

God's Politics: When Did Jesus Become Pro-Rich?

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Matthew 21:12-17

“Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, ‘It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.’

The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’, they became angry and said to him, ‘Do you hear what these are saying?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself’?’ He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.”

The 1989 film, *Jesus of Montreal* is a beautiful, challenging, and poignant film that tells the story of a group of actors brought together to put on the passion play at a struggling Roman Catholic Parish. These actors craft a controversial and hugely successful depiction of the passion of Jesus and their own lives begin to parallel the story in some unique ways.

In one moving scene the character that plays Jesus is attending a television commercial audition with a fellow member of the cast. In this audition the young woman is pushed to play up sex appeal as a means of selling more of the product. In a sleazy exchange the casting director for the commercial asks this young woman to remove her shirt so they can see her topless and figure out how to incorporate that into the commercial as a means of selling more of their product.

This request sets off the main character and he rushes to the front of the auditorium in defense of his friend. He runs through the aisles, his long hair flowing behind him, and he grabs the table behind which the casting director is sitting, turning it

over and spilling papers and electronic equipment to the ground. He then knocks over a couple of television monitors, electrical sparks shoot into the air, and he grabs his friend and they run together from the theater.

The scene has a powerful connection to a story about Jesus found in the Gospels; a story set in the Passion week as Jesus comes into Jerusalem. Hear these words from Matthew - 21:12-17,

“Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, ‘It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.’ The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’, they became angry and said to him, ‘Do you hear what these are saying?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself’?’ He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.”

Jesus enters the temple during a time of preparation for one of the holiest Jewish festivals and is outraged to see the way that the money changers are exploiting and taking advantage of the poor. This image of Jesus overthrowing the money changers tables in the temple is one that we’re quite uncomfortable with as the mainline church in America today. It is quite different from the calm gentle Jesus that we often talk about and envision as the gentle shepherd. This image of Jesus is tough for us to swallow because it in many ways challenges a lot of what we do with money in the world today – the ways in which our actions as individuals and as institutions exploit the poor and dispossessed.

The truth is though, this image is one that is quite consistent with the message and ministry of Jesus. Jesus talks about money – a lot. The bible talks about money – a lot. And Jim Wallis has observed that when he meets with American Christians and asks

them what Jesus and the Bible say about money, they without fail quote back at him “The poor you will always have with you!” These words from Mark are easily remembered by mainstream middle class American Christians. The context of these words is not. And so when we quote these words today what we are often in essence saying is – there’s nothing we can do about the poor – even Jesus said they’ll always be with us. We use these words as a scapegoat for our own inactivity. We use them to remove guilt from ourselves for the unjust systems that exist globally and the ways in which we contribute to them through our living and purchasing.

The context of this passage is hugely important. Jesus speaks these words at dinner with lepers and the worst outcasts of society. Jesus speaks these words to his followers as they are hanging out with and eating dinner with the poorest of the poor. Jesus assumes that his followers will always be in close proximity to the poor because that is the heart of their ministry. The poor will be with the followers of Jesus always, because that’s who the follower’s of Jesus hang out with. However, this is not the case today. The critical difference between the middle class church in America today and the early followers of Jesus is our lack of proximity to the poor.

So, as followers of Jesus today, we can’t let ourselves ignore the issue of poverty – especially the lives of persons who are so drastically impacted by it. I mentioned a few minutes ago that the Bible and Jesus talk about money and poverty – a lot. When Jim Wallis was in Seminary he and a group of friends went through the Bible verse by verse to see how much it really said about the poor and injustice. They found that these themes are mentioned thousands of times in the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures it is the second most prominent theme. In the new Testament – one of every sixteen verses is about the

poor or the subject of money. In the first three gospels this number is one out of every ten verses, in the Gospel of Luke alone, it is one out of every seven verses. The Bible and Jesus talk about money, the poor, and injustice – a lot!

But you know what, we as the mainline middle class church in America – we don't so much. Once a year we talk about money as it relates to our stewardship campaign and the next year's operating budget, but we don't do a very good job of talking about global economic systems, the poor, and the injustices that exist. For as much as Jesus talked about these themes – why don't we? The Jesus of the Gospels proclaims a message that liberation theologians have called God's preferential option for the poor; the idea that God lifts up and cares for and seeks out comfort for the poor. The Jesus of the Gospels is repeatedly on the side of the poor. How did this change? When did Jesus Become Pro-Rich?

I can't put a date on it, but I do want to talk a little bit about the development of a big theological problem that exists today – that contributes to this idea that Jesus is Pro-Rich. This theological problem is the preaching of a Prosperity Gospel. It is preached in many large and powerful churches. The theological idea goes something like this – if you are good and faithful and pray in the right ways and do the right things God will reward you financially. It exists here in our community and in communities all across the country – the idea that our faithfulness will be rewarded with financial gains. The problems with this theology are many, but let me share the biggest two.

The first is we know that corrupt folks are doing just fine financially. We know that corrupt leaders who have been involved in the big scandals like Enron and Worldcom have done sneaky and distrustful things and have reaped huge financial gains.

On the other side of this we know that there are wonderfully faithful people – people who love Jesus, and live good lives, and pray, and serve, and are still dirt poor. Both of these realities break down this prosperity preaching that is so prevalent.

And I would be remiss in this sermon on God's Politics, if I didn't take a minute or two to tie this in to the political situation that exists in our country today. In the last election two groups of people were identified as important demographics – the soccer moms and another group that has come to be known as NASCAR dads. Both of these groups represent the middle class and were seen as the bread and butter by both political parties. And as politicians vie for votes of these demographics persons who live in lower economic levels are left behind. Jim Wallis has come to categorize these lower classes with a personification of the Burger King mom – a hard working single mom who makes minimum wage and can barely survive.

The assumption today is that if you are an American you have all of the opportunity and protection that you need. Wallis points out that most Americans believe that if you work hard and full time you should not be poor. The reality in America today is quite the different though. Many people in our country today have to work several jobs just to scrape by and survive. In fact, Wallis points out in his book that in Denver a person would have to work 144 hours a week at minimum wage in order to afford even basic housing. We often acknowledge that global poverty is an issue, but the statistics for our own country are remarkable – one in every six children are poor (that's 13 million children). 36 million people live below the poverty line. 4 million American families are hungry to the point where people in the household are skipping meals. 45 million Americans are without health insurance – including 8.4 million children.

This brings us back to the task of engaging faith and politics. If I may over generalize for just a minute, politicians aren't doing enough for the men, women, and children in our country who are living in and suffering from poverty. Poverty is talked about yes, but at a primarily theoretical level. Instead of engaging the horrifying facts of poverty in our country politicians spend most of their time and energy blaming other politicians for the problems. Wallis lays out the following three steps that have become the D.C. standard operating procedure for dealing with tough issues like poverty. 1) You name the problem. 2) You make the public afraid of the problem. 3) You blame your opponent for the problem. In this three step methodology there is a glaring concern – the identified problem is never solved. The problem, in this case poverty, is something simply to be used in the battle for political power, it is not something that ever gets truly addressed. As Wallis puts it, “Low-income Americans become an ideological sacrifice on the altars of both conservative and liberal fights for power.”

And this is where we are as a country today. Both political parties use the catch phrase of poverty as a political tool for battling their opponents, but little to nothing is being done about it by politicians on the ground. This is where it is our responsibility as Christians to step in and to be advocates for a change. We need to take back our faith – to reclaim the faith of Jesus and his early followers and to live in and amongst and with the poor in ways that can make a difference in their individual lives as well as in the systems that oppress. But, it's not just about serving meals or providing clothing for people in poverty. Wallis reminds us that our calling as Christians in the world today is not simply to pull people out of the river, but to go upstream to find out what or who is pushing them into the river in the first place.

There are many ways to go about doing these kinds of things – we can take sandwiches out on the streets and feed the hungry. We can provide financial support and our time and energy to organizations that work to end poverty. We can write letters to our congress people encouraging them to work for solutions rather than simply complaining about the way things are. We can do a number of things to make small differences that can expand to greater levels. As followers of Jesus, we cannot stand by and let things continue as they have been. We cannot let religious leaders continue to claim that if only people were more faithful they would be more comfortable and affluent. We cannot let politicians continue to use persons who are poor as their political pawns in power struggles.

As I conclude each of my sermons I always hope to be clear about what the Good News is. As I wrap up today though, I acknowledge that in this case the Good News of Jesus Christ might not sound so great to some of us today. The Good News of Jesus Christ means that all people are to have the things they need to survive. And to those of us to whom much has been given, much is required. So, the Good News for the poor and dispossessed in our country and around the world is that there are enough resources. And the Good News of Jesus Christ to those of us who have much is that we are to work to share it with others – doesn't sound like such great news does it? It sounds like work and sacrifice! But the truth is, God's Good News is for all of the world, not for some elite, not for persons in particular social or cultural locations, and so we have work to do. We must reclaim our faith and seek to make a difference so that all persons have what they need.

And while this might sound like work and sacrifice on our part, there is still Good News for us, for the rich of the world today. That Good News is this – as we struggle with the realities of the world, as we open our eyes to and wrestle with the economic injustices that exist, as we seek to become a part of the solution so that poverty can be eradicated and God’s justice can be made known, the Spirit of God fills us and equips us for the ministry to which we are called. It won’t always be easy, but God will always go with us.