

# Who Is My Neighbor? Modelling Christian Social Ethics

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this paper is to restate the social-ethical implications of Jesus' message and actions, as documented in the gospels. Additionally, based upon the example provided, it offers a brief reflection on the implications of Jesus' model for the contemporary church. The paper concludes that authentic Christian social ethics should actively work to alleviate poverty, oppression, injustice, and alienation.

**KEYWORDS:** social ethics, Christian ethics, Jesus' teaching, social involvement, Christian service

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## Introduction

“Who is my neighbor?” is a question often asked but seldomly answered. That is precisely the problem addressed in this paper. In the gospels, Jesus provides a response to this question. The individual asking the question was seeking a way to avoid this responsibility, uncomfortable as it may have been, to help those in need. Unfortunately, he did not find such an escape.

Is human need—whether physical, emotional, psychological, and social—important to God? Should the church become muddled in such problems? Or is it not more important to fulfill our “religious” duties and leave the problems of this world behind? The aim of this paper is straightforward. I argue that, unless due attention is given by churches today to the charge of Jesus (Lk. 10:37), the indifference toward the needy implied in the question

“Who is my neighbor?” is reenacted hundredfold. Our doctrine may seem correct, and we usually boast to that effect. Yet, if social concern is missing from our praxis, we are no better than the scribe who tried to justify himself in front of Jesus (Rotaru 2016, 29-43).

It is my proposal that Jesus did illustrate a deep, concrete concern for the poor and oppressed, and that he taught his disciples to exhibit the same level of concern and to act responsibly and caringly on behalf of the disadvantaged. By examining Jesus’ response to the social problems of his time, I hope to illustrate below the model of social engagement provided by the New Testament. This task will be followed by reflection upon the social action required of the church nowadays. By “social action,” I am referring to concrete acts of assistance given to anyone in need. Dayton (1987, 55) suggests the following definition for the broader concept of social transformation: “a process of external intervention intended to enable a people to become better than they were before.” defines social transformation as “a process of external intervention intended to enable a people to become better than they were before.” Consequently, I argue that to better understand Christian social ethics, one ought to examine not ‘what *would* Jesus do’, but ‘what *did* Jesus do’. And to unwaveringly follow his example.

## First Century Palestine and Its Problems

The task set in this paper ought to begin with a short description of life-conditions in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. Ignorance of the social climate to which Jesus responded during his earthly ministry can lead to ignorance of obvious social implications of Jesus’ teaching and actions; and that, because “it is impossible to understand the historical development of the early Christian movement without understanding the contemporary economic and political situation of the Jews” (Horsley and Silberman 1997, 12).

In the book *Victory over Violence*, Hengel (1973, 45) describes the experience of life in Palestine in the Hellenistic period as “oppressive exploitation, wars of brutality, and disappointed hopes.” Life in the time of Jesus was no different. Roman occupation and high taxation laid a great burden upon the inhabitants of Palestine. Culturally the people suffered from an increasing loss of ethnic and religious identity. It must have been difficult to

harmonize the teaching of the supremacy of Yahweh and the reality of foreign occupation. Repeated attempts to restore the reign of God in Judaea by force only served to heighten both disappointment and anxiety. Economically people were undergoing serious hardships, many of them having to turn over their land because of the enormous debt they incurred because of burdensome taxation. This resulted in a change of status for many from landowners to that of tenants; and the situation was even worse when various disasters, such as famine, drought, and war took place (Lieu 1996, 47-48).

Thiessen (1978, 40-42) describes the situation as “social rootlessness,” arguing that the social problems of Jesus’ time tended to sever the identity of the average citizen from its traditional social foundation, leading to a feeling of restlessness and a desire for change. Besides famine and uneven concentration of wealth, the accompanying, equally bad, problems of Palestine at that time, Thiessen argues, were overpopulation and the struggle caused by unfair distribution of goods. The result was a scarcity in resources and an overwhelming debt for the Palestinian peasants.

In stark contrast to the poor, a small Judaeian minority, including priests, Herodians, merchants, and the old aristocracy, justified their enormous wealth and subsequent oppression of the poor through cunning legal interpretation (Davids 1992, 701-2). Their wealth was maintained through collaboration with the Romans, which allowed the wealthy class to maintain political and religious power. This made the life of the poor even worse since their financial poverty was associated in the eyes of the religious establishment to spiritual poverty. Not having sufficient time or money, the average peasant was unable to keep the law as it was interpreted by the religious teachers of the day, the Pharisees (Davids 1992, 703). Thus, the term “sinners” Jesus often encountered in his conflicts with the Pharisees refers not to hardened criminals and despots, but to common folk who were unable to keep the law because of their financial situation.

By way of summary, there are at least three categories of problems the average person in Jesus’ times encountered: (1) crippling poverty; (2) financial and religious oppression; and (3) social rootlessness. Below we will consider Jesus’ response and subsequently the responsibility of today’s church in each of these areas.

## The Social Ethics of Jesus

As a Galilean Jew, Jesus experienced firsthand the poverty, oppression, and social unrest of Palestine. In this light, Jesus' inaugural speech (Luke 4:16-21), which announced the coming of God's just reign through his own ministry (cf. Măcelaru 2009, 59-68), sounds very much like a "messianic manifesto." As Theissen (1978, 98) puts it, this is the beginning of a Jewish renewal movement. Hays (1996, 116), commenting on this passage, has pointed out that the implication of the message proclaimed by Jesus is that he was presenting himself as the Messiah and understood the liberation of the poor and oppressed to be his main work. By reading those texts from Isaiah (chapters 58 and 61), Jesus is, in fact, announcing "a restored Israel in which justice and compassion for the poor will prevail" (Hays 1996, 116). Considering the state of Israel at the time, Jesus' announcement must have been genuinely good news to most of his hearers, who were prime for reform in Israel. The content of that message addressed the four areas of distress listed above.

Firstly, central to Jesus' mission was his calling to bring "the good news to the poor" (Lk. 4:18). The word "poor" used in the context of Jesus' mission is pregnant with meaning. Parker (1996, 58) notes that the "poor" to whom Jesus is sent are not only those who lack money but the oppressed in general, meaning those who are financially, spiritually, and emotionally in need. One key aspect of the "good news" is clear in (among other texts) the Lukan account of the beatitudes. There, Jesus pronounces blessing upon the poor and oppressed (6:20-23), and judgment upon the rich and the oppressors (6:24-26). As the Messiah, Jesus is announcing, in true prophetic fashion (e.g. Măcelaru 2022b, 118-137; Măcelaru 2017, 49-56), that God's expected reign has broken into the world, bringing with it a reversal of fortunes to the downtrodden and marginal (cf. Verhey 1984, 17). In proclaiming this imminent reversal, Jesus deconstructed and relativized wealth and power structures by teaching his audience not to place their hope in wealth or prestige, but instead to thoroughly commit themselves to upholding the qualities of the Kingdom of God (cf. Mt. 6:33). Thus, Jesus' teaching of eschatological expectation and trust in God liberates the obedient from the worries of life (what to eat, drink, or wear, cf. Mt. 6:25f), and results in readiness to be generous and to care for the needy. Hence, we have the first concrete response to poverty – readiness to give.

Secondly, as one of his messianic tasks, Jesus undertook to create a messianic community whose purpose was to embody Jesus' message and witness to the imminent coming of God's just reign. Through proclaiming the good news to the poor, Jesus invited "those who accepted his message into a new social world" (Davids 1992, 708). In this way the early community of Jesus functioned as a "contrast-society," that is, an "alternative to the world's present system" (Moltmann 1993, 121). This new community offered an answer to the social and religious rootlessness experienced by many in Palestine, providing a new social identity and a renewed sense of faith by partaking in the purposes of God. This new society functioned as a "program of community action and social resistance to a system that efficiently transformed close-knit villages into badly fragmented communities of alienated, frightened individuals" (Horsley and Silberman 1997, 55). Moreover, this messianic community was a sign that the coming Kingdom of God was already present in the world. One aspect of this was the restructuring of financial relationships within the community, resulting in equal distribution to the needy (Sider 1990, 73). Being in community with the poor naturally meant sharing equally and generously with them, which is exhibited by the common purse that Jesus' disciples held (Jn 12:6, 13:29). This social ministry was not limited to the community, but extended to all, even to foreigners and enemies. This fact is exhibited by Jesus' radical reinterpretation of the Old Testament concept of love for one's neighbor as having unlimited application (cf. Lk. 10:25-37) for social concern (Mott 1982, 34). In fact, for Jesus, generous giving to the poor was a distinct mark of the community, if not a prerequisite for its membership.

Thirdly, Jesus responds to religious and economic oppression in his inauguration speech as proclaims, "freedom to the prisoners" and "release for the oppressed" (Lk. 4:18). His response came in the form of criticism, reinterpretation, and pronouncement of judgment. Jesus criticized the religious establishment for faithlessly misinterpreting the Law of Moses. Instead of seeking justice and relief for the poor they "loaded them down with burdens that they can hardly carry" (Lk. 11:46). This was criticism of their uncaring and condescending attitude towards the "sinners," for they failed to take into consideration their difficult financial situation when they laid down lengthy requirements for piety (Mangalwadi 1987, 195). Moreover, Jesus

reinterprets what it means to be righteous (to do justice and love God, cf. Lk. 11:42) and pronounces judgment upon the religious establishment (Lk. 11:43-52). Thus, Jesus envisions a new community, which is “a more humane and compassionate counterculture” (Mangalwadi 1987, 197), composed of those who will obey the authentic will of God. On innumerable occasions Jesus criticized the wealthy for storing up worthless treasure on earth and ignoring the cry of the poor. Jesus based ultimate eternal worth solely upon trust in God and in his just principles (Mt. 6:33), and in doing so undermined the entire system of wealth, confounding the accepted superiority of the wealthy and lifting the dignity of the poor (Moltmann 1993, 101). The unrepentant wealthy receive the same fate as their precious possessions- rust, rot, and decay (Lk. 12:20-21). Thus, as the Messiah, Jesus announced the coming judgment of God in terms of a reversal of fortunes. He criticized the religious and social establishment for its oppression of the poor and helpless. Moreover, he began a new society based on the contra-values of justice and generosity to the poor.

## **The Social Ministry of the Contemporary Church**

There is an enormous number and a great diversity of Christian ministries today that address the social problems of our world. To say that the entire church is (or is not) following the example of Jesus in such and such an area would be to vastly overstate or understate reality. Therefore, the task in the remainder of this paper is to examine shortly basic teachings and practices of social ministry nowadays in the light of the model provided above (Rotaru 2012a, 6). Both criticism and reform are in view here, a task that requires the imagination and creativity of the reader.

As was acknowledged above, foundational to Christian social ministry is the ultimate reliance upon God; it is the “seek-first-the-Kingdom” attitude, which means placing one’s aspirations solely upon the action of the Kingdom. This frees the believer from financial (and other) worries and enables her to share generously with the poor. This new set of values also operates as a tool by which to measure “accepted” values and to discern what is just. This is the platform from which the Christian community ought to begin and carry out its social ministry (Rotaru 2012b, 6).

Paul also understood the importance of community life as a witness of the truth and justice that come from Jesus the Messiah alone. The primary focus of Paul's missionary work was to form communities, not to make individual converts. The result of Paul's high regard for community building was that the churches in general showed "a high degree of participation and a strong sense of belonging" (Tidball 1993, 885). Consequently, the inner life of the church is central to Christian social ministry. Only to the extent that the church lives faithfully in regard to her calling as a messianic community – exhibiting the love, forgiveness, generosity, mercy and justice of the Messiah Jesus in tangible ways – will she be able to faithfully follow Jesus' example in social ministry (Sider 1990, 65).

One of the most potent aspects of the early Christians' pursuit of social ethics was their practice of economic justice. If the church today is to continue the social ministry of Jesus and the early church it must not only teach from a biblical perspective on money and just (equal as Paul sees it) financial relationships, but it must also actively and concretely embody generosity within and without its structures (Rotaru 2010a, 7). This may require a radical rethinking of the church's economic practices. In the light of the poverty and human need the world knows nowadays, the church ought to work in Christ-like fashion through radical sharing with the poor. Redemption is not only for the soul but should also impact finances. Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats presents an excellent picture of how a life of Kingdom-generosity would look like (cf. Mt. 25:31-46). Jesus does not give here an exhaustive list of actions but examples of creative and spontaneous responses to human need that should naturally occur when encountering need. It is startling that the "wicked" are not labelled as such because they did not pray or attend church meetings but because of the lack of concrete acts of social concern. Their excuse, that they did not notice the need of their "neighbor," does not move the judge in his decision to cast them away. Considering the gravity of the imagery here, the church should take seriously these types of concrete needs in society and reconsider the priority of their projects in the light of the poor who struggle for their existence.

Regarding opposition to oppression, Christian communities today bear the responsibility for direct criticism of injustice and the witness to a new Kingdom-reality as founded by the true King, Jesus Christ. The one



is based upon the other. Because the community finds true justice and peace in the risen and victorious Messiah, it is enabled to demonstrate that justice in the here and now, within and without the community (Sider 1993, 77). When it is living justly, the Christian community acts as a witness to society by exemplifying just relationships. As the transcendent source of ethical action, Jesus frees the Christian community from the worry which binds society to unjust systems and gives it an alternative set of values from which to proclaim and work for social justice (Yoder 1994, 53). This means that the church should call for justice and judge injustice in the context of the society at large (Rotaru 2012c, 5). Nevertheless, it should not limit the involvement to words but act concretely, in concrete situations, on behalf of the oppressed. Thus, Christian social ministry also includes seeking to change social structures and environments that hurt and oppress (Davis 1983, 525). This begins as a proclamation of the reality of Jesus' Lordship and his Kingdom values in the context of structural oppression and acting in love to counter systemic injustice. To do this, the church may need to leave behind some of its treasured things, such as financial security, power, and "ministries" that endorse violence and unjust structures. It is our call to think of the needs of our neighbors, especially when they are lying beaten to a pulp on the side of the road.

## Conclusion

There are a lot of "neighbors" in need of "good Samaritans" in the world today. We may call them refugees (Măcelaru 2018), we may forget that the worth of humans is not decided by their wealth or social status (Măcelaru 2021) and we may ignore the fact that there are rights to which all humans are entitled (Măcelaru 2022a). However, such attitude is not the model Jesus has provided. We may ask whether these are our "neighbor," too. And we can be sure of Jesus' answer.

The question posed in the beginning, whether Jesus really cares about the needy and poor, has hopefully been answered with a strong "yes." Jesus did show deep concern for the poor, oppressed, and needy, and he responded in concrete ways to their needs. This was not a peripheral concern for Jesus, but the central aspect of his mission. Furthermore, Jesus pioneered a community of individuals who were free to share and minister generously to everyone.



In the light of Jesus' example (Rotaru 2010b, 7), Christian communities today are called to be actively involved in ministering to the poor, the oppressed, and the needy. Also, to oppose and intervene to change structural oppression. The task is enormous, indeed, but it is the only way to go. It is the only valid model of Christian social ethics (Rotaru 2017, 57-76).

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