

# THE GREATEST LIBERAL OF THEM ALL

A Sermon preach by Forrest Church  
at All Souls Church, New York City  
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Shortly before the end of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln famously observed that both sides read the same Bible and prayed to the same God. He was certainly right on the first point. They did read the same Bible. But I'm not quite so sure—at least with respect to public theology—that they were praying, in fact, to the same God.

Following in the spirit of Jesus, abolitionists, despite hundreds of Biblical texts sanctioning slavery, prayed to a liberating God. Those defending the institution of slavery cited the Biblical letter and prayed to a God who was on record in defense of the status quo. Biblical literalists today can cite far fewer specific passages to condemn homosexuality than their forbears could to defend slavery, but the same distinction obtains. In supporting Gay rights, today's religious liberals follow the spirit of the scriptures, even as Jesus himself did, when he summed up all the law and the prophets into two all-trumping commandments: "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." Taken literally, there is no more liberal precept in the annals of organized religion.

I've been pondering this discrepancy recently for two reasons. My old friend Peter Gomes, the longtime Harvard preacher who was hammered by the Religious Right when he defended his homosexuality by invoking the spirit of the scriptures, has written a new book, The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus, which doesn't mince words in spelling out the practical consequences incumbent on anyone who takes Jesus' two great commandments seriously.

And I've been watching the way religion is playing itself out on the presidential campaign trail. When one candidate was told that his religiously inflected social policies struck some of his detractors as sounding "liberal," he bristled. "They're not liberal at all," he shot back in reply. "They're American."

As for the Democrats, I've watched most of the presidential debates, and would be hard pressed to cite a single occasion when any candidate slipped and uttered the dread L word.

The United States of America, of course, is, by our founders' definition, a liberal republic. Freedom—of belief, of action—is America's watchword. And, whether drawn from the scriptures or the Declaration of Independence, which affirms our God-given liberty and equality, the liberal spirit lies at our nation's very core. When George Washington described his aspirations for our people, liberal was his favorite adjective.

The greatest liberal of all time, of course, is not George Washington, but God. Think about it. No one is more generous, bounteous, or

misunderstood. Not to mention profligate. Take a look at the creation. God is a lavish and indiscriminate host. There is too much of everything: creatures, cultures, languages, stars; more galaxies than we can count; more asteroids in the heavens than grains of sand on earth. Talk about self-indulgence, in the ark itself, if we take the story literally, there must have been a million pairs of insects. We may not like it, but that's the way it is. In fact, every word I can conjure up for God is a synonym for liberal. God is munificent and openhanded. The creation is exuberant, lavish, even prodigal. God has a bleeding heart that simply never stops. Liberal images such as these spring from every page of creation's text. They also characterize the spirit, if not always the letter, of the Bible, which teaches us that God is love.

If God is the most famous liberal of all time—as I argue in my book, God and Other Famous Liberals—his son Jesus surely falls close to the tree. It is not a question of sweetness and light. Jesus was often angry. He turned over the tables of the money changers. He scorned the religious establishment of his own day, branding them as liars and hypocrites. Jesus' liberalism was founded on two principles that always distinguished religious liberals from their more traditional contemporaries: He was not a Biblical literalist, and he disdained every superficial form of religious show, whether moralism, pietism, or doctrinal presumption. Jesus placed the burden of religious proof not in saving words but in saving works.

Both principles are important, and each is ignored by the more vocal and insistent of Jesus' so-called followers today. In many Christian circles, Biblical literalism is the key to salvation, and personal morality the litmus test of one's Christian sincerity. Nothing could less honor the memory of a man who so eloquently challenged the religious presumptions of his time. In contrast with the Pharisees, those good people who were the Biblical literalists and moralists of their day, Jesus sought a deeper proof of faith. He was unimpressed by propriety and fearless in his advocacy of society's lost sheep: sinners, outcasts, untouchables, all the forgotten ones.

As for his disdain of Biblical literalism, consider the Sabbath law, duly codified in scripture. Proclaiming that "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," Jesus aligned himself with the spirit, not the letter, of the Bible. Those who wish to enact Christian laws in our own country must beware. The person in whose name they are acting would have cringed at the very thought.

As he was by Southern preachers during the Civil War, Jesus is still held captive by people who claim fidelity to his teachings. But his words persist, defying their presumptive deed of ownership. Jesus was no conservative. He challenged the establishment, both religious and political. Would anyone who turned over the money-changers' tables in the temple have had anything nice to say about today's televangelists? Of course not. And what about those who pride themselves for saving the taxpayers' money by slashing social programs. Not Jesus. He had no use

for pride, and always came down on the side of the dispossessed and downtrodden, even tax collectors!

The Bible can be quoted by anyone for his or her own purposes. In its pages, there are passing references to the evils of everything from women to shellfish. But Jesus himself drew a sharp distinction between transient and permanent teachings contained in the scriptures. When brought before the religious authorities and charged with breaking sacred laws, Jesus summed up the Hebrew scriptures in two great commandments, which override all lesser particulars: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your might. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments,” he said, “depend all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22). Here Jesus follows in the spirit of the great Rabbi Hillel, who wrote, “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor. That is the Torah. All the rest is commentary.”

If the word liberal means generous (washing his disciples’ feet), indulgent (allowing his own to be bathed in costly oils), compassionate (taking pity on the forgotten members of society), flexible and nondoctrinaire (breaking the Sabbath laws to serve a person in need), and free-spirited (dancing and drinking, honoring the spirit of the law above its letter), Jesus was a quintessential liberal.

When I speak of Jesus as a liberal, I limit myself to his teachings, not teachings about him. Even here, his proclamations of unconditional love and forgiveness contrast with others that are judgmental. Yet, when we extract those fragments of his gospel that Jesus himself underlines as having precedence and holding ultimacy, we encounter a man for whom deeds are superior to creeds, and service to the downcast and forgotten the key to salvation.

In some respects, Jesus is nothing less than radical. Those who enlist him as chairman of the cosmic board, a hard-working, no-nonsense free-market capitalist, ought to go back and ponder the story of the rich man who wishes to know how he can ensure himself a place in heaven. The answer is not drawn from the tax slashers’ manual. It is not “make and keep as much money as possible.” What Jesus actually said is this: “Take all you have and give it to the poor.”

By definition, every religious establishment is conservative. Its object, by no means an ignoble one, is to uphold traditions, maintain customs, and preserve order. Yet apart from Micah’s call to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God and Jesus’ many calls for forgiveness and neighborliness, there are no religious laws mandating love in the Bible, only laws prescribing and proscribing moral and ritual behavior. This is why we need prophets, men and women who arise among the people, to proclaim that the religious establishment, the priests and teachers, are so busy enforcing their religious rules and regs that they have lost sight of a higher law, the law of love being shared and justice done.

Whoever and whatever else he may have been, Jesus was clearly such a prophet. A prophet in the spirit of Isaiah, who declaimed, “Behold,

in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and crush all who owe you labors. Behold, you fast for strife and debate, and to strike with the fist of wickedness. . . Is this not the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed ones go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to break your bread to the hungry, and that you should bring home the poor that are cast out? When you see the naked, that you should cover him, and that you do not hide yourself from your own flesh?” Upon hearing Isaiah’s liberating words intoned as holy scripture, how could Jesus fail to recognize that these same radical social teachings were not being honored by the religious gatekeepers who enforced moral discipline and kept the temple coffers full?

Quite understandably, for embracing a liberal and prophetic gospel, Jesus got himself in hot water with the Pharisees. The Biblical literalists of his own day, they tried to catch him up on the legal niceties they knew so well: “This man Jesus is associating with Samaritans,” they said. “Not only that, but he drank from the cup of a Samaritan woman, drawn from her well, which he called holy. He even touched a woman who was in the throes of her period, compounding the uncleanness. According to the letter, the Pharisees were correct in pointing out how scripture and tradition clearly state that Samaritans are unclean, adultery cannot be forgiven, and women must be shunned during their period. Even as this man Jesus has broken the Sabbath commandment, he continues to spurn the Torah, they said. How can he call himself a Rabbi, and how can others call him the Messiah, when his teachings are so clearly blasphemous?”

They were right. Jesus did prefer poor and prodigal children to both moralists and materialists. Compared to the former, society’s outcasts had fewer pretensions to virtue; compared to the latter, many of them had stronger claims. He even associated with tax collectors, who were shunned by almost everyone and for understandable reasons. In Judea taxes ran to 80 percent of earnings, and tax collectors skimmed their own meager earnings on top of that.

The contest between spirit people and letter people hasn’t changed all that much from then until today, only the names of the players. Today’s Pharisees call themselves Christians, rejecting, among other things, the liberal, even radical gospel that Jesus espoused..

Consider Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal son. This story is really about two sons and their liberal father. Throughout his entire life, one son has been the model of propriety and rectitude: saving his inheritance, obeying his parents, eschewing immorality, working hard, following the letter of the law. The other son takes his inheritance and squanders it: whoring and gaming, lying and stealing, living a life of riot and self indulgence, until he manages to dissipate not only himself but all the money his father has given him. At the end of his pleasure trip, broke and broken, the prodigal returns home, expecting to be punished, perhaps even banished by his father. Instead, the old man runs out to meet him at the gate, embraces him, and cries tears of joy at this unexpected reunion.

Rushing back to the house he instructs his servants to go out and slaughter a calf, an enormous luxury.

Put yourself in the dutiful son's shoes. He has been the perfect son, yet his father never cried tears of joy over him. The calf could have been sold at market for a good price, not to mention that they were sacrificing this promised income for his wastrel of a brother who went out and broke every moral law: Honor thy father and mother; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not covet another's property; thou shalt not commit adultery. By nightfall this scoundrel is seated in the place of honor, on their father's right hand, at their hallowed family table, which shortly before he desecrated by his absence, disobedience, and folly.

No parable could be more liberal in spirit. Not only is generosity golden but those who think by virtue of their piety, education, or wealth that they are more deserving than other people are in for a surprise. According to Jesus, the Commonwealth of God is an egalitarian realm. Entrance is secured not by hard work, proper behavior, public religious observance, or even strict morality. The only key to Kingdom is a contrite and loving heart.

Even right theology doesn't matter. Take with you in leaving this passage from Matthew 25. Jesus tells his disciples that when we die there is a quiz. The questions, by the way, are not "Who is the second person in the trinity?" "Should women be allowed to be priests?" or "During your lifetime were you sufficiently militant in your abhorrence of high taxes, homosexuality, stem-cell research, and abortion?" According to Jesus—who assured his disciples, "if have done these things to the very least of these our brothers and sisters, you have done them to me"—the questions are these: "Did you feed the hungry; clothe the naked; heal the sick; and visit those in prison?" Get them correct, Jesus says, and we go to heaven.

He wasn't quoting the letter of the Bible. He was drawing from its spirit, the liberal spirit of the prophets, the spirit of Isaiah, who said, "If you draw out your soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul—then shall your light rise in darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday." That is the essence of the liberal gospel.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.