

Hot Topics

The Marginalized

Leviticus 19:15; Matthew 19:21

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You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor (Leviticus 19:15).

Jesus said to him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matthew 19:21).

Introduction

Thoughtless critics might look at the above two verses and cry ‘contradiction.’ It is not uncommon for people to halt their theology with the supposed words and actions of Jesus incarnate, especially if they appear to collide with the Law of God as expressed in the Old Testament.

In doing so they unwittingly deny the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), for it was the Spirit, proceeding from the Father and the eternal Son that produced both the Old New Testaments. All this to say, every commandment in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is a wise and loving command of Christ.

Assuming that little error is corrected, we are still left with a supposed contradiction. Jesus wants this ruler to sell what he has and give it to the poor. But in Leviticus, we are told not to show partiality to the poor. Does He care about the poor or not?

The poor might be just one example of what we have come (very recently) to call *marginalized people*. To marginalize means to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position. In the same way the margins on a sheet of paper are not part of the real literary action, marginalized people are in the metaphorical margins of society.

The term can be applied to any number of types of people. It can refer to race, skin color, religious affiliation, ethnic origin, educational status, childhood relationships (who you once associated with), political opinions,

appearance, disabilities, elderly, addicts, trafficked, styles, caste systems (social hierarchies), and more. Though the term is new, the world and history are thick with marginalized people. Marginalized people may be the majority, depending on where one draws the margins.

People often speak of the one percent. This refers to one percent of people who are said to have most of the money, property, and power in society. The Occupy Wall Street said their movement represents 99 percent of Americans who've been left behind. By that metric, the margins are almost the entire sheet of paper.

Different people draw different margins which include a variety of things the marginalized are excluded from. Generally speaking, the marginalized find themselves excluded from participation in social norms, economic benefits, employment opportunities, political office, political representation and justice, general freedom (as in slavery, which exists in many forms to this day), etc.

In an effort to cure societies of marginalization, the world has engaged in untold numbers of solutions. Some of these solutions seem reasonable, some violent, some perhaps necessary, some made things worse, some have temporary benefit.

The Jews were marginalized in Germany resulting (among other reasons) in a world war. Blacks were marginalized in antebellum America resulting in a national bloodbath where the number of Americans killed was comparable to the number of deaths of every other war we've been in put together. The Bolsheviks felt marginalized by the monarchy leading to the Russian Revolution. The French citizens were so outraged by the French aristocracy that it degenerated into the Reign of Terror.

There are various opinions on what forms legitimate efforts of ending marginalization. And we certainly do not have time to engage all the types of marginalization or evaluate all the methods of eradicating it. Suffice it to say that the non-Christians efforts of eradicating marginalization, inevitably calls upon the darkest traits in humanity.

The types of revolution people feel are justified to exterminate marginalization appeal to the most angry, vindictive, spiteful, proud and cruel passions of this fallen race. People feel justified in hating their oppressors. And it is a short trip down the stairs to shoot them and all their children.

This Hot Topic is hot indeed. For we live in an era where the accusation of marginalization is reaching a fever pitch. And those who feel marginalized (and those leading their quest for deliverance) don't seem remotely interested in a Christian approach to the problem. Maybe there's a long game that's so well hidden, that everybody's missing it, but the movers and shakers, seeking to set their people free, appear to be accomplishing just the opposite.

Every conceivable relationship among the marginalized and those not marginalized (whoever they may be) and the marginalized with other marginalized, is worse now than at any time in the past one hundred years. Whatever we're doing to solve this problem is failing miserably. Everybody seems to hate each other. As a nation we are becoming a house divided, and, as Jesus taught, we cannot stand.

The Christian Approach

What then is the Christian approach to curing the sin of marginalization?

Justified Marginalization

First, we must be sure that the marginalization is not justified. Convicted criminals in prison may feel marginalized because they are forbidden free access to society. The margins in this case are actual bars and walls. In these cases, the marginalization is a necessary consequence to criminal behavior. Drag queens may feel marginalized if they are forbidden access to the children's section at the local library. A strong argument can be made that this is a healthy and necessary restriction.

Unholy Alliances

Second, we must be aware of unholy alliances. Old Testament Israel was often tempted to covenant with surrounding nations. It seemed practical and utilitarian. But God warned against such a practice.

Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst (Exodus 34:12).

The New Testament application of this is found in the writings of Paul.

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14)?

There may be emergencies that call for immediate, collective action. If someone is hit by a car or is bleeding to death on the street, it may not be expedient to ask those seeking to help to provide a statement of faith. But it is matter of concern when I see Christians to immediately hitch their wagon to organizations that are ostensibly helping the marginalized.

It has been my practice to find the charters of those organizations, to unearth the heart of their desires. Sometimes they can be cryptic and ambiguous. But other times their desire, for example, to eradicate the family unit or undue, and supplants, a political system is right there in black and white.

They may find in you one sliver of ethical similarity. But all of the sudden, thoughts are entering your mind and words are coming from your lips that are in massive conflict with that which is godly.

Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, ²⁵ lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare (Proverbs 22:24).

Anger

This leads to my third point. Do not be governed by anger. The Scriptures do speak of a righteous indignation. Jesus clearly demonstrated a holy anger in His clearing of the temple (Matthew 21:12, 13). The accusers of Jesus had such hardness of heart that Mark records that Jesus “**looked**

around at them in anger” (Mark 3:5). Paul writes that Christians can be angry, yet not sin (Ephesians 4:26).

But we need to be very careful here. We need to be careful that our anger is tempered. We need to be careful that we are angry because there is an affront to God rather than affront to us. It is neither Christian nor beneficial to anyone for a people to become an angry mob.

...for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God (James 1:20).

You shall not follow a crowd to do evil; nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after many to pervert *justice* (Exodus 23:2).

Patience

Fourth, we must speak of patience. In order to keep the land from desolation, God informed the Israelites that their success would be incremental.

Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land (Exodus 23:30).

There is a common story structure called the *Heroes Journey*. Like many literary formulas, this structure originates from Scripture, Jonah and the great fish may be its genesis. Whether it's a fish or a dragon, the story presents a hero who, by all observable accounts, has failed. He is in the belly of the dragon and the story seems to have sadly ended.

Yet the hero has not lost his sword, and, from the inside out, he carves away at the evil by which he is surrounded (devoured). The dragon seeks to continue to give the appearance of vitality, but it is being destroyed from its inward bowels.

Of course, the ultimate hero (the one to which Jonah and the fish points) is Christ Himself engulfed by death. And from death, death itself is destroyed. But we as Christians are called to imitate Christ in this journey. His Gospel may appear devoured by a sinful world, but it is cutting away

at sin and death. Though our efforts may appear vain, we are told that our toil in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Immediate results may be shallow and temporary.

Partiality

Fifth, as our opening verse so indicates, is to avoid partiality. There is no contradiction between what Jesus teaches regarding caring for the poor and not showing the poor, or any marginalized person, an unjust favoritism. Unjust favoritism does not breed equanimity in a society. It may be a healthy pursuit for a society to seek to pursue equal opportunity. But equal opportunity is not the same as an unjust verdict, whether in a courtroom, classroom or position of employment.

Even the natural, worldly person knows when they've been treated unfairly. It doesn't take a great deal of wisdom to grasp when that happens. Not only does this breed resentment, but widespread partiality also opens a Pandora's box of ills in a culture.

Wise Love

Sixth, we need to practice wise love. Though we should not engage the poor (or any truly marginalized person) unjustly, we should not ignore them. Out of love, we should help. I might add here that it is not just throwing a few dollars in their direction.

Over the years I have taken under my wing people who have been disadvantaged in any number of ways. To make a long story short, I have helped, but I also have determined how I will help. We see this practice among the deacons in our church. They don't just write checks. They prayerfully determine the best and most loving course of action.

Philemon

I'd like to conclude with a quick examination of how the Apostle Paul engaged a disciple with a mutual marginalized friend—a slave named Onesimus. Paul's disciple, Philemon, was the owner of the slave. And I would like to begin this conclusion by pointing out Paul's desired hope in this matter.

Onesimus had likely escaped Philemon, leaving Philemon “wronged” (Philemon 18) in some financial way. Paul is willing to compensate Philemon in this matter. But the compensation is not Paul’s ultimate desire. His deeper desire is expressed in these words:

For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave – a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord (Philemon 15, 16).

The primary goal here is a fraternal and eternal love. Perhaps this is how the hero begins cutting away at the entrails of the dragon. Perhaps this is the beginning of the end of slavery.

Paul’s approach to Philemon is not one of a domineering master, giving an order. It is more of a father, giving a lesson regarding a brother. Paul wants Philemon to voluntarily make the right decision.

But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary (Philemon 14).

He doesn’t merely desire these two disciples to forebear one another but love one another.

And let us not ignore the courage and faithfulness of Onesimus, since he is the one delivering the letter! None of this works apart from Philemon recognizing his own debt before God and Onesimus faithfully, patiently trusting that his Father in heaven governs whatsoever comes to pass.

There are times that call for the sword to carve away at the outward scales of the dragon. Hitler needed to be violently halted. But so often, those kinds of wounds, like a hydra, find two nastier heads growing back. Lasting victory for the marginalized comes from within the dragon. The sword of the Spirit and the gospel of peace yields long-lasting victory.

In the final analysis, we’re all marginalized when it comes to peace with God. And God, indiscriminately, without partiality, rescued us from the slavery of sin and death.

