

*“Who Was Jesus?—The Rebel...With a Cause.”*

Today we’re continuing in a sermon series entitled “Who Was Jesus?” To find out who Jesus was we’re working our way through the Gospel of Luke, which paints such detailed images of who Jesus was and what he taught. Luke wrote this book so that people coming after him could know the truth, a truth that he himself was willing to die for. I believe that if we really look at the images, the portraits of Jesus in scripture, we can better understand him as he lives and moves among us now.

So far we’ve looked at Jesus’ early years, we’ve looked at his baptism and temptation by the devil. We’ve looked at his teaching ministry and we’ve looked at how Jesus loved people regardless of the category they had been labeled with. Today we’re going to look at the conflict that Jesus faced as he forced the religious establishment to look at itself and what it stood for. I’m going to retell an event from Luke 11:37 and following. On this day Jesus is invited to the home of a Pharisee. Let’s call him Levi...

That night in my home was quite a night. I’ll never forget what Jesus said and did in my home, at my table. Jesus was talking to me that night.

You see, for three years we’d been hearing about him. We had heard about the miracles Jesus had done, what a powerful preacher Jesus was, what a kind man Jesus was. All this about Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! So many of the common people in Jerusalem were talking about him and even claiming him to be the messiah, the savior of the world.

We, the religious authorities, had heard about how Jesus had touched the eyes of the blind and they could see, and he’d touched the ears of the deaf and they could hear. We had even heard about Jesus bringing two people back to life after they had died. It was just too unbelievable.

Others had told me about his preaching and teaching. They said that it wasn’t bad, actually. It wasn’t bad until he started to talk about the Pharisees. I am a Pharisee. Jesus had a way of making us, the religious authorities of the people, the butt of his stories. It was humiliating! But the crowds loved it when he would talk about sinners who became heroes and saints who were sinners. And he knew about sinners. He would spend time with whores and tax collectors. What kind of messiah would associate with riffraff like that?

Well, the next time Jesus came to Jerusalem I went to hear him for myself. He came and wherever he went, crowds gathered. We couldn’t get the people to show up in the synagogues but they would turn out in the fields to hear him talk. They would turn out in droves! He would preach what he called “the good news.” And they listened so intently to him, as if he was speaking the very words of God! They said he spoke with authority. I listened...and I was insulted.

He talked about prayer. He said, “When you pray don’t pray like the Pharisees who use such flowery words trying to impress the people that are around them.” He said, “When you pray, go to a private place, pray simply, pray from your heart.” Then he started to talk about the power he had and where it came from. I was listening closely, just waiting for him to mess up.

That day as Jesus spoke there was a pause in what Jesus was saying. And during that pause a man went forward to Jesus. I knew that man. I knew his parents and grandparents. This man had been unable to speak for years. Some thought he had a demon. Others thought that he was sick in the head. He hadn’t said a single word for years and years. Lots of us had prayed for him and counseled him, but nothing helped. I wanted to see what Jesus would do.

Jesus looked at him and took his head in his hands and stared deep into his eyes and then he said, “Speak. By the power of God, speak!” A silence swept over the crowd. Even the birds and bugs went silent. And suddenly that man started to move his lips and then shouted out, “Alleluia! I can talk! Praise the Lord, the God of Israel!” The crowd went crazy! I stood back and wondered, was this a miracle or not.

Some of my friends were there and one of them said, “Levi, it’s by the power of the devil that he casts out demons. Jesus gets his power from the devil himself.” But it was like Jesus could hear exactly what we were saying. He looked right at us and said, “Do you really believe that it’s by the power of the devil that I cast

out demons. That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Tell me you don't really believe that." We didn't know what to say.

Jesus kept right on going that day. He taught and preached and prayed and healed the sick. It went on for hours. Finally, Jesus began to dismiss the crowds, but I wanted to know more. Honestly, I was intrigued. So I went up to him and said, "Jesus, I know you eat with sinners and tax collectors, but do you ever eat with Pharisees?" He said, "Yes, Levi, I do." I said, "How do you know my name?" He said, "Levi, I just know. And yes I would eat with you. Invite your friends and let's eat tonight."

My friends jumped at the chance to eat with Jesus that night. The questions started as soon as he walked in the door: "Jesus why is it that you eat with sinners? Jesus, how is it that you have the power to forgive sins? Jesus, what do you believe about this or that?" The questions went on and on. He was patient with us, very patient.

Finally, the meal was ready and just before we sat down to eat we went to the basin to wash our hands. You see, we believe that sin collects on the hands. The sins of anyone we touch stick to our hands and that needs to be washed off so that we won't end up eating that sin with our meal. First we wash our fingertips then we run the water up to our wrists. Then we wash the palms of our hands with our fists and then we run more water from our wrists down to our fingertips. That's the only way to be sure the sins of other people we may have picked up get washed off our hands. As we do this we pray asking God to wash us clean from the unholiness of others.

Everybody there that night washed their hands. Everybody but Jesus! I was watching him. When I looked over at him to let him know it was his turn, he simply smiled. In fact, I think he smirked. And he just walked by the basin and sat at the table. It was disgusting! He'd been touching sinners all day long! He had cast out demons, he had touched unholy people, but didn't wash his hands! That's what I was thinking.

It was like he could read my mind. He looked at me and said, "Levi, you Pharisees are such hypocrites. You love to wash your hands and go through all of that formality, but your hearts are filthy. You are filled with wickedness and greed." I couldn't believe my ears! But he didn't stop there! He went on to accuse us of giving our tithes but not loving God or neighbor. As if he knew my neighbors!

He had the gall to call us hypocrites and accused us of grand-standing and not caring about people. He accused us of seeking the praise of people instead of God. He said that we were like unmarked graves. He meant that people were made unclean and unholy by us! I was in shock!

One of the religion scholars at the table broke the silence by saying, "Jesus, you're insulting us and you must stop." But Jesus turned to him and told him that the religion scholars were no better than us Pharisees. He told them that they made all these religious laws for people to follow that they could never keep. And they didn't keep them themselves. He said, "Woe to you Pharisees, woe to you Scholars of Religion. You have dishonored God and abandoned his children. Woe to you."

Then Jesus got up from the table and said, "Gentlemen, I have work to do." And he walked out. He said those things then just left us! I said, "How dare Jesus do that to us?! Who does he think he is?! A nobody from no place telling us what's right and wrong." Somebody agreed with me and said that they had heard that he was born out of wedlock. We decided right then that he was a dangerous fraud. But deep inside I felt the sting of his truth.

My friends and I did what you would probably do if you were humiliated like that. We began to plot to trap him with his words, and humiliate him in front of the crowds, and destroy him. Three weeks later he would be nailed to a cross. I'll never forget that night at my house.

Levi's story helps us to see why Jesus was put to death. As you read Luke's Gospel you will see growing opposition to Jesus. There are people who just grow to hate him and what his doing and teaching. That's not Jesus' goal. He tries to gently convince them to follow him, but they don't want to see him for who he really is. All they see is a threat to the way they've done things for centuries. They pick his message a part and criticize him for spending time with sinners. Their hearts were so hardened that they couldn't see that those sinners were the people God wanted to bring back to himself.

The religious authorities of the day couldn't take his message so they began to call for his death. It's interesting that the most religious people in Jesus' day are the ones who missed him and eventually orchestrated his execution.

When I read through this part of the Bible I have a disturbing thought. I wonder to myself, "If Jesus were to walk among us today would I be one of his followers, or would I be one of the Pharisees?" He wouldn't come dressed like he was in the first century. He would say the same things but speak them in a different way. But if he walked into Saint Paul's, if I invited him into my home, if I met him in Target, how would I respond to him? That scares me sometimes.

The Pharisees hated Jesus, and Jesus was so frustrated by them. But as frustrated as he was by them, I believe that he had hope for them. I say that because over and over again we see him going to their homes and having meals with them. He wanted them to be true followers of God but saw that they were missing the mark. He loved them but what he saw frustrated him.

There were three things that Jesus disliked about the way the Pharisees lived out their faith. Three things that caused Jesus to denounce the Pharisees. Three things that have a tendency to raise up their ugly heads in me and in you. Let's talk about them. [SLIDE: "Jesus' Three Criticisms of the Pharisees..."]

The first reason why Jesus condemned the Pharisees was that he saw in them a [SLIDE: add to previous...] 1. Religion of deeds without heart. He hated to see them go through the motions of being religious, but not really feeling anything toward God or other people! They went through the motions, like washing their hands in a religious way, but never really ventured to look inside their own hearts at how wicked they really were. They went to worship week after week after week, but never really let the word of God into their lives. They went through the motions of their faith.

But the same thing is true of us Christians isn't it? We can go through the motions of reading the Bible and coming to church and praying. We can go through all the motions but not really give God our hearts. We do these religious things and mark them off our religious to-do list. But God says, "I don't want you go down some list marking things off thinking that makes you close to me. Don't think that going to church an hour a week is what I'm really looking for. I want all of who you are, all the time." It's not about going through the motions.

You may have heard me tell about the young couple that gets married. The wife cooks a ham for dinner one night. It looks great and tastes great. But the husband noticed that his wife had cut the ends off the ham before cooking it. So he asked her, "Honey, this is a great ham, but why did you cut the ends off it?" She said, "Well, because my mom always did it that way." Later that year they were at a family gathering and the man's mother-in-law was there and he went up to her and said, "Your daughter is a great cook like you, but I was just curious. She cuts off the ends of her ham when she cooks it because you do. So why do you cut the ends off your hams?" She said, "Well, I do it because my mom always did it! But she's here so let's ask her." The mother-in-law went to her mom and said, "Mom, why is it that you always cut the ends off your hams when you cook them?" The Grandmother said, "Well, my mom always did, but I think it was because she had a small oven and she had to cut off the ends to get it to fit."

Sometimes we do the same thing with our faith. We just go through the motions. Not caring to understand why we do what we do and believe what we believe. But Jesus would have us do something more. He wants us to understand our faith so that it is more than a religion, that it becomes a living relationship with the God who loves us more than we could ever imagine or believe.

The second reason Jesus condemned the Pharisees was because he saw their [SLIDE: add to previous...] 2. Pride and arrogance. They had a tendency to look at other people and judge them. They looked at other people and tried to guilt them into obeying religious laws that they didn't obey themselves. They were experts at the religious law and they were also experts at finding loopholes. For example the law said that on the Sabbath you could not go more than 1000 yards from your home. They got around that one by

tying a rope onto their doorknob and so long as that rope was tied to the house they could go as far as the rope was long.

The law also prohibited tying knots on the Sabbath. It was meant to be a way to keep people from working on the Sabbath. You were forbidden to tie a knot in a rope, but they found a loophole. You couldn't tie a knot in a rope, but you could tie a knot in a woman's girdle. So if you needed to lower a bucket into a well, you couldn't use a rope on the Sabbath, but you could borrow your wife's girdle to do it!

On the Sabbath you couldn't carry anything in your hands. That's what the law said. So they got around that law by carrying things in their mouths or around their necks.

I picture this devout Pharisee on the Sabbath with a rope tied around his waist walking to the well with a bucket in his teeth and his wife's girdle around his neck beaming with pride because he was obeying God's law! Looking down on everybody else. Is it any wonder that Jesus had a problem with that kind of religion? They spent all their time learning God's laws and finding ways to get around them, and in the process they lost all touch with the heart of God. And not only that they were so filled with pride that they looked down on everybody. They would look at people they labeled as sinners and say, "I'm so much better than they are."

So, what's your attitude? It's so easy for us to look down on other people and be smug in our own religiosity. But the Old Testament prophet Micah cleared this up. He said, [SLIDE...] "What is good...and what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8. NIV). Walk humbly with your God. It's not about looking down on other people. It's about looking up toward God and saying, "Lord, I thank you. Not that I'm any better than anyone else. I thank you that you have loved a sinner like me!"

The Pharisees looked at the sinners that Jesus hung around with as riffraff. Jesus saw them as the ones God desperately wanted to show his love toward. How about you? Is your pride in check? Are you humbly trying to serve, or to be served?

And that leads into the third problem Jesus had with the Pharisees is that he saw that their [SLIDE: add to previous list...] 3. Their religion had lost its focus. They thought their religion was just about them and their needs. But Jesus demonstrated that God's desire is for us to be focused more on the people who are not here than those who are here. That's why Jesus tells the story of the shepherd who has 100 sheep and finds that one of them is missing. What does that shepherd do? Does he say, "Well, one is missing, 99 are here, too bad for that lost one, let it die out there in the wilderness." No! The shepherd goes and looks for that one lost sheep until he's found it and brought it safely home. Jesus was talking about himself in that story. He goes looking for the lost. That was his mission and his mission is our mission. God wants us as a church to be more focused on those who are not here than those that are.

That's why we channel a lot of resources into getting our message out to this area. That's why we do the Catch the Spirit weekend every Fall. Free food, free prizes, free games, free everything. You know, that could be a big fundraiser for us, but that's not what it's about. It's about letting people know we're here and that if they don't have a place to get to know God, well, we'd love to be that place. That is the central mission of our church because it was the central mission of Jesus himself.

You know, that's why we're starting The Salvage Yard! [SLIDE: salvage yard slide] This is a big deal and it's going to take an investment of our time and money and leadership. But this is a God thing! It's a God thing! That's why we're willing to channel resources in that direction. Because there are people that Jesus loves so much, but they're never going to show up here, so we're going to do what Jesus did, we're going to go there. Downtown, rent a building right near the bars, and offer an alternative to people who don't know about this God who loves them, people who are lost, people who are hurting. And they won't know unless we go there and tell them. Jesus often went to where the people were, and so are we.

The Pharisee's religion was focused on them and their needs and they didn't give a flip about anybody else. A church with the same attitude is destined for a slow death. Our primary purpose here at Saint Paul's is to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ. That happens when we are willing to focus on those who are far from him and we do all we can to draw them close. It is important that I understand that as pastor. It's very important that you understand that as you become a part of this church family.

One reason I am so proud of Saint Paul's is because in large part we try to stick to a religion that goes beyond the walls of our church and into your workplaces and homes and wherever you happen to find yourself in the world. You see real religion, the kind Jesus demonstrated, doesn't happen inside a church, this is just a place of teaching and inspiration and spiritual feeding. Real religion happens when you are at work and you stand up for what you believe and you share a depth of hope and love and encouragement that has Jesus Christ as its source. That's real religion!

Jesus knew that Christians would have a tendency to become like Pharisees. He knew we'd be tempted to have a religion focused on us and our needs. That's why he warned his followers to constantly be on the look out for traits of the Pharisees in their lives...and in your life.

Here are the questions I want to leave you with today, look inside yourself and ask: "What does my heart look like? Am I going through the motions, or do I actually believe what I'm doing? Am I striving to serve God daily with my head, heart and hands? Am I doing my best to serve others, or would I rather be served by them?"

If you're like me and you occasionally slip into the habits of the Pharisees, this would be a great day to say, "Lord, forgive my sins. Lord, help me to be the real deal. Help me to follow you with all that I am, and everything I have. Help me so that I can walk humbly with you." And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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