

Christ vs. Empire *The Gospel of Luke*

Christ vs. Empire, Part 2: Empire, Exploitation, and Jesus' Resistance *Luke 3:12 – 13*

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Introduction: Val's Work with Her Labor Union

The title of this particular message is *Empire, Exploitation, and Jesus' Resistance* – the resistance that Jesus embodied in himself, and we'll see that, and the resistance that he calls his people to make a difference for because they are suffering. Some of them are in our midst, in the body of Christ. So we want to be attentive to that. Some of who are outside the body of Christ as far as we know, and we want to extend an invitation to them on the basis of his goodness and what he's doing in his kingdom family to bring about wholeness and healing.

As you may know, at Neighborhood Church of Dorchester, our mission is to experience the shalom of God, and to invite our neighbors to experience God's shalom with us. This is a continuation of that. As all that we do hopefully reflects that. To begin, to introduce this time, I wanted to give our sister Val Copeland a few more minutes to share more about her labor union and her thoughts on success stories. How has she seen the resistance to exploitation unfolding, and how does that give her hope, energy, and strength as she continues to participate in those things. I know many of us have heard Val tell us a few stories as a local president of her union. I wanted to give her a few more minutes to do that. As the people of God, as Jesus followers, this is one way to resist the exploitation.

“I am a President in Local 509. That's the umbrella of my union. We do public sector – private sector, which means public sector -- people who work for the state – and private sector organizations that provide services for the state such as nursing homes things of that nature. We also have an international presence. There are about 2 million members across the country. There's about 18,000 in my local chapter. Unions were formed to resist the exploitation of workers because we know that there was a time when there was no weekend. We know there was a time when child labor was allowed. We know there was a time when people were locked into their sweatshops until they met their productivity quotas. Unions have a long history of resisting exploitation of children in the workplace, women in the workplace, immigrants in the workplace. Over time, unions had gained quite a bit of strength, but capitalism and corporate greed began to dismantle a lot of what unions had worked for over the years and then of course created this narrative that unions were greedy and exploited people by making them pay dues. That's what you commonly hear on Fox News and what you hear about unions – that we exploit people and make them pay dues for services. So, over the years you saw the breakdown of unions. You saw Ronald Reagan dismantle the air traffic controllers union. When he broke their backs, that was the straw that saw the collapse of unions because no one had ever gone after them before. We saw the decline. But there was always resistance. We still have unions. We are still organizing across the country. I'll touch on three things.

“On July 28th in California, 45,000 child care providers finally won after 17 years of struggle the ability to collectively bargain with the state. Meaning they are now recognized as a union and can collectively bargain on behalf of 45,000 child care providers. Which allows them to raise their compensation, fight for benefits, and also improve the child care system. And you know that essentially, child care providers are women: black women, brown women and immigrants. So again the most exploited segment of the workplace. It's so important we can organize.

“In addition to that, in SEIU, in 2016, we made a commitment at our convention to fight for racial justice as it connects to economic justice. And in 2020, we passed a resolution that said they are now aligning themselves in support of the movement for black lives, and are moving towards developing more black leaders within the union. Which is very significant because we made our statement around racial justice, race was in there but not as targeted. The 2020 resolution specifically calls out anti-black racism. It specifically calls out the movement for black lives. It's significant for us to be moving in that direction

especially during this time of unrest regarding police brutality and police murdering black and brown people. We do have police within our union. They're not very happy about the union pursuing that cause of action. So we are within our union trying to figure out how we handle having police within our union and what does that mean. How do we hold them accountable? Do we put them out? The unions that support cops and corrections officers feel betrayed by the union.

"Finally, during the recent COVID crisis, our union was able to negotiate with the state to get hazard pay for workers who are now essential workers: DCF workers, group home workers, nursing home workers, who have to show up for work because people rely on them. So we were able to negotiate with the state to get a \$5 – 10 an hour incentive pay for those who have to show up for work in these places that are now hazardous. Of course, the vast majority of workers are black, brown, and immigrant, and women. So again, the strength of being able to organize for people who are exploited in the workplace. We understand that when we can collectively bargain together, we can improve the work lives, and family-sustaining benefits for a lot of workers across the state and across the country."

Relevance:

It's so important to stay updated on developments like this because there are so many people are affected by unfair work practices and pay practices. As we talk about how to resist the exploitation of the Empire, labor unions and Christians in the labor movement have been so important. This is relevant because Jesus stands against exploitation. When God said, "Do not steal" in the Eighth Commandment, God declared that exploitation—economic exploitation among other forms—is against His will, His character, and His love. And yet we live in the United States of America, and one of the foundational building blocks of this country is exploiting people.

Last week we started this series on *Christ vs. Empire*. We looked at the Book of Daniel. The Bible's understanding of Empire is when one group of people conquers another group of people. It creates an unnatural situation. So God used unnatural, hybrid beasts as symbols of human empires. The Babylonian Empire was a lion with eagle's wings. And so on. These beasts broke the boundaries between lion and eagle, just as the empires broke the boundaries between this people group and that people group in terms of power. This is not talking about friendship or inter-ethnic or inter-racial marriages. This is the conquest of one people group over another.

Text and Context:

This week, I'd like us to look at The Gospel of Luke. There were ways that John the Baptist and Jesus engaged with the Roman Empire – the Empire of their time – and this will be really instructive for us. Luke's Gospel is one of the four biographies of Jesus. They were all written down within a few decades of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. They were probably circulating in oral form before that. Luke's Gospel was probably written – in my view – in the early 60s. Luke was writing to a guy named Theophilus probably to explain how the apostle Paul had wound up a prisoner of the Roman Empire. Paul was going to trial. There needed to be some historical documents about what this Jesus movement was. How challenging was this to the Empire?

So we're going to pick up the story here. Remember last week, we looked at around the time of 586 BC, the Babylonian Empire swept in and took the people of Israel captive. Daniel and his three friends got deported back to Babylon and became high-ranking advisors to the king of Babylon. They are incredibly influential. They're also incredibly vulnerable. But do have some influence to help the Babylonian Empire care for the poor (Dan.4:27).

Fast forward five hundred and a half years, and we have Jesus now coming on the scene. His front guy is John the Baptist. He's the opening act. God sends John the Baptist ahead of Jesus to say, "The king is coming." Because the comparison between the Empires of humanity and the kingdom of God reigned over by Jesus – that was the big thing. We talked about how this is so important. We cannot miss this theme in the Bible. We say all the time that Jesus is the answer to sin. Yes, absolutely. And sin manifests itself in all sorts of ways. Ultimately, in power dynamics like Empire. Jesus is the answer and response to Empire and the exploitation of Empire. That's part of Jesus' resistance.

Empire and Exploitation: v.12

I'm only going to talk only about two verses: Luke 3:12 – 13. But we're going to go really deep here. Jesus has not yet arrived on the scene doing public stuff. John the Baptist is a prophet. He's dressed funny. But he's attracting a lot of attention. He's getting people ready for the kingdom of God. All these people are coming out to him in the

wilderness. One of the groups is the tax collectors. “Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”” (Luke 3:12)

Now who are the tax-collectors? And why are they asking this question? In that day, the tax collectors are the Jewish people who decided to work for the Roman Empire and collect taxes from the Jewish people, and give that money to the Roman government. So they were considered to be the sellouts. Other Jews thought of them as “unclean.” They would not have a meal with these people.

There’s a little backstory with the Roman Empire that’s important. The Roman Republic used to tax its own people because they had public infrastructure project like roads. But when they sent their army abroad and conquered others, they stopped taxing native Romans.¹ They only taxed other people. Do you follow me? The Roman Empire taxed other people.

This is the first thing we learn. One of the things that an Empire does is exploit people. Empires want money. How do you get money? You conquer people and extract money from them in some unfair way. That is called exploitation. And the whole reason the ruling class of an Empire wants to take the risk of paying an army and taking over some other group of people is because they can somehow exploit those people and make even more money. It’s a way of saying, “Let’s not tax ourselves. Let’s make other people pay for stuff.”

Last week, we talked about whether the United States an Empire in this sense? Yes, it is. In the U.S., we are told in schools that the first English settlers came because they were Pilgrims and Puritans who just wanted to practice their Christian faith. There is some truth to that. But that’s not the whole story, is it? They wanted to escape what the established church said about not exploiting other people. Back in England, Ireland, France, and all of Western and Northern Europe, slavery was already illegal. Why? Because Christians had abolished slavery way back then!² The colonies were a legal gray zone, where people could be enslaved. Back in Europe, you couldn’t enslave people. You couldn’t break up their families. You couldn’t take people’s land. You couldn’t pay people miserable wages. You couldn’t charge high interest on loans. Why? Because Christians had thought through all that stuff! Christians had made laws that protected people from exploitation. But hey, if you wanted to make quick money, go to the Americas! To the colonies! Because what is the whole purpose of colonies? Exploitation. As Republican Senator from Arkansas Tom Cotton said this past week, “Slavery was a necessary evil.”³ Necessary for who? For what? For some white people to get really rich. So exploiting people has always been part of U.S. history, culture, and the structures of power. It was heresy. And the U.S. was a safe space for heretics to practice their heresies. Do you understand what that means for your view of this country? It means that the reason why Europeans came to North America was because they didn’t want to practice Christian faith. They wanted to mutate it. I cannot stress enough: The U.S. was a safe space for heretics to practice their heresies.

¹ Sven Günther, “Politics of Taxation in the Roman Empire,” *Australia Tax Policy: Tax and Transfer Policy Institute*, February 28, 2019; <https://www.austaxpolicy.com/politics-taxation-roman-empire/> writes, “Roman citizens were exempted from *tributa* since 167 BC, except in some rare situations during the Civil Wars in the Late Republic. Consequently, *tributa*, together with *stipendium* (a military *guerdon* to be paid by the conquered), was then exclusively paid by inhabitants of the Roman provinces. It consisted mainly of a poll tax (*tributum capitis*) and a land tax (*tributum soli*), calculated on the basis of a census list. *Vectigalia*, on the other hand, were imposed on all persons in a given framework, for instance in a community or due to a specific status, as long as they had no exemption status (*immunitas*).”

² See my research papers summarizing this history at www.anastasiscenter.org/race-slavery-belief-systems and the resources listed there. The most relevant papers are Mako A. Nagasawa, *Slavery in the Bible* and Mako A. Nagasawa, *Slavery and Christianity: First to Fifteenth Centuries*.

³ Christopher Brito, “GOP Senator Tom Cotton Under Fire for Comment that Slavery Was “Necessary Evil”,” *CBS News*, July 27, 2020; <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tom-cotton-slavery-necessary-evil-1619-project/>. Tiana Lowe, “Fact check: No, Tom Cotton did not say he believes slavery is a necessary evil,” *Washington Examiner*, July 26, 2020; <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/fact-check-no-tom-cotton-did-not-say-he-believes-slavery-is-a-necessary-evil> asserts that the entirety of Cotton’s statement exonerates him. Cotton said, “We have to study the history of slavery and its role and impact on the development of our country because otherwise we can’t understand our country. As the Founding Fathers said, it was the necessary evil upon which the union was built, but the union was built in a way, as Lincoln said, to put slavery on the course to its ultimate extinction.” But Lincoln’s assessment is debatable, unless we propose that the *Civil War* was foreseen and intended by the Founders, which is unlikely. And, more importantly, Cotton’s opposition to the *New York Times’ 1619 Project* would seem to suggest that he believes that racial segregation and other aspects of white supremacy did not continue appreciably past the end of slavery, formally – which is untrue. The question is still: *What* made slavery so necessary, supposedly?

So think of the main ways people were exploited—people who were non-white, but including other white people, too. In the U.S., it was slavery of Native and black people, and the white poor in the South, then convict leasing and sharecropping of black people in the South, then child labor in factories in the North, and getting immigrants and migrant workers in the West and North sometimes by tricking them to come here. It went along with preventing those people from learning how to read, how to vote, how to collectively bargain for their wages. Then it was about making Scotch-Irish poor folks in Appalachia to work the coal mines and get black lung disease. It was about making the Navajo work the uranium mines and get cancer. Now, it's about prison labor from mostly black and brown prisoners, and you don't get told about prison labor. It's also about debt as the new slavery for everyone, and you don't get told about real financial literacy.

Illus: Earlier this week, I was telling Paul Malkemes what I was going to speak about today. He forwarded me this article about church furniture being made by prison laborers. Things like pews, wooden pulpits, and beautiful things that are made and sold at 70% of the normal cost because people are paid \$1.20 an hour.⁴ There are churches who buy these things. And for all of us, debt is the new slavery. And you don't get told the real story about financial literacy that you would need to understand your personal finances, sometimes, but also the whole system – how do banks really work? Why do they keep getting more powerful?

That's the first thing we really learn. The second thing we learn is that a few people in the conquered group always benefit. A few people in the conquered group – in the oppressed group – always benefit. Because the Empire gets them to side with them. The tax collectors side with the exploiters.

You know who really benefits? The Empire does. The Empire gets to say, “Look at how we have raised up a few of you all. We've made your lives better. If all of you were just the model minority...” There have always been minority folks who have made that choice. Look at how we have some minorities in suburbs, or in Congress or on the Supreme Court. Never mind that it makes many other people despise you for not seeing how you're a tool. The Empire benefits. The ruling imperial class benefits.

Illus: Now I want to say that there are more power dynamics than race alone, but I'm going to stay on this for just a moment, because I am Japanese-American and I have to address the “model minority” myth. The “model minority” myth is a way that white America uses some Asian Americans as an example that if you work hard enough, you can make it, because the U.S. is not racist. The main problem with that is the U.S. is still racist! Look at the rise in anti-Asian violence and harassment, and the lack of response from Bill Barr's Department of Justice to investigate it.⁵ Look at the laughter in a white evangelical megachurch when Trump calls the coronavirus the “kung flu.”⁶ That's on top of anti-black and anti-brown issues. But the real background of the “model minority” myth is that in 1965, the U.S. was in the Space Race with the Soviets, so they only wanted certain types of Asians: educated immigrants from China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan who had science and technology skills who would be given jobs in defense and electronics. Of course that group would be decently successful. So the U.S. doesn't get to take credit for being fair, or being a level playing field. And Asian-Americans should not side with the exploitation.

Kingdom Resistance Against the Empire: v.13

So how do we resist the exploitation of the Empire? Let's look at v.13. And John the Baptist said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” That means: resist the Empire. Practically, it means: make no personal salary.⁷ Which means: absorb some of the injustice in your own lifestyle, your own salary. It means: you're going

⁴ Will Young, “Who Built Your Pew?” *Sojourners*, June 2019; <https://sojo.net/magazine/june-2019/who-built-your-pew>.

⁵ Alexia Fernández Campbell and Alex Ellerbeck, “Federal Agencies Are Doing Little About the Rise in Anti-Asian Hate,” *NBC News*, April 16, 2020; <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/federal-agencies-are-doing-little-about-rise-anti-asian-hate-n1184766>.

⁶ Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at a Turning Point Action Address to Young Americans,” White House Briefings, June 23, 2020; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-turning-point-action-address-young-americans/>. Trump delivered his address to white megachurch Dream City Church in Phoenix, Arizona. See also Samuel Smith, “Trump Critic Condemns Term ‘Kung Flu’ for COVID-19 Cheered On By College Students At Rally,” *Christian Post*, June 25, 2020; <https://www.christianpost.com/news/trump-critic-condemns-term-kung-flu-for-covid-19-cheered-on-by-college-students-at-rally.html>.

⁷ Sandra Sweeney Silver, “Taxes in the Ancient Roman World,” *Early Church History*; <https://earlychurchhistory.org/daily-life/taxes-in-ancient-roman-world/> points out that the Jewish tax collector under the Roman Empire “made his money by making sure the expected revenue exceeded his bid. He paid the government the bid and pocketed the rest.”

to have to rejoin the oppressed people, because you're going to have to depend on them financially. And your lifestyle isn't going to be great, because you'll be dependent on other people. But the community as a whole will benefit. Why? Because you might not be able to make the Roman Empire go away. But as long as they are in power, you're not personally benefiting at all. And you're not just getting out of that job so someone else could fill your shoes and the Empire can put a different face on the exploitation. That cut that you were making at other people's expense, you will no longer make. So that portion of the suffering of the oppressed, you take onto yourself because you were once part of the exploitation of the Empire.

We need to carefully consider this. What do we learn? First, it means that those of us who benefit from systemic exploitation from the Empire are called to absorb some of the cost of that exploitation for the sake of others. I'll talk about housing in just a minute because there are some important and exciting things that we as a church are talking about and hoping to move forward on. But let me talk about the ongoing corporate exploitation.

Illus: How many of you have Domino Sugar in your kitchen shelves? Do you know why it's called Domino Sugar? Because they grow sugar in the Dominican Republic. Years ago, some students who were partnering with local communities noticed that Domino Sugar wasn't paying their workers decent wages. They weren't concerned about the shanty towns that popped up near the factory. They weren't rotating crops so that the soil could have a rest and be replenished. Instead, the soil was getting depleted quickly because it was just being used to grow sugar. So young Americans and Dominicans, led by professor at Eastern College named Tony Campolo, bought one share of Domino Sugar. That entitled them to go to a shareholders' board meeting. They got there, and said, "We've noticed all these things about our company. We are Christians, and we believe Jesus is concerned with the people of the Dominican Republic than he is about profit. In fact, we believe he will come back one day, and that he will judge the way you are running this company." But the executives said, "Give us a few weeks. Let's schedule some meetings together to see what we can do." Weeks later, the board of Domino Sugar came out and said, "We resolve to do the following: We will increase the wages of our workers in the DR. We will implement a system of crop rotation, alternating sugar with food, for long term health. We will dedicate so many millions of dollars over the next few years to education, so many millions of dollars towards infrastructure development, and so many millions to health care initiatives."⁸

One practical point: We need to not buy things made with prison labor.

Second, it means that you can call for social justice and do evangelism at the same time. A lot of white evangelicals say things like, "We shouldn't prioritize systemic racism. We should just preach the gospel, and the systemic stuff will take care of itself." They don't say that about abortion. Gee, I wonder why. But the real assumption evangelicals tend to make is one I want to engage with seriously. Evangelicals tend to assume that Christians have to relate to non-Christians in a certain kind of order, like a sequence. Like, first, you have to share your faith in an individualistic way that stresses your personal story. Second, you have to wait for their conversion to Jesus. Third, if they come to Jesus, then, maybe you can talk about things God calls us to do, but don't teach about social justice just yet, because instead you need to make sure they understand that Jesus died for them so they don't have to feel guilty about anything, including things like social injustices, exploitation, systemic racism, and the things of Empire. There's this assumption that there's a sequence that people go through.

But look at this passage. Who is John the Baptist talking to? Mature Christians? No! Jesus hasn't even started his ministry yet. John the Baptist is *preparing* people for Jesus. Do you see the significance of that? He's telling people about what the kingdom of God means in their lives, especially against the Roman Empire. And then, he'll point them to Jesus! God is having John the Baptist do discipleship before they come to Jesus. Because it's against the Empire. It's not that we can ever forget about Jesus, because only with Jesus do we have God's power against sin and selfishness pressed into Jesus' human nature—the human nature that we need by Jesus' Holy Spirit. And if you think the biggest problem Jesus came to deal with was your feelings of guilt, then you'll probably never get to a biblical social justice posture because we're always going to have guilty feelings. But if you recognize that the biggest problem Jesus came to deal with is human evil – on every level, from the personal human nature level all the way up to the level of Empire – then this makes perfect sense. We do social justice and evangelism at the same time. We talk about what Jesus calls us to, and who Jesus is, at the same time. People can make all kinds of choices

⁸ This story was told by Tony Campolo in a sermon I heard on tape, and am sharing from memory. Any errors are mine.

about that. They can come to him in whatever order. That has got to be engrained in us, as we as Neighborhood Church call people to the shalom of God, we call people to contribute to the shalom of God.

Third, we learn that the New Testament totally understands structural injustice. There are many people—and many Christians—who are somehow under the impression that the New Testament is so heavenly-minded, it's no earthly good. Or, they think that the New Testament sees everything in only personal relationships, not systemic power. And if that's true, it'd be really hard and maybe impossible to talk about Christian responses to systemic racism or systemic injustice. But the New Testament totally understands structural injustice.

Get this: John the Baptist does not tell tax collectors to stay in their jobs. That is totally a systemic move. If John the Baptist and Jesus had said, "Quit your job," because they were individualistic and pietistic and all that matters is your feelings of personal guilt, then what would happen? Someone else would take that job. And the community is back where it is. The suffering would be the same; it'd just be a new face doing the exploitation.

Who else gets told in the New Testament to stay in your job but make no personal money? No one. And you know what that means? It means that the New Testament can take the principle of no exploitation, no theft, no further harming the poor, let's address the issues of Empire, and contextualize it to certain roles of power. What does this mean for me? Well it depends on the role you occupy in the whole system. This is what we had started to see whenever an Israelite rose to a place of influence in the Gentile Empires. That was Joseph, that was Daniel, that was Esther. They applied that principle of protecting the poor. Let's not exploit them in particular ways. Here, now when we see Jesus and John the Baptist, we see them factoring in your unique role.

Representation matters – today, when we talk about ethnic and racial minority leadership – but in addition to that, we had to diagnose the structures of power. Otherwise, people are probably going to fail. We'll have people of color as police who make the same mistakes. We'll talk about Empire, police terror, and Jesus' police next week.

What happens with the tax collectors is so important for us to pay attention to. The same thing happens in Luke 19, With Zaccheus. That guy was probably the second wealthiest man in the Bible, next to King Solomon. He made a cut off of everyone who worked under him. But other Jews hated Zaccheus. He was a short man, and everybody closed ranks against him so he couldn't see Jesus. Zaccheus comes to Jesus and admits he's been a thief. How does he admit that? Zaccheus says he'll give back 4 times what he stole from anyone. And, on top of that, he'll give away half his wealth right off the bat. Jesus says, "I will accept that." Why? Because Jewish law in Exodus 22 that thieves have to give back 2 to 5 times the amount that they stole.

We need to be sensitive to exploitation in all its forms. The U.S. is an interesting Empire. In the biblical cases, those Empires would send an army to conquer other people and exploit people and get taxes. The United States absorbed people, brought them into the geography of the United States, and continued to exploit them. The dynamics are a little different but we have to pay attention. That's one of the reasons why I asked Valerie to share about labor unions because so much of the exploitation happens today because we have given people with capital so much more power over those who labor, and over clean air, land, and water that we all need. Why do corporations have so much power? Because this country has a long legacy of exploitation. In a biblical sense, it is an Empire, and Empires are designed to exploit.

Application: Pay It Forward Fund

About a third or a half of us here at Neighborhood Church of Dorchester have been talking about forming a "Pay It Forward Fund." Back in January before the COVID pandemic, we had a church members meeting. The Elder Team shared a thought that was just in its early stages. What if we did something amazing with our finances together. In light of Luke 3, I'd add: "to resist the exploitation of the empire." We are blessed with our partnership with the Boys and Girls Club, where we pay \$2000 per month to rent the gym and a few other rooms for our children's programs. At some point, with all due caution related to COVID, we'll be back in the gym at some point. We could grow by 500% and keep our fixed costs the same. So we would like to create a "Pay It Forward Fund" where we could contribute to a fund where members of Neighborhood Church could apply for a loan or a grant. The purpose could be to get out of debt, or get help for buying a home. Now why would we do that? Because in the U.S., that is where a lot of the exploitation of black and brown people happens. It happens especially through debt, where you wind up paying so much money to a credit card company, or a bank, or the Department of Education if its student loan debt. Exploitation also happens through the real estate market because of a long history of

government policies to help white families build assets through their home and policies to prevent minority folks from doing the same. As a church community, we can play a small part in resisting that exploitation if we had a “Pay It Forward Fund.”