

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY & THE PRIORITIES OF OUR LORD

by Charles C. Ryrie

Many needs of many people confronted the Lord just as they do us. But He did not meet them all. What can we learn from His life and ministry that will help give us a sense of discernment and scale of priorities?

Physical or spiritual? No one can help every other person in the world. Even our Lord did not help everyone He contacted, nor did He command His followers to do so.

It is perfectly obvious that He did not heal everyone who needed it. In the thirty-five recorded miracles of Christ performed on specific individuals or groups there are thirty-nine cases of healing. Of those, two (Malchus and the Syrophenician's daughter) involved individuals outside the commonwealth of Israel. Although He healed an unspecified number on several occasions, there were many others who crossed His path whom He did not heal. We know, for example, that a multitude of sick, blind, lame, and withered people were gathered at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:3); yet Christ threaded His way through the crowd to find a single individual to heal—a man who, oddly enough, exhibited no faith that he could be healed. Our Lord could just as easily have healed two, ten, or a hundred more that same day, but He only healed one. If need always carries with it a responsibility to respond, then our Lord furnishes no example of this in His ministry of physical healing.

Neither did our Lord feed all those who were hungry. On two occasions He fed over ten thousand people—but only a single meal. He did not continue to supply them with food, though some of them likely had a genuine need of food later. Furthermore, the healings and feedings were not done primarily to benefit those who were healed and fed, but to glorify God, or to teach the disciples, or to confirm His claims to be God. The physical benefits seemed secondary to the spiritual lessons intended to be learned. The Lord's priorities were spiritual.

Some would charge that this emphasis on the spiritual over the physical is a false dualism that cannot be supported by biblical teaching on the nature of man. If we would properly stress the unity of man, then, it is said, we would erase the false distinction, but it would

also logically lead to incorporating social action as an equal part of the gospel message.

Unquestionably man is a unitary being, but Scripture views man as a being of great complexity and varied functioning (see 1 Corinthians 14:14-15; Romans 7:22-23; 2 Corinthians 5:1-5, 8 that distinguish various aspects of man's being). Although he is a unitary being he has a corporeal aspect and an incorporeal aspect. Body and spirit are distinguished in the Bible (James 2:26); one can minister in the realm of the spirit (1 Corinthians 2:11; 14:14) and one can minister in the realm of the physical (James 2:16). Thus to be fully biblical one must recognize both the unitary nature of man and the distinct complexities within that unit. Our ministry may be directed toward any or all of those aspects of man's being, but the ministry may vary in intensity or direction according to situations and circumstances.

Back to our Lord's example. While He did attend to physical and material needs on occasion, He gave first priority to spiritual needs. The angel announced Him to Joseph as the one who "will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). John the Baptist designated Him as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), and He Himself declared that He came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). He also came to serve, to teach, to set an example, to show God's love, but above all, He came, as His primary purpose, to save.

Justice or subservience? In the twentieth century social involvement in many countries has been in the political arena. That is not necessarily wrong, but at this point we are only examining the example of the Lord in this regard.

Clearly, Jesus did not attempt to reform the Roman government under which He lived. He acknowledged the rule of Rome (Matthew 22:21). When faced with the question of paying the poll tax that was due annually and that went directly to Caesar in Rome, our Lord did not address the more basic question of whether or not Rome had the right to occupy Palestine. If not, then should the Jewish people try to gain independence from Rome? They were an oppressed people, yet the Lord did not suggest any action to free

them from that subservience. He simply said that if one accepts the benefits of government (in that instance by using the money Rome coined), then one is obligated to pay taxes.

The particular denarius with which the poll tax was paid bore the image of the emperor and acclaimed him to be God. The inscription on the coin read: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the Divine Augustus." Yet our Lord did not address the question of idolatry that some of the people believed was involved in simply using these coins. He simply said, "Pay."

But on that occasion the Lord also said something else that gave an indication of His scale of priorities. He reminded His hearers that they had an obligation to God when He said that they should render to God the things that are God's. He was making a connection between the image of Caesar stamped on the denarius and the image of God stamped on the coin. What then did they owe Caesar? The tax. We are men, and as members of the human race we bear the stamp of the image of God. What then do we owe God? Ourselves. The more important priority is not our relation to the government under which we live, but our relation to God. Once again His priorities were spiritual. You can afford to be without political justice, but you cannot afford to refuse to be subservient to God. Our Lord was not a political revolutionary; but He certainly was a radical religious revolutionary.

On another occasion the Lord was asked to settle a dispute between two brothers (Luke 12:13-21). He refused to do so because He would not usurp the sphere of constituted authority. The manner with which He addressed the questioner was severe and shows Jesus' indignation at being asked to step out of His sphere of ministry ("man" in v. 14). However, the Lord did not leave the matter there. He used the request as an occasion for a sermon on covetousness and the priority of soul over substance (v. 20). Once again He gave priority to the spiritual rather than the material or political.

Rights or ministry? The incident concerning payment of the Temple tax also reveals Jesus' priorities (Matthew 17:24-27). The tax was based on the regulation of Exodus 30:11-16 and was collected from every male Jew twenty or over, including those living in foreign countries. It was used to keep the Temple in Jerusalem in good repair.

Seeking out Peter, the tax collectors asked him if Jesus would pay the tax. Peter responded quickly and affirmatively, but then had second thoughts. Anticipating Peter's misgivings, the Lord questioned Peter and instructed him in the uniqueness of His person. There followed a short dialogue that led to the conclusion that Jesus, as the owner of the Temple (because He is God, Malachi 3:1), was exempt from paying the tax. Jesus clearly claimed exemption because He is God. Nevertheless, through a miracle of finding a coin in a fish's mouth, the taxes for Peter and the Lord were paid.

However, it is the reason why Christ paid that is instructive—"lest we give them offense" (Matthew 17:27). The same verb is used in Romans 14:21 and 1 Corinthians 8:13 to teach that Christians should sometimes surrender their freedom for the sake of others.

Here the Lord demonstrated a principle all reformers could follow; namely, "the avoidance of actions which are not absolutely essential for the success of the reform, and which, because easily misunderstood, and so arousing prejudice, would make it more difficult for others to join in the good movement. . . . Some who might otherwise have listened to Him would have turned away had He seemed by His example to teach that the Temple-services were not worth maintaining" (Alfred

Plummer, *A Critical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* [London: Scott, 1911], p. 246).

On other occasions our Lord cleansed the Temple of the money changers and predicted the destruction of the Temple. But here He conformed to a temple law not even commanded in the Old Testament. Not offending for the sake of ministry took priority over insisting on His rights.

Summary. These examples clearly demonstrate that the Lord gave top priority to spiritual needs. Though not insensitive to physical needs, He met relatively few of them. Though always obedient to government, He led no attempt to reform the system or correct injustices. He always kept His principal purpose for being on earth in sharp focus. And His commission to us follows the same priorities. ■

* This article originally appeared as a chapter in *What You Need to Know about Social Responsibility* and is used by permission from Dr. Ryrie.

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