

## HEALING OF LIFESTYLE

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 10th October 2004

Micah 6: 1-8; James 5: 13-16; John 14: 1-3

Most likely, when the word “healing” is mentioned, we think first of physical needs, then maybe also emotional & spiritual needs. It may therefore sound strange or even far-fetched to talk about healing of lifestyle.

And what is lifestyle? Is it the title of a glossy magazine? Some of our big cities now have Lifestyle Centres – not just a little garden nursery, but a huge centre offering everything for home and garden associated with an affluent stylish life. I’m not referring to that, nor am I about to suggest we turn our car park into the Hilton Lifestyle Centre.

Broadly speaking, I’m referring to the pattern of how we live, eat and spend recreational time, how we conduct our working lives and social activities, what rules our diaries and our relationships - and how these all shape society & how society shapes us.

Although I know some of you have heard it before I want to tell you the story of “the frog in the kettle”. It sounds like an activity of a horrible schoolboy - but it is also the eye-catching title of a book by George Barna, a highly acclaimed marketer and researcher in the USA, also a Christian, who did research on the state of the Christian Church in general alongside his work for many of the largest corporations of N. America.

He writes:

“Place a frog in a kettle of boiling water and it will quickly jump out, aware that the environment is dangerous.

Place a frog in a kettle of room-temperature water, and slowly increase the temperature of the water until it is boiling. The frog will stay in the water until it boils to death.

Will the Christian community be like the frog?"

Let’s face it: We all live as “creatures of our time”, and I doubt any of us truly live in ways that are completely counter-culture. Generally we adopt the assumptions and living patterns of society around us, sometimes unquestioningly, uncritically.

Some of us may be in a position to really influence and shape society. Many of us are in a position to influence a few people in some way, such as children and family members, work colleagues etc. And all of us are influenced and shaped by others around us to varying degrees. That is not all bad, and some influences may be very good.

In many ways, our society faces issues no different from others in previous centuries.

They cause us varying levels of stress, but are factors that affect how we live:

- Wars, social strife
- Political concerns and threats (even in Jesus' day, furious conflicts raging)
- Poverty
- Problems relating to morals and affluence
- Corruption and abuses of power
- Human hearts and minds, capable of great acts of love and creativity  
Yet often used for depravity and cruelty
- Rebellion against God

[The Old Testament is a history of the continuous patterns of faithfulness and unfaithfulness of God's people, contrasted with God's faithfulness in loving them and reaching out to them to restore relationship.]

Yet we also face issues very different from other periods, which define our age:

- Such changes to the family and community, that "stable family life" is no longer considered a norm
- Secularism, the edging out of the spiritual dimension esp. from the public sphere
- Resistance to integrating spiritual belief with daily behaviour
- Strong emphasis on the personal, to the detriment of community or family
- We speak a lot about "finding balance in our lives" ... yet our lives grow more hectic as we feel obliged to cram more into every 24 hours
- ... Reflected in increasing levels of aggression, in road rage, in children displaying the violent aggression of their parents and increasing numbers of teenagers with stress-diseases that were previously considered "adult illnesses"
- Rejection of any sense of absolute moral standards: "I do what suits me and the reaching of my personal goals."
- Greater use of technology to free us up to have more personal time - which we fill with more activities and expectations, thus being busier than ever with little time for ourselves, and almost no reflection on our lives and on what is really important.

I could continue, but all I'm doing is highlighting trends which affect how we live and which (for us as Christians) affect how we live our lives for God. Much of this is in stark contrast to God's patterns, expressly stated throughout the Spirit-inspired books and letters that we revere as "God's Word".

So much in our lives is a contradiction of what God knew would be best for us. Even when we know that so clearly, we often still say to ourselves, "we live in the real world, which is imperfect and sinful, and these are just the realities of it". True! But we also live with the consequences of that "real world", which includes alienation from God, and lack of wholeness in so many spheres. Referring back to the "frog in the kettle" analogy, it may sometimes be that we so acclimatise to the situation around us that we fail to see the harm it may be doing us!

As Christians, we try however imperfectly to direct our lives primarily towards God, living in friendship with God and according to the values of the Kingdom of God. We are directed to live with God at the centre, and to walk humbly with God. The OT passage refers to one of those cycles in the life of God's people, experiencing God's goodness in amazing ways yet quickly grumbling when it suited them and turning their backs on God; God asks a later generation of people in similar circumstances to turn back, not with the traditional sin offerings of sacrifices, rather...

...in the manner of their lifestyle: "Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God"

In the remaining minutes of this sermon, I want to challenge us to reflect on our lifestyles. There are questions it may be good to ask ourselves, not for today only but for all days, for instance,

- Am I like the frog in the kettle, slowly boiling to death in hot water but unaware of my impending fate, having become acclimatised to society around me?
- Do I integrate my faith and my daily behaviour?
- That in itself can be a cause of stress, because it may bring me into conflict with prevailing attitudes and values, or it may bring ridicule or rejection, or require great moral courage to be different by living in accordance with godly perspectives on life.
- Am I so hectic in my life, that everything is thrown out of balance, including my friendship with God, family, my mental and physical health?
- Do I walk humbly with my God - implying also that I have taken the trouble to respond to God's great efforts to come alongside me?
- Do I walk trustingly with God, allowing God to deal with my fears? – many of which are absolutely real and legitimate, let us add!

- Do I know that I am deeply loved by God, or do I experience so much stress and alienation in my life that I have walled myself away even from God's love?
- What changes may I need to make in inner attitudes and perspectives, or outer behaviours and lifestyles, to bring about healing in areas of my lifestyle that are under huge stress?
- Areas we CAN change:

(e.g. not seeking higher and higher promotions at work when the stress of that will potentially ruin every other aspect of our lives and compromise the values we claim to hold dear, or the example of family with 3 children with respiratory tract problems and severe asthma, often in hospitals; but both parents smoked 40 – 50 cigs/day. No matter how much we prayed for physical healing, it only came when the parents stopped smoking.)

- Areas we CANNOT change – yet we still need to walk humbly, trustingly with God.

(e.g. work stresses, esp. where dependant upon others – colleagues/superiors)

None of this suggests “moving back to the wilds of nature” (if we all did, there'd be no nature left!), nor am I advocating switching off all technology and living like the Amish people. I am not for a moment suggesting we move out of “the real world”, which is God's world - God made it and placed us in it. But God also gave us parameters in which to live for our own good. When we step outside those parameters, there are negative consequences! And we need healing and deliverance from those. How we live in this world, is a matter of life and death - life and death of our souls!

I close with some words of James, and words of Jesus (Matt. 5 – “The Message”)

Jesus: “Get the inner world right - the heart and mind –

and you will see God in the world around you.”

James: 5: 13-16

Prayers...

We are going to pray, in a way different to the way we usually do. Our church community is a “lifestyle centre” – a place where we can be encouraged to reflect on our lives, and to ask God to renew us to live with God at the centre, also healing us, also correcting our imbalanced perspectives, and re-focusing in a more godly way than before.

[Explanation of Prayer Time – anointing at the altar rail as a sign of God's grace in our lives, and asking for healing in body, mind and spirit (as needed) and recommitting our selves to living trustingly and humbly with God.]

