

# JESUS,

## *The Politician*

**GOD'S HEART FOR JUSTICE**



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# JESUS, *The Politician*

Okay, an admission even before I start. The title of this article is misleading.

With our modern day view of politicians, the title sounds terribly irreverent. How dare I call Jesus a politician! I'm sorry. Yes, the title should instead be, "Jesus the Prophet." But hold on. The way we have smudged the meaning of "Prophet" means this, as an alternate title, would be misleading too.

The truth is I don't believe I am misleading you, the reader, by using this title<sup>1</sup>. In fact I have selected it, perhaps unwisely I admit, but simply because it reveals how we've been misled; how we have been fed a shrink-wrapped, over-spiritualised, privatised version of "Jesus". A messiah who just wants to get us to heaven while fulfilling our every whim before he does. And by "Prophet" we often mean only that he wants to give us warm and fuzzy assurances that he will bless us all the way to a happy and successful life. We have been misled.

But who has misled us? I'm not completely sure. I could name names and offer suggestions but then that won't do any good. Pointing fingers has never been a very good path to healing. Perhaps Jesus' own phrase, **"the Pharisees and Sadducees"** (Matthew 16:6) will have to do. (Have you noticed how Jesus never named personal names – not giving them the attention they craved – but emphatically and prophetically confronted the corrupt systems they represented and profited from?) So I'm suggesting we use His phrase to represent the distorting influence, in every generation since that first century, imposed upon us – often unintentionally by sincere people who should know better – that discredits Him whose name is Jesus, **"the Christ, the Son of the living God"** (Matthew 16:16).

<sup>1</sup> In fact, the same kind of reaction we may have to the statement, "Jesus, The Politician" is akin to the reactions stirred by Jesus' use of the Greco-Roman phrase "gospel of the Kingdom". The words **"gospel"** (Greek: *evangelion*) and **"kingdom"** (Greek: *basileia*) were both political words used by the Roman Caesars. When Augustus Caesar, for example, ascended to the throne in 27 B.C., he presented his "gospel of the kingdom" – his dream of a utopian society – declaring that his reign would bring favour upon the world and its inhabitants. Of course, his citizens – many of them slaves – were forced to applause even though they new another bout of tyranny was on its way. Jesus played on these highly explosive political themes to announce His arrival: **"The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel"** (Mark 1:15). My choice of this title aims to provoke thought in the same way.

And by using Jesus' phrase, "**the Pharisees and Sadducees,**" I don't need to look for someone to blame; I need only look in the closest mirror. Yes, now I'm on the path to healing; facing the enemy in the mirror, acknowledging my part in the horror. I have profited from the deceit; what's more; having been fed a half truth I have propagated the lie with the same passion and fervour. I act like a Pharisee more often than I care to admit. I hate that I act this way yet find it so easy to do; so in keeping with the dark side in me. I can only pray that my confession is genuine so that I may be delivered. I can only hope that my admission may provoke you to look into the mirror yourself.

Jesus, the Politician<sup>2</sup>? Yes. Certainly not in the way politicians operate today, nor in the way politicians worked in His day. Rather...

A Saviour, whose offer of redemption is not just salvation from hell "then" but salvation from corruption and wickedness "now".

A Lord, whose promise of righteousness is not simply to make us more pious but to, through us, establish true justice.

A Provider, whose open arms are not just to provide generously for us but to, through us, provide outrageously for all mankind.

A Healer, whose cure is not just so that we may be comforted but who, through us, desires to heal the whole world.

A Deliverer, who intends not to just break the chains of our bondage but who, through us, intends to liberate this planet.

Thus a Prophet who addresses the social and political ills of our day with magnanimous gentleness and compassion while confronting all systemic wickedness with razor-sharp truth-telling completely void of bias and prejudice.

Not in the sweet by-and-by. Now! Seriously...in this life!

For the real Jesus had the audacity to declare: "**Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand**" (Matthew 4:17).

We have to either conclude that He seriously overplayed His hand or we have to believe Him and align ourselves to the implications of such a declaration of insurrection.

<sup>2</sup> For the record, the word "politics" refers to the activities associated with governing; including the theory and practice of government, especially the activities associated with obtaining legislative or executive power or with forming and running organizations connected with government. And a "politician" refers to a governmental officer or representative. Both are neutral words and, in the right hands (or correctly, in the right spirit), are crucial to a healthy, functioning society (see Romans 13:1-7).

## More than just a sermon on a mountain...

Describing Jesus' teaching in Matthew, Chapters 5-7 as the "Sermon on the Mount" does no justice to it at all (justice being a core issue as you will see in a moment). That implies some staid, dull 'same old, same old' sermonette for Christianettes. Jesus' download from heaven in this discourse was more like a bomb going off; a revolutionary battle-cry...insurrection talk...a clarion call to a new way of living. (Take the time to position it in its historical, geopolitical context and you'll have your mind blown and eye-lids singed!) And it is as appropriately subversive today as it was back then!

Jesus' Kingdom declaration, launched from the Mount, begins with eight qualities of a new breed of humanity; not an elitist, exclusive club of spiritual "black-belts," rather a vision of what God intended for all of us. And while Jesus wasted no time in unpacking His two most crucial revelations – the Fatherhood of God and the Kingdom mandate – what is particularly key to understanding where we've been duped is His references to **"righteousness."**

Mentioned three times in the opening seventeen verses (Matthew 5:6, 10, 20), Jesus made it clear that an undercurrent to His Kingdom project was how we view this issue of righteousness. Concluding the first part of His whirlwind address, before going for the jugular (Matthew 5:21ff), Jesus summed up: **"unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the Kingdom of heaven"** (Matthew 5:20).

The way the Pharisees viewed righteousness is, I'm afraid to admit, the way we tend to view righteousness.

I've thought a lot about this and have deeply pondered on the twenty odd years I've heard people present, discuss and model righteousness; from a fairly well-read perspective and relatively broad range of experience. In my opinion, most Bible-believing Christians view righteousness in this passage as a reference to one's ***personal, moral, right-standing with God***. So when Jesus taught, **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness"** (Matthew 5:6), we assume He is urging us to strive to be more upright, moral, virtuous. And when Jesus said, **"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake"** (Matthew 5:10) we take this to mean that He is encouraging us to stand firm when we are ridiculed for being upright, pure, devout.

However the word **"righteousness"** (Greek: *dikaiosune*) refers to *"equity of character and action"* and hence, is a synonym for ***justice***. It refers not only to one's private and personal piety but to one's public and communal responsibility to seek and stand for justice; that is, the well-being and good of others, especially the disenfranchised.

Before I expand on this further (because I know you don't believe me just yet), please allow me to state the obvious by way of qualification. Yes, unless we harness a deeply personal and authentic sense of right-standing with our Father in heaven (which is what Jesus spotlights in Matthew 6:1-21), there is no way we can ever seek and stand for justice with any integrity or validity. Public effectiveness stems from private victory without question. But Jesus never gave us the option of merely enjoying private victory for ourselves and our own benefit. His desire for us was, is and always will be; that we're blessed to be a blessing (Genesis 12:1-3). What is the point of being upright if we don't then, in His power, right all the wrong we can?

And this is exactly what the Pharisees did. They turned righteousness into a measure of personal piety: so much so that they not only missed the point, they effectively erased it; keeping others from even knowing what the point was in the first place. Listen to the Politician's rebuke of the first century equivalent of the department of "law and order": **"For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered"** (Luke 11:52 c. Matthew 23:13).

The Pharisees, like our generation I'm afraid, turned righteousness into a spiritualised selfishness, a sanitised self-centred faith in a personalised Messiah. Thus, like the Pharisees, we tend to redefine faith as staying right with God, finding all the promises that we can claim, upgrading our religious knowledge, intensive rule-keeping, blah, blah, blah. Then whatever we define as "the list" that makes one an A-grade Christian, we slave to the best we can and find it morbidly helpful to compare ourselves favourably against those who aren't making "our" grade. It becomes all about "me" and "my place in the world"<sup>3</sup>. With full heads and empty hearts we rejoice in how righteous we are.

Forgive me if you feel I'm being too harsh or plain judgmental. Please be assured I'm still staring at the mirror. Perhaps I should have written "I" instead of "we" in the preceding paragraphs. But I'm as uncomfortable in writing this as you may be in reading it. Can I ask you to please bear with my use of "we" and sympathise with my confession if you have looked into the mirror and are at peace with yourself? If looking into the mirror you see what I see, you will bravely relate to the use of "we" and seek God with me.

So for the record, Jesus does require personal holiness. But He does not allow us to camp there; for doing so is tragic and dangerous. **"Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies"** cautioned Paul (1 Corinthians 8:1). Jesus calls us on, from the firm foundation of our restored relationship with God, ***to seek and stand for justice in this world.***

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<sup>3</sup> Free Tip: If you don't know your place in the world, try this fool proof strategy. Serve! Roll your sleeves up and start serving anywhere and everywhere. Make sure you serve for the Father's pleasure and you'll soon unlock your passions and discern your non-passions too (which is a key to fully appreciating the gifts and passions of others by the way).

## Righteousness equals justice...

Are you sure that **"righteousness"** refers to justice? This is the issue for sure. The fact that you're trouble to confirm this point reveals that you are becoming aware of some of the implications and how radically they will affect your faith and life. So let me unpack this from Jesus' Explosion on the Mount.

Firstly, the eight qualities that highlight the true potential of God's desire for humanity – often called the Beatitudes – ***all have a distinctive ring of justice to them*** (Matthew 5:3-10). Jesus refers to the **"poor in spirit"** (v. 3; and before you point out that this may have nothing to do with the literal poor, let me suggest you read Luke's Gospel in which he quotes Jesus saying precisely this: **"Blessed are you poor – full stop)"** (Luke 6:20<sup>4</sup>). Jesus refers to **"those who mourn"** (v. 4; Luke's Gospel reads, those **"who weep"** (Luke 6:21)), the **"meek"** who **"inherit the earth"** (v. 5), those who hunger and thirst for justice (v. 6), the **"merciful"** (v. 7), the **"pure in heart"** (v. 8; "clean;" hence, unbiased, fair and free from prejudice), the **"peacemakers"** (v. 9) and those who are persecuted for standing up for justice (v. 10).

Secondly, in comforting those who **"are persecuted for righteousness' sake,"** Jesus alludes to the **"prophets who were persecuted before you"** (Matthew 5:12). What were the prophets persecuted for? For pious snobbery? For establishing an elite, holy club? For preaching a holier-than-thou message? Of course not. The prophets were persecuted for confronting two related issues: on the one hand, idolatry and on the other hand, the unjust systems of their day; those systemic attitudes and structures responsible for the neglect and oppression of the poor and marginalised.

Consider Isaiah, known for His Messianic prophecies. Do yourself a favour and read through them. You'll see frequent references to God's intention to establish justice.

<sup>4</sup>I'll comment more on the **"poor"** later on so don't be put off by my comparison between Matthew and Luke's Gospel. For now, read through these eight statements afresh. I, for one, am shocked at how I *don't* get inspired by these qualities at first. They don't sound heroic; they don't have the ring of champions to them; they don't have enough bravado. Of course, this is probably the initial reaction Jesus got from the crowd who heard Him that day. Living under the oppression of Rome, seeking a Deliverer, they were probably waiting for Mel Gibson's Braveheart to arrive on the scene.

But by the end of His message the people seem to have sufficiently misunderstood Him, projecting upon Him what they wanted Him to be (Matthew 7:28, 29). Certainly, this is the drama that builds until they; frustrated and disappointed, cast their vote...not to elect Jesus as president, for He refused to be the politician *they* wanted (see John 6:1-15 for example), but to sentence Him to execution (c. Matthew 21:1-11 vs. 27:15-26).

Isaiah begins his ministry by delivering a scathing rebuke from on high (not exactly the way to raise your popularity stakes): **“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. ‘I have had enough of burnt offerings... I do not delight in the blood of bulls... Bring no more futile sacrifices... Your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them... Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear...’**” (Isaiah 1:11-15). Ouch! Talk about wasted worship!

Why did God detest their worship, even though He had prescribed it? Because it was a smokescreen behind which injustice ran rampant. God cut through the facade: **“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean... Learn to do good; seek justice. Rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow”** (Isaiah 1:16, 17).

***Learn to do good; seek justice!*** What a simple and concise yet profoundly loaded statement! This becomes a core backdrop to much of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry.

God rebuked Judah’s greedy urbanization – **“Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left”** – while **“cries of distress”** went unheard (Isaiah 5:7, 8 NIV). He chided their excessive pleasure-seeking while they neglected to stand up for **“justice to the innocent”** (Isaiah 5:22, 23 NIV).

Unsurprisingly Isaiah then reveals God as **“a God of justice”** (Isaiah 30:18) who will **“bring forth justice”** (Isaiah 42:1). And one of God’s core indictments against the people was that **“no one calls for justice”** (Isaiah 59:4); that is, the nation had become inundated with injustice, deceit and oppression and no one seemed to care. He laments: **“Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands afar off; for truth is fallen in the street and equity cannot enter”** (Isaiah 59:14).

Stressing **“I, the Lord, love justice”** (Isaiah 61:8), God promises, through the Messiah and His legacy (you and me!), to **“build the old waste places...raise up the foundation of many generations”** being a testimony as a **“Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to Dwell in”** (Isaiah 58:12).

Then in declaring **“the Spirit of the Lord God upon”** the Messiah – the exact passage Jesus chose to launch His ministry off – God makes it clear the anointing of the Spirit is, in large part, to establish justice: **“good tidings to the poor,”** healing to **“the broken-hearted,”** **“liberty to the captives”** (those falsely imprisoned) and freedom to the indebted, the implication of proclaiming **“the acceptable year”** or year of Jubilee (Isaiah 61:1, 2). And, in words, reminiscent of Isaiah 58:12, God continues to unveil His intention to establish justice through the Messiah’s rule: **“And they shall rebuild the old ruins, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations”** (Isaiah 61:4).

However, if you want one verse that says it all, you need only to turn to the prophet Micah, through whom God reveals: **“What does the Lord require of you but *to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God*”** (Micah 6:8). God requires that we establish justice, showing His mercy while acknowledging our utter dependence upon Him (knowing without true humility we can so easily become self-reliant and proud, abusing our privilege to oppress rather than serve others).

The psalmist declared: **“righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne”** (Psalm 97:2). In this statement the psalmist uses two words **“righteousness”** (Hebrew: *tsedeq*) and **“justice”** (Hebrew: *mishpat*) to express the importance of both God’s moral character and His just nature. The **“foundation of His throne”** – the very basis of God’s Rule – is, on the one hand, righteousness; God’s moral character, which we have fairly well documented in our understanding and, in fact, is traditionally viewed as the essential “contract” in our systematic theology.

On the other hand, justice – His desire (and demand) for equity – is also the basis of God’s Rule. This aspect of the Rule of God may be something we acknowledge in the “small print” of our theology, but it is not terribly popular in the “rubber-on-the-road” application of our faith. Clearly, God does not share our double-mindedness on the subject, nor does He overlook ours.

Justice is synonymous with righteousness and Jesus is calling us not to a pious, personal, privatised faith; He is calling us to, from a vital relationship with the God who loves justice (Isaiah 61:8), intentionally pursue justice and be prepared to suffer for our stand to eradicate injustice wherever and whenever it surfaces.

Still not convinced?

Thirdly, Jesus goes on to emphatically call upon us to do as much good as we possibly can: **“Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”** (Matthew 5:16).

He doesn’t call on us to impress men with shallow efforts and image management; in fact, Jesus confronts this in the next chapter, saying **“do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your father in heaven”** (Matthew 6:1). Jesus calls on us to serve men with our good works so that the Father is glorified; that is, men are impressed with Him! And following Jesus’ flow of thought; these **“good works”** don’t just refer to good intentions but, in fact, to establishing justice, making peace, showing mercy and other **“charitable deeds”**.

What’s more, the metaphors Jesus used to define our influence in the world leads to some frightening connotations should we, like the Pharisees, neglect our responsibilities as **“salt”** and **“light”** (Matthew 5:13-15). Jesus explained, for example, that **“if the salt loses its**

**flavour, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men”** (Matthew 5:13).

Paul identified pseudo-believers with the term, **“idle talkers”** and explains, **“they profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work”** (Titus 1:10, 16). Settling for literal cheap-talk and zero action; they in fact **“deny Him”** through their absence of good works – which, at the risk of redundancy, Biblically refer to acts of service in helping others, especially the marginalised and disenfranchised (James 1:27; 2:14-18).

Of course, it is common knowledge that Jesus radically altered the traditional version of the Golden Rule. Most religions teach some version of this rule and most state it in a negative, defensive way. The Jews, for example, taught: *“Don’t do unto others what you don’t want them to do to you”*. If you don’t want others to defraud or harm you, don’t defraud or harm them. Yes, great advice for sure; but really a basic expression of defensive, “minimum standard” on-the-back-foot morality. Our modern society, turning a deaf ear to even this, has completely reinvented the Golden Rule; restating this ideal into a twisted anthem that goes something like: he who has the gold makes the rules. (No wonder injustice abounds!)

But Jesus repositioned the Golden Rule putting the onus on us to be radical doers of good. He taught: **“whatever you want men to do for you, do also to them”** (Matthew 7:12). In other words, get on the front foot.

How would you like to be treated? Treat men likewise. You want respect? Respect others. Do you deserve to be heard, your point of view considered, your contributions valued and your effort rewarded? Yes? Then *do* unto others. Create a better world by being a better person; ignite a chain reaction of good reactions; set in motion a string of good events. Pass good forward.

And recall that Jesus spoke these words to an oppressed people seeking, above all things, justice. The implications are obvious yet profound.

Imagine a world in which God’s Kingdom has come; a society in which His will is being done. What kind of blessedness do you expect citizens of such a society to enjoy? Then serve your fellowmen towards these high aims.

Fourthly, in revealing a God of love, who – don’t miss this – **“makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust,”** Jesus then calls us to **“be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect”** (Matthew 5:45, 48).

True-blue Pharisees will seize a statement like this and cry, “Ha! God demands that we be perfect! Who dares not to measure up?” and by doing so, act in just the opposite spirit to what Jesus taught here.

Jesus is calling us to **“be perfect” in showing love without prejudice or bias**, in a word, to show justice. He had explained, **“if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”** (Matthew 5:46).

Luke quotes Jesus as saying, **“be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful”** (Luke 6:36). The context is without question the justice of God and His desire that we, His people, seek and stand for justice.

I apologise for perhaps overdoing the Bible study here. A whole book can be written on these explosive three chapters in Matthew revealing the challenge to establish justice. (As you will notice I just made brief comments on the first of these three chapters!)

### **Some (frightening) implications...**

A highpoint statement for most people in their reading of these three chapters in Matthew is correctly, in my opinion, Matthew 6:33. But listen to it again as we substitute the word **“rule”** for **“Kingdom”** and **“justice”** for **“righteousness”**.

Listen with first century ears...

**“But seek first the Rule of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added to you”** (Matthew 6:33).

Wow! Now we are hearing it in a way that the audience of Jesus’ day heard it. The rule of Caesar caused and exasperated gross injustice and oppression. In bold heavenly contrast, ***the Rule of God brings justice and liberty***. The rule of Caesar profited an elite group of “insiders” while afflicting misery and suffering on everyone else outside of Caesar’s “circle of trust *and beneficiaries*”. In disturbing otherworldly contrast, the Rule of God comforts the afflicted but afflicts the comfortable; confronting the systems through which the elite oppress and profit off the rest.

Only in unmasking the evil in these systems will they be rejected and true blessing – **“all these things shall be added to you”** – benefit everyone as the distinction between “insiders” and “outsiders” gives way to the Kingdom of God, where everyone is welcome at the table; especially the marginalised and disenfranchised<sup>5</sup> (Luke 14:15-24).

<sup>5</sup> Some disparage the Christian faith as a cripple man’s crutch. Oh yes it is, but it is not just for the cripple man; for we all need a crutch, we’re all damaged, sick, cripple...everyone of us. There are none so blind as those who cannot see, or so lame as those who walk all over others. And if Jesus didn’t accept the cripple man none of us would be welcome. Only when we acknowledge our disability, or more correctly our inability to save ourselves or improve ourselves, do we discover true salvation and join the revolution to heal our world.

If we will be true to the Kingdom message of Jesus, we must seek to establish justice; not merely proclaiming the deliverance of God but challenging the systems that keep people oppressed; not saying, **"Depart in peace, be warmed and filled"** but confronting the evil that causes hostility while we provide shelter from the cold and necessities that they may no longer be empty (James 2:16). For without this follow through, James asks a screaming question: **"what does it profit?"** And then, for added effect, alarmingly concludes: **"faith by itself...is dead"** (James 2:17).

Okay, now that you've warmed up, let's get to those implications...

### **Are we profiting from the system?**

While Paul's phrase **"principalities and powers"** refers to demonic forces (Ephesians 6:12), his phrase **"thrones and dominions"** (Colossians 1:16) more than likely refers to the "institutional systems of man" through which the principalities and powers oppress and subjugate mankind. And it is through these "systems of man" that many profit; some intentionally (and cruelly, vindictively and greedily), others unintentionally.

Consider two examples which occur back-to-back in Luke's Gospel. First, a rich young ruler with a glowing C.V. and sterling track record for good behaviour asks Jesus a question about inheriting eternal life (Luke 18:18-30). Jesus begins to answer him by quoting the Ten Commandments, to which the man explains that he has scored full marks in all the areas mentioned since his youth.

Jesus then prods at his core: **"You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me"** (Luke 18:22). Yikes! Jesus exposed and confronted the idol of his heart; his self-reliant pride harnessed in the school of fine privilege and considerable affluence. I don't think, based on the next incident we will look at in a moment, Jesus necessarily meant that he should bankrupt himself financially; although He may have intended this. The point was that for all this man's religious piety, he had profited from a system in which he now placed his dependence; using his privilege for his own advancement and gain. Jesus called him to defect from the system, renounce his self-profiteering orientation to life...and give himself to advancing the Kingdom and doing good.

Sadly, he could not give up his addiction to the system: he **"became very sorrowful, for he was very rich"** (Luke 18:23). It is indeed difficult to give up our dependency on the systems that have enriched us for so long; having, in large part, made us who we are. Jesus explained, **"How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God!"** (Luke 18:24)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> This is not a statement extolling the virtues of being impoverished (for there are none!). Jesus is teaching us that smashing our dependence on the systems that enrich and profit us is very difficult. And indeed, if we do not destroy our dependence on wealth, it is **"impossible"** – to use Jesus' words – to follow Him (Luke 18:25-27).

Shortly after this encounter with the rich young ruler, Jesus meets a short little rich guy named Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). In contrast to the ruler, Zacchaeus defects from the system he has profited from, declaring: **"Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold"** (Luke 19:8).

Jesus obviously considered his repentance and restitution integral and declared: **"Today salvation has come to this house"** (Luke 19:9). First, notice that the issue is not necessarily about quantity; in Zacchaeus' case, half of his goods were sufficient. The issue is about renouncing the system from which we profit; instead choosing to use the advantages we are afforded for the good of others.

Second, notice this phrase: **"Today salvation has come to this house"**. Salvation from what? Of course, this may mean Zacchaeus found saving faith and entered into an essential relationship with Father God; but that is an assumption we read into the passage, it does not in fact say this. What does the passage itself mean in terms of salvation?

Zacchaeus defected from a system that he had profited from at the expense of others. Being a tax collector, he had snuggled up to Caesar's Empire and benefited from its oppressive rule and exploitation. Furthermore he had, by his own admission, used this position of authority to falsely accuse others; defrauding them. His repentance thus saved him personally from the vices of greed, cruelty and fraud and just as importantly, if not more so, it saved numerous others (past, present and future) from being exploited by him. In this passage, as well as many others, salvation is thus synonymous with justice.

Justice was established in that specific place in that glorious moment. The Kingdom had come; God's will was done.

I'm not sure how to properly define the Empire's system that we profit from but I see its influence everywhere. Two thoughts spring to mind.

First, we have the rich versus poor dilemma wherein the Empire extravagantly enriches a smaller and smaller minority at the expense of an increasingly growing majority, forcing an ever-widening, already insurmountable, gap between the two. The "poor" are growing ever more angry and frustrated at being exploited; the "rich" are becoming progressively more anxious and fearful at the threat the "poor" pose<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Permit me to bear my heart on my sleeve for a moment. One of the tragedies for me is that so much of the church's focus today seeks to cater for the middle class in what can only be called "irrelevant cloisters of high-maintenance, low-impact ministries". Much church planting thought begins with the premise of targeting demographically "Average Joe" and catering to his whims. Thus, at the very inception of many sincere church initiatives is the creation of yet another consumerist institution that again chews up resources; this time, the very resources that are supposed to reboot the "system" and thus change the world: believers' faith, gifting, energy, initiative, time and money.

After the rich versus poor dilemma, we also have the Empire's economic distortion. Capitalism's basic "demand and supply" tenant has been usurped by a Capitalism gone mad; or in a phrase: *capitalismania*.

On the one calloused hand, our society's "supply" exceeds its "demand" because, through the clout of advertising geniuses, demand itself will be bloated beyond all proportions. And then what isn't sold simply gets "turfed;" rather than being used to help the needy. Why? Well, if it remains in the "system;" it will undercut our, in the words of Gollum, *precious* inflated-demand. This "turfig" not only exasperates the rich versus poor dilemma, it also pollutes the environment; complete with the depletion of natural resources and destruction of plant and animal life.

On the other equally bruised hand, our society's "demand" keeps growing because we simply cannot control ourselves; enough is never enough. We burn through the limits of our planet's resources as monster-consumers, stuffing our overfed appetites and desires with the latest, the greatest, the newest, the hippest, the hottest, the coolest – in order to impress people we don't like with "things" we don't need, usually with money we don't have. So much so that 70% of the world's population eats worse than the dustbins of most people in the affluent West. Our mouth-wide-open "demand" ensures that supply continues to occur at epic proportions; a rate that is effectively raping the earth.

This marketing-driven "demand" and out-of-control "supply" is like a tornado increasing in momentum and force, becoming now – it has for sometime of course, but we are just now beginning to see it – capable of literally destroying us. And it will gobble all in its wake: the rich, the poor and everyone in between; animal life, plant life, resources, materials, the ozone and everything else as well.

As far as the promise of capitalism goes, we've thrown the baby out and kept the bath water. Our free-economy has become a free-wheeling, runaway train. Hurtling out of control, it is now threatening to fly off its tracks. And it is worth remembering that we – you, me, our children and our children's children – are on board.

So here is, for me, the most important question we can ask: Are we profiting from the system? And if we live in what we refer to as the "West," in my humble (yet potentially misguided) opinion, it is a distinct possibility. The real issue becomes: "In what ways am I profiting from the system and how do I defect? How do I use my privilege intentionally and extravagantly for the good of others?" This is a serious matter for heart-searching consideration for all those who believe that they are not **"of"** this world.

Listen to Paul's counsel to those who enjoy privilege and advantage in this age (and compared to the world's categories of poor, if you can read this paragraph you are more than likely considered in the "privileged" categories):

**“Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share. Storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life”** (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Note these pointers:

1) We must not **“be haughty”**.

The word **“haughty”** means, “to be arrogant, snooty and puffed-up;” a perfect description of a Pharisee. It is so easy to allow our privilege – which we had nothing to do with – to become something we think we deserve; something that makes us better than those without privilege. Of course, this is daft. Paul said, in essence, don’t be daft!

2) We ought to **“trust...God, who gives richly all things to enjoy”**.

This is a masterpiece of advice. Paul tells us to reaffirm our dependence in God, expressing gratitude to God for the privilege we have, ***being sure to enjoy all He gives***. We are to fast and feast; and in our praying and playing our laughter and labour make this world a better place (for all work and no play makes for a dull world).

Importantly, we are not to despise what we have. We’re not to bite the hand that fed us, or detest our privileged upbringing in a spirit of ingratitude and self-loathing. Rather, in joyful gratitude, we ought to use our advantages for the good of others; not for self-indulgence, self-congratulations and self-advancement. And yes, we should abhor *the corrupt systems* that blatantly oppress some to profit others; using our privilege to prophetically cry, “Foul play!” in the face of injustice.

3) We must **“do good”** being **“rich in good works”**.

And here is the rub. We are to use our advantages to benefit all; to serve our fellowman and improve our world. We are to abandon the seducing path of self-enrichment and instead be **“rich in good works”**. We are to give up our pursuit of pleasure and treasure and pursue rather the Rule of God and His justice. Jesus made it clear: **“For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required”** (Luke 12:48). In God’s eyes, ***privilege is responsibility***.

4) Using our privilege for the benefit of others is both an eternal investment and it serves to unlock God’s will, **“as it is in heaven,”** here on earth.

Paul, in words similar to Jesus’ **“do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth”** (Matthew 6:29), exhorts us to invest in what counts; in keeping with the counsel of the

wisdom writer: **“He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given”** (Proverbs 19:17).

The words Paul uses, **“storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life”** (1 Timothy 6:19), are profound. Clearly it reveals that through our good works we are investing into the age to come – **“for the time to come”** – but don’t relegate this only to “then”. The phrase **“eternal life”** is, in our English translations, misleading. It does not refer only to life in the sweet by-and-by; it literally means, “the life of the ages” and refers to a quality of life **both** now and forever. The NIV translates this phrase, **“eternal life”** here with these wonderful words: **“the life that is truly life”**.

The implication? Yes, using the privilege given to us for the good of others is an eternal investment but it also makes possible the quality of life God intends here, **right now, for everyone**. God’s Kingdom comes; His will is done and a little bit of heaven shines to brighten our world.

And herein lies a second implication...

### **Are we doing all the good we can?**

Some make a distinction between “sins of commission” – sins we commit such as gossip, lying and other inappropriate behaviour – and “sins of omission” – good we neglect to do, such as a lack of prayer, service and giving. While I’m not a big fan of making categories for sin, this distinction does have a provoking implication. It seems we have a tendency to define righteousness as avoiding the first list, “sins of commission”. Jesus has completely different expectations of us. It seems He would define righteousness as living way beyond the second list, “sins of omission;” that is, envisioning us to live in a way as to do all the good we can.

Seriously, I have to ask myself: Am I doing all the good I can? Am I using the privileges I have had and the opportunities I have been given to serve others and make this world a better place? Is planet earth enriched because I am here? Not with the crumbs of my life while I feast on the fat. Not with token pay offs while I pander to my impulses.

Yet as we look around our world today, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the desperate need of the poor. The plight of the needy can knock the stuffing out of you before you lift a finger; it can crush your enthusiasm, squash your initiative and rob your resolve. Unless... unless you decide to make a crucial decision right at the get-go. Ready? Here it is, **refuse to be overwhelmed by what you cannot do; rather be inspired by what you can!**

Therein lies a bombshell of empowerment if we will grasp it. I cannot save the world but I can play my part. My part, by itself, may not make a difference to the world; but it will make a world of difference to those I serve. And if enough of us do our part, the momentum will –

at some point – cause us to reach a tipping point; from which our earth will gloriously “upgrade” in line with God’s eternal intention. From our side: not magically but progressively; from God’s side: supernaturally and profoundly. Can you imagine that happening...in our day? (If you can, you’re drinking of the life-giving, empowering stream of Biblical hope).

So what can you do, right now in this immediate moment? Do it. What can you do with a little more thought and training in the foreseeable, short-term? Set the wheels in motion. What can you do with a spiritual community, resourced with the heart and power of God, who together dream to make a difference? Begin to brainstorm for action today. And what can you personally and collectively do if you give yourself to a medium to long-term project enlarged with a Kingdom vision from God? Dream!

The alternative? If we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed, we shut our eyes and drop our head. Yes, it is so easy to close our eyes to the need; to become familiar with it, inoculated to it, and to then drop our heads in despair and dismay: “What can I do?”

There is a phrase in the Scriptures that urges us to do just the opposite. As Joshua led Israel into their promised land, he **“lifted his eyes”** (5:13). Jesus told the disciples to **“lift up your eyes and look...”** (John 4:35). The phrase means, “to be watchful, alert and ready”. Thus when we fight through the temptation to drop our head and shut our eyes, we then open our hearts to the flow of God’s compassion.

When Jesus **“saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them”** (Matthew 9:36). God has linked our eyes to our heart. When we see with God’s eyes, we are moved with God’s heart! Live with your eyes open! God does: **“the eyes of the Lord run to and fro...”** (1 Chronicles 16:9).

What’s more, God doesn’t require that I slavishly live to meet every need around me with a martyr-spirit; grudgingly giving **“my body to be burned”** (1 Corinthians 13:3) moaning, “Woe is me! I’m just a pawn sacrificed for the greater good”. No! Rather, as we gratefully live for Him, we discover the pleasure of cooperating with Him in His concern for the needy. With passion and compassion; ***we intercede when we see a need, and intervene when we sense the Lord lead.***

We must see the need; yes, we need to live with our eyes open. We must allow the need to break our hearts; to unlock the reservoir and resources of God’s compassion (His raw and real emotion) to flow through us. For it is only then that we truly intercede! And it is only in heart-felt intercession that we learn to hear the voice of God for others. Until then we act only out of human sympathy and while this is certainly a good start, it will never stay the course or provide substantial life-giving solutions. But as we learn to be quick in bringing the needs of others before God; we can live in the peace and joy of responding to His leadership, meeting the needs He directs us to.

And whatever we do, and here is a vital point, we dare not detach ourselves from the needy...or else we can never meet their needs. ***The moment we lose our heart for our world; in that sad moment, we can no longer be an answer.***

Enough said? Not quite.

Whenever mention of the poor is made somewhere along the line someone pipes up and says, "But didn't Jesus say we'll always have the poor with us?" To which I answer, "Yes, so what's your point? Do you mean that we are somehow excused from helping the poor?"

"Uhh...umm...I mean only that... Isn't giving to the poor a deep, black hole that has no bottom to it?" comes the reply.

Jesus actually quoted Moses in this incident in Bethany, when the disciples expressed their shock that Mary anointed Him with **"costly oil,"** rather than sell it and give the proceeds to the poor (John 12:1-8 c. Matthew 26:6-13). The statement he used, **"for the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always"** (John 12:8), is from a critical passage in the Mosaic Law dealing with the poor.

In this download from heaven, God revealed the principle of debt relief and generosity that would drastically limit the number of poor in the geopolitical nation of Israel (Deuteronomy 15:1-8). It was a strategy that, along with other instructions such as the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-17), built into the fabric of society a core value and practical tactic to ensure justice for the underprivileged and opportunities for all; and what's more, making certain that the disenfranchised were treated with dignity and respect rather than being patronised and dehumanised. (This is something that we, the privileged, should consider in our relief efforts towards the underprivileged today).

And for those still marginalised in geopolitical Israel, God said: **"the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy in your land'"** (Deuteronomy 15:11). Knowing well the human condition and its dysfunctions, God commanded His people to go beyond the framework of a brilliant God-initiated "welfare system" to ensure that those who "fell through the cracks" fell into the safe place of *their* overwhelming generosity. There is no doubt that God was, is and will always be desperately concerned about the poor and places the responsibility of the poor on us, His people.

Thus in the episode in Bethany, Jesus did two things; first, He challenged the disciples' claim and sentiments. John makes it clear that it was Judas who was the one who got the insinuation going around and then makes this remark: **"not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it"** (John 12:6). Jesus saw through his shallow pretence and challenged his carnal intentions.

The second thing Jesus did was chide Judas for his criticism of Mary's worship. But His rebuke of Judas' complete lack of devotion and inadequate grasp of true worship in no way at all belittles the poor, nor should it be used as an excuse for inaction and apathy. Jesus delights in extravagant worship yet also requires that we be outrageously open-hearted and **"open-handed"** towards the poor.

And now we come to a third implication. (Still with me? You haven't burnt this article yet?)

### **Are we majoring on the minors?**

It seems that the longer we serve Christ the more complicated we can make serving Christ. We don't intend this, nor does God delight in it. In learning more about God's ways we also tend to learn more excuses, through the inevitable disappointments of life, along the way. Our initial salvation expectancy and idealism can give way to "mature faith" despondency and cynicism. We learn the many formulas and clichés that explain why God won't save, heal, deliver, answer, prosper, blah, blah, blah.

Of course, these crises of faith, soul doubts and genuine questions are part of the true maturing process where we move through the idealism, way past cynicism, until we discover a holy "realism" in God; where we come to the end of our natural enthusiasm and the death of our fleshly, self-will and ego. It's in this place of brokenness, in the heart of **"a contrite spirit...who trembles at His word,"** that God dwells in power (Isaiah 66:1, 2).

But so many choose rather to anchor in the bay of cynicism and never sail out into the open seas of realism. Moored in disillusionment and hope deferred, complexity is a good smoke screen in which to hide; in which to play it safe; in which to find more excuses to explain our apathy, failure and inaction.

The Pharisees were guilty of just this. Shipwrecked in the harbour of religious scepticism they added reams more rules and interpretations of rules in a complex web of confusion and perplexity effectively paralysing themselves and others from action. They so majored on every possible minor that they lost all bearing as to what the majors in fact were.

Jesus cut through their smoke and mirrors: **"Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"** (Matthew 23:24). What a disturbingly ludicrous word picture! A first century strainer, similar to one today, was used to filter out debris and impurities from their drinking water. Jesus is saying that they painstakingly remove a tiny gnat but gulp down a camel; they spotlight the trifling, insignificant matters while completely missing the enormous, significant matters of life. Specifically, in this passage, they turned the principle of the tithe into a soul-badgering regulation while neglecting **"the weightier matters of... justice and mercy"** (Matthew 23:23). Ouch! This is a shoe that fits too many today.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day majored on the minors and missed the heart of God. And we are Pharisees today if we do the same.

It doesn't really matter what trivial pursuits we major on (and there are hundreds that occupy most believers; most of them centring on our fixation for self-enrichment and our obsession with "blow this joint" eschatology), we tend to neglect matters of justice and other "major category" good works simply because it is easier to tickle ears than roll up sleeves; easier to articulate the problem than chisel out the answer; easier to philosophise than "actionise". Amen or O-me?

Majoring on the minors will keep us from doing good as we perfect the art of making excuses. (And remember excuses are like armpits; there are usually two of them and they both stink!) Worse, because pursuing the trivial is a default value of the system itself, we become more entrenched in the systemic dysfunction; increasingly unable to discern how much we are in fact profiting from it. Twisted, distorted and fused in as a cog in the machine, a part in the system, we offer our lives, our time, our breath, and our children to sustain the ravenous appetite of our never-satisfied Empire.

### **Jesus, Prophet and Politician...**

There we have it; three implications phrased in three questions:

- Are we profiting from the system?
- Are we doing all the good we can?
- Are we majoring on the minors?

I'm absolutely sure that there are more implications; I'm not so sure what they are and how to explain them. But I'm quite sure that these three questions give us plenty to begin with; lots of track to run on.

Jesus is certainly concerned with our eternal soul, yet I have become increasingly awakened to the reality that He is not just concerned with getting us "to the other side". He is concerned with the very real and raw issues of this life, those that have great bearing on the condition of the human soul. I am convinced that we are not just here to get as many lost people "to the other side" but to bring the "other side" – that is, God's will as it is in heaven – to this side, so that an entire lost planet finds salvation. Tall order? Not for God.

Jesus taught about the “**narrow gate**” saying that the “**way that leads to destruction**” is broad and well-travelled while the path that “**leads to life**” is “**difficult...and there are few who find it**” (Matthew 7:13, 14). Why have we made this about getting to heaven? It clearly is not. In a manifesto on Kingdom justice, Jesus is comparing the easy, thoughtless path chosen by many who seek to profit and indulge themselves versus the few, characterised by the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-10), who choose to defect from the system and instead become magnanimous agents of the life-giving resources of God.

We have indeed settled for a narrow gospel despite Jesus’ love that knows no limits; a message that we’ve made exclusive and elitist even when God’s grace is overwhelming inclusive and astonishingly universal; a gospel we’ve muddied with a thousand petty arguments when we ought to be demonstrating the divine compassion and justice of God; a message we’ve pitched to tickle the ears of the spiritually fat and flabby when we have a message that offers hope and liberation to all (including the fat and flabby, who need to be set free from addiction, meaninglessness and boredom).

And please don’t accuse me of claiming that everyone gets saved; that is not what I believe. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life and no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). But **our message** often positions Jesus as “in the way;” a hindrance to truth-seeking, one who prejudicially gives life on condition of performance. We can, if we’re not careful, reduce Jesus’ outrageously generous invitation to run into Father’s arms, freely and expectantly, into numerous hoops that must be jumped through, grades that need to be attained, behaviours that need to be finely tuned...religion of the Pharisee-kind.

It humbles me no end when I remind myself that Jesus concluded His Explosion on the Mount by explaining that there will be some horrific/wonderful surprises (depending on how you greet this news) on the day of judgment (Matthew 7:21-23). I, for one, see the wonder in it; I certainly don’t rejoice in the smug who think they’re welcome and aren’t, but I do rejoice in the implication that some who, I think won’t make it, will! God’s grace and mercy is so much larger and wider and higher and broader than I can even contemplate. And for me this is awesome news; motivating me to abandon my prejudices, in terms of who I think deserves justice and mercy, while at the same time urging me to “**work out my own salvation with fear and trembling**” (Philippians 2:12).

The Prophet Jesus confronts every kind of social wickedness, every oppressive institution, every system of man that enslaves and every form of injustice. And it is clear that “**judgment begins at the house of God**” (1 Peter 4:17). God desires a just people who can, with integrity, establish justice.

Thus, in a very wonderful and substantial way, Jesus’ politics – His governmental rule – is the most important thing needed in our world today; a planet on the brink, a civilisation on the edge, an Empire fraught with injustice and exploitation, bribery and corruption.

Read Matthew 5-7 again, and the Gospels for that matter, and position Jesus in the historical, geopolitical context of His day; addressing an oppressed people, confused by a religious construct that was just as Caesar-like in its domination and venom.

Then think of what He would say and do today.

Then ask yourself...

- Am I profiting from the system Jesus so vehemently opposed?
- Am I doing all the good I possibly can?
- Am I majoring on the minors, using them to excuse my apathy?

Then come on, roll up your sleeves. We've got a world to improve.

### **Highly Recommended!**

I want to recommend Brian D. McLaren's book, "Everything Must Change" – easily the most disturbing, provoking book I have ever read. It goaded me to much reflection, study, tears and then ultimately to put my thoughts down on paper – which became the contents of this rather tame, in comparison, article.

"Everything Must Change" is his brilliant and articulate attempt to show how Jesus' teachings do in fact profoundly answer the global crises of our day and how we, as God's people, should be proclaiming and demonstrating this much-needed Good News. The book is a challenge in its depth and intensity and there are definitely some parts, as in every book, in which you'll have to labour through. But the book is so worth reading and the topic is so astoundingly relevant today.

I personally think this book can be used to engage with deep thinking unbelievers, who will be taken by our interest in politics and economics – areas that Christians tend to be thoughtless about (certainly in our Gospel presentations) – and hopefully moved by the answers Jesus gives to the problems of our day.





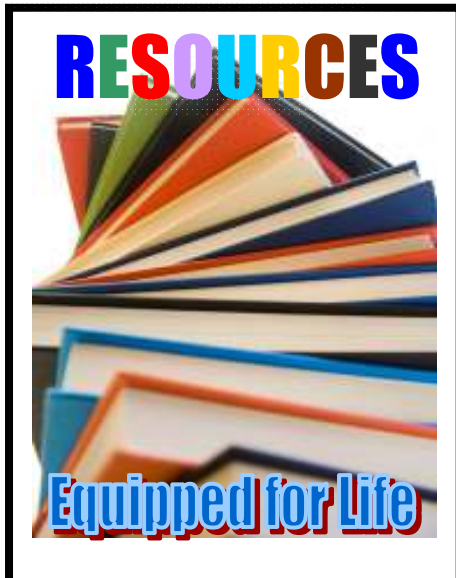




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## **CrossWave**



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