

Jesus and the Hypocrites

February 9th, 2014

Luke 19:45-20:8

⁴⁵And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, ⁴⁶saying to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers." ⁴⁷And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him, ⁴⁸but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on his words. ¹One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up ²and said to him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority." ³He answered them, "I also will ask you a question. Now tell me..."

When you think of the beauty of Jesus Christ, what events, actions, words, come to mind?

We're studying Luke to behold "the Beauty of this Man", and this is an unusual glimpse of it. This is not Jesus, meek and mild, bidding the weary to come and rest. He is angry with the people in the temple – driving out the sellers, overturning tables and chairs – an intense, passionate, God-centered rage against what was happening there. Then He gets into a dialogue with the religious leaders and basically concludes, "I'm done with you; I don't talk to people like you." So this expresses itself in different ways in the text, but it's clear that Jesus is *not* happy with these people. What's going on here?

In both scenes, it seems to me like the issue is one of hypocrisy. Pretending. Having the appearance of something sincere and genuine and God-honoring, but not the substance. So let's look at these two scenes to try to get a sense of what's going on, then consider how Jesus exposes the hypocrisy, and then draw out a few implications. And as we watch how Jesus exposes these people for what they really are, maybe we'll find Him exposing us to. Maybe the Lion of the Tribe of Judah will wound us, that we might be healed. Better to be exposed now, and repent, than to meet this rage on the last day.

Scene #1: Jesus in the Temple

Jesus has just triumphantly entered Jerusalem to the chants of “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” The people are thinking that He has come to stick it to the enemies of God, the Romans, and re-establish Israel’s Kingdom forever. And in a sense, He does come to stick it to the enemies of God; the surprising thing is that God’s enemies aren’t the hated Romans, but are the very people engaged in lots of religious activity in the temple.

So Jesus visits the temple, and it’s pretty clear that He’s angry. He’s flipped over tables and driven people away; I think this is the only recorded act of violence done by Jesus. And He follows it up with these words, splicing together two statements from the Old Testament: “⁴⁶It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a den of robbers.” (cf. Isaiah 56:7, Jeremiah 7:11).

What’s going on here? Merchants and money-changers had turned the worship of God into a money-making endeavor. Foreigners, who had traveled long distances to worship in the temple, were not able to bring along their own animals to sacrifice. So the merchants would take advantage by charging unreasonable prices for the animals, thus making a hefty profit. The money-changers pulled a similar stunt on those who needed to exchange their currency in order to pay the temple tax (imagine the ridiculous price you need to pay for a bottle of water at the airport, after they make you dump out your own water). Their hunger for profit – led and overseen by the high priest – in a setting that was supposed to be sacred and reverent is what infuriated Jesus.

You see the issue of hypocrisy here...having the appearance of worship and godliness, but not the substance. They had taken the house of God, His holy Temple, which was to be a house of prayer for all nations, and, in the name of worship, were living out their greed and selfishness. All this commerce was happening in the outer courts, which was the only place where the Gentiles could come if they wanted to connect with God. Think of how loud and confusing the trading floor of the stock

exchange is, and then add tons of livestock! How was someone supposed to connect with God in that environment? They didn't care about prayer, they just cared about money. That's what enraged Jesus.

Scene #2: Jesus' Authority is Questioned

So Jesus has proclaimed Himself as the Messianic King by rising into Jerusalem on a donkey (cf. Zechariah 9:9), accepted the worship and praise of the people (v.38-40), declared that even the rocks exist to give Him praise, and now He has cleansed the temple in a condemnation of their religious hypocrisy. And the question arises: where does Jesus get this authority. In other words, who does He think He is? That is the question that the chief priests and scribes and elders approach Jesus with in chapter 20: "2Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority." But it's clear that this question is another expression of pretending, of having the appearance of something (sincere curiosity in Jesus), but not the substance.

I say that because of what we've already been told about these religious leaders: "47And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him." These are the same men who approach Jesus in chapter 20, inquiring about the source of His authority. Don't you think that you would want to get that question answered *before* plotting to murder someone?! These men hate Jesus and what He stands for and the way He is exposing their hypocrisy. They want Him dead.

So this is not a sincere question, just seeking a bit more information. Jesus has already made it abundantly clear where His power comes from: "20But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." They are masking their rebellion with the disguise of humble inquiry.

They are pretending, and Jesus knows it, and exposes it. They would have hoped that Jesus would say, "My authority is from God," so they

could accuse Him of blasphemy. But instead, Jesus unmasks their hypocrisy with a question of His own: ³“He answered them, “I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, ⁴was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?”” They’d been trying to trap Jesus, but now they themselves were trapped.

They deliberate: ⁵“And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ ⁶But if we say, ‘From man,’ all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.”” They’re cornered, and their cowardly response is to simply say, “We don’t know.”

There’s no effort to honestly grapple with what is true. All they care about is public perception, appearances, self-preservation. But they *look* like sincere seekers of truth. They’re hypocrites. So Jesus says, ⁸“Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” I’m not interested in playing games anymore; I don’t deal with people like you.

Three Implications of Beholding Jesus

So in both of these incidents, Jesus is against those who try to pretend...those who have an appearance of something without its substance; those who appear engaged in religious matters, but who have no real intention of submitting their loves to Jesus. Let’s draw to a close by working out a few implications for our lives.

1. Jesus demands all of you, not just a part of you

Jesus’ words here about making the temple a den of robbers comes from Jeremiah 7:

⁸“Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. ⁹Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, ¹⁰and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations? ¹¹Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD.”

The lesson in this is that you cannot compartmentalize your life, and give Jesus a part of it, while you hold on to other parts yourself and live your way. Either Jesus has all of you, or He has none of you. When you really encounter Jesus, He doesn't sit down and say, "Let's have a seminar here. What do you think would be a good use of your gifts? I'd like to hear from you. Do you think it would be a good idea to lie here or not? Do you think it would be ok to sleep with this person or not? What would make sense to you? How would you like to handle your money?" Jesus comes to rule over all of you.

This is good news. It's hard, but it's good. And it's lifelong. Recently, Jesus has been showing me that I don't have a servant's heart in many regards, especially at home. "What does it mean to live in the way of the cross in the next five minutes?" is just tearing me apart. Are you experiencing that at some point in your life? If He's doing that, you're just pretending. Because when He's really Lord and King over all, He goes to work on everything. And truly, it's good news. The cross means that every command of Jesus comes to you from a tender, sacrificial, generous King...not a distant, indifferent, gloomy tyrant. "These things I have spoken to you, that *my joy* may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

2. Jesus values truth more than appearances

We live in a day where truth has become relative, and where even Christian leaders appear on national television and refuse to give straightforward answers to simple questions like, "Is faith in Jesus necessary for salvation?" How easy it is in evangelism or in discipleship to be ruled by what people will think, what will put us in a good light. And Jesus' harshness here with the religious leaders who had this mindset are a strong warning to us to be bold and courageous (and winsome) in our dealings with others.

When you're asked questions about Jesus, or the Bible or homosexuality, let's strive to be people whose first concern is to speak

what is true. "2But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." The mission of Jesus is not committed to gaining the most votes, or winning a popularity contest. We are to be people (though not abrasive) who honestly declare where we stand and why, come what may, even when it's not popular.

3. You can't sit on the fence forever

Jesus' encounter with these leaders in chapter 20 caution us to beware of rebellion masquerading as sincerity. Brothers and sisters, we need to know this. We are called to patiently instruct and correct and to gently and respectfully give answers for the reason for our hope. But evidently, there comes a time when there's been enough Q & A, and a person must make a commitment to Jesus, or not. And one way of avoiding that kind of commitment is to just ask more questions.

For those of you who might be inquiring about Jesus, I'm glad you're here. It's ok to ask questions, and we want to help you get answers. But please know that you can't sit on the fence with Jesus forever. But when that's happened over and over and over, there comes a point (let the believers seek the Spirit diligently on when this is) when the loving thing to do is not keep rehearsing the same questions and answers and going down rabbit trails, but to call you to repent and to believe the good news of Jesus, or just walk away.

Notice that 20:1 tells us that in His final days before the cross, Jesus was preaching the gospel. The Word of God that you are not a meaningless accident, but that you have a Creator. And because you have a Creator, every grain of your strength, every molecule of your abilities and your talents and your money and every gift you have and everything you have and are, you owe to Him. Do you honor him that way? Do you treat him as if he owns you? Do you treat him with the

gratitude with which you should treat him? Do you give him the love and honor and respect that you should give Him? You don't.

To one degree or another, we all want to be our own masters. That's what sin is. We take our own money, we take our own talents, we take our own time, sexuality, gifts, intellect, and we do what we want with them instead of honoring Him with them, using them in eager submission to Him. So you have made yourself at odds with Him, deserving His eternal punishment.

But the gospel, the good news, is that in Jesus we have a high priest so unlike the one who Jesus was enraged with in the temple. Jesus Himself is the true High Priest, who did not get rich off the system of sacrifices, but who lost His riches to be that final and forever sacrifice, living the life that you've failed to and dying the death you deserved, and rising from the dead three days later to demonstrate that He had defeated sin, death and hell, so that all who would repent of their self-rule and receive Jesus' pardon by faith could be forgiven and made beloved children of God, citizens of His eternal Kingdom of peace.

How many times can you hear the gospel and reject it before Jesus finally says, "I have no more to say to you." Don't let that happen. Some of you have been cloaking your rebellion in the garb of sincere inquiry, and you need to repent. Some of you have been cloaking your rebellion in the garb of noisy, religious activity. And you need to repent. Others of you need to repent of being more absorbed with what other people think of you than what your Creator and Redeemer thinks of you. And you, too, need to repent.

May all of us – no matter where we are in our journey of faith – be sobered by the seriousness of the danger of pretending. And may we all look to the wonderful cross, on which the Prince of glory died, and find as we look there that Jesus is a loving, merciful, compassionate, Savior and King, ready to meet us at every point of weakness and need. If only we would stop playing games with Him.