



In a World of Social Need

Adapted from “X-Factor” series by Scott Erickson.

A few years ago, *Christianity Today* did an article on “The Greatest Social Need”. As you prepare for these lessons please take a moment to read the article:

The greatest social need in the world today is not HIV/AIDS outreach. It's not hunger. It's not global warming. It's not ending poverty, eliminating malaria, or tuberculosis. Not clean water. Not racial reconciliation. Not sex trafficking. Not abortion. And it's not peace in the Middle East, and not even world peace.

These are not unimportant social issues. They grab the heart of God. God's compassion has always been focused on the poor and oppressed—something noted all through the Bible. So, it's no surprise that God instructs his people to "learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isa. 1:17, ESV).

And they have grabbed the hearts of evangelicals in a fresh way. One telling example: A decade ago, it was still rare to find an evangelical church with an HIV/AIDS ministry. Today, one can hardly find an evangelical church that doesn't have or support one.

HIV/AIDS ministry is one book in a library of social action we have written recently. And it's been noticed. Just last February, we felt our chest swell with pride when *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof said, “Today, conservative Christian churches do superb work on poverty, AIDS, sex trafficking, climate change, prison abuses, malaria, and genocide in Darfur. ... Today, many evangelicals are powerful internationalists and humanitarians.”

Other examples abound in politics, foreign policy, and international justice. It's been quite a ride on the racehorse of social action.

Despite the advances, none of this constitutes our movement's greatest contribution to the world. None of these good works—nay, great works—deal with the most profound social problem facing humankind. That social problem is alienation from God.

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It is in fact the first social problem. After Adam and Eve ate of the tree in the midst of the garden, the Lord God—with whom they have had warm fellowship—sought them out. But they hide in fear and shame. From this, the biblical story unfolds to reveal murder, lust, greed, loneliness, pride, oppression, and a host of other evils that plague humankind.

The biblical picture is clear: The breakdown of society is rooted in the breakdown of our relationship with our Creator. And the biblical response is equally clear: The way out of social chaos begins with people being restored to God. This won't solve all social problems immediately, but transformed individuals go hand in hand with transforming social networks.

Of course, this alienation is much more than a social problem. It is a fundamentally spiritual problem that constitutes humanity's greatest crisis: billions of men and women who do not know the love and grace of their Creator. Some live in societies characterized by fear of the spiritual world. Others live in religious cultures where people are taught they must earn their way through heaven's gates.

Many people live in ignorance of life's richest possibilities—that they can know a loving God, and that His power can move within them. He calms fears, forgives guilt, and instills an unearthly joy. He establishes the lonely in the family of faith and gives life to the dying—life of startling and enduring dimensions, not just for individuals but also in the community we call the kingdom.

We are right to give so much of our energy to relieving social ills, but we must never forget that the greatest social ill has spiritual roots. John Green is the founder of Emmaus Ministries in Chicago, an outreach to male prostitutes. His ministry offers food, shelter, counseling, and an array of social services to help men move out of that degrading lifestyle. Some would think that is more than enough. But Green disagrees, saying, "We do violence to the poor if we don't share the gospel with them."

Throughout history, many groups within the commonwealth of Christianity have specialized in mercy and justice, and they have done marvelous things. Evangelicals have done their share as well. But the one thing evangelicals have done better (if not always perfectly!) than most other Christian movements is sharing the Good News that God loves and forgives us and invites us into His family, into His work, and into life abundant, now and forever. It is our unique charisma, our special gifting of God.

The mainline American churches up until the middle of the last century held in healthy missional balance social action and evangelism. But slowly the evangelistic mandate got squeezed out. A myopic concern for the social undermined the church's spiritual mission. This has led to spiritual decline, from shrinking membership to a loss of spiritual vitality to faddish theology. It would be a shame if evangelicals did not learn from this sad history.

We are not calling for creation of more evangelistic institutions or more evangelistic tracts and techniques—we have plenty of each, thank God. We are not threatened by our newfound enthusiasm for social action, and in fact rejoice in it.

But we are urging that we not inadvertently "do violence to the poor." We must enter neighbor-loving outreach with a mindset that fully incorporates the greatest need we are called to meet. ¹

¹ "The Greatest Social Need," *Christianity Today* 53 no.1 (2009): 18. See also <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/january/20.18.html> (accessed July 21, 2017).

COURAGE

C1: If you look around, you can see the world is in turmoil. From your perspective, what is the greatest need facing our culture? Why?

C2: God has provided boundaries for abundant life. It is urgent that we understand the heart and directives of God and we do life as God declares. Read and answer the following

Exodus 19:3–6 (ESV) While Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

- From these verses, what are the directives God made to His people?
- Do you believe these directives are still for us today? Why?

C3: Israel was to have a unique relationship with God. Men today should also have a unique relationship with God. Read and answer the following.

1 Peter 2:9 (ESV) But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

1 Corinthians 3:16 (ESV) Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?

- What can you glean from these verses that put us in a unique relationship with God?

- On a scale from 1-4 with 1 being very well and 4 being not well, rate yourself on how well your relationship with God is?

- Write out a plan to improve your relationship with God in the next 30 days?

STRENGTH

S1: God gave Israel 10 commandments by which to live. Read and answer the following.

Exodus 20:1–6 (ESV)

- According to these verses, who gave the 10 commandments?
- According to these verses, when and to whom were these commands given?
- On a scale of 1-4 with 1 being very well and 4 being not well, how well do you keep these commandments? Write out a plan of improvement.

S2: Today, we do not seek salvation by obedience to the law, but through Christ's sacrifice. Read and answer the questions.

Galatians 3:24–25 (ESV)

- From these scriptures, what can you glean about God's law?
- Since salvation comes through Christ's sacrifice, does this mean we no longer have to follow His commands?

S3: God has a purpose for everything He does. Read the following and answer the questions.

Exodus 20:20 (ESV)

Ecclesiastes 12:13 (ESV)

- Why did God give the commandments?
- How do you think the commandments keep us from sinning?

S4: Read the following and answer the questions.

Exodus 20:1–6 (ESV)

- What two parts are the commandments broken into?
- Why do you think they are broken into 2 sections?

ENDURANCE

E1: Read and answer the following.

Exodus 20:1–3 (ESV)

- What does it mean to have no other gods before Him?

Take the “who do you worship” test?

- On **whom** do you rely?
- **Where** does your time, energy & money go?
- **Who** are you trying to impress?
- **What** or **who** is at the center of your life?
- Did you answer all the questions honestly?
- Write out a 30-day improvement plan to make God the top priority.

E2: The Bible tells us that God is a jealous God and there is none like Him. Read and answer the following.

Deuteronomy 32:3–4 (ESV)

1 Samuel 2:2 (ESV)

Psalms 18:30–31 (ESV)

- Why does God command exclusive worship of Himself?
- What are three things from these scriptures you glean about God?

E3: Loyalty to any false god (money, pleasure, sex, sports, self-image, etc.) involves disloyalty to the living God. Read and answer the following.

Matthew 6:24 (ESV)

Acts 14:15 (ESV)

Colossians 3:5 (ESV)

1 Thessalonians 1:9 (ESV)

- What do you glean from these scriptures about exclusive worship to God?
- On a scale of 1-4 with 1 being very well and 4 being not well, rate yourself on how well you worship God?
- Write out a plan on how can you improve your worship to God in the next 30 days?