

“On Human Rights” Matt 25:31-46

Introduction:

Oh, people of God. To have to talk about Human Rights feels like defeat for me. I'll talk about why when it makes sense to. But to talk about human rights we have to talk about a handful of things. What is a person entitled to? What are humans for?

Before we'll done we'll talk about Jesus, because it's always coming back to Jesus, man. Over and over. We're going shallow, and we're going fast, but I think we'll have something to chew on at the end of this morning, or gum at, at least. Let's pray!

Prayer:

Problem: Value Systems

And the problem is that when it comes to questions of human rights, of what people have a right to or over, we have almost no foundation.

Our sense of what people have a right to and why is just a pile, a spaghetti-mess of beliefs that come from all over the place: the home we grew up in, the news we listen to, the books we read, the political party that

has our current affection, the language that we speak, the economic class that we've inherited. And of course, for us in this room, we touch back on Scripture, even as we believe God backs us up in our convictions.

Questions: Rights?

Let me ask some questions. We'll let them be thought-provoking, rhetorical, not ones we actually answer. And as I ask them, we'll think about them, and we'll go "Yes! *Well...*" "Of course! *But...*" "Sure. *If...*" We'll see how the ways we think about rights fluctuate, for us. And there is no "gotcha!" here. Just questions that we all answering through the choices we're making: choices about what to buy, who to vote for, what to complain about, where to worship, all sorts of things. So. Questions:

Rights?

Do people have a right to rest? Do people have a right to work? Do we have a right to the fruit of our own labor? Do investors have a right to profit? Does a government have a right to tax? Do we have a right to retire?

What do rich people have a right to? Poor people?

Brown people? People who speak English? Spanish? Hindi? What do Millennials have a right to? Baby Boomers?

Do children have a right to be with their parents? Do parents have a right to be with their children? Do children have a right over their bodies? Do parents have a right to spank their children? Is education a right? Or play? Do people have a right to sleep safely?

Do people have a right to not be owned by other people? A right to freedom from slavery? Do people have rights over their own bodies? Over who can touch them and when? Do people have a right to manage their fertility? Do people have a right to be born? Do we have a right to die?

Do we have the right to put whatever we want in our own bodies or down our own throats? Do we have the right to put whatever we want in our own trash or down our own drains? Do we have a right to trash? To drains? To potable water? Do people have a right to clean air? Do people have a right to eat?

Do we have the right to sell whatever anyone's willing to buy? Do we have a right to markets? Do we have a

right to buy whatever we have the money for? Do we have a right to advertise? To protect our markets and our products?

Do we have the right to gather together and disperse as we see fit? To move freely from place to place? Do people have the right to seek safety? Do we have a right to private property? Do we have a right to public roads?

Do people have a right to self-defense? How about a right to kill people? Do people have the right to kill people if a government tells them to do it? Does the government have the right to kill people?

What rights do nations have? What right do they have to enforce their rights? Do people have a right to be governed? A right to be ungoverned? Do people have a right to determine how they want to be governed? Or not? Do people have a right to vote? What if they're felons? What if they're divorced? What if they pay taxes, but aren't citizens? What if they're not people, but corporations?

Do we have the right to lie? Do we have the right to tell the truth? Do we have a right to ignorance? How

about a right to education? To treatment? To suicide?

Do we have a right to reconcile? A right to punish? A right to forgive? To withhold forgiveness? To be forgiven? Do we have the right to hate people? Fear people? Love people? Do we have the right to speak? To be silent? A right to respect? A right to safety?

Problem W/ The Term:

The reason that I feel so defeated when it comes to a conversation about human rights is that to talk about this at all is to already have given away control to a perspective that has almost nothing to do with God. When we start by framing the human experience in terms of rights, the way the conversation will go has already been determined. It'll be one that asks, ultimately, "What's the least we have to do for people?"

"What's The Least":

Human rights, as a concept, is always about minimalist questions. It asks what's the least a human being deserves from other human beings. "human rights" as a concern among nations assumes that unless some sort of list is made, and those rights are protected, then those with power will simply use up

humans for whatever they want: profit, pleasure, comfort.

Yet Mary says that in Jesus, God, “has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.” Jesus is on the side of the weak and hungry and poor. To start by asking about what rights a person has, for me, feels like giving something away from the start. Because whatever rights aren’t listed out as the minimalist basic ones that have to be protected, those with power have, in history, taken.

An Alternative Society:

Beyond all this, our list of “basic human rights” are fundamentally shaped by the societies that we’re in.

But we’re a part of a Christian society, called the Church, right? We’ve touched on this a dozen times just in this series. We’re privileged citizens of the Kingdom of God, our loyalties are first to Christ, and our lives are meant to be directed by an ethic whose foundation is Jesus, in which all our actions seek to embody his own, and we live out his way of life in the world as the Spirit guides, to God’s glory.

And so when we talk about human rights in this

society of ours we have to go back to this really basic, biblical reality: We have no rights. We have no rights. Only blessings and obligations.

As far as the Bible is concerned, humanity has no rights to anything. We have only blessings and obligations.

Created: Not Self-Made

One of the basic truths the Bible points out, over and over in all sorts of situations is that we are not self-made. We are not self-made.

One of our most pervasive, tightly held myths in America is the myth of an utterly free person who no one is in charge of. Someone who no one can tell anyone else to do, fully able to become and do whatever they want to become and do. There are no strings on them, no one's the boss of them. They can do as they please. We love this character, and hate anything that gets in the way of him or her.

But a fully free person is a lie. It's always been a lie. We gotta serve somebody. Intrinsicly--something that's essential to being human--is that we enslave ourselves. We were made for service, to be under

authority. And we bind ourselves to others, to ideas, to causes. It's just what we do. This gets twisted, and evil people can use this to justify their destruction of others: whether that's outright slavery and human trafficking, or abusive patriarchy, misogyny, or parenting. In a world broken like ours, using people is too easy.

But serving a master is part of what it means to be human. Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other." He's talking about money when he says it. His point, though, is that we're meant to serve God.

Created: Service To God & Creation:

We were made to serve God, made in "the Image of God." Made to be stewards over all creation, nurturing and blessing it.

The image of God in us means that we are both part of the created order, lowly, and also connected to God on creation's behalf. We're created things in need of God's sustenance, and at the same time we are given God-like responsibilities to the world: its care, its "stewardship," its naming, and being a familiar face

that God can see in creation's crowd as we represent God to all those around.

Blessing & Obligation:

And in this role--this relationship we have with the rest of the created order and any privileges that come of it--nothing good in this human role is ever, ever framed as a right. It is presented as a blessing from our maker, and from the moment God chooses Abram as the one through whom He'll redeem creation, it's clear that our blessings obligate us. We have no rights; we have blessing and obligation to use our blessing for the good of others.

What the Bible never says is that we are entitled to what we have, whether it's power, or pleasure, or relationships, or wealth. In fact, over and over the Bible tells us enjoy these things, but watch out or they will replace God for us, and we'll be remade in their image. Enjoy these things, but not too much, because death is coming.

Human Christians: Image of God & Image of Christ

This is doubly-true for we who have become privileged citizens of the Kingdom of God, who have taken on

Jesus' way of life as our own. *Because we are, as Paul puts it, not just in the world, or in sin or in humanity as it stands, not in Israel or outside it. We are "in Christ," we are Christians.*

We share in the same common graces that our sustaining God gives the world. And of course, we share in the same context, right? We're alive in the world: We are still trapped in a web of sin, stuck right in the middle of ways of organizing the world that have nothing to do with God and everything to do with competition and the self-interested strategic death of people, places, and things.

But our power has been renewed in one major, major way: we are able, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to make less mess. To sin less. And this is all because of Jesus. And not just this: but we're given a team to do Spirit-inspired, "greater things than these" things, and we're given Scripture to guide us in our pursuits. We bear the image of God, and have been reborn into the image of Christ.

And guess what? Those blessings and obligations that all humanity has are doubled-down on for us. We don't just represent God to the world; we represent Christ.

Humans: Love Is The Minimum:

Look, there are no human rights, only human obligation. That obligation is to represent God to the world.

But we Christians know that what's most true about God is this: God is love. Isn't that what we say is most true about God? Isn't that what we say to people? "God loves you." Because God is love. God can't seem to help but show love.

And so we could march on whatever place we want to march on, we could train and teach the world, we could print signs, and t-shirts, and banners, and declare "God is love" and help people who were made in the image of God show love to one another.

And those are totally legitimate activities. The best things in history have come about because Christians have called for this, tried to live it out. Hospitals and peace-keeping and infrastructure, and all sorts of amazing things have been built by Christians because they were operating on this very basic

But this itself is minimalistic. The least thing we can

do. Calling humans to show their human obligation to love other people is, actually, the least thing we ought to do. It's our lowest bar.

Human Christians: A Deeper Love:

Because because just as we aren't made only in the image of God, but have been remade in the image of Christ, we're not only obligated to show love to the world, but we're obligated to a show of love that is deeper, and wider, and more persistent, and better in every way than those who don't know Christ show.

You are obligated to love people. In fact, from the other direction, the greatest human right is that a Christian show them love. The greatest human right is that a Christian show them love.

We see this over, and over in the New Testament. We remember Paul saying ***Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law [which is] summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.***

This isn't a passage about financial investments, about credit obligations. It's a passage about the way we ourselves are obligated to act with continual love toward each other. What does love do? What is love?

“Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.

8 Love never fails.

Paul is saying that this is what we are obligated to offer others; it is a debt that is not erased.

And this call to love isn't just, you know, words to the Church for how to interact with the Church. The Bible nearly always casts these wider, broader, and Jesus' greatest parable on service has a person going outside his race and religion to show love, and make a neighbor of a despised stranger. Christians are those who make neighbors out of strangers by blessing them.

Christian Obligations:

Humans are obligated to represent God to the rest of creation; humanity has, by and large, just blown it.

Christians are obligated to represent Christ, “the image of the invisible God,” the one who, “emptied himself by taking the form of a slave,” who “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” We exist in Christ, who ensures that “nothing can separate us from the love of God.” Our obligation is to represent Christ to the rest of creation.

And here’s what that means:

Everyone:

Everyone is entitled to our love. If we want to use the world’s minimalist framework to talk about what the very least thing a person should get from us, that least thing is our sacrificial love.

People are entitled, have a right, to our patience, to our kindness, to our celebration at their blessings, our humility, to whatever words we can say that are for them. We don’t act irritably, we don’t remember all

our complaints, we don't applaud injustice. We put up with everything, trust God in everything, hope for everything, endure everything, and we don't fail. We persist. We become love embodied, Christ, for everyone. We exist for nothing less. It's our obligation, clothed in blessing.

We who God showed mercy to while we were still separated from him, show the mercy of God to the blind fools boasting arrogantly, motivated by self-preservation and self-interest, snapping and unforgiving and hateful. We love everyone, no matter what, just as God loves us, no matter what.

Trained to Forget:

And we're being trained to forget our obligation as Christians by nearly every broadcasted message around us.

We're being trained to ignore our obligation as Christians for politicized, sinful reasons, even though Jesus made no bargain for power when the devil offered him one. We're being trained to drive past people on the corner, begging for cash, even though Jesus says "give to those who ask, and don't turn away from whoever wants to borrow from you." We're

trained to cling to complaints and withhold forgiveness, even though Jesus tells us to ask God to “Forgive us the way we forgive others.” We’re taught to excuse violence, even though Jesus says “blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.”

But no one can serve to masters. We either serve God, who obligates us to love, or we serve something else: a political party, a nation, an economic class with all its presumptions, a way of life that is rapidly passing away in a world that is rapidly passing away.

No Rights:

There are no human rights, except, maybe, the right every person has to expect love from Christians. We aren’t entitled to anything, yet Christ gives us the world. We have no right to anything, but only the obligation to love.

We aren’t just given the world, we’ve been given to the world for its own salvation. We’ve been given to the least of humanity, for their help. We’ve been given to the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigners--people on the move. We’ve been given to the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. We’re obligated to them all, the ones

Jesus was born among and came to be with.

You bearers of the image of Christ, listen to me: Your heart and purpose is under attack. We're besieged by those who would enslave us, and leverage the influence and wealth and ingenuity that God has blessed us with for their own agendas, rather than see it given in meeting the needs of the desperate. There are a thousand voices waiting to satisfy our itching ears, offering us snake-oil for our fears and anxieties and worries. The question we have to ask, all the time, is "Is it loving?" Is it loving what you want me to believe? To do? To fight for? To plant my flag in?

Does it feed the hungry, clothe the naked, embrace the foreigner? Does it satisfy thirst, and illness, and loneliness? Does what you're asking of me--you talking head, you clever meme, you exclamatory post, you intriguing conspiracy theory--does it call me to my obligation to love everyone, which is their right, or does it call me to myself and my self-protection.

Is it loving?

Again, there is no human right, except maybe the right to a Christian's love. There is no advantage in our

blessing, except being taken advantage of, the way we always, in our sin, take advantage of God's never-ending compassion.

Let's consider again what it means to be a Christian and what we little Christs are obligated to.