

## **Habits and the Lord's Return**

Scripture readings: Daniel 12: 1-4; and Matthew 25: 31-40.

### **Introduction**

The major theme that I see linking these scriptures, what I think the Lord would have me say with them, to the work I do as a sociologist, has to do with our habits as they relate to the Lord's return. Much of sociology as a social science has to do with the development of theories and methods that allow us to recognize trends (in ourselves and others, individually and as a whole) in order address them. One of my favourite sociologists, Peter Berger, says, "we are always either making or breaking habits." In an otherwise unstable world, researching trends is to be seen as quite helpful as it provides a means of understanding the world around us (e.g. beyond a journalistic description) and providing a road map through it, if not an action plan to do something about it.

### **What is sociology and how can it be helpful for Christianity today?**

An issue I should like to touch on would be the specific strategies and techniques that social scientists develop to either encourage or rebuff trends. This is because the actual deliberation over and application of sociology--public sociology, for instance--often comes across as ideological. Marx' communist manifesto, for instance, despite rebuffing what he saw as the ideals of the elites of his day--"the ruling ideas in every epoch are the ideas of the ruling class"--comes across as a replacement ideology, itself, and causes people to automatically assume sociologists are socialists. And yet as a classically-trained economist, Marx' methodology helpfully allows us to recognize the ways in which global trade, corporate structures, and labour rights play out in the everyday life of the average worker, creating unprecedented (uniquely modern) problems like those having to do with alienation. This is something that could, otherwise, only be speculated upon during nineteenth century Europe (and addressed using

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nascent utopian concepts), when new social problems having to do with suicide, crime and deviance were emerging for the first time.

My interests in sociology center around the unique characteristics of the modern self, including the ways in which race and ethnicity, and cultural practices like music, play into this equation. Like most social scientists, this stems from my own personal experience, in this case, of having grown up in a broken family, where the foundations of my self-concept, rooted as they were in a suburban Mennonite, Pentecostal, tradesperson milieu, were challenged not only by my parents' separation and divorce, but also by the (varied) responses of my extended family, church, and friends, and even Canadian society and family law (e.g. the intensity of my parents' divorce relates, in part, to the fact that child support laws were enacted the year prior, thus creating an exaggerated difference between both my Mom and Dad's expectations for how to settle--they went to trial). Entering my twenties without a mom or dad around, while performing with a travelling band in the early 2000s was a precarious scenario with no shortage of self-destructive opportunities through drugs, sex, and rock'n'roll. However, by the Lord's mercy I was spared from such a demise, and I now enjoy the privileges of being joyfully married with three children, and as being employed in the academic sector, with many opportunities for advancement.

**So how does this relate to the sociology you practice?**

As the Lord led me to my current career, he instilled in me a desire to explore the ways in which we understand ourselves in order to change ourselves. This may remind you of some influential statements by influential people: Mohandas Gandhi, "be the change you want to see in the world;" Auguste Comte, "connais toi pour t'amelierer" (know yourself to improve yourself); the oracle from *the Matrix*, "Gnothi seauton" (know thyself). The theories and methods of sociology are helpful in that they allow us to connect ourselves, beyond an individualistic psychological understanding of consciousness, say, to the world around us, the families into which we are born and or raised, our education, the influence of peers and workplaces, and their mediation and organization. Being born black or white figures here too, as is our social status, class background, gender, sexuality. Such formative relationships are influential not only by planting

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us in and directing us along a trajectory that proves to be foundational for future life chances, but functions as a bulwark against crushing forces during times of stress. And yet, herein lies a contradiction; while self-awareness certainly is a first step towards positive change, there are some limitations inherent in this endeavour when we consider the influence of implicit bias. This refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Such bias tends to prevent us from recognizing the ways in which even our self-awareness prevents us from noticing the ways in which our behaviour affects others. For instance, if I “do unto others as I would have them do to me,” then my self-absorption through self-reflection tends to reproduce itself throughout society, leading to a lonely society of individuals. Specifically, I have come to realize that understanding self-transformation for myself alone follows a finite logic; rather, it is important to think about this ethically in relation to others, and more specifically, to those in need (and even more specifically, in terms of Christ's needs, but I'll return to this in a moment), as it allows self-transformation to work its way through society.

Because of the combination of my personal experience of having to rebuild some of the conventional self-moorings having to do with family and peers, I have become sensitive to that experience in others, especially African-Americans, Canada's Indigenous people, and immigrants. These are the aliens whom Moses calls the Israelites to “love as ourselves, because we were once aliens” (Leviticus 19:34). The history of modern slavery draws our attention to the ways in which Africans were denied many of the foundational institutions we often take for granted in our becoming modern citizens, such as the family and its rites of passage, like marriage. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has brought to light the ways in which the Indigenous experience has involved being stripped of adequate education and subsequent job opportunities, and successful life outcomes. And the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry revealed how women have suffered loss of life because of their gender. Knowing what it's like to not have a clear picture of my future has led me to sympathize with others in similar predicaments, to understand techniques and strategies of self-transformation in order to collaborate with such people in their goals for change, and to figure out ways to rebuff the habits that have led us to overlook people in such predicaments. As such, I use the tools of sociology to bring negative formative experiences to light in order to begin working on them

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using music, education, and the gospel. In terms of my work at Booth UC, I teach undergrad courses in sociology, and I am currently developing a program in community and urban studies that will involve courses relevant to these topics. Moreover, I am developing an applied research component that I will be calling Shelter U, in which I will be offering university courses to the homeless through the Salvation Army's emergency shelter in downtown Winnipeg.

### **How can Christians use sociology to complement their faith today?**

There is a second level to my concern with trends, however, which centers on the church--the body of believers--during the period of time immediately preceding Jesus' return at the end of the age, and how those believers will live in ways that will determine their fate, without their knowing. In a long passage from Matthew 24-25, the last of his public speaking before turning inward to prepare for his coming crucifixion, after being asked what the signs of the end of the age are, Jesus himself offers seven parables. In fact, he refers first to Daniel, which is a clue for us as to where to start in gaining our own understanding of this age. For instance, in the twelfth and last chapter of Daniel's book, he refers to the end of the age as characterized by "a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time." Of course, the nation he refers to is Israel, so the trouble he speaks of refers first to that nation, which he is promised, will be delivered. However, an interesting characteristic of that time for us, is the concluding verse: "Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase." It seems, this is one of the problems Jesus challenges his followers to prepare for in Matthew. According to the end times prophecy scholar, Dalton Thomas, Jesus' end of the age parables represent battles for truth that we are encouraged to engage, making up our preparation for Christ's return. In the first, the fig tree is used to illustrate how important it will be to discern the times in order to be relevant, namely to offer lifegiving wisdom (as opposed to instrumental knowledge) to others living during those times. As we run to and fro, and as knowledge increases in our world today, this discernment will become all the more important for the church's survival.

In the final lesson, our second reading, Jesus depicts God's final judgment as separating "people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep and goats." Fascinatingly, the sheep are admitted to the kingdom based on their life's work, giving food to the hungry, drink to the

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thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, and visitation to the sick and imprisoned, as unto Jesus himself, and, *not knowing when they had done these things*. What this says to me is this: the end of the age, of which we know we have been a part since the Lord's ascension, to be sure, is still, today, imminently worth our preparation because it is in that preparation that we will establish habits of the heart that will inform the Lord's determination our eternal place. Moreover, the condition of the end of the age will be such that will we be limited in our capacity to effect "change" on our own, whether because of our position in the social hierarchy of things, because of the ways in which wisdom will be overridden by knowledge, or knowledge by information systems and their laws of governance, or because of a polarizing influence that will separate us like never before. Sound familiar? There is an urgency here that cannot be overstated. Just think of who Jesus' audience was in this passage: those who were most intimate with him, who should have known him and therefore, should have known how to live. And yet the judged are described as having been separated despite having believed they were righteous. So how does this happen? And how can we prepare ourselves and those for whom we are responsible, for this coming age? Jesus gives us a hint by describing how those who are separated from the sheep are done so based on having not done to these "my brethren" as unto me. While I believe there is a general applicability to this passage, to all peoples, there is also a specificity that has to do with Jesus' Jewish brethren. Because of the way in which Jews fit into the Lord's plan for the end of the age, based on my reading of this passage, how we as Gentile believers will respond to His brethren will actually be a determining factor in our eternal outcome.

Of course, this opens up a number of questions for which we still have time to return to in the future, however, in conclusion, I should like to encourage the listener to begin committing their habits to the Lord by asking him, in the words of the singer, Mavis Staples, "are You in need?" By asking the Lord where (and how) He is in need, we can begin to listen to His Spirit's leading, to become stewards of the opportunities He has given us to give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, and visitation to the sick and imprisoned, as unto Jesus himself, thereby protecting ourselves from subtle untruths that prevent us from doing what Jesus first did for us.