

Handout 14: Paul and Social Activism

Responding to questions in response to Ephesians Talk #22 > 12-16-2018

I received the following email. I have edited it slightly:

Jac

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As you shared your thoughts about today's Christian culture and universities pushing for big platforms around social justice and the like, and as you gave your perspective on how our job really should be less about trying to write God's story for Him and instead to work to reconcile our place within this story, I got the sense you were essentially saying we should be working within the circumstances and opportunities in which we find ourselves rather than seeking out a platform to change the world for the better (or how we define better) on some grand stage.

Assuming I got the general gist of that position, my question had to do more with what it looks like to work within the circumstances and opportunities in which I'm placed. I guess I assumed you would find a lot of room between seeking a grand stage and working out my role — true? Or do you not see a lot of room in between?

For example, if I were to give \$100 to the Eugene Mission, is that working out my place in this story where I've been given more than I need and can put it towards helping those others in need? Or do you find that kind of gesture to fall into this platform for social justice?

Another example, I don't usually give money to the panhandling homeless, but the other day I encountered a man I see a lot around our office building and he had a gash on his head. He was asking for some Neosporin. I walked with him down the street and bought the medicine for him. And I guess I'm wondering if you find this kind of gesture to be more of an appeal for social justice on my part, or more of the working out my place in this story? Of course there can be all kinds of motivations behind such gestures (prosperity gospel stuff), but just at some basic level, I'm curious where you judge actions to be more like an appeal to social justice and where they are working out my place in this story — because I am a character interacting with a lot of other characters every day.

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I subsequently received a second email, here are a few excerpts from that second email that I want to address publicly:

How would you reflect your position on social activism in the following situations:

- you are President Abraham Lincoln facing the excruciating decision of whether or not to plunge your beloved country into a bloody, destructive war in order to abolish slavery

- you are a German citizen risking punishment or death in order to protect Jews in your

neighborhood from certain death at the hands of the Nazis

- in your place of employment, you are aware of egregious sexual discrimination or abuse, and you risk your career in order to expose it

You also denigrated the idea of believers taking a stand against social injustice just because it's the "cool" thing to do. Martin Luther King Jr. and William Wilberforce did not take heroic stands against slavery and racial bigotry because they were "cool" but because they had deep convictions about the evil of those institutions.

No one who opposes evil in our society is morally pure. How would you esteem MLK's heroic and sacrificial efforts differently if he had not been a philanderer?

• In the 7th chapter of his book, *Works of Love*, the Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, has some very important things to say relative to the issues that I raised last week. (Many thanks to Earle Craig for pointing this out to me.) If you do not have access to Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* to read it for yourself, a summary of chapter 7 of *Works of Love* is included in a work posted by Earle Craig on the biblical philosophers web site. You can download Earle's chapter summaries of *Works of Love* at: <http://biblicalphilosophers.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Works-of-Love-Chapter-Summaries.pdf>

1. Some definitions:

- 1.1. ACT OF LOVE: acting in such a way that my action promotes the well-being of another human being in one way or another.
- 1.2. ACT OF MERCY: Acting in such a way that my action concretely and practically benefits someone who has been victimized or disadvantaged by societal structures or institutions that are evil or unjust.
- 1.3. ACT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM: Working to change the structures and institutions of a society in order to eliminate the evil and unjust outcomes that are encouraged and promoted by those structures and institutions.
- 1.4. ACT OF EMPTY VIRTUE SIGNALING: Acting in such a way and with such a purpose that my action "signals" to onlookers (or, at least, it is meant to "signal" to onlookers) that I am a righteous and morally upright individual who passionately cares about justice and about other people, even though the action itself does little or nothing to promote the well-being of any other human being.

2. My understanding of what Paul's perspective would be:
 - 2.1. The righteousness that a Jesus-follower is called to pursue necessarily includes
 - 2.1.1. *acts of love*, and
 - 2.1.2. *acts of mercy*.
 - 2.2. If and when God calls a particular individual to play a particular role in changing society, the righteousness that a Jesus-follower is called to pursue may include
 - 2.2.1. *acts of social justice activism*.
 - A. However, it will be acts of social justice activism of the righteous sort, not of the unrighteous sort.
 - 2.3. The righteousness that a Jesus-follower is called to pursue will NEVER include
 - 2.3.1. *acts of empty virtue-signaling*.
3. A common mistake in reasoning that modern Christians make:
 - 3.1. arguing that we are under obligation to engage in acts of social justice activism because the Bible instructs us to love our neighbor.
 - 3.1.1. Or, to put it in the terms I just defined above, arguing that we are under obligation to engage in acts of social justice activism because the Bible instructs us to engage in acts of love and mercy.
 - A. Note that Paul, in *Ephesians*, is **clearly** and **unmistakably** calling on the masters of slaves to engage in *acts of love* and *acts of mercy* toward their slaves.
 - a. But—remarkably—Paul, himself, is clearly refraining from engaging in any social justice activism with regard to the institution of slavery and is clearly not exhorting his readers to engage in any social justice activism with regard to the institution of slavery.
 4. Today, a distinctive stream within Evangelical Christianity has adopted the view that to declare support for certain social-political policies is an act of love. Specifically, because, as believers, we are obligated to love our neighbors—they argue—we are thereby obligated to openly declare our support for social-political policies that, for example, transfer wealth from the wealthy to the poor. Correspondingly, if we balk at those policies that, for example, transfer wealth from the wealthy to the poor, then we are failing to love our neighbor, we are failing to practice righteousness, and we call the authenticity of our discipleship into question.
 - 4.1. Whether we should embrace such social-political policies or not (each policy would need to be evaluated in its own right), it is fallacious to suggest that to do so is necessarily *an act of love*.
 - 4.1.1. *When it costs me nothing to support such policies*, it is usually little more than *empty virtue-signaling*, rather than an actual *act of love*, to openly support such policies.

- 4.1.2. If it does cost me something, it is still—more often than not—an attempt to establish my own righteousness, rather than an actual *act of love*. (This is the mistake that anyone makes who is not actually believing the good news of the gospel but is, rather, seeking to establish his own righteousness.) *When I do good to you to establish my own righteousness, I am **not** loving you, I am using you as a prop for my own self-justification.*
- 4.2. In the example that I explicitly offered above (the enforced transfer of wealth from the wealthy to the poor), it is *arguably* immoral (and the opposite of love) to support such a policy:
 - 4.2.1. As Bastiat would argue, I am supporting a policy that advocates using the power of the state to steal from one group in order to give to another.
 - A. And it is quite clearly unbiblical and unrighteous to act evilly (and unlovingly) against one person in order to do good to another.