

The Beatitudes: A Call to Social Justice

Don't tell Jesus that religion plays no part in the public arena or that faith is just a private matter between you and your Creator. He'll think you weren't listening. Jesus' inaugural address as he begins his ministry in Galilee clearly points to social justice:

"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."

This opening address emerges from the book of Isaiah (61:1, 2). Why is this important? Isaiah is the most prominent source for the formative language used by Jesus in announcing the Kingdom of God. Isaiah begins to define how Jesus himself views the world under God's reign, in contrast to the way the world functions with human rulers such as Caesar. Isaiah stresses that only God is to be exalted and all other high and mighty elements within society (wealthy people, empires) will be reduced to their proper place in due time. In the words of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, "Yahweh is to be known as a God committed to the establishment of concrete sociopolitical justice in a world of massive power organized against justice."

In order to fully appreciate the importance of social justice as a primary focus of Jesus, one must look to the Beatitudes found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, widely recognized as Jesus' most authoritative discourse:

"Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 5:3). The Hebrew word used here implies one who is both economically poor and spiritually humble. Depending on the context in which it is used the Hebrew connotation reflects one who is being oppressed by the rich and is needy or one who is humble and pious. On more than one occasion, Jesus teaches the value of being "spiritually poor". People who are humble in their spirituality acknowledge that they don't have all of the answers and therefore they are willing to look to God for guidance. This will enable them to see God's vision for the world and they will be more disposed to follow his way. The wealthy and self-righteous assume they already have the answers so they stop listening for God's word.

"Blessed are those who mourn (grieve, weep), for they will be comforted." (Matt 5:4). The Hebrew word used here has a double meaning. We are inclined to interpret this in terms of grief, losing something or someone you care about. However, the word also has implications of remorse, as in mourning our personal and communal sinning, our acting in ways contrary to God's will and truly wanting to revert back to His way. We see this in the proclamation of the Jewish prophets that God's judgment will come upon those who do not mourn, referring to those who do not see the needs of the poor and destitute.

Within this context those who mourn are blessed and comforted because they see the world's injustice and act to relieve it.

"Blessed are the meek (humble), for they will inherit the earth." (Matt 5:5). Again, we commonly misinterpret this as referring to a docile and submissive person. However, the Hebrew word applies to a person that is socially and economically powerless or one who has surrendered himself completely to the will of God. Both John the Baptist and Jesus exemplify this Hebrew connotation, but I doubt any of us would characterize these men as unassertive since they continually challenged the political and religious elite. The other connotation of this word comes from the Greek word for meek or humble which has the implication of nonviolence and peacemaking. We see this usage in the description of Jesus entering Jerusalem "humble and mounted on a donkey". This differentiates Jesus' nonviolent approach from that of the Zealots who condoned violent rebellion for reestablishing the reign of God.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (Matt 5:6). Our misperceptions here stem from the interpretation of "righteousness", a word that appears more than 500 times in the Hebrew Scripture and 200 times in the New Testament. Too often we interpret this as virtue or holiness. However both the Hebrew and Greek word allude to a pursuit of social justice, a justice that restores the community to the way God envisioned it. It is doing right by God, through our actions and relationships. In Isaiah, it is used repeatedly to indicate the delivery of a justice that rescues the oppressed.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (Matt 5:7). Most often we think of mercy in terms of forgiveness, but the Greek word used here denotes one who is generous in doing deeds of deliverance whether that be releasing one from bondage, healing, or giving to those in need. A different Greek word is used when referring to forgiveness. When two blind men followed Jesus and call out, "Have mercy on us, son of David!", they are not requesting forgiveness. They are requesting a release from the bondage of their affliction. (Matt 9:27-31) in light of this, the best interpretation of this beatitude is "Blessed are those who reach out to others with compassion and relieve their needs."

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Matt 5:8). In a community where outward rituals of purity dominated (fancy robes with tassels and scripture boxes, temple sacrifices, public displays of praying), Jesus refocuses his listeners on purity from within, purity that only comes from an inner orientation toward God, one that allows God to transform us into people who will bring his vision into the world.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." (Matt 5:9). The poor and oppressed are tempted to reverse social order through rebellion (ex. Zealots), but here Jesus stresses that unity with God and each other only evolves from peace. Too often we choose to exert control or power over those we perceive as enemies of God, all the while thinking we are demonstrating our loyalty to God. Jesus makes it clear that God's grace requires us to forgive our enemies and come to them in a posture of peace. Jesus reinforces this through his other teachings on loving one's enemies (Matt 7:43-48).

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus adds, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matt 5:10-12). These dual passages remind us of the societal reaction one expects whenever someone stands up for social justice. The Jewish prophets and Jesus were both rejected by the religious and political elite of their day, as were contemporary heroes of justice such as Oscar Romero and Martin Luther King Jr. Yet this is what Jesus requires of us as disciples. When it comes to Jesus' teachings, we don't get to pick and choose, focusing only on those we find easy. He clearly challenges us to embark on a quest for social justice, a life dedicated to caring for the destitute, supporting the vulnerable, and restoring those who have been ostracized or marginalized. So why aren't we committed to this challenge Jesus so clearly delivers? First and foremost, we treasure our material goods and personal accomplishments. Our focus is clearly placed on three P's, power, possessions, and prestige. Any move in a different direction is therefore seen as a renunciation of the happiness we feel in attaining these. We fail to appreciate that the joy obtained through our current lifestyle is temporary and cannot compare to the joy one experiences through serving others. It seems paradoxical to us that accepting Jesus' challenge to focus on others will bring greater joy than we experience now focusing on ourselves, but that is his promise. Focusing on restoring our local, regional, and global neighborhoods through acts of social justice reconnects us to God and each other in a powerful and transforming way that results in the fullness of life that God intended.

I don't think Jesus expects me to become the next Mother Therese, but there is much I can do. I'm about 20 lbs. overweight. I'm pretty sure that means that I could eat less and donate food to local food banks, or buy less and send a check to organizations fighting global hunger. Since I'm out of closet space, I'm guessing that I don't really need all of those clothes and could take some down to a homeless shelter. If I'm willing to step out of my comfort zone, maybe I could even donate a few hours each week to that shelter, or a church that is located in an impoverished neighborhood. I can help restore those who have lost their way through addiction, visit those who suffer from physical or mental illness, and stand for peace over violence. These are but a few ways that all of us can respond to Jesus' call for social justice and begin to experience the fullness of life and joy he promises.