

## **WAS JESUS REPUBLICAN OR DEMOCRAT?**

Matthew 25:31-46

“Once we get a handle on liberating the poor and oppressed, who are already alive, I will turn my attention to fighting for the rights of the unborn.”

That was the answer my friend—an African American pastor—gave as to why he voted democratic in the last election. The person who asked the question was an upper-middle class, white, evangelical Christian, for whom the concept of any “God-fearing” person voting for a pro-choice party was unfathomable.

I will admit, at first I didn’t like the answer. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. I’m still not sure I agree with my friend 100%, but his answer gives incredible insight to a perplexing question: *If Jesus were alive today, would He be a Democrat or a Republican?* Closely related to this is the question: *Which political party best represents a Christian worldview?*

The reason this is such an important question is because of our desire to make sure God is on our side. Lately, politics has gotten very religious, with each side claiming to be believers in (or at least admirers of) God. But instead of trying to get God on our side, we need to examine ourselves and make sure we are on God’s side, regardless of what side of the political aisle we find ourselves.

I once heard a comedic ventriloquist, through his alter ego, define politics as the word *poli*, meaning “many” and *tics*, meaning “blood sucking leaches.” There may be more truth in that definition than we like to admit.

Some people consider the whole question of Jesus and politics to be a waste of time. After all, Jesus' mission was spiritual, not political. Thus, Jesus had nothing to say about politics and social issues. But that just isn't true! Jesus had plenty to say about social issues and social institutions. Yes, His primary mission was spiritual, but what He taught had tremendous social ramifications. Not to discuss Jesus' politics would be to leave out a significant portion of His life.

## The Kingdom of God

Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God was a present reality, as well as a future hope.<sup>1</sup> The "kingdom of God" is an Old Testament idea, referring to a time when what God wills, "will be done on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>2</sup> A key component of the kingdom is justice and equality. Over and over again the Prophets exclaimed that the reason for God's judgment on His people was because of the way they mistreated and oppressed the weak of their society. Here is a sampling of the Prophets' rebuke:

- *" 'Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. Come now, let us reason together,' says the Lord. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool'" (Isaiah 1:16-18).*
- *"For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts" (Amos 5:12).*
- *"Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:24).*

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15; and others.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:10.

- *“Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor...But your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion” (Jeremiah 22:13, 17).*
- *“And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah: This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.’ But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by His Spirit through earlier prophets. So the Lord Almighty was very angry. ‘When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,’ says the Lord Almighty.” (Zechariah 7:8-13).*

After studying all these verses, plus many more, author Obery Hendricks concluded, “Prophetic speech is characterized by two elements: an overwhelming sense of an encounter with God and a message of moral and political judgment...the primary purpose of biblical prophecy is to effect social and political change in a society.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, Hendricks believes two criteria can be used to identify a false prophet: (1) Silence about issues of social justice. (2) Uncritical supporters of people in governmental authority, instead of being the moral conscience of a society.<sup>4</sup>

What does all this have to do with Jesus?

EVERYTHING!

Jesus was the Prophet of all prophets. He made it clear that He came, not to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them completely.<sup>5</sup> On the day He announced His ministry in His hometown, He read the prophecy of Isaiah concerning

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<sup>3</sup> Obery M. Hendricks. 2006. *The Politics of Jesus*. New York: Doubleday Publishers (28). I can hear the objections now: “No! The primary purpose of the prophets was spiritual change and repentance.” And that’s the point I am trying to make. *You cannot separate spiritual change from moral and political implications!*

<sup>4</sup> Hendricks (31).

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:17.

the job description of the Messiah. The prophecy is from the opening verses of Isaiah 6. Jesus' words are in Luke 4:18-19: "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Provide programs to help the poor. Let prisoners out of prison after they have been rehabilitated. Provide universal health care. Spread freedom around the world. Sounds like a platform from which to launch a presidential campaign, doesn't it. Jesus' mission was to upset the social order of things. That, my friends, is a spiritual mission with tremendous political implications.

The New Testament writers understood this very well. The church in the book of Acts met together daily, assisting the poor and the oppressed. It is said of them, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."<sup>6</sup> I don't know about you, but to me that sounds a lot like "redistribution of wealth." Along those same lines, Paul writes, "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain...Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share."<sup>7</sup> No one says it any clearer than James, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:45.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 6:17-18.

orphans and widows.”<sup>8</sup> John writes, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”<sup>9</sup>

I will admit, thinking along these line is relatively new to me. After moving from an affluent community to an economically deprived neighborhood back to an affluent community has forced me to see things differently.

Pastoral ministry has a way of hardening a person. Here is just one of hundreds of examples I could give. A young family in the church I was pastoring reach a single mom who was struggling to keep her head above water. The holidays were coming, and so this family in my church, bought presents for all the single mom’s children, and stocked her kitchen cabinets and refrigerator full of groceries. All told, they spent several hundred dollars. A few days later they stopped by the mom’s house and were horrified at what they saw. All the presents were gone, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, in the kitchen cabinets and refrigerator. At first, they thought she had been robbed. But that was not the case. This single mom had sold and pawned everything she had been given so she could by drugs!

The wife of the family in my church called me in tears. She vowed to never help anyone again. I know how she felt. I had seen this scenario hundreds of times. At times it seems the majority of people who want help are nothing more than con artist. It’s made my cynical. As a result, I have either ignored those needing help, or given assistance in order to get rid of them. Both approaches are wrong because neither show the love of Christ and advance God’s kingdom. I don’t know the answer, but I do

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<sup>8</sup> James 1:27. Orphans and widows are the most vulnerable people in any society. If James were writing today, he might possibly add “single moms” to the list. Single moms, and their children, and widows, make up a significant portion of people in our society who live below the poverty level.

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 3:17.

agree with the words of Mother Teresa, “Only in heaven will we see how much we owe to the poor for helping us to love God better because of them.” On one occasion, after being asked why she works with the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed, she replied, “Each one of them is Jesus in disguise.”<sup>10</sup>

The gospel according to Jesus was the good news that God’s kingdom was at hand; and that through faith in Him, you enter that kingdom. It was a present reality, as well as a future hope. After His resurrection, and before His ascension, Jesus met with His followers and told them not to “leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift My Father promised.”<sup>11</sup> The promised “gift” was empowerment by the Holy Spirit to continue the mission of Jesus, which was proclaiming, and bringing about, the kingdom of God.

His followers understood this, and so they asked Him, “Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?”<sup>12</sup> Jesus informed them not to worry about the exact time of the fulfillment of God’s kingdom, but to go and wait for the Holy Spirit. Once the Holy Spirit comes, then they will be able to continue bringing in the kingdom.

In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit filled all the disciples. Today, the Holy Spirit indwells each of us, enabling us to proclaim repentance, and advance God’s kingdom in this world! And a huge component of that kingdom is “preach(ing) good news to the poor...proclaim(ing) freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind...release(ing) the oppressed.”<sup>13</sup>

As a conservative, evangelical Christian, I am passionate about convincing people of their need to repeat the sinner’s prayer. But how passionate am I about

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<sup>10</sup> <http://home.att/-hillcrestbaptist/mt.html>

<sup>11</sup> Acts 1:4

<sup>12</sup> Acts 1:6; “kingdom of Israel” is another way of saying “kingdom of God”; Matthew refers to it as “kingdom of heaven” in his gospel.

<sup>13</sup> Adapted from Luke 4:18

standing up for injustice, healing the sick, freeing the prisoners, and liberating the oppressed? How passionate am I about turning the social order on its head?

## **The Sheep and the Goats**

There is one parable in which Jesus spells all this out better than any other. It is the parable of the Sheep and Goats, found in Matthew 25:31-46. This parable is the last in a series of parables about coming judgment. Jesus begins, “When the Son of Man comes in all His glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left.”<sup>14</sup>

Right away, you notice the symbolisms of this story. Jesus is the “Son of Man,” and on the day He comes in all His glory, the kingdom of God will be completely fulfilled. On this day—the culmination of God’s kingdom—Jesus will separate people like a shepherd separates his sheep from his goats. Throughout scripture, “sheep” symbolize the people of God; and goats, while not sinful in themselves, symbolize sin. In the Old Testament, a “scapegoat” was used to carry the sins of the people away from camp. So, in this story, Jesus places the “sheep”—His followers, people who believed in Him and continued His mission—on His right, a place of honor. On His left, a place of dishonor, He places the goats—people who rejected Him and His mission.

Now, if you are like me, you were taught that the way you become “sheep” is by praying the sinner’s prayer, confessing “Jesus is Lord.” If you did so, on judgment day,

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 25:31-33

you would go to your eternal reward. If you did not repeat that prayer, you would go to hell. I don't believe we were taught the wrong thing—salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. I do, however, believe we have misunderstood what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Notice how Jesus explains the separation process:

“Then the King (Jesus) will say to those on His right (His sheep, His followers), ‘Come, you who are blessed by My Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me.’”<sup>15</sup>

Confused about the process, those on Jesus' right—the “righteous”—ask, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You something to drink? When did we see You a stranger and invite You in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see You sick or in prison and go to visit you?”<sup>16</sup>

These are important questions because it tells us that the righteous had been doing all these things regularly, and they had been doing them with the right motives. They had been doing these things because they loved God and loved each other. They were not doing them expecting anything in return from anyone, or anticipating that God was keeping score. They had fed the hungry, given something to drink to the thirsty, healed the sick, and liberated the oppressed, just like Jesus had modeled for them. But they could not ever remember doing them for Jesus Himself.

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<sup>15</sup> Matthew 25:34-36. Parenthesis for emphasis and clarification.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 25:37-39

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for Me.”<sup>17</sup> That sounds a lot like, “Each one of them is Jesus in disguise.” Doesn’t it?

Jesus then places the goats on His left, and repeats the entire speech. Except the goats did not feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, shelter the stranger, clothe the naked, nor care for the sick and imprisoned. Because they did not do those things, Jesus said, “Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”<sup>18</sup>

Heaven and hell will be decided, not only on what you do with Jesus, but what you did with the poor, the sick, and the oppressed among you! As a citizen of God’s kingdom—which I become through faith in Jesus Christ—I am to be an ambassador of His kingdom, establishing kingdom satellites all around me, while I wait for Him to return. How do I establish kingdom satellites? By fighting for those who cannot fight for themselves. By speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves. By taking care of those who cannot take care of themselves. By standing up for justice and equality, everywhere I see injustice and inequality; in politics, at work, at school, and even in the church. That’s what it means to be a Christ-follower. That’s what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom of God.

## **CONCLUSION**

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew 25:40.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 25:41-45, especially v. 41.

It was this type of teaching, and living that got Jesus in trouble with the authorities. He constantly challenged the system. He continually stood up for the poor and oppressed. On one occasion He violated the class (or caste) system of the day by talking to a Samaritan woman at a well.<sup>19</sup> The violation was three-pronged. First, he was a man talking to a woman (women had very little social standing in that day). Second, He was a Jew talking with a Samaritan. Samaritan's were considered "half-breeds," and were avoided by most Jews. Third, this woman was getting water, by herself, in the hot part of the day, meaning that she was a woman who had a checkered past as an adulteress. Jesus upset the social order of the day by reaching out to her, extending an invitation to her to become part of the kingdom. An invitation which she accepted.

On another occasion the Pharisees brought a woman to Jesus whom had been caught in adultery.<sup>20</sup> Intent on humiliated her and trapping Jesus, they stood the woman in the middle of the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"<sup>21</sup> The Law in question is found in both Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22, which states that both the man and the woman caught in adultery should be stoned. So, the first obvious question is, "Where was the man the woman committed adultery with?"

There is no evidence that in Jesus' day the Pharisees, or any other Jews for that matter, were carrying out this law in a literal way. (More than likely the Romans would not have allowed it.) Thus, the sole purpose of this encounter was to humiliate the woman and trap Jesus.

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<sup>19</sup> John 4:1-26

<sup>20</sup> The story is found in John 8:1-11.

<sup>21</sup> John 8:4-5

Jesus did not take the bait. Instead, He “bent down and started to write on the ground with His finger. Halfway through writing He stood back up and said, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”<sup>22</sup> And then He stooped back down and continued writing. People have speculated what He wrote, but the Bible doesn’t say. Apparently what He wrote, along with what He said, embarrassed the accusers, and so one by one they left until Jesus was alone with the adulteress.

“Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’

‘No one, sir,’ she said.

‘Then neither do I condemn you,’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin.’<sup>23</sup>

Jesus told a story that may have been based in a real life experience.<sup>24</sup> In the story a certain man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. The man was robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. A priest came down the road, saw the injured man, and passed by on the other side, refusing to help. Next came a Levite. He also saw the injured man, but neither did he offer assistance. Instead, like the priest, he walked by on the other side of the road. The assumption was that the victim was Jewish. The priest and the Levite, are not only Jews, they are also members of two different religious parties. Do you get the picture? A Jewish man lie dying in the street. Two, well respected Jews, ignore him.

Eventually a third man walks by. This third man was a Samaritan. To the audience Jesus was talking to, a Samaritan would have represented someone from the

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<sup>22</sup> John 8:8

<sup>23</sup> John 8:10-11

<sup>24</sup> The story in mind is the Good Samaritan, found in Luke 10:25-37.

other side of the tracks. Someone, not like the injured man at all; maybe even a different race than the victim. This third man, the Samaritan, treated the guys wounds, took him to a safe place, and paid for all his medical treatments.

Jesus' point was clear: *Loving people, meeting their needs when it is within your ability to do so, is the single most important thing you can do, regardless of your race, political affiliation, or religious membership.*

When I was in college, one of the many jobs I had was as a “big-brother” at St. Luke’s Community Center, in Nashville, Tennessee. This organization served the poorest of the poor. I was a big brother to about 12 fourth graders. I would hang out with them for a few hours each day, and then take them home. They all lived in government housing, in some of the worst areas of the city.

During my first stint as a pastor in Franklin, Tennessee (a very affluent community), I still worked with some organizations that helped do different things for the poor—from feeding and clothing them, to providing health care. I also started teaching Sociology at a community college. A big part of that class deals with the issues of poverty, injustice, and inequality.

During the 3 ½ years I lived in Russellville, Arkansas, our home was in a poor part of town. One block away from our home was an apartment complex that was as close to third-world conditions that you will find anywhere in America.

Now I’m back in Franklin, and the city is more affluent than ever. But for some reason, I don’t notice the affluence. I notice the poverty. I think I notice the poverty because after all the things God has allowed me to experience, my perspective has changed. For months I have been praying about an opportunity for myself, and our

church, to get involved in key social issues. I believe, being a follower of Jesus means standing up for the poor and oppressed, turning the social order of things upside down. Being the “light of the world” means we are to be the social conscience of our communities.

Recently I received a letter from the city of Franklin, asking our church to participate in a Point In Time Count of the homeless population in Franklin. I have volunteered myself to meet with others (I don’t know who or how many) on Thursday, January 17<sup>th</sup>, at 4:00 o’clock in the morning, to walk the city, looking for homeless people. I have no idea where all this is going to lead, but I believe that letter from the city was an answer to prayer, and an open door that I have to walk through. I also believe, that somehow and in someway, this will be a key moment in the life of our church. Are we going to talk like were religious, or are we going to become activists, assisting Jesus in bringing about the kingdom of God in Franklin, Tennessee? I’m looking forward to going to Honduras this summer, but I cannot wait to see what God is going to do through our church in this city! To me, my prayers, that letter, and that walk, are the implications of this sermon to our church.

But what about on an individual level? What am I supposed to do with this message? Does it really matter if Jesus was a Democrat or a Republican?

Here is at least one implication: There is a presidential election coming up this November. I challenge you to think through what it really means to be a follower of Jesus, and what it truly means to partner with Him, bringing about the kingdom of God. Jesus challenged us to pray—in this life, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on

earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>25</sup> This election year, study the candidates through the prisms of justice and equality; poverty and oppression. Don’t make your decision based solely on one moral issue, when there are a host of moral issues.

I don’t know if any of this has made any sense. So I want to close with an editorial I wrote to a local newspaper a few years ago. It’s entitled, “Was Jesus a Democrat or Republican?”

I am told you should never discuss religion, or politics, in public. Well, I’m throwing that advice out the window and discussing both at the same time. More than likely I am going to make you mad. So I apologize now. Upfront, let me say, “I am sorry for offending you. Please forgive me.”

Was Jesus a republican or a democrat? In answering that question, allow me the liberty of painting in broad strokes.

Right or wrong, the general public’s perception is that democrats are for the working class, and republicans are for the wealthy class. If that perception is correct, then Jesus would have been a democrat! He was always on the side of the poor and oppressed. Jesus said it would be easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.

It’s assumed by many that republicans have higher moral standards than democrats. Their standards are so high that republicans are often accused of trying to “legislate morality.” If that assumption is correct, then Jesus would have been a republican. He came, not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill the Law, calling people to a holy life.

One party is pro-choice, the other is pro-life. (I think Jesus would be pro-life.) One party is pro-environment, the other thinks God created the world’s resources to be consumed. (I think Jesus would be pro-environment.) One party stresses the importance of community, the other stresses individual rights and responsibilities. (I think Jesus would stress the importance of the individual to the community and the importance of the community to the individual.) One party is about sharing; the other party is about hoarding. One party thinks the war in Iraq is unjust, the other thinks it is just. I don’t know what to think.

What does Jesus think? In my humble, though biased, opinion, I think Jesus would be...appalled at the way both parties try to kidnap Him to win votes. Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21).

Jesus was not a politician or a statesman; and neither was He an elephant or a donkey. Jesus was (and is) the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). And that includes the sins of both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party.

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew 6:10.

If you don't remember anything else, remember this. I mean, commit this verse to memory: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? *To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*"<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Micah 6:8