

Zechariah 7:8-12; Matthew 25:31-46

Faith & Flourishing in Politics: Help the Needy

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / November 28th, 2021

We've been working through the word "F.L.O.U.R.I.S.H." in our *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* sermon series. Today we're finishing our acronym. Let's review:

- F – Faith, Not Fear (or "faithful presence")
- L – Love God & Neighbor (enemies too)
- O – Other Peoples' Good (shalom/common good)
- U – Understanding & Wisdom
- R – Reign of Christ
- I – Image of God (*Imago Dei*)
- S – Speak Prophetically
- H – Help the Needy

Last week we talked about speaking prophetically. We speak prophetically (truth to power with power) out of love for our neighbors, often the poor and needy. There's a Brazilian Catholic archbishop who said:

"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." – Hélder Câmara (1909–1999)¹

One of the prophetic messages the Old Testament prophets emphasized again and again was protecting the poor, needy, and most vulnerable. Israel and Judah's failure to do so is one of the things that sent them into exile. After their exile, God wants them to remember to do justice. The prophet Zechariah returned with the exiles from Babylon.²

Zechariah 7:9-10 (ESV)

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."

Zechariah speaks prophetically on behalf of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor—those people most at risk in any society. Zechariah warns the returning exiles not to be like their ancestors who hardened their hearts against these vulnerable people groups, because if they do, they will face God's wrath:

Zechariah 7:12 (ESV)

They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the Lord of hosts.

The people faced God's judgment because they oppressed the widows, orphans, immigrants, and poor—the needy. Last week Amos prophesied against six outside nations along with Southern Judah and Northern Israel about their injustices. That theme continues, but now with the return of the Judean exiles.

When I was growing up, I don't remember hearing any Church or Christian emphasize the prophets' warnings to take care of the poor, needy, and most vulnerable in society. I know we cared about abortion, and I remember doing food drives, Christmas shoeboxes, and donating Thanksgiving meals. Our church also hosted an English class for Spanish speakers for a season, but it did not seem like the churches I've known have taught on the poor and needy with the same intensity as the prophets. I don't think that's uncommon in the evangelical church. At least, it hasn't been my experience.

Why is that? Is it because our political ideologies help us see some disadvantaged groups but skip others? Is it because we have Jesus now, so we don't have to worry about the poor and needy? There's a reason our Scripture reading today is first an Old Testament prophet that preaches about the needy and warns of God's wrath. And our second reading is Jesus himself, a prophet who does the exact same thing. Jesus preaches about the needy and warns of God's wrath for those who do not help them.

Jesus will judge all people on how well they care for the needy.

Like the prophets judged the nations for their level of societal justice, Jesus warns of something similar when he returns. Before it ever gets to the individual, Jesus gathers the "nations" (ethnos). Ethnos can mean "Gentiles" (non-Jews) or nations of people. Jesus gathers all nations and people for the final judgment.

Matthew 25:31-32 (ESV)

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Sometimes in and around ancient Palestine, the sheep and goats would flock together and mix. Jesus often identifies his people as sheep, and here he begins to separate them out from the mixture of nations.³ While everything heads towards addressing the church community, it matters that Jesus' judgment starts with the nations. That mirrors the Old Testament prophets like Amos rebuking the nations and reminds us of our corporate (church), political, and even national responsibility to address caring for the poor.

Matthew 25:33-36 (ESV)

And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'

Jesus uses the imagery of "blessing," I think to recall his audience's mind to the promises God made to Abram (Abraham) and the Israelite people that he was going to bless them and make them a blessing to "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:1-3). God's true people are going to be a blessing to the world, both spiritually and practically. To be a blessing to the least of these, the neediest, is part of what it means for God's people to bless all the families of the earth. To be a blessing includes providing for:

1. Physical Needs – Food, drink, clothing, healthcare.

Maslov's hierarchy of needs might identify these as those basic physiological and safety needs. We need to provide baseline care for the least of these—food, water, clothing, healthcare for the sick.⁴ Even before political action, Jesus encourages the hands-on meeting of the needs of others.

2. Social & Safety Needs – The outsider, stranger, foreigner, and immigrant.

Jesus' word for "stranger" here is the Greek word "xenos." In the New Testament, xenos can mean stranger, alien, or foreigner.⁵ So when Jesus says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me," he emphasizes taking care

of people foreign to the community. Today this could be immigrants, refugees, or maybe at a basic level, those outside our church and circle of relationships. Jesus calls us to be mindful of them too.

3. Restoration & Justice Needs – Those imprisoned, forgotten, and neglected.

Jesus encourages his followers to visit those in prison. That scares me because I've never even been to prison (a prison). I remember once my high-school youth group visited a boy's home for Christmas. I didn't realize how important that was till much later. I'm glad Cornerstone supports prison ministry, but maybe we can do more. How should this impact how we think about our criminal justice system? Do we lock people made in the image of God up and throw away the key? Jesus shows compassion to people like them. I also think there's a principle of caring for anyone society forgets, the elderly and homebound.

President Jimmy Carter has tried to care for the poor and needy, both in and outside of office::

Shortly after presidential candidate Jimmy Carter gave his acceptance speech at the Democratic convention, he taught a Sunday-school class at his home church. A reporter was there to write a story about what he said to the class. In class, Carter went through his speech point by point. In the speech he had expressed a concern for the poor—the reason for this, Carter explained to the class, is that the Bible says God is concerned for the oppressed and the outcast.⁶

Jimmy Carter continues to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity, reaching 35 builds in 2018.⁷ He might be the reason *Habitat for Humanity* is so well known.⁸ When he finishes a house, he gives the homeowners their keys and a Bible. *Jesus will judge nations on how well they care for the needy*. Jesus calls us to care for the needy, but more than that, Jesus identifies with the needy.

Jesus identifies himself with the poor and needy.

Jesus identifies himself with his Father, the Jewish people, his disciples, and the poor, needy, and most vulnerable. The sheep are surprised when Jesus identifies himself with the poor and vulnerable.

Matthew 25:37-40 (ESV)

Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' 40 And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

To serve the poor is to serve Jesus. There's some debate of what Jesus means when he says, "the least of these my brothers." Does he only mean caring for the poor and needy within his followers, the Christian community, or all poor people? Brothers could mean either.⁹ When we served at Living Waters in Lowell, several of those I talked to expressed faith in Christ or openness to hear the gospel. These are our brothers. The point of the sheep and the goats is not to figure out which needy people we don't need to serve but to serve the needy. That's just like the story of the Good Samaritan. The wrong question is, "Who is my neighbor?" The right question is, "How can I most love my neighbor?" It helps to look at Paul, who, like Jesus, seemed to emphasize the faith community but also called his followers to take care of any in need.

Galatians 6:10 (ESV)

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Let's make sure we take care of our church family, which I see here at Cornerstone. We have a benevolence fund to help pay for utilities, medical, mental health, and other needs, and I often see our church family making meals, visiting each other, giving rides, and just being there in times of need. Our family felt it when

my dad got sick with Covid, and I had to leave town. We received meals, a mowed lawn, and a car ride to the airport. The body of Christ came together for us. And we have such a good thing; let's share it with an outside world. Let's do acts of kindness and mercy for community members who don't know Christ yet. They may be our future brothers and sisters in Christ or are already a part of another church community.

Jesus identifies himself with the poor and needy multiple times:

Matthew 25:41-46 (ESV)

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44 Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ 45 Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

To ignore the physically and spiritually poor and needy is to ignore Jesus. Jesus doesn't say, “the least of these my brothers” in this passage, but simply “the least of these.” Jesus casts the net wide. To care for the least of these is to care for the greatest of all, the King of Kings. If we take a moment and look at Jesus' life, we see Jesus isn't making this up. **Jesus was...**

Hungry – At the start of Jesus' ministry, he fasted from food for 40 days. He knew what it was like to be near starvation. Satan wouldn't tempt him with bread if it weren't a real temptation (Matthew 4:1-4). Jesus became hungry so that he could feed us with his own body in communion.

Thirsty – On the cross, Jesus said, “I thirst,” before giving up his spirit (John 19:28-30). He became thirsty so that we could drink his living water and never thirst again (John 4:14).

Stranger – When Herod tried to kill Jesus, Joseph and Mary fled into the night as refugees to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). Jesus went into exile so he could bring us, exiles, home. Jesus left his glory in heaven so that we could enter into glory with him (John 17:5; 1 Corinthians 15:42-43).

Naked – Jesus was stripped of his garments and was probably even naked at the crucifixion. He was unclothed and shamed so that he might clothe us in his righteousness (Zechariah 3:3-5).

Sick – They flogged and abused Jesus so that he could bear the sin of the whole world upon himself. Isaiah 53:5 says he “was crushed for our iniquities . . . and with his wounds we are healed.”

Imprisoned – They arrested, tried, and crucified Jesus, an innocent victim, but set guilty Barabbas free. This is the gospel—that God condemns sinless Jesus to pardon and forgive us.

When Jesus identifies himself with the needy, he's not just saying it because it's a nice thing to say, but because he lived it. And how we treat people like Jesus reflects how we treat him. Like in Zechariah, those who ignore the poor and needy, and so mistreat Jesus, will face God's wrath. *Jesus will judge all people on how well they care for the needy. Jesus identifies himself with the poor and needy.*

Here's my problem with some liberal politics and theology. When they read Matthew 25, they downplay God's judgment and hellfire and so neuter our motivation to do good. On the other side, I get frustrated with some conservative politics and theology. When they read Matthew 25, they downplay that Jesus meant what he said because we're saved by grace. They also neuter the fire in Jesus' words. The best understanding holds the two in tension. God is gracious, but he's also serious about us caring for the needy. And it's this grace that both challenges and motivates us from the inside out to do good.

Jesus' grace moves us to help the needy.

I want to point out one more thing from our passage. Those who have helped Jesus, the sheep, didn't realize they'd helped him. They didn't remember caring for the needy and were surprised.

Matthew 25:37, 40 (ESV)

Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? [...] 40 And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

And if we were to reread the second half, we'd see that the goats are just as surprised that they haven't served Jesus or cared for the needy. If we read this passage by itself, we might be tempted to think works save us. But Jesus emphasizes grace as he warns of judgment.¹⁰

If, when we get to heaven, we present a list of all the needy people we've served, will we have been serving Jesus or ourselves? But suppose we recognize that we've done nothing deserving of eternal life even on our best day of caring for the poor and needy. In that case, we'll be overjoyed when Jesus accepts our imperfect offerings as done unto him (1 Corinthians 10:31). His grace allows us to serve the needy and care for the poor, not to win salvation, but out of gratitude and joy for what Jesus has done for us. Grace changes our heart's motivations to want to love others as Jesus has loved us.

So how does this connect to politics and voting? When you are thinking about a ballot issue or the candidates, remember the poor and needy. Try to seek their best. Only God will know if we vote to protect ourselves or out of a sense of social self-righteousness. Only God will know our motives, and if we care about those we impact with our ballot. I believe that even if we vote the "wrong way," God can still be honored if we attempt to do so out of genuine love for our neighbors, especially the poor and needy.

When it comes to the poor and needy, there's no quick fix. Good policies require a lot of understanding and wisdom. I think we can all agree that we should care for the poor and needy, but we might differ on how to do that—more jobs, a better social safety net, some other way to help? It's challenging to help, and not hurt, to not act like a savior, but to equip and empower. Only grace can sustain us for the long haul of helping those in need. *Jesus' grace moves us to help the needy.*

Let's be Matthew 25 Christians who help the needy.

Matthew 25 is the cumulation of what it means to walk in faith, not fear, practice faithful presence where we live, honor the image of God in all people, seek the shalom and the common good of our city, and honor the prophets' call to care for the poor and needy. And it takes wisdom and the Holy Spirit to do so well.

As part of my studies, I read the testimony of one self-described liberal evangelical, Jim Wallis. He grew up in a church in Detroit, but when he grew concerned for the poor in the city, especially marginalized black people, his church wouldn't do anything about it.¹¹ That's when he emotionally checked out of the church. After that, he searched through activists and revolutionaries to find the answers he was looking for, but they all lacked a "spiritual foundation" for caring for the poor and fell short.¹² But what brought Wallis back to faith in Jesus was not a church or evangelism. He was incredibly moved by Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5-7, but it was reading Jesus' words in Matthew 25, the sheep and the goats, which brought him home to Jesus.¹³ When he saw Jesus' heart for the poor and needy, he fell in love again. That was the kind of Savior he wanted to follow, and a Matthew 25 Christian was the kind of disciple he wanted to be. *I want to be a Matthew 25 Christian who helps the needy* in hands-on ministry and political engagement. *I hope you do too.* Let's pray.

Benediction – **Jude 24-25** (NIV)

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church as part of his Doctor of Ministry research study through Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Spiritual Exercises

Dear Church,

Thank you for listening to my ninth sermon from our *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* series, *Help the Needy*. Here are several follow-up spiritual exercises for continuing to learn and grow this week:

Journal & Pray: Who are the poor and needy in your community, both your church and your town? Do you know who they are? Can you identify orphans, widows, immigrants, and the poor? Write a list people in need. Then next to that list, write how you could help, your church might be able to help, and your local government could help. Pray over this list and ask the Holy Spirit to help you discern which ideas are worth following up on and which ones to ignore. Listen to where the Holy Spirit leads.

Listen (sermon #1): In the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, Jesus encourages his followers to care for the poor and needy. He also warns his followers what will happen if they don't. Probably one of the most qualified pastors to preach this text today is Francis Chan. Listen to his sermon on YouTube: "[The Sheep and the Goats Matthew 25 Francis Chan](#)" (2/22/2018; 28:49).

Listen (sermon #2): This is my last Timothy Keller recommendation (maybe). He preaches the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 and talks about how important it is for the church to care for the needy. YouTube: "[Blueprint for Revival: Social Concern – Timothy Keller \[Sermon\]](#)" (8/10/2015; 40:05)

Listen (sermon #3): It's probably self-promotional to share one of my sermons, but when I reread it this week, I felt like this sermon is a helpful bridge between last week's message from Amos, *Speak Prophetically*, and this week's message on caring for the poor and needy. If you'd like, please read or re-listen to "[Homeless Lazarus | Luke 16:19-31](#)." The scripture reading starts at about 31:35 into the video.¹⁴

Read (book): Dr. Kenneth Barnes co-led my [GCTS Ockenga cohort](#), and as part of our weekend discussing business, we read and discussed his book *Redeeming Capitalism* (224 pages; intermediate level). I'd never read an in-depth critique of capitalism, socialism, communism, and economic systems before, and I found his insights and proposed solutions helpful and biblical. If you're interested, I recommend reading this [TGC book review](#) and listening to him discuss his book on the Eric Metaxas show. You'll notice a lot of overlapping themes with our sermon series, especially in the 2018 interview (#1 [July 25, 2018; Hour 2](#); #2 [March 29, 2019; Hour 2](#)). The interviews begin after commercials and news.¹⁵

Worship: Listen and sing along as Chris Tomlin leads "God of This City." Pray it for your city, for Westford, and Boston. Pray the Lord would provide for the needy wherever they are and that he would use our church to care for the most vulnerable in our communities. Thank you for praying.

God bless,
Pastor Jonathan Romig

Sermon Slides

See this week's [sermon on our website](#).

Discussion Questions.

Discussion questions for Sunday school or small group coming soon.

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Endnotes

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1. Michael R. Wagenman, *Engaging the World with Abraham Kuyper* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019) chap. 6, Kindle.
 2. “Overview: Zechariah,” BibleProject, published August 1, 2016, accessed November 24, 2021 https://youtu.be/_106IfO6Kc0.
 3. Psalm 23; Matthew 18:12; John 10:27-29.
 4. Dr. Saul McLeod, “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs,” SimplyPsychology, updated December 29, 2020, accessed November 27, 2021 <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.
 5. Matthew 25:35, 38, 43; 27:7; Acts 17:18, 21; Romans 16:23; Ephesians 2:12, 19; Hebrews 11:13, 19; 1 Peter 4:12; 3 John 5.
 6. Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010) 131, Kindle.
 7. See “Carter Work Project 2018,” Habitat for Humanity, accessed November 27, 2021 <https://www.habitat.org/volunteer/build-events/carter-work-project/2018>.
 8. “35 years of building with the Carters,” Habitat for Humanity, published May 30, 2018, accessed November 27, 2021 https://youtu.be/5IKJ_2JGK24.
 9. Matthew 10:21; 12:48; 18:15; 19:29.
 10. See David J. Hansen, *The Art of Pastoring: Ministry Without All the Answers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press) chap. 5, Kindle.
 11. Jim Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a World Divided* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014) 56-57, Kindle. Wallis highlights the importance of “nations” in Matthew 25 on page 70.
 12. Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good*, 67-68, Kindle. Matthew 5-7 also impacted him. Originally “spiritual foundations.”
 13. Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good*, 69, Kindle. Matthew 5-7 also impacted him.
 14. Jonathan Romig, “Homeless Lazarus | Luke 16:19-31 (The Rich Man and Lazarus,” Cornerstone Congregational Church, April 11, 2021 <https://cornerstonewestford.com/sermons/homeless-lazarus-luke-1619-31-the-rich-man-and-lazarus/>.
 15. These recommendations do not constitute an endorsement of the Eric Metaxas show.