

The Life and Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Lesson Two: Living in Christian Community
February 1, 2025

Opening Prayer

Brief Introductions

Opening:

Martin Niemöller was a friend of Bonhoeffer and prominent Lutheran pastor in Germany. In the 1920s and early 1930s, he sympathized with many Nazi ideas and supported radically right-wing political movements. Later, Niemöller became an outspoken critic of Hitler's interference in the Protestant Church. He spent the last eight years of Nazi rule, from 1937 to 1945, in Nazi prisons and concentration camps. This famous quote is attributed to him:

- First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.
- Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.
- Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.
- Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Sermon on the Mount Bible Study (separate handout)

Watch the Video: Religionless Christianity

What are your initial thoughts about the film? What impacted you? Questions? Concerns? Insights?

Bonhoeffer in America 1939

Friends pulled strings to get Bonhoeffer out of Germany in 1939. They believed his work was too important and his life was in danger. He had many opportunities to teach in America.

After just 26 days his conscience compelled him to return to Germany. (Life together pages 27-28)

- Do you agree with Bonhoeffer's decision to return to Germany?
- If you were his friend, would you have tried to stop him?

Religionless Christianity: The Purpose of Religion

Read from *Letters and Papers from Prison* (pg 66)

Bonhoeffer believed that the Nazis were able to gain power even among the “Christians” of Germany because they practiced religion, not Christianity. They went to church as a matter of responsibility, like a law. They did not live out their Christianity in their lives.

- What is the purpose of religion, to teach us to avoid sin or to teach us to follow Jesus through action or both?
- What is religionless Christianity according to Bonhoeffer?
- How could the phrase “Religionless Christianity” be misused against Bonhoeffer and the church?

Churches, like Christians, require action: Speaking out against injustice and loving your neighbor.

- How is Abiding Savior a religionless church?
- How is Abiding Savior NOT a religionless church?
- Think about what we learned from the Sermon on the Mount.
 - Can we be Christian without actions of love for our neighbor?
 - And who is our neighbor?

Read *Ethics* page 43

- According to Bonhoeffer, when Christians act, are they acting by their own authority or the authority of God?
- Do you agree that we can do nothing without Jesus and all actions of love and service spring from Jesus?
- What does this mean for Bonhoeffer about Christian inaction? (See Matthew 7:24-27 in the Sermon on the Mount)
- How does this understanding of the need for taking action as Christians influence Bonhoeffer’s decision to join the resistance?

John 15:5: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

- What is Jesus telling us here?
- What did Bonhoeffer hear Jesus telling him in this passage?
 - Christians act! If we act, we are acting with Jesus. If we are wrong, Jesus will forgive us, but at least we acted.
 - We are not the moral judge of what Christ calls us to do. When we hear the call of Christ we must act.
- How do we know what God is telling us to do?
- How do we know that what we think is God’s voice is not some other voice? (“True action and false action”)

The Hypocrisy of the Pharisees

Matthew 23

23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’s seat; ³therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴

¹² All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

¹³ “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in you stop them.^[c] ¹⁵

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

²⁵ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and of the plate,^[c] so that the outside also may become clean.

²⁷ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

- How are the Pharisees hypocrites?
- How did the Pharisees inaction or false action influence Bonhoeffer?

Whenever Jesus teaches about the Pharisees, pay attention! He is often talking directly to those with money, power, and influence.

- In what ways do we sometimes act like the hypocritical Pharisees?
- Are we practicing Religion instead of Christianity?

Bonhoeffer's involvement in the plot to kill Hitler

Bonhoeffer was called to action, doing nothing was not an option. Bonhoeffer was a part of the German Intelligence, the *Abwehr*, but was a double agent. He travelled all over Europe meeting with church leaders and was supposed gathering information for the Nazis. In reality, he was meeting with Allied leaders to shore up support for the resistance and to get assurances that the Allies would strike when and if the resistance killed Hitler. Bonhoeffer was not directly involved in the assassination attempts, but he was aware of them and played his part.

Read *Ethics* page 210-211

- What does this teaching of Bonhoeffer teach us about the role of government?
- Why might this create an ethical dilemma for Bonhoeffer?
- If you were Bonhoeffer and you had the opportunity, would you participate in an assassination attempt? Why or why not?
- What role do we have as Christians to stop evil with the use of force, even lethal force, in order to let the oppressed go free?
- Is murder (assassination) even justified?

We are Called to Action

- What are you learning from Bonhoeffer that can be applied to our lives today?
- Are we suspicious of one another today in our society?
- What happens to the free flow of thoughts and ideas when we are suspicious of others?
- What happens if we do not speak out for justice out of love for our neighbor?
- Is loving our neighbor political? Why or why not?

Closing Prayer:

Bonhoeffer's Evening Prayer

O Lord my God,
thank you for bringing this day to a close.
Thank you for giving me rest
in body and soul.
Your hand has been over me
and has guarded and preserved me.
Forgive my lack of faith
and any wrong that I have done today,
and help me to forgive all who have wronged us.
Let me sleep in peace under your protection,
and keep me from all the temptations of darkness.
Into your hands I commend my loved ones.
I commend to you my body and soul.
O God, your holy name be praised.
Amen.