

# Transform Society

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 26 April 2026

Preacher: Rev Mike Rattenbury

[ 0 : 00 ] Lord, as we look into your word together, help us to understand your will for our lives and your ways and increase our love for you through Jesus our Lord.

Amen. Well, over the last couple of months, and there's been a bit of a break over Easter, we've been working our way through the five marks of mission.

And we're resuming that this week with the fourth of those marks, and that is of transforming society. And perhaps while the first three marks were challenging to proclaim the good news of Jesus, to make disciples, and to love one another, this fourth mark of transforming society may be even more challenging in some ways.

But before we look at it from a scriptural perspective, I just want to raise a couple of concerns that we might have about that. The first is, isn't this beyond us?

And the second is, is this really mission? And just to briefly address those two concerns. And for the first concern, I'd just like to remind you of a story that you've probably seen in the news over the last five or six years, as it's unfolded gradually, of one very small boy who has made a huge difference in society.

[ 1 : 35 ] Born in 2014, Tony Smith's parents abused him terribly. He suffered repeated fractures, dislocation of joints.

The harm of the beatings he suffered led to organ failure. He suffered sepsis and nearly died, and the ultimate knock-on effect of that was the loss of his legs.

The most horrific injuries were inflicted on him when he was only six weeks old as a baby. And he was neglected and left in pain for 10 or 11 days before he received any treatment at all.

Not surprisingly, he was removed from his parental home, and Mark and Paula Hudge adopted him, and Tony Smith became known as Tony Hudge.

When he was five years old only, inspired by Captain Tom during that first COVID lockdown, he decided that he would do some fundraising of his own, and although he was only five years old and walking on prosthetic legs because he'd lost both his legs, he decided he'd walk 10 kilometres and raise what he could, and he ended up raising £1.8 million for his children's hospital, as his story caught the public eye.

[ 2 : 55 ] That was the story back in 2020, and subsequent to that, he's made the headlines again, because Tony's story has also inspired two changes to British law, covering child cruelty and neglect.

And the latter of those two changes to the law came into force only this year. Tony, of course, is now 11 going on 12. But a huge impact from one very small life at a national scale.

And that's not to say that we're all going to have stories like Tony Hudge's, and certainly from the violence that he suffered, I hope we don't, but just a story that occasionally small people can achieve big things, great things.

The second concern is, is transforming society really part of our mission? Isn't mission about proclaiming the Lord Jesus?

And again, the answer to this, as we've looked at for the last three times we've been looking at the marks of mission, is to see this world as God sees it, and his wider mission is to redeem and to change and to transform a fallen, sinful world.

[ 4 : 10 ] And it's within that perspective that transforming society, I would say, is very much part of the church's mission. I would always, always see the primacy of the gospel, that we are called to see a new creation in people's lives, to be born again, to come alive to God, and to know him, and to experience that redemption that Jesus has won for us on the cross.

That is the core of the gospel that we proclaim. But to reach out and to transform the society of the world that God has created that has fallen, sits alongside that. And in meeting people's practical needs, that works alongside meeting people's spiritual needs. And we shouldn't see the two as a choice, that we need to say, oh, I'm going to do this and not that, or I'm going to do that and not this.

The two sit very well side by side. And as we seek to meet people's social and practical needs, that can have a knock-on effect in saying, this is the God that we serve, this is the good news, and Jesus has got a lot more for you, even than that.

And in terms of both concerns, whether we feel insignificant, inadequate, insufficient for the task at hand, remember that we are called, not just to do it all ourselves in our own strength, and then feel overwhelmed by it, but to remember our calling, which is to be fellow workers in what the Lord God is already doing.

[ 5 : 50 ] Ours is not the main task, ours is very much an assistant role. We help, and we support, and we proclaim what God himself is wanting to do, and is already doing.

It's not just down to us. And that's sort of quite encouraging to know. So looking into scripture together, what have we got here that says that the Lord wants to see society transformed? And particularly, we go to the Old Testament to find the strongest scriptures on this, and remember that what we call the Old Testament, to the apostles themselves in Jesus' time, that was the scriptures.

They didn't have the New Testament then, because they hadn't written it yet. And when you get mentions of the scriptures, in the Gospels, and in Paul's letters, and the other letters as well, those, what the New Testament describes as the scriptures, we know of as the Old Testament.

And there, we find God clearly revealed as a God of justice and peace. And throughout the Old Testament, that sense of justice, of rightness, of fairness, is rooted in God's character.

[ 7 : 07 ] We can see in the Old Testament what pleases God, and we can see the sort of things that displease Him. And that was very much at the heart of the reading that we just had now, from Amos, where the corrupt society of Israel, in Amos' day, you trample on the poor, you despise those who tell the truth, you build stone mansions for yourselves, you're not going to live in them, you plant lush vineyards, I know how many your offences are, and how great your sins, you oppress the righteous, take bribes, sensible people keep quiet.

This is a very corrupt society. And Amos pulls no punches as he denounces what he sees going on around him. He condemns the oppressor, the corrupt, and those who deny justice to the poor.

And that's not obviously the only passage. If we look in the Psalms, Psalm 11, verse 7, says something similar. The Lord is righteous, he loves justice, upright men will see his face.

And there's an echo there of the beatitudes that Jesus gives, they shall see God. Exodus 22, verse 21, And although we are not under law, we still value what God says in his word, as to the things that please him, the things that he wants, and the things he doesn't want.

And in Exodus 22, verses 21 and following, do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do, and they cry out to me, the Lord says, I will certainly hear their cry.

[ 8 : 48 ] My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword. Your wives will become widows, and your children fatherless. Do not ill-treat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.

And so we see there, God's concern for the underdog, people who are the have-nots in society, God has a special care and concern for them. Going back into the prophets, I was swithering as to whether to use a reading from Micah or Amos.

I went with the Amos reading in the end, but if we just go to Micah, and Micah chapter 6, we have these very well-known words that stand out so brightly and so clearly.

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

Those are such beautiful words, and they describe an engagement of the heart. We're not just doing these things because we're being watched and we're threatened with punishment if we don't do them.

[ 10 : 04 ] We're not just doing these things because God is somehow keeping an eye on us and we dutifully want to do that or we'll do the right thing. There is that sense of actually wanting to, of loving to do so, of this is actually really what we want to be like.

To love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. This is what he wants. And there are many, many, many more scriptures there that we could turn to that say the same thing.

It's not just don't do evil, but it is to love good. And throughout the Old Testament, we see God's love, his passion, his concern for justice and for righteousness.

So is this reflected in the New Testament or are we just looking back to the Old Testament? And of course, yes, it is. And we find it in the words and the teachings and the actions of the Lord Jesus. In Luke 11, we see that Jesus was no different to Amos when he denounced the Pharisaic religion that neglected justice. And you might have noticed in that reading from Amos that there was that sort of hint there.

[11:16] And I must admit, I hadn't spotted it earlier on when I was preparing this, but where it says, seek good, not evil, that you may live.

Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you just as you say he is. This was a religious age that Amos lived in and people were quite regular in going to the temple and worshiping and saying, oh, God is with us.

But their lives didn't reflect that. What they said wasn't what they were doing. And the Pharisees were similar to that in the New Testament time. They were very much worshipping devout people, but there was a strong streak of hypocrisy in them.

We see in Matthew how Jesus' care for women and children again was radical. That in a society where women and children were very much seen as second rate, it was very much a male-oriented society, Jesus singles the women and children out and cares for them.

We see how Jesus overrode the Sabbath to heal. And again, that outraged the Pharisees and Jesus' enemies that he was somehow bending what they saw as the religious rules in order to do good.

[12:34] I could read from Matthew 12 verses 9 to 13. Going on from that place, he went to the synagogue. A man with a shriveled hand was there looking for a reason to accuse Jesus.

They asked him, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? He said to them, if any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?

How much more valuable it is how much more valuable is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Then he said to the man, stretch out your hand and heal him.

And it says, the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. There's a real disconnect between their religion and their piety and their hatred for Jesus when he did the right thing.

So Jesus combined the social and the spiritual. He taught repentance, he addressed sin, he commanded people turn to God, but he also fed the poor and he healed the sick.

[13:43] And that's reflected in his initial words when he began his ministry and we read that in Luke 4 when he quotes Isaiah. Again, he's quoting the scripture, what was scripture for him and Jesus, as he begins his ministry, takes the scroll and he reads in the synagogue, the spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And again, we see that blend of the practical and the social, of restoring, of healing the blind, of setting people free, of lifting the burden off the oppressed and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus, in Matthew, says, blessed are the poor in spirit. In Luke's gospel, Jesus says, blessed are the poor. So is it blessed are the poor in spirit or is it blessed are the poor?

Or is it both? That Jesus is concerned to bring blessing to the poor, people who are the have-nots materially.

[15:03] He wants to bring them God's blessing. But he also recognizes, as do we, that meeting people's physical and practical and social needs, if we don't meet their spiritual needs as well, isn't doing a complete job.

But if we only meet the spiritual needs and we neglect the practical needs, that's incomplete as well. Are we forced to choose? Of course not. We are encouraged to do what we can to meet the needs at both levels.

And many of Jesus' healings show that blend of a physical and a spiritual dimension. In Luke chapter 5 verses 20 to 26, we read of one of Jesus' healings and I think it's the guy who gets lowered through the house roof.

His friends carry him onto the roof of the house, knock a hole in the roof and lower him down. It's a very spectacular healing miracle. But Jesus, the first thing that Jesus says is your sins are forgiven. And that creates an outrage. And then Jesus says, okay, which is the harder to do, to forgive sins or to heal him? And then he heals him as well. Again, we see that blend of spiritual and practical need. [16:24] And we find that as we read on into the New Testament that both Paul and James emphasize that faith should be transformative. In Romans 12, we could read quite a lot of Romans 12, but from verse 9 onwards, love must be sincere, hate what is evil, cling to what is good.

It is so down to earth. In Romans 13, verse 7, it says, give everyone what you owe him. If you owe taxes, pay taxes.

That doesn't get preached on very often, does it? If revenue, then revenue. If respect, then respect. If honour, then honour. There is a practical dimension to the way that we live lives so that they honour God.

And they proclaim that there is justice, that there is righteousness, and this is what the Lord stands for. And we set a lead by our example in a society which seeks to get away with what it can. if you can find ways of not paying your taxes, well, wriggle out of it if you can. That is the mindset of our society. What Paul is writing here is saying Christians should stand out as different, that we shouldn't be seeking ways out of things, we should just pay our taxes and our revenue and our respect and our honour because that is the right thing to do.

[17:46] And sometimes, transforming society is simply doing so by setting a lead in doing the right thing, which is often not what we see going on round about us.

James, of course, is even more to the point. In James 2, verses 14 and onwards, what good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?

Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

In the same way, faith by itself, if it's not accompanied by action, is dead. What we believe, the relationship we have with the Lord, the redemption that we experience, the gospel we proclaim, should affect affect the way that we live.

And the way that we live should have a leavening effect on the society that we live in. So God's passion for justice, as revealed in the Old Testament, is reflected by a call to live godly, righteous, just lives in the new, because that is the fruit of the relationship that we should find that we have in the Lord Jesus.

[19:12] How we share God's passion for justice and peace when we recognize that God has a passion is a challenge to us. We can start thinking about unjust structures when you're looking at the marks of mission, and we're not all Tony Hudgills, we're not all able to work at a global level, we're not influential people that can transform society because we've got so much clout.

And these unjust structures can seem huge and unshakable. We're talking about global politics. How are we going to sort out the mess that there is in the Middle East at the moment?

How are we going to resolve historic injustices? Isn't that something more at governmental level than us? But it can be grassroots, and sometimes it is a grassroots change that has that eventual effect.

It wasn't just Tony Hudgill who raised 1.8 million for his children's hospice and later on influenced Parliament to change two laws on child cruelty and neglect.

It wasn't him alone. He was the focal point. His determination was the spark, the trigger, if you like. But it was also every individual who said, that's good, I'm going to support him, I'll sponsor him.

[20:40] It was every voter who said, I want to be behind that. There was a groundswell started off by the example of one person that led to a groundswell of public opinion that led to the change in the law.

And remember that even the Old Testament prophets, however powerfully God used them, were individuals individuals as well. Amos, Micah, all the other prophets were perfectly normal individuals who God chose to use in an extraordinary way.

You could even say that prophecy was the voice of protest in partnership with God because Amos was protesting against what he saw going on round about him and he wasn't afraid to stand up and say this is wrong and God is not pleased with it.

And God endorsed that, God moved by his spirit in Amos and the other prophets and we have the record of it today to encourage us. The prophets were voices only.

They warned, they spoke out, they didn't change anything but then the Lord acted. There was that partnership that Amos said if you don't mend your ways God is going to act in judgment and the hope was that the people would change their ways and sometimes they did.

[ 22 : 14 ] Sometimes there was a repentance and things did improve but ultimately at the end of the day God gave up and said okay you're going out of the land for a time you're going into exile and God intervened and allowed first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians to come in.

He never gave up on his people but God acted at a much higher level than Amos or any of the other prophets. They were simply voices working in partnership with the Lord who has the real power.

Act chapter 2 again the early the very very early church at Pentecost and the following days modelled a kinder society and as we read in Acts chapter 2 we read how that church acted and I've chosen in verse 44 that well known passage they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship the breaking of bread and prayer and it says all the believers were together and had everything in common selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need.

That infant church modelled a different a kinder society a less greedy a more selfless a more generous society and it had an impact on the people round about it says that more people became believers.

the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved because it was a powerful witness that backed up the gospel message that they proclaimed.

[ 24 : 03 ] Later on it was the church that would save exposed babies that were abandoned on rubbish hips by an uncaring Roman society. It was the Christians who would buy slaves to set them free.

It was the Christians who would boycott the gladiatorial games that eventually led to the games running out of steam and being abandoned and people were no longer killed for public entertainment.

And just about every social reform ever since has been initiated and motivated and driven by Christians. That is one of the joyful things that the church can look back on and say we've done a good job there.

it's not an easy thing to do it's a costly thing. It's so often sneered at at weakness love your enemies pray for those who persecute you.

Jesus is repeated you've heard it said but I say to you in the Sermon on the Mount it's radical it's costly and it's often sneered at by people who value strength over love.

[ 25 : 10 ] Jesus acknowledges that he says so they treated the prophets who were before you. If you're treated with contempt for doing the right thing well so were the prophets.

But the lesson of history was that the prophets were vindicated and the people who did the treating with contempt it didn't end so well for them. Better to side with the prophets and suffer for doing right than to come under judgment for loving evil.

It's hard not just because it's unpopular but because our instinct is wrong. My instinct is for revenge. If I'm offended, if I'm hurt, if I'm ill-treated my natural instinct is to retaliate some way and wish harm on the person that's been harming me.

That is human nature. So how does love your enemy and pray for those who ill-treat you work? But it does work and in Christ and with the strength of his spirit we can heal instead of harm.

But healing justice is still confrontational. To reply with love is still as shocking as it was in Jesus' name because there is a justice here when Jesus says pray for those who persecute you, love your enemies.

[ 26 : 38 ] there is a justice there because ultimately we are working with God's justice that wants to win people over and to repair the damage not repeat it.

But we too need changing so that we are willing partners with the Lord in that. So there are challenges here as we look at this fourth mark of mission of transforming society to recognise that yeah this is the way that God wants to work, it's the way that God wants us to work in partnership with him and it raises questions for us.

How can I be a peacemaker? How can I respond rightly and lovingly when I'm on the receiving end of injustice? Lord change me because I need changing as well.

How can I be more just and I'm preaching this to myself as well, how do I spend my money? Do I go for the cheapest bargain because I usually do or shall I be more careful in looking to make sure that I'm buying things where the farmers and the producers are getting a fair price and workers are getting a fair wage and they are not being exploited?

I need to be more conscientious in that because I know my own spending patterns but perhaps being more aware that as I preach this I need to do something about that as well.

[ 28 : 03 ] How can I be more prophetic? can I speak out more when I see things that are wrong in society? We've got elections coming up soon. Far be it for me to say who to vote for but this ought to be an election issue.

Are we campaigning for a fairer and better society? And practically how can I support others who are engaged in this? I said earlier that as a congregation by default we support the work of Cross Reach and the work that they do but to be more conscious of what they do and to give and to support and be willing and more prayerful about the work of organisations like Cross Reach and Tier Fund in their work seeking to transform society and make something better of it.

To conclude God's mission is to restore humanity to his original created intent. The Bible begins with the creation not the fall.

The Bible ends in revelation with a new heaven and a new earth where everything is restored. It doesn't end with judgment. It goes beyond that to the new creation.

God's mission is ultimately to restore to his original created intent. And because that is God's mission, that should be our calling as well.

[ 29 : 30 ] See what God is doing, model it in the way that we live, be a prophetic voice in speaking up for it, and proclaim Jesus as Saviour and Lord both.

Amen.