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JUDGING HYPOCRISY

People just cannot resist misquoting the Bible in order to support their positions. The MSNBC host of *Morning Joe*, Joe Scarborough, fell prey to this temptation recently. While interviewing Tavis Smiley and Cornell West, two prominent African-Americans, Scarborough took a swipe at political conservatives for their religious hypocrisy.

Scarborough began hosting the weekday morning talk show in 2007, following a four-year stint with the MSNBC news and analysis show, *Scarborough Country*. Before that, he gained public attention by winning a seat in Congress as a Republican in a Florida district previously held by the Democrats since 1873. He retired from Congress after three terms.

In the interview with his guests on "Poverty in America," Scarborough accused conservatives, who consistently refer to religion in their message, of missing the core of Jesus' message. To support his critique, he referred to a section of Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24-25.

Scarborough begins badly by mistakenly stating that Jesus spoke in reply to his disciples asking, "Who is getting to heaven? How do we sit on the right hand of the Father?" Actually, the disciples never pose a question about heaven. Heaven did not occupy their thinking. It was the kingdom promised throughout the Old Testament that first-century Jews anxiously awaited, a kingdom on earth ruled by the promised Messiah.

The disciples did not ask about sitting on the right hand of the Father, either. They believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah and two of his disciples, James and John, asked specifically if they could sit on his right hand and left hand when he brought the kingdom to reality and sat on his throne. They made this request on a different occasion from the Olivet Discourse.

The Olivet Discourse ensued from a prediction that Jesus made about the total destruction of the Temple. Then his disciples asked, "When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the close of the age?" (Mt 24:3) Jesus' lengthy response has generated extensive debate over its interpretation, particularly what it says about the end times.

So Scarborough begins by revealing he is a stranger to the biblical text or that he gives little attention to details – details that might color the meaning of the passage. He continues by correctly quoting Matthew 25:34-36, "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothing and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me.'"

In this passage, Jesus discusses the final judgment of nations, when he, as King, will separate the sheep from the goats. Those he welcomes into his kingdom demonstrated a compassion for the broken and distressed, those who suffered from living in a fallen world. Jesus refuses entrance to those who did not display this kind of compassion.

Scarborough wants to reduce the scope of Jesus' ministry. "That was Jesus talking about, when asked, what his ministry was about. It was about taking care of the poor." What about the other groups mentioned by Jesus? Does Scarborough think that only the poor are strangers or sick or in prison? I wonder if Jesus will ignore acts of compassion towards abused children or battered women or victims of bullying. Was Jesus really talking about only the poor?

This does not reject the idea that those who breathe the air of Christ's kingdom should have compassion for the poor and act to meet their basic needs of food, clothing and housing. This theme echoes from book to book through the Scriptures.

This begs the question, How? Does Jesus expect a government to forcibly tax its citizens and use a portion of that tax for programs of compassion? Some would argue that a government that fails to extend assistance to the poor is guilty of moral negligence. How much assistance is required? Would raising a family's standard of living barely above the poverty line and not to the mean of middle class living still be morally insensitive?

Numerous ministries to the poor currently exist, but they severely lack funding. Are those who decry the inadequacy of government entitlement programs making personal donations to private ministries and programs? If not, that would seem hypocritical.

It is also hypocritical to selectively invoke the name of Jesus and his words for personal agendas, while ignoring other teachings of Jesus. Is Scarborough as concerned about Jesus' statement, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6)? Or does he take Jesus seriously when he says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," (Mt 22:39) or "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:33)?

No question about it. Followers of Christ not only have a deep compassion for the weak, the distressed, the broken and the poor, but they also have a deep respect for everything that Jesus said. Scarborough should pay close attention to Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1, "Judge not, that you be not judged."

Pastor Stan