

## **HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 8/30/2024**

### **The Pursuit of Power**

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

The two thousand years that separate us from JESUS' time led to our frequent lack of understanding of how HIS listeners might have understood HIS words. The promise and comfort of what JESUS said had powerful meaning to the people of HIS day, especially the common people. I try to point out how the situation in the Holy Land two millennia ago was received by those in that time so that we might better see how its implications can be understood today.

An example is the impact of power. We know that Palestine, the land in which JESUS lived, was controlled by the Roman Empire. Rome conquered Palestine in 63 BCE and was well-entrenched by the time of JESUS. While the Romans allowed the Jewish leaders, and that was the religious leaders, to lead the country, much had to be approved by Rome or done the way Rome allowed it to be done. A key instance that we know from the Bible is that the Jews could not officially perform an execution without approval and supervision by the Roman leadership. Of course, that didn't stop them from the occasional stoning. But an official death sentence, like crucifixion, had to be carried out by the Romans.

Now think about how Rome's power and control affected everything else in Palestine. Think about what happens when your power is taken from you. The Jewish religious leaders had been the ones to make all the decisions for the governing of the nation and its people. The Sanhedrin still was the government, much like our Congress, but under Rome, their authority was diminished. When something like that happens, when you lose power in one place, you try to find it in another.

Because of the Romans, the Jewish leadership was now limited in how to guide and control the people. So, they found other ways to do this. There was an increase in things people were allowed to do or not, often presented as religious laws. And these were given as the ways to "get right with GOD." If you didn't do things the way the Pharisees, the lawyers, the priests, and the teachers of the law said, you would fall out of favor with GOD. That could result in poverty, sickness, and the like. Further, you knew who had already lost GOD's preference because they were, well, impoverished, sick, and so on.

This pursuit of power had a trickle-down effect as others did what they could to gain that divine favor and control the ones they could. Landowners who rented their land to tenant farmers would charge so much that the people who lived on and worked the land could never earn enough to purchase their own land. More income for the landowners and more control over their renters. Indentured servants could not earn enough to purchase their freedom. Those who were unable to pay their debts were thrown in prison until their families earned enough to bail them out by finding additional ways to acquire the necessary income.

Matthew 20:25-27 tells us that "JESUS called them together and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.'" JESUS named their situation and then JESUS elevated them in their poverty. JESUS subtly condemned the Romans and the religious leaders for ignoring the needs of the people and failing to support them. Contrary to what the ones in charge were saying, JESUS said it was in their servitude that they found favor with GOD.

We don't live in the same situation today, though some may be able to identify with the people of JESUS' day better than others. But just because our time is different doesn't mean that JESUS' teachings are less true. It is not in wealth and power that GOD's love is earned. Rather, it is in our service to others that we are doing the will of GOD.

In CHRIST's love,  
Pastor Jeffrey