

COVENANT PULPIT



The Caste System India and Naples

Matthew 28:18-20
John 13:34&35

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The crime was so brutal that it shocked India. On October 15, 2002 five Dalits were brutally murdered by Hindu militants. This gang of thugs was on a "holy" mission, sent by a high cast Brahman priest to beat and stomp these Dalits to death.

Who were these Dalits, and what was their crime?

Dalits are the outcastes of Hinduism, the untouchables of India. The Hindu religion regards them as polluted, and anyone they touch is made unclean. According to the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation, being born into a Dalit family is proof of heinous crimes committed in a previous lifetime. It is the holy duty of the upper castes to abhor and abuse these Dalits who number more than 250 million people.

What was the crime of the five Dalits? They skinned a cow to tan its hide. For 3,000 years Dalits have roamed India looking for dead cows to skin. A Brahman priest had heard rumors that these Dalits had first killed the cow, a holy animal, before skinning it. Hinduism says that Dalits may touch only dead cows, lest they defile live cows with their "untouchability." So he sent the thugs to deliver a chilling warning to uppity Dalits everywhere.

Their gruesome murders came on the heels of another sensational killing. A Dalit stonecutter had carved an idol. He wanted to see his finished work, but Dalits are not allowed in Hindu temples. So he hid in the shadows and worshiped his stone god from a distance. But a high caste Brahman recognized him. The enraged priest grabbed a knife and slashed the Dalit to death. The police turned a blind eye to the atrocity.

While a few Hindu progressives spoke out against the murder of the five Dalits, the local authorities shrugged their shoulders. The leaders of the Hindu Nationalist Party celebrated the killings. They told reporters that the life of a cow was worth more than five outcastes.

The statistics are staggering. In 1994-1996 there were 98,349 reported cases of abuse and atrocities against Dalits. Millions more go unreported. In the city of Mumbai there are 300,000 prostitutes, almost all of them Dalits sold as sex slaves. Girls who are ten years old go to the highest bidder. If there is one thing worse than being an untouchable, it is being a Dalit woman. More than 80 percent are illiterate. Their daughters are sold into virtual slavery. Their sons drop out of school to work for less than a dollar a day. For 3,000 years these Dalits have been dehumanized by Hinduism. Without a doubt, they have been the most oppressed people in the history of the world.

But a cultural revolution is taking place. Christianity is sweeping across India, and Dalits are turning to Christ by the millions. On November 4, 2001 Udit Raj, the leader of the Dalits announced that he would lead hundreds of thousands of people out of Hinduism. He angrily declared, "I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu."

Behind the scenes, the leaders of the Dalit movement approached the Christian churches of India. They asked them to educate their millions

of children, to teach literacy to their women, and help their men gain dignity. But Christians didn't want these outcastes in their churches. A dirty secret was exposed: the caste system was entrenched in the Indian Church. Thirty-seven out of the 38 bishops in the Catholic Church of India were high caste Brahmans. Most of the leaders of the Protestant churches came from the highest castes. Christians were almost as prejudiced as Hindus. Their identity was more in the caste they were born into than the Christ they confessed. It's no wonder that 1900 years since St. Thomas was martyred establishing Christianity in India, and some 250 years after William Carey brought the first Western missionaries to the subcontinent, Christians only numbered about two percent of the country's massive population.

After the Church ignored the overtures of the Dalits, Udit Raj became a Buddhist. He did so because Buddhism, unlike Hinduism and the Christianity he saw in India, did not practice discrimination based on caste. Still he urged Christians to embrace the 250 million Dalits.

A growing number of Indian Christians have taken up the challenge. Their leader is a visionary named Joseph D'sousa. He is a towering intellectual and passionate preacher of the gospel. A high caste Brahman, Dr. D'sousa married an outcaste Dalit named Mariam. He started the Dalit Freedom Network to let the world know about the oppression of the world's largest minority group. He wrote a best-selling book called *Dalit Freedom*. He is the President of the All India Christian Council, the world's largest alliance of Christians dealing with human rights issues. He has spoken before the Indian Parliament, and is known in the halls of the U.S. Congress. More importantly, he has led a revival among the Evangelicals of India. In the last ten years, his Operation Mobilization and The Good Shepherd Churches have founded 120 schools, and more than 3,000 churches among the Dalits. It is estimated that the number of Christians in India has jumped from two to ten percent in the last decade. That's ten percent of 1.2 billion people! And the rate of Christian growth is growing exponentially.

Dave Berg and I just got back from ten days with Joseph D'sousa and his leaders. David worked closely with Dr. D'sousa's leadership team on how Covenant could get involved in a significant way. I taught 700 of his Dalit pastors who had come in from all over India. It was overwhelming to be a part of history in the making. The outpouring of God's Spirit made us feel like we had been transported back to the Book of Acts. We met pastors whose churches had been burned down by Hindu militants, evangelists who had been beaten, and heard of hundreds more who had been martyred. We went into villages where thriving churches stood on spots where evangelists were stoned five years ago. We were mobbed by untouchables hungry to be touched, overwhelmed by broken people desperate for love, and shamed by passionate believers who make us look bland by comparison.

Joseph D'sousa has called us to join him in his great work. We came home convinced that God has opened a window of historic opportunity for Covenant. I asked David, "What sermon should I preach when I get home to Naples?" He thought for a moment and then gave me a title: "*The Caste System: India and Naples.*" It's a provocative title, but Dave is

right. There's a caste system everywhere. It may be subtler in Naples, but it exists.

We live in a world where people build walls that separate themselves from one another. Naples is a city of gated communities; of "haves" and "have nots"; broken marriages; estranged families; racial and religious divisions. America's richest and poorest people live in Collier County. In India, the four castes are divided into thousands of sub-castes. Everyone can find someone who makes him or her feel inferior and someone else to whom he or she can feel superior. We Americans suffer the same affliction.

A few weeks ago, members of Covenant stood on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The caste system was alive and well in ancient Judaism. The Holy Mount was divided into sections. Anyone who didn't belong to the right caste was subject to death if they crossed those dividing walls: the outer court for Gentiles only; then the court reserved for Jewish women; after that the court of men; then the court reserved for priests; and finally the holy of holies for the High Priest only. There were a thousand rules that labeled people unclean, untouchable, and outcastes. The Priests were the Brahmins of Judaism. Everyone else was inferior by degree. In Jerusalem today you see castes in Judaism: Hasidic, Ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed. You see Roman Catholics, Armenian, Coptic, Greek Orthodox, and various brands of Protestants—all divided into Christian castes.

The Christians in the Book of Acts knew that the only way that they could show the power of Christ was by smashing the caste system of their day. Over the last several weeks we studied the family that they created in Jerusalem. We have the same vision in Naples: "A loving family, dependent on the Holy Spirit, committed to the Word, growing in grace, reaching out in mercy." What is transforming India? Hindus and Muslims are watching Christians overcome the caste system. When they see a Brahmin like Dr. D'sousa marry a Dalit named Mariam, they witness the transforming power of Christ. When they see Christians touching untouchables, and Brahmins and Dalits worshiping together, they witness the supernatural. They are not just hearing John 3:16 preached; they are seeing it lived out in real life. What is true for India will also be true for Naples. This principle is so critical:

**At the heart of the Great Commission
Is the Great Commandment.**

Jesus gave his disciples a mission, and the disciples at Covenant have taken it up. We have declared it this way: "Developing fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ." Let's look again at that mission from Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20:

"All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

This is not an easy mission. We are dependent on the Holy Spirit. But it is a doable mission. Jesus begins by telling us that he has all authority, and he ends by promising us that he will be with us always. But we will have to do our part too. This requires *fully* devoted followers. So how do we smash the caste systems that divide and dehumanize people?

1. *FULLY DEVOTED FOLLOWERS MUST BE FULLY DEVOTED TO ALL CHRIST'S COMMANDS.*

Let's unpack the Great Commission phrase by phrase. It begins with the verb "*go*." Literally, it is "going" in the original language. Disciples must always be on the go: moving on, moving on out, and moving on up. We can't stay in one place. But going somewhere isn't enough. We have to "*make disciples of all nations*." We have to go to the nations. The Greek word is *ethnoi*. From it we get our word ethnic. We not only go to the nations of the world, we go to the ethnic groups, races, and castes in our own cities and nation. If we aren't reaching out to people who are different than us, we aren't fulfilling the Great Commission. And, what do we do? We disciple them. What is a disciple? He or she is "a fully devoted follower of Christ."

Jesus goes on: "*...baptizing them...*" This is evangelism. People can't become disciples until they first commit to Christ. Baptism is a public confession of conversion, but is not yet discipleship. He goes on, "*teaching them...*" But even if we fill people's heads with Bible knowledge, that doesn't make them disciples. If the demons believe the Scriptures, then Bible knowledge simply qualifies you to be a demon. Jesus goes on to say, "*teaching them to obey...*" Discipleship isn't about what you know, but what you do. It's putting faith into practice. But even that's not enough. Jesus says, "*teaching them to obey everything...*" Jesus won't allow us to pick and choose what we want to obey. Discipleship is an all-or-nothing deal. But there's one more thing: "*...obey everything I have commanded you.*" Who is the "*you*" he's talking about? These are the disciples to whom he gives his Great Commission. We can't just teach, we have to also live what we teach. The teachings of Christ are not so much taught, as they are caught. We disciple more by our lives than our words.

So, what is the most important commandment of all? I would think that it is the last commandment that Jesus ever gave. At the Last Supper, his disciples were arguing about which one of them was greatest. In short, they were busy designing their own caste system. This is how Jesus responds to them:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
—John 13:34&35

Some have called this the Great Commandment. It is at the heart of the Great Commission. Living out this Great Commandment is the key to fulfilling the Great Commission. What does it mean to love one another? It is to love the way Christ loves us. "As I have loved you, so

you must love one another.” Who are the “one another?” Remember, Jesus is speaking to his disciples. He is talking about how disciples are to love one another—how we are to treat each other in the church.

2. CHRIST IS *FULLY* DEVOTED TO *ALL* HIS FOLLOWERS.

He says, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” How has he loved us? He’s loved us in a million ways, but five stand out:

HE LOVES US *KNOWINGLY*

This is what I mean: he knows everything about us. He knows our deepest sins, worst character flaws, and most embarrassing weaknesses. He knows that every molecule of our being is corrupted by sin. After Jesus looked into a woman’s eyes, she whispered to her friends, “He knows everything I ever did.” When he chose Peter, he knew that he was a loud-mouthed coward. He knew that Thomas was a doubter, and that James and John were barroom brawlers. He didn’t come looking for perfect people. He said, “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save those who are *lost*.” He loved outcasts and untouchables: tax collectors, prostitutes, and drunkards, flawed and failed people. In short, he knows everything bad there is to know about you, and still he loves you. No one else is like that. You have to hide the worst things about yourself, play games, wear masks, and pretend that you are someone different than you really are—lest others are disappointed when they discover the “truth” about you. We love others for who they seem to be, and who we want them to be. We would prefer *not* to know the things they hide from us. But Jesus loves us *knowingly*.

HE LOVES US *UNCONDITIONALLY*

He has to love us without conditions. The truth is: if he set any conditions for his loving us, we wouldn’t be able to measure up to them. St. Paul says, “But God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) He didn’t wait for us to clean up our act before he loved us. When we were at our worst, he already loved us enough to die for us. He never said, “I love you *because...*” or “I will love you *if...*” or “I will stop loving you *if you ever...*” He loves you for no other reason than it gives him pleasure to love you. If you live the holiest day you have ever lived, he won’t love you anymore than he did before the day began. If you have the worst “mess up” day of your life, he won’t love you any less. He loves us *unconditionally*. We set all kinds of conditions on our love.

HE LOVES US *SPECIFICALLY*

We love all Christians en masse. It’s easy to say, “I love all my brothers and sisters in Christ.” But we can hardly stand some individual

Christians that we know. I had a roommate in college who said, "I love you as a Christian, but I hate you as a person." What he meant by that was, "I love you generally because it's my duty as a Christian, but when I see who are *specifically*, I just don't like you." As a result, he refused to have anything to do with me. A lot of Christians play that game. We play it in our marriages, with our friends, and in our churches, and with everyone who turns us off. But Jesus loves you *specifically*. He didn't choose the mass of humanity, he chose *you* by name. He wrote *your* name in the Book of Life. He didn't die for the mass of nameless humanity, but for *you*. He carried *your* sins and endured *your* hell. He knows that you are a mixed bag of both good and bad. But he loves you in spite of (and because of) all *you* specifically are.

HE LOVES US IRRESISTIBLY

St. John says, "We love him because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19) He didn't drag us kicking and screaming into the Kingdom of God. He never forced us to love him. But, when we were still his enemies and too dead in our sins to grasp his love, the Holy Spirit came and made us alive, opened our eyes, unstopped our ears, and replaced our heart of stone with a heart of flesh. For the first time we could see and feel how much he loved us. When we finally understood, we couldn't resist his love. We came running into his open arms. *Real* love is irresistible. Isn't it interesting that the worst kind of sinners, who would never darken the doorway of a temple or synagogue, flocked to Jesus? They saw love in him that they didn't see in houses of religion. The same holds true today. When we display a religious spirit, we only manage to turn them off. But when we love Jesus, and our fellow disciples, and those outside the church with *Jesus* love, it's simply irresistible!

HE LOVES US ETERNALLY

This love never lets us go. Jesus said, "I will never leave or forsake you." In the Great Commission he says, "I am with you always, even until the end of the world." In John 10:28 he said, "No one can snatch you out of my hands." If you are truly saved, you can never lose your salvation. He who began a good work in you, *will* carry it on to the day of completion. If you mess up, he will still love you. If you disappoint him, he won't turn his back on you. He won't wall you off, give you the cold shoulder or the silent treatment, or walk out on you. He will never divorce or disown you. No one else has ever loved you like Jesus. He's the only one who will ever go the distance with you, no matter what!

This is *Jesus* love. "*As I have loved you, so you ought to love one another.*" It is so easy to preach about *Jesus* love to others. This is the heart of our gospel message. But the real rub is living it in our relationships with one another. This is what the Great Commandment requires of *fully* devoted followers of a *fully* devoted Christ:

3. WE MUST BE FULLY DEVOTED TO ONE ANOTHER IN THE SAME WAY THAT JESUS IS TO US.

Jesus says, "*As I have loved you, so you ought to love one another.*" Those five descriptions of the way Jesus loves his disciples must also describe the same way his disciples love one another. It's one thing to

preach the doctrines of grace. It's quite another thing for us to live out the doctrine of grace in our relationships with each other.

Try this as a practical experiment: take each of the five ways that Christ loves you, and apply it to the way you treat your spouse, or children, or fellow Christians. Does your theology pass the smell test of practical reality? Here is a wonderful exercise to do with your spouse, children, friends, and fellow disciples: look them in the eye, and make a commitment to love them. Go through each of the five ways that Christ loves you. Do it step by step, making it personal to them. Say something like, "Jim (or Sue), I purpose to love you *knowingly*. I will love you knowing that you are a sinner, that you are flawed with defects, and that you will do things that might let me down. But I will purpose to love you anyway. I will not be caught by surprise, or shocked, or disillusioned, or embittered if I discover that you aren't always what I thought you were, or hoped you would be." Then go on to the other four, making the same kind of love commitment. Then purpose to go out and love your fellow disciples these five ways. Especially, practice that fifth way: *persevering* love. You will never abandon this person, or give up on him or her, or give him or her the cold shoulder, silent treatment, or wall this person off emotionally because you were disappointed or wounded by them. You will never divorce or disown, speak ill of, or write them off as a lost cause. If you can do this, then you will "obey all that Christ has commanded you." Then, because you are fully devoted to one another, you will be a fully devoted follower of Christ.

IT IS NOT PREACHING JOHN 3:16, BUT *LIVING*
IT THAT WILL PERSUADE OTHERS

The *GREAT COMMISSION* demands the *GREAT COMMANDMENT* because it results in the *GREAT CONVINCING*. Note carefully the sentence structure of John 13:35. Jesus says, "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, *if* you love one another." Notice Jesus doesn't say, "If I love you." We think it is enough to tell others how much Jesus loves them. We give testimonies and preach sermons about how much Jesus loves us. All that's important. But it won't convince them. It's when they see us love each other that they will know. The proof of the pudding is in actions, not words. When they see our love for each, the love of Jesus in us is made visible. The reason that Udit Raj, the leader of the Dalits, didn't embrace Christianity was that he saw the same caste system in the church that he saw in Hinduism. As far as he was concerned, Christianity was powerless if it couldn't overcome the prejudices of the world. Our children and grandchildren are leaving our churches in droves for the same reason. The power and persuasion isn't in what we preach, but how we live with one another.

It is no accident that our vision statement begins with the phrase: "a loving family..." This is the ultimate proof of the gospel we believe. It is grace lived out. The only hope for those debilitated by caste systems everywhere is the gospel of Jesus. But it won't be preachers in India, or Naples preaching the message of John 3:16 and then saying to the outcastes, "You are an embarrassment to us." The world is full of untouchables longing to be touched and outcastes looking for a family. If we can be such a family, we won't have a house big enough!

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