

If Jesus Were Mayor Catching a Vision of God's Agenda

❖ Two history-making prayer breakfasts were recently held in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. One prayer breakfast was for the National Assembly, where the President was the guest of honor. The Mayor of Nairobi hosted another one. This was the first time that the city leaders of Nairobi had met to pray. Several political figures declared their faith publicly. The government minister who spoke at the breakfast issued this challenge: “If you loved your neighbor as yourself, would things be different in Nairobi? How?” Does this sound familiar? (“What would Nairobi, Kenya, be like if Jesus were Mayor?”) After the breakfast, there was a newfound spirit of unity. Civic leaders decided to begin a weekly fellowship and make the prayer breakfast an annual event.

❖ A colleague in India went to a village where his ministry team had been working for a year. They asked the village women what a “developed” village looked like. (“What would your village look like if Jesus were Mayor?”) Umrai, one of the more outspoken, described a village where there was unity and solidarity. She knew Jesus was not honored by how her village was divided. Each family lived only for itself. Because of her reply, the group formed a health committee and a self-help group. The self-help group, comprised of fourteen village women, began to meet regularly and with great enthusiasm. Group members collected small amounts of individual savings into a group account—and they began to solve community problems together. Umrai became president and used her leadership gifts to plan and mobilize the village to do the kinds of things Jesus would do if He were Mayor.

“If Jesus were Mayor, how would your community change?”² I often ask this of pastors and church leaders in our conferences around the world. Their answers help them catch a vision to engage their churches in their communities.

The Bible clearly says: “Where there is no vision the people perish.”³ If young people lack a vision for their future, they don’t know how to spend their time. They are unsure about their direction, and they accomplish little. Young people with a vision for their future, however, do not have a problem using time well or making decisions. Their lives are organized around specific visions for their future. In the same way, a church without a vision does little more than maintain the status quo. It has little chance of making an impact for the Kingdom of God in its community. But a church with a vision has an opportunity for earthly and eternal significance. We do not want just any vision—but God’s vision for the people and world He created and loves. Jesus always carried out the will of His Father.⁴

Knowing that, let’s imagine: What would Jesus do if He were Mayor?

- What would He do about street children and the homeless?
- What would He do about alcoholism, drug abuse, and other addictions?
- How would He strengthen families?
- How would He promote safe drinking water, adequate housing and food, health services, garbage and sewer systems, and decent roads?
- What would He do about fair wages and adequate employment?
- What would He do about unwanted children and care for the sick and elderly?
- What would He do to bring beauty—clean streets, trees, flowers, and public parks?

- What changes would He make in the education of children and adults?
- What new public policy decisions would He institute?
- How would He help people evaluate problems and make just decisions?
- What would He do to change the way local government works?
- Would His teachings be televised? Would He hold “town meetings” where His agenda and Kingdom principles would be set forth?
- What would He do about crime and civil unrest? What guidelines would He use for police and community relations?
- What changes would He make in the courts? In the prison systems?
- What would He do about the gap between the rich and the poor?
- How would the “little people” be treated in the community? How would the powerful people feel about Him?
- What would He do about corruption and bribery?
- What regulations would He establish for business?
- What would He do about depression, loneliness, and mental illness?
- How would He deal with pornography, sexual immorality, and prostitution?
- What would He do about child and spousal abuse?
- How would He improve social relationships among the citizens?
- What would He do about recreation and entertainment?
- What role would the church play in the community?
- How would He encourage unity among the churches?
- What would He do about other religions?
- Would His teachings and actions put His life in jeopardy?
- How would the community be changed to reflect the administration’s priorities?

We are working in the realm of our imaginations, and there is a caution. Before our speculations go off course, I should say what I do and do not mean. Let’s use these as ground rules to imagine His governance in ways that are compatible with the realities of Jesus and the present world:

- Jesus’ mayoral actions would match the character of God, revealed in Scripture. He would carry out God’s will.
- Jesus would not be literally returning in the flesh as a community leader.⁵ Instead, we are imagining what would happen if Jesus’ character, values, laws, and teachings were the governing basis for our communities.
- Jesus would not establish a theocracy or a government ruled by the church.
- Individuals would have free choice.
- Jesus would not create a welfare state. For example, His government would not instantly provide free housing for everyone. He would not instantly and miraculously make everything perfect for all of the citizens. As He did in Scripture, He would involve the citizens in healing the brokenness around them.

We cannot know exactly what Jesus would do as Mayor, but we can study Scriptures and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal what they mean for our communities. We need to know God’s Word and character—and hear His voice. The things Jesus would do as Mayor would reflect the Father’s will for the community. Jesus taught us to pray to our Father: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”⁶ God wants His will done on earth—now—as it is in heaven. He desires this because He loves us and the world He created. He wants the very best for us. As we will learn, He wants to reconcile everything back to Himself.

We can also learn from others, as we will in this chapter and throughout this book, to see how they have already answered the question in their locales: “What would Jesus do here if He were Mayor?”

Let's imagine again. Imagine what would happen if God's will were done on earth as in heaven. Another way to think of this is to ask ourselves: "What would happen if, next Monday morning starting at 9 a.m., everyone in our community started to live as God intends?"

- What would happen to us, personally, if we fully obeyed God's intentions for our relationships, the care of our bodies, and our walk with God?
- What would happen in our families if all members fully obeyed God's intentions in their relationships to one another?
- What would happen in our church and the other churches of our community if all the leaders and members truly loved each other, served one another, advocated for the powerless, and lived in unity?
- What would happen in our community if our leaders worked together for the common good, with honesty and integrity?
- What would happen if cheating, dishonesty, or corruption were never used in our business community?
- What would happen if children respected their parents and learned from them?
- What would happen if there were no corruption in our nation—but real justice?

One time many years ago, I was praying and talking with pastors in a slum community of Honduras. Suddenly, God gave me a story to share with them. After I finished, we explored God's vision for a wholly transformed culture. It was a journey I will never forget. Come with me again and listen to "The Parable of Juan."

The Parable of Juan

Juan sensed a call of God to move to an unchurched area in his rapidly growing city and start a church. Actually, every time he rode the bus to and from work, the bus passed by the squatter community of Las Palas. Juan felt a strange attraction for the people who lived there. He didn't have much training—just a few Bible school extension classes. What he did have was a passion to see people come to know Jesus.

Juan discussed it with his wife, and they decided to move to Las Palas with their two young daughters. They rented a small, one-room wooden shack. Las Palas had no water, no electricity, no school, and no clinic. The roads were dirt. The people were poor. They lived in shacks made of tarpaper, tin, old tires, cardboard, used boards, and anything else they could find for shelter. It was tough living, but Juan and his wife believed God had called them to live and minister there.

Juan worked during the day, but he used his evenings to visit neighbors and invite them to his home for Bible study. He devoted his weekends to being a pastor. Within a few months, a small group of women and children gathered each Sunday in Juan's one-room house. In a few more months, they were able to rent a room that served as a meeting place. Juan had about twenty women and numerous children in his congregation, but there were no men. The men in the community liked Juan, but thought religion was something for women and children.

Juan was a faithful and loving pastor. He rose early every morning to pray for his people and to study the Bible. After the first year, there was good fellowship but not much growth. Juan and his wife found that the living conditions were weakening them physically. His little daughters were often sick. He did not earn enough money to get them proper medical care. Juan was discouraged.

Early one morning, about 4:00 a.m., Juan got up quietly. As usual, he was careful not to awaken his wife and daughters. He had hung a plastic curtain to divide the room. At night, it separated the sleeping area from the living area, which was furnished with a table and four chairs. Juan sat at the table and lit the wick of an old milk can. It was full of paraffin and served as a lamp. He opened his Bible and began to read. This particular morning, he was reading Isaiah 58. He read about God's concern for the hungry, for the naked, for the homeless, for the oppressed. Juan's heart cried out silently to God: "God, I see your concern for the poor in the Bible. Why don't I see it here in Las Palas?" Juan was deeply touched by the needs of the people, and a tear ran down his cheek as he prayed. As he was meditating on the difference between his experience and what he was reading, there was a soft knock at the door.

Immediately, Juan walked to the door, but he didn't open it. It was dangerous to open the door to a stranger in the dark. "Who is it?" Juan whispered.

A soft voice came from the other side and said, "I'm Jesus, Juan."

"Who are you really?" asked Juan.

The voice again said, "I'm Jesus, Juan."

The voice sounded so gentle that Juan almost believed it was Jesus. He quietly slid the locking bolt off the door and carefully opened it just a crack. He could see the silhouette of a man in the dark, and he did not look threatening. Juan opened the door a little wider and said, "Come in."

But Jesus said, "No, Juan, I heard your cry this morning. I came so you could show me the things that trouble you here in Las Palas."

Juan quickly and quietly stepped outside, a little surprised by his obedience to this invitation. He shut the door behind them. Juan said, "Okay, Jesus, but stay close by me. This is the rainy season, and I know where to walk to miss the puddles."

"Okay, Juan," Jesus said, "I'll follow you."

They began their walk down the winding path. As they did, Juan talked to Jesus. "Jesus, over in that shack, there is a single mother. She sells her body—in her house and in front of her little children—to make money for food." They walked a little further. "And in that tarpaper shack, there's a family. The man is an alcoholic. He often comes home drunk and beats his wife and kids. The whole area can hear him yelling. Jesus, I can't stand it when I hear the screams, but there's nothing I can do." They walked further and Juan said, "Hold your nose as we go by here. This is where the people throw their garbage and use the toilet." They could hear the rats scurrying among the trash. Then Juan pointed to another shelter. This one was larger than the rest. Juan said, "This, Jesus, is where the 'presidente' of Las Palas lives. He likes to feel powerful. He collects money and tells the people it is to bring water and electricity here. But everyone knows he uses it for liquor and women." Then Juan turned a corner, walked downhill, and began to circle back to where they had started. Juan pointed to a little shack at the bottom of the hill. "Jesus," he said, "This is one of the saddest things to me in all of Las Palas. The woman who lives there was abandoned by the father of her three little children. Whenever it rains, black water floods her little shack. They all sleep on the floor, and she has to hold the children so they don't drown!"

Juan heard someone softly weeping. He looked around. He could tell from Jesus' shaking shoulders that it was the Lord who was crying. Juan saw that the same things that broke his heart also broke the heart of Jesus! In a broken voice, Jesus turned and said, "Juan, I want to show you My intentions for Las Palas."

Juan didn't know how it happened, but all of a sudden he and Jesus were looking down on Las Palas. Juan could see the whole community. Jesus started talking about adequate housing. All of a sudden, the shacks turned into small, neat shelters. They weren't fancy, but they were nice. Jesus talked about jobs, and Juan could see the people of Las Palas going to work. Juan could tell that the jobs weren't high-paying, but he could tell that they paid enough to support the families of Las Palas. Jesus talked about water. All of a sudden, there were water pumps appropriately spaced in the community, and everyone had clean water. Jesus talked about education and health. Right before Juan's eyes, there was a school and a clinic. Jesus talked about beauty. Juan saw the garbage disappear. In its place, children played in a field with trees and flowers! Jesus talked about healthy families, where men and women and children respected and loved one another. Then Jesus talked about spiritual healing. Juan saw his little church full of families—including men. He was excited! He thought, "This is the kind of community I'd like!"

Of course, Jesus read his thoughts and said, "Juan, these are My intentions for Las Palas. I want you to tell the people about My plans and begin to lead them there."

"But, Jesus," Juan protested, "I can't do that! How could my little congregation of women and children do anything? We are just struggling to survive!"

"Juan, listen to Me. I want you to share my plans with the people here, and then I want you to instruct your congregation to begin to serve the neighbors. Visit the sick. Visit the single mothers. Share with their neighbors. They can bring a cup of rice, a little soap, some sugar or salt, a few vegetables, and extra clothes to church on Sunday. Collect them in baskets and take them to those who are in greater need. They should do this every week. Then, you go and develop relationships with the city officials. Explore what is needed to bring water and power to Las Palas. . . ."

"Jesus," Juan said, "We need to be realistic. These little things will never make a difference. I . . ."

"Juan, who created the world?"

"You did, Lord, but . . ."

"Juan, who divided the Red Sea so that the children of Israel could cross?"

"You did, Lord, but . . ."

"Juan, who fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish?"

"You did, Lord, but . . ."

"Juan, I am the same yesterday, today and forever. You do your part, and I'll do the rest. Some things will not come to fulfillment until I return, but I want you to begin the process. You and

your little flock are my ambassadors, my representatives. As you obey, I will begin to heal Las Palas.” Juan was thinking about what Jesus said. Suddenly, he heard a rooster crow. He heard his wife beginning to stir behind the dividing curtain. He looked around. He was sitting at the table. The oil wick had gone out. It was becoming light outside.

Juan looked around for Jesus, but saw no one. “What happened?” Juan thought. “Did I have a vision? Was it a dream?” Juan did not know. But he did know that Jesus had met him—and that he had a new vision for the church and community of Las Palas.

I believe this is what Jesus wants for Juan’s community and others. In fact, I have shared this parable with local church leaders of many nations to encourage vision and hope.

Until this point, I have asked questions, raised issues, and told a parable. Hopefully, those who are reading this will have already begun to consider the question: “If Jesus were Mayor, how would our community change?” I would now like to tell you my thoughts. If Jesus were Mayor, I imagine he would do several things:

- He would live a life that modeled what it means for His Father’s will to be done.
- He would help the people of the church recognize their role, follow His example, live according to His Father’s instructions, and intentionally promote His Father’s will wherever they go and whatever they do in the community.
- He would be sure that the community knew His Father’s will for all aspects of community life—business, education, health, police, housing, and every other area.
- He would compassionately present the benefits of following—and the danger of disregarding—His Father’s plan. He would give each citizen the choice to accept or reject the plan.

Finding and carrying out the Father’s will is a large task! Jesus is not physically our Mayor. He has not tapped on our doors, as He did on Juan’s, and supernaturally given us His vision and shown us His compassion. Knowing this, one of my colleagues who has a difficult time imagining Jesus Christ as a community official rephrased the original question. She asked: “If I were mayor and could carry out the intentions of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, what would my community look like?”

This is a great question—and one worth thought. However, the task is too large for one person! If only there were an organization—a group of people—that could be equipped for this . . . a group that exists in all sectors of our communities . . . a group that has a sound moral code . . . an organization that represents all ages and facets of God’s creation—individuals, families, neighborhoods, local businesses, local government, education, health care, and the physical environment.

As a matter of fact, there is such a group—it’s called the church! Through its varied members, the church is uniquely positioned to advocate and advance God’s will in each sector.

Let me tell you now what some of the people who have heard our teachings have decided Jesus would do in their communities. They not only decided what He would do—they did it! I have used examples here that deal with community services because that is often what people expect of a mayor. It is a good place to begin. However, the list of things Jesus would do if He were Mayor would have enormous variety. After all, God cares about every single aspect of life!

❖ There is a small church located in a rural village among the rice fields of an Asian nation. The area is predominantly Buddhist. The pastor attended our training conference, returned to his church, and taught his people. The thirty members then decided to demonstrate God's love in their neighborhood. During the rainy season, the water collects in this village. Roads are impassable. The water rises and floods people's living quarters. Great swarms of mosquitoes bring Dengue fever and other ills. Even fish ponds—the community source of income—are flooded and lost. The church property stands between the flooded neighborhood and a rice field. Church members hand-dug a trench from the often-flooded neighborhood, across the church property, into the rice fields. They lined it with concrete pipe. The rain waters drained sooner, and no families were displaced by flooding! It was hard work, but it had a profound effect on the community. The church has developed relationships with previously antagonistic Buddhist neighbors. Many neighbors helped as the church members cleaned weeds and rubbish and added more drainage pipe. The church is not large (thirty members), not old (seven years), and not rich (many members are illiterate farmers). But they demonstrated the concerns of Christ in their community. They did something that Jesus would have wanted done as Mayor.

❖ A couple wanted to serve a community in Brazil. They did several small exercises, but knew more could be done. They organized an association and called it "Emmanuel," or "God with us." They planned fifteen different social projects for a single community. They raised funds for a daycare center for forty children; and they mobilized a large church, pastors, and government departments. Their zeal reflected the intentions, love, and Spirit of God. Their trainers comment: "Their enthusiasm was contagious." Jesus was at work.

❖ Ladies from a Bible study in rural Uganda decided to serve their village. They carefully planned their first project—cleaning garbage around a local bar. Two of the women courageously entered the bar. (Usually, the only women in that area who go into a bar are the prostitutes.) They asked permission to clean up the garbage. The surprised owners laughed, but agreed. The women then mobilized the community—even the headmaster of a local, prestigious school volunteered. The group dug two pits—one for biodegradable garbage and the other for non-biodegradable materials. When bar patrons saw others cleaning up their trash, they helped. To the delight of the community, the bar owners continued to keep the area clean. Encouraged, the women decided to build nine fuel-efficient stoves for local families and to provide water storage bins for needy people. Next, the Bible study group undertook a larger project—a community market. (The village women typically walk many hours, carrying their vegetables and goods to far-away markets; a nearby market would allow them to generate income while keeping them close to their families, community, and gardens.) Land was donated, but it was too steep to begin to build the market. The women from the Bible study prayed—and highway workers who were repairing a road nearby willingly came and bulldozed the market property at no cost. With God's help, the small group of rural Christian women discovered and collected resources, saved money, solved dilemmas, built a community market, and confidently and expertly shared their story at a conference attended by high government officials. Their spiritual lives grew as they served others on behalf of Jesus.

❖ A new church had been planted in Asia in a poor, small village of one-hundred homes. Church members wanted to respond to community needs. As there was no electricity in the community, they decided to buy a generator and provide the line and power for one light bulb per home. The children could read and study at night, and the adults could work later into the night. The pastor and denominational leaders discussed this idea in a teahouse. They agreed to initiate it, but first needed to find a generator. A man overheard their conversation. He said, “I am a new believer, and I have just heard your plans. I have a new generator that I will give you!” Electricity has now been provided for the homes. Each home pays a small fee, which covers gasoline and maintenance. Many community people have thanked the church for its interest in them. The denominational leader is also grateful to have discovered the power of “loving your neighbor.” Jesus’ agenda was served.

❖ To get water in Fonfrede, Haiti, people walked up to three kilometers to a polluted river, which was sometimes dry. One day, a group of foreigners arrived with machinery and announced they were going to dig a well. There was great excitement! But the area was filled with stones too large for their equipment, and they couldn’t drill. Great disappointment was evident. The church leaders decided to explore what they could do to meet the community’s need for water. They visited a development organization that owned equipment to help dig wells by hand. At first, the idea was not well received. If hand-dug wells were possible, the people reasoned, why hadn’t they been dug before? However, the church rented the equipment, moved it to Fonfrede, and began to dig for water on the church property. Water was struck at forty-five feet. The celebration was great! Non-church members, though, were not pleased. They thought church members would hoard the water. On the contrary, the church invited the community to share in God’s blessings. Soon, representatives of other parts of the rural community asked the church for help in digging wells. In less than a year, fifteen wells had been dug by hand. If the machinery had worked, there would perhaps be only one well in Fonfrede today! The church did what Jesus would have done as Mayor, demonstrating God’s practical love to their neighbors.

We opened this chapter by asking what Jesus would do if He were Mayor. Perhaps we need to ask the question another way. “What would Jesus do if He served here through His people, the church?” God has already commissioned and equipped the church to administrate His will in the sectors of the community where His people live and work. We, the church, serve the will of God, on earth as it is in heaven.

A friend recently heard the title of this book and wondered, “Why Mayor? Why not President? Prime Minister? Governor?” He thought awhile and then answered his own question: “This is about the ministry God wants to work through the local church. We have to think first what Jesus would want if He were the local ruler—the leader of the territory that the local church occupies on His behalf?”

We need to ask ourselves what Jesus would do if He were the leader of our village, hometown, or metropolis. As we do, I believe our findings will resemble the activities of the Christian church of history. From the time of the early church, the people of God cared for others and influenced the society around them, as if Jesus were Mayor.

Following are two thought-provoking examples from Nepal and Peru, written by people who took the time to ponder, “What would Jesus do if He were President of our village? What if He were Mayor of my hometown?”