

## **You Who Have Neglected: Reading Matthew 23 for #MoralResistance in an Age of Poverty and Inequality**

Liz Theoharis

Kairos: The Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice  
at Union Theological Seminary

### ABSTRACT

Although a plethora of biblical texts preach good news to the poor, other texts are used to justify inequality and to blame the poor, or different religious groups, for the misery and oppression of the people. This article focuses on Matthew 23 – one of the strongest biblical critiques of religious and moral (mis)leadership. It asserts the warnings from Matthew 23 are for those in religious leadership and emphasizes their misplaced priorities, exclusion, and hypocrisy. These warnings are a critique of how the religious leadership of Jesus' day was complicit in the further impoverishment and oppression of the people, but they apply to our day as well. Indeed, throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus provides a large-scale economic and social analysis. Consistent with the main themes of the Hebrew Prophets, this includes: a critique of wealth and poverty; a critique of the status quo and especially the complicity of leaders in the poverty and oppression of the Empire; and the necessity for all, but especially moral and religious leaders, to mix and meld their words and their actions. The article explores the strong moral critique that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. makes with the Poor People's Campaign, connects this critique to Matthew 23, and insists that a moral movement and new Poor People's Campaign is needed to address growing poverty and inequality today. Written in sermon form, it functions as a model for how one might preach about poverty in the contemporary U.S.

Common throughout the Old and New Testaments are texts addressing the redistribution of wealth and the abolition of poverty: “This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood” (Jeremiah 22:3); “Doom to you who legislate evil, who make laws that make misery for the poor, that rob my destitute people of dignity, exploiting defenseless widows, taking advantage of homeless children” (Isaiah 10:1-2); “[God has] lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things” (Luke 1:52-53).

Although a plethora of biblical texts such as these preach good news to the poor, other texts are used to justify inequality and to blame the poor themselves or different religious groups for the misery and oppression of the people. In this article, I will focus on Matthew 23 – one of the strongest biblical critiques of religious and moral (mis)leadership. It is a text I have been exegeting and preaching in diverse groupings of moral movements across the United States as I travel with Rev. Dr. William Barber, President and Senior Lecturer of Repairers of the Breach and the Moral Revival: Time for a Revolution of Values (see: [moralrevival.org](http://moralrevival.org), [breachrepairers.org](http://breachrepairers.org), and [kairoscenter.org](http://kairoscenter.org)).

The critique of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 has been interpreted in very violent, anti-Semitic, and anti-Catholic ways. Many of the anti-Jewish sentiments expressed in our society still today make reference to the woes against the hypocrites from this chapter of Matthew and its connection to the crucifixion of Jesus a couple of chapters later. I want to suggest that reinterpreting this passage is important for understanding the larger message of justice, righteousness, and freedom from poverty and slavery that is in the Hebrew Scriptures and that continues through the New Testament. It seems important to reclaim this text and more of the Bible from the bigots and bullies who have been interpreting it and leveling it against whole communities and people.

Selections from Matthew 23:1-24 read:

“Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So, you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

‘Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others....

‘Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you

make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness.... You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel....”

I was raised in a family who believed that faith without works is dead, where we linked following the gospel with doing social justice. I joined the National Union of the Homeless and the Kensington Welfare Rights Union in the mid 1990s. Much like Jesus’s, this was a peripatetic movement where we walked as we talked, educated as we organized, taught as we fought – the whole time calling out abandonment in the face of abundance, apathy in the face of needed action, and hypocrisy in the face of the hard reality of poverty and racism in our society. I have spent the past twenty-three years working to build a social movement, led by the poor, to end poverty. The multi-racial movement of the poor and dispossessed I joined when I was still a teenager challenged the hypocrisy of so-called religious leaders – decrying the fact that poor people are called sinners rather than calling out poverty as a social sin and challenging churches and religious leaders for preaching that the rich are blessed and the poor will have pie in the sky when we die (that’s a lie!) – as the song goes.

I am currently the Co-Director of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary; I founded the Poverty Initiative 15 years ago, which is aimed at raising up generations of religious and community leaders dedicated to building a social movement to end poverty led by the poor. I am an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and a biblical scholar focusing on New Testament and Christian origins and methods of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” in order to illuminate a new theology of liberation being created in poor communities across the United States. I am a mother of two children who are being raised going to protests, standing up for justice, and affirming the dignity in every human being.

For more than 15 years, I have been a student of the theory and theology of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., especially his sermons and writings from the last year of his life where he called on American society to “lift the load of poverty.” In fact, I believe that Matthew 23 is one of the strongest statements on moral (mis)leadership in the entire Bible and connects well with the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King:

The dispossessed of this nation - the poor, both white and Negro - live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize....against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. The only real revolutionary, people say, is a man who has nothing to lose. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life. Beginning in the New Year, we will be recruiting three thousand of the poorest citizens from ten different urban and rural areas to initiate and lead a sustained, massive, direct action movement in Washington. Those who choose to join this initial three thousand, this non-violent army, this ‘freedom church’ of the poor, will work with us for three months to develop non-violent action skills.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, in the final year of his life, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King took a truly radical stance. His last sermon was to be titled “Why America is Going to Hell.” The international leader for human rights was assassinated before he was able to preach that sermon. However, this title, which he had chosen earlier in the week, and the content of sermons especially from the last years of his life, posed fundamental questions about the structure of society and what needed to be done to end racism, poverty and militarism and prioritize human need over greed.

There were many reasons back in 1968 why Dr. King would have asserted America was going to hell: the struggle and violent response over implementing voting rights, the deep poverty and inequality across the US, especially in northern ghettos and the whole of the American south, the urban rebellions and the battle for economic equality and police accountability that were spreading across the country, the impact of the Vietnam War at home and abroad.

And there are many reasons today why America may still be headed in that direction. Consider the massive suffering and death taking place in the Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill. There are thousands of people whose lives and livelihoods have been completely destroyed, and very few have been held to account for that human-made suffering. Similarly, scientists now agree that the production of coal in West Virginia is carcinogenic and therefore thousands of people suffer with and die from cancer each year, and yet the coal industry does not have to pay for this.

In Detroit, tens of thousands of families have had their water shut off each year over the past few years because they can’t afford the high water rates—while the Nestle Corporation can pump and sell billions of gallons of water from the same water sources for less than \$200 in administrative fees.<sup>2</sup> Farmworkers who make below poverty wages in Florida have discovered and helped to break up modern day slave rings in the hidden agricultural industry<sup>3</sup>, while grocery stores and fast food companies continue to profit by robbing their employees and supply chain workers of decent pay and enable working conditions that support modern day slavery. The struggle for Medicaid expansion specifically, and the universal health care fight in general, demonstrates that we are losing the fight to value life over profit – where thousands of people whose lives could be saved instead die each year because they lack medical care.<sup>4</sup>

The Walton family, of Walmart fame, alone owns as much wealth as 40% of the US population.<sup>5</sup> On Martin Luther King Day last year, Oxfam announced: “The combined wealth of the richest 1 percent will overtake that of the other 99 percent of people next year unless the current trend of rising inequality is checked,”<sup>6</sup> and the majority of public school kids nationwide qualify for subsidized lunch and are therefore poor.<sup>7</sup> There are millions and millions of poor people in this rich nation. From this list alone, we see a modern-day hell on earth for so many of the poor and dispossessed. It seems possible that this could be Dr. King’s indictment against America. Much of America, indeed the whole world, is already in hell.

I think Dr. King’s words from *Trumpet of Conscience*, in fact, resonate with the urgency and impatience of Matthew 23:

There is nothing wrong with a traffic law which says you have to stop for a red light. But when a fire is raging, the fire truck goes right through that red light, and normal traffic had better get out of its way. Or, when a man is bleeding to death, the ambulance goes through

those red lights at top speed. There is a fire raging now for the Negroes and the poor of this society...Disinherited people all over the world are bleeding to death from deep social and economic wounds. They need brigades of ambulance drivers who will have to ignore the red lights of the present system until the emergency is solved.<sup>8</sup>

Nearly fifty years after Dr. King made this speech, poverty remains a defining issue of our day. More than 250,000 people die from poverty and the lack of education each year in the United States, and millions of children are homeless, lack adequate food and housing, and are denied a quality education.<sup>9</sup> Half of the US population is poor or low-income in the richest country in history<sup>10</sup> and one in five children are food insecure.<sup>11</sup> Twenty-nine million Americans don't have health insurance, including more than four million denied Medicaid expansion by their state and this number could double under health care reform proposed under President Donald Trump.<sup>12</sup>

"The Bible is the only form of mass media that has anything good to say about the poor," asserts Willie Baptist, Co-Coordinator of Poverty Scholarship and Leadership Development for the Kairos Center at Union Theological Seminary.<sup>13</sup> Some of the only social institutions relevant and centrally located in many rural, small town, and urban communities in the United States are churches. Churches are the first stop for many people struggling with poverty – the vast majority of food pantries and other emergency assistance programs are out of churches, and much of the work going on in churches is motivated by interpretations of the Bible.<sup>14</sup> Also, recent social outbreaks around police brutality, mass incarceration and immigration reform; the spontaneous and globally coordinated actions of fast food workers demanding higher pay and better working conditions; and demonstrations about the right to safe and clean water are all being couched in a moral framework. These justice movements demonstrate that there is much interest and action towards achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth and the "right to thrive not merely survive" – as leaders in the welfare rights movement that started in the 1960s and is still around today – say.

The Bible and church have been significant to social movements throughout history. In the abolitionist, industrial union, and civil rights movements in the United States and other movements for justice across the globe, those supporting social change and those protecting the status quo used the Bible, God, and the church to make their stand. Slaveholders quoted "Slaves obey your masters" from Colossians 3:22 and the Book of Philemon about returning runaway slaves to their masters. At the same time, abolitionists used the Bible to argue that God condemned slavery and that all Christians and people of conscience should follow. Harriet Tubman, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, was called "Moses" and many of the most prominent abolitionists were preachers and pastors.

Although times are different today, a theological battle is nevertheless taking place. Geographically, this battle of theology and interpretation manifests itself in the United States in the state of Mississippi and other states in the south (perhaps it even is a continuation of the theological battle dating back to slavery). Although there are more churches per capita in Mississippi than in other states and high rates of attendance in those churches,<sup>15</sup> Mississippi has the highest child poverty rate, the least funding for education and social services for the needy, and lowest ranks in the country for overall health and wellness.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the area of the southern United States known as the "Bible Belt" is at the same time known as the "Poverty Belt," where

there is the deepest and most contiguous area of poverty affecting people of all races, genders, and ages in the country.<sup>17</sup>

This is possible, in part, because the Bible has been politicized in a way that says that poverty is a result of sinning against God and individual failure, and the Biblical passage “the poor will be with you always” (Matt 26:11) has been interpreted to mean that God wills poverty. I would assert that such a theological battle, however, is not between left and right, conservative versus liberal (although it does manifest that way as well). When it comes to biblical and ethical interpretations of the social and religious response to poverty, conservatives and liberals alike often agree that poverty is inevitable, that the only possible and necessary response to poverty is charity, social services, and self-help, and that Jesus believes that poverty is an eternal part of the human condition.

Yet while many focus on this single verse, the issue of poverty appears throughout the Bible: the Old and New Testaments are full of instructions on how we are to respond to poverty and injustice. Jim Wallis of *Sojourners Magazine* surveyed key Biblical themes, noting:

[I]n the Old Testament, the suffering of the poor was the second most prominent theme...  
[I]n the [New Testament] we found that one out of every 16 verses was about the poor. In the Gospels, it was one out of every ten, in Luke, one of every seven, and in James, one of every five verses.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, I have focused much of my biblical scholarship on Matthew because of how passages like “the poor will be with you always” and “for those of you who have little, what you have will be taken from you” (Matt. 13:12) and Matthew 23 have been politicized to justify inaction in the face of injustice, to claim that the only good news the poor will hear will be in heaven, and to divide people and set us against each other.

In his book, *Covenant Economics*, Richard Horsley writes:

Matthew’s Gospel, moreover, expands Jesus’ condemnation of the rulers of Israel for their economic manipulation and exploitation of the people, all clearly on the basis of covenantal commandments and principles (17:24-27; 21-22; 23) . . . Matthew also indicates that the communities addressed understand themselves as a continuation of the renewal of Israel inaugurated by Jesus over against the rulers of Israel, the high priesthood in the Temple as well as the Romans.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the woes to the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 that open this article are not being leveled against the whole people of Israel. Jesus and his followers are Jewish, they remain Jewish throughout the Bible. The prophetic critique from Matthew 23, in fact, connects the Hebrew prophets to Jesus and shows how he continues in the line of such movement leaders and agitators throughout history. The warnings from Matthew 23 are for those in religious leadership (in the case of Jesus, religious leaders who practiced the same religion as him) and emphasize their misplaced priorities, exclusion, and hypocrisy. They are a critique of how the religious leadership of Jesus’ day was complicit in the further impoverishment and oppression of the people that applies to our day as well. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus provides a large-scale



economic and social analysis. Consistent with the main themes of the Hebrew Prophets, this includes: a critique of wealth and poverty (Matt 5-7); a critique of the status quo and especially the complicity of leaders with the poverty and oppression of the Empire (Matt 25:41-46); and the necessity for all, but especially moral and religious leaders, to mix and meld their words and their actions (Matt 15:17-20).

Jesus starts off Matthew 23:1-8 with a warning about the authority and power of his contemporary political and religious leaders. In this passage, he is telling his followers that they should not administer laws that punish the poor, nor follow orders to exclude and discriminate and divide the people. Jesus' mention of Moses and Moses' seat is a prompt of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt – Moses, the liberator, the leader of the Exodus, and a teacher who brought God's commandment of justice to the people. Jesus is reminding people to follow in the footsteps of the liberator Moses and not just political and religious authorities who claim Moses or sit at the "Moses seat."

In his instruction in Matthew 23:9-11, Jesus continues by associating the word 'Father' with God alone. It's important to say a little about the structure of the Roman Empire here. The Emperor Caesar was called the Father of the Fatherland, he was called the Savior of the World, he was called the Lord of Lords, the Son of God and considered God himself.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, insisting that the only father is God, the Father in heaven, is a polemic against Caesar, who is making people slaves and dispossessing people from their land and livelihoods. Jesus is saying that the God who led you out of Egypt, who stood up to slavery and oppression and made it topple and drown, is the one true authority in our world. Not our politicians, not religious leaders, not Caesar, not the wealthy – the God of the poor and of slaves. And this oneness of God is deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In fact, I want to suggest that the deep critique of idolatry in the Hebrew Scriptures—the naming of God as "I am the one who led you out of Egypt," in Exodus and throughout the Hebrew Bible—is not about critiquing other religions or religious practices. It's not critiquing setting up shrines or making offerings to God, it's about worshipping the powers that be – believing that the ruler or emperor or pharaoh is God. But the one God of Israel was the God who led you out of Egypt; the God of the slaves, the poor, the oppressed, is the God we are to worship and to whom we give all authority and honor.

The Gospel of Matthew forbids hierarchical titles and insists on the brotherhood and sisterhood of all those following Jesus. I do not believe this is because the Gospel of Matthew is about anarchy or against leadership and structure per se, but because he is responding to the hierarchy and brutality of the authorities – the collaborators with the Roman Empire. He is saying there needs to be equality in the movement and that the leadership of all those taking up the gospel is important. Jesus asserts in this passage that the leadership and authority of Caesar and other authorities is immoral and unjust.

Jesus' insistence to call only God "father" and to refrain from calling the worldly authorities "father" is also about humility and integrity of moral and religious leadership. Matthew 23:13 reminds Jesus' followers that those in religious and moral authority in his day closed the door to the kingdom of heaven in people's faces: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to." Rather than upholding the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus teaches, in Matthew 5, that the God and the kingdom of heaven belong to the poor and oppressed, some religious authorities are only lifting up

themselves, keeping out the poor and marginalized from God's kingdom, and supporting the status quo that takes lives and terrorizes communities.

This critique of the hypocrisy of religious and moral leadership resonates with experience from our day as well. In my experience, too often it is our religious leaders who bring a message of inferiority and blame to the poor and oppressed of our society. Poor people are called sinners, lazy, and to blame for their situation. The rich and powerful are considered blessed. Even some struggles for economic justice led by religious leaders ignore the deep faith, commitment, and difficult situations of the poor and oppressed. Sometimes these justice struggles become solely focused on the religious leaders involved and not the issues of low wages, the lack of health care, and the policies that are hurting and discriminating against people. This is a warning for us. Follow the God of the poor and oppressed, not elites and authorities who blame the poor for their poverty, homelessness, and low wages.

Jesus continues in Matthew 23 to raise some specific critiques of these religious and political authorities.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. (Matt 23: 15, 23)

Jesus says that his followers should talk the talk and walk the walk, unlike the religious leaders and authorities of their day. He says that instead of standing for justice and inclusion, the opponents of the poor are tying up heavy burdens; worshipping gold, power, and wealth; and crossing land and sea to convert one person to the faith while excluding many others. If we explore these critiques in their literary and contemporary context, we see that they are economic and political critiques of power, corruption, exploitation, and exclusion of the poor by the rich and powerful.

The critique of tying up heavy burdens and worshipping gold and power reminds me of an example from where I live in New York City. Located near Wall Street between all the buildings and centers of finance and trade stands the statue of the Wall Street bull. People go rub the genitals of this bull on Wall Street. They take pictures of this. They even buy little statues of the bull all across New York City in tourist shops. These people – some of them in desperate financial situations, others because they desire more riches – are *de facto* praying to the corporations and business leaders, perhaps “worshipping Mammon” for individual prosperity rather than praying to the God of the poor, the God of justice, for community prosperity.

Our society at large, including many Christians, worship gold rather than our Creator God—the source of all of our resources, including gold. The Wall Street bull is reminiscent of the story of the Golden Calf, where God's people worship the very thing that was responsible for their slavery and oppression, but also the reference in Matthew 23 to holding gold and our religious temples more sacred than God, their source.

A poor mom, who is organizing against the effects of the BP oil spill in the Gulf Coast now more than six years after it happened, said to me, “you can't eat gold, you can't eat oil, why then do we worship it and try to get so much of it?” In Flint, Michigan, they are still struggling with the poisoning of their water and whole bodies and community. A local resident recently posed a question to our group: “what good is it if you can



go to a store and get lead-free paint and go to a gas station and buy lead-free gas but the people in Flint and in communities across the US can't get lead-free water?"

We must stop worshipping gold and profit and power.

Matthew 23:15 reads, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." Here Jesus is referencing Haggai 2:6 and 1 Maccabees 8:23 & 32, but also the Roman Empire that controls land and sea to ensure the empire's growth and stability on the backs of the poor nations. Biblical scholars assert that Matthew 23:15 is a reference to the conversion of King Izates from Josephus Ant 20:34-38.<sup>21</sup> This emphasis on converting important leaders – kings and merchants – to a particular religion and not being welcoming of all those poor and oppressed in our midst should also be familiar. So many of our religious congregations – both clergy and laity - get very excited about having famous and wealthy people in them. And so many extremists in our society today claim to be "religious," but get away with denying Medicaid expansion, criminalizing immigrants and the poor, and causing low wages and poor living conditions in our communities. Many religious leaders today will not challenge congregants who are mistreating their workers or amassing great wealth at the expense of others. In some poor communities, at least in the Northeast where I live, churches are closing down in poor communities but flourishing in rich neighborhoods. There, prosperity gospel preachers are building churches of the wealthy and prosperous, claiming that God is blessing these people with prosperity, but damning others to the hell of poverty because of their "sins."

Matthew 23 continues in its critique of hypocrisy and injustice by asserting that tithing is not enough for the work of justice. Matthew 23:23 states that giving a tenth of mint, dill, cumin are the lighter provisions of the law. This echoes Micah 6 and the Hebrew Prophets who ask how to worship God; these prophets suggest bringing burnt offerings. In Matthew 23, Jesus insists that justice is heavier, by which he means that it is more important than bringing in offerings and more difficult to accomplish. In addition, this reference to tithing has to do with economics and power. On top of the taxes and other payments that went to landowners and the wealthy, economic pressures overwhelmed many farmers and fisherpeople in Jesus' day and those living in the time of Micah and Amos and Ezekiel. So, tithing on basic things like dill, etc. would have been something those with wealth could afford to do and potentially another way that the poor were further excluded.

Biblical and classical scholars argue that the Roman imperial economic system deeply impoverished and enslaved the vast majority of the population – between 80% and 99% of the population was in deep poverty as a result of conquest and wealth appropriation. It was undergirded by systems of debt, charity, taxation, and poverty creation.<sup>22</sup> The wealthy, and in many cases religious leaders, were rewarded for acts of patronage with appointments to paid positions of social, political and religious power. Therefore, those who had accumulated enough wealth to donate some of it to the empire were able to secure well-paying positions of status, including positions of religious authority like those being critiqued in this chapter.

Matthew 23 continues with its emphasis on the hypocrisy of the moral and political leadership in Jesus' day. Calling out some religious authorities, Jesus says that: "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Matthew 23:24). "Gnat" and "camel" are a word play in Aramaic, but more than that, this phrase emphasizes how these religious leaders have focused on small things like ritual and offerings but have neglected justice

and righteousness. Another play on words is with “tomb” and “inside” – “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean....” (Matthew 23:27-28). This phrase shows what matters is not the surface but the substance of one’s justice work. Whitewashing tombs happened annually, so Jesus and the disciples would have seen them while entering Jerusalem for Passover. Imagine Jesus pointing this out to his disciples and making it an example of how those in power try to make rotten bones and other examples of death look pretty. Similarly, employees of the City of Philadelphia literally spray painted the grass green throughout poor communities for the Republican National Convention in 2000.

Jesus continues in Matthew 23:29-30 by saying: “You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’” Even in ancient times there were large-scale projects to build tombs. Jesus is pointing out the irony and hypocrisy of building important monuments to the very prophets who were rejected and in fact killed by those in power. Jesus’ statement resonates with the quote “it’s easier to build a monument than a movement” from the documentary *Citizen King* about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Dr. King is a good example of people building tombs and monuments and decorating the graves of such a social critic without having to follow his prophetic critique of society.

Overall, in the seven woes to the hypocrites, Matthew is adopting the biblical tradition of public denunciations – denunciations that are addressed to people with power and influence, describe their evil action, and warn people not to follow them. Throughout Matthew 23, Jesus summarizes the history of rejecting prophets and decries the complicity of moral leadership in propping up and justifying the status quo. In Matthew 23:34, Jesus talks about killing and crucifying real prophetic and moral leadership: “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore, I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.” It is important to point out that the only ones with the power and authority to crucify – including who crucified Jesus – were the authorities of the Roman Empire.

Indeed, crucifixion was punishment for revolutionaries, movement leaders who opposed the state power, and rebels – not common criminals and thieves. Therefore, one of the main things we know about Jesus from Paul’s letters and the Gospel accounts of Christ’s mission and ministry – the fact of his crucifixion – demonstrates that Jesus was a threat to the Roman Empire. He was executed for being the kind of revolutionary who stood for justice and dignity and against forces that enslaved, degraded, and violated the people. This should be the backdrop behind which his earthly mission and especially his teachings, including the whole of chapter twenty-three of Matthew’s Gospel, are read. His crucifixion is not the product simply of a religious debate and difference. Although usually understood to be the act of the whole Jewish people, an historical understanding of crucifixion reminds us that the Roman imperial authorities in conspiracy with some Jewish authorities were responsible for Jesus’ death. They killed him because he was a threat to the political, moral, and economic status quo—a threat epitomized by his critique of the hypocrites in Matthew 23. But Jesus’ revolutionary teachings do not end in Matthew 23.

Matthew 26:11, “the poor will be with you always” is Jesus’ most famous passage on poverty that has been used to justify inaction in the face of growing poverty and misery. In actuality, this verse is another

strong teaching that advocates justice over charity, righteousness over hypocrisy. This passage takes place in the context of a meal with his disciples, right before the last supper, and directly following the teachings in Matthew 22-25. It begins when a woman comes and pours an alabaster jar of ointment, *muron*, on his head.

With this action, the woman anoints Jesus. He becomes Christ (“the anointed one”) in this scene. But the disciples do not get it. They critique the woman for wasting, for destroying the ointment by pouring it on Jesus’ head. They say that instead of breaking the jar, they could have taken the nard and sold it for a year’s salary and given the money to the poor. This suggestion follows the dominant economic systems of the Roman Empire. This idea of earning excessive amounts of money and giving the proceeds to the poor follows how we think our society is supposed to address poverty – by doing charity work, by buying and selling and then donating to the poor, but never questioning how poverty was created in the first place.

When Jesus responds to the disciples, he quotes Deuteronomy 15, one of the most radical Sabbath prescriptions in the Bible. Deuteronomy 15:1-4 says that there will be no poor person among you if you follow the commandments God is giving today: to forgive debts, to release slaves, and to lend money even knowing you won’t get paid back. Deuteronomy 15:5-11 continues, stating that because people will not follow those commandments, there will always be poor among you. So, when Jesus quotes this phrase, he is not condoning poverty, he is reminding us that God hates poverty, has commanded us to end poverty by forgiving debts, by raising wages, by outlawing slavery, and by restructuring society around the needs of the poor. He is reminding the disciples that charity and hypocrisy will not end poverty but keep poverty with us always and forever. He is reminding his followers that he is going to be killed for bringing God’s reign here on earth, and that it is their responsibility to continue the fight.

Much like Matthew 26 and Deuteronomy 15 are biblical examples of a morally-rooted, anti-poverty movement from thousands of years ago, Dr. King’s Poor People’s Campaign was intended to sound the alarm on the crisis of poverty, racism, and militarism in his last years. He developed his concepts for this Poor People’s Campaign in *The Trumpet of Conscience*:

Massive civil disobedience is a strategy for social change which is at least as forceful as an ambulance with its siren on full. In the past ten years, nonviolent civil disobedience has made a great deal of history, especially in the Southern United States.... Of course, by now it is obvious that new laws are not enough. The emergency we now face is economic, and it is a desperate and worsening situation. For the 35 million poor people in America—not even to mention, just yet, the poor in the other nations—there is a kind of strangulation in the air. In our society it is murder, psychologically, to deprive a man of a job or an income. You are in substance saying to that man that he has no right to exist. You are in a real way depriving him of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, denying in his case the very creed of his society. Now, millions of people are being strangled that way. The problem is international in scope. And it is getting worse, as the gap between the poor and the “affluent society” increases.<sup>24</sup>

In December of 1967, through this speech and others, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. announced plans for a Poor People’s Campaign and called for the nation to take dramatic steps to end poverty. Despite

King's assassination just weeks before the launch of the campaign, it went forward, but was met with apathy and resistance. The attention and resources of the U.S. government were consumed by waging war in Vietnam. Political leaders were stoking and exploiting a growing backlash against the gains resulting from long struggles against racism, militarism and poverty. The vision of and call by, King and the poor people who traveled to Washington to make their voices heard, were not heeded. For this reason and given the overall persistence of poverty, racism and militarism, contemporary grassroots leaders from all over the United States are taking up the call to reignite Rev. Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign.

Indeed, if we take the message from Matthew 23 and Matthew 26 seriously, in conversation with Rev. Dr. King's *Trumpet of Conscience* and his call for a Poor People's Campaign, we have to commit ourselves to fully understanding and engaging in justice work. We have to put the cross back into our theology and social justice witness knowing full well that resurrection follows crucifixion. In Matthew, the resurrection is not just of Jesus but all of the fallen fighters, the rejected prophets who have come before. In Matthew 27, as Jesus is crucified, the curtain at the Temple splits, the earth quakes, the tombs of the saints break open. These prophetic fighters are resurrected to continue the movement, but only after the public execution and crucifixion of Jesus at the hands of his oppressors.

Today leaders from the ranks of the poor are rising up in the spirit of Rev. Dr. King and building a new Poor People's Campaign. This example is what the moral movement looks like. It is not about one leader sacrificing or saving everyone, but rather it is about the leadership and prophetic witness and actions of everyone. I believe this is the call from Matthew 23, Matthew 26, the entire book of Matthew, and the Gospel that is echoed in the ministry of Rev. Dr. King.

We know what we need to do. We have heard the biblical and theological foundation for ending poverty and oppression and building a moral movement. I believe that God hates poverty and wants it to be abolished. Shouldn't we?

## NOTES

---

- 1 Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 61.
- 2 Nancy Kaffer, "Nestle wants more Michigan water", *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 2017. Accessed April 24, 2017. <http://www.freep.com/story/opinion/columnists/nancy-kaffer/2017/03/07/nestle-michigan-water/98696462/>
- 3 For more information on slavery in agriculture in the United States and the efforts of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to prosecute and end slavery see: <http://www.ciw-online.org/slavery/>
- 4 These examples come from my experience organizing and educating amongst the poor in the United States. You can learn more about the organizations of the poor fighting to end poverty at: [kairoscenter.org](http://kairoscenter.org), [ciw-online.org](http://ciw-online.org), [bridgethegulf.org](http://bridgethegulf.org), [mwro.org](http://mwro.org), [www.United4Respect.org](http://www.United4Respect.org), [poorpeoplescampaign.org](http://poorpeoplescampaign.org), and many more.
- 5 Molly Moorhead, "Bernie Sanders Says Walmart heirs own more wealth than bottom 40 percent of Americans", *POLITIFACT*, July 31, 2012. Accessed April 24, 2017. <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/>

jul/31/bernie-s/sanders-says-walmart-heirs-own-more-wealth-bottom-/

6 Larry Elliott, "World's Eight Richest People Have Same Wealth as Poorest 50%," January 15, 2017 Accessed April 24, 2017. [https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jan/16/worlds-eight-richest-people-have-same-wealth-as-poorest-50?CMP=tw\\_t\\_a-world\\_b-gdnworld](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jan/16/worlds-eight-richest-people-have-same-wealth-as-poorest-50?CMP=tw_t_a-world_b-gdnworld).

7 Lyndsey Layton, "Majority of U.S. public school students are in poverty," The Washington Post, January 16, 2015. Accessed April 25, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/majority-of-us-public-school-students-are-in-poverty/2015/01/15/df7171d0-9ce9-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.01f7a688eb64](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/majority-of-us-public-school-students-are-in-poverty/2015/01/15/df7171d0-9ce9-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4_story.html?utm_term=.01f7a688eb64)

8 King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience*, 55.

9 Nicholas Bakalar, "Researchers Link Deaths to Social Ills," *New York Times*, July 4, 2011. Accessed Feb 25, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/05/health/05social.html>.

10 "Census Shows 1 in 2 Americans Poor or Low Income," *USA Today*, accessed at <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2011-12-15/poor-census-low-income/51944034/1>.

11 Lindsey Tanner, "Food Stamps Will Feed Half Of US Kids, Study Says," *Associated Press*, November 2, 2009.

12 Kaiser Family Foundation, "Medicaid Income Eligibility Limits for Adults as a Percent of the Federal Poverty Level." Accessed September 29, 2016. <http://kff.org/health-reform/state-indicator/medicaid-income-eligibility-limits-for-adults-as-a-percent-of-the-federal-poverty-level/>.

13 Willie Baptist is the Poverty Scholar in Residence at Union Theological Seminary and the Co-Coordinator of Poverty Scholarship and Leadership Development for the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice. He has written numerous articles and leads trainings and discussions across the country. In these statements, he regularly states that the Bible is the only form of mass media that portrays the poor with agency and power.

14 Stephanie Samuel, "Lifeway Study: Almost a Quarter of American Families Have Turned to Church Food Pantries for Help," *Christian Post*, November 26, 2014. Accessed April 25, 2017. <http://www.christianpost.com/news/lifeway-study-almost-a-quarter-of-american-families-have-turned-to-church-food-pantries-for-help-130318/#wJkarAeovRMz5vSJ.99><http://www.christianpost.com/news/lifeway-study-almost-a-quarter-of-american-families-have-turned-to-church-food-pantries-for-help-130318/>.

15 "Mississippians were the most frequent churchgoers in the nation in 2009, as was the case in 2008, with 63% of residents attending weekly or almost every week. Nine of the top 10 states in church attendance are in the South." Frank Newport, "Mississippians Go to Church the Most; Vermonters, Least Overall, 42% of Americans attend church weekly or almost weekly," *Gallup Poll*, February 2010, Accessed October 13, 2013. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125999/mississippians-go-church-most-vermonters-least.aspx>.

16 Tami Luhby, "Mississippi has highest poverty and lowest income," *CNN*, September 20, 2012, Accessed October 14 2013. <http://money.cnn.com/2012/09/20/news/economy/income-states-poverty/>.

17 Based on a census study about poverty, Richard Florida, an urban studies theorist at the University of Toronto,

writes, “Immediately apparent is a broad ‘Poverty Belt’ - states where more than three in ten people live in high poverty areas - stretching from West Virginia through Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas. The states with the lowest concentrations of poverty, where less than 10 percent of the population live in high poverty areas, are Wyoming, New Hampshire, Vermont, Delaware and Maryland.” Richard Florida, “Map of the Day: America’s Poverty Belt,” *The Atlantic*, Dec 8, 2011. Accessed October 25, 2013. <http://www.theatlanticcities.com/jobs-and-economy/2011/12/americas-new-poverty-belt/677/>

18 Jim Wallis, *Faith Works: Lessons from the Life of an Activist Preacher* (New York: Random House, 2000), 71. Jim Wallis is the Founder of Sojourners Magazine and community in Washington D.C. He is one of the most vocal evangelical voices speaking against poverty in the United States.

19 Richard Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All*, (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 150-151.

20 Suetonius, *Lives of Caesars: Life of Augustus*. XLIII, Loeb Classical Library.

21 Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.2.3-4 34-48. Loeb Classical Library.

22 Richard Horsley asserts “Among the Roman urban poor...we should not imagine either that the poor were happy about their dependency or that patronage really alleviated poverty and hunger” (Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, 90).

23 *The American Experience: Citizen King*, directed by Orlando Bagwell, Noland Walker, Roja Productions, 2005.

24 King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience*, 55.