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## Why Does The Modern World Care So Much About Equality (and what does Scripture say about it)?

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Today's question: "Why is equality such an important ideal (given good) in modern society? What are some underlying causes and how does the gospel shed light on this desire?"

You can read the Joyce Benenson article I discuss on female intrasexual competition here: <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/full/10.1098/rstb.2013.0079>. I've also commented on the strangeness of the modern mind here: <https://alastairadversaria.com/2017/12/07/the-strangeness-of-the-modern-mind/>.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>.

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### Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, why is equality such an important ideal or given good in modern society? What are some underlying causes and how does the gospel shed light on this desire? I might begin at the end and think about the way that the New Testament speaks about concepts like equality and some of the things that we would interpret as equality, and then work backwards from that and hopefully explain why

modern society has a very different understanding of things. When people read their Bibles, they might encounter the word equality at various points.

So for instance, in 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks about equality between two congregations, one giving and one receiving, but in a situation where one party gives out of their abundance and the other party can give out of their abundance. There's a sense of mutual common interest in the other party, that each party is giving what they can to the other so that they have a truly common good. In this situation, it's balance, it's fairness, there's a sense that I'm committed to your good, you're committed to my good.

Within that situation, there's equality. That equality is not the same thing as what we might think about as equality within our society. I'll get to that in a moment.

Paul will also use the same terminology when talking about fair payment of slaves by masters and the way that people can act within those sorts of relationships that are not quite as straightforwardly reciprocal as we might think in a way that is just. What we're thinking about when we talk about equality in Scripture is something that is grounded within a deeper image of what society is. There, I think it's important to think about Paul's image of society in something like the body.

In 1 Corinthians 12, he talks about the church has a body, the body of Christ, that has received the one gift of the Holy Spirit, which is represented in the many different spiritual gifts of the different members. How does the body image work? It works because you have the body works as a whole. All of its different members work because they are part of one body.

They share in that common good. If they're detached from that common good, they are not actually operative. So if you remove the eye from the body, it no longer functions as an eye.

It depends upon the other members to operate. It can't boast over the other members because the eye and the hand belong together. It's hand-eye coordination.

As they are coordinated, each party is strengthened by the other. The hand can become dexterous. The hand can become ordered to reality in a way that it would not were it not for the eye.

And the eye can become powerful in its world by ordering the world according to its instruction of the hand. Now this is something that operates on the body on a far greater scale, but there's a sense of a common interest and each party's strengths being used for the sake of others. This re-presentation of the gift of the Spirit also means that the one gift of the Spirit that Christ gives to the Church is exercised through the many different members.

So we all participate in Christ's giving process. We give to each other as Christ gives to

us. And that one gift that belongs to us means that the gifts that I have are given for your sake, and the gifts that you have are given for my sake and for others.

This is a way of thinking about things that places people in a situation that is not a zero-sum game. So the more strength that you have, the more that I benefit, because your strength is not held over against me, but rather your strength is exercised for my benefit, for a common good, not just for my private benefit, but for the common good in which I am also invested. And that common good is where we all place our weight.

So I'm not thinking about my personal benefit, I'm thinking about the common good, and you're thinking about the common good, and as we all work towards the common good, I don't feel threatened by your strength. I don't feel threatened by your gifts. There's a sense in which they all belong.

We're all in this together. We're all exercising these things for the same cause. And there's no way in which we're placed at odds with each other.

Now, when we read Paul on the relations between different groups, we will often read that instinctively within our society, within a framework of equality. So within Galatians 3, 28, Paul says, There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, or male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And people will tend to read that within our modern society, as you are all equal.

Those differences are irrelevant. And so they are just rendered inoperative in all aspects of society. There's no difference between male and female anymore, that you can treat men and women as interchangeable, that that's what equality means.

But notice, Paul isn't talking about equality at all. Paul is talking about being one. And it's that underlying image of the body that is important there, that we're all one body, that the differences that were once divisions between these parties are no longer so.

And so the difference between Jew and Greek is no longer one that holds Gentiles out and Greeks out. Same way, master and slave, there's no longer an opposition between those parties that subjects in a non-reciprocal relationship one party to another. Likewise with male and female, that there is now this clear establishment of common good between those parties, so that the strength of one is not exerted at the expense of the other.

Now this is not something that functions according to our notions of privilege, which will unilaterally weight one particular party with blame, typically, or with responsibility in some other cases, and treat the other as lacking in agency and unable, just dependent and having this grievance that they bring forward. No, there's a sense of reciprocity, that there is a mutual, that there's, for instance, a display of honour that is due to other parties. So for instance, Gentiles should show a certain sort of honour to the Jews,

because the Jews are the natural branches.

The Jews are the ones who have given us these great gifts, and they've been trusted with the oracles of God, and we have received those from their hands. And there's a sense of honour that should go with that. And so this is not a straightforwardly Jewish privilege, and then we're overcoming Jewish privilege with Gentile inclusion.

It's not like that at all. There's an honour given to both parties in that relationship. What we see then, as we move to a more modern cultural context, is that we do not have an operative body metaphor, because we do not have a society in which that can easily be operative.

There are a number of reasons for this. I think that there are reasons that we see in the ways that different parties are placed in competition with each other increasingly, that there cannot be a true common good between them. For instance, when we talk about the gender gap in wage or something like that, we're constantly thinking about men and women in opposition to each other.

But thinking about those sorts of differences can be very different when we're thinking about a society that's framed primarily by marriage, where the good of men and women are bound together in a common good, the good of the family. So the good of the man in that relationship is not his own private good, but he's invested in the good of his family and his wife likewise. And they're both invested in that in ways that they will want to see the strength of the other party and the flourishing of the other party, because the other party is invested within that common good.

Now, what does this mean in the context of thinking about things like the wage gap? It means that often what will be most keenly felt is the lack of equality within a society where we're all placed in competition. But yet that lack of equality won't be a threat in other societies, where the greater wage that, for instance, a husband can earn compared to a wife who's working more part time in other respects, that there can be a sense of equality, a balance between them, a fairness between them, as they both work towards the common good. And as one party earns more, that is for the sake of the family.

It's not something that's held over against the class of women, but rather it's for the sake of the building up of everyone. And so a society where we no longer can have a one-wage-earner family is not a good thing for families. Whereas if you're thinking purely in terms of abstracted, individualised men and women in competition with each other, that's the sort of society that will be created.

Now, this leads to all sorts of issues, I think, within our society that we haven't truly wrestled with. When we read the Bible, I think, we'll also see some of these problems in the movement from the abstract into the particular. Because within our society, we have the principle of equality, which is a very abstract principle.

I mean, what do we mean by equality? Do we mean treating like things in a like way? It seems to be more axiomatic than that. It's not just this principle of fairness, because to establish that principle of fairness, you'd have to establish that two parties were in fact alike in some critical respect. So the same wage for the same work actually will generally lead to men being paid considerably more.

Now, that is not something that our society is happy about, because what it's concerned about is a deeper issue, which is the fundamental dignity of persons. And when that dignity of persons is placed in opposition to each other, and measured according to the metric of wages and earning, and status within society, in a society that's very much framed by economics and political power, then it will be an issue. It will be a problem.

And naturally, you'll have this sense of a keen feeling of inequality. And that sense of inequality is not inappropriate, because there is a sense in which there is not a true common good, and that parties are being placed at odds with each other. That the good of one party is in a zero-sum game relationship with that of another party.

And this is not a good thing. This is not an ideal situation. Rather, within scripture, we can deal with the concrete differentiation that any society will involve in a way that's not so threatening, because there is this sense of a common good that's established as they're brought together.

So, for instance, if we're talking about men and women within scripture, the modern reader of the Bible will go back to Genesis 1, and they'll read the text in Genesis 1.27, and they'll say, God created man in his image, and in the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. Men and women are made alike in the image of God.

Actually, if you read the story a bit more carefully, you'll see it's not quite that straightforward. And it becomes even more straightforward, and even more complicated in places like 1 Corinthians 11, where there is a differentiation within the image of God. But what is the point there? The point, the image of God, is a concept that applies chiefly to humanity, not to men as distinct from women, men over against women, or each individual separately and severally.

Rather, the point is that humanity as a whole is created in the image of God, and that is an image that is differentiated in various ways in society. Likewise, when you think about men and women within the original creation, many readers of that text are deeply threatened by the fact that there would be all sorts of natural and unavoidable differences that would arise in any society arising from the sort of creation that God established. Where women, for instance, bear children for a period of nine months, where men are considerably stronger and more equipped for manual labour, and for risky endeavours within the world, and where each party has different relationships towards group activities.

These are things that lead to deep differences. And deep divergences in behaviour. And that will be a threat to any modern sense of equality.

We'll seek to deny that that is natural, we'll seek to push it away, we'll seek to subdue it and repress it, we'll seek to arrest it in different respects, oppose its development, and seek to counteract and to mitigate its effects. Now, within scripture that's not such a threat, because there's a sense of deep difference is not held over against different parties. Rather, each party is serving the common good, and as the common good is served, it doesn't really matter that much that there are these huge differences.

So when we get to the nitty-gritty questions which hardly anyone seems to ask, who is going to mine the gold from the land of Pabla? Who's going to ford the river? Who's going to find some way to cross the river Euphrates? Who's going to be the one who raises baby Abel and teaches him how to walk? Who nurses him? Who's going to be the one who hunts game? Who's going to be the one who prepares meals? Now, there'll be all sorts of different ways of resolving those practical questions, but as you look at virtually any human society, it's in those questions that we see the differences between men and women emerging. And these social differences are not from some great ideology from the sky that's handed down. You have often an ideologising of some of these fundamental phenomenological differences, but it's not primarily established from above.

It's these natural differences that arise from just the clear and strong differences between the tendencies of men and women, and the parts that they have to play in things like reproduction, and the differences in body strength, all these sorts of things, and the differences between male and female groups and how they operate. And it's very hard to avoid that, but within our society we struggle with this because we have to have people interchangeable, because we think very much in terms of detached individuals. So modern readers of these texts will struggle to overcome their sense of resistance to a society where these differences are practically unavoidable.

And there can be a sort of a sense of deep grievance about nature itself, that nature itself will create these asymmetries. But within a society where these asymmetries are not held over against each other, but are within a body context and exercise for the sake of each other, there's not the same threat. What you'll notice, for instance, in scripture, is how often there is a sense of investment in the strength of the other party.

So the woman, for instance, will often want to have this situation where she has strong sons and a strong husband. She's not looking for that strength for herself. And so a figure like Deborah, people look at the figure of Deborah, oh, she's this strong independent woman, and yet she seems to be investing a lot in raising up sons.

She's a mother in Israel and she wants to raise up a generation of sons, because what you have in a society where people are subdued by other external forces, is you have a

breaking down of the male structure of society. So the structure is weakened and you're depending purely on... And the women are far more central to that society, because you've destroyed any male power that could be military, that could be engaged in some sort of establishment of institutions, power structures, things like that. But within that situation, the woman is invested in establishing that male order, because she's strengthened by it.

It's not good for us to be weakened by the weakening of the other party. Likewise, the expectation is the man should be invested in the glorification of his wife, that Christ, for instance, glorifies the church, that within the book of Proverbs, the whole point is to lead towards the glorified wife, because that glorification is the sign of the glory of the man's household, that he is glorified as his wife is made to flourish. And that sense of a non-zero-sum game is one that is very difficult for us to recover within our society, particularly when we think in terms of universalising of things, and a departicularising and breaking down of differences so that people can become commensurable.

We all are units who are operating within the economy, and we should be interchangeable. The problem is we're not as interchangeable as people want us to be, and that poses a problem for our sense of justice. But that sense of justice is founded upon an atomising of society, and a loss of a clear sense of a common good.

Now, what else is involved here? I think there's a loss of a sense of a common good, there's a loss of a sense of clear community, of peoplehood. Within modern society, this concept of equality is also related to some of the deep, inter-group tensions that exist within society, where some parts of society, some groups within society, feel alienated from the common good. This is a problem in a society that amplifies diversity all the time, because diversity, where you're not actually establishing a strong common good, an investment in the good of each other, will lead to a situation where there is a keen emphasis upon equality.

Because any difference in status, any difference of that kind, will be seen as over against others, because there is not a common good to invest those differences in. And that is a real problem. So whereas within the family, there is a bit more flexibility for inequality of certain types, an inequality that is found in the fact that there is a deep common good here, that everyone's invested in the same thing, and we're all exercising our effort for the building up of each other, there is a problem when we move to a more atomised society.

I think along with that, we've lost a sense of reciprocal relations. So within a society where there is a sense of balance, rather than just equality, what you have is, for instance, the relationship between host and guest, or the relationship between elders and youngers with a sense of age and the honour that's associated with that, and then the strength that's associated with youth, and the strength and the beauty and the

flowering of humanity in its height. And then we also have the relationship between men and women, that men have greater strength, but there's a sense of greater responsibility and onus upon them, and accountability to protect society, to uphold society, to serve the common good.

And on the other hand, for women, there's a sense that they have particular strengths that they have to give to society, that they have to use their strengths to, not over against men, but in a way to glorify and to honour men. And this sense of investment in each other is something that is very important within a society where you have a sense of a common good. Now, we don't have that in the same way.

So the relationship between host and guest can't operate in the same way. Rather, this is one of the problems, for instance, in immigration debates, that the host-guest relationship can't operate. And so you have to think in terms of how can this party that's just entered in, how can they become equal? And then that involves breaking down peoplehood, because peoplehood, which is a sense of that in-group, becomes a threat to that newcomer.

But yet within a host-guest relationship, there is a sense of reciprocity, a common good, and mutual duties. Each party has duties to the other, but there is not symmetry. And that lack of symmetry is important, because it maintains a common good.

Likewise with the sense of the differences between people of different generations, and the sense that there is a dignity given to the strength and the beauty of younger people, but then there's also a dignity and an honour given to age, that we honour our elders. And so we're all invested in each other, that there's a sense that we're all in it together. I think a further aspect of this is basically the differences between male and female groups.

And there are ways in which men and women operate very differently. Male groups tend to be large and broad, and they tend to be ones in which people are very competitive, there's a lot more of an agonistic structure, a lot more agonistic, there's a lot more of an openness to disjunctive relationships. So for instance, competitions where there's winners and there's losers.

This isn't something that female groups are so apt or encouraging of, that's not something that comes so naturally to female groups. And so there is competition within female groups, but it's of a very different kind. Now within our society, I think what you'll notice is that the concept of equality is very closely related to the entrance of women into context.

Because that concept of equality is something that women have traditionally, I think they have a more natural emphasis upon this. Within the context that women are most traditionally and historically and naturally operative in, that concept of equality is very



important. The concept of fairness, that everyone getting their good share, having their equal share.

That within the family situation, if you're not distributing food in an equal way, there's a deep problem. Some parties are allowed to starve and others not. The family is supposed to be a place of a deep, strong common good.

A very intense common good. And equality is one of the principles that keeps that in play. That each party is maintained in their part within the whole.

Within male groups, by contrast, there's a lot more focus upon task. External focus upon task, idea, object, whatever it is, purpose. And within those groups then, you have a lot more competition, you have a lot looser affiliation, and you have a sense of bonding through common task.

As you're acting shoulder to shoulder out into the world. Those groups tend to be a lot larger and it leads to a very different sort of dynamic. The competition within those groups is such that there will generally be hierarchical structures.

There will be people who are more powerful and others who are less powerful. But there's a sense you're working towards the same common object. And there can be a sense of deep companionship within that.

That sense of, for instance, being bound to your lord. You find yourself following your lord into battle, for instance, because you feel he's leading you, he's there, he's invested in that. And you're invested in what he's doing.

And there's a sense that that equality is not threatening. Because there is a common goal, a common object to bind you together. But that object is not the internal group object of person-focused relations that you find more within female groups.

And when you have that difference between male and female groups, and then male and female groups being collapsed into each other, you'll have a lot of problems. And so Joyce Benenson has written quite a lot upon female competition. She has some very helpful thoughts about how this works.

So she talks about different strategies of female competition. Avoid interference competition. So no pushing or just standing as the obstacle to someone else or direct confrontation.

You're trying to disguise competition. And so women will often disguise competition in a host of different ways. Frenemies.

Being frenemies is a particularly female dynamic. Or it's also something you might see in gay males more. But what you have is a dynamic where there is a sense of you're friends

but you're undercutting the other person subtly all the time.

And you're in competition but you're disguising that very carefully. And you'll say things to just cut the other person down, to make them doubt themselves, whatever it is. There'll also be ways that competition is disguised by concern.

I'm really worried about Janice's relationship to her husband. She's really seeming to struggle in her marriage at the moment. I think that Justin might be having an affair.

Now we should really pray for her. I mean what's going on there? In many cases what it is, is concern that disguises competition. It's bringing one party down but elevating your own status relative to them.

But it's disguising all of that. It's not a direct competition. Likewise competition, she argues, only occurs if someone is high ranked in the community.

That for most of the time it's disguised. And it's disguised in another way through, she argues, the enforcing of equality. That within female groups the enforcing of equality is a very important dynamic of competition.

The important thing is that no one distances themselves from the group. No one is an individual who pursues their own competitive advantage. Rather everyone must be invested within that.

There must be complete equality. For instance, winners and losers, you can't have that. You have to be very careful that things are balanced out.

And then there's the use of social exclusion. Social exclusion is very quickly operative to enforce all of this. So she writes, Within the female community, status is calculated differently.

Generation and age determine status among female kin. By contrast, unrelated women enforce equality. Unlike unrelated men, status is not earned through skills and allegiance to a large interconnected group.

Instead, a woman forms several separate exclusive one-on-one friendships within the larger female community. Female friends prohibit competition by one another and other acquaintances by punishing superiority, requiring reciprocity and exhibiting a low threshold for dissolving relationships when conflicts arise. These prohibitions do not apply to relationships with kin, a spouse or a friend.

And then she writes, Eliminating all uneven resource distributions and status differentials provides an effective counter-strategy. Linguistic researchers conclude that a girl cannot assert social power or superiority as an individual without risking other girls' denigration. By age three, girls enforce equality.

Compared with boys across diverse cultures, girls avoid employing signifiers of high status with same-sex peers, including commands, boasts, provision of information or joke telling. Another movie viewer study with same-sex groups of four three- to five-year-olds demonstrated girls' dislike of superior girls. Those girls who took control and viewed the movies longest were less liked by all their female classmates than those girls who rarely viewed the movies.

The opposite was true for the boys. And so what I think you're having now is increasingly the conflict between male and female dynamics within groups. So whereas previously you'd have a very clearly defined male group and that male group would have the ways of men operate for a common good, for a common objective, but there would be a sense of difference within the group and different status and things like that, but not in a way that was threatening.

Now you have the entrance of women into those groups and there's a comparison between men and women. And those comparisons become very threatening. And I think this is one of the ways in which we see the development of equality as a very keen concern, that women and equality are two terms that go hand in hand.

And it's not a bad thing. It's not as if equality is a bad thing in principle. The point is how do we manage that? And in a situation where equality is established over everything else and it's used as something to break down the differentiation that any society will have, it becomes a problem.

When equality is something that is established within a clearly established common good, and there are differences that are enabled within that, there are differences and divergences and polarities and asymmetries that are all part of this common good society, we have a way of mitigating the dangers of deep inequality, of deep polarisation, of deep social exclusion, these sorts of things. But we also have a way of recognising that there is a need for competition, there's a need for hierarchy, there's a need for these sorts of structures in a way that is not pathological, that is not exclusionary. But yet that's a deep problem when you collapse male and female groups into each other.

And when you have that situation, increasingly the mere existence of a group that is overwhelmingly male will be considered exclusionary, whether or not women want to function within it. Because that sense of group and sociality and the need for inclusion is far more keenly felt by women than men. Male groups are far more about functionality, about object, about task, about idea, whatever it is, it's more about that objective.

Whereas for female groups, that inclusion, equality, everyone having their place within the community is very important. Now, this is something that I think the Christian understanding engages with. It recognises the difference, but it brings the difference into line with a common good.

So everyone's invested in this common good. We all have a part to play in the body. We're all invested primarily in the body.

But yet that body is one that allows for significant differentiation and does not atomise us. And if it were to atomise us, we would easily vaunt ourselves over against each other. And have a sense of our superiority.

But rather you have differentiation within the unity of a differentiated body. And that enables us to deal with these sharp differences that will naturally arise within any healthy and operative society in a way that is not threatening. Now, when we're talking about the gospel within modern society, that will require a recovery of a sense of a common good.

On a small scale, it would involve thinking differently about your family. Not thinking about it as two independent careerists who are brought together, but thinking about it as the establishment of a deep common good where you want to see each spouse wants to see the other thrive. And as both thrive, everyone thrives.

And there's a sense not just of let's have something for our mutual interest, but let's have something that is a common good. Let's have something in which we all benefit. Now, this is also something that comes with a sense of honour.

That when you have a deep common good, you honour that common good. Now, common good is different from just honouring isolated individuals. So marriage, for instance, is honoured because it serves a deep common good.

It brings together the generations. It brings together male and female in a unity whereas otherwise they might be polarised and they might be at odds with each other within society. It brings together the generations where you have the interests of children are deeply central.

So the bringing together of a husband and wife in a committed relationship means that children who are born into that relationship are maintained in the natural bond of love. So there's something that in that relationship, it's the honouring of our natural site of entry into the world, that we enter into the world and we do not enter as strangers. Rather, it means that there is a relationship of host and guest and we are welcomed into the world as those who are known and loved.

And that welcoming into the world occurs particularly in this site. It occurs in a place where men and women are bound together, where their interests are bound together with the interests of the family over time, with the extended family, with the good of society, and with the good of particular children who are born into that union, where their origins are protected, where their lineage is protected, where there is something about the dignity of their persons that is upheld by the fact that they are born into a

bond of love and that their parents' commitment to that bond of love is a commitment to them as they are a specific and natural expression of that one flesh union. Now, when we talk about marriage equality, that's begging the question.

We're not asking, are these things in fact equal? What we're thinking about is, is there, it's rather equality is taken as axiomatic. And the point within marriage equality is that individuals should have the right to be expressed in equal dignity, whether or not they are serving some deeper natural good and common societal good. So the fact that every child that is brought into a same-sex relationship is not, is divided from one of their parents, that is, they're separated from one parent and they're not bound together in that one flesh union, that is not seen as a source for any degree of difference.

What we have, I think, in our society is a loss then of a sense of the honour that is due not just to individuals, but to the common good itself, the common good that is established through marriage, the common good that is established through nationhood, the common good that is established through a particular community or neighbourhood, the common good that is established through the sense of a peoplehood, the common good that is established through a body of people that join together in the church. And when we lose that sense of honour, I think we'll move in the direction of a deep and fragmented individuality where we're all placed in competition with each other, where we all feel keenly those differences from each other that will exalt others over against us because there is no longer anything that establishes something in which we're all benefited, where we're all serving something in common and when we lose things like marriage and the family, when we lose things like the church, when we lose things like peoplehood and nationhood, all those things that once established a deep sense of common good, we will feel inequality very keenly within our society and this I think is one of the ways in which it has become a deep alienating and polarizing principle that equality is what we need above all else because we have no longer a way to be one and that I think is one of the ways that scripture and the gospel more generally can talk to these things. This is a difficult conversation to have in our society because it's such a loaded value, it's one of these values that is a sort of hooray term that people love.

Equality sounds good, like freedom sounds good but no one really tends to define that term, it's axiomatic, it's something that is begging the question a lot of the time. I mean it doesn't establish that things are equal, it just presumes and insists that they're equal and this is something that we need to consider when we're responding to it. What we may need to do is focus very much upon just establishing communities where there is a common good and help people to see first and then to understand the limits of the concept of equality.

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