

## Part 2: A Missoula Church

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Tyler Velin | Romans 8:18-25

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In Jeremiah 29 the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to God's people who were temporarily living in Babylon. God's people had been taken captive by a foreign nation and would be there for the span of 70 years. Jeremiah's words to these exiles are words which have been wrestled with for centuries in the church.

He says this: **Jeremiah 29:4-7**. Seek the welfare of the city, in the good of the city you will find your good.

We are in the middle of a series unpacking the goals this church wants to labor towards for our next 50 years. Last week we looked at what is the most essential goal, and this to be a healthy church. We saw the mission of a healthy church is to glorify God as the church but today we are going to talk about how a healthy church magnifies Christ in the city.

In salvation we glorify God as the church, but in witness we learn to magnify Christ in the city. This is what it means to be a Missoula church. We have a rather eclectic church body when it comes to our relationships with Missoula. We have life-long Missoulians, we have people who grew up in Missoula, people who moved here during college and have stayed here, and people who have moved here in their retirement years.

And over the course of those years the culture of Missoula has slowly evolved and changed, and I would imagine that those changes are met with opinions. Opinions in the negative and opinions in the positive. But if we want to be a Missoula church, we must have opinions based not on our own desires or attitudes, but on what God calls us to consider through the gospel.

In writing on that Jeremiah passage, one author said this: "That is not how Christians usually think about the city. Many Christians write the city off. At most, they try to establish their own fortresses within the city. But God does not tell his people to seek peace in the city; he tells them to seek the peace of the city."

This sounds attractive and good, but the truth is, the role of the church in the context of a secular world has been something long wrestled with in history. The church faced it in the first century as they grew up under Roman rule. In the fourth century, men like Augustine tried to pave a path forward for the church in a post Rome world. Calvin and his contemporaries during the reformation tried to reconcile the gap between what was secular and what was sacred. The Puritans in the 16th and 17th century wrestled with the level of distinction the church ought to have. Believers in Europe at the turn of the century experienced wonderful reformations of public and religious action in the Netherlands, and terrible ones in mid-century Germany.

And presently we stand attempting to discern what the role and relationship of the gospel is with things like social justice and local politics. What place does the church have in the public square, and does the public square even care? Not just in its gathering, but in its influence in every area of life.

What I want to do with us today is something relatively simple. I want us to see why the way in which we care for our city matters to God, and I want us to have an idea of what it looks like to do that.

We are going to look at three reasons why God wants us to care about our city, and then we are going to look at three ways in which we are biblically called to care for our city. Why does God want us to care for our city? Because God's plan includes where we live, because the way we live in public matters to God, and because our city wants what we have. How do we care for our city? We live distinctly, we work intentionally, and we relate evangelistically.

So with that as our road map, let's dive into reasons why we should care for our city.

The first reason we should care for our city is because **God's plan includes where we live**. If you remember last week we looked at God's mission in this world. God's mission includes two functional tasks for his disciples: **Matthew 28:19-20**. In here we see the two tasks: we are to add people to the church by baptism, and we are to conform people more and more to Christ by continuing to teach the council of God. God's goal is to have people saved by the gospel and to have people changed by the gospel.

This plan is not separate from where you live. Look with me at **Acts 17:26-27**. Did you notice the tying together of our life and God's goal? God determined the specific time periods in which we live, but even more specifically the boundary of your dwelling place. Not only has God appointed you to live in Missoula, but the very square-footage of your over-priced apartment is part of God's plan to call men to himself.

We are going to be looking at the book of 1 Peter a lot this morning because in the book Peter is constantly calling us to consider the way we engage with the non-believing world around us. In fact look at how his letter starts: **1 Peter 1:1-2**. Peter is writing this book to believers who due to persecution have been scattered across through various towns and regions. And immediately after he lists the names of these cities these believers have been scattered to, he says, "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ."

Now we could look at those descriptions and we could think that those are in reference only to their salvation: their salvation was ordained, their sanctification was ordained, and their obedience was ordained. But if God had done all of that work to foreknown and plan their eternity, wouldn't he also have a hand in the dispersion which led them to their current towns?

And maybe, just maybe, in light of what we just read in Acts 17, that the way in which they live inside their respective communities is part of God's pre-determined plan for their obedience and sanctification. To be called to Christ in salvation is also to be called to be present in the community which your salvation is lived out. We cannot be thoughtless about where we live in light of God's goals for his Kingdom.

The second reason we should care for our city is: **The way we live in public matters to God**. God cares not only about the private pietism of our heart, but also the way in which that is lived out in public. Jonathan Edwards once said, "Godliness is more easily feigned in words than in actions."

If part of God's goal is to call us to himself, and then to have us changed more to be more like him, the expectation is that it would be seen and noticed in public. This is why we should care about where we live: it is the theater in which God is calling us to display the transformative power of the gospel. With our words God calls us to proclaim the gospel, and with our lives we can reflect the gospel.

This was the point of one of the passages we looked at a few months ago in **Matthew 5:14-16**. Our public witness is important to the glory of God. We also see this in the Old Testament when God is describing what has gone wrong in the city because of the people's unbelief. Look at **Isaiah 59:14**. To the best of our ability our lives should not cause truth to stumble in public.

We should care about how our city and our neighbors think about us. Not because we fear man so much that we feel their opinion of us brings us salvation. Instead it's what we just saw in Matthew 5: their opinion of gospel-centered people might contribute to their own salvation. God wants us to live out our faith in a way which is visible to those around us.

The last reason we should care for our city is: **Missoula wants what we have in the gospel**.

This is why I had Jonny read for us Romans 8 to open up our message today. My guess is many of you have heard this text before. It's a popular text which talks about creation groaning for redemption. But as we read this again I want you to focus on the relationship between creation, the sons of God, and redemption. **Romans 8:18-23**.

When Paul is talking about creation in this text he isn't talking about humans. He's talking about rocks, trees and rivers. But the point he is making in here is this: human sin has also placed creation itself under a curse, and because of that creation is groaning for the day when it will be set free from the curse of sin.

But did you see what creation's hope is? Look back at **Romans 8:20-21**. Creation's hope is not direct redemption from God to creation. Creation's hope is an indirect redemption: God's children are set free, and the glory of God's redeemed children is the freedom which creation is blessed by. Does that make sense?

Creation is eagerly waiting not for its own redemption, but for ours. Why? Because creation never sinned. It didn't need Jesus to die for it. It was a causality to sin not an accomplice of it. Our problem is the sin inside of us, creation's problem is us. Yet creation's hope is in our redemption as children of God.

We live in a landscape of unprecedented beauty. And to what end does Blue Mountain shine in the morning sun? To what end do majestic elk decorate the Bitterroots? To what end does the Blackfoot roar? Sentinel Stand? And the Rattlesnake stir? To the end that one day Jesus will come back and transform his believers forever. That one day not only will the punishment of sin be removed, but the effects of it will be forever vanquished.

Creation screams for this beauty at the revelation of all things. As an observer of redemption creation groans for what we have. How much more should our friends and neighbors yearn for this redemption not as observers, but as participants in it?

Whether Missoula knows it or not, its greatest desire, its strongest hope is what we have in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Every outdoor program, every community initiative, every non-profit and every lecturing

professor all will one day see the culmination of their work, but will they see it before it's too late? Will we show our city that they love the shadow or which we know the shape?

Our hope is to make this treasure known to our city. Because we know how the story ends, we call people to that beautiful conclusion. One late pastor named J. Gresham Machen says this: **"We are accustomed to encourage ourselves in our discouragements by the thought of the time when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. No less inspiring is the other aspect of that same great consummation. That will also be a time when doubts have disappeared, when every contradiction has been removed, when all of science converges to one great conviction, when all of art is devoted to one great end, when all of human thinking is permeated by the refining, ennobling influence of Jesus, when every thought has been brought into subjection to the obedience of Christ."**

Why do we care about Missoula? Because there are people in this city who are still to be called to Christ. And one day we will live in a new city, a better city, a heavenly city. But now we invest in our earthly one, knowing that God cares for it and so should we.

What does this mean for us? It means that long term, and Lord willing our building will serve the community that it is in. Right now we have the ability of leasing to various sports leagues, and we would like to think of ways in which our community can be served by our church building during the days and times we are not gathering for service in it.

If we are able to find a permanent home, and if we can afford such a footprint, we would love to be able to open up our building to after school needs, community meetings and even offering low-cost rent to local non-profits who have a mission and vision which aligns with our own vision for mercy at Sovereign Hope.

Currently we partner locally with organizations like Care Net and Family Promise and we would love to see these partnerships and efforts continue to serve the needy in Missoula. However, the footprint of our building and the things we participate in corporately as a church will not be the primary way we make progress as a Missoula church.

When we talk about being a Missoula church we want to empower us to think more individually than institutionally. In other words we want to equip our members and our community groups to engage and serve Missoula as an extension of Sovereign Hope. One of the goals we have for our community groups moving forward is to have them be part of our ministry efforts to engage the lost in our city.

You as members are the greatest resource we have as a church to magnify Jesus in our city. You are already involved in sports leagues, school communities, career luncheons, neighborhood councils and other associations. That's wonderful, we want that, and we want to equip you to have a gospel framework in all those spheres.

All that to say, in the future as we grow in this area we might be able to say with greater clarity: "As part of being a Missoula church lets go do this." But the most sustainable way to do this, and the best way we have to do this right now is to equip you to see your life in Missoula through the lens of eternity. So how do we care for our city?

First: **We live distinctly.** Specifically we live as distinctly Christian in a world which is increasingly post-Christian.

This was Peter's charge to the churches scattered across Asia-minor. Look with me at **1 Peter 1:13-19**. Peter's encouragement to the church in exile is to live holy lives even while you are among non-believers. Why? Because you have been ransomed by the invaluable blood of Jesus.

Our salvation has purchased for a new life and this cannot be hidden. Part of our witness is living out the way in which the gospel has changed us. This means the way we serve and give mercy to people in our city should be distinctly Christian. The way we are involved in the social fabric of our city should be distinctly Christian. The way in which we love our neighbors should be distinct. Jesus laid down his life to serve us, we should lay down our lives to serve others in our community. Jesus loved us when we were sinners, we can love our neighbors when their sprinkler hits the side of our house.

There are many people in our church who are involved with and participate in adoption and foster services. Oh that we would serve distinctly in areas like that! That the adoption we experience in Jesus Christ makes us more passionate to serve those who are fatherless in our community.

Our leisure should be distinct. We live in a state with the second highest percentage of Microbreweries per capita. Most of Missoula's community events rotate around our breweries. Being Christian doesn't mean we have to do everything differently. But it does mean that in all things we should still be distinct. Is your conduct around Missoula's craft beer culture distinctly Christian? Is it self-controlled and a witness to the salvation Jesus has provided you? Is it a snare to those who are weak? Is it distinct?

People will notice when this is true. Look at what Peter says in: **1 Peter 4:3-4**. Part of engaging our culture is learning to be present in it, but also distinct from it. This is what it means to live distinctly. Even if that distinction is not met with applause and earthly comfort.

However our distinctiveness is not due to the simple fact that we want to be contrarian or better than others. Our distinctiveness as a church is due to the role God has given to us as ambassadors of the gospel.

Look again at what Peter says in 1 Peter 2 and look at the connection between distinct lives and gospel witness: **1 Peter 2:11-12**. When we live distinctly, it may be opposed, and it may be hard. But in ways we will never know it may plant seeds in the heart of individuals which bear fruit on judgment day.

Therefore we do not live distinctly because we are pretentious. But Because God has told us that it is better for us to obey him, and it is better for others to when we obey him. In other words, one of the greatest benefits our community can experience is lives oriented around the Kingdom of God.

This is the second way in which we can care for our community: **We work intentionally.**

What does that mean? It means that every act of service that we do, every day we go to work, every conversation we have with a non-believer we do because we want it to represent the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what we mean when we talk about magnifying Christ in the city. God is glorified in salvation coming into places where it once was not, but we can magnify Christ by highlighting and revealing the places in which glimpses of the gospel are already present.

Everything we can do in our community can be done not simply because it is good. But because it can be a reflection of what is true in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In our work, we are clocking in and doing

whatever it is we are doing so that obstacles might be overcome and goods provided so that society can thrive.

As Christians we go to the same jobs and we do them knowing full well that one day we will live in a world where all obstacles will be overcome, the greatest good will be provided, and there will only be a thriving civilization. So when we are at work we might work more intentionally because our efforts are connected to far more than working for our boss, but it is working to create a clearer reflection on eternity.

This is indeed what Paul meant when he wrote this: **Colossians 3:23-24**.

Montana is second in the United States for Non-profit's per capita, and Missoula has a non-profit on every corner. From Fun-runs to community service days, we have ample opportunities to support social efforts in our city. And we should. It was such a privilege to hear how the City spoke about our church when they discussed our land situation. They specifically spoke of the way in which we help serve homeless families.

The truth is that witness is due almost exclusively to Sandy and Nick Shepherd and their family who have spearheaded, championed and stood in the gap for our involvement with Family Promise. But I know why Sandy does it, and I know why we do it. We do it because one day we will live in a world where there are no homeless families. One day we will live in a heavenly city where all of our needs will be met by the lamb who gave himself for our greatest need by dying on the cross for our sins.

There are other individuals in our body who have run races in support of Justice Ventures International because they want to serve the relief of human suffering because they know one day they will live in a world where the suffering of Jesus was sufficient to eliminate all suffering for all eternity.

We want people who make the best coffee, and cook the best food, and provide the best services because Jesus has given us a model of provision which is useful and beautiful. We want our church to live intentionally in the shadow of eternity not because it is good public relations, but because it is great gospel reflection.

Efforts in these areas are not evangelism. But they support it, and are a necessary part of it. For one obstacle which must be overcome in a post-Christian is not only the truthfulness of Christianity, but its relevance. When we live, work, serve and play as an intentional extension of the gospel we can already begin to overcome obstacles of unbelievers by showing them the way in which the gospel continues to redeem the whole of our actions. This is how we can exercise influence in our culture at large.

My wife met a young adult woman who was pregnant. In a totally random conversation she mentioned she went to Care Net, and when she was there she said it was the first time she felt like a human. It was the first time people were excited about her baby. When my wife told her that our church partners with them she said, "I knew something had to be different about them." You see when we work in light of God's kingdom ideals, we can know we won't solve all the world's problems. But we can give glimpses of heaven even as we strain our eyes here on earth. We can serve and work with integrity and say with full intentionality: this is what God is like.

Now we should never pursue politics, social action, or community involvement as an end in and of itself. But these things do make sense when held in tension with God's greater goals for his church. D.A. Carson provides this helpful perspective: **Sometimes a disease can be knocked out; sometimes sex**

traffic can be considerably reduced; sometimes slavery can be abolished in a region; sometimes more equitable laws can foster justice and reduce corruption; sometimes engagements in the arts can produce wonderful work that inspires a new generation. Yet in these and countless other ways cultural change is possible. More importantly, doing good to the city, doing good to all people (even if we have special responsibility for the household of faith), is part of our responsibility as God's redeemed people in this time of tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet.'"

We can and should labor intentionally to make a difference in our community. But our hope for cultural witness is not in being well thought of by our community or in eliminating all that is wrong in this world. Our hope is in the change which Jesus has brought to us through his cross.

This is the last way in which we can care for our community: **We relate evangelistically.** Why should we be relationally present in our city? Because in the context of relationships made at work or in other places, we can clearly use words to speak the gospel others. The intentional actions we participate in help us have integrity here, but ultimately we cannot redeem or transform a culture. In fact Jesus doesn't even redeem or transform culture. He redeems and transforms people through the gospel.

One thing my wife and I have started to do to be intentional about this step is to actually talk to the people who work in the grocery stores and coffee shops in our neighborhoods. We want to know them because we want to have some relational capital to share the gospel with them. We can and should share the gospel with everyone, but it can really help if you know those people while you do it.

There is a lot in our city and in our world which is broken. And we should strive to fix that if we have the capacity to. But the way in which it will be fixed for all eternity is through individuals seeing Jesus as the real solution to our greatest needs.

This is what we must proclaim. Redeemed people redeem culture. This is what prevents our efforts in Missoula from falling into what is now called, "The social gospel." The social gospel is one issue which was brought up 50 years ago by this church as one of the reasons they would refuse to merge with the other denomination. The social gospel sees the goal of Christianity as reforming society as a whole.

The difference between the social gospel and the biblical gospel is that the biblical gospel sees the conversions of individuals as the place in which culture is changed.

We want to be a church who lives life with our unbelieving neighbors and co-workers so that when we share the gospel with them, they not only hear the truth of Jesus, but they see the truth that Jesus is better in our own lives. That the gospel really does make a difference. And that God's glory really is the object of greatest joy.

Our goal as a Missoula church is to be involved in our community so that the gospel might be visibly seen in our actions and audibly proclaimed by our words so that Christ might be magnified in word and deed. This is what Paul was after in **2 Corinthians 2:14-17**.

God cares about our city. How do we know that? Because God saved you and put you here. And Lord willing, there are many more in this city just like you. So live here. Serve here. Love here. Magnify Christ by living life in light of the kingdom which we do not yet see, but anxiously hope for.