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Interpersonal Relationship as a Missional Ministry to the Affluent

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Abstract

This study examines interpersonal relationships as a missional approach for engaging with the affluent. In the Great Commission in the book of Mathew 28:18-20, Christ commissioned His disciples to reach all nations with the gospel and make them His disciples. Without an appropriate model for ministering to this wealthy individuals, gospel ministers risk focusing only on poor and marginalised communities, thus failing to fulfil the Great Commission's inclusive call. The study used a qualitative approach to analyse primary data from Luke 19:1-10 and theological commentaries. It also employed a library-based method to examine relevant secondary sources. The study analysed interpersonal communication theories, including Uncertainty Reduction Theory, Attachment Theory, and Interpersonal Needs Theory. Using the interaction between Jesus and Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10 as a case study, the research demonstrated how Jesus used interpersonal relationships to minister to Zacchaeus. The findings suggest that loneliness and a desire for privacy are barriers to ministry among the wealthy. At the same time, genuine connection, empathy, and pastoral presence are essential remedies; the affluent desire to feel valued and to belong through authentic relationships, not just financial transactions. The study concludes that Zacchaeus's change of heart resulted from genuine relational ministry, emphasising that interpersonal relationships are crucial when ministering to the wealthy. This research contributes to the field of missiology by addressing the often-overlooked affluent population as a potential mission field. It also provides gospel ministers with practical models of ministry to the wealthy through authentic interpersonal relationships rather than transactional approaches.

Key words: Affluence, great commission, interpersonal relationships, missiological ministry, zacchaeus' transformation.



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INTRODUCTION

This study examines how interpersonal relationships can serve as a practical approach to missional ministry for wealthy individuals, exploring the theological basis, psychological factors, and practical methods to promote genuine engagement and address relational challenges, thereby supporting holistic witness and discipleship among the wealthy.

The affluent, like any other class of people, form part of the mission field that should be ministered to. However, gospel ministers have not given this populace the required attention. Gospel ministers have given much attention to the poor and marginalised due to their quick reception of the Word of God, leaving the affluent unattended. According to Smith (2018), gospel ministers often assume the wealthy are resistant to the gospel, which explains their neglect in mission strategies.

During His ministry on earth, Christ reached all people regardless of their diverse backgrounds, including the poor, the blind, beggars like Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52; the marginalised, social outcasts like the Samaritan woman in John 4, demon-possessed, and the rich like Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10, Nicodemus and the wealthy young ruler referenced in Mark 10:17-22 (Parsons, 2000). Following Christ's example of concern for all people, gospel ministers should be equally concerned with all people without discrimination. Considering this background, this study analyses relevant missiological theoretical frameworks. It also examines Luke 19:1-10 to understand the interpersonal skills Jesus used in His encounter with Zacchaeus.

According to this narration, Christ's decision to engage with a wealthy tax collector, whom the Jewish community disliked due to cultural biases, provides a model for ministry to the affluent (Working Preacher Commentary, 2022). The study analyses this story to identify the practical steps Christ took in his outreach to this wealthy individual.

This paper presents the steps in the order of spotting Zacchaeus on a sycamore tree, calling him, and accompanying him to his house, where they shared a meal; serving as a demonstration of an interaction that resulted in Zacchaeus's conversion. These explorations lay the groundwork for understanding the importance

of interpersonal relationships as a missional approach for ministry to the wealthy.

Defining the Affluent

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2025) defines affluent as an individual with a substantial amount of wealth or people with a high social status. Affluent is synonymous with wealthy, rich, prosperous, or well-to-do (Webster, 2004). According to this paper, the affluent are individuals who have accumulated substantial wealth, often holding lucrative jobs and professions, managing booming businesses, owning large and productive farms that generate considerable wealth, or occupying high-ranking offices, such as those of political leaders and high-ranking government officials. The interpretation of this is that the affluent are among the most influential people in society, possessing high economic standing and extensive social networks.

Defining Interpersonal Relationships

Arnold and Boggs (2019) define interpersonal relationships as interactions between individuals that facilitate communication and lead to close bonding. Rockmann and Bartel (2024) support this definition by adding that Interpersonal relationship is a sustained way of communication that brings individuals closer together and cultivates a sense of belonging, trust, recognition, and openness. In the context of ministry to the affluent, this relationship brings the preacher (minister) and the wealthy to a standard level of interaction and trust-building, creating a platform for sharing the Gospel message.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT)

According to Morales, E., & Williams-Smith, R. (2023). Uncertainty Reduction Theory explains how individuals navigate initial encounters with strangers. The chief tenet of the theory posits that communication reduces tension while creating a platform for close interaction between individuals meeting for the first time, who are initially strangers. The URT delineates seven axioms that demonstrate the links in uncertainty to acquaintance through the means of verbal expression, nonverbal cues, reciprocity, similarity, liking, self-disclosure, and information seeking. Furthermore, URT is systematic in that it presents relational interactions as possessing the capacity to undergo three stages: superficial interaction, deeper

self-revelation, and the choice of either continuing or terminating the relationship.

Long et al. (2020) further elaborated three strategies for obtaining information: passive observation, active inquiry, and direct interaction. This theory is selected for this study because it provides practical insights for ministry among affluent individuals, who, in many cases, are reluctant to get into new relationships due to a fear of violating their privacy. While URT highlights relational engagement as a key missional practice, the study proceeded to examine Attachment theory as a complementary approach to URT.

Attachment theory

According to Cherniak et al. (2021), Attachment theory plays a pivotal role in this study, providing insight into the understanding of interpersonal relationships through the lens of ministry to the affluent. In summary, the theory suggests that humanity requires solidly secure relationships for survival and development. An analogy of the attachment between a child and their mother illuminates the theory's understanding of the assurance of security, and thus, proponents of the theory debate that the child-mother relationship extends into adulthood, impacting friendships, romantic relationships, and social interactions.

However, some scholars criticise this theory for its overemphasis on early childhood and its attention to Western caregiving models (Keller, 2018). In this regard, recent scholarly attention attempts to incorporate cultural variation and acknowledge relational influences across the lifespan. This paper presents attachment as a platform that portrays God as the ultimate secure base, offering safety, trust, and a sense of purpose. Similarly, the paper posits that by emulating God's relational character, gospel ministers can provide a safe and trustworthy presence, creating space for the affluent to experience a sense of belonging and transformation.

The study, having considered URT, which advocates for close interaction between individuals meeting for the first time, and Attachment theory, which promotes secure relationships, also considered Interpersonal Needs theory to gain a deeper understanding of relational ministry.

Interpersonal Needs Theory

According to Slemph et al. (2024), the Interpersonal Needs Theory posits that forming and sustaining meaningful relationships is a fundamental human drive. This theory advocates for a relationship that provides a platform for frequent and enjoyable interaction that is enduring and reciprocal. By this, any relationship lacking these elements is insufficient and leads to physical, psychological, and emotional crises.

The theory is applicable in ministry contexts where identity and belonging align with *koinonia* (Christian fellowship) and *agape* (selfless love). In this study, the argument is that affluent individuals who may experience isolation or superficial social ties require intentional ministry that fosters authentic community and reciprocal care. Such practices counter the loneliness and guilt sometimes associated with wealth, offering a sense of inclusion and spiritual restoration.

Existing Literature on Interpersonal Relationships

Young and Firmin's (2014) study engaged pastors through phenomenological interviews and identified presence, confidentiality, and availability as indispensable practices for effective ministry among the wealthy, because wealth often shields individuals from vulnerability. Like their study, our study seeks to explore the essence of authentic relationships in the ministry to the affluent.

While Thumma and Bird (2015) observed that many church leaders engage affluent individuals in mobilising resources for church development or mission, Chaves (2011) posits that pastors with high-income congregation's experience reduced administrative strain, permitting a greater focus on relational ministry. The study builds on this to explore how interpersonal relationships with the affluent contribute to the ministry. Nash and Berger (2012) postulate that affluent church members demonstrate long-term engagement when integrated into smaller relational networks. It explores how these engagements affect the ministry. Wuthnow (2014) emphasises the great value of missional hospitality, which involves sharing meals and making pastoral visits. They create trust and transparency. Collectively, these findings affirm that enduring, reciprocal relationships are central to effective ministry among the wealthy.

Relational Theology and the Affluent

Relational theology presents God as a relational God, a concept in the Trinity and covenantal faithfulness. In this view, Keller (2012) relates God to people through a covenant, and as God's means of binding people together into a community. Similarly, Hahn (2020) presents theology as an invitation into divine relational life. As an emphasis, Kenneson (2021) conceptualises human identity in communion with God and others. Volf (2016) scaffolds this view, arguing that hospitality and reconciliation are critical demonstrations of relational theology, addressing the alienation often experienced by the affluent. Although these studies exist, they do not thoroughly examine the relation between the wealthy and the ministry. This study seeks to fill this gap.

Young and Firmin (2014) state that intentional relational presence negates defensiveness among the wealthy. Thumma and Travis (2017) reported that affluent participation in mission projects grew out of relational trust rather than financial expectation. The present study builds on this practical relationship rather than focusing on economic gains. Since Guinness (2013) noted that affluent Christians frequently wrestle with loneliness and achievement pressure, underscoring the necessity of relational theology in pastoral practice, this study departs from his conceptualisation. It affirms that relational theology provides a framework for cultivating belonging, vulnerability, and transformation within affluent communities.

Challenges in Ministering to the Affluent

With the understanding that the rich often protect their privacy and prefer to maintain their independence with a sense of self-sufficiency, it has become a challenge to minister to them. Keller (2012) comments on this isolation as a behaviour that has rendered the affluents as people with a low need for God or the church. A study by Young and Firmin (2024) suggests that wealth leads people to guard themselves and stay in isolation, anticipating the need to maintain "polished public identities" and "resistance to participate in small groups" or counselling (Guinness, 2013). Hence, ministering to the rich is quite challenging.

The study argues that the question of power dynamics plays a role as the wealthy individuals may attempt to influence church decisions, "creating the risk of manipulation or favoritism" (Major-Smith et al., 2025).

Spiritual temptations such as materialism, greed, and misplaced security compound the challenge (Matt. 19:23–24; Alawode, 2020). Moreover, affluent lifestyles marked by overcommitment can limit engagement in discipleship or service (Kenneson, 2001). This study aims to reconcile these gaps and address them as potential barriers that require pastoral approaches in fostering authentic discipleship without capitulating to power or privilege.

Christ's Interaction with Zacchaeus (A Case Study) Zacchaeus' Identity

Luke presents the story of Zacchaeus as a chief tax collector, a wealthy, socially stigmatised individual. As a tax collector in the Roman government, the nature of his job made him hated by the Jewish community. Solevåg (2020) states that Zacchaeus's unpopular profession relegated him to the margins of honour in Jewish society. Luke presents Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus Christ, an event that transformed his marginality into a setting for divine intervention. This divine intervention is what our theory of Interpersonal Needs argues for. Both Jesus and Zacchaeus receive equal scores—while Jesus saves a lost soul, Zacchaeus, too, benefits; salvation is his assurance for eternal life. As a collaborator in imperial revenue systems, many people associate Zacchaeus' wealth with the identity of exploitation (Motuku & Van Eck, 2024). This argument alludes to Uncertainty Reduction Theory, where many people had already chosen to disregard Zacchaeus. However, this study exploits the Jesus-Zacchaeus relationship as a psycho-spiritual relationship.

Jesus' Identification of Zacchaeus

Christ was on His route to Jericho when He noticed Zacchaeus on a sycamore tree and acknowledged him publicly. Here, in tandem with the definitions used in this study, we argue that "noticing" is already an effective relational that shows care, compassion, and the bond as contended for in the Attachment theory. Acknowledging someone already vilified by others is a critical appraisal strategy and a significant step in fostering an objective relationship. Driggers (2019) argues that Jesus' gaze is a symbolic recognition that interrupts social invisibility. Through this, Jesus' character expands our understanding of the Interpersonal Needs Theory, alluding to the silent, unnoticed happenings. Jesus restored Zacchaeus' dignity and communicated this through a symbolic act;

His message expands our understanding of salvation, not as a privilege for certain people or social statuses. Christ chose to honour one labelled a sinner. His identification is thus both personal and counter-cultural.

Calling Him by Name

After noticing Zacchaeus, Jesus called him by his name and told him to hurry and come down. This naming transforms Zacchaeus from a faceless outsider into a valued participant in God's story. In a cultural setting where names signify belonging, Jesus' call shifts Zacchaeus from "exclusion to covenant membership" (Solevåg, 2020). Calling Zacchaeus by his name is a practical aspect of attachment theory, as used in this study, as one of the strategies of relational ministry. In support of Driggers (2019), this is indicative of a "relationship marked by presence and recognition."

Visiting His House

Christ went beyond noticing and naming Zacchaeus to visiting his house, an act that demonstrates radical solidarity. According to Luke's theology, household fellowship symbolises acceptance and reconciliation. By entering Zacchaeus' house, Jesus dismantles purity boundaries and affirms that salvation penetrates ordinary life (Driggers, 2019). His presence in Zacchaeus' house confronted Zacchaeus' wealth not with condemnation but with reorientation (Motuku & Van Eck, 2024).

Sharing a Meal

The act of Christ sharing a meal with Zacchaeus in Zacchaeus' house is an indicator of covenantal inclusion. In the book of Luke, dining signifies belonging to God's people, and in this case, eating with Zacchaeus amplifies Christ's declaration that He reconciled Zacchaeus as a fellow in God's household, not a target of charity (Driggers, 2019). This act of meal sharing, combined with previous recognitions, fosters relational intimacy, which in turn leads to Zacchaeus' moral responsibility. The table becomes the site where social repair begins, linking hospitality to justice (Motuku & Van Eck, 2024). This act suggests that impactful relations can serve as the links through which the affluent can reconcile and participate in the ministry.

The Power of Relational Presence

Although Luke does not record any dialogue between Christ and Zacchaeus, his dramatic response — giving half of his possessions to the poor and making restitution — reveals the power of relational presence. Zacchaeus's act also affirms that transformation arises not from coercion, but from Jesus's incarnational approach. Driggers (2019) posits that his confession reveals how a proper relationship motivates an ethical and moral reorientation—namely, the "restoration of justice." As such, Zacchaeus' restitution surpasses personal repentance, and his response confirms that conversion has both internal renewal and outward action, grounded in interpersonal encounter.

Conversion Through Relationship

The trajectory of Zacchaeus' transformation is purely relational: Jesus sees him, calls him by name, enters his home, shares his table, and elicits a confession from him. Conversion is not a formula or transaction but a process of mutual recognition and restored belonging (Driggers, 2019; Solevåg, 2020). Zacchaeus' actions reconfigure economic relationships, integrating justice with discipleship. Relational engagement thus produces holistic transformation, spiritual, social, and financial—demonstrating the far-reaching power of interpersonal ministry (Motuku & Van Eck, 2024)

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a qualitative and descriptive design to investigate theological and missiological ideas related to interpersonal relationships as a form of ministry to the affluent. It adopted a library-based approach, utilising biblical, theological, and scholarly sources to support its findings. The following three theoretical frameworks guide the methodological framework: Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT), Attachment Theory, and Interpersonal Needs Theory. These models are grounded in the case study of Jesus and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), and the methodology combines theological interpretation with social-scientific insights for a comprehensive analysis of interpersonal ministry.

The primary data source is the biblical passage of Luke 19:1-10, which illustrates Jesus' interpersonal ministry to an affluent individual. Secondary data sources include peer-reviewed journals, dissertations and theses, scholarly books, and authoritative online sources. The research identified sources through

systematic searches in JSTOR and Google Scholar, and evaluated them based on relevance, academic rigour, and contextual value. The study analysed data using descriptive thematic analysis, organised pyramidally to reflect the progression of the relational ministry.

The study ensured ethical standards by accurately citing all sources in accordance with the 7th edition of

the APA, respecting the theological and cultural significance of biblical and theological texts, and maintaining integrity in the representation of scholars' arguments and interpretations.

The Pyramidal diagram:

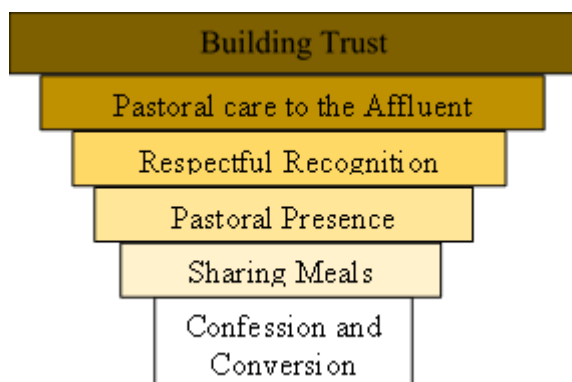


Figure 1. The pyramid illustrates the theoretical arrangement applied in the methodology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Uncertainty Reduction and the Affluent

Scholarship provides evidence that the rich often guard their privacy, social status, and prior experiences of mistrust. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) advocates for verbal openness, nonverbal warmth, and reciprocal self-disclosure as tools for minimising ambiguity. Within the ministry to the affluent, these practices establish pathways of trust that allow for deeper Gospel sharing.

Attachment and Pastoral Presence

Despite material dispensation, affluent individuals often experience delicate attachments, loneliness, and a reliance on self-sufficiency. Attachment theory emphasises the importance of trust, empathy, and secure relationships in addressing these challenges. The study proposes that gospel ministers should emulate God's consistent love by offering an unwavering presence, relational reliability, and empathetic care to eliminate isolation and foster a conducive atmosphere that promotes trust restoration.

Belonging and Interpersonal Needs

Interpersonal Needs Theory affirms that a sense of belonging is crucial for human motivation. Wealth does not substitute this longing. The rich, like anyone else,

need to belong, and this is only achievable through relationships. Effective ministry to the affluent, therefore, requires authentic spaces of community, selfless love, and genuine fellowship.

The Priority of Relationships in Previous Studies

Scholars affirm that effective ministry to the affluent communities is not about programs and stewardship campaigns but rather about lasting, genuine relationships. Gospel ministers who practice consistency, presence, and trustworthiness report stronger engagement among affluent congregants. Relational approaches rather than institutional strategies create the conditions for both spiritual formation and meaningful community impact.

Relational Theology as a Ministry Foundation

Relational theology grounds ministry in the relational nature of God, as revealed through the Trinity and the covenant. This perspective challenges individualism brought about by wealth and reorients identity toward communion with God. A ministry that prioritises relational presence, hospitality, and solidarity empowers affluent individuals to overcome isolation, pride, and self-sufficiency, fostering a sense of belonging within the body of Christ.

Challenges in Ministry to the Affluent

Ministry to the affluent face challenges that include guardedness, isolation, demanding schedules, and power dynamics. The rich create these barriers in an attempt to protect their privacy. To effectively reach the affluent and break down barriers, pastors must maintain integrity by resisting favouritism and donor-driven influence, as seeking financial support can compromise their ministry to this demographic.

Zacchaeus as a Case Study in Relational Ministry

The Biblical encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus demonstrates the transformative potential of interpersonal ministry. Jesus affirmed Zacchaeus' worth by seeing and naming him, extended solidarity by entering his home, and nurtured a sense of belonging through shared table fellowship. This relational engagement prompted confession, restitution, and a reorientation of wealth toward justice and community.

Transformation through Relational Ministry

Zacchaeus' conversion exemplifies genuine relational ministry, yielding outstanding results that encompass socio-economic transformation and communal renewal. Zacchaeus' story confirms that ministry to the affluent is most effective when centred on authentic, trust-based relationships rather than transactional approaches.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that interpersonal theories offer a constructive lens for interpreting Christ's relational approach to Zacchaeus, a wealthy yet socially marginalised figure. Drawing upon Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT), Attachment Theory, and Interpersonal Needs Theory, this discussion highlights how communication, security, and a sense of belonging converged to shape Zacchaeus' transformative encounter with Jesus.

First, URT provides insight into how Jesus eliminated social barriers of tension and mistrust. Zacchaeus was wealthy yet stigmatised by his community, rendering him both inaccessible and distrusted by them. By Jesus publicly addressing him by name, "Zacchaeus, hurry," this is a demonstration of nonverbal warmth, as Jesus notices him amid the crowd and engages in reciprocal self-disclosure by requesting to stay at his house. This gesture aligns with the principles of uncertainty reduction. Jesus initiated clarity, transparency, and openness, thereby lowering Zacchaeus' guardedness,

which created an atmosphere that fostered a good rapport. This approach suggests that effective ministry to affluent individuals requires intentional relational practices that minimise ambiguity and foster trust.

Second, Attachment Theory sheds light on the relational security Jesus offered. Affluence can mask relational fragility as wealth often conceals loneliness beneath a facade of self-sufficiency (Guinness, 2013). By calling Zacchaeus by name and entering his home, Jesus provided unmistakable signals of acceptance, presence, and trust. These gestures mirror the pastoral role of offering a "secure base," enabling Zacchaeus to reconfigure his internal relational models—not through exploitation or suspicion, but through grace (Keller, 2012; Young & Firmin, 2014).

Third, Interpersonal Needs Theory highlights the belonging dimension of Zacchaeus' conversion. Table fellowship with Jesus provided not only hospitality but also covenantal inclusion, signalling that Christ accepted Zacchaeus despite communal hostility.

Research by Young and Firmin (2014) and Thumma and Bird (2015) indicate that ministry among the affluent is most effective when based on relational authenticity, presence, and trust, rather than on programmatic or financial appeals. Jesus' approach mirrors this dynamic: He does not appeal to Zacchaeus' wealth but to his relational and existential needs. Wuthnow (2014) further notes that even brief yet intentional relational engagements, such as a pastoral visit or shared meals, can open pathways to trust and confession—precisely what unfolded in this encounter.

This study, which focuses on relational theology, provides the broader theological foundation for this narrative. The study embodies Christ's divine relationality by seeing, naming, dining with, and restoring Zacchaeus. In doing so, Jesus not only affirms Zacchaeus' worth but also reframes wealth within a covenantal ethic of justice and community, a move that aligns with Kenneson's (2021) critique of consumerism and individualism, reorienting affluent identity toward belonging, mutuality, and communal flourishing.

Ultimately, the Zacchaeus account illustrates that interpersonal relationships are not incidental but central to mission. Jesus' approach exemplifies an incarnational, relational strategy that aligns with

missional theology (Frost & Hirsch, 2013; Longkumer, 2025). By engaging Zacchaeus personally and relationally through seeing, naming, visiting, eating, and conversing, Jesus facilitated a transformation that was spiritual, relational (social), and socio-economic. The research proposes that ministry to the affluent requires overcoming barriers of guardedness, isolation, and power dynamics through a consistent relational presence shaped by the gospel of hospitality.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Interpersonal relationship is a missiological approach that is pivotal for ministry to the affluent. While wealthy individuals value and protect their privacy, they also need trust, a sense of belonging, and secure relationships. The gospel can be an avenue that addresses these human needs when the gospel ministers exercise relational presence, openness, and hospitality. Christ's interaction with Zacchaeus reveals that ministry to the affluent is more than just routine and requires deliberate recognition, affirmation of their worth, entering into their personal spaces, and the creation of authentic fellowship. Such engagement breaks the barriers of privacy, suspicion, and isolation and enhances communal transformation.

Gospel ministers need to integrate trust-building, pastoral presence, and genuine community into their ministry with affluent individuals. This integration enables the church to reflect Christ's relational approach to mission, fulfil the Great Commission's mandate, and contribute to a holistic transformation

that addresses both spiritual life and social responsibility.

Recommendations: Gospel ministers should build trust by demonstrating openness, honesty, and genuine care in their interaction with the affluent, and they should cultivate genuine relationships that go beyond the pulpit with the wealthy. To achieve this, they should engage in regular, personal interactions—such as home visits, shared meals, or informal chats—and show dedication and pastoral care. In addition, gospel ministers should cultivate a sense of belonging through authentic, relational community, since wealthy individuals, like all believers, need trustworthy spaces to experience community and love.

Furthermore, gospel ministers should follow Christ's relational model, as shown in the encounter with Zacchaeus. Ministry should start with recognising and affirming individuals by name, respecting their dignity, and challenging societal stigmas. In line with this, gospel ministers should emphasise that identity and belonging are rooted not in possessions or achievements, but in a relationship with God and genuine, relational community. To support this approach, church leaders should equip gospel ministers with interpersonal relationship skills to effectively minister to the affluent community. Finally, the study suggests conducting ethnographic research among wealthy populations to gain deeper insights into how preachers convey the gospel message to affluent individuals.

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