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Are You Awake?

God's people are to be an awakened people.

Introduction

Typically, sermons begin with a prayer for illumination and end with a prayer of application. The preacher starts by asking God to open their hearers' eyes and hearts to receive their word for the day, then concludes by asking God to do his part and help hearers do their part to apply that word in today's world. This morning, I'm reversing that order.

I recently came across a prayer for social justice that has been ringing in my mind ever since I first read it. It goes like this:

Righteous Lord God, you love justice and hate evil, and you care for the weak, vulnerable, needy, and the oppressed. Bless our country and its leaders with the wisdom of righteousness and peace. May they secure the right of protection for the unborn, equality of educational opportunities for the young, work for the unemployed, health care for the sick, and food for the hungry. Help management and labor to cooperate for the common good, giving honest work, and receiving a fair wage. Deliver our land from all tribal, social, and religious strife, and make our national life more pleasing in your holy sight, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

I've been unable to get this prayer out of my head for three reasons. The first is its timeliness. Unless you've been living under a rock, you're aware of the ongoing social unrest that's shaking our nation to its core. Cries for social justice and for people of all stripes to wake up to the plight of our black neighbors especially are ringing from shore to shore. Yet strangely, this prayer wasn't voiced by an American believer in recent weeks but by the British Anglican priest John Stott who died in 2011. His prayer has a certain timelessness about it.

I haven't been able to escape how Stott relates all these facets of social justice back to the character of God, who loves justice, hates evil, and cares for "the least of these." Clearly, this is a prayer born out of no political agenda but a thoroughly biblical and richly theological vision.

Wherever racism, sexism, tribalism, classism, ageism, and all the other ism's unmentioned by Stott are tolerated, if not encouraged, social *in*justice will abound. Until *all* these ism's are no more, there will be no true social justice.

If you agree, if you're like what I believe to be the majority of spiritually mature followers of Jesus in this hour, you may be asking, "But what can I do about it? Society was shattered when Adam fell way back in the Garden of Eden. What can I do but look forward to Jesus' return, when he'll heal all our fractures and mete out perfect

justice to all?" I have two words for you: "Wake up!"

Long before "woke" became a popular twenty-first century watchword, with a nineteenth century origin, describing an awareness of issues concerning social and racial justice, Jesus commanded his disciples to "stay awake!" in Mark 13:33-37.

If you're reading that passage in the King James or New International Version, the imperative there is to "watch" or "be on guard." The problem with those translations is they mask the distinction between two different Greek words used by Jesus in this chapter.

He uses the word *blepo*, which is also translated "watch" or "take heed" in verses 5, 9, 23, and 33. But the word he uses in verses 34, 35, and 37 is *gregorio* (from which my first name, Gregory, is taken). It means to "be alert" or, as it's rendered in the present imperative found in the English Standard Version, "stay awake!" God's people are to be an awakened people.

Awakened People Are Awake to History

It had been a full day of controversy in the temple's courts (Mark 12). Jesus and his twelve disciples were heading out when one of Jesus' men tried drawing his attention to the magnificent stones out of which that temple was constructed. Maybe it had just dawned upon the fellow how impressive that temple actually was. Herod began its reconstruction in 19 BC and had seen most of it finished by his death in 4 BC, though the work was ongoing throughout Jesus' ministry and didn't end until the 60s. "What wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings," indeed! But it's more likely that the unnamed disciple said what he did as an attempt to get Jesus' mind off of all that day's unpleasantness. If that's what he meant to do, it didn't work.

Jesus answered, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." That unexpected reply, as shocking as it was, shut everyone's mouths until they were outside the city. There, sitting down for a rest, Peter, Andrew, James, and John went to Jesus privately to inquire when that destruction would happen. To their minds the temple was God's house, and if the temple were to be destroyed, it would surely be the end of the world.

From verses 5-23 Jesus tells them what it will be like before that day comes. His answer is as confusing to us today as his prediction of the temple's destruction was confounding to Peter, his brother, and their friends. Biblical scholars have puzzled over these verses for two thousand years, trying to tease out which of the events described here were to take place before the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD and which ones are to take place in the future before Jesus returns.

I believe our Lord was being purposefully vague. He wanted his disciples then, just as he wants us now, to be awake to the history in which we live. One of the wonderous things about history is it's made every moment of every day. We only recognize the significance of those moments after they've passed, if then.

Brooks Adams kept a diary from his boyhood days and on through the years that followed. One day when he was eight-years-old he wrote in his diary, "Went fishing with my father; the most glorious day of my life." Brooks' father was an important man—Charles Francis Adams—the United States Ambassador to Great Britain under the Lincoln administration. Interestingly, he too had made a note in his diary about that fishing trip. He wrote simply, "Went fishing with my son; a day wasted." Charles had missed it.

Wonder how many people who rode that bus in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955, and arrived home

later that night for supper gave a second thought to that black woman who refused to give up her seat to a white man? Rosa Parks was making history right before their eyes, but it wasn't appreciated until after the fact.

We romanticize and idealize history. We like to imagine that if we'd been alive back when those things we read about in the history books took place, we'd have realized their significance. We would have jumped in, joined the good guys, and done the right thing. In that way we're like people who believe in past lives. They invariably believe they were someone famous in an earlier time—Julius Caesar, Madame Curie, or Marilyn Monroe. But the truth is most people lead very ordinary lives and pass through history without realizing it, much less impacting it.

The Christian life is meant to be lived out in the rough and tumble of our everyday world. Every second that passes is another tick on God's alarm clock to Christ's any-minute-now return. Awakened people are awake to this fact. They are awake to their historical moment.

Awakened People Are Awake to Eschatology

Jesus' discourse in this so-called "little apocalypse" moves from the time preceding his return to his return itself in verses 24 through 27.

The sun, moon, and stars are common biblical metaphors for this world's authorities. The convulsions of those celestial bodies are common apocalyptic imagery for sociopolitical upheavals. Until Jesus returns, earth's powers will continue to come and go. Empires will rise and fall. The old king dies; the new king rises; and the people will chant, "Long live the king!" History is cyclical like that, but it is not circular.

History is linear. It's moving towards a terminus, an end. That's what eschatology is all about—the end. At some definite point in the future, Jesus will return in power. He will send forth his angels to gather his elect from wherever they reside on this earth, whatever their station in life, and whoever they are or aren't in this world's estimation. People who don't know that, forget it, or otherwise fail to order their lives by that coming end invariably waste their seventy to eighty years here chasing the wind. That's how the preacher saw it when he wrote in Ecclesiastes 1:14 (Amplified Bible), "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity, a striving after the wind and a feeding on wind."

The American dream? Wind. Beauty? Wind. Fame? Wind. Your social pedigree? Wind. Your social position? Wind. Your social power? Wind.

The poet reminds us: "Only one life; twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last."

The hymnist invites us to sing: "On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand."

Awakened people are awake to the end that's coming.

Awakened People Are Awake to Their Personal Responsibility

Living in this moment of history and looking forward to the moment of Christ's return, how now should we live? That's the question Jesus answers in verses 28 through 37.

There's a balance here that you must maintain. On the one hand, you need to pay attention to the signs of the times, this moment in history which God has appointed you to live before Christ returns (vv. 28-30). On the

other hand, you shouldn't waste this moment speculating on things no one knows for sure, like the day and hour of that return. Instead, be that worker who responsibly goes about his duties while his boss is away (vv. 32-37). Do what you can, while you can, where you are. That's how you'll impact both history and eternity.

What does that look like, practically speaking? Mark 13 is bookended by the accounts of two unnamed women, which is itself significant in the patriarchal society in which they lived. The first was a widow who did what she could when she dropped two coins, her last, into the offering box. She was poor, but she was not so poor that she couldn't give to the praise of her God and in service to her fellow man. For this, Jesus exalted her (12:41-44).

The second woman in 14:3-9 was wealthy, at least to the extent that she owned a bottle of precious perfume that cost as much as a full year's wages. She quietly entered the room where Jesus was dining one evening and, without fanfare or warning, poured it all on Jesus' head. There were some sitting nearby who were filled with indignation over such a wasteful act. "That money could have been given to the poor," they hissed.

"But Jesus," says Mark. Jesus doesn't always see things like everyone else. Jesus sees what most people miss. Jesus didn't fault the woman for having owned such an extravagant luxury in a sea of poverty, nor did he deny that the poor should be looked after. Rather, he praised her for doing what he called "a beautiful thing" to him, praised her for doing "what she could" in that unique historical moment, and declared that for this lone act she would never be forgotten.

I once knew a young white pastor who served an all-white congregation in the deep-south. One year he decided to invite a black pastor from a nearby state, a former classmate of his, to preach in his church's annual revival services. As far as he knew, no black preacher had ever stood in his church's pulpit. He realized this would be a historic moment in the life of that body, one that might create some problems for him, but he decided it was the right thing to do and determined that he would not to make a big deal of it. He printed the promotional poster with his friend's name and picture, tacked it to the bulletin board in the foyer, and announced the services like he would any other. No one said a word, which could have been good or bad. He would know later.

The weekend campaign began on a Friday night and ended on Sunday afternoon with a potluck fellowship. As the men talked and the ladies began collecting their bowls of leftovers to take back home, the young pastor was pulled aside by two teenage brothers whose family attended the church. They had been members of other churches across the years but were now there in his. On those occasions when the boys came with their parents, including their dad—a retired Alabama cop, it often seemed they did so against their will. It was therefore highly unusual that they together sought him out for a private word. The younger spoke for them both. "We just wanted to tell you that we thought it was really cool that you'd have your friend to come preach here like that. In all the churches we've attended, we've never seen a preacher do that. It took guts." His brother nodded, and they were off. That young pastor stood there thinking, hoping, this was something they'd never forget.

Conclusion

What will it take for John Stott's prayer for social justice to be fulfilled, for Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream to be realized? It will take us, just us, each and every one of us doing what we can, while we can, wherever we are to live out the implications of our hope in Jesus. And to do that, our eyes must be open. We must stay awake.

Before Mark 14 ends, Jesus comes to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane and finds them asleep—not once, not twice, but three times! As it was then, so it is now. The hour is late. The land is dark, but dawn is near. Are you awake?

Gregory Hollifield

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Scripture: [Mark 12:41-14:9](#)

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