

Understanding the Social Order in Jesus' Day

Gerhard E. Lenski, in his 1966 book, *Power and Privilege: A theory of Social Stratification*, identifies nine classes of agrarian society.

Five in the "Ruling" Class

1. **Ruler** – This ruler is one person in a class alone, usually a king or queen. This one person had complete access to at least 25% and often 50% of gross national product.
2. **Governing Class** – This is about 1% of the population. Bureaucrats, nobles and officials that surround the ruler.
3. **Retainer Class** – These persons maintain the system, lower class bureaucrats. This is about 5% of the population. Retainers serve the political elite. These are secretaries and soldiers that want to keep their job. They fight for the ruler and 1% that have the money.
4. **Merchant Class** – Less than 5% of population. It wasn't until the 13th century and the time of St. Francis that the merchant class began to take over. Today, the merchants control the world. This is a relatively new phenomenon. Throughout history, most people on this earth have been farmers.
5. **Priestly Class** – They were landowners in Jesus' day.

Lower Class – 80% of Society

6. **Peasant Class** – They farmed the land, very often tenant farmers and someone else owned the land. That's why so many of Jesus' parables are about landlords and tenants. They were at the whim of the ruling class and landlords. Two-thirds of what they produced were spent on rent, taxes, and tolls!
7. **Artisans** – This is about 5% of the population. Skilled workers such as carpenters and they depended upon patrons. Artisans were gifted, yet remained poor.
8. **Unclean** - They were deemed unclean by reasons of origin or occupation. Jesus had a great deal of contact with this group.
9. **Expendable Class/Criminals/Beggars** – This was 5-10% of the peasants. They lived at the charity of others. They are the unemployed or unemployable.

Purity Code and Debt Code

The social maps of the Second Temple Judean state consisted of two mutually reinforcing codes: Purity Code and Debt Code.

Purity Code

- This code was adjudicated by priests, established what was clean and unclean in order to maintain group and class boundaries.
- This included dietary laws and circumcision: This distinguished Jews from non-Jews.
- Purity status determined by birth: Tribal affiliation
Body – male or female, disabled or healthy
Behavior – cultic obligations such as washing or contact with the dead

Debt Code

- The terms Debt and Sin are virtually interchangeable. This code was adjudicated by the scribal class and regulated individual and social responsibilities, criminal behavior, and economic status.
- It's rules (ex. – ten commandments) determined sins of commission (stealing, adultery) and omission (not paying tithe or observing the Sabbath).
- It's important to remember that there is no differentiation between secular and sacred this system. The religious text was also the legal code.

Why is this important in understanding the Gospels?

- We begin to understand the difference between the “health care”(purity) and “criminal justice”(debt) systems and our own. We can begin to ask questions about how power was distributed within it.
- We also can begin to see how Jesus provoked opposition.
 - When Jesus debates scripture, he's not just debating belief, he's involved in social criticism.
 - When he challenges the temple cult, he is subverting political authority and threatening those whose social status and national identity are bound to the temple state.
 - When he clashes with priests or scribes, he is taking on senior administrators who are spokespersons for the status quo.

Society of Patronage

In a society of patronage you are not defined by what you have or what you know but who you know. Everything depends upon your connections. If you don't have connections you just don't get anywhere.

The relationship of little person to patron inevitably grows into a system of honor and shame.

The little person must show honor and respect to the patron. The patron has a moral obligation to take care of the little one who pays honor. There are obligations on both sides.

The patron stands between the little person and the overlord. In the west, this became the feudal system and lasted for centuries.

You must understand this system to understand much of Jesus' teaching.

Jesus' society said that someone must be the go between an individual and God. Therefore the temple gave access to God or took access to God away. Jesus is taking away the patron, the broker that society establishes. He's telling the people that God is totally accessible. That God is available in reality itself, in experience itself, in the world of graced relationships.

The kingdom of God is in your midst. You don't need a patron to worship God in Jerusalem or the emperor. Jesus' is threatening the system & the system responded by killing him.

Mark 1: Jesus' baptism – God is as available as the water. In baptism, Jesus is accepting this new world order, that God is as close as water. We don't need a patron.

A View from the Bottom

The winners write the history! Through most of human history, 98% of people who lived were poor and uneducated. People didn't have the luxury of writing their personal histories. They didn't have the skills to tell us what it's like to be persecuted, oppressed or simply used to build pyramids. We hear about pyramid building from the side of Pharaoh.

Most of the Bible however is written from the perspective of the people who were occupied, enslaved, poor, or disenfranchised in some way! The Bible is written from the bottom instead of from the top.

Amazing, the stories that survived were passed down orally before they were ever written down.

Jesus is Dangerous

Jesus is dangerous! By chapter 3, verse 6, the Pharisees and Herodians were making plans to destroy him. Pharisees – religious leaders & Herodians were Political leaders.

Honor and Shame

The kinship system of family and home was the central institution. Status was achieved through the honor and shame. Self-Image and meaning come primarily through how others see you.

People didn't think, "Who am I before God," as Jesus taught or "what do I feel about myself" as our culture does, but asked, "How does the village see me?"

Meaning is tied up almost entirely in how your family and friends see you. It gives great comfort to the ego, and it also gives great power for social control.

Example of modern day Japan: (Visitors to Japan going to see Hiroshima museum, asked to leave expensive cameras outside on the curb.)

Honor and Shame system is a strong enforcer of morals!

Jesus challenged the honor/shame system and called for persons to find identity in God rather than through the eyes of others. "Who you are in God is who you are." My value no longer depends upon whether my family or village likes me, whether I'm good looking, wealthy or obedient to the laws. Jesus' message challenges the honor/shame system. (Prodigal son.)

Jesus offers a new system: neither shame based nor guilt based, but based on who-you-are-in-God. This is Good News.

Honor is the opposite of what prayer teaches the heart. Rather than finding value in God, it is the value of a person in one's own eyes or through the eyes of others. Honor is excellence as recognized by society, and therefore self-image and human value are forever shaky, changing, and unreliable.

In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus counters such externalization by promoting 3 great religious disciplines: prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. 3 time tested ways to get rid of the false selves. Jesus adds a twist: do this secretly.