



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No.
1286-12
Luke 5:33-6:11
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February 27, 2005

Jesus the Controversialist

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

John Stott writes, "The popular image of Christ as 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' simply will not do. It's a false image. To be sure he was full of love, compassion and tenderness. But he was also uninhibited in exposing error and denouncing sin, especially hypocrisy. Christ was a controversialist."

In each of these stories just read Jesus sparks controversy. These three incidents are the last in a series of five conflicts Jesus had with the Pharisees. He said to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven," and the scribes said, "This is blasphemy. No one can say that but God." He was found eating with sinners and tax collectors at Levi's house. The Pharisees complained, and Jesus said, "It's not the healthy who need a physician but the sick. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners." And now we come to three more incidents.

In all of these stories, the Pharisees are omnipresent. They're always there, watching, evaluating, frowning. Jesus isn't just a minor irritant but a major threat to their whole way of living. It would be easy for us to just write them off as a bunch of self-righteous, hypocritical losers. But these men were sincere. They were truly trying to avoid sin and obey the scriptures. They didn't have a secret life. They didn't just act religious and then go off and commit adultery or steal from the Temple. They were doing their best to follow the narrow path. The Pharisees were what I would call "white-knucklers." They steered the ship of their lives with hands tightly clutched on the wheel.

While I was in college, I worked one summer at a Young Life camp in the Colorado Rockies. My job was to drive a jeep full of high school kids from the camp at 8,000 feet to a little chalet at 13,000 feet. The road was incredibly narrow; it was cut in to the mountain in such a way that if you lost control you could end up rolling down the mountain and endangering the lives of kids. Our supervisor put the fear of God into me from the very start: "No messing around," he said. "If I see you goofing off up there I'll send you home." So I became a "white-knuckler." I sat in my seat and looked straight ahead. I clutched the wheel of that jeep so tight that if it was an orange I would have made juice!

What made me tighten my grip? It was knowing that one false move separated me from disaster. One rock hit the wrong way could jar the steering wheel out of my hands; one panicked over correction; one second of lost concentration; any of these might not only send us down

the cliff but send me home on a Greyhound bus; a miserable failure. As a jeep driver I lived in a rigid, unforgiving moral universe where every move was being watched. There was no place to relax, no place for fun.

This is how the Pharisees lived out their relationship with God. One false move, one moment of lost concentration, and disaster might strike. There was no room to let down their guard. Many of us live our Christian life a lot like the white-knuckled Pharisees. We're so focused on not screwing up that we've lost a sense of joy. We're concentrating so hard on not messing up that we ignore the needs of people around us. Apart from the fact that white-knucklers aren't very fun to be with, they can't take their eyes off the road long enough to see that the people in the back of the jeep are hurting. Rules become more important than human needs.

Jesus was NOT a white-knuckler. First of all he was full of joy, and people were more important than rules. He didn't ignore God's law, but he saw into the very heart of it. That created controversy. How can we be more like the freewheeling Jesus than the white-knuckled Pharisees?

I. FEASTING OR FASTING? 5:33-39

In the first story Jesus is not condemned for eating with the wrong people, as at Levi's house, but for eating too much at the wrong time.

"And they said to Him, 'The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink.'"

The Pharisees compare Jesus' disciples with John's. John's disciples were very disciplined; they set aside times for fasting and prayer. By now John had been placed in prison and was in constant threat of being put to death. So they fasted and prayed for their leader. The Pharisees fasted too, but for different reasons. In the OT Jews were required to fast just once a year on the Day of Atonement as a sign of repentance. As time went on, a few more days of fasting were added. The Pharisees came along and they wanted to show how dedicated they really were. Most Pharisees fasted twice a week. Remember the prayer of the Pharisee in Luke 18:12, **"Lord, thank you that I am not like other men. I fast twice a week..."**

So these white knucklers want to know why Jesus and his disciples aren't into that. They might have even been a bit resentful. I mean, here they were, starved to death, and here was Jesus with his disciples, fresh from a sumptuous meal at Levi's house! Perhaps it was one of the set times of fasting and praying. "Why aren't Jesus and his friends showing their commitment to God by fasting and praying? Come to think of it, they never fast." By the way, it's not that Jesus never fasted. He fasted for 40 days in the desert! And no one was more committed to prayer than Jesus was. Look at 5:16,

"But Jesus himself would often slip away into the wilderness to pray."

Jesus' prayer life was rich, but he didn't follow the prescribed formulas and he didn't flaunt it.

So Jesus responds. He was a master illustrator, so he uses three short but potent illustrations to answer their question. All three of these illustrations essentially point out that it's just not the right time to fast.

The first illustration comes in vv. 34-35.

"And Jesus said to them, 'You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days.'"

It's about a wedding feast. Jewish wedding feasts were seven days long. The bride and groom didn't go on a honeymoon; they just celebrated and feasted with everyone else for the entire week. They were treated like a king and queen the whole week. For hardworking, poor people, an event like this would be the happiest week in their lives. The whole village took part. It was strictly forbidden during these times to engage in any act of mourning, especially for the attendants of the bridegroom. You know that we're planning a wedding in our family, and I can tell you the last thing we want is someone coming to the reception and with a sour face saying, "I can't eat. I'm fasting." I would say, "Well you can just go home, thank you!"

Jesus says that he's the bridegroom. As long as he's with his disciples it's totally inappropriate for them to fast. He says, "Don't you get it? This is not a funeral; it's a wedding! The bridegroom is here, and as long as he's here, there should be joy and gladness; feasting rather than fasting." Jesus also hints that a time was coming when the bridegroom would be taken away. He's talking about the cross, when he would be taken away from his disciples and killed. That's the time to fast, not now while he's still with them.

How about today? Is the bridegroom with us, or not? Is it more appropriate for us to fast or to feast? Before he left he said, **"I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you"** (Jn.14:18). You see, the bridegroom is with us today. He's come in the person of his Spirit who dwells in us and among us. Fasting and a kind of dour approach to God is no longer appropriate. It's like fasting at a wedding reception. What's appropriate is joy and feasting.

The dominating characteristic of our life ought to be joy. Martin Luther said,

"A Christian should and must be a cheerful person. If he isn't, the devil is tempting him."

I'm not talking about a "Pollyanna faith" where we ignore the painful realities of life. I'm talking about the reality of what Jesus brings to our life. A reality so great that when it really gets a hold of us joy is the inevitable result. When people see your life and my life and our life together they ought to see joy.

The second and third illustrations are in vv. 36-38.

"And He was also telling them a parable: 'No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.'"

In both of these examples, something new is placed on or in something old with the result that the old is damaged. A new patch will tear an old garment when it shrinks. New wine will burst old wineskins when it ferments. You have to put new wine into new wineskins.

Jesus is saying that something new is happening and that new thing requires new expressions to contain them. The old formulas of fasting and all the ceremonialism of the law is no longer appropriate. It can't contain the new thing that God is doing through Christ. It will tear! It will burst! Christ didn't come to just patch up the old system of the law. He didn't come to put a new spin on old religion; to just patch up Judaism. He came to do something entirely new. That's why he doesn't fast like they do. But some people, like the Pharisees, still prefer the old way. That's what he means in v. 39. **"And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough.'"** Unfortunately, a man drinking the old wine of Judaism is so content with the old that he doesn't want to try the new. He says, "The old is good enough."

All of our religious disciplines ought to be reevaluated in light of this. Fasting, tithing, abstaining from certain things ought to be reevaluated. Are they rooted in the old wine of legalism?

Eugene Peterson writes,

“Legalism is religious behavior that is performed because someone else is looking, or because God is looking. It is life by performance, by show, by achievement. And it imprisons us because someone else is always looking. We never have the pleasure of doing something just because of the pleasure that it brings or the rightness it has in our own lives. We must always be calculating what someone else will think of what we do, whether it will fit into what others expect, how God will reward us, what penalties we will avoid.”

Don't get me wrong. There is a place for discipline. There is a place for fasting. The early church fasted when they appointed elders as well as before they sent Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey. There are times to humble ourselves and fast and pray, but that solemnity should never be the strongest note people hear coming out of our lives.

A number of years ago when I was a new Christian in my early years of college, I learned about the value of having a “quiet time” with the Lord. This was just a time to be alone with the Lord alone, praying and reading his word. I loved that time. I lived for that time. But somewhere along the line, the idea of having a regular quiet time became more of a burden to me than a blessing. I was taught that I HAD to do this every day, and that if I missed a day I could expect disaster to hit—that very day. I also learned that the longer the quiet time the better. So I tried to stretch my spiritual muscles by spending at least an hour in prayer and reading; by then I had also added several other things like writing in a journal and singing. Then, to cap it all off, I discovered that the most spiritual people did it really early in the morning. I remember this conversation I had with one guy when I asked him what time he started his quiet time each morning. He told me he usually started around 3:00 am? My first thought was, “What a spiritual giant!” My second thought was, “I'm a spiritual pygmy!” The sad thing is that all the joy had been taken out of my time with the Lord.

Jesus Christ is here and he brings us joy. We're free from bondage to that law. You can loosen your grip on the steering wheel. You're forgiven, cleansed, and made righteous. He'll never leave you or forsake you. He's given you eternal life. You're going to sit with him at the marriage supper of the lamb. The party has begun. Are you celebrating?

II. HUMAN NEEDS OR COLD LEGALISM? 6:1-11

A. Harvesting grain on the Sabbath: In the second story (vv. 1-2) Jesus and his disciples are passing through a grainfield on the Sabbath.

“Now it happened that He was passing through some grainfields on a Sabbath; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in

their hands, and eating the grain. But some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’”

It's lunch time and they're hungry. There is no food, so they begin to pick the heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat them. Hovering nearby are the Pharisees, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” It's not so much what they're doing that bothers the Pharisees, it's when they're doing it. It was okay to walk through someone's field and pluck grain by hand (Deut. 23:25). God allowed the poor to do that, so this was not stealing. But God had told them not to harvest grain on the Sabbath (Ex. 34:21). To the Pharisees, plucking a few heads of wheat and rubbing them in your hands was the same as reaping and threshing.

The Pharisees were careful about the Sabbath. That's what set them apart from other nations. They had come up with 39 things that constituted work on the Sabbath. For instance, you couldn't spit on the ground, because that made mud, and mud was mortar; therefore you would be working on the Sabbath. That's how careful they were.

Jesus responds, first, in vv. 3–4.

“And Jesus answering them said, ‘Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?’”

He goes back to the OT which the Pharisees were so familiar with. He tells a story about David from 1 Sam. 21. David and his companions were fleeing from King Saul. They were tired and hungry and they came to the house of the high priest. Jesus reminds them how David and his men were given the sacred bread of the presence to eat. But Leviticus 24 says that this sacred bread was only for the priests to eat. So this was an example of breaking sacred law in order to meet a human need, hardly a thing white-knucklers would ever dare to do! Jesus says, “What do you think of that?”

Sometimes the rules have to be broken. That's hard for some of us. We've been gripping the wheel so tight that our hands are petrified around the wheel. There is security in those rules. There is structure we feel safe in. But God says when that structure gets in the way of meeting the true needs of people, we need to get rid of it. I know we could take that too far. We could justify a lot of bad things with that reasoning. Jesus never did that, but he did place meeting human needs above cold legalism. In Matthew's gospel, he quotes Jesus as adding these words, “**But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent’**” (Mt. 12:7).

I heard a story about the pastor of a Scottish church which had strict rules about the Sabbath. The pastor had to travel some distance from his home to his church. One winter Sunday morning he had to get to church, but the river that flowed between his home and the church was frozen over. Being a good ice skater, he decided to skate to church. Folks in the church were surprised to see him show up on skates. The incident gave rise to a debate whether he should have skated on the Sabbath. The elders met and discussed the matter at some length. They argued back and forth on whether getting to church or keeping the Sabbath was more important. Finally, they decided to settle the matter by asking the pastor one vital question: "Did you enjoy skating up the river?" You see, if he did enjoy it, it was wrong; but if he just endured it, then it was okay. Of course that seems silly to us, but there are many ways we can put our religious scruples above meeting human needs.

Does that mean we ignore the Sabbath? Notice he says in v. 5,

"The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

This is quite a statement. The Sabbath was God's creation. The Jews believed it even existed before creation. To claim Lordship over the Sabbath is to claim Lordship over creation! This is really a statement that points to his deity! But notice that Jesus doesn't abolish the Sabbath, but he restores it to its original purpose, which was to meet the human need for rest and refreshment. The Sabbath is not something to ignore today. It's not a gift to reject.

B. Healing on the Sabbath: But meeting human needs comes before cold legalism. The third story drives this point home. The scene shifts from out in the fields to inside the synagogue (vv. 6-7).

"On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him."

Again, it's the Sabbath and the Pharisees are hovering around, watching Jesus. There was a man in the synagogue with a withered hand, and they wanted to see if Jesus would heal him on the Sabbath. Again, they had rules about that. They said it was unlawful to heal or practice medicine on the Sabbath, unless a person's life was in danger. Note how they pay Jesus a tremendous compliment here. They know he has the power to heal the guy, but they don't care; they don't care about what that says about Jesus or about the man; they just care about the rules.

We don't know much about this man. Most men back then worked in some way with their hands.

Jesus was a carpenter. Peter was a fisherman. Paul was a tentmaker. All these things required strong, skillful hands. But this man had a withered hand.

In vv. 8-9 Jesus responds:

"But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, 'Get up and come forward!' And he got up and came forward. And Jesus said to them, 'I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?'" Jesus turns to the man and calls him out: "Get up and come forward!"

His hand was withered, but he still could walk. As he came up, Jesus asks the Pharisees a question: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?" Jesus chooses their ground—what is lawful? But he focuses on the true intent of the law. Is it to help or to harm, to save or to kill? There is no neutrality here. You can't choose to do nothing. To choose to do nothing is to do harm. You either do harm or you do good. Which will it be? Which is closer to the true nature of the Sabbath?

Jesus puts human need above cold legalism.

"And after looking around at them all, He said to him, 'Stretch out your hand!' And he did so; and his hand was completely restored."

In v.10 Jesus looks around at all of them and then says, "Stretch out your hand." I grew up with a boy who had a deformed hand. I didn't know him well. He didn't talk much. He kept to himself, and he almost always kept that hand in his pocket. Hide the shame, right? Jesus calls this man to stand up and come forward. That would have been hard enough, but then he tells him to stretch out his hand. Jesus requires he demonstrate his faith by exposing his greatest area of shame. Faith in Christ means being willing to expose our deepest shame; it means bringing that to him, even publicly if need be; it means coming out of hiding; it means pulling our withered hand out of our pocket and exposing it to Jesus.

It was then that Jesus healed the man. As he stretched out his hand, it was restored—it inflated to normalcy like air filling a balloon. That's what Jesus does, he restores us. He puts us back together. He didn't give this man a new arm. He didn't give him Hulk Hogan's arm. He just gave him his old arm back. I think he went back to the Union office the next day and said, "Hey, I'm ready to go back to work." Jesus restores us so we can carry on with our lives. He can do that with anything. He can do that with a relationship. He can restore it. He can make it what it used to be. He can do that with a marriage. He can give us that "first love" again. If we will just come out of hiding, expose ourselves to him, and perhaps even to one another, he will restore us.

CONCLUSION

After being at that Young Life camp a couple of weeks I did something that for me was really hard. I exposed my fears to the people I was working with. I told them I was petrified to drive up and down that mountain. I asked them to pray for me. And they did. Within days I was able to loosen my grip on the wheel. I was able to enjoy the people in the jeep. I experienced the joy of Jesus' presence as I drove.

How can we be more like the freewheeling Jesus than the white-knuckled Pharisees? We can enjoy feasting instead of fasting because Jesus is here. We can put human need before cold legalism. We can even expose our own needs to him and to others. And he will meet us at the point of our deepest need.

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