



Evangelism Emphasized In the Holy Gospel of St. Matthew

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“I have never been able to convince myself that someone could be saved, if he has never done anything for the salvation of his brother.” –St. John Chrysostom

In our Savior’s classic teaching on prayer we are told to make the following request of the Father: **“your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven” (Matthew 6:10)**. This request, which contains the fundamental guiding principle of the Lord Jesus Christ’s own life, should be foundational for Christian ethics: we are to do our Father’s will on earth (Matthew 7:21). The Holy Scriptures in general and our Savior’s teachings in particular reveal the essential contents of His will for us.

Let us then examine several of the Lord Jesus’ prescriptions for us in an effort to catch the flavor of the kind of thing our Father wants us to be about. For the sake of brevity, considering the vast amount of material relevant to such a study in the Holy Scriptures, we will limit our exploration primarily to the Holy Book of St. Matthew, the Gospel of “the King.”

We embark upon our exploration with reflections on a prescription much favored, the Great Commission of St. Matthew (28:17-20):

All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

The conclusion to the passage gives the following effect: that we should be winning others to the Lord Jesus Christ: that we must respond to our Savior’s “missionary” challenge; that we have been issued a commission by our Savior of the utmost importance and urgency. Although history does not uniformly reflect a proper response to this challenge, surely no one would gainsay this sort of conclusion being drawn from this passage.

Ethics and the Great Commandment

What then did He teach? At once we think of the other great pillar of the Lord Jesus Christ’s teaching, namely, the Great Commandment of St. Matthew 22:35-40. In response to the Sadducees and Pharisees, the Lord Jesus Christ summarizes all the Law and Prophets in the command, first, to:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind (Matthew 22:37).

And secondly, we are to:

“Love our neighbor as our self (Matthew 22:39).”

Doubtless these are commands sufficient to challenge the energies and resources of any disciple for a lifetime, even the power of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The question of the disciples’ energies and time, however, is this: does the Great Commandment appear to suggest that “evangelism” and “caring for others” are properly seen as competitors, with the latter inevitably losing out to the former? Surely not!

The neighbor is, by definition, social: the neighbor is the “other”; he or she is the essence of my existing not as an isolated atom but as a member of society. In this broad spectrum of responsibilities the whole ethic of the Holy Scriptures come into play from the individual gestures of love that are meant to meet a personal or family need, to the sharing of the Holy Gospel and the prophetic call to justice and fairness in social structures.

According to the Lord Jesus Christ, love of the neighbor is indeed secondary, not to evangelism



but rather to the love of the Lord our God. And this secondary love of the neighbor is the powerful motive both for sharing the Holy Gospel with him or her, and for the kind of caring behaviors the Lord Jesus Christ so powerfully prescribes. On the basis of the Great Commandment, therefore, it appears unlikely that an individual responding to the Lord Jesus Christ and becoming a disciple would be counseled to avoid social ethics and social reform.

Ethics and Discipleship

What other sorts of things did the Lord Jesus Christ command? What priorities did He call His disciples to adopt? In His ministry of preaching the Good News of the Kingdom and healing the sick, the Lord Jesus Christ saw the crowds as sheep without a shepherd in the Holy Gospel of St. Matthew 9:35-38. Then, dramatically changing metaphors, He calls for leadership in the image of the harvest which was plentiful and the laborers who are few. We are then commanded to **“ask the Lord of the harvest... to send out workers in his harvest field” (Matthew 9:38)**. Clearly and most emphatically the disciple ought to be paying heed to such a command as this: just as clearly, on such a command the call to missions, evangelism and the life of full-time ministry are properly based.

Along with the “harvest reaping,” however, there are in the Lord Jesus’ teaching commands which go in another - not competing but complementary - direction. Think of the parable of the sheep and the goats of Matthew 25, a parable which has as its very setting the image that the King has come: **“When the Son of Man comes in his glory” (Matthew 25:31)**. Now surely He will tell us in this parable the things we ought to have been about until He returned, and we are not disappointed; in a striking way He goes so

far as to claim that these are the sorts of things that will be of decisive significance for the King’s judgment. What are they?

We know the answer; simply doing the Father’s will on earth: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, taking in the stranger, providing clothing, looking after the sick and visiting those in prison. All are matters of social ethics and to anyone familiar with the Great Commandment they should come as no surprise whatsoever: each is only an outworking of loving our neighbor and treating him or her as *if* they were the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Again, the disciple will surely be about such a business as this, and the closer the return of the King appears to be, the more zealously he or she will pursue such tasks.

The parable of the sheep and the goats also addresses the issue of the eternal worth of loving the neighbor. However things may appear to work out according to our tables of calculation, and however confident we are of our own perspicuity in the matter, *according to the King* acts of love are of eternal consequence; the dichotomy we feel so strongly between the eternal value of the “decision for the Lord Jesus Christ” over against the fleeting value of the “cup of water” is quite foreign to the Lord Jesus Christ’s teaching. Perhaps the answer to our confusion is to be found in our failure to see that a “decision for the Lord Jesus Christ” *necessarily* is a decision to become the sort of person who will offer the cup of water: viz. to become a genuine disciple.

Evidently then, both the Holy Gospel of St. Matthew chapter 9 passage about the harvesters and the St. Matthew chapter 25 passage about the sheep and goats represent the kind of thing that the Lord Jesus Christ, in the Great Commission, intended to be





St. Matthew wrote *“The Great Commission”* which states
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taught to disciples. Do we still dare to play off the one against the other? It is our decision to do so. His intention was clearly quite to the contrary: both harvesting and caring and sharing are part of discipleship. How out of character with our Savior's teaching to render them competing interests! Moreover, the harvesting in and of itself should result not only in even more harvesters, but also in more caring and sharing, at least if disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ are being harvested.

There are, of course, numerous other passages and themes which illustrate similar commands for the disciple (of the Great Commission), and thus principles of a truly Christian ethic: think of the importance of the one lost sheep, leaving the ninety-nine on the hills to search for it, and the implications of this parable for evangelism (Matthew 18:10-14); alternatively, consider the social implications of: **"Love your enemies"** (Matthew 5:44), **"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth"** (Matthew 6:19), **"Blessed are the merciful"** (Matthew 5:7), **"You cannot serve both God and money"** (Matthew 6:24), **"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets"** (Matthew 6:21), and **"... unless you forgive your brother from the heart"** (Matthew 18:35). The picture that emerges of the disciple is one of a transformed person, a member of a New Humanity, who will both share his or her faith boldly and, in the whole network of his or her social relationships, reflect the new life that the Lord Jesus Christ has wrought.

Conclusions

What then is the conclusion of the matter? Simply that in so far as we endeavor to fulfil the Great Commission, to make disciples and to be disciples, to teach His commandments and to do them, there is profound implications both for evangelism and social action. Consequently, the prophetic reading of the "signs of the times" should serve as a powerful motive to undertake the whole mission, not a reason to abandon half of it. Eschatology does not provide the substance of ethical principles and priorities, but it can provide motivation for ethical action. The knowledge that the King is coming challenges us to accomplish the ethical mission He has given, not to alter it. As people who believe in the imminence of the "coming King" we have the responsibility of teaching and doing everything that the King commanded us when He lived upon earth in the form of a Servant:

"...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in Heaven (Matthew 5:16)."

