

WHAT WOULD JESUS SAY ABOUT THE MEDIA?

Mark 9:1-9

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I was 11 years old when Santa Claus brought our family its first television. I was ecstatic! This black and white, three-station miracle with a tall antenna towering above our roof put me in touch with the outside world. It's hard to believe that after all these years. After all, where I come from, a mega-bite was something a snake might inflict on you, a mouse was a critter to be found in a corn crib, a net was something to fish with, and only spiders spun webs at night. My how times have changed.

In my lifetime we have moved from the Industrial Age to the Information Age. A frustrated father said to his friend, "I have a cell phone, a car phone, a fax machine, a beeper, e-mail and voice mail and my children still tell me I am out of touch." We can drown in information and still long for communication.

So I complete this series of sermons on "What Would Jesus Say?" today by asking the question, What Would Jesus Say About the Media? My answer to that question is two-fold.

PONDER ITS POWER

Media has become a way of life. The radio, the television, and now the internet have revolutionized our way of communicating around the world.

97% of American homes have indoor plumbing, 99% have a television.

75% of American homes have a VCR, even though most of us over 50 still can't figure out how to keep the 12:00 from flashing. It probably doesn't matter anyway since the DVD player is rapidly making the VCR obsolete.

The remote control has become the most cherished household possession, especially for men. My advice to you ladies is not to fight over the remote control. Become a Baptist, graciously submit, and let him have it.

The average American spends five hours a day watching television. That is 20% of your life. A seven year old child will watch 20,000 commercials a year. *Atari*, *Nintendo*, and *Sega* have become the baby sitters of America and MTV their tutors. The average person now spends two hours a day on the Internet.

I for one do not want to live without any of these. The good old days were not so hot. I am delighted that we are in a new era of information. I want to be informed of world affairs. I like entertainment in the comfort of my home. While I once prepared every sermon I preached at a seminary library, I now use the

Internet. Thanks to the Information Age, people are talking with one another again. Families are keeping in touch through e-mail and many parents have come home to work.

The moral question of the media has to do with values. What values? Whose values? Who is responsible for developing a value system for the media among us? Does the media mirror values or make our values?

Bob Mueller of Channel 2 News has agreed to chat with me about that.

Dr. Olds: Bob, how does television impact the values of society as you see it from the media perspective?

Mr. Mueller: Television obviously is a mass media. The idea is to attract a mass audience. We all share values. But we also share a wide variety of values. So television portrays a wide variety of values. The values portrayed, in say The Osbournes, are much different than those portrayed by Touched by An Angel. But are they worse or better may depend on your particular values. Media in many ways is criticized, and some of it probably accurate, as portraying too many negative values. Or is it that the values are just different from points of view? For example, the show Walker, Texas Ranger is not a very big hit nationwide. It is a non-controversial show about right and wrong. But it does very well in this community. More controversial shows—NYPD Blue, Will & Grace—that are big hits nationwide and that have controversy, do well in this community. So the question then is, are the values of these shows wrong or do the values of these particular shows not reflect the values of certain communities?

Dr. Olds: That's the critical question, it seems to me. Do television and the media set values for us or do they mirror values or, in fact, are they forming the values of society?

Mr. Mueller: I don't think they form values. I think they mirror values. I think that they mirror bad values and they mirror good values and it is up to the individual consumer to decide what values they are going to take away from programming, what values are good for their families and what values are bad for their families.

News-wise I can tell you that values are very important to what we do. We try to reflect the values of the community. We know that family and church and school are all important here and we try to make sure that we make that part of our newscast. On the other hand, we have to be objective and sometimes cover issues that do not reflect the values of the community because we have to tell about those stories.

Dr. Olds: You come into our living rooms every night and somebody over at that station makes a decision about which stories will be told. How do you do that?

Mr. Mueller: We cast a big net. We look at global stories with all the impact being, the most important fact being, do they affect the community that we live in? Are they important to the people of Middle Tennessee? Sometimes we succeed, sometimes we don't. Sometimes it's obvious what the news story of the day is—war on terrorism, the shuttle disaster— or local issues—a big school referendum, a new company coming to town that may mean new businesses and growth for the community, school issues—those are important things.

Sometimes they are not as obvious and sometimes they may affect just a section of the community. We can't just do stories about Brentwood because we have to cover a bigger area. A big traffic accident that blocks up traffic on the north side of town affects a lot of people there, but it may not affect anyone here. So those are the judgments we have to try to make. Stories that impact the whole area that we cover as well as specific areas, stories that are important to individuals, the people that we call our audience, people that live in Middle Tennessee. We make judgments on a daily basis.

What's important right now? Probably all of our thoughts and prayers are with the service men that are being deployed. Last year I was in Afghanistan for two weeks because we thought it was important to tell the story of the men and women who were serving over there. Today we are sending a crew to Iraq because we think it is important again.

Dr. Olds: Thanks to the media we see it all up close and personal. Thank you so much Bob. Thank you for being here today.

Values. Who sets them? What is the responsibility of the community? What is the responsibility of the media to determine them?

So Jesus and his friends have a spectacular and mysterious experience on the mountain that we call the Transfiguration. It was full of mystery. The immediate response of Peter is to institutionalize it and market it. Jesus says just keep it to yourselves. Just leave it as a mystery. Some things are best not reported. Ponder the power of the media.

PURSUE ITS POSSIBILITIES

Seize the day—Carpe Diem

The genius of the Christian Church has been its ability to adapt its methods without abandoning its message.

In the oral tradition of the first century, the gospels were written. By writing them, the scriptures were preserved in remarkable, pure form to the present day. Writing in the first century was revolutionary. It changed the system by which the stories were told. They put them in print, wrote them down. So you and I today have a rather accurate account of the gospels, because people dared to take

a risk to do it in a new and different way.

The one thing that made the Protestant Reformation powerful was the printing press. Without it, Martin Luther would have simply been a rebellious monk. The 95 Theses would have been simply placed on a door. But something happened. Guttenberg had invented the printing press and suddenly this movement, this revolution, this re-formation of the Church took life and gave birth to what you and I know today.

We have entered a visual, sensational, experiential season of communication in the world. We don't go to sporting events for the game as much as for the experience. In the first place, we've been conditioned by television that this is the place to be. Once there, the game on the field is secondary to the hype in the stands including fireworks, giveaways, videos, and instant replays.

Meanwhile, people are invited to church to read out of a bulletin, listen to a sermon, and sing songs that are centuries old. Is it any wonder that some people find church boring?

The purpose of worship is not to entertain, but it must be engaging for a divine connection to take place. Jesus would say, "Seize the day. Don't ignore it; use it for good and positive ends." Jesus would say, "Seek the lost. Go into the highways and alley ways of life and invite people to my party." What better way to do that than through the effective use of modern media? Main line denominations ignored radio and television creating a vacuum for religious hucksters to roam. Are we going to do likewise with the Internet? Are we, as the mainline church, going to sit it out when it comes to engaging in this means of communication?

Beginning this week you can watch our Faith Breaks on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 7 a.m. and 12 midnight on Channel 2 television. You can listen to our Faith Breaks on WSIX radio every Tuesday and Thursday at 7:45 a.m.—Why? Some people ask that question. Are we so desperate for members that we need to advertise? Why invite more people to church when it's already full?

Let me answer that question with a parable of Jesus. Once upon a time, a certain man prepared a great banquet. When everything was ready those who were invited sent regrets that they couldn't come. So the master gathered his servants and said, "Go out quickly to the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and lame." And when there was still room, the master said again, "Go to the roads and country lanes and make them come in so that my house will be full." People of every age, stage, and station of life deserve a simple invitation to God's party.

If media-presence is a matter of making members, we could spend our money more profitably elsewhere. If it is a matter of taking a message of love and grace to every strata of society, I ask you to show me a better way.

If you want to be a part of expanding our presence in the media, give me your name after this service of worship. We have a task group working on that very

issue. What would Jesus say about the media? He would say, “Seize the day, carpe diem, use the moment, seek the lost with it.” What would he say? I think he would say, “Redeem it in every way.”

Redeem the Medium

Mr. Rogers died this week. For 34 years, this gentle Presbyterian minister put on his sweater, changed into his sneakers, looked into the television camera and invited children to his neighborhood—a place where children were special, the days were beautiful, and people learned to respect one another. Who is going to replace Mr. Rogers?

We simply cannot allow the Internet to threaten the safety of our children by exposing them to predators and enticing them with filth. Who is going to draw the line and set the standards unless it's people like you?

If the television and the music industry are not willing to police themselves in the proliferation of sex and violence, are we really at the mercy of the First Amendment to endure it? What if the decent people of America organize to boycott sponsors which may attack the greed which fuels it in the first place? What is the responsibility of ordinary people in the community to set the standards for which we will experience the world?

What Would Jesus Say about the Media? Maybe he would say use it, but never be used BY it.

This is the word of the Lord as I understand it; the purpose of discussion is to discover greater truths. Amen.

