

# Editorial: Could Jesus get elected dog-catcher here?

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Can you think of a time when Jesus failed to take the side of the underdog?



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From start to finish, Jesus focused his teaching and his ministry on the weak, the sick, the disadvantaged, the outsider, the shamed, the poor, the folks he called “the least of these.”

Early in his ministry, [Jesus told people from his hometown](#) the Spirit of the Lord had sent him “to preach the gospel to the poor, ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:16-22).

Late in his ministry, [Jesus declared all people eventually will be judged](#) by whether they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, took in the stranger, clothed the naked, looked after the sick and visited the prisoner (Matthew 25:31-46).

## **In-between ...**

In-between, Jesus spent significant time talking about how to treat the people others scorn and serve people others ignore. For example, he:

- [Cast out demons](#). And [more demons](#). Healed [a demon-possessed man](#) everyone else despised and feared. As well as freed a [demon-possessed boy](#).
- [Healed sick people](#). [Raised a dead girl and healed a chronically ill woman](#). And [another longtime ill woman](#). Later, [a blind man](#).
- [Touched the most dreaded outcast—a leper](#)—and healed him. And later [healed 10 other lepers](#).
- [Healed a paralyzed man](#) and, according to conventional wisdom, spoke blasphemy by forgiving his sins.
- [Blessed the poor](#), the hungry, the weeping, the hated and the insulted, but [cursed the rich](#), the well-fed, the laughing, the praised.
- Told his followers to [love their enemies and give to them](#) freely.
- [Forbade his followers](#) from judging and condemning and commanded them to forgive and give generously.
- [Took pity on a widow](#), one of the least-powerful people in society.
- Told John the Baptist's followers the best sign that he was the Messiah was [how he treated the weak and vulnerable](#): "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them."
- Allowed a ["sinful woman"](#) to anoint him—an extremely personal and touching act of compassion—and promised her salvation.
- [Fed hungry people](#).
- [Not once](#), but [twice](#), told his followers to throw banquets for "the poor,

the crippled, the lame and the blind.”

- [Defined as a “neighbor”](#) an outsider most everyone else would have described as an enemy.
- [Called a man a fool](#) for gathering up and securing his possessions.
- Told his followers to [sell their possessions and give to the poor](#).
- Strongly implied [a rich man went to hell](#) because he was greedy and a poor man went to heaven because he suffered on earth.
- [Cared for little children](#).
- Told a law-abiding rich man, “[Sell everything you have and give to the poor](#).”
- Commanded his followers, “[Love your neighbor as yourself](#)” and “[treat people the same way you want them to treat you](#).”

### **Longstanding discussion**

We’ve been conducting this discussion—about how Jesus treated the marginalized and how we’re to do the same—throughout the past two decades. In fact, I suppose reflections on how Jesus intended his followers to treat the underdogs have accounted for more editorials than any other topic across these years.

The poor always have been with us. And their plight is ever before us.

But despite Jesus’ repeated teachings and abundant examples, those editorials generated controversy. Maybe that shouldn’t be surprising, because Jesus’ attitudes and actions toward the poor kept getting him in trouble, too.

When you start quoting Jesus’ sermons and statements on serving the weak

and vulnerable, you get the feeling he couldn't get elected dogcatcher around here. Of course, he never got elected Citizen of the Year in Nazareth, either.

And yet the subject keeps coming up. Sure, the poor are with us, but that's not the half of it. We've kept talking about the poor, and the sick, and the homeless, and the stranger because how we treat them gets at the heart of the gospel.

Baptists are all about salvation. We're most comfortable talking about evangelism and leading people to faith in Jesus. That's the main thing, of course—helping people develop a relationship with God in Christ. But ...

But Jesus expressed concern for their lives in the here and now. He told us to care for people's physical needs. He didn't give us a pass to baptize them and treat their physical plight as a mess they made and for which they are responsible.

And meeting human need often provides the best path for evangelism. Once they know we care for their bodies, they're more open to hearing about our care for their souls.

For two decades, I've been pestering Texas Baptists about how we treat the poor, the sick, the children and the elderly. This is my next-to-last editorial, so I'm going to plead once more: Take Jesus seriously, and do everything you can for those he loves, whose plight breaks his holy heart.

### **More of the gospel**

If motivation to help others is not sufficient, then lean into eternal self-preservation. Over and over, Jesus said he would judge our fervency—the reality of our salvation—by how we treat people's physical condition. He won't ask us about our testimony, or how much Scripture we can recite, or exactly what we believe. He said he will judge us by how we look after

hungry, thirsty, naked and sick people and how we comfort strangers and prisoners.

Texas Baptists are generous, and we care for many thousands of people through our churches and community organizations. Who among us has not beamed and/or wept when we've read stories of grace and compassion?

But that's not enough. Not if we expect to fulfill Jesus' commands to care for the myriad needy among and around us. To get that done, we must:

- Continue to serve them—operate food pantries and clothes closets, tutor children and mentor their parents, as well as offer community health clinics, jobs programs, marriage and parent training, and other ministries that tangibly touch lives.
- Steward our influence and persuasive goodwill to convince our fellow citizens to stem the tide of poverty and provide a durable safety net for the sick and those from damaged families. This means supporting legislation and programs that enable the larger society to serve the greater good, which particularly includes looking out for the most vulnerable. Jesus commanded his followers to be “salt and light”; surely that involves leveraging positive influence for the benefit of others.

This side of Glory, we can debate the size and effectiveness of government. We should strive to demand accountability and cooperation that makes government strong and effective.

But Jesus warned us that, on the other side, we will be judged by how we cared for the poor. Jesus won't be talking politics or debating tax structures, either. He'll be judging our hearts—and our actions.

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