The Social Justice Tradition: Practicing the Compassionate Life

Jesus and the Compassionate Life

Read Matthew 25:31-46

Have you ever been a stranger? Think about some of the feelings you had. Did anyone welcome you? Describe that experience.

This passage from the Gospel of Matthew is a powerful indictment of those who neglect the needy. Though it reads like a parable, it describes the future judgement of all nations. Jesus uses a simile (“He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from goats”). Jesus, like a shepherd will separate all people into two groups: those who cared for the needs for the hungry, thirsty, alienated, naked, sick, or jailed; and those who did not. Notice this powerful detail: Jesus tells his listeners that when they have (or have not) cared for the needy, they have (or have not) cared for him. When Jesus blesses those who cared, they are surprised and ask, “When did we see you...?” and though the second group never served those in need, they ask the same question. Jesus then delivers his powerful response saying “Truly I tell you, just as you helped (or did not help) the people who needed it the most, you helped me. Jesus’ reply stresses that when we serve the needy, we actually serve Him. We may be tempted to turn this teaching into a law that if performed makes us friends with God because of our good deeds. Instead we should understand that we are saved by grace through faith (see Ephesians 2:8).

God and the Social Justice Tradition

God cares deeply about how we treat one another. When asked which commandment in the law is greatest, Jesus responded, “You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all you mind” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself”. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:37-40). God gives us instructions, so we know how to act. The call to love one another is outlined in 1 John 4:11.

When we look at the call to practice social justice from God’s perspective, we see it much differently. Each and every human being- in fact the entire universe is a precious work of God. The book of Proverbs 14:31 tells us “those who oppress the poor insult their Maker”. If we could see the world through the eyes of God, we would look through a filter of compassion. God cares about our needs, hurts, our brokenness and instead of judging us God is ready to forgive us, heal us and to restore us. Jesus lived a
life of compassion for “the least” He mended, cared and forgave those in need and yet his compassion never undermined his sense of justice. Jesus blended justice and compassion together. His love of God led him to grab a whip and throw out the merchants in the temple. When faced with injustice, Jesus fought against it with a holy passion. In Isaiah God states that “I the Lord love justice” I hate robbery and wrongdoing. God desires that “we give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute (Psalm 82:3).

Do you know someone who lacks compassion yet calls themselves a Christian? How did you respond? How would you respond if you see this again?

What is the Social Justice Tradition?

Jesus distilled the laws into two commandments: love God and love your neighbor. The Social Justice tradition (aka Practicing the Compassionate Life) has always been integral to the life of the Church and the true believer. Many men and women have dedicated their lives to caring for the needy. However compassionate response demands more than a donation of food or clothing. Many times, bringing justice into a situation means helping people long term. Social justice can mean equipping people with skills they can use to support themselves, confronting social structures and institutions that oppress needy people. Christ calls us to fight policies that discriminate on the basis of external appearances, race, gender and class. He calls the Church to stand against evil in our society and government and to work for equity in all human relations and social structures if we are going to truly love our neighbor.

Practicing the Social Justice Tradition

When we practice Social Justice we are helped also. John Wesley once said that true happiness comes from helping others. We begin the task of “carrying one another’s burdens” out of compassion, but in the end we find that we too have been truly blessed. As we seek to meet the needs of others we must set aside self-righteous service and pursue true service. True service listens and depends of God; true service recognizes no task is to small rather God notices all; true service does not seek applause or rewards; true service is not disappointed when obvious or external change does not occur for those served; true service does not neglect the poor or the rich, all have needs; true service asks those in need what they really need and does not focus on what we want to give; and true service does not seek to be repaid.

Spiritual Exercises in the Social Justice Tradition

- Volunteer at the Love Pantry, Houston Food Bank. Donate funds and times to organizations committed to social justice like the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Black Lives Matter, the Color of Change, Prison Fellowship, The Goodwill, Asylum Seeker Advocacy Project or other organizations you know that seek to help those in need.

- Guard another person’s reputation- Although you can’t see it a reputation is valuable, and you can guard and protect it be refusing to gossip or backbite.

- Take a stand against racism or other forms of discrimination in your community or institutions in your community. Always be prayerful, peaceful and compassionate in your approach.

Resources