



Lesson Four – Jesus and the Multitudes

Most human societies are divided between the elites and the masses. The elites represent around 5-8% at the top – they have and hoard the most money, weapons, power, influence and opportunities. They make the rules and usually rig the game to protect their interests. They also forge alliances across sectors – government, businesses, religions, media, arts, sciences and the military. As a result, they have loyal allies across all sectors of a society and they reward those allies to keep them loyal.

Then we have the masses – at the bottom – commonly called the “multitudes” in the gospels. They provide cheap labour in the system run by the elites. They work with little pay, little security, little prestige and little notice. Their houses are usually located in socially distant areas.

So to the elites, the multitudes can remain surprisingly invisible and insignificant most of the time.

In between these two groups there are the loyal allies who function as mediators between those above and those below. They may make more money than the masses and often live in hope that they or their children will be able to climb up the pyramid, closer to the elites. But the elites don't like competition.

This is what society was in Jesus' day. In His parables, He constantly praised people from the multitudes – the labourers, farmers, women working in the home, slaves and children.

He challenged those in middle management – stewards, tax collectors who robbed the powerless so they could serve the greedy at the top of the pyramid.

Jesus constantly turned the normal dominance pyramid on its head, confusing the disciples.

Read: Luke 5:17-32.

Why do you think the Pharisees were angry at Jesus in this healing miracle?

There are many more examples of Jesus 'turning the world upside down.' Here are just another two:

- Jesus healing someone on the Sabbath (Luke 14:1-6)
- Jesus healing a blind man along the road (Mark 10:46-52)

The Pharisees were pious, fastidious and religiously knowledgeable. They maintained a close association with the "scribes" or religious scholars. Today, you may call them "hyper-orthodox" or "fundamentalist." But back then, most would have considered them pure and faithful people, the moral backbone of society.

From the start, the Pharisees seemed strangely fascinated with Jesus, even when Jesus claimed that His disciples needed a moral rightness that surpassed their own – this unsettled the Pharisees and religious leaders.

During His ministry, Jesus proposed that basic human kindness and compassion are more absolute than religious rules and laws.

Notice the contrast between how Jesus sees the multitudes and how the Pharisees see them. The Pharisees once said of the multitudes – this crowd don't know the Scriptures – they should be damned. (John 7:49).

When Jesus looked at the multitudes He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36).

Read Ezekiel 34:1-31 In this chapter God condemns the shepherd-rules of Israel for neglecting their duties and exploiting their human flock. Heaven will not remain silent at this injustice. A change is coming – this change is Jesus.

Now, although the Pharisees in the gospels are depicted as cruel and unjust, they bear no resemblance to the honourable and wise Pharisees depicted in Jewish history from the historical period just after the gospels were written. Whether or not the gospel portraits were accurate, many in later centuries used their negative depiction of the Pharisees to stereotype and vilify all Jewish people. The consequences were horrible beyond words.

There are always multitudes at the bottom being marginalized, scapegoated, shunned, ignored and forgotten by elites at the top. And there are always those in the middle torn between the two.

To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to stand with the multitudes, even if doing so means being marginalized, criticized and misunderstood right along with them.

Engage:

- What one thought or idea from today's lesson intrigued, provoked, disturbed, challenged, encouraged, warmed, warned, helped or surprised you?
- Have you ever felt like one of the multitude?
- Have you ever behaved like of the Pharisees?

Activate:

Make an opportunity this week to spend time with some member of "the multitude."

Meditate:

Think of some group of people you normally turn away from. Imagine them, in silence and repeat these words:

They are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Notice what happens to your heart as you do so.