

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for January 17: How to be pro-life

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The pro-life movement has been a part of the political scene for many years. Beyond the political position lies plenty of opportunity for believers to practice a nonpolitical pro-life position in their everyday lives.

Jesus' ministry was filled with interactions with all types of people from all types of circumstances and walks of life. Many of his encounters were with people living at the margin of society. Every recorded encounter gives us a chance to see how the Lord valued the lives of others. The passages selected from Mark for the present lesson provide showcase Jesus' regard for people and his compassion for their situation. Insights abound from these stories that can help believers shape the way they respond to the lives of people around them.

Concern for people with special challenges (Mark 3:3-5)

Verse 1 says the events of the story took place in a synagogue. The land of Israel was saturated with synagogues which had become the most influential Jewish religious institution in the lives of the common people. Verse 2 states the events of the story took place on a Sabbath. Jesus seems to often have found trouble on the Sabbath. Yet it might be better stated that he often challenged the teachings of the religious leaders. These challenges sometimes happened in a synagogue. In this case, Jesus challenged the treatment of the man with a shriveled hand.

Verse 2, by stating that some were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus,

suggests the stricken man's presence in the synagogue was part of an ambush. Jesus instantly saw the ruse and had the man stand up so everyone could observe.

Many suggestions have been made regarding the nature of the man's condition, none of which are certain. The main point, however, is that the man would have had difficulty taking care of himself and his family. He especially could have had difficulty earning a living. To ignore such a plight would be out of character for God's people. To use the man's plight as a trap for Jesus was even worse.

Jesus asked an important question in verse 4, that with only slight variation must be answered by believers today. Standing in a center of Jewish religious instruction, Jesus asked if doing good, or evil, was lawful on the Sabbath. Jesus' question was not a broad philosophical question. It was a religious application question. In other words, how should people of religious conviction apply and practice their religion on the Sabbath. Of course, Jesus referred indirectly to helping the stricken man on the Sabbath.

Jesus' line of questioning in turn challenged an understanding of ritual law. Is obedience to God's ritual commands more important than tending to human need?

Jesus answers by action here, but by words in Mark 2:23-26 reasoning from the account of David eating the showbread of the tabernacle in 1 Samuel 21:1-9. Ritual obedience is important and has its place in teaching people about God, but Jesus taught and showed that God expected ritual observances to yield in the presence of pressing human need.

Here is a strong lesson for believers. Important as it is to organize one's life for correct religious observance, one cannot allow religious observances to impede a response to human need. The infirm man could have waited

another day so that his healing would have not occurred on the Sabbath, but Jesus would not stand still for this. God is a good God and desires goodness in the lives of people. Having great interest in human welfare, Jesus healed the man immediately.

Jesus' personal conviction about helping humans in need can be seen in this passage. Verse 5 reveals that Jesus looked around himself with anger. Jesus did not express anger on the cross as might be expected, but he experienced anger when confronted by insensitivity to genuine human need. Knowing this, how should believers respond to those with special needs and challenges in their lives? Imagine the increase for God's kingdom if believers led the way in responding to genuine human need.

Concern for people with chronic problems (Mark 5:33-34)

This section of Scripture is part of an interesting story of faith found in Mark 5:24-34. In the story, a woman with a 12-year hemorrhage of blood silently sought out Jesus as he traveled through a town. She became convinced that if she merely touched him, she would be healed of her disease. Her determined faith was rewarded just as she expected and her body was healed.

One learning point from this story is that the woman's experience with this illness had the effect of driving her to God, not away from him. Often when tragedy strikes lives, people turn away from God with bitterness. In this case, the woman who had suffered humiliation and financial ruin at the hands of unsuccessful doctors had come to the realization that only God could heal her. Then she realized God was with Jesus. So her faith grew during her tortuous illness and was rewarded by a God who has a quick appreciation for faith.

A remarkable feature of the story is that Jesus appears not to know who was healed. This underscores that Jesus lived fully as a human being, even

though he is also fully divine. While on earth, Jesus submitted himself to the limitations and capacities of the human body and mind. This story shows that God the Father also worked through Jesus in ways in which Jesus himself was not always fully aware. This point may be surprising to those who grapple with Jesus' identity as both human and God. What is not surprising, however, is that Jesus fully understood and expressed God's compassion for the sick and his appreciation for faith when it was found.

Believers too must learn to express compassion for the sick and especially those with chronic illnesses. The standard religious opinion of Jesus' day stated that sickness was a sign of God's displeasure and chronic illness was a sign of God's enduring rejection. But God's healing of this woman effectively answers this misimpression. God has compassion for all people who suffer. Likewise God's followers should demonstrate the same compassion.

Concern for people facing deathly illness (Mark 5:35-42)

The story of this episode begins in verses 21-24 and then resumes in verse 35. Jesus' compassion for suffering people already has been seen in this lesson, so it is not surprising that he responded by going to the synagogue leader's home to heal his deathly sick daughter.

One remarkable insight into this story is that here a member of the nation's religious leadership sought out Jesus with a dire personal request. Jesus had trouble with the religious leadership in a synagogue in the first episode of this lesson. The man who sought out Jesus was a ruler of the synagogue (or better, head of the synagogue), which is roughly equivalent in some aspects to the pastor of a church. One duty of rulers of a synagogue was to arrange for visiting rabbis to speak in their synagogue. Jesus spoke in numerous synagogues and would have been invited to do so by those holding the same office as this man. In fact, though we are not sure, this very man previously could have invited Jesus to speak in his synagogue.

That this was the case seems to be suggested by the man seeking out Jesus.

In route to the man's home, news arrived his daughter had died. Nevertheless, Jesus pressed on, showing God's continued compassion for the girl even though she now was far beyond normal human expectation and hope for recovery. Yet she was not beyond God's ability to address her situation. Jesus quietly spoke to her, lifted her up and her life was restored.

The girl's raising has important lessons for understanding resurrection to new life in God's presence. Yet Jesus' compassion for the family and especially the little girl underscores once again how believers should react to dire situations in the lives of others around them.

Concern for people and their children (Mark 10:14-16)

This passage contains the classic memorable statement of Jesus about not hindering children to enter his kingdom. In a thoughtless moment, Jesus' disciples turned away children with maladies from seeing the great healer. Still consistently showing compassion for the suffering, Jesus stated children were welcome in his presence.

Jesus' statement in verse 14 reveals a truth about how people enter God's kingdom. They come to God's kingdom like needy, dependent and ill children who place themselves at the mercy of the only hope they have for long term life and prosperity: God himself, as appeared in the person of Jesus. God cherishes every expression of faith and responds with the lavish gift of himself, just as Jesus healed and blessed the little children who came to him.

Showing concern for children is yet another way to show compassion to the marginal and weak members of society. God has strong feelings for children, and his followers should likewise reach out to children and draw them to the Lord.

The lessons gained from the stories handled in this lesson can help a follower of Christ establish a thoroughgoing pro-life value system guided by the Lord's expression of compassion to all people, especially those who have been marginalized by their status in life or their physical condition. Jesus saw great value in the lives of these people, showing he valued all human lives, not merely those who were religiously or ritually correct.