

# The Reign of God and the Limits of Social Justice

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**Theme: Jesus conception of the reign of God provides a holistic vision of God's creation.**

Matthew 4:23-25

<sup>23</sup> *Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*

<sup>24</sup> *So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.*

<sup>25</sup> *And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.*

Throughout the history of Christianity, social justice has served the wind beneath the wings of many churches and individuals. When the prophetic teachings of the Christian faith are fully understood and internalized by the faithful, including the teachings of the biblical prophets and Jesus himself, many of the faithful become motivated to apply their faith to situations and circumstances in the world around us.

Jesus and the biblical prophets remind us that marginalization and oppression of the poor are against the will of God. Seeing the suffering and pain of the many inspire some to do everything they can to eradicate it. The very existence of poverty and inequality requires people of faith to question the validity of systems and structures that maintain them. Historic battles in which people of faith have fought include child labor laws, abolition of slavery, equal pay for equal work, voting rights, women's suffrage, civil rights (for race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation) just to name a few. While striving for social justice can be meaningful and fulfilling work for the people of God, I contend it has its limits.

First of all, Social justice can't change hearts. For example, despite all of the laws passed to ensure that people of different races are treated equally in the public square, some people will always believe that some races are superior to others.

Social justice does not always encourage personal responsibility. Advocates of social justice often see victims one dimensionally. They fail to remember that the marginalized can be victims of injustice and contributors to their own demise at the same time.

Social justice often does not demand personal accountability. Very often advocates of social justice take a macroscopic view of society by focusing on systems and structures. Therefore, they sometimes overlook life at the micro level and the impact of personal decisions on one-on-one human relationships. Every person has the potential to impact the lives of others in our communities (for good or for ill) through our own personal behavioral choices.

Social justice sometimes becomes a spectator sport. Some people join faith communities that are active in social justice struggles, only to sit on the sidelines and watch the pastor or other leaders fight the fight. Sometimes they watch because they would rather write a check to fund the work than actually join the fight. Others may not think they have a place in the struggle. We

have put some civil rights leaders such as Mother Teresa, Caesar Chavez and Martin Luther King, Jr. on such high pedestals that some people don't feel they have a place in the struggle. Some people may think they are not smart enough, dedicated enough, or gifted enough or inspirational enough to lead or be instrumental in a movement. Therefore, they opt out of the struggle altogether.

Social justice often has no ultimate vision. Advocates of social justice often spend time fighting one battle after the next. They fight battles that need to be fought and won for the good of the people. However, they don't have time or take time to conceive of an ultimate vision. Some may believe their ultimate vision is implicit in their work – a world without injustice. But I contend that it is hard to catch a vision of a negative. And, is the absence of injustice a vision or just a really, really good idea?

The work of social justice is good and necessary. But God may be calling us to something more. God may be calling us to embrace a vision, an image of what the world can be and who we can be as a people. This vision must encompass social justice but not be limited by it. By closely attending to the Gospels, such as Matthew, we may just be able to grasp the vision that Jesus is calling us to embody.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, after a season of preparation, being baptized by John, being declared a beloved Son by God and after resisting Satan's temptations, Jesus went about preaching the gospel of the basileia and healing every sickness and disease. But what is the basileia of God? And is there a relationship between the basileia and healing?

We know that basileia can be translated kingdom or reign. But even with that translation, we do not have a clear understanding of what the reign of God actually is. Matthew offers details about what the basileia of God is in the Sermon on the Mount then throughout the entire Gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount, we find a new way of being starting to take shape. From the beginning, Jesus unveils the connection between human relationships with God and human relationships with one another. In the first section of the Gospel we read blessed are those who mourn, are meek, are merciful, are peacemakers, and are pure in heart. We observe that each of these behaviors has a dual purpose: each facilitates good relationships among the people, and each pleases God.

Further into the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus admonishes the crowd not to insult one another or commit adultery. He makes it clear that these behaviors not only displease God, but they are also detrimental to human relationships. In the fifth chapter, Jesus tells people that when they are offering a gift at the altar, if they remember that their brother or sister has something against them, they should leave their gift at the altar, go and be reconciled with the sister or brother. Then, they can come back to give their gift. Their offering to God is unacceptable to God as long as they are not in right relationship with one another.

In chapter 6, at the very center of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches the crowd how to pray. Jesus taught them that if they would forgive their sisters and brothers when their brothers and sisters sinned against them, God would forgive their sins. Therefore, our first observation about the reign of God, is that human spiritual well-being is integrally linked to our relationships with one another. If we cannot learn to treat each other in a Godly way; if we cannot learn to love each other unconditionally the way God loves us; if we cannot learn to treat each other with dignity and respect, (even people we do not like with every fiber of our being), then we cannot please God. In addition, by highlighting the intersectionality of human behavior and divine affirmation, Jesus' vision of the reign of God reminds us to take responsibility for ways we behave in the world. Jesus's vision of the reign also reminds us that we must hold each other

accountable for our actions. Our actions have consequences not just for ourselves but for our families, friends, and for people we don't even know.

Throughout other gospels as well as in Matthew, we find that when the people opened their minds to hear and understand the good news, God changed their hearts. Zacchaeus the tax collector, for example, vowed to change his ways after he had an encounter with Jesus.

However, there is something else going on in the Jesus's vision of the reign of God that we discover not only in his words but through his actions. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew and the other Gospels as well, Jesus spends much of his time healing. Notice that Jesus does not do his healing in lofty places. He does not heal in the palaces of the Herodians or lavish accommodations of the Roman emperors. He takes his healing powers to the streets. In city of Louisville terms, he not only heals in the east end but in the west end as well. He takes his healing powers not just to St. Matthews, the Highlands and J-Town, but also to Beecher Terrace, the Smoketown, and Portland.

Just like today, in Matthew's day the majority of the wealth was concentrated in the hands of the dominant few. The poor were mostly unskilled workers who lived at the mercy of wealthy landowners and elites. In their poverty, they often struggled to have enough to eat which often led to poor nutrition and then to sickness and disease. Though the study of medicine was not nearly as developed as it is now, there were physicians in those days. But only the elite or the wealthy could afford them. By healing the physical bodies of the poor, Jesus was making a profound statement. For Jesus, good health was not a commodity that was only be available to the rich. Good health was a right, and therefore needed to be available for all, even the poor and marginalized.

When Jesus healed the poor of their illnesses and diseases, he replaced their hopelessness with hope. Whereas, before they met Jesus, contracting sickness and disease was a death sentence, after their encounter with Jesus, sickness and disease no longer determined their fate. In addition, Jesus healed the Gerasene Demonic in Matthew 8 of what we would today consider his mental health challenges. Good mental health mattered to Jesus as well.

Feminist theologian and biblical scholar Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza helps us to understand what is happening theologically. In the basileia of God, salvation is not just for the soul. In the basileia of God, salvation also encompasses the mind and the body, as well as the soul. The basileia vision of Jesus is one in which all of God's people are whole, healthy, and strong.<sup>1</sup> In the basileia of God, if my mind or my body is in bondage, I am not experiencing the fullness of God's salvation.

When Jesus took to the streets to provide health care for the poor, he was demonstrating to us that social justice, like responsibility and accountability, is integral to the fulfillment of the reign of God. When we ensure that all people are treated justly in all things, we fulfill God's will for all people.

So what is going on here? What is the larger picture that is emerging? What is God doing through the ministry of Jesus? I believe that the World Health Organization gives us language that will help us grasp the vision Jesus is casting for us. After years of serving diverse populations across the world and collecting medical data on illness and disease since its founding in 1948, the World Health Organization has drawn at least two major conclusions. Firstly, every

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company), 1985, 123.

person on earth needs to have access to good and comprehensive healthcare in order to live full lives.

Secondly, 70% of all deaths worldwide are caused not by biological illness.<sup>2</sup> Rather, these deaths are caused by the conditions, circumstances, and situations that we humans create for ourselves and for one another - otherwise known as social determinants of health. Social determinants of health include social justice concerns such as: access to education, employment, healthy food and clean water, ability to earn a living wage, gender equity and degree of social inclusion or exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Social determinants of health also include personal behaviors such as tobacco use, drug use and excessive drinking, health of diet, and level of physical exercise.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, the WHO defines health as not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, but the complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being.<sup>5</sup> Even if our bodies are free of biological disease or illness, social determinants of health can render us unhealthy. Humanity cannot be completely healthy until we provide all of God's people with opportunities to thrive in all human social interactions.

As a result, through our brief study of the gospel of Matthew and with help from the world health organization, we are able to better understand the limits of social justice and the ultimate vision of the reign of God. In the reign of God, salvation is holistic – including mind and body as well as the soul.

Whereas social justice cannot change hearts, God can. In the reign of God, those who had an encounter with Jesus, and were open to hearing and receiving the good news of the gospel, were altered by it. Whereas social justice often ignores the importance of accountability and responsibility outside of systems and structures, the reign of God highlights them and reminds us that fulfillment of God's ultimate vision is contingent upon the ways we interact with and treat each other. Whereas, social justice sometimes becomes a spectator sport, in Jesus' vision of the reign of God there is no room for spectators. Everyone has multiple roles to play in the realization of God's reign. In addition to treating all people with dignity and respect, the reign needs gifts such as leadership, preaching and teaching, encouraging, hospitality, showing mercy, sharing wisdom, among many others. Whereas, social justice often has no ultimate vision, the reign of God, as exemplified and explicated in the gospels, along with some help from the World Health Organization, helps us to understand that Jesus's vision of the reign of God is ultimately a vision of holistic human health. The reign of God is a state of being in which the spiritual, mental, physical and social needs of all people are fully met.

You may ask the question, what is the significance of a holistic vision of human health? Why should we even care? Perhaps it is Thomas Frieden, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who captures the importance of a holistic view of health best. In a 2013 report entitled "Health Disparities and Inequality," he wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> *What We Do*. Geneva, Switzerland: The World Health Organization, 2015, accessed August 12 2015; Available from <http://www.who.int/about/what-we-do/en/>. The WHO deems these diseases non-communicable. They posit that by addressing social justice concerns and highlighting the consequences of personal behavioral choices, this percentage can be greatly reduced.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Marmot, Sharonn Frei, Ruth Bell, Tanja A.J. Houweling, and Sebastian Taylor, *Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity Through Action on the Social Determinants of Health* (Geneva, Switzerland: The World Health Organization, 2008), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Steven H., Woolf, and Aron Laurant. *U.S. Health in International Perspective: Shorter Lives, Poorer Health*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 2013, 97.

<sup>5</sup> *About Who* Geneva, Switzerland: The World Health Organization, 2015, accessed August 1, 2015; Available from <http://www.who.int/about/en/>.

*Every person who dies young, is avoidably disabled, or is unable to function at their optimal level represents not only a personal and family tragedy, but also impoverishes our communities and our country.<sup>6</sup>*

In his statement, Frieden recognizes that everyone matters.

In the reign of God, God wants all people to be spiritually healthy. Being spiritually healthy means we strive daily to be in right relationship with one another. In the reign of God, God desires all people to experience God's justice. All people should be treated with respect no matter their gender, race, ethnicity, age, class, or sexual orientation. All people should have opportunities to live, work and play in conditions and circumstances that contribute to their thriving. In the reign of God, God wants all of God's people to be physically and mentally healthy. This means that we should not rest until universal healthcare is the rule of the day. In the reign of God, accountability and responsibility are necessary if we are to realize the full potential of human social well-being.

Lest we think that we do not have what it takes to embody the reign of God, I must share with us the good news that we don't have to try to do any of this on our own. We serve a risen savior - one who rose from the grave with all power in his hands. Because Jesus rose with all power, and we are his people, we too have the power to do all things. This means that through the power of God at work in Jesus Christ, we have the power to make good and sound personal choices. We have the power to treat all people with dignity and respect. We have the power to fight for social justice wherever injustice is found.

The reign of God is a vision that can be fulfilled by a people who believe in the power of God to do all things. Are we that people today LPTS? If so, let us allow the vision of the reign to be our guide. May the vision of the reign guide us in our homes. May the vision of the reign guide us in our faith communities. May the vision of the reign guide us in our jobs. May the vision of the reign guide us in our life together at LPTS. May the vision of the reign guide us as in our nation and our world. Let us fully embrace and embody the vision of the reign of God! Amen!

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas R. Frieden, Harold W. Jaffe, Joanne Cono, and Chesley L. Richards. *CDC Health Disparities and Inequalities Report — United States, 2013*. Atlanta, GA: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013, 1.