"FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP" IN JESUS

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"Faithful Citizenship," as used in this article, presupposes a favorable relationship between the Christian faith and political engagement. This presupposition necessitates a further inquiry into whether Jesus himself was concerned with the political matters of his time. This question, of course, implies an even broader investigation into the person and mission of Christ not unlike earlier Christological inquiries, such as what characterized the "quests" for a more historically accurate picture of Jesus of Nazareth. Without delving too deeply into the latter, this author can summarize the "quests" in the following manner.

Scholars like Hermann Samuel Reimarus proposed the possibility that the words and intentions of Jesus might have been misinterpreted by the Apostles to suit their own personal agenda. Reimarus speculated on the possibility of the Apostles intentionally beginning a movement around the resurrected Christ to protect themselves from subsequent persecution and having to return to their old ways of life.[1] Other scholars made use of the modern social sciences and the tools of literary criticism to attempt to segregate which among the details in the Gospels were based on historical evidence, and which were the result of mere faith-statements of the nascent Christian movement.[2]

[1]Thomas Rausch, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Quezon City: Claretian, 2016), 9-10.

[2]Ibid., 20-21.

While the quests in themselves were not without merit, and some of their contributions continue to be significant today, it is slowly becoming clear that it is naïve to expect that a purely objective reconstruction of Jesus can ever be possible. Much of the life of the Nazarene—unrecorded in the Gospels—will remain unknown, and any attempt to fill in the gaps will be nothing more than conjecture. Furthermore, while there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of history and scientific study on theology, there has nonetheless been a recognition that a "purely historical Jesus," apart from being nearly impossible to recover, is also insufficient to inspire faith and be normative of theology.[3]

This excerpt does not claim to finally lay to rest the debates surrounding Jesus' supposed interest in political matters, or lack thereof. The New Testament remains to be the prime authoritative witness to who Jesus was, what he said and did, and what his intentions apparently were. But outside of the New Testament writings, there is little (if at all) that is available that could objectively shed light on the political motivations of Jesus.[4] Moreover, together with this sparsity of materials is an endless array of varying Scriptural interpretations that makes settling the question all the more impossible.[5] While the very polyvalence of Scripture can argue for its truly being the "living Word of God," it also makes discussions about its meaning and application an almost never-ending task. The most that can be done, then, is to make educated inferences from what can be known from Scripture as well as from what

[3]Rausch, *Who is Jesus,* 21-22.

[4]Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 19-20.

[5]Carl Vaught, *Sermon on the Mount: A Theological Investigation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2001), xiii.

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can be realistically deduced about Jesus' unique context. This author hopes that this effort can contribute to what can reasonably be asserted concerning the question at hand.

The Exclusion of Politics

Among theologians and thoughtful believers, there is disagreement with regards to Jesus vis-à-vis political engagement, i.e., how politically involved was Jesus? There are those who wish to separate Jesus from politics altogether. Marcus Borg offers a long and complex list of possible areas of contention for what he calls the "exclusion of politics" from the teachings and ministry of Jesus. Some of these areas of contention would include lengthy discussions on existentialism, its implications on Jesus' teaching, and a skeptical reading of the Gospels. Here scholars argue that the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God (or, as Jesus would say, that it is "at hand") leaves no room for any ethics in the interim. What good would it do to concern oneself with paying taxes to Caesar, with the pursuit of social justice, or with temporal matters in general, when all will pass away very soon anyway?[6] Furthermore, these scholars would argue that the Judaism of Jesus' time has been increasingly accommodating to apocalyptic thought, the thinking of which is that the fulfillment of all they have been promised would come, not in the immediate future, but at the end of time.[7] What is most relevant to this study, however, is what Borg claims to be an increasingly myopic understanding of politics and political activity, which acts as a significant stumbling block to recovering any semblance of Faithful Citizenship in Jesus.

[6]Borg, *Conflict, Holiness,* 26-28.

[7]Rausch, *Who is Jesus,* 51-60.

Rediscovering Politics

Borg suggests that the hesitation to implicate any political content in the teachings and ministry of Jesus might come from a narrow understanding of what politics is and what political activity entails. Politics has often been unfairly and exclusively defined as disruptive insurrectionist activity, and, in the context of Jesus, is made synonymous with being part of, or at least being sympathetic to, the Zealot movement.[8] Recent scholarship on Jesus has convincingly established his uncompromising stance against any form of violence, making it difficult to imagine that Jesus was part of or could ever have been sympathetic to such a violent group (cf. Lk 9:51-56; Lk 22:51; Mt 26:52). As a result, New Testament scholars like L. H. Marshall have asserted that it is unthinkable for Jesus to have ever "dabbled in politics." In Marshall's view, Jesus was exclusively a religious reformer. One proof of this is the lengths to which the Sanhedrin had to go in order to convince Pilate that Jesus was a threat to Roman rule (and to eventually execute him). This showed that Jesus could never have been interested in politics.[9]

Underlying these assertions is what could justly be called a narrow understanding of politics that falsely dichotomizes political involvement: either one belongs to an insurrectionist movement like the Zealots, or one is completely indifferent to political matters, with nothing in between. Borg calls this "strange language" in that it fails to give credence to the

[8]The Zealots were a political Jewish sect in first century Palestine that refused to compromise with pagan rule and used violent means such as guerilla warfare to overthrow the Roman government in order to restore the sovereignty of God over Israel. Cf, accessed February 23, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zealot.

[9]L. H. Marshall, *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1946), 149.

spectrum of varied political stances that fall in between.[10] In the first place, to detach oneself from political matters is a political stance all on its own – one that kowtows to the status quo, even to the benefit of the ruling elite, as some would say.[11] On the other hand, it would be a mistake to define political involvement exclusively to mean being on the vanguard of some violent uprising, given that it is not the only avenue by which political engagement is expressed.[12] All in all, the hesitation of scholars to highlight the political implications of Jesus' teachings and ministry stems from a fear of casting Jesus as a Zealot figure.

In addition, politics has also been narrowly equated with partisanship or partisan politics, which refers to a slew of activities geared towards competing for and retaining positions of authority.[13] Seen in this light, perhaps for some scholars it becomes even more urgent to distance Jesus from "politics." Are not the Gospels unequivocal in portraying Jesus as being indifferent, perhaps even averse, to assuming any position of temporal authority for himself (cf. Jn 18:36; Mt 4:8-9; Mk 1:13; Lk 4:6-8; Jn 6:15)?

In reality, political scientists today would say that there is no such thing as a single, all-encompassing definition of politics. Some might define it broadly to mean a social activity that permeates through every single human interaction, while others might restrict it to the decision-making process proper

[10]Borg, *Conflict, Holiness,* 22.

[11]Lydia N. Yu Jose, "Politics, You, and Democracy," *Philippine Politics: Democratic Ideals and Realities* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2014), 36.

[12]Jose, "Politics", 37-38.

[13]CBCP, "Catechism on Church and Politics," *CBCP Online*, accessed February 24, 2021, http://cbcponline.net/catechism-on-the-church-and-politics/.

only to the government. At any rate, these experts would reject the various understandings of "politics" mentioned above as being far too general, simplistic and shallow.[14] While conflict, partisanship and insurrectionism can be a part of the rich dynamic of political activity, as evidenced in the histories of people all over the world, they are by no means exhaustive of all the possible meanings of politics. There exists a spectrum of definitions, convictions and expressions that could all fit snugly under the umbrella term "politics."[15] No less than the CBCP has echoed this point, and the Philippine bishops even offered a three-fold definition of politics as: 1) a dynamic organization of society that seeks the common good, 2) the art of government and public service, and 3) the avenue by which the State is able to realize its purpose.[16]

Therefore, to say that Jesus could not have been political "because he was not a Zealot" or "because he did not seek a seat in the Sanhedrin for himself" indicates that one has a narrow definition of politics. When the larger context of political activity is considered, one might be able to say that Jesus need not be a Zealot nor be interested in securing power for himself in order to be considered politically engaged. Indeed, in light of the CBCP's understanding of politics as an "organization of society that seeks the common good" and "an art of public service," it might even be possible to say that Jesus was quite politically active.

Jesus, the Faithful Citizen

In first-century Palestine, the bifurcation of *religious* faithfulness and citizenship *in society* was practically unheard of. It would be strange to regard religious questions separately

[14]Jose, "Politics," 27-30.

[15]Ibid., 26.

[16]CBCP, "On Church and Politics."

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from other pressing societal concerns such as politics, law, and social justice. Such a notion would be alien to the community to which Jesus belonged. The people of Jesus' time would not narrowly and exclusively understand "religion" simply as the performance of rituals, private prayers, or what one does to relate to the divine. Rather, the religious dimension would include matters that pertain to the structure, purpose, and destiny of society as a whole. Religion and politics are thus always intertwined. Therefore, to claim that Jesus could have been interested only in the former and not in the latter would be to alienate him from his history, culture, and community.[17]

Furthermore, the Judaism of Jesus' time taught an inviolable unity between faithfulness to Yahweh and doing what is right to one's neighbor. While fidelity to God is paramount, this loyalty is expressed not only through the offering of ritual sacrifice but also through one's commitment to the just structuring of society as well. The Torah, as a sacred book, functions not only as a channel of divine revelation, but also as a legal document – the binding constitution of the people of Israel.[18] In other words, an internal cohesion exists between the demands the Decalogue imposes on one's relationship with God and the demands that it makes on one's relationships with others. The commands to love God and to love one's neighbor are inseparable. Having no other gods besides Yahweh goes hand in hand with honoring one's parents, respecting the good name and property of one's neighbor, preserving human life, upholding marriage, and all the rest.[19]

Moreover, the Jewish people to which Jesus belonged traditionally identified themselves as the chosen people of God, while at the same time contending with a long history

[17]Borg, *Conflict, Holiness,* 21.

[18]Ibid., 26-27.

[19]Ibid., 27-28.

of conflict with other nations. As God's special people, inexplicably they suffered violence, subjugation, and exile. All of Israel's messianic hopes and expectations was born in this paradoxical state of affairs. The Jewish people keenly anticipated the fulfillment of all that they had been promised: the triumphant coming of the Messiah whom they understandably expected to be a warrior-king and who would liberate them from their enemies;[20] their deliverance from their foreign overlords; and, in the end, "new heavens and a new earth" (Is 65:17). With this as the context when Jesus appears on the scene, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine how his persistent preaching of the Kingdom of God could not have evoked in his audience images of this ideal socio-political reality.[21] Such preaching would inevitably be understood by his contemporaries as having implications on their social structures and political institutions. How Jesus could have preached a message about a "kingdom" completely devoid of messianic, eschatological, and even immediately political overtones is difficult to justify.[22]

Borg's assertions about Jesus' "political engagement" are not at odds with what the Church would more traditionally teach about Jesus. To be sure, he was sent by God the Father who "so loved the world" and through his only begotten Son wished to save it (cf. Jn 3:16-17). The Church's *kerygma* of the saving work of Christ is, after all, *the* Gospel or good news. This message must remain paramount, its content and understanding carefully safeguarded, and its proclamation *ad gentes* ceaseless until Christ comes again. To claim, however, that Jesus' saving work was "purely religious," causing hardly

[20]Rausch, *Who is Jesus,* 42-43.

[21]Ibid., 84-91.

[22]Borg, *Conflict, Holiness*, 20.

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any temporal or societal ripples is to alienate Jesus from the Judaism of his time and the society to which he belonged. As previously mentioned, for the Jews, faithfulness to the covenant is expressed not only in one's ritual piety but also in one's commitment to the building of a just society.[23] Borg says that

> [t]o separate Jesus in this way from his historical situation is reminiscent, according to Amos Wilder, "of those orchids that are said to live on air. They bloom up off the ground and nourish themselves on ozone" and have nothing to do with the dust of life…. However, to take seriously the Christian understanding of "incarnation" means precisely that God in Christ did become enmeshed in the circumstances of human life in a particular time and place, which need not (and perhaps cannot?) exclude the turbulent political questions of that time and place.[24]

This excerpt aims to connect Jesus Christ with the idea of Faithful Citizenship. In doing so, the author is not arguing that temporal citizenship must now be the primary preoccupation of any faithful follower of Christ. No, indeed, this writer strongly believes that citizenship with God in heaven is and will always be a disciple's ultimate purpose (cf. Col 3:2; Phil 3:20). What this article hopes to achieve, however, is the recovery of the essential idea — call it *truth* — that faithfulness to God calls for a kind of political engagement that seeks to orient society towards the common good and to structure it justly. One might be able to say then that love for God *expressed in faithfulness* needs to overflow into love for neighbor *expressed in citizenship* (cf. Mt 22:38-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-28). Such is Faithful Citizenship.

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[23]Rausch, *Who is Jesus,* 56-60.

[24]Borg, *Conflict, Holiness*, 24, citing Amos Wilder, *Otherworldliness and the New Testament* (London, 1955), 67.

A Way Forward: The Sermon on the Mount

In an attempt to better understand how Jesus might have exemplified Faithful Citizenship, the excerpt will now examine select parts of the Sermon on the Mount as a primary resource. While there might be other texts that could be used for this purpose, the discourses preserved here by Matthew could arguably be among the most useful in demonstrating Faithful Citizenship in Jesus. With such powerful units as the Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5:1-16), true righteousness (5:17-37), loving one's enemies (5:38-48), and true piety (6:1-18) among others, small wonder that these texts are held in such high regard by Christians and non-Christians alike.[25] It is thus unsurprising that these chapters in Matthew are said to contain the "classical expressions of Christian conduct"[26] and have been variously described as the "Christian Magna Carta," the "compendium of rules for Christian living," and the like.[27] Charles H. Talbert describes the Sermon as a potent "catalyst for the formation of character," and a significant "contributor to decision-making."[28] Furthermore, its use in the defense of early Christian communities,[29] and in Tertullian's apologetics

[25]Among the Sermon's non-Christian admirers was Mahatma Gandhi.

[26]Robert Guelich, *A Foundation for Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (Dallas: Word, 1982), 14.

[27]Ibid., 13-15.

[28]Charles Talbert, "The Functions of the Sermon," *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 29.

[29]Warren Kissinger, *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow and the American Theological Library Association, 1975), 5-6.

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against the Gnostics and the Manicheans,[30] all make the Sermon an invaluable text for informing Christian political engagement. What follows will elucidate on the sections that contain the Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5:1-12) and the teaching on retaliation (cf. Mt 5:38-42).

The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12)

Biblical "beatitudes" (Greek *makárioi*) belong to a literary genre called "blessing formulas" (or *macarisms*) found throughout the Bible, a large concentration of which is located in the Psalms and the Wisdom Literature. They fall into two general categories: 1) those that bless God, as is the case with standard Jewish prayers that begin with "Blessed art thou, O Lord," and 2) those that bless human beings either for their current circumstances (e.g., Prov 3:13) or for that which they are to receive in the future (e.g., Tob 13:14).[31] The Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount clearly belongs to the latter category, where Jesus blesses the poor in spirit, the hungry, and the afflicted as "the privileged beneficiaries of the Kingdom,"[32] not because they are better disposed religiously, but simply because they suffer.[33] Matthew's beatitudes comprise eight

[30]Ranko Stefanovic, "The Meaning and Message of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)," Andrews University, accessed March 5, 2021, https://www.perspectivedigest.org/archive/22-3/the-meaning-and-message-of-the-beatitudes.

[31]Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 41.

[32]Jacques Dupont, *Les Béatitudes* vol. II (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1969), 215, cited by Anna Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 54.

[33]Anna Wierzbicka, *What did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 277.

distinct sayings; the ninth (5:11) is usually regarded as an expansion on the eighth.[34] The text is as follows:

> [1] When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. [2] Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
>
> [3] "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
>
> [4] "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
>
> [5] "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
>
> [6] "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
>
> [7] "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
>
> [8] "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
>
> [9] "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
>
> [10] "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
>
> [11] "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."
>
> [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (New Revised Standard Version)

In the New Testament, blessing formulas are found mostly within the Gospels, particularly in Matthew and Luke.[35] Matthew's version is arguably more well-known than Luke's; together the eight *macarisms* form the "heart of Jesus'

[34]Ibid., 30.

[35]Guelich, *Foundation for Understanding,* 65.

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teaching" (CCC 1716) and the "quintessence of the Christian faith."[36] While there is still some debate surrounding just what function the Beatitudes really had in the ministry of Jesus, they are nonetheless "revered for expressing the values on which Jesus placed priority."[37] Thus, constructing a framework for Faithful Citizenship might be impossible – or worse, even futile – if done without the invaluable guidance that the Beatitudes can provide. As the light that guides "the actions and the attitudes characteristic of the Christian life" (CCC 1717) and as sayings which "reveal the goals of human existence" (CCC 1719), the Beatitudes can reasonably be used as a lens by which Faithful Citizenship could be clarified, and a metric by which it could be judged.

Interpreting the Beatitudes

The Beatitudes are unique in that they explicitly wrestle with the reality of human suffering, the severity of which has led many to seriously question the existence of God in the first place.[38] Jürgen Moltmann says the text embodies suffering as its quintessential theme, addresses the reality head-on, and shows just how much God is affected by it all in ways that have no parallel anywhere else in Scripture.[39] They portray God as one who is scandalously affected by the affliction of his beloved children, and is thus firm in his resolve to not only undo the evils of the present but more so to console the victims

[36]Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven: Doubleday, 1977), 226.

[37]Ibid., 227.

[38]Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 49.

[39]Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 28.

with reward.[40] The texts function as "paradoxical promises which sustain hope in the midst of tribulation" (CCC 427), a hope anchored on the conviction that God is committed to acting on behalf of the oppressed. The texts describe an "eschatological paradox" motivated not only by God's tender love and compassion *(hesed)* for the marginalized but also by the firmness of his justice *(sedeq)*.[41] In this reading, the structure of the unit is itself significant: the eight Beatitudes present the grim realities of the people juxtaposed with the blessings they are to receive in the future. The following table by Allison gives a convenient contrast:

Table 1. The present condition of the people and the rewards they are to receive[42]

Present Condition	*Future Condition*
poor in spirit	possess kingdom
mourn	obtain comfort
meek	inherit the earth
desire righteousness	obtain satisfaction
merciful	obtain mercy
pure in heart	see God
peacemaker	sons of God
persecuted	possess kingdom
oppressed	great reward

Wierzbicka asserts that the Beatitudes address an audience that has greatly suffered in the world.[43] This assertion necessitates an inquiry into what exactly caused their suffering. Raymond Brown describes the context of Jesus' audience as one ridden in strife and oppression from centuries of being caught between the power struggles of the Mediterranean

[40]Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount,* 42.

[41]Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean*, 50.

[42]Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount,* 42.

[43]Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean*, 33.

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superpowers.[44] Apart from this, the people of the time also broke their backs on the yoke of an oppressive taxation system – a fate made necessary by the lofty quests of the Roman empire.[45] As a consequence, exorbitant taxes were imposed on just about everything, making it almost impossible to make a decent living. Worse still, the collection of taxes was egregiously farmed to the highest bidder, usually to the notorious "publicans" or tax collectors who, in their desire to derive a lucrative "return on investment," would demand even greater amounts of tax money. The end result was a situation in which the average citizen was crushed under the weight of insurmountable debts, a populace vulnerable to the ebbs and tides of an unforgiving economy, and a society constantly devastated by poverty "similar to that of the Third World today where people have no place to live or even scraps to eat, and so are in constant danger of perishing."[46]

When the text is read squarely within its historical context, it becomes clear that the grim realities described in the Beatitudes exist due to an oppressive social structure that systematically exploits and dehumanizes people.[47] Such a society could rightly be judged to be in opposition to God's will insofar as it prioritizes anything other than the dignity of the human persons it was meant to serve.[48] Walter Wink aptly

[44]Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament,* 104-112.

[45]Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 103.

[46]Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament,* 114.

[47]Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation,* trans. C. Inda and J. Eagleson (London: SCM, 1974), 175, cited by Hormis Mynatty, "The Concept of Social Sin," *Louvain Studies* vol. 16 (1991): 3-26, in 4.

[48]Hormis Mynatty, "The Concept of Social Sin," *Louvain Studies* (vol. 16, 1991): 3-26, in 13.

calls this a "system of domination" or a society "characterized by unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all."[49] The injustice and oppression of such a system could not be felt more starkly than by those who were its victims – the oppressed, the weeping, and the persecuted – the very audience to whom Jesus addressed his lavish blessings.

The Beatitudes and Faithful Citizenship

The Beatitudes make it abundantly clear that human suffering is not something that could ever sit well with God. But while the text clearly indicates that God is committed to granting a better future to those who are marginalized, it is not as clear what God might or would be doing to address their suffering in the here and now. This raises a problem: Is God in fact concerned with alleviating present-day suffering? Can the Beatitudes be read as promising not only future reversal and reward but also immediate relief?

First of all, that Matthew 5:3-12 either uses the future tense or speaks of one's reward being "great in heaven," gives the impression that the promises contained here are intended to be fulfilled only at the end of time.[50] Add to this the fact that many biblical scholars see Jesus as believing in the imminent coming of the Kingdom and thus regarding day-to-day existence as meaningful only when viewed through the optic of eternity.[51] Furthermore, that the Beatitudes are thought to function more as a poetic text rather than a legal codex makes it all the more challenging to use them directly to

[49]Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 39.

[50]Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 12.

[51]Ibid., 11.

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inform an engagement that might help address the situation immediately.[52]

For scholars like Robert Guelich, however, to say that the Beatitudes are solely concerned with the eschatological overturning of the status quo is to reduce them to nothing more than bland aphorisms without any real consequences.[53] The salvific character that comes with calling the poor in spirit "blessed," the relief that comes with the promised comfort to those who mourn, and the vindication that comes with assuring a rich inheritance to those who have nothing in this world, would all be diluted if the Beatitudes were to refer only to what God will do in the future, not to anything that he is doing now.[54] More importantly, an exclusively eschatological interpretation of the Beatitudes risks alienating the texts from Jesus himself who, in his preaching and ministry, demonstrated that commitment to the eschatological fulfillment of the Kingdom of God need not be isolated from a sincere desire to proclaim and effect it in history.[55] Allison says that the Beatitudes must not be separated from the rest of the Gospel.[56] When taken together, they coherently express Jesus' intention to bring his audience to "a kingdom that has both come and is coming and into a way of life that makes it possible for us to live in terms of the end toward which we ought to be directed."[57] The dual nature of God's reign and the promises that come along with it mean that, while the consummation of the *basileia tou theou* is indeed

[52]Ibid., 11.

[53]Guelich, *A Foundation for Understanding,* 99.

[54]Ibid., 100.

[55]Ibid., 28.

[56]Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount,* xi.

[57]Vaught, *Sermon on the Mount,* 9.

a future event, Jesus' ministry makes it tangibly accessible in the present nonetheless.[58] As Guelich puts it, "The Beatitudes promise not only that God will, metaphorically speaking, wipe away all tears and compensate suffering with joy but also that the apparent injustice of the human lot on earth will in some way be overcome and compensated for and that God's love for *all* will become apparent to all."[59]

Societies that are unjustly structured are unusual in that the individuals who make them up are simultaneously their victims as well as their cause.[60] After all, a "system of domination" does not exist by and for itself alone; it exists only insofar as human freedom allows it to.[61] Oppressive societies emerge as a composite of unjust choices made by individuals who habitually behave unjustly, and so it follows that the agency of these same individuals will largely determine whether the oppressive conditions would persist or be eventually curtailed.[62] While the eschatological promises of the Beatitudes inspire hope for a better future, they cannot be used to rationalize apathy, complacency, and inaction. After all, God in the Incarnation entered into human history, becoming a direct actor in it and showing through word and deed that concern for the just ordering of society is not simply an adjunct to his mission but is in fact essential to it.[63] Truly, through his preaching and ministry, Jesus actively opposed the "system of domination" in his time through:

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[58]Guelich, *A Foundation for Understanding,* 99.

[59]Guelich, *A Foundation for Understanding*, 55.

[60]Mynatty, "Social Sin," 18.

[61]Ibid., 14.

[62]Ibid., 22.

[63]Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 70-73.

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- his parables that shed light on its evils (cf. Lk 10:25-37; Mt 18:27; Mt 25:14-30),
- his public ministry that privileged its victims (cf. Mk 11:15-18; Jn 8:1-11; Lk 19:1-10),
- and his radical disdain for it that ultimately brought about his death on the cross (cf. Mk 14; Lk 22; Mt 26-28; Jn 19).

The Teaching on Retaliation (Matthew 5:38-42)

Walter Wink has observed that many people "who have committed their lives to ending injustice simply dismiss Jesus' teachings about nonviolence out of hand as impractical idealism."[64] This observation, if true, might be based among other reasons on interpretations of Jesus' teaching on retaliation (cf. Mt 5:38-42) that portray him as supposedly making blanket statements against all forms of conflict. Such an interpretation renders the teaching "impractical" in the sense that it is reduced to a mere metaphor that has no real use to anyone who wishes to engage with the problems of the world.[65] But what if the text were rather to be interpreted differently—and, it is to be hoped, correctly—such that the exegesis would be useful to a social reformer or activist?

The text is as follows:

> 38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your inner cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not

[64]Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003), 9.

[65]Guelich, *A Foundation for Understanding*, 97.

> refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." (New Revised Standard Version)

Mt 5:38-42 has been described traditionally as Jesus' subversion of the *lex talionis*. In what could arguably be called the bedrock of all legal codices going as far back as the code of Hammurabi, the *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) is a legal principle that calls for a kind of justice that seeks punishment equal to that of the crime committed.[66] It intends to limit retribution to only what strict justice requires, and to prevent the excess of vengeance. "An eye for an eye" captures the principle best. That Jesus would subvert this "law" is in itself unsurprising; it might even be considered a defining feature of Jesus' teaching in which a profound love for one's enemies (cf. Mt 5:43-48; Lk 6:27-28; Rom 12:14), the scandalous mercy of God (cf. Lk 15:1-31), and the steadfast commitment to non-violence (cf. Mt 10:28; Lk 22:36; Jn 16:33; 1 Jn 3:15) all take centerstage as the hallmark of Christian ethics.

Wink, however, would say that despite the moral high ground signified by these verses, they have also been used to justify monarchial absolutism, pacifism, and unconditional docility.[67] According to him, no less than Augustine himself used these same texts to teach against any form of self-defense.[68] It is also common for the injunction "turn the other cheek" to be used to justify pacifism of a dangerous kind – the extremes of which is a masochistic inertia in the face of domestic violence and bullying.[69] These pacifist interpretations of Mt 5:38-42, combined with the interpretations of other relevant

[66]Diarmuid O' Murchu, *Inclusivity: A Gospel Mandate* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015), 20.

[67]Wink, *The Powers That Be,* 100.

[68]Ibid., 99.

[69]Vaught, *Sermon on the Mount,* 97.

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texts that pertain to authority such as Romans 13:1-7 have been used to absolutize political authority. As Wink puts it,

> 'Turn the other cheek' suggests the passive, Christian doormat quality that has made so many Christians cowardly and complicit in the face of injustice. 'Resist not evil' seems to break the back of all opposition to evil and to counsel submission. 'Going the second mile' has become a platitude meaning nothing more than 'extend yourself,' and rather than fostering structural change, encourages collaboration with the oppressor.[70]

The earlier parts of this excerpt should by now make it increasingly clear just how inappropriate it would be to use these texts to conclude that Jesus taught this kind of passivity. To say that Jesus taught his disciples to simply let themselves be trampled on like doormats is utterly misrepresentative of Jesus, given that the Gospels unanimously portray him as a figure who resisted evil with every fiber of his being (cf. Mt 4:1-11; Lk 8:2; Mk 1:25; Jn 2:11). When taken in their original contexts, "to turn the other cheek," "to give your inner cloak," and "to go the second mile" might not be prescribing unconditional passivity after all. Instead, they might be some of the most revolutionary statements ever uttered! What follows are brief summaries of Wink's interpretation of Jesus' teaching on retaliation.

"Turn the Other Cheek"

In many situations, a slap on the face is more than simply a random or thoughtless act of aggression. In Jesus' time, as in the present, a slap to one's cheek was an insult intended to put one in his or her place.[71] That the text specifically mentions being slapped on the *right* cheek all the more implies the

[70]Wink, *The Powers That Be,* 98.

[71]Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 14.

intention of a superior to insult and demean his subordinate. In a right-handed world, to slap another on the right cheek is to imply the use of a *backhanded* slap. Culturally speaking, a slap of this kind is used exclusively by masters to chastise their slaves or for men to discipline their wives, their children, or anyone considered a social inferior.[72] These are situations of social inequality in which a superior intends to humiliate one having lesser power or status through a backhanded slap.[73] In this context then, to "turn the other cheek" is hardly a masochistic request to be slapped once again but more a defiant assertion to be treated the way one would an equal.[74] It is a dignified way to stand up to one's oppressor, a clever means to rob him of his ability to humiliate, and a nonviolent injunction to force the oppressor to treat the oppressed as an equal human being.[75]

"Give your inner cloak as well"

Jesus' second instruction to "give your inner cloak" needs to be understood in light of the contemporary Jewish legal system that requires an accused who cannot pay his debts to give his clothes as some kind of collateral.[76] Wink understands Jesus to be critical of a judicial system that is so unfairly biased towards the wealthy that it would go so far as to demand the clothes on the back of the poor as payment for his or her debts.[77] As one's imagination might have it, "to

[72]Robert E. Barron, *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith* (New York: Image, 2011), 54.

[73]Vaught, *Sermon on the Mount,* 100.

[74]Vaught, *Sermon on the Mount*, 101.

[75]Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 15-16. See also Barron, *Catholicism,* 55.

[76]Ibid., 18.

[77]Ibid., 19.

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give your inner cloak" means literally to give up all of one's clothing, leaving one naked in court. For Wink, however, Jesus' injunction does not mean capitulation or accepting defeat. It is rather a form of protest against the oppressiveness of the legal system. The irony here is that, while nakedness is taboo in Judaism, the shame falls not so much on the one who is actually naked but on the one who causes it (cf. Gen 9:20-27).[78] While the debtor is the one who stands naked in court, his nakedness is not cause for embarrassment but is rather the means by which he shames the creditor for his greed.

"Go the second mile"

Finally, Wink asserts that Jesus' third instruction to "go the second mile" hardly refers to some form of connivance with the Roman occupying forces but is rather a reference to military law that states that a legionnaire could impress a civilian to carry his pack for only one mile and no further.[79] These laws are enacted in order to pacify governed peoples, with the intention of making Roman rule seem more amicable.[80] For a civilian then to insist on carrying the soldier's pack for another mile is a clownery of sorts, where the situation is once again, as it were, turned on its head, and the soldier is now the one frantically asking to get back his pack out of fear of receiving punishment.[81] Just like the previous two, this third instruction of Jesus is not meant to imply some form of unconditional docility but is rather a creative and a nonviolent way for the oppressed to be able to stand up to their oppressors and restore their dignity.

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[78]Ibid., 20.

[79]Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 23.

[80]Ibid., 23.

[81]Ibid., 24.

Jesus' "Third Way"

For Walter Wink, Jesus' commitment to non-violence should not be construed as unconditional surrender to the instruments of oppression. The injunctions to "turn the other cheek," "give your inner cloak," and "go the second mile" cannot in any way mean that Jesus was instructing his followers to be inert in the face of exploitation and abuse.[82] To do so would be to imply that Jesus is counseling passivity to, or worse, is complicit with, the powers of evil. As John Stuart Mill has famously put it: "Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends than that good men should look on and do nothing."[83]

This writer argues, following Wink, that Jesus truly abhorred the violent overthrow of evil as much as he abhorred inaction in the face of it. To an oppressed people, Jesus is in effect saying: Do not violently react to your oppressors but do not acquiesce to them either.[84] St. Paul gives a similar teaching in some of his letters (cf. Rom 12:14; 1 Thess 5:15) that non-resistance to evil does not mean complete docility in the face of it but rather resistance in ways that are not evil in themselves.[85] The upshot is that there seems to be no basis for concluding that Jesus was making a blanket statement against all forms of retaliation. Rather, Jesus offers what Wink calls a "third way," a middle ground between unconditional docility and mindless aggression, which Jesus himself practiced in confronting his enemies. Wink calls this set of responses a "third way" because, when

[82]Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 103.

[83]John Stuart Mill, *Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867), 36, accessed May 18, 2021, https://books.google.com.ph/books/about/Inaugural_Address.html?id=8w8qAAAAYAAJ&redir_esc=y.

[84]Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 110.

[85]Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence,* 27.

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facing an adversary, one is not restricted to responding only with either violence (fight) or complete passivity (flight). While such are the usual responses to an opponent, he says that there exists a middle ground or "third way" that does not necessarily annihilate the opponent, but neither does it condone his or her evil ways. Furthermore, the end goal of it all is to call the enemy to conversion and thus also to restore communion.

Wink describes Jesus' "third way" as follows:

- Seizing the moral initiative
- Finding a creative alternative to violence
- Asserting your own humanity and dignity as a person
- Meeting force with ridicule or humor
- Breaking the cycle of humiliation
- Refusing to submit or to accept the inferior position
- Exposing the injustice of the system
- Standing your ground
- Recognizing your own power
- Being willing to suffer rather than to retaliate
- Causing the oppressor to see you in a new light
- Depriving the oppressor of a situation where a show of force is effective
- Being willing to undergo the penalty for breaking unjust laws
- Dying to the fear of the old order and its rules.[86]

[86]Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence,* 27-28. The application of Jesus' "third way" might vary depending on the unique situation of a society trying to live it out. In the fourth chapter of this thesis, the author will attempt to demonstrate how the Philippine Church has exercised Jesus' "third way" at various points in its history, most notably in the 1986 People Power Revolution.

Jesus' teaching on retaliation is a stern reminder for his followers not to become the very thing they are trying to oppose. His words in Mt 5:38-42 should not be taken to mean a blanket prohibition against all forms of retaliation.[87] It so often happens that unconditional docility becomes the very condition by which people are inured to a lifetime of sinfulness, and inaction the milieu that encourages the perpetuation of abuse. In this regard, it is significant that Jesus' teaching on retaliation is immediately followed by his command to love one's enemies (cf. Mt 5:43-48). After all, the instruction to retaliate must always go hand-in-hand with the commitment to seek not only the liberation of the oppressed from injustice, but also the redemption of the oppressor from sin.[88]

[87]Wink, *The Powers That Be,* 123.

[88]Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 111. See also James Martin, SJ, "Is Turning the Other Cheek Even Possible?" *America Jesuit Review* February 19, 2011, accessed June 15, 2021, https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/turning-other-cheek-even-possible.

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