

Jesus and Justice

international
social**justice**commission



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The Salvation Army
International Social Justice Commission*

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JESUS AND JUSTICE

Living Right While Righting Wrongs

Jesus' mission is captured in a single vision with two dimensions. His hope for a restored humanity envisions well-being for people who are *spiritually poor* and people who are *socially poor*. And in their midst, righteousness and justice mark the events of his days and nights. Jesus lives right and makes life right with others.

In Jesus' code, to love is to be just. To be just is to love. And when we claim to follow Jesus, we are disciples of justice. Jesus' mission on earth in his time is our mission on earth in our time.

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JESUS AND JUSTICE

Living Right While Righting Wrongs

INTRODUCTION

Jesus' first days were marked with poverty. The family was on the road. There was no room available—anywhere. A smelly stall in a barn was Jesus' starting place in life. The details surrounding the night of his birth are largely unknown. Perhaps there was a midwife staying in a nearby hotel. Surely someone came with water and a basin to bathe the newborn child. Whatever the specifics were, we are left to guess. What we do know is, the beginning was bleak. Only the bare essentials were there.

We also know that the birth did not go unnoticed. The shepherds, who were on duty out in the night air, were honoured with the first birth announcement. They rushed to be the early worshippers of this special child. The shepherds didn't think much about the place where Jesus was born. They had been in many barns before. They were comfortable kneeling on the straw. They didn't appreciate the incongruity of the Son of God's meagre beginning.

The quandary for those of us who follow Christ is to link Jesus' first days with his continuing mission. The honoured shepherds were poor. The rewards of their work barely put food on their tables. Yet, they were the first worshippers. As examples of God's bias toward the poor, the shepherds are historical spiritual heroes. They remind us that God's heart still leans toward those who are pressed to live with less.

Jesus' articulation of his mission on earth is best expressed in his inaugural address delivered in his hometown synagogue. Again, he identifies with the poor.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:16-21 *NRSV*).

Early in his ministry, Jesus returned home to Nazareth. Rumours were spreading about his teaching and miraculous powers. He was invited to speak at the local synagogue where he had worshipped as a child. Jesus' audience that morning was filled with sceptics. "What is Mary and Joseph's son doing now? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Sensing a special moment, Jesus took the occasion to lay out his mission. He read the Hebrew text from the revered prophet Isaiah (61:1-2). And when he finished, Jesus rolled up the scroll and essentially said, "Let me tell you what this means."

The essence of Jesus' mission is captured in a single vision—one vision with two dimensions. Jesus' hope for a restored humanity has a double focus: people who are *spiritually poor* and people who are *socially poor*.

SPIRITUALLY POOR: Jesus begins with a personal claim: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me." I have been touched by God and I am in touch with God. And the good news I bring to those of you who are spiritually poor is: You can be in touch with God, too.

SOCIALLY POOR: Jesus understands the systemic nature of social poverty. He sees people in poverty as those who are held captive. They are oppressed. They are victims of their circumstances. People living in social poverty need eyes to see beyond the barriers that imprison them. They need to be freed to explore a new future.

The sections that follow will reveal over and over again that Jesus lived right—that righteousness was his way of life. The material will also show that Jesus repeatedly righted wrongs—that pursuing justice for the sake of others was his intent and practice. Jesus' mission had two cutting edges. He awakened in the morning with a vision for people's spiritual well-being. And he envisioned opportunities for people whose plight in life was curtailed by oppressive constraints and life-denying forces. Jesus lived right and righted wrongs. And for those of us who claim to be Jesus' followers, Jesus' mission on earth in his time is our mission on earth in our time.

SECTION A
JESUS AND JUSTICE: INCLUDING THE EXCLUDED

Experiencing exclusion is traumatic. It is like being unfairly “red-carded” while playing soccer. You were on the playing field, passing the ball on offence and intercepting passes on defence. Then suddenly, after inflicting what a biased referee claims to be an intentional foul on the opposition, you are on the sidelines and out of the game. Tragically, in real life, many people never leave the sidelines and get into the game. Without even breaking the rules or inflicting pain on anyone else, they are red-carded. They are ineligible to play in the game of life.

1. SHOWING COMPASSION TOWARD SOCIAL OUTSIDERS

Our world can be an unkind place. Caste systems have many configurations. Social judgement parades with many faces. The disfigured, the physically disabled, the mentally handicapped and even kids who are bullied on school playgrounds can be victims of injustice without being guilty of anything but being themselves. They are outsiders. They are simply excluded. And their unjust exclusion is humiliating.

Historical Dilemma: Lepers

In Jesus' day, lepers were victims of discrimination through no fault of their own. They were social outsiders. Their bodies attacked with skin lesions that physically disfigured their limbs and eyes, lepers were subjected to social segregation. They were excluded.

In Old Testament times, one of the most famous lepers was Naaman. A man of prominence, the "captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honourable, because by him the Lord had given deliverance unto Syria: he was also a mighty man in valour, **but he was a leper**" (2 Kings 5:1). And as a leper, even Naaman was required to shout out "unclean, unclean" when people approached him. Even though the debilitating disease is now readily treatable and is not contagious, victims have been and continue to be contained in colonies. Instead of humane treatment they are judged to be socially unfit and sentenced to social isolation.

Today, according to the World Health Organization, there are approximately 200,000 people who still suffer from leprosy. Pockets of high vulnerability remain in some areas of Angola, Brazil, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nepal and the United Republic of Tanzania. These countries remain highly committed to eliminating the disease and continue to intensify their leprosy control activities.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

Give yourself permission to travel into a new spiritual place. Take permission to rest in that new place before exploring your next journey.

- Read the three texts below consecutively and out loud
- Without any discussion, read the passages in silence and let the text speak to you
- Ponder your thoughts in silence
- Share your thoughts with each other, without discussion
- After everyone has shared, invite each person to make one concluding comment

Jesus Cleanses Lepers

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately his leprosy was cleansed (Matthew 8:1-3).

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:11-19).

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them" (Mark 1:40-44).

Current Challenges

Compassion is motivated by empathy. It generates behaviour that sees life from the other person's point of view. True compassion generates responses that open doors for outsiders to become insiders.

Identifying Social Outsiders

The social-outcast scale has numerous levels. Obviously, some experiences of exclusion are more painful than others. Childhood memories can still generate deep feelings in adulthood. Being rejected by your circle of friends, coping with a learning disability, failing a grade at school or always being last person chosen to make up a sports team can leave emotional scars. Cultural rejection can be as simple as being born a girl or dealing with the stigma of testing positive for HIV/AIDS. On the religious front, women can be restricted from leadership roles or isolated in separate sections for worship. In some circles, being divorced or living as a lone parent can lead to relational alienation. Having a particular sexual preference or indulging in certain lifestyle behaviours can close doors into people's lives. On the outcast scale, the treatment from other people can be more difficult to cope with than carrying the emotional weight of being physically disfigured or mentally challenged. And then there is the parade of economic disparity. If you are chronically unemployed, a permanent recipient of welfare or live on the street without an address where the government can send you cheques, you can expect "do not enter" signs to be posted at almost every turn.

- **Focus on yourself first**

Reach back in your memory to identify a time when you were excluded—an occasion when you were an outsider. Using single words, describe how you felt. Write the words and let them awaken your emotions. Be honest about how they make you feel. Discuss your experience with others.

- **Identify today's social outsiders**

My home country

- Identify two or three people groups who are excluded—who are outsiders. Be specific and think broadly.

My church/denomination

- Identify people who are outsiders. Be honest. They may be tolerated, but are they really welcomed? Again, be specific.

My global neighbours

- Identify at least two people groups who are outsiders. Give attention to those who are subject to stigma and discrimination. People with HIV/AIDS are an obvious example. List others.

Review the list of people in the three categories who have been identified as outsiders. Choose one person and/or people group from each category and describe acts of compassion that would result in outsiders becoming insiders—where the excluded can be included.

Prayers of Response

Focus first on your home country

Extend your reach to a global focus



2. PROTESTING GENDER INEQUALITY

The cultural setting in Jesus' day was a tapestry woven of Roman, Greek and Hebrew traditions. There was an intriguing interplay between political power, social customs and religious influences. In Jesus' society, Hebrew customs and religious practices were the most dominant forces. Although the treatment of women did not equate to the stigma heaped on lepers, the convergence of Roman, Greek and Hebrew attitudes toward women clearly positioned them as inferior to their male counterparts. Women were second-class, subservient human beings.

Historical Dilemma: Women

Many advocates for gender equality would raise their voices and ask, "So what has changed?" They would argue that the subjugation of woman is still a problem today. Religious prejudice in favour of men continues to be a reality in some Christian traditions and many churches. Debates continue about "headship" and what ministry roles are allowed for women. Corporate board rooms are populated with majorities of men who retain their power. Even in what we label our "enlightened age," many people continue to believe that a women's primary role in life is to have children and take care of the home. Even when women are not confined to these roles they still are often trapped with double-duty expectations at work and at home. All the same compared to circumstances in Jesus' day, women's rights are surging ahead in many parts of today's world.

In Jesus' context and time, women were considered inferior to men. The New Testament culture was lived in the shadow of Old Testament norms. The legacy of Eve, "the temptress" in the Garden of Eden, lived on. Unmarried women were not allowed to leave the homes of their father. Married women were confined to the homes of their husbands. Talking to strangers or testifying in courts was forbidden. Women were under the authority of men—more like a possession than a person. Their status was "slave-like" rather than living as dignified human beings. The elevation of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the inclusion of the Magnificat in Scripture stands in contrast with cultural practices of the day.

Jesus was a social revolutionary and a religious innovator. Jesus included women in his life when other people of influence excluded them. The passages below illustrate how Jesus protested against the gender inequality that swirled around him.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

*Drown out the noise of your distracted mind,
In quiet reverence be open to receive what God gives you,
Prepare yourself to live the salvation story.*

- Without commenting, read the three texts below, consecutively and out loud
- Read the passages a second time. Listen for a word or phrase that catches your attention
- Contemplate on the thought for two to three minutes
- Share your thought out loud in a simple statement, without elaboration. Listen carefully to each other to see if the comments of others link with your idea
- Take a few moments to reflect on what you have heard
- If what someone else observed linked with your observation, comment on how the two ideas reinforce each other

Jesus Visits Martha and Mary

Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).

A Girl Restored to Life and a Woman Healed

While [Jesus] was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district (Matthew 9:19-26).

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!”(which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her (John 20:11-18).

Current Challenges

What do these passages teach us about Jesus’ views, relationships and practices with women?

- Jesus’ inner circle of people included women
- He was approachable—he signalled freedom of access to his time and attention
- Jesus engaged in candid conversations with the women he knew
- In response to a parent’s pain, there was no discrimination between daughters and sons
- In her time, the haemorrhaging woman was judged to be unclean. Jesus ignored the ritual purity laws and dignified her in spite of her stigma
- Outside the tomb in the early morning light, Mary recognized the sound of Jesus’ voice—the voice of the one who had taken time to be her teacher
- At a most critical time in Christian history, Jesus revealed himself first to a woman
- In a culture that did not recognize a woman’s testimony in a court of law, Jesus trusted Mary to be the first person to spread the resurrection message

In his time, Jesus elevated women to a new level of life. He bestowed dignity on the female gender in a cultural context where women were repressed and assumed to be inferior. He addressed their injustice with his “let’s make life right” behaviour.

In our times, the structures in democratic and secular societies are leading the way in addressing the social injustices faced by women. It is the Charter of Rights legislation, employment laws, human rights tribunals and the decisions of the courts that are serving as the primary advocates for gender equality.

The troubling question the people of God face is: “If Jesus’ mission on earth in his time is our mission on earth in our time,” what attitudes and actions should we express toward women in these times?

Think about specific women in your various relationships and social sectors: family, friends, neighbours, community, church, work, politics, society at large and the global scene. Choose a particular category or two that captures your attention.

- As a woman, what attitudes and actions will address injustice with *your* 'make life right' behaviour.
- As a man, what attitudes and actions will Address injustice with *your* 'make life right' behaviour.

Prayers of Response

Focus first on your home country

Extend your reach to a global focus

3. EMBRACING THE EXCLUDED

Although Christians around the globe look at Jesus through various lenses, the dominant lens is to view Jesus as “Saviour.” He is the Son of God who came to earth to die on the cross, to forgive people of their sins and be the Saviour of the world.

In this series, we affirm Jesus as the divine Son of God and, at the same time, we celebrate his humanity as the ultimate expression of how life is best lived. Jesus is both divine and human—a unique and one-time-only revelation. In God’s design, Jesus’ humanity is graced with divine presence that makes him sacred and accessible for people everywhere. Regrettably, many who emphasize Jesus’ divinity tend to limit the importance of his humanity. And those who most appreciate Jesus’ humanity tend to downplay his divinity.

When we embrace Jesus as both divine and human, and seek to understand him through a justice lens, there is a double endorsement. Jesus’ divinity ratifies both his justice teachings and his behavioural practices. And his humanity elevates his life as the example of the best of justice behaviour.

Consequently, when we look at how Jesus treated lepers, women and children, we can understand how God views marginalized people and how they can best be treated in our time. Jesus—showing us how to live and how to love.

Historical Dilemma: Children

People in New Testament times were as influenced by the norms of culture as we are in ours. And in Jesus’ day, the culture and customs were blatantly patriarchal. Men ruled on all fronts. As heads of households, men made all the decisions. If husbands didn’t have the only word, they had the final word. The authority of fathers was unquestioned. Sons were far more significant than daughters, especially as the first-born child in a family.

Of course, children were still loved by their families. Brothers and sisters played games and argued with each other. They raced and wrestled. They giggled and cried, and as children do. But as children, they were subjected to the cultural practices of the day. There was a utilitarian set of assumptions. Wives were to fulfill the function of producing a male heir for the husband. Children were expected to provide economic support for the family. They were the social safety net for parents in their old age.

Childhood was a stage of life to be obedient to parents and prepare to become a responsible adult. Children were not invited to dream about what they could become.

Beyond participation in their families, children were socially insignificant. They were cultural nobodies. Their voices didn't count. Consequently, when Jesus miraculously fed the 5,000, the women and the children were excluded from the count.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

*Orient your spirit in a searching mode,
Be attentive in reading,
Listen for God's voice,
Be faithful in living.*

Rather than beginning his incarnation as a grown adult, Jesus began his life on earth as a baby like the rest of us. His childhood years with Mary, Joseph and the rest of his family bestowed inherent dignity on the ages and stages of children. Later in his life, Jesus was child-friendly. He enjoyed children and blessed them.

- Read the following passages in silence. Read slowly and listen for God's voice
- Read the passages again out loud
- Now put yourself into the situations described in the story
 - Describe how the children must have felt
 - Describe how the disciples and the adults looking on must have felt
- In silence, make a mental list of the names of children who come to mind
- Read the passages again out loud
- Now, speak the names of children who come to your mind
- Offer sentence prayers on behalf of the children named

Jesus Blesses Little Children

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:15-17).

True Greatness

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!" (Matthew 18:1-7).

Current Challenges

Jesus treats children in ways that challenge the cultural norms. Rather than excluding them, Jesus embraces them. Rather than pushing them to the edges of life like his disciples, Jesus brings children to the center stage.

Turning societal norms upside down, Jesus chides his disciples: *“Let the children teach you. Don’t exclude them. Learn from them.”*

“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

- What is Jesus teaching us here? In what ways should we be like children in order to be welcomed into God’s kingdom—God’s family?

Children are fragile and vulnerable. Jesus warns us to protect them, and in particular not to be “stumbling block.” There are consequences if we lead them astray.

- In their relationships with adults, what obstacles and stumbling blocks do children face? How can adults lead children astray?
 - Thinking about the needs of children, what protections do children need from adults in these times?
 - Complete the sentence: “People who champion children
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Prayers of Response

Focus first on your home country

Extend your reach to a global focus

SECTION B

JESUS AND JUSTICE: CHALLENGING CULTURAL PRACTICES

Justice is a concept with many meanings. It is too multi-dimensional to be reduced to a single dictionary definition.

There is *legal/courtroom justice*: In democratic societies and many other cultures there is an assumption that “you get what you deserve.” Virtue is rewarded, evil is punished and criminals are brought to justice. They get their “just desserts” and are penalized according to the law as guilty offenders. The justice system holds court, and penalties are meted out to fit the crime.

There is *ethical/human-rights justice*: Ethical justice gives a different meaning to “you get what you deserve.” In the moral equation that links basic rights with being a human being, individuals are inherently worthy to receive benefits from their society. Citizens thereby have rights to education, health care and opportunities for employment that make human dignity possible. A society is a “just society” when equitable access to the advantages and benefits of the nation are available to all. Social-justice advocates contend that these same human rights and equality principles should be extended to all global citizens.

There is *divine/God’s justice*: God’s justice embraces measures of both legal and ethical justice. In some senses, people who disregard God’s laws of life get their “just desserts.” Selfishness eventually inflicts its own punishment. Unrestrained greed guarantees disdain and even revenge from those who are exploited. Deceit may lead to short-term gain but guarantees long-term pain. God’s moral equation lifts life from the noble level of bestowing equal rights on all creation to the human experience of both loving and being loved. God’s vision for a just creation sees people in right relationships with each other. Love protects the vulnerable, and offers the right to fail and the freedom to begin again. The ethic of love and the practice of “loving your neighbour as yourself” are at the root of God’s vision for a just creation. The tenacity of God’s love refuses to accept injustice.

In the spiritual realm, the distinctive quality of divine justice is that we don’t get what we deserve. Instead of jail time, we get forgiveness. Rather than being forever guilty we are granted a clean slate—a kind of clemency. We are invited to walk alongside Jesus who has already showed us how to live and how to love. As people who are forgiven and loved, God enables us to live right and participate in making life right with others.

1. REJECTING RACISM

Racism is a life-denying force, a weapon of injustice. It is a “sin structure” that denies people opportunities to stand as equals. Racism demeans its victims and vetoes their true humanity. Its abusive power condemns people to ethnic prisons and social-class ghettos. Racism locks the doors to desirable employment, limits relationships and consigns people to economic impoverishment. In history’s darkest hours, racism has generated death squads and justified “ethnic cleansing” and genocide. And although we cannot allow ourselves to countenance such horrors, if we are honest, there are traces of this life-denying disease in all of us. We silently feel that we are superior to someone somewhere based on our race, nationality, culture or personal pride.

Historical Dilemma: Racism

Racism is rooted in a sense of racial superiority, which makes people assume they have the right to control and abuse “the other.”

In Jesus’ day, expressions of racism were both overt and approved. Samaritans were the recipients of the prejudice and discrimination. They lived in the region of Samaria, the ancient northern kingdom of Israel. In the centuries prior to Jesus’ birth, the Samaritans were the offspring of intermarriages with Assyrians and Hebrews. They were the half-breeds—a mongrel mix of ethnic impurity. Jews felt that the racial purity of the Samaritans was stained. Consequently, they were culturally culled from those who were ethnically pure. The social fallout generated animosity between the Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus understood the prevailing cultural practices—the stereotyping and the segregation. The unnamed Samaritan woman at the well also knew her place—“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” she asked (see John 4:9). Still, in one purposeful, but quiet, move toward an unnamed Samaritan woman, Jesus countered culture and broke the barriers of both racial bigotry and gender discrimination.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

*Acknowledge we can resist God’s will and ways,
Confess that we are influenced by the culture around us,
Permit knowledge to evangelize our behaviour,
Allow mystery to capture our attention.*

- Read the story silently, focusing on the dynamics between Jesus and the woman
- Read the story again, this time audibly. Imagine yourself as an on-site observer. Listen carefully to the dialogue between the woman and Jesus
- Resisting the temptation to spiritualize the encounter, attempt to get inside the feelings of the Samaritan woman. Reflect on her self-image as she arrived at the well, then ponder the impact of the event on the woman and attempt to **describe the feelings she must have had** as she left Jesus and walked away from the well
- If you could **hear the woman's inner thoughts** as she walked down the road, what do you think she would have said to herself?
- Compare your insights and comments with others in the group

Jesus and the Woman of Samaria

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world” (John 4:1-42).

Current Challenges

- Class-structure superiority pervades the human landscape. The sense of being superior is most often triggered when we compare ourselves to others and we think “I’m better than you.” The triggering points include family history, economic standing, intelligence levels, educational achievement, occupation status, spiritual maturity, social skills, skin colour and ethnicity. Identify one or two of the triggering points where, if you are honest, you are vulnerable to feeling superior to others. Why do you think you feel that way? How does feeling superior affect your behaviour? What do you think you can do to alter your attitudes and vulnerability?
- The Samaritan woman began the day with a tarnished reputation. Later in the day she was the talk of the town in a different way. What do you think the townspeople said about her following her encounter with Jesus? If you had listened in on the disciples’ conversation over their evening meal, what comments do you think you would have heard?
- The Holocaust, apartheid, the killing fields of Cambodia, the Rwandan genocide, the Darfur scandal and other racially motivated horrors have disgraced our human landscape and marred God’s creation. We tend to feel helpless. However, if silence and disengagement are not options in these situations, what can we do? Individually? Collectively?

Prayers of Response

Focus first on your home country

Extend your reach to a global focus



2. DIGNIFYING SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS

“Who is my neighbour?” is a troublesome and complex question. The neighbour dilemma is especially thorny when it is linked to justice issues that involve a sense of responsibility for other people’s predicaments. The encounter between Jesus and the lawyer that prompted the parable of the Good Samaritan is a starting place for us to unravel the complexities (see Luke 10:25-37).

Let’s be clear. In both Old Testament and New Testament terms, “loving your neighbour as yourself” is not about cultivating the art of reciprocal living. The “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” maxim doesn’t qualify. If you invite me to your house for dinner and I reciprocate by inviting you to my house, I still fall short. Instead, it is helpful for us to define neighbours with an external viewfinder. Specifically, neighbours are “*anyone within reach of our ‘make a difference’ compassion.*” Neighbours are not just anyone from anywhere. They are people within tangible reach of our compassion. The challenge from Jesus is to realize how widely our compassion can reach.

- *Look closely:* Understand “neighbours” as people you know by name. Start with family and extend to friends. Draw the circle to include people who live nearby, colleagues in your workplace and church community. Extend the reach to relationships that had meaning in the past and be ready to respond to those who are yet to appear in your life.
- *Reach beyond self-interest:* Self-interest-only living is for whiners. If the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us anything, it is that self-interest is exchanged for the best interests of “the other.” The Christian meaning of neighbour turns our eyes and ears outward.
- *Do something global:* When the pursuit of justice is linked with Jesus’ vision for living right and making life right with others, loving our global neighbours is non-negotiable. Global neighbours are informed. They pray intelligently, give money strategically, defend human rights and advocate for justice beyond their national borders.

Historical Dilemma: Neighbours

History offers us many reasons to celebrate but it is also marked with a lack of neighbourliness that has scarred our humanity with exploitation and abuse. The slave trade is a reminder of how racist and cruel people can be toward “the other.”

The Island of Goree is situated a few kilometres off the shoreline of Dakar, Senegal, in West Africa. Today, the island is a tourist attraction that features the architecture of Portuguese, Dutch and French conquerors. But historically, Goree was a slave-trade prison compound. It was one of the transit centers where black African captives were gathered and locked up until they were shipped off to the New World. Those who survived the journey became commodities to serve the economic interests of plantation owners and other people with social power.

Today is different. The United States of America has elected a gifted black man as its president. But when you connect the cultural dots to the events of history, consequences still prevail. Walk the streets of Savannah, Georgia, and observe the painful effects of the legacy from the past. Hotel managers are white and service staff are African Americans. Business owners are white and cashiers are black. The wealthy are white and most often the poor are black. Tourists are invited to tour plantations to see how life used to be, but it is all too evident that in many ways the class structure and the discrimination of the past continues.

The historical and cultural struggle of indigenous people groups continues in other developed countries as well. Aboriginal Peoples in Canada and Australia, Indians in South American countries and Palestinians in Israel struggle daily with discrimination and repression. They live as second-class citizens.

Jesus lived in a class-structure culture where discrimination was rampant. Religious leaders were part of the upper-class structure. Samaritans were victims of discrimination. Full participation in the community of faith was restricted to the members of one ethnic family. And in the midst of that social milieu, Jesus was a cultural disrupter.

During his years of ministry, Jesus attained some social prominence. There was countryside talk about this new prophet. Jesus’ teaching caused a stir. His miracles made headlines. Messiah rumours began to circulate. Jesus was more careful and calculating than in previous days. And again, he can be found in a public forum, this time interacting with a lawyer.

In the biblical account, it is the lawyer who asks the first question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus fields the question with a two-part response. “What is written in the Law? What do you read there?” Taking the bait and seeing an opportunity to parade his knowledge of Scripture, the lawyer recites the right answer. Displaying keen intellect, the lawyer and Jesus continue their verbal sparring. Jesus then seizes the situation for a remarkable teaching moment by telling a story about the Good Samaritan.

The impact of the parable is profound. Jesus’ own people are the target audience. His cultural inheritance makes him fully aware of the ethnic tension between the Hebrew people and the Samaritans. He turns the prevailing social status upside down. The upper-caste priests and the Levite temple custodians are portrayed as the villains. The inferior-caste Samaritans are applauded for their superior moral behaviour.

Jesus’ words liberate the Samaritans from their second-class status. His parable confronts racial prejudice, elevates the marginalized and endorses religious practices outside of tabernacle rituals. In a radical fashion, the doors to the community of faith are opened to more than just one ethnic people. The prevailing notion that God loves one race or class more than another is defeated. Jesus’ actions announce that all peoples are chosen and loved by God. The cultural and ethnic containment of faith is shattered. The encounter is a mighty blow to the cultural status quo.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

Pray together:

*God, enlighten our memories to avoid errors from the past,
Enliven our consciences to do what is right in the present,
Shape our character to guide our conduct in the future.*

- Involve three people, with one as the moderator, to read the connecting phrases in the text. Identify a second person in the group to read the lawyer’s script and another person to read Jesus’ words. Listen carefully as the text is read out loud
- Without responding, take time to reflect in silence
- Have the three people re-read the encounter. As they do so, identify one observation to share with the group
- Share your observations with each other

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:25-37).

Current Challenges

- Responding to the needs of neighbours is inconvenient and it can be costly. “Loving your neighbour” involves the precious currencies of both time and money. Paradoxically, it is often the case that people who have time do not have money and those with money often lack time. Which currency do you value more? Between time and money, which is easier for you to release?
- Think about your neighbours. Write down names and identify people in three categories: 1) People close by—people you know by name; 2) People you sometimes think about—people you read about or hear about on television; people who used to live close to you but have moved away; people who catch your attention in difficult situations; people who live beyond your self-interest but keep entering your awareness; 3) Global neighbours—people in countries who sometimes capture your long-distance interest and compassion. Choose a person who is struggling. Identify a situation that arouses your compassion. Decide to do something tangible to express your concern.
- Reflect on the culture in which you live. Identify people groups—particularly second-class citizens who are subjected to social, sexual or religious stigma. What expressions of “good-neighbour” behaviour will put a smile on their faces? What initiatives can lead to their social benefit?

- Jesus' parable focuses on individual care. The victim is rescued by the Samaritan. A deeper look reveals systemic social structures affecting the behaviour of the priest and the Levite. Identify organizations that work with some of the people groups you named in the previous question. Invite a representative from an organization to present their work to your group; make an appointment to visit their offices; consider becoming a volunteer and joining their causes.

Prayers of Response

Focus first on your home country

Extend your reach to a global focus

3. RISKING ONE'S REPUTATION

Jesus' equation for living fully is startling:

Express love for God, yourself and others and you will live;

Refuse to express love for God, yourself and others and you will die.

In other words, living without loving is like committing suicide in slow motion. And the premise of this series of studies is that Jesus does not just teach solid theory, but his life expresses best how to live and love. Jesus repeatedly demonstrates that seeking justice for "the other" is an expression of love.

We may not be surprised to see Jesus defend Samaritans and lobby for the dignity of those who are excluded from main-street living. However, we are inclined to take a second look when we see Jesus spending time with prostitutes and drunkards. Having compassion for people who live in sin is one matter, but inviting them into his circle of friends is shocking (see Luke 7:34). Then again, Jesus' actions are only surprising until we look more closely at his overall approach to people. Jesus reached out repeatedly beyond the norms of social convention. His love for his neighbours extended to *anyone within reach of his "make-a-difference" compassion*.

Historical Dilemma: Bad Reputations

Tax collectors, women with tainted reputations and Pharisees are the lead characters in the scriptural accounts that follow. The tax collectors in Jesus' time make today's revenue assessors who play by the rules look benevolent. In New Testament times, the tax collectors' tactics were more like extortion. Not only were they collaborators with a foreign power to collect money to pay the Romans, they also had reputations for oppressing the poor for personal gain.

Illicit sexuality has always been an easy target for critics. The Law of Moses not only forbade prostitution but condoned stoning guilty parties (Leviticus 19:29; Deuteronomy 22:21; John 8:2-11). The cultural climate made it easy to point fingers at what continues to be labelled "the world's oldest profession." In Jesus' time, women were still considered acquisitions and often owned as property.

The Pharisees were part of the religious establishment of the day. Although they had minority membership in the courts of the Sanhedrin, their popularity with the people reinforced their religious authority. As keepers of both the written and oral Law attributed to Moses, they pronounced and monitored what was religiously right. Their agenda was to defend the faith and entrench the Mosaic religious traditions. In their self-perceptions, they had no need for a spiritual doctor.

Jesus entered this cultural climate with another agenda. Rather than distancing himself from tax collectors, he recruited one of these prominent sinners to join his troupe. Instead of pointing an accusing finger at women with stained reputations, Jesus welcomed them into his presence. His mission-minded drive overruled his concern to protect his reputation. Jesus was a cultural boundary breaker. But it was his vision for the spiritually sick that motivated him to challenge the religious authorities and tangle with their views about what was religiously right.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

*Let God's grace draw you close,
Let God's truth inspire you,
Let's God's love excite you.*

- Read the three texts consecutively in silence and without comment
- Have someone read the texts a second time out loud. Focus on how Jesus related to the tax collectors and women
- Read the text a third time, again out loud. This time, focus on how Jesus responded to the Pharisees in the texts
- Write down your primary impressions
- Discuss your impressions with each other

The Call of Matthew

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matthew 9:9-13).

A Sinful Woman Forgiven

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried

them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:36-50).

Actions Overrule Words

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him (Matthew 21:28-32).

Current Challenges

- *Guarding my reputation:* In his “keep your distance—don’t touch” world, Jesus allowed a woman to anoint his feet and use her hair for a towel. While confronting the religious establishment who denied their own sinfulness, he readily associated with sinners and commended their brand of spirituality. Jesus crossed lines that generated rumours that damaged his reputation. Most of us guard our reputations with a “safety first” strategy. What forces and factors keep us from taking more relational risks, living more adventurously or serving more creatively?
- *Human trafficking:* These passages invite a focus on the current plight of sex workers and others in today’s world who are subjected to human trafficking.

“Trafficking in persons includes the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.” (Definition from United Nations Protocol 2000)

Human trafficking is a flourishing modern-day form of slavery which The Salvation Army seeks to oppose across the world. Women and children are the most frequent sufferers of this injustice. Commercial exploitation is most often related to the sex industry, factory sweatshops, domestic servitude, agricultural labour and debt bondage.

Question: Look back at Jesus in the above encounters. Assess his attitudes and actions. What can we learn from his example that can inform our own responses and practices to human trafficking?

For further information and suggestions for responding to human trafficking, check the International Social Justice Commission link on the international Salvation Army website: www.salvationarmy.org

Prayers of Response

Focus first on your home country

Extend your reach to a global focus

SECTION C

JESUS AND JUSTICE: CONFRONTING THE POWERFUL

As we transition into the second half of this series, a candid focus on the human costs and consequences of injustice is in order. We are challenged by the reality that injustice has both individual and social dimensions. We know that personal injustice is often the consequence of structural injustice and that every social issue has a human face. We are reminded that ...

WHEN: Eight-year-olds cannot read,
Families cannot drink water without getting sick,
HIV-positive women cannot protect their newborn babies,
Funerals displace preventable deaths,

WHEN: Children go to bed hungry seven nights a week,
Parents bury their children because they died of malaria,
Women, young girls and boys are exploited as sex slaves,
Workers labour for scandalous wages to fashion designer clothes,

WHEN: The earth is abused without regard for future generations,
Skin colour and social status padlock doors of opportunity,
The healthy and educated cannot use their strengths to work,

WHEN: The righteous and holy disregard the impoverished and unclean,
God's compassion is closeted in sanctuaries and temples,
The strong and the privileged disregard the weak and the oppressed,

THEN: Injustice rules,
Countless lives are squandered,
Our shared humanity is disgraced,
And darkness prevails.

1. CHALLENGING UNJUST BEHAVIOUR

Seeking justice is a struggle. We often resign ourselves to the reality that some justice is better than no justice. We console ourselves with the fact that more justice is better than less justice. But we hang on with hope, believing that full justice is attainable. Only then will we be able to celebrate with others as they experience sustainable justice. As followers of Jesus, our vision for a more just world is dependent on two primary “delivery systems”: social and spiritual.

Social Order Justice: Social order is a mark of a healthy society—and a healthy society commits to the well-being of all its citizens. It is social order, including citizen rights and responsibilities that make the prospect of social justice a possibility. In civil societies, the pursuit of justice is the mandate of public policy.

As previously noted, a just social order embeds *ethical/human-rights justice* in a culture. Acknowledging the differing capacities between more-developed and less-developed countries, the goal is equitable access for all peoples to the benefits of the nation. Among their other responsibilities, politicians exist to ensure the right of access to education, health care and services such as safe water. Political corruption is not tolerated.

Strategies to ensure an economy that can support the livelihood of families are an essential priority. Banks keep money in circulation. Although businesses may be profit-motivated, their social contribution is to provide services and products that generate jobs. Creating space for entrepreneurial innovation that challenges the status quo is the norm. Competition generates high performance.

Making space for ethnic diversity and other expressions of difference includes protecting the vulnerable in communities. Resources are allocated so the unemployed can pursue vocational retraining, the disabled are sheltered with taxation income and welfare programs are funded. When proper societal structures are in place, the resulting social order delivers justice for all.

Spiritual Transformation Justice: When God’s people get it right, they bring a distinctive contribution to the justice table. Even though followers of Jesus do not have sole access to human virtue or an exclusive claim on being principled people, they have two advantages: Christians have Scripture to help them discern God’s will and ways for themselves and others; and they have the historical Jesus who demonstrated the best of what human life can and should be. Have no illusions, followers of Jesus will never duplicate the full beauty and wisdom of the Christ of history. But their faith points them in the right direction.

The understanding they gain from Scripture and their relationship with God's Spirit can enable them to translate their convictions into compassionate behaviour that serves the interests of others.

Circumstances will always influence the responses of God's people. But personal concerns, self-interest and material gain will not have the final word. Christians will champion the marginalized and be driven by the ethic of love. Right relationships will rule the day. Love will prevail. Justice will trump injustice. And quietly, Christians will know that God has forgiven and restored them—made them better people than they ever would have been on their own. And regardless of their beliefs, power-brokers who have a vision for a just social order will welcome the participation of people of faith.

Historical Dilemma: Sinners

Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus was not one of his crafted parables. This real-life exchange was with a walking, thinking, feeling, innovative, but conniving, individual. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus was part of the Roman revenue machine that should have been contributing to social order and justice for all.

The Jewish cultural consensus was clear. Tax collectors were sinners. They were scoundrels on a number of counts. Working for the Romans was considered collaboration with the enemy. This perception was reinforced by the Roman practice of selling tax-collecting franchises to the highest bidder. Tax collectors could use whatever tactics necessary to extract all they could from the populace, so long as they paid their quota to the Roman authorities.

Spiritually speaking, tax collectors were judged as people who sold themselves to a life of sin and deliberate disregard for God's ways.

Zacchaeus was rich at the expense of others and socially marginalized. He was considered the chief of sinners. Given the circumstances, Jesus was criticised for his lack of judgement. Here he was having a lavish meal with a rich sinner.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

*Speak to yourself like no one else is listening,
Listen to others like no one else is listening.*

- Read the story in unison as a group
- In silence, reflect on your first impressions

- Continue in silence. This time read the story looking carefully at Zacchaeus' behaviour
- Write down what captures your attention about Zacchaeus
- Continuing in silence, read the story a third time, looking carefully at Jesus' behaviour
- Write down what captures your attention about Jesus
- Share your written insights with each other

Jesus and Zacchaeus

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:1-10).

Current Challenges

- Sharing a meal in someone else's home can be revealing. There is a sense that you do not really know someone until you have spent time with them in their home. Their style of hospitality, pictures of their family, art on the walls, an ambiance of contentment or tension all speak to people's private reality. Their personal space reveals an aspect of their true selves not on display in their workplace. Imagine what Zacchaeus' home was like. Project yourself into Zacchaeus and Jesus' conversation around the table. How would you describe the tone of their talk? The results indicate that at some point Jesus challenged Zacchaeus' practices. What do you think was the focus of their interaction?
- The encounter between Zacchaeus and Jesus generated two primary outcomes: one was social and the other was spiritual. Zacchaeus reordered his public behaviour. He became compassionate toward the poor and started sharing his riches. He admitted his coercive tactics and committed to generous restitution. Spiritually, Zacchaeus experienced forgiveness and salvation. Jesus' mission to seek and rescue the spiritually lost was fulfilled in two essential ways. Zacchaeus restored his relationship with the God who loved him and the people he cheated experienced just treatment. Think about the impact on the people who lived in Jericho. What rumours must have circulated in the community? What did people start saying about both Zacchaeus and Jesus?

- Think about your own community: neighbours, friends, church associates, work colleagues. What rumours would you like them to hear about you? If you could receive a “faith compliment” from your friends or work colleagues, what would you like to hear them say? What would you like people in the community to say about your church?
- Even the thought of paying taxes can fill a sunny day with clouds. At tax time, feeling the tension between the legal right of tax avoidance and the illegal temptation of tax evasion is common. But in most societies, taxation is what makes social order possible. Focus on your own community. If you had control over political policy in your community, which two or three social sectors would receive priority tax resources?

Prayers of Response

Focus first on your home country

Extend your reach to a global focus

2. CONFRONTING THE SPIRITUALLY ARROGANT

The ultimate expression of spiritual arrogance is self-righteousness. The self-righteous are the “good” people. They have only one point of view. They hear with one ear and see with one eye. They are more inclined to pronounce than to listen. The closed systems they live in predispose them to judge others. And they are ready to impose their will and ways whether others agree with them or not.

It would be a mistake to limit self-righteousness to the realm of religion. Advocates for the environment, personal prerogative sexuality, anti-smoking, pro-life and anti-abortion can all exhibit the same one-sided clamour for their cause. That doesn't mean the self-righteous do not have virtues to admire. They can be counted on to stand up for their convictions, and often their intentions are honourable. Still, if you hold different views and are the recipient of their judgement, the self-righteous are tough to love.

Historical Dilemma: Self-Righteousness

Jesus' agenda put him at odds with the self-righteousness of the religious elite. The Pharisees and the scribes were the religious power people of the day. They had social standing and spiritual authority. The Pharisees were a small but influential group who upheld the standards of the Law and ritual purity. They were scholars who were well informed and respected by the people. The scribes were also part of the religious establishment. They dominated the hierarchy of the priests who supervised the temple worship. Together the scribes and Pharisees comprised the Sanhedrin, which functioned as the Jewish court system. Accordingly, they were not just public teachers and interpreters of the religious Law, they also served as judges to enforce the laws of the state.

In that Mosaic tradition, the scribes and Pharisees had both political power and religious stature. Jesus' progressive teaching, his open critique of their brand of righteousness and his increasing popularity with the people put him on a crash course with the existing power structure (see Matthew 5:20). Jesus refused to bless their restrictive application of Mosaic Law and their pervasive control over the Israelites. Compared to Jesus' example of how to love God and serve your neighbour, the legalism of the scribes and Pharisees amounted to religious oppression. And oppression was what Jesus lived to liberate.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

*Acknowledge where you are indifferent and cast it aside,
Discern where your spirit is quiet when it should be disturbed,
Create space for passion to reside in your soul.*

- Read the section on “Sabbath Standards” silently
 - Read the passage again silently, with a focus on the Pharisees
 - Write down your observations about the Pharisees
 - Read the passage a third time silently, with a focus on Jesus
 - Write down your observations on Jesus’ actions
 - Share your observations, contrasting the Pharisees and Jesus
-
- Now read the section on “Hypocrisy Denounced” out loud
 - Take a few moments to project yourself into the crowd. Prepare to listen to Jesus’ outburst as a member of the crowd or as one of the disciples
 - Read the text again out loud. What is the strongest message you hear?
 - Share your message with others in the group

Sabbath Standards

One Sabbath while Jesus was going through the grain fields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” Jesus answered, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?” Then he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath ... On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come and stand here.” He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” After looking around at all of them, he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus (Luke 6:1-11).

Hypocrisy Denounced

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach ...

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 23:1-3, 23-28).

Current Challenges

- Religion that majors on minors is oppressive. When faith is choked by legalism, instead of being the aroma of life, it smells and tastes like death. According to Jesus, some religious matters—such as justice, mercy and faith—are more important than others. What checks and balances can we put in place to keep us focused on spiritual priorities and protect us from diversions into spiritual wastelands?
- Who do you associate with religious power? Where should we look for our sources of religious authority? How can we protect ourselves from the abuses of misguided religious power? Who has the responsibility to keep religious leaders accountable?
- The pretence of godliness is another route to religious oppression. And while we all need measures of grace and mercy, unless we attempt to live the life of faith, we are imposters. Reflect back on your journey of faith. Identify times when how you lived your faith energized you and when you felt liberated to live as God created you to live. Share a story to illustrate.

Prayers of Response

Focus first on your home country

Extend your reach to a global focus

3. REORDERING POLITICAL POWER

The interface between politics and religion has a long history. In many instances, the mix has been explosive. In Old Testament times, the Jewish people were ruled by the laws of the Torah. The commandment to “love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself” was part of Scripture, but considered inadequate to inform all the dilemmas involved in living a godly life. As a theocracy, the Mosaic religious Law was the societal standard.

No political system is perfect. Many Islamic republics institute religious repression. Some monarchies and dictatorships are intolerant to religious diversity. Marxism and communism remove social space for God and replace it with atheism. Even democratic societies are pressed with the evolving will of the people and their perpetually changing beliefs and preferred behaviours.

Historical Dilemma: Power and Authority

Political and religious tensions surrounded Jesus in his day. In the predicament conveyed in Mark 12, Jesus was being monitored with the intent to entrap him into transgressing either civil law or religious law. The Pharisees were looking for a reason to accuse him. So were the Herodians, representatives of King Herod who controlled the secular state of Galilee on behalf of Rome. Despite their differences, the two groups were ready to collaborate if it meant finding fault with Jesus. With veiled motives, they employed pretence and flattery in an attempt to trick Jesus.

The encounter recorded in Matthew 20 launches us into the dilemma of how political leaders should use their power and authority. The situation reveals how confused the disciples were about the nature of the “kingdom” that Jesus was establishing. James and John were thinking about their future positions in Jesus’ new government order. Rather than making a personal appeal to be the next prime minister and director of finance, they hid behind their mother who made the request to Jesus on their behalf. The other disciples were not impressed. They began squabbling among themselves. Jesus had heard enough. He gathered his disciples around him for a teachable moment. Jesus’ tone was stern. The implications were startling. His directive was decisive: **“It will not be so among you.”**

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

*Read for information,
Meditate for understanding,
Contemplate for restoration,
Implement for faithful living.*

- Read the two passages consecutively out loud
- Read the Mark passage about paying taxes out loud again, this time putting yourself in Jesus' position
- How do you think you would have felt? What might you have said?
- Now transition back to the Matthew passage and read it out loud. Listen carefully. Jesus makes a number of distinct statements. Identify a single statement that captures your attention
- Share your observation with others in the group and comment on why it is significant to you

The Question about Paying Taxes

Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it." And they brought one. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Jesus said to them, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him (Mark 12:13-17).

The Request of the Mother of James and John

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."

When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:20-28).

Current Challenges

- Jesus' brilliant response to his adversaries indicated that his followers must fulfill their obligations to both God and the state: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." The directive invites dual citizenship: be a citizen of the kingdom of God and a citizen of your country. Identify areas of life where God's laws and government laws reinforce each other. Where can the two conflict?
- A primary role of government is to provide equitable services and keep social order. Identify a social segment of the population that has specific needs but has been left out of the political planning in your community/city. Suggest recommendations that would address the vulnerabilities of those who are ignored
- Jesus critiques the methods and priorities of the governing rulers in his day: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant." The message is clear: political power is to be used to serve. Rather than seeking personal gain, politicians are to use their authority over people to serve the best interests of the people in their constituencies. What mechanisms are in place and what additional systems are needed to keep politicians accountable?
- God's aspiration for equity and justice transcends all political ideologies. The responsibility to seek justice is not the domain of any race or creed. Neither is the practice of pursuing justice the exclusive right of any nation or culture. Create a list of countries that currently have reputations for ignoring human rights. Identify their systems of government. Identify their leaders by name. Create and share a prayer list that invites people to become aware and intercede. Keep open to ideas that call for intervention

Prayers of Response

Focus first on your home country

Extend your reach to a global focus



SECTION D

JESUS AND JUSTICE: ADVOCATING FOR THE OPPRESSED

The two most consequential factors in anyone's life are where are you born and who is your family. The profound influence of one's family and the inescapable impact of one's geography are enormous. Yet, no one has any control over either reality. Still, these two forces wield their power in determining people's economic status, social standing and spiritual destiny. If you are born into a Muslim or Christian family, in all probability, you will embrace that Muslim or Christian religious identity. If you are born poor in a country that ranks on the bottom rungs of the human-development index, unless your family is economically privileged, your destiny sentences you to live in poverty.

This scenario makes it sound as though people's lives are predetermined. Certainly, there are exceptions. Individuals can choose to reject their religious heritage or convert to another faith. Some who are born in poverty can advance their social standing. A few exceptions are able to transcend their beginnings and become the next generation of change-agent leaders. However, the majority of the world's six billion people are bound by life's circumstances.

Why are people economically poor? Are they lazy? Intellectually inferior? Socially inept? Are the poor to be blamed for their plight or praised for their heroic efforts to survive? The response below is not complete but it is a beginning.

If you are born in Sierra Leone, Malawi, Burundi, Bangladesh, Haiti, Vietnam, Palestine, or parts of Indonesia and India, your birthright most likely ensures that you are economically poor. Though no fault of your own, if you enter a caste-system culture without the privileges of being a member of a "high caste," your lack of social standing will lead to deprivation and perpetual poverty. When people are forced to live without choices and resources, they suffer. Lack of access to education, health care, daily food and safe water hampers basic development and crushes the human spirit. Human potential is squandered and opportunities for meaningful employment are lost. Victims of abuse, corruption and violence also live in the grip of devastating poverty.

Turning a blind eye to the causal factors that victimize populations is not what is being proposed. Political corruption that channels wealth to abusive leaders must be stopped and penalized. Incompetent governance needs to be named and challenged. Repressive warlords must be restrained and removed from power. Leaders must be held responsible for the well-being of their people.

Still, overseas development funds need to be allocated to less-developed nations that can demonstrate quality program standards and accountability for performance. Regardless of the complexity, the prevailing global inequity between the more-developed and less-developed nations demands strategic and compassionate responses. Otherwise, we become indifferent to human-rights disgraces and content with systemic injustice.

Why are people spiritually poor? Are they inherently self-willed? Conditioned to be autonomous? Along the way, have they been damaged by their experiences with religion and religious people?

On the issue of spiritual poverty, we must be careful not to oversimplify what is profoundly complex. Still, there are primary and secondary causes. Many Christian theologians point back to the Garden of Eden and link spiritual poverty with an inherited human disposition for sin and disobedience. Who would deny that there is a human bias to be self-willed and autonomous?

In our search for the reasons of spiritual poverty, the questions of “Who is your family?” and “Where are you born?” are also predominant causal factors. The role of religion in every family is a strong indicator of how the next generation will respond to issues of faith. If parents are serious believers and live in ways that enrich the family’s spiritual experience, the children will be influenced by their inheritance. The absence of family faith leaves children vulnerable and spiritually disadvantaged.

One’s geographic and cultural inheritance is also a strong predictor for how people perceive the role of the spiritual in their lives. If you are born in an Islamic republic, in all likelihood you will be Muslim. Those born in the Philippines or South America will probably claim a Christian Catholic identity. In nations that have strong multi-faith populations or a predominance of Protestants and Catholics, the family background will play a strong role in how individuals establish and express their religious beliefs.

The absence of spiritual awareness can lead to lifelong journeys of spiritual poverty. Rejecting God’s love, denying his truth and ignoring the consequences of sin are all detrimental to one’s spiritual well-being.

Jesus’ mission is captured in a single vision with two dimensions. His hope for a restored humanity envisions well-being for people who are *spiritually poor* and people who are *socially poor*.

1.

1. ADVOCATING FOR THE POOR

Jesus was an advocate for spiritual and social well-being. This was not an afterthought for Jesus, but rather the heart of his ministry. In his final days with his disciples, Jesus called himself as an “advocate” and also promised to send them another, the Holy Spirit. The good news for all of us is that Jesus continues to advocate on our behalf:

“I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1).

Historical Dilemma: Poverty

The predicament of the poor was an ongoing concern in Jesus’ life. Striking evidence of his bias for the poor was illustrated during a visit to Simon the leper’s home. A woman intruded on the conversation with a jar of expensive ointment in hand and began applying it to Jesus’ head. Some of the guests suggested the money spent on the ointment should have been given to the poor instead. Jesus affirms the women’s good intentions and chides her critics: “You will always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish” (Mark 14:7). The incident highlights the difficult balance between spending money on celebrations and remembering the enduring needs of the poor.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

Resist the temptation to block out what may be different from your past understanding. Discern what is good and right so that your spiritual insight can guide your future aspirations.

The two passages cited below contrast with each other. The first invites us to celebrate with the poor and the second obligates us to intentionally serve those who are hurting in various ways.

- Read the passage from Luke together out loud
- Without commenting, take time to reflect privately on how you feel about Jesus’ directive
- Read the passage again silently. Write down your feelings and reactions
- Without commenting, keep your notations to be shared after reading the second passage
- Have someone read the passage from Matthew out loud

- Read the passage a second time silently, especially noting the expression “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”
- Write a paraphrase of Jesus’ statement that captures the meaning in your own words
- Read your paraphrased statements to each other and discuss what you’ve learned
- Return to your earlier comments on how you felt about being told to hold banquets for people who cannot return the favour. After engaging with the second passage, do you still feel the same way? Share your reflections with each other

Party with the Poor

He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12-14).

The Judgment of the Nations

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:31-46).

Current Challenges

Both passages underscore Jesus’ mandate to share resources with those who have less. But there is more to it than just being generous. Disregard for the needs of the poor is evidence of the absence of faith. A refusal to alleviate the pain of the poor in the “here and now” becomes the criteria for one’s final judgement before God.

And that's not all. When followers of Jesus express their practical love, they also bring the touch of Christ into the lives of the poor. Christ is present when God's people are present and doing good is a practical expression of God's love.

- Jesus' directive to express generosity to people who are not in a position to "pay you back" is a reminder to live beyond self-interest. Think about your community or city and some of your nearby neighbours whose needs exceed their limited resources. Is there a situation where you can offer to care for children so a single parent can have a night out? Can you tutor a struggling student, teach some vocational skills or influence your church to offer a compassionate service in your community?

On a global scale, the United Nations has proposed eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as an overall strategy for addressing global poverty and social justice concerns.

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

Giving your attention to the less-developed world (sometimes referred to as the Third World), review the MDGs and identify what you consider to be the most critical issues of injustice that keep people from achieving their social and spiritual well-being.

- Advocacy is a proven strategy for collectively addressing issues of poverty and injustice. The acrostic below captures components of effective advocacy. Review the framework.

Advocacy:

- Addresses issues of injustice
- Designs strategies to alter systems
- Values vulnerable people as agents of change
- Offers expertise to implement objectives
- Convinces power structures to alter policies
- Accesses like-minded people to join the cause
- Changes policies, practices and perceptions
- Yearns for justice that leads to sustainability

Identify one of the components/advocacy functions that captures your attention. Make an observation about your choice.

- Let's be specific. Brainstorm how you and others might advocate to make a difference in response to the following issues:
 - **Social Issue: Achieve universal primary education**

One of the injustices in the less-developed world is access to “no-fee” primary education. Education is the best antidote to dead-end jobs, perpetual dependence on welfare and living in poverty. What steps can be taken to close the education gap? Find out what relief and development organizations give priority to global education and choose one to support. Engage with government policy makers who are responsible for development assistance. Mobilize a local school to link with a school in the less-developed world and pursue what can be done together.

- **Spiritual issue: Freedom of religion**

In 1948, the UN General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 18) affirmed: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his/her religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his/her religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

Get informed. Research and identify which countries have signed the UN declaration but do not practise the principles of religious freedom. Find out what organizations exist for the purpose of ensuring religious freedom. Align yourself with the efforts of an organization that inspires your confidence. Do something.

Prayers of Response

Focus first on your home country

Extend your reach to a global focus



2. ADVOCATING FOR THE PRIVILEGED

One might mistakenly assume that privileged people don't need advocates. After all, they have the resources and opportunities to make it on their own. Not so, in Jesus' mind. For Jesus, the greatest spiritual vulnerability for all people—from all cultures and for all time—is self-sufficiency.

Self-sufficiency is enticing. Why be dependent when you can be independent? Why seek other people's counsel when you have all the answers yourself? Why wait in line when you can send a servant or employee to wait for you? Why worry about feeding your family when you can have a fridge full of food and choose whatever you want to eat? Why travel on a bus when you can fly first-class? Rather than worrying about the next loan payment, wouldn't you prefer to have investments and money in the bank? Who in their right mind would rather beg on the street than be ushered to a front-row seat to enjoy a concert?

Historical Dilemma: Self-Sufficiency

Money is always a big part of the self-sufficiency. It is no wonder that Jesus was so direct on the issue: "Beware of the power of money!" was his warning. "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24). Clearly, social hierarchy and economic disparity were also a part of life 2,000 years ago. Otherwise, there would have been no need for Jesus to include the above statement in the Sermon on the Mount.

The rich ruler was a self-sufficient member of society. He had wealth and was socially privileged. These benefits did not make him a bad person. There was a lot that was right about his intentions. His spiritual yearnings were admirable. His inner spirit desired to be right with God. Although he may have been self-centered, he followed the Old Testament commandments. When Jesus set the standard higher than the ruler was ready to accept, his response was sadness and remorse. Who could blame the man for wanting more? He already had as much of heaven on earth as anyone could have hoped for. Why didn't he add eternal life as the ultimate prize?

Nicodemus was also privileged—spiritually privileged. He was a Pharisee of high standing, a member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus was a scholar, a teacher of Israel with formal credentials. He was a man who was dedicated to God's Law. Nicodemus provided answers to his people's religious questions. Still, he was like the rest of the Israelites, who neither understood who Jesus was, nor accepted what Jesus asked them to believe.

Nicodemus had more outward credentials than Jesus, but his inner spirit was troubled. There was something about Jesus that was compelling to Nicodemus. He knew that Jesus was performing miracles and that his astonishing teachings were becoming controversial. Perhaps his discontent was linked with how he and his fellow Pharisees interpreted God's Law. Whatever the motivation, in the quietness of the night, Nicodemus came to Jesus. They were two teachers in an intimate setting. But for Nicodemus, it was time to make himself vulnerable. It was time for him to be honest about his own spiritual questions.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

There is a spiritual wind blowing in the following incidents. The wind is gusty and storm-like with the rich ruler. The breeze is gentle but troubling for Nicodemus.

Allow the breeze of the Spirit to catch your attention and keep you on course. Be courageous enough to be truthful with yourself. Desire the things of God and keep alert to the Spirit's whispers.

- Read the rich ruler text silently on your own. Be patient; don't hurry
- Read the story again on your own and identify one aspect in the scenario that especially catches your attention
- Why did you focus on that particular aspect?
- Share your insight with others in the group

Rich Ruler: Socially Privileged

A certain ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother.' " He replied, "I have kept all these since my youth." When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" He replied, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:18-27).

- Read the Nicodemus text silently on your own. Take your time
- Read the story again on your own and identify one aspect in the scenario that especially catches your attention
- Why did you focus on that particular aspect?
- Share your insight with others in the group

Nicodemus: Spiritually Privileged

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:1-16).

Current Challenges

What you get ahold of gets ahold of you. What you embrace embraces you. In the rich ruler’s case, he surrendered himself to the power of money and the privileges of wealth and social standing. Nicodemus sold his soul to the religious establishment. He embraced what he inherited. His ethnic culture and his religious rules and regulations propelled him into closed-system living. Both the rich ruler and Nicodemus were locked in the prisons of their privileges. Although they didn’t see it at the time, Jesus was their advocate. Jesus was anxious to free them from the forces that oppressed them.

- In the case of the rich ruler, money and social prominence fuelled his sense of self-sufficiency. When we perceive ourselves to be self-sufficient, we become our own authorities. We self-construct our values, morals and beliefs. We set our own priorities, let personal prerogative drive our decision-making, and have the final word on what is right and wrong. We think we know what is best. But our presumed strength blinds us to our need for God. In the rich ruler’s case, he exchanged the God of creation for the god of money.

Identify and discuss the influences in your life that nurture your self-sufficiency and autonomy. Think about Jesus’ intentions with the rich ruler. What do you think Jesus was trying to achieve? What do you understand about God’s intentions for you and others?

- For whatever reasons, Nicodemus’s religious system was disrupted. He was no longer an answer machine. In fact, his answers turned into questions that troubled him. Jesus’ response to Nicodemus was that his present spiritual assumptions were inadequate and incomplete. There was more for him to discover and experience. “Nicodemus, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above ... you must be born again.”

Nicodemus had difficulty understanding what Jesus meant. How do you understand the meaning of “being born from above” or “being born again”? Without using those particular expressions, write a personal paraphrase that expresses what they mean to you. Discuss your statements.

- Evangelism and Christian witness at its best is an expression of spiritual advocacy. Jesus helped us understand the role of the Holy Spirit when he told Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” What can we learn from Jesus’ teaching about how people come to Christ and experience salvation?

There are two subsequent references to Nicodemus and his response to Jesus. In John 7:45-52, Nicodemus becomes an advocate for Jesus with his Pharisee colleagues. Following Jesus’ crucifixion, Nicodemus brought a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes to care for Jesus’ body (see John 19:38-42). It seems fair to conclude that Nicodemus became a believer and a follower of Jesus.

Prayers of Response

Focus first on your home country

Extend your reach to a global focus

3. RELEASING THE OPPRESSED

Many people are uncomfortable at the mere mention of demons. These same people may acknowledge a spiritual world of some kind, but they doubt the existence of demons. Ironically, these people subscribe to horoscopes, the occult and psychics but have no place for the powers and principalities of the devil. Angels, maybe, but demons never.

Many of God's people are comfortable assuming that we live in a spirit world where forces of good and evil co-mingle and wrestle with each other. In their worldview, Satan is the evil one, the prince of demons. Principalities and powers do create darkness in the core of the human soul, and those who are empowered by God to exorcise and cast demons out in the name of Jesus are applauded.

Historical Dilemma: Inner Demons

The Bible refers to demons 70 different times. Only two of these references occur in the Old Testament. Jesus repeatedly freed people from the presence and power of their inner demons. Images of light and darkness and struggles between good and evil frequently dramatize the pages of Scripture.

The two biblical passages that follow reveal that demons' many manifestations can create common consequences. Demons are oppressive. They invade the human spirit. They are seductive and haunting. They are deceptive, coercive and controlling. They are spiritually destructive. Best understood, "demons of the soul are the anti-God forces in our lives."

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

Accept God's gift of spiritual nourishment. Pray for enough energy to live faithfully through another hour, another day, another week. Strive to live fully through another disagreement, another disappointment, another surprise.

There are two sections in the passage from the first chapter of Mark cited below. The first takes place in public, in the synagogue. The second begins in a private home with four of Jesus' disciples. In both situations, miraculous healings are the outcome.

- Listen carefully as both sections are read aloud
- Allowing your attention to focus on a particular aspect of the story, read the passage silently
- Take time to reflect on what has grasped your attention
- Interact with each other and share what you are hearing and thinking

Overruling Demons and Evil Spirits

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him (Mark 1:22-34).

In the Luke 4 passage below, we have returned to where we started in the introduction to this series. It is early in Jesus' public ministry. He is back home speaking at the synagogue where he learned and worshipped as a child. And it is here that he explains his mission on earth in what we have called his "inaugural address." In the Mark passage above, people have been miraculously freed from evil spirits and the oppression of physical sickness. In the Luke 4 passage, Jesus sets his sights on other forms of oppression. He has good news for those who are blind to their predicaments and captive to the "anti-God forces" in their lives.

- Read the Luke 4 passage out loud together
- Read the passage silently on your own
- Scan the passage again and identify a central thought
- Write down your observations
- Share your perceptions with members of your group and connect what God is saying to them with your own impressions

Jesus' Inaugural Address

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:16-21).

Current Challenges

Belief in demons and their devastating power is more prevalent in some church denominations and also in particular regions of the world. Consequently, when charismatic churches preach their “powers and principalities” brand of the gospel, the high-voltage worship is celebrated. In some of the less-developed countries in the world, the poor are often rich in faith. Where access to medical care is limited, a more profound dependence on God seems to be evident. Prayer is powerful and there are expectations that miracles of healing will win the day.

- Assess how your church community deals with “demons” and the need for miracles to counter and conquer these “powers and principalities.” What is your personal perspective?
- For centuries, Christians have identified a list of seven “deadly sins” that for our purposes can be understood as “demons of the soul” or “anti-God forces” in our lives. The historical list includes lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride.

Think about your society, your country, your community. From the “deadly sins” list, identify two sins that you think have the most devastating effect on life around you. How would life be different if they no longer existed?

- Consider the consequences of another demon on the soul, the anti-god force of refusing to forgive. Refusal to forgive is like a death sentence. It’s a self-imposed state of oppression. In contrast, forgiveness releases people. Forgiveness frees people to deal with the past and find a pathway into the future.

Imagine a world without forgiveness. Discuss the consequences. Now imagine a world where forgiveness could be spread in war zones, gifted to fractured families, injected into dysfunctional workplaces, infused into individuals who are locked in past memories and unable to begin again.

- Give your attention to one other devastating demon of the soul: the anti-god force of selfishness. If God is love and God’s great command is to love, then selfishness is the greatest life-denying, oppression-inflicting, injustice-creating force in our world. Selfishness is catastrophic.

Selfishness restricts life to the boundary of self-interest
Selfishness imprisons people within their own little worlds
Selfishness damages people in the swath of its desires
Selfishness denies justice and the rights of others
Selfishness ignores people victimized by poverty
Selfishness excludes the marginalized

Tragically, selfishness blinds its victims to a life worth living.

Love, on the other hand, is life-giving. To live is to love and to love is to live. It is God's love and God's love in us that advocates boldly for the vulnerable and the unlovable.

The ethic of love refuses to muzzle the truth
The principle of love includes the excluded
The emotion of love inspires creativity, generosity and risk
The morality of love seeks justice for all
The boundaries of love are set far beyond self-interest

Fortunately, there is more love in God than there is selfishness in us.

Prayers of Response

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CONCLUSION

What can we conclude? Jesus lived right. Righteousness was his way of life. He related to others with aspirations for their spiritual well-being. Jesus also repeatedly righted wrongs. Jesus' vision for justice for the vulnerable drove his intent and guided his practice. In his teaching and in his living, Jesus created opportunities for people whose plight in life was curtailed by life-denying forces.

Jesus' life is a demonstration of how to live and love. Jesus incarnated intentional love. He demonstrated wilful, purposeful and creative love; love for God, self, neighbour, truth, righteousness and justice. Jesus envisioned what didn't yet exist. He championed freedom from oppression—discrimination, exclusion, inequity, poverty, sin and injustice.

In Jesus' code, to love is to be just. To be just is to love. And when we claim to follow Jesus we are disciples of justice. Jesus' mission on earth in his time is our mission on earth in our time.

In worship, there is a question and response that is sometimes asked, which merits the final word in this series on "Jesus and Justice."

Question: "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

Response: "We will, with God's help."