



Remarks by John Colyandro To The Junior Statesman Foundation

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“Exactly, what would Jesus do?”

For those who are adherents to the Christian faith, the highest calling and most profound lesson of the Bible is to love. As Jesus Himself said, “love one another as I have loved you.” That commandment supersedes all others and provides the basis for Christian action, specifically Christian charity.

There are many ways in which charity may be manifest but none more vital than direct human action. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” Jesus said. But many people of good intention and unassailable faith have taken Biblical admonitions to help the poor and the oppressed to mean that government -- rather than families, friends, neighbors, communities, and churches – should be the primary caregiver in response to pressing social needs.

The Reverend Greg Rickel, pastor at St. James Episcopal Church, asserted in an opinion piece in *The Austin American- Statesman* that universal health care is a Christian duty. He and other advocates of government spending interpret biblical teachings as a basis for government action as a replacement for true Christian charity.

For most of our nation's history, faith and religious institutions played a very prominent role in shaping policy and culture. The founding of the American Republic cannot be understood without reference to religion, Christianity specifically. The same can be said for most of the major social conflicts including slavery and civil rights which were resolved mostly through the determination of America's churchmen, notably Rev. Martin Luther King.

Unfortunately, the debate over religion and politics has taken two wrong turns in the last 40 years. The twin pressures of secularization and the growing insistence that government assume the role traditionally left to churches dangerously undermines a core strength of Christianity and radically expands the power and size of the state to the detriment of the people and churches.

Rev. Rickel writes "Insisting that all people deserve basic health insurance seems to be in keeping with Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, especially our neighbors in need."

Rev. Rickel points to the Sermon on the Mount as guidance: "What are we to do with the Sermon on the Mount? Or, also in the Gospel of Matthew, with Jesus' condemnation of those who turned away from the sick, the hungry, the imprisoned and strangers? He blessed those who reached out to people in need, saying that to do so was also to serve Christ."

But the conclusion that government is charged with "reaching out to people in need" is not a lesson that can be drawn from the Bible. There is not one reference in the New Testament to Jesus asking Roman or Jewish authorities for assistance to carry out His ministry. Jesus and His apostles and disciples fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and healed the sick on their own, and inspire us to do the same in our time.

The New Testament clearly states that each of us has the responsibility to help each other. "In everything I did, I showed that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak,

remembering the words the Jesus himself said, “It is more blessed to give than receive.” [Acts 20:35].

Giving is not the same as taxation. Charity is very different than government spending. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Galatia, “All they (James, Peter and John) asked was that we should continue to remember the poor...” [Galatians 2:10]. James wrote to all Christians, “Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their misfortune and to keep oneself unstained by the world” [James 1:27]

Put another way, love, the greatest of all divine virtues and the essential element of human health and healing, cannot be expressed through government programs. Improving the lives of those impoverished materially, morally and mentally can only be achieved through direct human interaction.

Government cannot and should not attempt to meet all the personal needs of people. Our churches and all people of faith and virtue must. That is our calling. It is wrong that the government doesn't permit churches to do more to minister to the needy; it is a greater shame that Christians have ceded the church's mission to the government as a substitute for real charity.

How many churches sit idle on most weekdays? How many children could be cared for in a safe, spiritual environment if our churches opened their doors to children in single-parent households for guidance and protection after school hours? How much more could our faith-based groups do if government allowed churches to contact people on public assistance programs?

And how many more instances of the failure of government to meet the needs of the people will it take before public policy takes a turn for the better? The eminent sociologist Charles Murray put his finger directly on this problem in his latest book [In Our Hands](#):

America's population is wealthier than any time in history. Every year, the American government redistributes more than a trillion dollars of that wealth to provide for retirement, health care and alleviation of poverty. We still have millions of people without comfortable retirements, without adequate health care, and living in poverty. Only a government can spend so much money so ineffectually.

Government has failed to alleviate the number of children without health insurance. It has failed to deter the increase in child molestation and other serious crimes against the innocent. It cannot end the tragedy of single parenthood.

Advocates of the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) make increasingly strained arguments that the state has a moral obligation to provide health insurance for underprivileged children. That moral obligation rests on social justice theories which posit that access to publicly-funded health insurance is fundamental to human dignity and therefore a governmental imperative.

Former Lt. Governor Bill Ratliff has entered the fray on the side of CHIP, argued that support for CHIP, a government-run program, rests on certain biblical teachings, and accuses those legislators who oppose increased funding and revenue to pay for CHIP of failing to live up to the highest imperatives of Christianity.

Mr. Ratliff claimed: "When considering how many poor children in Texas will be removed from the Children's Health Insurance Program in order to hold down costs to the state, they [referring to certain legislators] choose not to consider Christ's admonishment to 'suffer the little children to come unto me.'"

One may ask Mr. Ratliff: what end of social justice is served by continuing to fund a government program that has not met its objective of *reducing* the number of children who are without health insurance? The fact that certain families decline to sign up for the program is not a failure on the part of any public official "to suffer the little children."

Parents must make a myriad of budgeting decisions based on what is best for them and no amount of cajoling by the government will determine the best interests of every family.

Furthermore, by eliminating most income verification and asset limitations, the legislature actually undermined the state's ability to keep CHIP fiscally sound. There is growing and publicly available evidence of program fraud. Included in an HHSC report is evidence that people on CHIP were driving luxury vehicles including a 2003 Lexus. One family of 2, a mother and son, had three vehicles with a value exceeding \$50,000.

Perhaps CHIP advocates should explain what Christian principle requires taxing a family just living *above* poverty in order to pay the insurance of a family driving a Lexus? Who wouldn't be offended if the well-off took money from the collection plate at church?

More importantly, taking someone else's money in the name of charity is not charity at all. There is not one command in the Bible – not one reference – to shift the duty of care for the poor to the government. It is a shame when Christians call for the government to relieve them of that responsibility.

No one would dare claim that the work of the Health and Human Services Commission is on par with the divine compassion of Mother Teresa, who labored intensely, patiently and lovingly in the slums of India. She devoted her life to the service of the poor, embracing the AIDS patient, the leper and the cripple in a real, meaningful way just as Christ did.

Unfortunately, too many advocates confuse taxation with charity, and see government programs as the chief means of achieving social justice on earth. Mr. Ratliff says, "We even have the teaching of Christ's parable, where he tells the rich man that if he wishes to enter the kingdom of heaven, he must 'go, sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, and follow me.' Talk about a high tax rate!"

However, Christ did not instruct his apostles to petition the Roman authorities to help the lame and the poor. He helped them himself, and demanded they do likewise. Christ filled the multitudes with loaves and fish, and gave us the bread of eternal life in the form of His

self-sacrifice. But government advocates, wrapped in their own self-sewn Shroud, can, at best, salve their own moral conscience by insisting that others do the work of tending to the poor. Is that really living the word of God and emulating Jesus Christ?

Government programs are nothing more than an involuntary transfer of wealth, no matter how noble one might want to make a program appear.

It is fashionable among many people to ask rhetorically: “what would Jesus do?” (WWJD). Mr. Ratliff even suggests that legislators wear WWJD bracelets. “I wonder what the impact would be if every legislator who avowed a religious motivation were required to wear such a bracelet — a ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ bracelet....” Apparently, he hopes the bracelets will be a constant reminder to raise taxes and increase spending for projects that he deems worthy.

However, raising taxes and increasing spending is no more a sign of being a “good” Christian than criticizing or eliminating a government program makes you a bad one. Why the religious Left assumes that it has the authority to question the morality and ethics of those who oppose its point of view on government programs is hubris at its worst. And until they sell their homes and all their assets to fund health insurance for the poor, they have no privilege to judge those who have not.

The first obligation of all those who believe in the message of Christ is to follow His word. The shallowness of many people who claim a superior moral conscience is evidenced by their unwillingness to “sell everything” as Christ commanded and, instead, demand that the rest of us render more unto Caesar. Giving of your own resources directly to the poor is called Christian charity. Redistributing the wealth of others in the name of the poor is called socialism.

The “What Would Jesus Do?” campaign is a selective application of the “Jesus standard.” It is false, unfair, and presumptuous.

One of the best known “What Would Jesus Do?” campaign targets is Wal-Mart. Critics of Wal-Mart, the super store giant, have enlisted the aid of 65 clergy (including the Rev. Jesse Jackson) to force the company to increase employee wages and benefits. “Wake Up Wal-Mart,” as the campaign is dubbed, has begun a television campaign and distributed a letter signed by the clergy that states that Jesus Christ would not shop at Wal-Mart. They argue that good Christians should boycott the retail giant.

“Wake Up Wal-Mart” is funded by the United Food and Commercial Workers union. This is no spontaneous social justice campaign. It is political agitprop cloaked in the shroud of religious rhetoric.

The campaign insists that “Wal-Mart's so-called low prices come at a high cost to the moral virtues and greatness of your workers, our families, and our nation.” One of their television ads says: “Our faith teaches us ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’” then asks the view “If these are our values, should people of faith shop at Wal-Mart this holiday season?”

What exactly is Wal-Mart doing that is so immoral? The company reports that it pays an average hourly wage across the U.S. of \$9.68. In Austin, the average wage for a Wal-Mart employee is \$10.69, *more than twice* the Federal minimum wage, \$5.15 per hour.

Nonetheless, “Wake Up Wal-Mart” claims that Wal-Mart’s workplace conditions are substandard, even dangerous, and the supposedly low pay and benefits are insufficient compensation. In reality, if a Wal-Mart employee wants better pay, better benefits, a better work environment, or better *anything*, she is free to seek out another job. Wal-Mart binds no one to servitude.

And just how does Wal-Mart “do unto” the nation and local communities? The Wal-Mart & Sam’s Club Foundation, the largest corporate cash giving foundation in the U.S., will give more than \$200 million in cash and donations through 2005. In 2004, Wal-Mart gave over \$16 million to Texas causes and charities, and garnered an additional \$9 million in in-

kind donations and funds raised through stores. For Texas, Wal-Mart's 2004 giving totals nearly \$26 million.

Furthermore, despite having hundreds of its own stores closed and/or damaged by Hurricane Katrina, Wal-Mart was among the first responders to the disaster-stricken region. Published reports demonstrate that Wal-Mart outperformed local, state and federal emergency responders in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The company's uncompensated commitment to the community devastated by Katrina was without parallel. It was the American Red Cross under investigation for fraud, not Wal-Mart.

Not only does "Wake Up Wal-Mart" twist Biblical passages for its own purposes, it misquotes the scripture. The letter purportedly quotes Deuteronomy 25:13-15: "Thou shalt not oppress a hired servant that is poor and needy ... lest he cry against thee unto the LORD, and it be sin unto thee."

Get out your Bible. Deuteronomy 25:13-15 dictates that weights should be perfect and just, not diverse. Of all the clergy who signed onto the letter that lambastes Wal-Mart for its immorality and alleged failure to follow the Golden Rule, it appears not one of them caught the error. And maybe that's the root of this problem: the clergy involved with this campaign are political activists, unfamiliar with the virtues of market economics and blindly idealistic about the social responsibilities of any corporation.

Wal-Mart is a business which the American people clearly value: shelves stocked with items they need (or want) at prices that alleviate financial pressure on the poor and underprivileged, while also benefiting millions of middle class shareholders who count on the firm's financial success. The company pays employees well above the federal minimum wage, and employs more people than any other company. It offers millions of dollars in cash to community efforts, and does even more when a crisis strikes.

Wal-Mart's business model is based on the Golden Rule, and it works. And we're betting Jesus would love the low, low prices.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that there are severe limitations to government action. It could not protect critical infrastructure much less ferry people stranded in the floodwaters in New Orleans. Yet, advocates expect government to actually improve the lot of people struggling in poverty, dealing with the pain of abuse, or trying to manage as a single parent. This defies logic and experience, and ignores the teachings of Jesus Christ who put the burden on us, not the government, to help ourselves and each other.

In Matthew's gospel (22:36), Christ's words are clear. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

Loving your neighbor as yourself, rather than increasing government spending, is the true nature of charity and should guide all Christians of good conscience, especially those charged with leadership in the Texas Legislature.