

# Earthy Spirituality:

Fighting for People

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**2 Chronicles 28:1-15**

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This past Tuesday night your church's men's softball was thoroughly trouncing our opponents. Actually, the game ended with what's called the "mercy rule" – i.e. when you get ahead by fifteen runs or more they call the game otherwise it could get downright humiliating. Anyway, as we were approaching the point of the mercy rule we weren't acting very merciful. We were still hitting hard, running hard and enjoying every minute of it. At the end of the game one of our brothers spoke up and said, "Guys, I'm embarrassed by our behavior. We know what it's like to get creamed (it happens to us often). We don't like it when they rub it in our faces. Why should we treat our opponents like trash? We should show honor and respect even in victory." I was stunned – because I was part of the unmerciful trouncing.

Thankfully, our Lord Jesus Christ doesn't have bad days when he fails to show mercy, but my softball teammate had an excellent point: because God has shown us mercy in Christ, we should display that same mercy to others. People matter to God. Therefore if we say we love God, if we say we follow Jesus, if we say we've been touched by the power of the Holy Spirit, then it should show in the way we view and treat others – even those who aren't part of our tribe, even our enemies.

In a true biblically-grounded spirituality there's an inseparable link between how you love God and how you love people. You can't divorce how you worship God from how you treat others. You may recall a past U.S. presidential race with the slogan of "It's the economy, stupid." As a follower of Jesus we could say, "It's the people, stupid." If we fail to do justice to people that need it, if we fail to share our resources with a world in need, if we hold bitterness in our hearts towards someone else, if we are wounding others (even if they have wounded us), if we hate others (even our enemies), if we show contempt or even show less love because someone is from another race or culture or economic group or educational level, then we have divorced spirituality from justice and neighbor-love. According to the Bible, God simply hates that.

When people are mistreated, especially the weak and vulnerable, God comes looking for a fight. Let me share a few examples:

- Psalm 12:5 says, "Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise," says the Lord. I will protect them from those who malign them."
- Or Psalm 11 says, "The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates ... For the Lord is righteous, he loves justice."

- Or Psalm 10 – “You hear the desire of the afflicted ... (you) defend the fatherless and the oppressed.” Isn’t it interesting how often the Psalms – the book of worship for Jews and Christians – has references to how we treat others?
- Or when the Bible says that when the political and spiritual leaders (i.e. the powerful) were acting like “wolves tearing their prey, shedding (innocent) blood” the Lord looks for someone to “stand in the breach ... and seek justice” (see Isaiah 1:17; 58:15-16; Ezekiel 22:25, 27 and 30).

This sounds so simple, doesn’t it? Did anyone here not know this? Did anyone here not know that biblical spirituality has an unbreakable link between love for God and love for others? And yet, the history of the world, the state of current affairs, and the track-record of our own lives shows us that we keep forgetting this simple biblical truth. So this obscure story tucked away in your Old Testament was placed here under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It calls us back to a holistic spiritual life that begins with worshipping God so that it flows into a big and broad love for others.

This is a difficult story. It doesn’t have any neat and tidy points to grab on to; instead, it invites us to wrestle with a God of love and mercy who calls us to display love and mercy to others – even our enemies. It begins in verse 1 with a King named Ahaz. Here’s a little Old Testament history to help us understand this story. In the Old Testament Israel was based on twelve tribes which became like states within the nation. Two of the tribes split off from the twelve and became known as the southern kingdom or Judah. The remaining ten tribes stayed as Israel. So Ahaz is now king of the southern kingdom and Pekah is king of the northern kingdom. Ahaz became king when he was twenty years old and he reigned for 16 years.

Verse 1 – unlike his distant relative, King David, Ahaz was a lousy king. “He did not do what was right in the eyes of Lord.” That sums up his life. Remember I said that there’s a link or a bond between putting God first and treating people well? Here we see the front-end of that chain. Love for God that is real and honest and alive will drive our love for others. This isn’t just a story about how to treat people; first of all, it’s a story about worship. Notice the end of the story in verse 24. Ahaz closed the doors on worship and it led him down the wrong path. In other words, if we fail to worship God for who he is, if we fail to love and honor God first, it ends up hurting rather than helping others. That’s why our life together as Christians should place worship at the center of everything we do. (Comments about worship).

So here are the results of Ahaz’s distorted worship: (read verses 2-4). The Valley on Ben Hinnom was located south of the temple and it became the site of the city dump. The dead animals and garbage were burnt so that there was almost a constant odor and fire. It was in that garbage heap that Ahaz sacrificed his sons in the fire. *How revolting*, we respond. And yet if you look around the world today, children are being routinely thrown away. In Brazil nearly 3% of the children under the age of 18 sell themselves for sex. One-third of the 50,000 prostitutes in Cambodia are under the age of 18. In our own

nation it took a long, steep, uphill battle to deny access to what's known as partial-birth abortions. Worshipping the true God will lead to the protection of the weak and vulnerable members of society.

As a result of Ahaz's distorted and disastrous worship life we move to the heart of this story found in verses 5-15. This is describing what's known as the Syro-Ephraimite War. This war sprang from a group of nations that were trying to form a NATO-like alliance against the superpower Assyria. Judah was nestled safely in the hill country so they refused to join the alliance. This enraged the northern kingdom of Israel so they attacked Ahaz and the tribe of Judah – and Judah got creamed. Verses 5-8 describe the people and plunder that the armies from the northern kingdom were hauling away. As we begin with verse 9 imagine a large group of victorious soldiers – sweaty but happy, holding weapons of death and destruction, maybe giddy with wine, singing songs of conquest – walking down the road with their plunder and prisoners of war. Unfortunately, these aren't just prisoners of war; they are also their brothers and sisters in the united nation of Israel.

Now in verse 9 a lone prophet named Oded approaches the group of happy soldiers, confronts them and says, "Because the Lord God of your fathers was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hands. But you have slaughtered them in a rage that reaches to heaven ..." First of all, notice Oded's guts. He has lion-hearted courage. Oded knows that when you really love God and you really love other people sometimes you have to fight for them. Love doesn't just mean being nice; sometimes it means defending, protecting and even fighting for people.

I wish I would have had an Oded earlier in my life. So often we assume that the only Christ-like virtues are being kind and sweet and nice. So if I'm a Christian I will always try to keep the peace because that's what Christians do. That's the kind of spirituality I grew up with for many, many years. I'm starting to realize that when Jesus fills you with his love, it also makes you bold and courageous; he helps you fight for people. When my friend was chewing us out after the softball game he was fighting for our opponents. He was reminding us that if we worship God and should show in the way we treat people on the softball field.

Oded and the rest of the Old Testament prophets really didn't say anything new; instead, they reminded people of what God had already said. So his critique is based on previous words from God. First of all, excessive violence in war was regularly met with God's disapproval and slavery of fellow-Israelites was against God's law (see Leviticus 15:39-43). God is saying, "Hey, you can't say that you love me and then ignore people, or worse, inflict pain on people. That won't cut it with me. I'd rather have you stop pretending that you're worshipping me – because whatever you're doing it isn't worship unless it flows into justice and protection for the most vulnerable members of society."

Do you see the link: Love God and love others; worship God and practice justice; praise God and fight for people? Justice for a Christian is based in the fact of God's justice. God cares and God sees the injustice. Do you recall the story of

Cain and Abel when Cain murdered his brother? God said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10). In the same way in this story, the excessive rage that they displayed in their military conquest “reaches to heaven.” As John Stott has said, “It is not so much the case that I am under obligation to my fellow human beings as that I am under obligation to God for my fellow human beings.”

Now here’s the amazing thing to this whole story: the northern tribes (the victorious army) should have known better. Two hundred years prior to this story the northern kingdom had allowed their spiritual lives to go bad. The southern kingdom attacked and defeated the northern kingdom (you can read about that in 2 Chronicles 13). They knew what it was like to be hurt and defeated and victimized. They knew the hurt and the pain, but it didn’t change their behavior. Both stories are told with some of the identical language. They are just repeating the cycle of violence and oppression and hurt and injustice.

Furthermore, they had experienced God’s mercy – actually, they were alive because of God’s mercy. They weren’t in a position to throw stones because their sins were also great (see verses 10b-11 and verse 13). But God forgave them; God showed them mercy in spite of their great sins. At the heart of the Christian story we have a similar story of how people should be treated because of how we have been treated (Ephesians 4:31-32 and Matthew 18).

When they are confronted with their mistreatment of others, they repent – i.e. they have a change of heart which leads to a change in the way they treat people. How do you know if you’re repenting? First, you feel it in your heart. Second, you start to slowly change. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. You can’t make yourself repent, but you can open your heart to God’s Spirit and ask Him to soften your heart and then to change your actions towards another person. And that’s exactly what happens here. “The men designated by name took some of the prisoners, and from the plunder they clothed all who were naked. They provided them with clothes and sandals, food and drink, and healing balm. All those who were weak they put on donkeys.”

This passage is not telling us how to treat prisoners of war in every situation. This is a very specific context, but there are a few principles that we can infer from this treatment: (1) First, in regard to warfare, as far as possible, we need to treat our prisoners well. Treat them better than they treat your prisoners of war. (2) Secondly, in regard to other issues, show mercy to the needy. This is so simple: feed them, clothe them, give them medicine and help the weak. Look, spiritually speaking, you had nothing. You were naked before a holy God. You had nothing to make yourself worthy of God’s grace, but he accepted you in Christ, he washed you, he clothed you, he gave you the medicine of the Gospel, he cared for you when you were spiritually weak; now go do that for others in the name of Christ. You must see that as your calling.

This is part of the essence of true spirituality. How you treat people reveals how much you worship and love God. Treating people well is a sign of true spirituality (See Isaiah 58:3b, 4a, 5a, 6-7). Forgiving others is a sign that you understand God's forgiveness (see Matthew 18).

How do we do this at TVC? How do we link worship with love for others?

- Global missions
- Local ministries – blessing our community
- Personally -- Are there any instances in your life where the link has been broken? The Lord's Supper (see 1 Corinthians 11).