

Rooted
A Higher Privilege
August 30, 2020

Good morning everyone. I'm glad you're with us today whether you're onsite or online.

And I hope you appreciated that little video clip. When we planned this service, we figured it would be good to start the message with something on the lighter side – with singing and dancing and Gene Wilder's *Willy Wonka* ...

... given that what we're going to be talking about today is *not*, for most of us, a *lighthearted matter*.

In fact, I'm quite certain that by the time this message is over, I will have offended pretty much everyone watching or listening.

And I'm convinced of that for two reasons.

- First of all, the last time I spoke on this issue (which was several years ago), someone turned in an anonymous comment card saying "your message today was the biggest load of liberal political crap I've ever heard. You just lost three families to your church."

Some of you will probably come to the same conclusion and maybe even make the same decision ... even though, as I have said repeatedly, this series is not about *politics*. "Politics," as someone has said, "is downstream from culture"ⁱ and this series is about culture.

- Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I'm sure I will offend some of you because what I am going to say to *you* is personally offensive to *me*. I personally offended myself as I prepared this message!

So, this is not going to be a feel-good message.

Overview & Review

Now, before I tell you what's likely to be so offensive ... for those of you who are joining us for the first time or for the first time in a long time, I should probably give you a bit of context ...

... which is that we're nearing the end of a series called *Rooted: Foundations of an Unshakeable Life* ...

... which is based on something that was written a long time ago to a group of Christians who were in danger of being misled by a philosophy and a worldview that *sounded good* but was, in reality, a dead-end in every way.

Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.
Colossians 2:7 (NIV)

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.
Colossians 2:8 (NIV)

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.
Colossians 2:9-10 (NIV)

Paul's point to those first-century Christians was that by ...

- Following Jesus ...
- Believing in Jesus ...
- And belonging to Jesus (who died on the cross and was raised from the dead) ...

... they already had everything they needed for the life they wanted not only for themselves but for the rest of the world.

Now, as I always say, I realize that not everyone listening to this message is a Christian. And if that's true for you, I realize that not everything I say will necessarily apply to you.

But I do think, if you're *not* a Christian, it would be wise for you, too, to be on guard of being taken captive through the hollow and deceptive philosophy ...

... which is currently being proclaimed loudly and boldly through pretty much every communication channel in our culture – music, movies, media (including news media and social media) – as “a better way to live than the current reality” ...

... which is why I've been calling it “the cultural gospel.”

As I've said pretty much every week, the word “gospel” isn't necessarily a religious word. It comes from the Greek word euangélion which simply means “a message of good news about a better way.”

And what we've been trying to do in this series is to compare various aspects of this cultural gospel with the Gospel of Jesus – the good news about the better way that is found in Him (which is what Paul was talking about in his letter to the Colossians).

And I won't go back through all of that – if you missed any of this series, as always, you can check it out online

in the media section of our app and website ...

... other than to say that the fundamental difference between these two gospels comes down to their view of what's wrong with the world ... which then, obviously, leads to what ought to be done to fix it.

The cultural gospel says that the fundamental problem which is responsible for all of our ills comes down to systemic oppression.

More specifically, in any given culture, some people are the oppressors while everyone else is oppressed.

Therefore, what needs to happen is for the oppressors to be overthrown. Their systems of oppression must be torn down and replaced with better ones (as defined by the oppressed).

And we're seeing a vivid example of this right now in the effort not merely to "defund the police" but to get rid of the police entirely ...

... because, according to this philosophy, policing is just one more strategy of the oppressor class designed to keep everyone else in their place. The principle of "law and order" is simply a tool to maintain systemic injustice and excuse racism.

On the other hand ...

The Christian gospel says that the fundamental problem with our world is systemic sin – disobedience to God and the way that God has designed us to live.

... which obviously includes oppression by various groups but also extends to individuals, including those who would be counted among the oppressed.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory" for which God intended us, meaning that *all* contribute in some way to the problem.

All of us do things that hurt God and hurt one another which damages and destroys peace and harmony, and leads to hostility and even death.

Therefore, what needs to happen is for all people to be first, reconciled to God and second, to one another.

... which is exactly what Jesus of Nazareth came to accomplish.

Again, to quote another of Paul's letters ...

In Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Ephesians 2:13 (NIV)

When Jesus died on the cross, according to the Christian gospel, He atoned for all of our sins which made peace with God possible. The list of everything for which we could be held culpable was nailed to the cross with Him and marked "canceled" ...

... which is why I said in one message that, in Jesus' version of "cancel culture," *sin* is what gets canceled – not *sinner*s (which is very different from how the cultural gospel works).

And, also, why Paul writes that ...

He himself is our peace ...

Without Jesus and what He did, reconciliation with God isn't possible.

You and I *can't* atone for all of our sins individually and we *can't* collectively atone for the systemic sin produced by our collective sinfulness. It's impossible. So, God did it for us.

And our response is simply to believe in and receive Jesus. That's why Christians say "salvation" is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

But that accomplishes more than just reconciliation with God.

Paul writes that "Jesus himself is our peace" ...

... who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. Ephesians 2:14 (NIV)

And what Paul was talking about was the fact that the Jewish people had always thought of themselves as superior to non-Jewish people (or Gentiles) because it was to them that God had revealed Himself through Moses and the 10 Commandments and the Prophets.

And there was a sense of superiority and smugness about that which Gentiles picked up on which then led to hostility and division and hatred.

But Jesus because Jesus died for all sinners – not just Jewish sinners – it was clear that Gentiles (like you and me) were loved by God and mattered to God and were on equal footing with everyone else.

This is why in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free. All of those things by which people tend to divide themselves are no longer "the main thing" which is what makes reconciliation possible between people.

So, that's the fundamental difference between these gospels.

And, as I have said in each message, I truly believe that those who follow the cultural gospel mean well. They believe that their "narrative" and their "way" will lead to a better reality than what currently exists.

But I don't think it does. I think it's hollow and deceptive, which is why in each message I've tried to show why and how the Christian Gospel is better.

Offensive Truth

So, with all that said, what is so offensive that all of you are going to be mad at me today?

Before I tell you, let me first ask that you try to hang with me all the way through this message. Please don't write me off or jump to a conclusion too soon.

Ok, here we go. According to the cultural gospel ...

If you are Caucasian, you are the beneficiary of “white privilege.”

If you're a man, you're the beneficiary of “male privilege.”

If you're “straight,” you're the beneficiary of “heterosexual privilege.”

If English is your native language, you're the beneficiary of “linguistic privilege.”

If your body and mind are fully functional, you're the beneficiary of “ableist privilege.”

If you were raised in a two-parent home, you're the beneficiary of “socio-economic privilege.”

... and the list could on and on of all the ways in which various groups of people are privileged.

I'm curious, how many of those describe you and your life situation?

For me, personally, every single one of them is descriptive ... which means – according to this particular philosophy – that I am among *the* most privileged people ...

- Not only in this community
- Not only in this country
- But in the entire world.

And so are many of you.

Now, here's where I'm going to offend you.

- I am not simply *quoting* what the proponents of the cultural gospel are claiming.

- I am *agreeing with* them because I believe their claims are supported by the evidence. And I think anyone who is willing to look at the facts with an open heart and an open mind would have to agree as well.
- In fact, of all the assertions of the cultural gospel, I find this one to be the most credible.

Now, saying all of that doesn't mean that I *like* this idea.

In fact, as I said at the beginning, my first reaction whenever I hear someone talk about this or I read about it is to be personally offended, for many reasons.

And I bet you can relate to these.

1. First of all, I am not a racist or sexist or a homophobe.

I believe that God made all people equal and that all deserve to be treated with honor and respect regardless of who they are or whether I agree with them. And I try to live that way.

And I know many of you do, too.

2. I don't intentionally take advantage of people.

If I *do* have some level of privilege, I don't abuse it. I don't "power up" on women, or on people of color, or people who don't have the same socio-economic status I do.

And *if* that somehow happens and someone points it out to me, I listen. And I try to do better.

And, again, many of you do, too.

3. I have worked hard to get where I am in life.

You have, too, right?

In my case ...

- I think I'm the first person on both sides of my family to have earned a bachelor's degree. I *know* I'm the first person to earn not just *one* but *two* master's degrees.
- I've battled and overcome inferiority issues that haunted me for the first half of my life because of bullying that happened when I was a kid.
- I've taken financial and career risks that very few people ever attempt.

I don't want to minimize the work of God in my life, but *I* had to say yes to those things, and *I* had to step out in

faith.

And I did.

4. There are lots of people who have it better than I do.

Yes, I do live in a nice suburban neighborhood like the one surrounding this church, but there are many other neighborhoods far nicer than mine. If anyone is “privileged” it’s *them* not me.

Furthermore, there are supposedly “oppressed” people who live in those neighborhoods and some of those people got there, not because they *earned it* but because of some kind of “affirmative action” that put them ahead of others.

5. Finally, whatever privilege I have, I didn’t ask for.

I didn’t ask to be born white.

I didn’t ask to be born male.

I didn’t ask to be born into a stable two-parent home.

It’s not my fault that I won the lottery, so to speak.

... which is why, when you tell me that I am the beneficiary of some special privilege because I have those characteristics and experiences, I’m offended. I want to push back and argue about it.

However ... as offensive as it is ... as I look at the evidence objectively instead of emotionally, *I can’t disagree*.

I think it’s true of me and it’s true of many of you – actually, of *all* of you. And to deny that is to deny the truth.

And I know that I’m making some of you mad by saying that, but hear me out, please, because I think ...

The true offense *isn’t* that privilege exists and that most of us have it.

The *real* offense – what we’re reacting to emotionally and even logically – is ...

“White Privilege”

Well ... we’ll get to that shortly but first, I should probably define exactly what I mean by “privilege” because this was helpful to me in accepting that *privilege exists*, and that I do have it in ways that others do not.

Specifically, as it pertains to “white privilege” (which obviously applies to me and to most of us) ...

“White privilege” refers to the individual and systemic advantages afforded to white people by virtue of

belonging to the dominant ethnic group in society.

For example ...

- White privilege is seeing mostly people who look like you on TV and in movies.
- It's having the history of people who look like you taught in textbooks.
- It's not needing to worry about whether the negative actions of another white person will reflect badly on you and "your race."
- It's applying for a loan or opening a bank account without your race possibly working against you.
- It's being pulled over by a police officer without worrying about unjust treatment ... or worse.
- It's being able to avoid even *thinking about* "white privilege" because you would rather focus on something else more relevant to your life.

That said, "white privilege" doesn't mean that you've had everything handed to you, or that you haven't overcome significant challenges in life.

Instead, it's that ...

With all other things being equal, a white person will still have an unearned advantage because their race won't be one of the things working against them.ⁱⁱ

And from my own personal experience and what I see in the vast majority of other white people, I think that's true.

My race as a white person, my gender as a man, and my sexual orientation does not hinder me in any great way because the vast majority of "systems" that exist in our culture were created by people just like me.

That doesn't necessarily mean there was evil intent in doing so.

As a friend of mine reminded me the other day, "birds of a feather flock together." That's how people work, too. We all naturally prefer people who are like us.

Of course, someone could say "well, Rick, if you're a straight white male these days, some company will be forced to give a job for which you're qualified to a gay black female. And that's reverse discrimination."

Maybe it is. But overwhelmingly, there is no denying that many of our cultural systems still benefit the white majority in ways that blacks and Hispanics do not experience.

For example, in 2014, the Pew Research Center released a report that revealed the median net worth of a white

household was \$141,900; for black and Hispanic households, that dropped to \$11,000 and \$13,700, respectively.

What's the difference? Why such a huge gap?

It comes down to wealth that gets passed from one generation to the next.

When white families are able to accumulate wealth because of their earning power or home value, they are more likely to support their children into early adulthood, helping with expenses such as college education, first cars and first homes.

And the cycle continues when those children grow up and do the same for their children.

But for black families, it's a different story.

Following WWII, because of exclusionary zoning practices and redlining by the FHA (which wouldn't back loans to black people or those who lived close to black people), people of color weren't allowed to raise their children and invest their money in neighborhoods with "high home values" ...

... which meant their kids didn't benefit in the ways white kids did ... and that cycle continues until today.

- One-fourth of black Americans living in poverty live in high-poverty neighborhoods; only 1 in 13 impoverished white Americans lives in a high-poverty neighborhood.
- More than 80 percent of poor black students attend a high-poverty school, where suspension rates are often higher and resources often more limited.ⁱⁱⁱ

Point being that under-resourced people of color are less likely to "make it out alive" than their white counterparts because of the way "the system" was built. Even though there have been many positive changes in recent years the "systemic racism" still lingers.

And believe me, as a white person who isn't racist (or sexist or a homophobe), I hate hearing that. And my first reaction is to come up with other statistics that tell a different story.

But, even if I could, I can't get away from something James Baldwin, a Black civil rights leader whose story was recently featured in the movie *I Am Not Your Negro*, once said because, in many ways, still rings true.

Baldwin said:

"Every white person in this country knows one thing ...

slide

"They know that they would not like to be black here. If they know that, they know everything they need to know."^{iv}

And, again, if you're a member of the dominant culture that "built the system" – if you're white – that's hard to hear.

It's hard to hear because ...

- It makes you feel like you're *personally guilty* for something you *personally had nothing to do with creating*.
- And that, like Veruca Salt, you're "a bad egg," and this world would be a much better place if people like you ended up going "down the chute" with her!

The Problem

And this is where *the true offense* lies – and rightfully so – because those things are *not* true ... at least, according to the Christian Gospel.

- You are not inherently guilty because of something your parents or your ancestors did to create "the system." You are not "complicit" simply because you were born white or male or whatever else.
- And your association with a predominant group does not mean you deserve to be shamed or written off ...

... which is exactly what is implied if not stated outright by the cultural gospel.

After all, the *reason* you have privilege is that you are belong to some class of oppressors.

And, according to this philosophy, oppressors oppress even if they don't intend to. They oppress simply by "being."

Therefore, the solution is to get rid of the oppressors and their systems and all will be well.

... which, on the one hand, is an extremely pessimistic outlook – seeing individuals as unable to escape their prejudices or their role in the oppression of others.

On the other hand, it's also an extremely optimistic outlook – that whoever and whatever replaces the current "oppressors" and their systems will be better.

But history shows that this is very rarely the case, especially when the "new system" does not take seriously the reality of individual sinfulness.

In other words, unless those who are oppressed are fully aware of their own propensity to sin against God and others *and* build precautions against those tendencies into their system, when they come to power, they

themselves will become the oppressors.

And those are just a few of the ways in which the cultural gospel falls short in dealing with the reality of privilege.

If we had the time, we could talk about many other ways such as ...

- The false perception that life is a zero-sum game; that when one person wins someone else loses; that privilege for one group necessarily comes at the expense of others.
- And that the obsession with defining what privilege is and who has it leads to envy on the part of those who are without them and hostility on the part of those who have them.
- And the misperception that suffering and injustice is the predominant experience and reality of the world when, in fact, by almost every measure, life is actually getting better for most people.^v

A Christian Perspective

So, in the time that remains, I want to talk about another way to approach the reality of privilege – and it *is* real ... a better way according to the Christian Gospel.

And I think a good place to start is to say that ...

1. Jesus believed that “privilege” existed and was, in fact, bestowed by God.

Obviously, He didn't call it that because it wasn't a “thing” in his day, but I think one of his most well-known parables proves the point.

The Kingdom of Heaven – the way it works when God is in charge – can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together his servants and entrusted his money to them while he was gone.

He gave five bags of silver to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip.

Matthew 25:14-15 (NLT)

Now, Jesus doesn't tell us how this businessman evaluated a person's abilities to come up with their allotment, just that he did.

And one employee was given one level of “privilege” while two others were given lesser dispensations.

But the point is some have more, and some have less – and that is God's decision. It's God's decision where you are born and what skin you have and who your parents are.

2. And what matters to God – and what will matter not only in this life but beyond this life – is what you do with whatever privilege you've been given.

And, as we'll see from Jesus' story, the ones who have more of it aren't judged any differently from the ones who have less and vice-versa.

Jesus said that ...

"After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of how they had used his money. Matthew 25:19 (NLT)

Turns out that the first and second workers both invested wisely and doubled what they had been given.

So, to each of them, the master said, "Good work! You did your job well. From now on, be my partner. I want you to share in my happiness."

But the third worker did nothing to increase what he was given. Instead, Jesus said, he buried his single bag in the ground.

Now, we don't know exactly why he did that. In the story, he says he was afraid, maybe of losing it.

Or maybe he was jealous because he didn't receive the same level of privilege as the other two and this was an act of resistance.

What we do know is that the business owner was not happy.

"Throw this guy out," he said to the security guards. "And give that bag of silver to the first guy, the one who now has ten bags."

Again, point being, you and I have no control over what we start out with in this world or even the limitations in growing what we have, but we do have control over what we do with it.

And God expects us to do something with what we've been given.

In addition, because what we've been given comes from God not only are we accountable to God ...

3. The proper attitude concerning whatever privilege we have is to be grateful to God.

In Jesus' parable, when the owner asks the third employee why he didn't do anything while he was away, the guy says, "well, I know you are a hard man and I'm pretty sure that sometimes you make money in ways that are not just or fair, so I hid what you gave me."

Clearly, he did not think highly of his boss and therefore he was ungrateful.

And honestly, I think that's one of the biggest reasons for all the angst we have in our country right now. We're just ungrateful.

We've talked about it before – how if we compare ourselves to the rest of the world instead of to each other, even those who are considered to be impoverished in our country are rich when viewed in relation to the other 6 billion people on this planet.

And I don't want to minimize the struggles for justice in our culture. They're real and they matter. But sometimes I think about people who live in places like Syria or Lebanon or North Korea or China and what they deal with on a daily basis and I just shake my head.

We're all fighting about monuments while those people are wondering if their spouse will come home for dinner that night or be imprisoned or killed.

We've just lost the sense of gratefulness for what we've been given. And it's sad.

And to be clear, when I speak of gratefulness, I'm not talking only about those who believe they are "oppressed."

I'm also thinking of those of us who tell ourselves that we have a great life because we've worked hard for whatever we've achieved.

And don't hear what I'm not saying. You have worked hard, and I have worked hard.

But let's not forget that we have been privileged by God to live in a place and walk a road that, in some way, was made for us by others. There are many things about your and my life – good things – that we have that we didn't earn.

For whatever reason, we were given five bags of silver and, OK, we made five more. But the fact remains that we started with five.

And that calls for gratefulness.

It also calls for generosity.

4. The proper application of our privilege is generosity.

Notice that the servants in Jesus' story weren't given money to go spend it on themselves and their wishes. They were called to invest it in the work of the owner.

And that's the way privilege works, too.

In the Gospel according to Jesus, God blesses us – we are privileged – simply because He is gracious, but God never blesses us – privileges us – solely for our own purposes.

We are always blessed to be a blessing. We are always blessed in order to be part of what God is doing to redeem this world and make it better.

Sometimes that means simply giving away some of what we have so that others may benefit from it.

Christians who are generous understand that just because it comes to me (financially) doesn't mean it is for me.

That's why ...

- Christians give to their church
- Christians support kids through World Vision, Compassion
- It's even why ... Cool & Dry Challenge

Opportunity for the use of our building during the week because of COVID

Half of the spaces are in the Boiler/Chiller area

Sometimes generosity means using our privilege to make things better for those around us – not to win their affection or to signal our virtue – but simply because we know that's God's heart for them and it's our heart, too.

As we talked about last week, that might mean marching for racial justice. It might mean volunteering at PWC. (Go back and listen to that message if you weren't here and want to know more).

And sometimes generosity means literal sacrifice – literally giving up our rights and letting go of our privileges for the benefits of those who lack those rights and privileges.

As Paul once put it ...

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant.

Being made in human likeness

*And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! Philippians 2:8 (NIV)*

So, a really good question to wrestle with – and if you’re not a Christian you don’t have to think about this, but you’re welcome to ...

A really good question to ask yourself is “What might I need to sacrifice in order to build up the world God imagines?”

Is it time? Is it money? Is it comfort? Is it my home? My hobbies? Is it my social group – the people who are like me that I naturally gravitate toward and vice versa?

Conclusion

And this isn’t to make anyone feel guilty but simply to say that ...

- Privilege exists – it’s real – and it has been bestowed on each of us in whatever measure for whatever reason by God.
- And that what matters to God – and what will matter not only in this life but beyond this life – is not what we’ve been given but what we do with what we’ve been given.
- And that the proper attitude concerning whatever privilege we have is to be grateful to God.
- And the proper application of our privilege is generosity of heart and of action, because that’s who He is and how He has treated us in Christ.

Let’s pray.

1. Small group sign up – virtual and in-person

Endnotes

ⁱ Andrew Brietbart

ⁱⁱ <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/us/racism-questions-answers/?active=5>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2018/what-is-white-privilege-really>

^{iv} James Baldwin, “Speech at the University of California Berkeley,” 1979

^v <https://ourworldindata.org/a-history-of-global-living-conditions-in-5-charts>