

“Let Your Light Shine”

Radicalism In The Sermon On The Mount

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In a much-cited article entitled “*Resist not evil: Conservatism in The Sermon on the Mount*,” J.A. Meyerson states ‘The main thrust of the Nazarene’s doctrine is: if you the poor are abused, exploited, stolen from, made to suffer or otherwise racked with injustice, grin and bear it. Those concerns are worldly, and you ought instead to be focused on heaven. This life, after all, doesn’t matter, and in the next one, you will be rewarded and your tormentors punished. So keep your head down, take your punches and deal with it!’

Meyerson says ‘Christ begins his sermon by issuing the beatitudes, probably the most fertile grounds for leftist quotations, but with the least reason. “Blessed,” Christ proclaims, “are the poor in spirit,” “they that mourn,” “the meek,” “they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness,” “the merciful,” “the pure in heart,” “the peacemakers,” “they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” and “ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake”.’ Then he says, ‘The blessings he heaps upon the poor are all very nice, but he does not end them by saying, “and woe to those who have put you in this position; let’s topple their order and establish a more just society!” Instead he counsels, “Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” (Matthew 5:12) Cry me a river, folks; this is your lot in life. Trust that things are going to be better once you’ve died’.

So Myerson sums up Jesus’ ‘thesis, expressed in the Sermon on The Mount’, as essentially conservative and basically saying ‘workers of the world: suck it up.’ⁱ

I really enjoyed reading Meyerson’s article because of its energetic engagement with many of the things that I care about, and because of the substantive issues it raised. And I would like to at least try to make some comments about some of those issues, which I published under the title “*Let Your Light So Shine*”- *Radicalism in The Sermon On The Mount*.ⁱⁱ

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The first issue I have with Meyerson is his (mis)representation of Jesus view of ‘heaven’. It is clear Meyerson sees ‘heaven’ as ‘life after death’ and suggests Jesus is saying, as many conservative Christians do, ‘that things are going to get better when you die’, ‘you ought to be focused on heaven’; ‘this

life doesn't matter'; 'in the next one you will be rewarded and your tormentors punished.' Which aids and abets the status quo.

Now in the Bible there are four books with four versions of the gospel story. And the one thing that they all agree on is: that the 'gospel' according to Jesus is all about the '*kingdom of God*' - or as it is sometimes called '*the kingdom of heaven*'.

The core message of Jesus is the 'gospel of the kingdom of heaven'. That's why Jesus began his famous Sermon on the Mount with the words '*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*'. (Matt. 5.3) In the sermon Jesus calls on his disciples to '*seek first the kingdom*', to make it a priority, and to continually pray that the '*kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven*'.(Matthew 6.33,10)

All throughout his ministry Jesus constantly preaches and teaches about the '*kingdom*'. All his parables are basically *earthly stories* about '*the kingdom of heaven*'. Only John records Jesus saying anything about 'born again' – twice on one occasion. Matthew, Mark, and Luke never record Jesus saying anything about being 'born again' at all. But all the gospel writers record Jesus speaking about the '*kingdom of heaven*' again and again – some 114 times!

In the beatitudes, it is clear that, for Jesus, the 'kingdom of heaven' is a place where the meek 'inherit the earth' (Matthew 5.5); where those who give mercy will 'receive mercy' (Matthew 5.7); where the hungry will be 'filled' (Luke 6.21) and those who hunger and thirst for justice will be 'fulfilled' (Matthew 5.6). It is a place where those who mourn will be 'comforted' (Matthew 5.4) and those who weep now will 'laugh' once more (Luke 6.21). It is a place where peacemakers will walk proudly as 'sons and daughters of God' (Matthew 5.9) and all those who are pure in heart 'will see God' (Matthew 5.8)

So, as far as Jesus is concerned, heaven is a way of life; and it is a way of life that people should be able to experience here and now, on earth, in this life, as well as in the next. Which is why he uses the present tense, rather than the future tense at the beginning and the end of the beatitudes, saying 'yours *is* the kingdom of heaven', so take it and make it your own. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray 'May your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is heaven' every day (Matthew 6.10) so that people can see God face to face, live as God's children, be filled and fulfilled, find the comfort and the mercy that they need, wipe away their tears and have a smile that no one can wipe off their face, here and now, on earth, in this life, as well as in the next.



The second issue I have with Meyerson is his (mis)representation of Jesus view of the 'system'. Incredibly, Meyerson tries to suggest Jesus 'puts a happy face on the political and social systems which oppress'. When in fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

Jesus says we are faced with a choice: to be - or not to be – the change we want to see. And in Luke’s account of the beatitudes, Jesus makes the choice - and its consequences for us - painfully clear.

‘Looking at his disciples, he said:

20" *Blessed* are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 *Blessed* are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

22 *Blessed* are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man."

23" Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,
because great is your reward in heaven.

For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

24" But *woe* to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.

25 *Woe* to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.

26 *Woe* to you when all people speak well of you,
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets."

Luke 6. 20-26

In Luke’s account of the beatitudes Jesus is using classic Jewish parallelism to compare and contrast two completely different positive and negative scenarios.

Positive Scenario	Negative Scenario
Blessed are the poor (and those with the poor in spirit) for yours is the kingdom of God.	But woe to you who are rich, (and all those into status and success) for you have received your comfort.
Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.	(But) woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.	(But) woe to you who laugh now, for you will...weep.
Blessed are you	(But) woe to you

when people hate you... because of the Son of Man, for that is how their ancestors treated the (true) prophets.	when all people speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets
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So Jesus is saying we need to think about the consequences of our choices.

Either we can...	Or we can...
Be poor (or be with the poor in spirit) And we will be blessed for the kingdom of God is ours.	Be rich, (and be into status and success) And we will be cursed because we put our trust in riches.
Be hungry (and hunger for justice), And we will be blessed for God will satisfy our hunger.	Be comfy, (and be well off and well fed) And we will be cursed for nothing will satisfy us.
Be sad, (weeping with those who weep), And we will be blessed for we will have the last laugh.	Be happy, (laughing with those who laugh), And we will be cursed for we will regret not really caring.
Be unpopular (and get bad press) because of our commitment to Christ And we will be blessed because we are part of a great tradition of courageous integrity.	Be popular, (and get good press), because we collude with the status quo And we will be cursed because we will have gained celebrity but lost our integrity in the process.

Jesus calls us not to aid or abet the status quo, but to be poor – to be with the poor in spirit, to be hungry – and be hungry for justice, to be sad – because we are weeping with those that weep, and to be unpopular – because we are committed to follow the way of Christ with integrity, struggling to challenge and change the system.

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The third issue I have with Meyerson is his (mis)representation of Jesus view of the 'struggle'. Meyerson tries to suggest that Jesus did not encourage people to struggle against the system, but only to struggle to accept the system and comply with the system. Meyerson interprets Jesus saying, "Resist not evil" as meaning 'Take it easy, you Saudi women who are stoned for the crime of having been raped, you American Indians who have been infected by disease and anguish while your land is stolen and your family murdered, and you Ugandan homosexuals who fall in love under the threat of execution, flogging and incineration'. 'This is your lot in life'. 'Suck it up.'

People like Meyerson make assumptions about the way to bring about change. Because Jesus didn't share their assumptions about the way to bring about change, they tend to assume that Jesus was not really interested in bringing about change.

The most common way of trying to change a system has always been to mobilise a group of disenfranchised and disaffected people at the bottom to overthrow the people at the top, and, thereby, institute a change of regime. This can be done either violently, by revolution; or non-violently, by election. Either way, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Because no matter how many times you may change the regime, the system remains. *Jesus' much more 'way-out,' innovative, alternative way of bringing change – was not trying to change the regime – but changing the system itself!*

Jesus wasn't interested in 'resisting evil', 'reacting to evil' or 'retaliating against evil'. He was interested in 'overcoming evil with good'. Jesus' basic stratagem was to deny hierarchy, advocate mutuality, and reframe all his relationships, over time, in terms of equality. Time and time again Jesus told the people who were with him to reject any kind of hierarchical modus operandi and embrace the practice of genuine mutuality (which, we know, is the only thing which can create the space for the transformation of the oppressive American, Saudi, and Ugandan relationships that Meyerson cites.)

Jesus told his disciples: 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. *Not so with you.* Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Matthew 20: 20-28) 'You are *not* to be called 'Rabbi,' for you've only one Master and you are all equals. And do *not* call anyone on earth 'Father,' (even if you are a Catholic!) for you have one Father, in heaven. (And you are all brothers and sisters). The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts themselves will be humbled, and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted'. (Matthew 23: 8-12)

To start with, the disciples related to Jesus as their 'Rabbi', as servants to their master, but over time, he reframed his relationship with all of them in clear, radically egalitarian terms. But after three years, Jesus said to them: '*I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*' (John 15:15) Knowledge is power and in sharing power they became friends.

The kind of changes we need involve system change, rather than regime change. So Jesus said that rather than spend all our time fighting the current regime, we need to be working slowly but surely for transformation of the entire system, by implementing his strategy of white-anting hierarchy, building up mutuality, and reframing inequality in terms of equality, one relationship at a time. As far as Jesus is concerned, there is no fast track, no quick fix, only a long ongoing pro-active struggle for total revolution.

Jesus publicly associated with the synagogue – by attending and participating, 'as was his custom', in congregational meetings. (Luke 4:16) *But*, Jesus never attempted to move up in the system. He moved out on to the edge. *And*,

locating himself 'on the side-lines', rather than 'in the main game', gave Jesus some great advantages.

One, it gave him perspective. From the sidelines he was able to see the whole field, and see what needed to be done to improve the game. Two, it gave him opportunity. On the sidelines he was far enough away from the game to be beyond its immediate control, yet close enough to affect the way it played out. Three, it gave him time. On the sidelines he was able to develop his short-term alternatives to the system while he worked on his long-term transformation of the system. Four, it gave him space. On the sidelines he was able to demonstrate the alternatives he developed in the eyes of everyone, so they could assess for themselves whether they wanted to adopt them – or not. Five, it gave him a position from which he could advocate change, without being in a position to impose the change he advocated on anyone. So people knew they were truly free to adopt the change – or not to – as they desired. And because that made the change process much less threatening to the people in the synagogue it gave Jesus greater freedom to experiment in his struggle for change.

For Jesus, an 'out and out' struggle for peace and justice involved five different tasks: *confronting injustice in society; delivering the poor from exploitation by the rich; liberating the powerless from oppression by the powerful; freeing people from cycles of violence and counter violence which are a constant threat to vulnerable populations; and creating just communities which are intentionally committed to including outcasts.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Many people say Jesus said a lot about love, but little about political, economic and social justice. But Jesus constantly confronted the injustice in his society. Meyerson says disapprovingly that 'In Matthew 4:24, we find Christ healing people for the first time, but asking no questions about why they should be sick while the rich have their health and demanding no aid to the ailing from an empire that takes no pity on the luckless and which callously allows ill-health to run rampant'. But in John 5:1-13 Christ goes out of his way to heal a man on the Sabbath - deliberately breaking the Sabbath law – in order to confront a society with its obsession with the kind of piety 'which callously allows ill-health to run rampant' without lending a helping hand. In the synoptic Gospels - not counting the parallel passages - there is a clear and unmistakable record of *Jesus specifically and repeatedly confronting both Roman and Jewish authorities with the injustices they perpetrated in Israel - 40 times!*

Jesus followed on from John the Baptist in denouncing the exploitation of the poor by the rich. John told the armed forces: "*Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely - be content with your pay.*" And he told the tax collectors: "*Don't collect any more than you are required to.*" He said: "*The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.*" (Luke 3.11-14) Jesus confronted Zacchaeus, an infamous tax collector, personally about his extortion. As a result of this encounter, Zacchaeus promised Jesus to give "half of my possessions to the

poor”, and “if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” (Luke 19.8)

Jesus not only consistently denounced the oppression of the powerless by the powerful, he also actively advocated liberation of disempowered groups of people through the empowerment of the Spirit. Jesus attacked the key religious leaders of the day, as “lovers of money”(Luke16.14-15), who would maintain a façade of sanctity, by saying long prayers in public, but would “devour widows’ houses”. When he saw a widow “put everything - all she had to live on” - into the collection box, Jesus condemned the temple for extorting the last coin from the kind of person it was set up to protect. (Mark.12.38-44) Jesus broke the monopoly on forgiveness that the temple had developed through the sacrificial system it controlled, by baptizing people in the Spirit and giving them the authority to forgive sins. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” Jesus said; and “if you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven.” (John 20.22-23).

Jesus advocated communities with leadership that would serve the people rather than oppress them. He said to his disciples: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, *whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant*, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - *just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve*, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”(Matthew 20.25-28)

Jesus demonstrated the practice of active, radical, sacrificial nonviolence, that would free people from the cycles of violence and counter violence which are a constant threat to vulnerable groups of people. He said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd...and I lay down my life for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10.8-18) Jesus turned to his friends and said: “*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends*”. (John 15.13)

Jesus created communities that were committed to doing justice to the marginalized and disadvantaged. The dominant value of orthodox Jewish society was “purity” - but the dominant value of Jesus was “inclusivity”. While the Jews despised Gentiles, Jesus declared “my house shall be called a house...for all nations.” (Mark 11.17) While the Pharisees ostracized “sinners”, Jesus invited “outcasts” to his parties. (Mark 2.16) Jesus said, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers, (sisters) or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.” (Luke 14.12-14)



“Let your light so shine before others, that (Meyerson and friends) may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)

ⁱ <http://thebusysignal.com/2010/03/31/resist-not-evil-conservatism-in-the-sermon-on-the-mount/?mid=56377>

ⁱⁱ ‘Let Your Light Shine-Radicalism In The Sermon On The Mount’ <http://www.wecan.be>

ⁱⁱⁱ Stassen,G. & Gushee,D *Kingdom Ethics* IVP, Downers Grove, 2003 p 355ff