

There are any number of ways that people might describe the pastor... some of which I'd rather not mention... ☺ As I've mentioned to you on *numerous* occasions before, one of my favorite concerning my job responsibilities as pastor is this: *“to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.”* Well, I think that today's sermon title would certainly fall into the latter part of that 'job description.' For to equate our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ with the word 'socialist' I am SURE would 'afflict the comfortable.' The funny thing is, discussions about such an inflammatory term as 'socialist'... particularly from one who is MUCH more 'comfortable' in talking about *theological* topics than *political* ones... has served to 'afflict' the preacher as well! Believe me, when I read this suggestion for a sermon topic, the title jumped off the page about the same way it likely did with you as well...

Because of my aversion to getting too 'political' in these public 'conversations' ... as well as admitting my own shortcomings in erudite discussions of socio-political subjects... I would use as simple a definition as possible to work with. Consulting the 'gospel according to Webster,' the term **“socialism”** is defined as this:

*“...advocating **collective or governmental ownership and administration of the means of production and distribution of goods...in which there is no private property; a stage of society in Marxist theory... between **capitalism and communism** and distinguished by **unequal distribution of goods and pay according to work done.**”***

In **comparing** this definition of the term 'socialism' with the defining character traits of our **Savior**, and His disciples, I would have to say that the various aspects could be considered to fall into the categories of 'the good, the bad, and the ugly.' In the 'good' category, where we consider the merits of *collective ownership and administration,* we could hear the words of Acts: *“...**the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul... everything they owned was held in common.**”*

(Acts 4:32) We need not look any further than our (the L.C. church's) partnership with 1st Christian Church to see the merits of such unity of believers, as we 'own and administer in common' our new property in MorganField..

Further, in '*advocating the distribution of goods,*' we might hear Jesus' admonition to the 'rich young seeker,' "**Go, sell what you own, and give to the poor.**" (Mark 10:21) Obviously the early church took this to heart, for it clearly says in Acts, "**they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need...**" (Acts 2:45) Considering the historic support of the poor and needy by the Presbyterian Church... both the larger, and local, church... I don't think that many of us would argue our calling to help those in need.

There ARE those aspects of this comparison of Christian principles and socialism, however, that are NOT quite so clear in our agreement. Particularly when it comes to "*government ownership*" and "*no private property.*" With regards to the latter, the author of Acts does address this directly: "**No one claimed private ownership of any possessions.**" (Acts 4:32) I'm thinking that most ALL of us would likely struggle with this one.

As to the role of **government** in fulfilling Christ's commission to 'share the wealth'... to "**give to the poor**"... the Scriptures in general, and Jesus specifically, do not give a lot of attention to that relationship. Most of us are likely familiar with his cryptic saying relative to the government and paying taxes, "**Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.**" (Luke 20:25) Well, since all of our currency has 'Caesar's' name on it, one could argue that it is ALL to be rendered unto the government. (Which, one might also say, IS our national government's perspective...) As to the amount of control that our public officials should have in the 'redistribution of wealth,' methinks of a 19th Century British expression that might be appropriate: "*Absolute power corrupts absolutely.*"

Aside from the good and bad... or at least, 'not-so-good'... comparisons between the concepts of socialism and Christianity, there are some pretty downright ugly ones. Along the lines of that quote I just used, when we in our democratic society think of terms like 'Marxism' and 'communism,' the 'absolute corruption' of 'absolute power' can certainly come to mind. But as we consider one of the guiding principles of Marx... "FROM each according to his ability, TO each according to his need" (that "unequal distribution... according to work done" in our definition) wouldn't that be pretty compatible with Jesus' admonition to 'sell all that you own,' to 'leave behind everything and follow me?' What do we do with Jesus' statement concerning **"How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"** (Mark 10:23) We can sure understand the verse that follows: **"And the disciples were perplexed at these words."** (v. 24) And perhaps SEEING those 'stunned' looks in their eyes, he says it AGAIN: **"Children, how hard it is [for those who trust in riches] to enter the kingdom of God!"** (Mark 10:24)

Jesus then utters one of his more well-known statements... particularly with regards to **wealth**... 'goods and pay'... and their relationship with one's eternal destiny: **"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven."** (Mark 10:25) Some popular scholarship says that this 'eye of the needle' was a small door within one of the large gates of a city wall. One that would allow... barely, with little room to spare... a camel to pass through. This could tend to trivialize, or minimize, the intent of Jesus' words. That those who are 'rich' the eyes of the world are not necessarily 'rich' in GOD's eyes. And seeing as how most EVERYONE in this room is considered 'rich' in comparison to the world's population, we would do well to consider the merits of Jesus' 'inconvenient truth.' Words that we might consider 'bad'... or even downright 'ugly'...

So, what do you think? Was Jesus a 'socialist?' Well, here's my answer...NO COMMENT. Just kidding... Seriously, though, I think that we should be very careful on

using ANY **human** term, political or otherwise, to limit, to 'pigeon-hole' our **Divine** Lord Christ. IMHO, I believe that He would be very leery about us investing too heavily in ANYTHING... be it government, possessions, or organizations that take away from our own **personal, God-given responsibility** to CARE for one another.

There is tremendous mistrust in our country, and indeed, in our world, for **institutions...** from our government even to our churches. Both of which do great good. BUT... they must be held **accountable** for that which they have been **entrusted**. Indeed, just as you and I will be held 'accountable' for all that WE individually have been 'entrusted' with.

Jesus KNEW that man who came up to him to ask about eternal life. He knew that he was trying to lead a Godly life. But like we all do, he had his flaws. His greatest one was particularly his attachment to his 'stuff.' He was most likely a 'results-oriented' businessman. 'Tell me the bottom line, Jesus. What do I need to do to get the desired result of eternal life.' And when Jesus told him to let go of this stuff, he took it pretty hard. The Scriptures said that he was 'shocked'... 'grieving'... because of his many 'possessions.' But get this. This is the ONLY person in all of Mark's Gospel of which it is written ***"Jesus, looking at him, LOVED him."*** (Mark 10:21)

WHY? Why THIS guy? Maybe because he was so representative of all of humanity. All of US! Even as we seek to be faithful followers of Christ... even as we try to serve God and God's people... we can have a hard time in **letting go**. It's not about having the 'right stuff'... but the 'right relationship.' With God. **MANKIND'S GREATEST PROBLEMS ARE NOT SIMPLY MATERIAL... BUT SPIRITUAL. Our quality of life is not determined by how much 'stuff' we have, but by our relationship with the Maker of all that 'stuff'... through the Son, Jesus Christ.**

John Chrysostom was a great leader and statesman in the 4th C. church in England. His very name should be indicative of his status... it is translated "Golden Mouthed." He particularly felt called to address the abuse of authority both in the

church and state. He wrote that *"I am often reproached for continually attacking the rich. ...But those I attack are not the rich as such, only those who misuse their wealth; Wealth is one thing... covetousness is another. Learn to distinguish."*

How are you and I USING our wealth? How much of our 'accumulation' of wealth is about 'acquisition' of that which we covet. Do we use our resources as a help to others? Or as a hindrance to following Jesus. Peter got pretty insulted by his 'prohibition to prosperity' when he said to Jesus, ***"Look, we have left everything and followed you."*** To which Jesus basically replied that for all that they had given up, it would be returned to them ***"a hundredfold."*** 'That in the END, you will GAIN so much more than you LOST.' He then goes on to say, ***"... but many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."*** We must be mindful of how are we caring for those who are considered 'last' in our world's eyes. For they are considered 'first' in God's eyes...

There is no doubt that socialism carries with it *some* of the compassionate aims of Christianity. And that we as Christians often fail to shoulder the burden for the hurting that Jesus intends us to carry. So instead of relying on a government to 'do our dirty work for us,' perhaps we need to live more closely to the example Jesus gives us. To borrow from Isaiah's words, Let the 'government' be upon HIS shoulders. Pray for God's Spirit to help us to give joyfully to the work that the early church accomplished: ***"There was not a needy person among them."*** (4:34) As we freely give of ourselves to others, may we remember the admonition of Paul: ***"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Cor 9:7)"*** Or, in the case of that rich man with Jesus, God even loves a 'NOT-so-cheerful' giver...