

What Would Jesus Say About the Marginalized?

Mark 1:21-28

January 19, 2003

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When the immensely popular author, Stephen Covey, wowed the world with his Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, he encouraged every person to sit down and write a personal mission statement. “Once you have that sense of mission,” said Covey, “you have the essence of your own proactivity. You have the vision and values which will direct your life.”

Jesus of Nazareth never read Covey’s books. But fresh from the wilderness of temptation, Jesus enters the Nazareth Synagogue to announce his reason for being. Here is what he said:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon 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.”

If we ever wonder what Jesus would say about the poor and marginalized of society, we need only understand his stated mission on earth.

JESUS CAME PROCLAIMING LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL.

Be *just*. What the poor and marginalized need most is *justice*. From the beginning of civilization there has been a problem of the powerful taking advantage of the poor. When the plumb line of *justice* revealed the crooked ways

of Israel, Amos marched to the town square calling for “*justice* to roll down like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream.”

When the public scales proved to be discriminating against the poor, the prophet, Micah, said, “What does the Lord require of us but to act *justly*, to love mercy and walk humbly with our God.” Even the worship liturgy of the Hebrew people included instructions to defend the cause of the weak and fatherless and maintain the rights of the poor and the oppressed. If you like to count, there are over 900 passages in the Bible reminding Christians not to forget, ignore, nor persecute the marginalized.

Within the lifetime of many of us here today, a modern prophet by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. called on America to stand up for the ideals of our founders who dared to believe. “All people are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.” “The hour is late,” said Martin. “The clock of destiny is ticking.” We must act now before it is too late. The American dream forever stands in the midst of the “is-ness” of our terrible injustices to remind us of the “ought-ness” of our noble capacity in human beings for *justice* and love.

What America needs now is a new prophet of justice. Is it *just* for a lending institution to charge poor people 30% interest when you and I can borrow money for 6%? Is it *just* for a landlord to own apartments where children are chased by rats simply because their parents cannot afford to live any place else? Is it *just* to expect Johnny without moral grounding to get a job at McDonald’s for minimum wage when the drug lord in the big car can teach him to peddle drugs for \$200 a day, or become a prostitute for a whole lot more? Somebody needs to stand in the public square and ask the question: Are we interested in saving money or are we interested in saving people? Can the Church once again become the conscience of America?

BE GENEROUS.

Before there was social security, before there were food stamps, when there was no public assistance, and no welfare as we know it today, there was a law in Leviticus which said, “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien.”

I’m glad to have lived long enough to see the old law of “gleaning” alive again. Thanks to the society of St. Andrew, 39,415 volunteers distributed 32 million pounds of produce to relief agencies and soup kitchens across America in 2002. We played a small part here with potato drops. Here is the way it works. Two truck loads of Florida citrus fruit are rejected because boxes in which they were packed had no bar codes and could not be electronically scanned into inventory. Do they go to the dump? Do they go to feed the hungry? Thanks to the ministry of St. Andrews, they go to the hungry. There are many other agencies of similar kinds trying to extend the hand of generosity to people around the world.

I believe Christians want to hear the cry of the needy and do something about the plight of the poor. I believe Christians care that 8.5 million people in America experienced hunger last year, including three million children. I’m not talking about the world; I’m talking about our fellow citizens of the United States of America. I know believers are more generous to all charities than any sub-group of Americans. While legislators argue, and social agencies struggle, let the Church stand tall by stooping to serve. Sometimes I wonder what this church could do if we mobilized all our resources to redeem a single neighborhood in Nashville. What if our children’s ministries, youth ministries, serving ministries, worship ministries, joined hands with our business professionals, medical persons, educators, and construction companies, to offer vital worship, adequate housing, quality education, compassionate child care, job training, and family health services to the most needy neighborhood in Nashville?

I want to put that before you. You see, for a long time I have lived by a little jingle: *Some want to live beside the church and hear the sound of bells. I’d like*

to build a rescue shop within a yard of hell. Will you help me? We cannot live in the suburbs isolated from the city and hope to be saved. Here is a way to go about it.

PRACTICE COMPASSION IN JESUS NAME. In Jesus' troubling parable of the last judgment (Matthew 25: 31) the Son of Man comes in all his glory to separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from the goats. On his right he will assemble the sheep and say, "Enter into your Master's joy for I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, thirsty and you gave me something to drink, a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me." As the righteous mumbled about when and how, the king replied, "As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it for me."

To those on his left he said, "As you failed to do it for one of the least of these you failed to do it for me." What does it mean to do it for Jesus? Is there a difference between a cup of cold water and a cup of cold water given in Jesus name? For the recipient it is H₂O either way you go. For the Christian, it is a question of motivation, adoration and devotion. You see, it makes a difference in whose name you give it.

"Martin the Cobbler" is Leo Tolstoy's story about a lonely shoemaker who in a dream one night is promised a visit from the Lord. The shoemaker rose early, got his shop ready for his special guest, then sat down to wait. The only visitor in the morning was an old man who shuffled up and asked to rest. Martin shared a room. In the afternoon a hungry, old lady with a heavy load of wood came by and Martin gave her the food he had prepared for Christ. As night began to fall, a lost boy wandered by. Martin left his shop and took the kid home, afraid all the time he would miss the Christ. That night Martin asked the Lord: "Why didn't you come?" Here is the answer he heard from Christ.

Three times I came to your friendly door.

*Three times my shadow was on your floor.
I was the beggar with bruised feet.
I was the woman you gave to eat.
I was the child on the homeless street.*

If it is true that Jesus reveals himself in the eyes of the least and lost, is it any wonder we feel far away from him? When was the last time you had a beggar home for dinner? Doing it for Jesus eliminates paternalism and makes the simplest deed of kindness an act of worship. Our Christology determines our sociology.

No one in our time has lived this principle better than Mother Theresa, the tiny Albanian nun who in 1952 picked up a dying, destitute woman off the streets in Calcutta and just kept doing it until she died. A dream of Mother Theresa's was that before they die, all people would know they are loved. After she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for picking up 40,000 off the streets of Calcutta and founding the Missionaries of Charity, which now has more than 3000 members working in 52 countries, reporters and politicians asked how and why she did it? Her answer was simple. "I do it for Jesus." People often asked her, "How can I help?" Mother Theresa liked to say, "Just begin." Begin at home, by saying something good to your child or spouse. Begin by helping someone in need in your community, work, school. Begin by making whatever you do something beautiful for God.

When helping the least and the lost, do not look down into the eyes of the poor, look up into the eyes of Jesus and you will be converted in the ways of understanding. In helping the poor, remember to forget about it. Goodness saved as a trophy may look good at first sight but tarnishes with the passing of time. Everybody who has ever helped anybody has been hurt. We set ourselves up for failure when we exercise too much control by wanting to run the show. Give and let go. Neither the blessed nor the unblessed could remember *when*

(Lord, when?). I love that idea. Work for the Lord. Forget about the reward. Keeping score keeps us from doing more. We must be free to serve.

For 25 years now I have carried a servant prayer with me. This is what it says: Lord, give us eyes clear enough to see the hurt of the world, and ears perceptive enough to hear your call. Give us a brain wise enough to figure a solution and a voice loud enough to tell of the need. Give us feet determined enough to seek out the alleys of misery and despair, and hands sensitive enough to hug, mold, and heal. Give us a heart strong enough to endure the struggle and a spirit thankful enough to ask, "What more may I do?"

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," said Jesus, "calling me to proclaim good news to the poor." Dare we follow the footsteps of Jesus?

Amen.