

Class and the Gospel

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Date: 03 February 2019

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[0 : 00] Good evening, everybody. Thank you. Let me start by reading a couple of these verses once more so we can focus our attention. Galatians chapter 3, verses 26 to 28.

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free.

There is no male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. In Paul's culture there were deeply distorted ideas about race and about class and about gender.

Some of you are familiar with the prayer that was sometimes prayed by Jewish men. It went like this. Blessed be God that he did not make me a Gentile. Blessed be God that he did not make me ignorant or a slave.

Blessed be God that he did not make me a woman. Blessed be God that he did not make me a woman. When Paul wrote Galatians 3, verse 28, he was directly challenging the distorted ideas that are reflected in that prayer.

[1 : 08] What's more, in the letter he is offering something better. He's showing us how the gospel redeems race and class and gender as a part of the redemption and renewal of us and God's world.

And we're reflecting on this over the next few weeks because we also have deeply distorted ideas in our culture about race and about class and about gender.

And so we're looking at this and we're looking specifically at this verse and we're asking how does the gospel challenge our distorted thinking and then how does the gospel offer us something better?

A vision of renewal. And a couple of weeks ago we looked at race and we did as much as we could in the time that we had and I feel like we just barely scratched the surface.

But this week we're shifting our attention and we're going to look at class. Social class. Social class. When you see someone sitting in Whole Foods wearing Lululemon, eating a quinoa and heirloom tomato salad with an NPR canvas tote bag, listening to the serial podcast on AirPods wireless headphones, that's not a coincidence.

[2 : 27] You're seeing class markers. You're seeing indicators that this person, and I'm describing anyone here, no offense intended, I'm simply being descriptive.

You're seeing markers that would indicate that that person is a member of a particular social class. There's a sociologist named Elizabeth Curried Halkett who says that this is the aspirational class.

And this is how you tell. In the aspirational class, we don't show status through our bank accounts or through driving nice cars. Our status indicators are connected to a shared cultural knowledge.

It's not so much about conspicuous consumption as it is inconspicuous consumption or even conscientious consumption. And these class markers are important because they indicate the boundaries.

If you walk into a room full of people who share some of these class markers, that will immediately tell you whether or not you have a shot at belonging. Whether or not you will be welcome in that community.

[3 : 36] And we are unconsciously reading these signals all of the time trying to figure out where we stack up next to this person or that person or within any given community.

And this isn't just specific to us. Even though I do believe that class is a major factor in society in Washington, D.C. Maybe the most divisive.

It's not unique to us. And in fact, there are societies all throughout history. Most every society has had some form of caste or class system, which is essentially a status hierarchy based on differences in birth, wealth, privilege, education, etc.

And so Paul is making a very bold claim here. He's claiming that because of the gospel, the Christian community is one of profound social equality.

Now I use that term broadly. But he's saying that the gospel makes possible a community where class no longer divides. Where the hierarchy is collapsed.

[4 : 45] Those with wealth and privilege and those without live together as equals. And so the question tonight that we're asking is, how is such a thing possible? So we're going to look at this in three parts. The origins of social equality.

The limits of social equality. And then we're going to draw out a couple of implications once we've looked at those points together. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

And we thank you for the power that your word has. Unlike our words and unlike our wisdom, your words have power. They formed and shaped the heavens and the earth.

And so we pray that they would now reform and reshape us. That you would speak words of recreation. That would renew our imaginations.

That would renew our hearts. That would renew our relationships. With the hope that is only to be found in the gospel. We pray this in your son's holy name.

[5 : 42] Amen. So the origins of social equality. Some of you may be wondering, well, why are we talking about social class when the passage is very clearly about slavery?

Right? There's no longer slave or free. And the reason is most people don't realize that in the ancient world, slavery was universal. In all the great ancient civilizations, slavery existed.

Any society that could afford to have slaves had slaves. And so it was virtually everywhere. In Rome, you know, Greece and Rome were two of the first slave societies.

Meaning they were economically dependent on slaves. And in Rome, around the time that Paul wrote Galatians, it is assumed that slaves made up around a third of the population.

So a lot of slaves. All of the glory and all of the splendor of Rome. None of that would have been possible had there not been slaves to make it possible. But unlike the North African slave trade, which is what most of us associate this with, most slavery in history, in the ancient world, was not race-based.

[6 : 47] Some people were born into slavery. Some people became slaves after military victories. They were captured in war. A bunch of people became slaves to improve their station in life.

It was a way to get an education and to make connections with other elites. And maybe give yourself a chance at a better life. Some people became slaves voluntarily to get out of debt.

And there were people who became slaves for a while. And they made connections and built networks. And then they bought their way into freedom. So lots of different ways that people became slaves.

Some slaves were menial laborers. But also some worked in business. And some worked in politics. Most all of the actors and musicians in the ancient world were slaves.

Little different than the Hollywood culture. They were all slaves in that society, right? The gladiators, the prostitutes, mostly slaves. And so the point I'm trying to make is, in the ancient world, particularly in Rome, a slave was a social class.

[7 : 55] On the status hierarchy. And so when Paul talks about a slave versus a free person, these represent very different positions on the social ladder.

Now one of the reasons that slavery was so widespread is that it makes the most economic sense. There's simply no better way to build a society.

If you're purely utilitarian, purely Darwinian, right? Then you have this massive free labor force. And so they're able to produce far more than it requires to feed and clothe them.

And so it makes a lot of economic sense. But there's another deeper reason why slavery was so universal. And this is the reason. In the ancient world, notions such as equality, universal human rights, simply did not exist.

It didn't exist. It didn't occur to anybody. And if you talked about it, people might have thought you were crazy. These were honor-shame societies. The values that these societies were built around were values such as personal strength, and power, and glory, and honor.

[9 : 11] And so, of course, in such a world, the strong trample the weak. Why wouldn't you? It's a demonstration of your power. Why wouldn't you? Why wouldn't you?

And so when it comes to slaves, people like Plato and Aristotle believed that slaves were, by nature, subhuman. They either had incomplete souls or no souls at all.

And so they didn't have rights. They could be owned like livestock. And in fact, the argument was made very often that slaves benefited from having masters, that a soulless, subhuman slave without a master would be aimless, and that a master gave a slave purpose.

And so, you know, some masters would say, well, I'm actually doing my slaves a favor. Aristotle at one point writes, from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.

So this is the common thinking in that society. And this is the society that Paul is writing into, right? And so the question becomes, why did things change?

[10 : 19] If this is basically the way most societies operated, why did things ever change? Rodney Stark, who's a historical sociologist, says this in one of his books, of all the world's religions, including the three great monotheisms, only in Christianity did the idea develop that slavery was sinful and must be abolished.

And this is because of a couple of things. Not only did Christians believe, along with the Jews, that every human being was created in the image of God, which gave them a certain amount of dignity and worth, but Paul goes on to write on top of that in Galatians 3.26, that in Christ Jesus, both slaves and free people are all sons of God through faith.

In other words, he's saying that slaves and free people alike, when they put their faith in Jesus Christ, they gain the ultimate status, the ultimate place in society.

They are firstborn sons of the living God. And this was a radical, massive, sort of tectonic shift of a thing to say. And so over the centuries, these ideas began to take root, and then they began to flower, and then they began to produce fruit.

So the first person to articulate that slavery as an institution is wrong was Gregory of Nyssa in the late 300s. So you began to see Paul looking, or these leaders looking at Scripture, looking at the writings of the apostles, beginning to put these pieces together.

[12 : 01] He says we can't abide this institution. And then by the Middle Ages, we began to see the idea that human beings do have certain inalienable human rights.

The concept of universal human rights begins to emerge. And then later on in history, Galatians 3.28 becomes one of the primary inspirations for the abolitionist movement.

And so we see this kind of movement through history, a shift in the way people think about what it means to be human. Now, these days, it's fashionable to point out, and we have to recognize, that there have been many churches, many religious leaders in ancient and modern times, who have supported and upheld slavery, supported and upheld racism.

It continues into today. We have to acknowledge that. But we also have to acknowledge this, that when it comes to something like slavery, our question from our vantage point, when we look back on that, we ask, how could anyone ever think such a thing is possible?

When we look at the places where slavery still exists today, all around the world, how could anyone ever think that this was possible, or something that we should be doing? But the real question, if you look at history, is the opposite.

[13 : 19] The real question is, why did anyone ever begin to think that it was not okay? That's the real miracle. Why did anyone begin to think that it was not okay?

And the answer is the Christian gospel. The whole idea of social equality as a value, the whole idea of universal human rights, is rooted in the Christian gospel.

And you see, when Jesus Christ came, he completely overturned the social hierarchy of the day. And it becomes obvious from the start that Jesus has come to institute, to initiate an entirely new way of being human together in the world.

So even though Jesus was a king, he lived in a working class family, and he worked a blue-collar job for most of his life. Although Jesus was a great religious leader, he preferred the company of prostitutes, and known notorious sinners, over the religious elites.

And although Jesus could have chosen anyone to be his primary disciples, by the end of his ministry, people were lining up. He could have had anyone he wanted. But he picked uneducated people, fishermen, even a tax collector, one of the most hated classes in his society.

[14 : 36] And so it's clear when you look at Jesus, his life, his ministry, his relationships, his priorities, that he is paving the way for a new humanity. But there is a problem. We talk about the origins of social equality, but there's also, when it comes to social equality, there are limits that we need to recognize.

So now we'll focus a bit on the limits of social equality. Since the Enlightenment, social equality has become its own stand-alone goal.

More and more and more, our society in the West has taken the fruit of social equality and cut it off from the roots of the Christian gospel. And so these days, especially in a place like Washington, D.C., the pursuit of social equality, the pursuit of social justice, that has become its own religion.

And so there are many people I know who are not religious, who don't believe in God, for whom the pursuit of social justice has become its own religion. It's become an identity, with its own set of values, its own community.

And there are many people who would hear that and say, well, what's the problem? Social justice, social equality, that's going to benefit everybody. See, most everyone these days wants some form of social equality. Here's one of the problems with that.

[15 : 51] No one seems to be able to agree on what social equality is or how to achieve it. What is it? Is it equality of opportunity?

Is it equality of outcome? Is it something else entirely? What role should the government play? Should we have more regulation? Should we have less regulation? How much should we tax the rich?

How many advantages should we give the poor and those without privilege? Should we pursue only free market solutions? Or are there other options that we should be pursuing?

Right? Should we try to abolish class altogether? That's what Karl Marx set out to do, a classless society. Is it true that when the tide comes in, all boats rise?

Or is it just the yachts? Right? These are the conversations that are happening in our society. And these are important conversations. These make massive differences in how we construct and operate our society.

[16 : 58] But ultimately, it seems impossible to find a workable solution for everyone. And the simple truth is that some people are not born like other people.

In other words, Jefferson was wrong. People are not born equal in the sense that many of us hope they might be. People are not born into equal circumstances.

Some people are born with opportunities that other people don't have. Some people are born wealthy. Others are born into debt. Even if you eradicate all of the racial and financial economic differences, you still have the issue of IQ.

Some people are born with an IQ of 80. Other people are born with an IQ of 145. That's going to profoundly impact your ability to pursue and to have a good life in this society.

It makes a massive difference. Right? So figuring out how to level the playing field, figuring out how to bring the right set of circumstances into place so that everybody has a reasonable shot at a good life, that's incredibly hard to do.

[18 : 03] It's incredibly complicated. Now, I don't have to tell you that. In fact, I know that many of you here understand these things, and you study them, and you write about them, with a level of complexity that goes way beyond where I can go.

But here's the thing that we need to see. Liberal, conservative, doesn't matter. At the end of the day, any pursuit of true social equality that is cut off from the roots of the gospel will be limited.

It will be limited in what it can do. Because true social equality, the kind of social equality that Paul is talking about in Galatians 3.28, is fruit.

It's a byproduct of the renewing power of the gospel in the human heart. In other words, social equality is the fruit of spiritual equality.

So what do I mean by spiritual equality? Well, I mean three things. The gospel says first, that every single human being is equal in that we all bear God's image.

[19 : 14] What I said before. God has imprinted himself on every human being. Which means there is no such thing as a subhuman. Every human being deserves dignity.

Every human being is infinitely valuable. Every human being deserves certain rights simply by virtue of the fact that they are a human being. Right? So that's the first way the gospel declares that we are equal.

The second way the gospel declares that we're equal is this. Every single human being is born sinful. We're all born guilty. We're all born broken by sin.

Now, you might hear that and say, well, that's not very uplifting and I wouldn't prefer to really focus on that. And that may be true for us. But for most of history, if you were a person who was oppressed or poor or powerless, you were at the bottom of the social ladder, it was assumed that when you looked up that ladder at the wealthy, the elites, the kings, the rulers, that they were up there because they had divine favor.

Right? The king is the king because the gods chose him to be king. The wealthy are the wealthy. The elites are in power because that's the divine will.

[20 : 28] They're up there because someone in heaven has looked down on them and given them a special blessing. And if I'm down here, it means that I must have screwed up or my family ancestors screwed up.

And God doesn't think very highly of me. Most of history, most societies, that's how you would think. And the gospel says that's absolutely false. The gospel says no one is born, no one can earn divine favor.

There's no such thing as divine favor. The gospel says at the end of the day that no matter where you are on the social hierarchy, if you're up here or down here, that you're all equal. No one deserves grace.

No one deserves favor. And then the gospel says that your only hope, your only hope is the free gift of grace. It doesn't matter who you are.

It doesn't matter what your resume says. That's your only hope. Which leads us to the third form of spiritual equality. The gospel says that this grace is available to all people.

[21 : 30] Everybody. Right? It says that Jesus, who had all the power, who had all the privilege, who had all of the status, gave all of that away, sacrificed himself to deal with sin, to offer this opportunity of free grace to anyone who asks.

Anyone at all. Right? And so you hear this and you realize how profoundly equalizing this is. It doesn't matter if you're a king or a commoner. It doesn't matter if you wear royal finery or rags.

Everyone has to go down on their knees. And you have the commoner and the king next to each other on their knees, both crying out for mercy. And Jesus gives it to them both.

Rich or poor, well-educated or uneducated, morally upright or morally bankrupt, anyone can come and receive grace on the same terms. It doesn't get more equal than that.

Paul says in verse 27, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There's neither slave nor free for you're all one in Christ Jesus. That's what I mean by spiritual equality.

[22 : 40] Christianity is the great equalizer. So the origin of social equality is the Christian gospel. This is where those ideas were planted in history.

But as we talk about social equality today, it has limits. If we try to pursue it apart from the gospel, it will always be limited.

Now this does not mean that the work that we do, the work that many of you do, is not important. As I said before, it makes a major difference in the quality of life. And some ideas are better than others.

Some policies are better than others. But at the end of the day, all of those efforts apart from the gospel will be limited. So now we want to ask, well, what does this mean for us, practically speaking, as the church?

And I want to offer a couple of applications that come out of this that hopefully will counterbalance each other. The first is this. The primary focus of the church should not be social equality.

[23 : 43] It should be gospel ministry. The primary focus of the church should not be social equality. It should be gospel ministry. It is very tempting to look at verses like Galatians 3.28, extract a principle, social equality, and then to pursue that principle.

And there are a lot of churches that have done that, that say, well, this is what we're about, and we're going to pursue this no matter what, and this is what Jesus really would have wanted. But what we need to understand is there's a reason why this verse shows up at the end of chapter 3 as opposed to the beginning of chapter 1.

Right? Paul knew that the major issues in Galatia were issues of racism and classism and gender discrimination. He knew that there was all kinds of division, but when Paul set out to write this letter, he didn't write, like Galatians chapter 1, verse 1, stop being racist.

Stop being classist. Stop discriminating. Be one. Right? He didn't take that approach. In fact, he takes three full chapters to explain and to clarify exactly what the gospel is.

Let me remind you what the gospel is. Let me make sure you're clear on that. And then once you're clear on that, and once that seeps into your blood and your marrow and your bones, then Galatians 3.28 begins to emerge once you are centered on the equalizing power of the gospel for all human beings before God.

[25 : 14] Then you will begin to rethink your relationships with those people around you. It's the only way it works. So we can't make the mistake of offering political solutions to spiritual problems.

Right? If we aim at social equality without the gospel, we're not going to get the gospel, and we're not going to get social equality. I think this is one of the reasons why Marxism failed so spectacularly.

It was an attempt to compel a way of life that is only able to be found as fruit.

Right? The fruit of a heart that has been utterly transformed. You can't compel that kind of thing. And any subsequent attempt to compel that in people has been met with disaster.

This is fruit. We can't legislate it. We can't force it. It has to come from a heart that has been renewed by the equalizing power of the gospel.

[26 : 18] Right? So, you know, the last thing I'll say about this is remember the striking words from Jesus in John chapter 12 where Jesus says, the poor you always have with you but you do not always have me.

Right? You read that and you say, well, what in the world does he mean by that? He doesn't mean the poor don't matter. In fact, on every page of the gospel you see Jesus' profound concern for the poor and the marginalized and the oppressed and the vulnerable.

What he does mean is get your priorities in order. What he does mean is get your own oxygen mask on before you help the person next to you. Right?

What he does mean is the only way you're going to have anything to offer a world full of brokenness and poverty and injustice is if you're one with me. If you have the spiritual power that I impart.

If you have the changed heart that I can offer you. That's the only way you'll have anything to offer. Right? So the first thing, the first point, our church cannot primarily focus on social equality.

[27 : 25] We have to focus on gospel ministry. Second point counterbalances that though. If we are a church that is focused on gospel ministry then we should be a place of social equality. Right?

In other words, if we're actually serious about gospel centered ministry then one of the qualities that should emerge in our community is that we would be a place of profound social equality.

You know, Jesus tells this parable in Luke chapter 14 about the wedding feast and about people jockeying for places of honor at the table and at the end he says in verse 11 for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

And essentially what he's saying is this, to all those people at the wedding who are climbing the social ladder he says for Christians for my followers you no longer live life on the social ladder.

You come off the ladder. that for us life is lived at the foot of the cross. That's a very different way to live. The gospel calls each of us to see our place in society in light of the cross.

[28 : 34] Right? If you're on the lower rungs of the social ladder then you look at the cross and you glory in your exaltation. Right? You glory in the fact that society may look down on you society make you feel like nothing make you feel like you're worthless and have nothing to offer but look what the God of the universe did for me.

And now I've been lifted up I've been exalted I've been given a place at the head of the table in the kingdom of God. And guess what? This life is a blip. That reality is the only one that matters.

Right? So if you're at the bottom of the ladder you will be lifted up you can glory in that. If you're high up on the ladder then glory in revel in your humiliation. And what I mean is this is that out there people may think that you're a pretty big deal.

You know you have the education you have the credentials you have the network people are impressed and they want to be your friend and they want to hang out with you and your social calendar is full for months. Right? Everybody wants you to come work for them.

But the truth about you is that you were so wretched so hopeless such a lost cause that it took nothing less than the death of the Son of God to give you any hope.

[29 : 51] Right? And so the cross brings those who are high up on the ladder down. The cross lifts those who are low down on the ladder up. This is the equalizing power of the cross.

And so this transforms the way we see ourselves it transforms the way we see people around us and as a church I believe that we are meant to be salt and light in the world. Many of you work on these issues and there are times when political battles need to be fought.

Right? Like slavery. Right? There are times when Christians need to step out we need to make a stand we need to fight the fight these are and all through history you see those times.

But the primary calling of the church is to be salt and light. In other words to be spread around the world communities within communities where people from the outside culture come in and experience a completely different way of life.

Because out there especially in this city is a meritocracy. It is a meritocracy. If you have the right education if you have the right parents the right family if you have the right connections and credentials if you have the wealth if you have the right color skin you're going to be okay.

[31 : 04] You have a good shot at a good life. But if you don't have wealth if you don't have the education if you don't have the status markers if you don't have the right color skin it's going to be a very different story.

And for many people you're told every single day every single day in a thousand different subconscious ways that you don't matter. That you haven't achieved anything worth valuing.

And so you're not worth valuing. But when you enter the church who you are out there ceases to matter. All of those status markers whatever we wear and whoever we go to for our news it all just drops away.

Where we buy our food none of it matters. Right? Because in the church the church is a place where a slave may very well be in spiritual authority over his master. The church is a place where you may very well see a former prostitute serving the chalice to a priest.

You know the church is a place where the rich wash the feet of the poor. The church is a completely different society. Because in the church you're not defined by your achievements you're defined by Christ's achievement alone.

[32 : 26] Everybody's equal. We all have the same resume. Jesus Christ. It's his name at the top. So you're told in the church again and again not that you don't matter but that you're loved unconditionally and infinitely irrespective of anything that you've achieved or failed to achieve.

So church I think this is our calling. I think this is who we are called to be in this city. And I think people out there are longing for they're starving for a refuge from the meritocracy where it's never enough where you're always having to strive where you're only as good as your latest great achievement where you're always having to prove yourself where you're never feeling good enough.

The church is a refuge from that place. The church reminds us that this earthly life like I said before is just a dash between two dates. And in the eternal reality of the kingdom of God we all have an opportunity to have the place of honor alongside Jesus Christ.

And you know in my preparation for this I've become painfully aware of my own status markers and my own class indicators and the fact that every time I'm up here I am doing things that are communicating to people either you could belong here or you probably won't belong here.

And I'm very conscious of the fact that my limitations could very easily become the church's limitations. Right? That who feels welcome here could be limited by me.

[34 : 04] And so if you leave it up to me it's going to get worse. Right? The only way we become the kind of church where anybody can feel welcome regardless of education regardless of skin color regardless of achievement is if every single person here is willing to proactively cross those barriers and to proactively love in self-sacrificing ways.

And the way I know that strategy works is because that's what Jesus did with us. And so I think that that's what we're called to do. It's going to take every one of us. And of course it will take the powerful working of the Holy Spirit in us because ultimately this is not about our glory but it's about God's glory.

So Lord we pray that this would be a reality not that we bring about or impose on ourselves or strategize into being but rather that this would be a fruit of the work of your Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives.

that the gospel would saturate this community and impact us so deeply and so profoundly that it would transform how we see ourselves and how we measure ourselves.

And it would transform how we see those people around us in a city that is riven by class division and race division. Lord, I pray that we would be an instrument of unity and reconciliation.

[35 : 30] Lord, a refuge from the meritocracy. We pray this, Lord, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.