

“What Do You Think? Looking Good vs. Doing Good” based on Matthew 21:23-32
Delivered on September 27, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

I can remember the refrain and still almost hear his voice saying it: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, who loves you as you are and desires us all to grow day by day, again, giving us many opportunities to say that ‘yes’ to Him. Happy are all of us who are called to this celebration.”

These were the words my parish priest said in every mass during the communion liturgy. The first line is from John’s gospel, the last is modification of a verse from Revelation. The Roman Catholic Liturgy uses these bible verses before distributing communion. But the middle lines, those were uniquely from the theology of my priest, who had perhaps the best name for ministry ever. His name was, and I’m not making this up, Father Hugh R. Grace. Perfect.

I have been thinking about these words quite a lot lately, and the impact they had on me, along with the deep biblical truth that is contained in each and every one of these phrases. Indeed, the first should be our focus, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes our sins, and there is nothing else in our faith more important than that truth.

All of Christianity is based on that premise – that the One True God, entered into our humanity, to live as we live in our limits, and be the sacrificial lamb who died on the cross for us, only to rise again as the first in the new creation, showing that He defeated both sin and death, by this ultimate act of love for us.

The next line, ‘who loves you as you are and desires us all to grow day by day.’ It sounds like a line from Mr. Rogers, but it is actually based on Paul’s letter to the Romans, specifically, Romans 5 and 6, in which Paul says the proof of God’s amazing love, is that Jesus died for us, indeed while we were sinners. He loves us as we are. But it doesn’t mean we keep sinning, but that we grow in faithfulness.

The next line, ‘giving us many opportunities to say that “yes” to Him.’ Well, this brings us to today’s Gospel reading, about what it means to say ‘yes’ to Him. What does it mean when we say ‘yes’ to God? What is supposed to happen?

In Jesus’s day, competing factions in Judea, each claiming to rightly worship God, were each struggling with this very idea – what does ‘yes’ look like. You had one extreme not mentioned in the gospels of the Essenes, living an ascetic life in the wilderness fasting, and considering all other believers to be lacking the discipline, perfection and moral superiority God requires.

Earlier in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus was engaging the Pharisees and scribes. These were the rabbis and teachers in synagogues, away from the temple in Jerusalem. They were trying to adapt the Old Testament law, prophets, Psalms and wisdom literature, with an oral law of rabbinic interpretations needed to apply God’s word in a changing world. I have great sympathy for the Pharisees as I do modern pastors, because they were trying to be true to God’s Word, but their interpretations could not and never would be, enough to redeem God’s people and the world. That required Jesus.

In today’s text, Jesus is now in Jerusalem, where he has already upset the powers that be.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple, and now these religious authorities, the chief priests and the elders of Jerusalem, which made up part of the faction known as the Sadducees, wanted to trap Jesus. The Sadducees were the priestly class, the wealthy of Jerusalem, and they regarded the temple as the centerpiece of their faith. To them, the right to worship as their ancestors worshiped, was how they sought to honor God in their faith. They made deals with Rome, gained power, all to preserve the outward expression, of a deep cultural faith in God.

Like I do for the Pharisees, I have a great deal of sympathy for the Sadducees as well, because they knew how the pagan religious systems of the Roman world worked. Yes, Rome allowed the worship of any god, as long as the worship of that local deity was done alongside the worship of the Emperor and the Empire's other gods. That kind of arrangement would not have worked for any faithful worshiper of Israel's God. As we know, the first commandment demands that God's people worship no other gods. But the alternative was destruction meted out by Rome.

So, the Sadducees kept order in Jerusalem for the Romans, ensured taxes were paid, and by this, Rome's authority allowed the Sadducees to control and maintain the temple. In this volatile city, it was easier for Rome to give the Sadducees power, and leave the citizens of Judea to worship their God alone, as long as it did not interfere with Rome's ability to govern. This meant the Sadducees had to obey Rome, and subdue any rebellion against the empire, in order to preserve religious freedom.

They asked Jesus, 'By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?' Authority matters in this setting. So for any teacher, this would be a good question to ask. But as I said, at this point, Jesus is not just any teacher preaching in the temple area. He is the one who had come into the city riding a donkey like King David, and who later scattered the tables of coins from the temple and Rome. To keep the Romans happy, to keep the temple secure, the Sadducees wanted to trap Jesus, challenge his authority, so that the mob would side with them at his arrest, allowing temple worship to continue.

Jesus, of course, sees their trap and responds by laying a trap for them. Jesus asks them where John the Baptist got his authority to baptize people for forgiveness of their sins. As Matthew reveals for us, if they say that John's authority came from God, then the crowd will judge them as hypocrites for allowing Herod to kill John. And if the high priests and elders said John's authority did not come from God, but himself, the people would have risen up, because John was their prophet. The priests and elders play it safe and say, 'We don't know.' The crowd does not revolt and their power is safe, but Jesus has revealed their character.

They become the subject of the parable of the two children. Now, I think it is important that we note that Matthew's Greek says 'children,' or '*teknon*.' Even though many bible translators have oddly chosen to change it to 'sons.' The Greek word for children is used here and this word isn't typically for a child of any age or status, but a child living in 'willing dependence' on a parent or a guardian. This is important, because Jesus as the Son of God is co-equal, indeed, is completely One with the Father and the Spirit. He's the Son of God and we're God's adopted children, called to be 'willingly dependent' on God.

So, in this parable, the children are each to be considered dependent on their father, so, an answer of 'yes' is to rightfully be expected. There is no real choice here. But the first child is rebellious and says 'no,' but then repents, or turns back. Indeed, the first child has a change of heart, and does what was asked. The second child says 'yes,' making the father happy in the moment, but never follows through, never does what was agreed. 'Which one,' Jesus asks, 'did the will of their father?' And the answer is, of course, obvious – the first.

You see, by their role as priests and elders, the Sadducees looked like loyal children of God. But like the child who says 'yes,' but never follows through, they truly only look the part in this scene. They are supposed to be 'willingly dependent' on God as caretakers of the temple, but they are arrogant in their own power, thinking that they know best. And yet, by their own actions seem to put their own authority before God's, and in doing so, make Rome's authority greater than God's, since, they are beholden to the empire for their power. Here is the God of Israel, the Lord among them, and they question His authority. Why? because it does not come from them, and it doesn't come from their true master, Rome.

In our culture today, we are under a constant assault of marketing and brand management, where someone, some company or some computer algorithm hopes to sway our opinions. The goal is to get you and I to buy something, support something, or oppose something, all because whatever we do says something about who we are, what we stand for, or some other critical part of our identity. At times it can be difficult to see how we are impacted, or know how something gains authority over us. It just happens, and the next thing you know, you might be buying 10 pounds of gummi bears, out of your unemployment check, because Amazon says it's a good deal and you only have one hour to get it. Confession: This was me, back in April of 2011. I don't even like gummi bears really.

But seriously, that was a relatively minor thing and still there are many things vying for who we are, asking for our 'yes.' And one of those things, believe it or not, is 'Brand Jesus.' There are even Christian sub-cultures selling Jesus, but not the Jesus of the bible, or at least, not Him alone. In their book, "Faith For Exiles," that we are reading with the session, researchers David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, say it this way, *'The church has responded to the identity pressures of our culture by offering... a Jesus "brand experience" rather than facilitating a transformational experience, to find [our identities] in the person and work of Jesus.'*

The authors point out that Jesus is made to 'compete with other affiliations and affinities,' to be a 'cool BFF, your partner in adventure,' who wants you to 'live your best life.' I agree with the researchers, and I've seen how Jesus can and has been co-branded with just about anything, from mundane things like home decorations and celebrity renovators, to political stances, ideologies, and the ever-growing partisan divide. If we stand with Jesus, then we have to have this, and we have to support that, we have to vote one way, and act another – because this is what it means to say 'yes' to Jesus. Kinnaman & Matlock say, *'it is a transactional equivalent to following a band, attending concerts, and wearing the swag. Jesus is just one more brand competing for our loyalty.'*

This is all so very daunting, and it can drain our hope, because it is hard to escape our culture. I feel for the Sadducees, the priests and the elders, because they were trying in their day, and

for them, they held on to what might have been called brand Israel, binding God's identity to the temple and nation state. They co-branded the God of Israel with the place they worshiped that God. Preserving the temple was an outward sign of their faith in God. I cannot imagine how hard it must have been for them, but I know how hard it is for all of us, because we truly want to say that 'yes' to Jesus, and look the part, look good before our God.

Jesus does not want to be for us just another brand competing for a stake in our identity, but Jesus wants to be the foundation of our identity. Jesus wants everything we have. This is not to drain us, but to give us new life – abundantly right now and life eternal with it. God came down to us, to be born a human like you and me, and live like us, and rather than make a deal with Rome, he died on Rome's cross, sent there by well-meaning religious types who just didn't see him, didn't recognize Jesus for who he truly was – God.

By sharing in our humanity, God showed us love, because God does not actually need to love us, but comes to us while we are sinners, and gives up everything for us.

Friends, Jesus does not want us to just be well-meaning religious types buying a brand Jesus, but wants us to be like the prostitutes and tax collectors who confessed their sins to Him. Because when we think we've said 'yes' but have not confessed and turned to Him, we are still in our sin, having not yet turned to accept the love we cannot earn, but which God wants to give us freely by the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Looking the part is not what Jesus asks of us. This is why our works cannot earn our salvation. It is incredible to think that not even our sins can keep us from the love of God, because the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the means by which we receive grace, that is: unmerited favor that brings with it forgiveness of sin and new life. Accepting this gift does not entail looking the part, buying into brand Jesus, but instead, means we stop making excuses for the things we do, and become like children, willingly dependent on our God.

Our 'yes' will be seen in our growing faithfulness and trust, by how we work in the vineyard, even when we do not look the part, yes, even when we might face criticism from the religious elites, just like those prostitutes and tax collectors did. Friends, let us turn away from our sins, from the temptations of this world, and repent. Meaning, let us be like the outcasts that Jesus sought in the gospels, and turn to Him.

This does not mean we continue to sin, nor that one 'yes' will make us sin no more. It means that every time we do sin, even when we act like a Sadducee, we get an opportunity to turn back to our Lord, lay down our excuses, and love one another as Jesus has loved us, no matter what. Say 'yes' to Him again and again and be transformed by His love, as willingly dependent children of God, who do their Father's will this world.

Behold, Jesus is truly the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, who loves you as you are, and desires us all to grow day by day, giving us many opportunities to say that 'yes' to Him, happy are all of us who are called to this celebration. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words run left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

Matthew 21:23-32 (NRSV) When he ***entered*** the ***temple***, the ***chief*** priests and the elders of the ***people*** came to him as he was ***teaching***, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who ***gave*** you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one ***question***; if you tell me the ***answer***, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the ***baptism*** of ***John*** come from heaven, or was it of ***human*** origin?" And they ***argued*** with one another, "If we say, 'From ***heaven***,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human ***origin***,' we are ***afraid*** of the ***crowd***; for all ***regard*** John as a ***prophet***." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what ***authority*** I am doing these things. What do you think? A ***man*** had two children. He went to the first and said, '***Child, go work today*** in the ***vineyard***.' The child answered, 'I will not'; but later ***repented*** and went. The ***father*** went to the second and said the same; and the child answered, 'I go, ***sir***'; but did not go. Which of the two did the will of their father?" They said, "The first." ***Jesus*** said to them, "Truly I tell you, the ***tax*** collectors and the prostitutes are going into the ***kingdom*** of ***God ahead*** of you. For John came to you in the way of ***righteousness*** and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes ***believed*** him; and even after you saw it, you did not ***change*** your minds and believe him.