. Here is one excerpt: *Baptists confront questions of their denominational image in the public square. ...In an increasingly secular society, doctrinal and ethical pronouncements that Baptists understand as convictions may be perceived by the broader culture as bigotry.*

Today, we consider another barrier of bigotry that is judged and derided by religious skeptics. I'm speaking of our emphasis on personal morality with a corresponding apathy about issues of community and global justice.

As one skeptic blogger put it: *Christianity is all about a personal list of dos and don'ts. It's really important for them to go to church, read the Bible and pray. It's also really important to abstain from actions like unmarried sex, cussing or drinking. That would be fine with me if they didn't try to make me follow suit. These Christians spend millions of dollars and exhaustive energy trying to regulate the morality of others. They will march on Washington and get out the votes like they did for Prohibition. But they are missing in action when it comes to broader issues of unequal education or financial injustice that is causing others to suffer?* (Barry Upton)

So this is the stumbling block; the turn-off; the stereotypical sense that skeptics have about Christianity. It seems to outsiders that we are obsessed with personal piety first; our practice of acting as morality police for others second; and having little interest in the global injustice that destroys others.

Put another way, American Christianity is often focused on the inward private life of the believer rather than what God is doing and wants us to do in our world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described it as the difference between private theology, which he thought was another form of religious escapism, and public theology that was engaged with every part of the world.

Is this private devotion the pure religion the Scripture teaches?

We have heard two among many references in the Bible that speak of God's demand for justice in our world. God became upset because his people had grown satisfied with their personal religious practices. There's something about saying all the right prayers; giving all the obligatory offerings; going through all the motions that makes us think, "Well that should be enough to keep God happy."

What we heard earlier from Isaiah was: ***Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Is the fast I choose, a day to humble oneself?*** (in other words, is the fast only about your personal piety) ***Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?*** The people came to believe that these personal practices were the heart of faith. Then the language shifts to God's correction: ***Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and***

bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

And Jesus continues this rebuke of the religiously self-satisfied by quoting a passage in Isaiah: ***Here is my servant... I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles... He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory.***

Don't we also get satisfied with going to church, giving some money, reading our bibles and saying our prayers? Look at what we have always counted in the church: attendance, baptisms and offerings. We have come to believe that our acts of personal piety are really all that God wants. Are you with me?

Time for a disclaimer: No prophet, apostle or Jesus ever said anything like "don't bother with personal piety." True devotion to spiritual practices is a vital part of our faith formation. It is, however, a means to a greater global end: justice; freedom; social order and the sufficiency of God's kingdom. God wants all creation to be upright, not just you and me. God wants justice and mercy as leaven in the systems of power, not just in the spirit of believers.

Again, the point is NOT that we should give up going to church; saying our prayers; studying our Bibles; giving our offerings; caring for our brothers and sisters. We simply cannot be satisfied with that when God has a greater vision and mission for us.

When keeping rules of personal piety seems to be the purpose of our faith, skeptics and prophets are both critical. If we do not work for justice; if we stay in our comfortable cocoons; unbelievers conclude that Christianity isn't and God isn't really interested in the massive problems of this world so long as believers will stop playing cards and dancing. It makes the cause of Christ seem trivial; yes, irrelevant.

Skeptics are already choking over the idea of why a loving God would allow such evil and suffering. We simply add fuel to that fire when we are cloistered in our nice homes and churches, insulated from suffering and injustice. I think we can understand why the skeptic would see our separation from the worst of life as another proof that there is no caring God.

There is another downside to faith that is focused only on getting one's self right with God. When our faith is summed up by personal piety, it seems that Christianity is like every other American practice of self-centered and self-interested self-improvement. Skeptics may think that following Jesus is just more self-help or a means of escaping this world.

Nothing could be further from New Testament teaching. Christianity is not about me being happy, secure and equipped with spiritual coping techniques. Our faith is about God's way of putting the world aright. Our faith is about practicing hospitality to the stranger, about setting the oppressed free; about giving compassion to the suffering. Our faith is not a personal escape from this life but an engagement with the principalities and powers of this world. Otherwise, we wouldn't need the whole armor of God.

The early church had the same struggles of using piety to insulate believers from having to get involved. Hear from the book of James (ch. 2): *Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?* If a Christian leader like James was frustrated by those who could have practiced justice but chose instead to give pious words, how much more the skeptic? Are you with me?

I led a good ol' boy from Texas to the Lord during my seminary days, and yes, his name was Buck, I kid you not. Of course he drove a pickup. He was, as you say, plain spoken, which in the south means course or insensitive. Buck really had no idea what he should do as a Christian, so we went through some study material on Christian basics.

I asked him a few weeks into his discipleship what had changed about his life. He told me with some enthusiasm about the difference his faith had made at his company. He called all his employees together and said to them; *"I want you to know that I've become a Christian. I'm not sure what all that*

means, but I know it means that me and this business belong to God. God has forgiven me of my sins and that is such a great thing that I thought I'd ask you to forgive me too."

"I'm going to make some changes around here. I want to see you treating each other with more respect. I'm going to be giving 10 percent of our profits to the Lord." He told me some of his employees came up to him afterward and said they were Christians too. His response was: *well how 'bout that. I had no idea.*

These business changes were all Buck's idea that he had picked up from our Bible study. He gave raises to his people who were making just over minimum wage. He facilitated reconciliation between people who were not speaking to each other.

Being a product of my upbringing, I said, "that's great Buck, but what about your prayer life?" He said something like, "well I'm tryin' but honestly, I'm not doin' so good with that." I remember thinking it odd that Buck would start living his new life at his business rather than safely in his inward personal life. Now, I think Buck the new believer saw something I had not: the social and relational implications of salvation.

But unbelievers hear that Christianity is about private spirituality, so it confirms their idea that our faith is another personal neurosis; something we need to take away the emptiness of our materialistic lives; something that insulates us from social responsibility; something that tells us we really only need to work on ourselves.

His story was sensational at the time, but few remember the name David Vetter today. They might recognize his moniker, "the bubble boy." David was born with a rare and serious immune deficiency that left his body defenseless against any pathogen.

David lived all 12 years of his life in a protected, pure environment. He had no real human contact until the last 2 weeks of his life. All the medical and psychological resources available were used to help David survive until a bone marrow transplant donor could be found.

David's bubbled existence was filled with anxiety and depression. NASA made a space suit for him so he could get out of his bubble and his house, but each time he wore it, he was overcome by fear that he would be exposed to a virus or bacteria. So he was stuck in his bubble again, trying to stay alive.

Eventually, there was a break-through in bone marrow transplant treatment and David's doctors thought they could give him some marrow from his sister even though it was not a perfect match. They performed the surgery not knowing that the sister's marrow contained traces of a dormant virus. Soon after the surgery, the virus had spread throughout David's body creating hundreds of cancerous tumors.

There was nothing that could be done, so 12 year old David left his bubbled environment. His mother was able to touch and kiss him for the first time. He died 15 days later.

I wonder if like David many of us are afraid of being out in the world of diseases such as violence, oppression, poverty and injustice. I wonder if American Christianity is depressed as a result of our cloistered faith; a way of being Christian that is highly private and personal; a retreat into a spiritual bubble. I think we would all agree; living in a bubble is not real living, nor is bubbled discipleship real discipleship.

When I have moved to a new place of service and have become part of some ecumenical or interfaith effort, the reactions of the other participants and leaders have been the same. After I identify myself as a Baptist pastor, I always get responses like this: "We are certainly delighted and surprised to see you; or you're from what church...really; or the more frank, we've never had a Baptist minister work with us. But that is changing in Greensboro. I think this congregation is ahead of the curve in doing church outside these walls; living the gospel among the poor and hurting; and I'm so very proud of you for that.

Are you with me? I'm sure with you.