

Social Justice Beyond Social Media

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It never really was supposed to be Radical...

It's become a fad the last decade or two in mainstream American Christianity, and you can see it all over Facebook and Twitter.

The phrase "social justice" has entered the Christian vernacular in the mainstream and has helped form programs, ministries and how we communicate via social media. You do not have to read the Bible carefully to get why this is a good thing; the teaching to love the poor, widow, orphan and immigrant is in literally every section and genre. God said in the law that there should be no poor among the Israelites and to love the immigrant "as you love yourself". In narrative God exalts Ruth, a poor, widowed immigrant woman as the heroine of her book. Israel's songbook says that the man who considers the poor is blessed. God speaking through a prophet says that King Josiah "defended the cause of the poor and needy" and then asks "Is that not what it means to know me?"

Jesus said in the Gospels to love the least of these is to literally love him. And in the epistles Paul said it was always his ambition to serve the poor. Depending on how you count, anywhere from 1500 to 2200 verses in the Bible teach this.

It seems that while God loves all people, he has a special place in His heart for those who are the victims of injustice.

We have the Instagram and Facebook pictures to prove it..

Somehow this theology escaped much of Christianity for the better part of the 20th century. Now we have legions of books, internet articles, Youtube videos and blogs dedicated to this topic. And the church has responded. Sponsoring children in poor countries, visiting prisons and soup kitchens, disaster relief, speaking out on social media about racial injustice and short term mission trips have become all the rage. It has become somewhat of a litmus test for churches these days to measure what they are doing for the disenfranchised people around them. Which is great.

The Inside Out, Upside Down Kingdom of God

Yet, I submit that social justice – truly biblical social justice – goes beyond posts and tweets and even beyond serving in the short term. One of the most convicting and sharp teachings of Christ is found in Luke 14:12-14, where he tells his listeners while at a banquet that when they invite people to their homes, they should not invite their friends, family and those who are rich, but instead to invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind.

I think Jesus is teaching something deeper than serving people with money from a distance or for a couple of hours at a time or even for a whole week. He doesn't really teach in this passage to serve. He is teaching, I think, that to love the poor we do not just *serve*, but we go even further in that we *associate*. I take from his words that when people had luncheons and dinners in his culture, they invited their social equals. As is typical of Jesus, he teaches something counterintuitive, countercultural and as inside out and upside down as could be: you should treat those society says are beneath you as though they are your family and best friends.

The Heart of the Church, Not an appendage

What does this look like for our culture? How do we go beyond just serving the poor, orphan, immigrant, etc. to associating with them? Well I think it begins with a flaw in our thinking as far as how we do church in our country. Even if we never say it this way, we far too often approach church ministry as “if you become like us, you will be welcome”. We often attend church with people who dress like us, speak in our cultural coded language, like our kind of music and get all of our inside jokes. People who do not, will feel out of place. And make no mistake, associating with the poor will be essentially impossible with this approach. And even if our churches have ministry to the poor, they may end up as a compartmentalized extension—an appendage—instead of having them as part of our DNA.

The commission has never been getting people to “come” to us but instead commanding us to “go”. The flaw is directional. We should go to them, live among them (when possible), associate with them, socialize with them and build community organically from that. Then the poor are welcomed no matter their dress or taste in music. As it was in the early church in Acts.

To give a specific example from my life, I am convinced God called me into a Spanish speaking neighborhood in Chicago to minister. I teach ESL classes to the neighborhood because it is by far the biggest need. But I have also attempted (poorly at times, just being honest) to learn the cultures and languages of my neighbors. To say it one way, teaching English is a way to serve; learning Spanish is a way to associate. This is just one example. I know that many, many people have done more that I can dream of to associate with the poor. Yet we all can do something.

Paul said people treated him as scum and refuse...what does honor mean to you?

But Luke 14:12-14 has context. Why did Jesus have to teach these people to invite the poor instead of their friends? Well vs. 7-11 explains why. The crowd at this banquet were far too concerned with being honored. They did not want to humble themselves, but wanted to be exalted. Hence they would have considered the poor far beneath them. Is it possible that we are the same? It is possible that we stop with serving a couple of hours a week or a for two weeks every summer and then go back to the safety of our world of social equals and family and churches of people just like us because we do not want to humble ourselves to associate?

But this thought is not complete in my understanding of Christianity. The other side to the context of Luke 14:12-14 is vs. 15-24, Jesus giving a parable of inviting three people to a banquet. They all make excuses as to why they cannot. And so instead Christ has them go out into the streets and invite the poor, lame, blind, etc. What could he mean by this?

Notice the three excuses the people give: they could not come because of relationships, activity and wealth. The poor are then invited, who generally do not have these things. Following on the heels of Luke 14:7-12, I think Jesus is teaching that we should associate with the poor because the very things that keep us from being poor (relationships, activity, wealth) are the very things that distract us from truly understanding our need for God. By associating with the poor, we are reminded of who we are spiritually. Luke 14:15-24 is the same exact scene as the prior verses. These things are connected.

A Beggar Showing Other Beggars...

Jesus taught that you cannot enter into his kingdom if you are not poor in spirit, the word for poor in Matthew 5:3 being the word for a person who had no resources to get money and had to beg for it. That is significant. When we value honor and consider the poor to be beneath us, we are missing the point of Christianity entirely. God is only valued correctly when we see how desperate our need for him is. Perhaps God loves the poor so much—2,000 verses worth—because they do not have anything to cloud their view of how badly they need Him. Perhaps this is why Christ repeatedly stated it is hard for the rich to get into Heaven. Relationships are necessary. Activity is great. Wealth in and of itself is not evil. But these things can and do distract us. [Note that Luke 14:25-35 is right after this, where Jesus teaches that we must hate the people closest to us in comparison to our love for Him. It's all connected.] By associating with the poor, we should be reminded of who, according to Jesus in Matthew 5 and Luke 6, is truly in his kingdom. Isn't that the point of Luke 18:9-14?

Lastly, I will add that this proves another directional mistake we make in Christianity. When we serve but do not associate, we are very tempted to think we reach *down* to serve the poor. But when serve while associating, we realize that in the Christian worldview, we reach *across*. Luke 14:7-12 teaches clearly that the Bible demands we see ourselves as equal to the poor. Because spiritually it is who we are. My ESL students want to see me as their superior as an English teacher in the US. But my faith demands I cannot see it that way. At the foot of the cross, all are poor in spirit and therefore entirely equal. And by having been to other countries where I was the minority struggling with the language, I can see myself as equal to them much more easily. Association teaches me humility.

Humility is not Goodness, It's Honesty

Other religions and philosophies teach service to the poor and even associating with the poor, but none of them start with Christianity's starting point. The rest of the world teaches that we do it to be good; Christianity teaches we do it because we are not good. Everything I do for my neighborhood in Chicago (and honestly, I am often lazy and do very little) is because I am poor in spirit and following Christ by grace.

And with that as our starting point, we can truly move beyond just serving the poor, orphan, widow and immigrant and to associating with them. Which means loving them as God does.