

## EUNUCHS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

### Transgender Study

#### Session 4

#### **Matthew 19:11-12**

*But Jesus said to the disciples, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the dominion of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”*

Many scholars argue that this passage is not to be taken literally, but refers primarily to those who have forgone marriage and become celibate in order to better serve the church. Jesus’ intention was clearly broader than that, because he includes not only people who abstain from marriage but all possible configurations of eunuchs. Limiting Jesus’ teaching solely to celibates oversimplifies this passage and does not hold us, as the community of faith, fully accountable to the full extent of Jesus’ words.<sup>3</sup>

The important aspect of this passage is that Jesus recognizes and comments upon the lives and situations of gender-variant people in his society. A number of transgendered authors write about Jesus’ saying regarding eunuchs. Virginia Mollenkott says the following about Jesus’ teaching:

Jesus’ words about eunuchs in Matthew 19:12 reveal an accepting, respectful attitude that ought to be the norm for the modern church: “For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth” includes at the very least all intersexual people; “and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others” includes post-operative transsexuals; “and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven” includes not only pre-operative and non-operative transsexuals but all other transgenderists, celibates, and homosexuals who do not engage in reproductive sex. The kingdom of heaven is located within us (Luke 17:21); so perhaps what Jesus means by being eunuchs “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” is the Jewish counsel of being true to one’s deepest nature.

In the web article “Jesus and Male and Female,” author Michelle Dee writes:

In Jesus’ day, there was no SRS, though there were transgendered people, naturally. (After all, why would crossdressing have been mentioned in Deuteronomy at all if it hadn’t existed for thousands of years?) Jesus openly acknowledges that “some are eunuchs because they were born that way,” and this naturally opens up the door to consider the intersexed hermaphrodite, whose sex is simultaneously both and neither. Jesus acknowledges sexual diversity and did not judge it.

This last point is critically important for Christians to consider. Clearly, Jesus knows that some people are born outside of the binary gender system and people whose lives lead them beyond it. He speaks of multiple ways in which someone might have become gender variant, and he does so with compassion and clarity. We are called to do likewise.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Question for Discussion:**

1. How do you describe the three classifications in this passage: a.) eunuchs from birth, b.) eunuchs made by others, and c.) self-made eunuchs? Do you think Jesus was speaking literally or metaphorically?

#### **Acts 8:25-39**

*Now after Peter and John had testified and spoken the word of the Sovereign, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans. Then an angel of God said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied,*

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<sup>3</sup> Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 73

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

*“How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:*

*“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth.”*

*The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask, does the prophet say this? About himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of God snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.*

One of the most powerful stories in Scriptures for gender-variant people is the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Acts. The eunuch was a court official of the Candace, a title for the queen of Ethiopia. He was in Jerusalem to worship and was now returning home, reading a section of Scripture filled with words of consolation and inclusion, as well as the description of the Suffering Servant of God from Isaiah 53:7. As a foreigner and eunuch, he was in a spiritual border zone, both included and excluded in Judaism, and between genders.<sup>5</sup>

First century-commentators, such as Josephus,...regarded eunuchs as unnatural “monstrosities” who must be shunned on account of their gross effeminacy and generative impotence (Ant 4.290-91), and Philo, who classified eunuchs as various “worthless persons” banned from the sacred assembly because they “debase the currency of nature and violate it by assuming the passions and the outward form of licentious women.” (Special Laws 1.324-25).

The very negativity of the commentators’ reactions strengthens the argument that eunuchs are analogous to modern transgendered persons since they were considered to have crossed gender lines. Certainly these views sound familiar to us and are ones against which we have had to struggle.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Question for discussion:**

1. What do you think would have moved public opinion from Jesus’ statement in Matthew 19:11-12 to Josephus’s and Philo’s statements in the first century?

#### **Galatians 3:28**

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

This verse of Scripture calls into question, and ultimately into accountability, the human divisions of race, class, and gender. If those of us who are Christians would follow this mandate, such a change would have a profound impact on how we live and are. Among other things, transgendered people would not be excluded from or just tolerated in communities of faith but welcomed as equals; nor would distinctions be placed on the roles of women and men in our religious bodies. We would not have categories of acceptable churchgoers and respectable Christians, separate from unacceptable, disreputable queer folks. Rather, all would be welcome in the body of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Questions for discussion:**

1. What are some ways that we can live out this passage? What things can we be intentional about doing in our own church to blur any distinction between race, class, and gender?
2. How can we make our church more “transgender-friendly?”

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 80.