

The Discipleship Question

MATTHEW 25:31-40 (NRSV) “*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me* clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

*L: The Word of God for the people of God.
P: Thanks be to God.*

This is the next-to-last sermon in a series inspired by the Jim Wallis book, *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus*, in which he discusses a number of ways too many Christians are disconnected from the life and teachings of Jesus, and what being connected to Jesus looks like in those areas. He identifies 8 questions—8 teachings of Jesus that provide a standard by which we can discern whether we truly are seeking to “Reclaim Jesus.” As he begins Chapter nine, he summarizes the first seven as: seeing all human beings as image-bearers of God, loving one’s neighbor, valuing and speaking truth, being a servant leader, learning how to deal with fear, distinguishing what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God, and resolving conflicts as one of the peacemakers. But at the end of the day, is there one final standard by which can discern whether we truly are reclaiming Jesus? If so, what are the implications for personal behavior *and public policy*?¹ Today’s focus is that standard: “The Discipleship Question.”

I concur with Wallis’ idea that public policy in America, and the process of legislation, execution, and adjudication of that policy currently do not reflect an integrity of values and principles Christians can endorse.

If we choose to reclaim Jesus as the center and standard of life, it’s a very thin line we’ll walk in relation to “Public Policy”. On the one hand, we advocate a doctrine of separation of church and state. Whether the church controls the state, or the state controls the church, human history has been-there-done-that; and that bucket’s got a hole in it. It don’t work no more! It never did. That scenario always has been, not about faith, but about power and control and forced compliance.

On the other hand, at least within Judaism and Christianity, people of faith are called to speak truth to power and to hold accountable those in positions of

¹ Wallis, Jim. *Christ in Crisis* (pp. 211-212). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

public service who have mutated service into power, and then abused that power.

The problem is, there's been no common standard by which people of faith can stand accountable in relation to public policy. Evangelicals and political conservatives emphasize the need for personal responsibility, Mainline Christians and political liberals emphasize the need for social responsibility—each to a relative neglect of the other. There's no middle ground, no overlap, no consensus.

Evangelicals make compassion about personal charity and separate it out from public policy. I might even go along with that if I could see it put into practice. I do agree that there's enough wealth represented within the American church to end hunger and homelessness—with minimal government involvement.

The government got involved because the church and people of faith didn't. It wasn't always that way. Social Security was signed into law by a president who was still in office when I was born. Medicare, SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, Earned Income Tax Credit, Housing Assistance, all have come into being during our lifetimes because individual people of faith and the infamous "private sector" weren't meeting the need—and not for a lack of resources. So we pay it in the form of taxes instead of charitable contributions, because too many people of faith won't participate otherwise.

But let's go there. Let's advocate for individuals and the private sector to take over issues of human hunger and homelessness and healthcare and equitable housing. In Matthew 25 we have both a standard and a precedent. Jim Wallis calls this the "It was me" teachings of Jesus: "When you fed a hungry person, it was me. When you visited a person in prison or clothed person who was naked, it was me. I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was in prison, I was naked... And you either did, or you didn't, reach out a helping hand." And note: this is a text of judgment from a teacher who normally was not judgmental. The sheep and the goats are separated.

The hardest tests of discipleship are how we relate to our enemies and how we relate to the "least of these"—the poor, the vulnerable, the powerless, the young, and the old. The issue really isn't whether the hungry are feed by the government or by the private sector, because, even with all the government programs and private sector involvement, there still is massive hunger and homelessness.

Here's the thing: to make a blanket assumption that all poverty and vulnerability are self-chosen, and to assume that to help is to "enable" laziness and irresponsibility, is to fail the test of discipleship. Can you point to a single time when Jesus qualified helping the poor or taught his followers to do so?

In this text, "I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked... And you either did or you didn't reach out to help." Matthew places this text as the last teaching of Jesus—perhaps as a summary of his life and teaching—before his arrest.

In the evangelical church in which I grew up, I don't recall ever hearing a sermon or a Sunday School lesson about this text. Everything was about personal salvation, with virtually nothing about what to do once you were saved, except don't drink, don't smoke, don't dance, and don't have sex before marriage—oh, and go out and witness and get other people saved. As I was growing up, I thought the only purpose for the church was to make sure people didn't go to hell when they died.

Now, I'm not discounting the importance of personal salvation. But nothing in Jesus' teachings or in the Gospels or in the New Testament Epistles supports a "Salvation Only" approach to faith.

The word, "disciple" means one who follows. I submit that salvation and discipleship are synonymous. If salvation is believing in Jesus, and if discipleship is following Jesus, I find it implausible that one person would follow another unless he or she believed in that someone. Does that make sense? The act of following is a demonstration that one already has believed.

And what does it mean to follow someone—in this case, Jesus? In the Matthew passage this morning, it's clear: "I was hungry, and you either did or did not give me something to eat." A more direct question is what are the consequences of not following Jesus?

The sheep and the goats are separated, and the judgment that falls upon the goats is unexpected; they can't believe their inaction toward the poor merits God's judgment. The goats are expecting the praise of God for their other accomplishments. The Pharisee prayed, "I fast twice in the week. I give tithes of all that I possess!" Why then, are the goats being cast into the lake of fire? Because they have measured their faith by a standard other than what they've done or not done to the least of their brothers and sisters.²

And note, Christ comes, not in the form of the person feeding the hungry, but in the form of the person who is hungry! And the applications are unending—"the least of these" includes most of humanity at one time or another. Matthew 25 is saying to us, "Here is what we can do: Stand up to serve and defend those most at risk at this crucial moment in relation to personal and public life."³

Works righteousness? No. This is not a check list for us to follow to get into heaven.

I have a friend who is an architectural engineer. In the early 1960s he was finishing his master's degree at Georgia Tech. All he lacked was his thesis. He had to turn in three copies, and none of them could be carbon copies. He had hired a typist, and was paying her a dollar a page to type his thesis—on a typewriter. His

² Ibid., p. 216.

³ Ibid., p. 222.

thesis was 200 pages long; so, that's \$600. He had a family—a wife and two small children—and their savings were getting low. They were pinching pennies.

He was working part-time at an architectural firm, and the firm was one of the first to use the newly-developed Xerox dry-process printing. He was amazed at the clarity of the print, so he took a page of his thesis and made a copy and took it to his advisor. The advisor said, "Yes, that would be acceptable."

He would pay the typist a dollar a page for the first copy of his thesis; then he would pay his firm ten cents a copy for the second and third copies, and would save \$360!

He said, "I believed that Xerox had developed the future of printed communication for the next fifty years." When he tells the story, he adds. "We had \$2,000 left in our savings account. If had really believed in Xerox I would have taken \$1,000 and bought Xerox Stock."

I first heard that story in the early 80s—about twenty years after his discovery of Xerox. Can you imagine what \$1000 of Xerox stock would have been worth after twenty years?

When you truly believe in something, you make it a priority—you invest some part of your life in it. To fail to follow Jesus—to fail the discipleship test—simply indicates one didn't ever really, truly believe in him in the first place.