

The Practices of Jesus: Cleaning Up The Mess

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

January 26, 2020-AM Service

Reverend Peter Jonker

Matthew 9:9-13

Whenever we hear the Pharisees offer an opinion, we tend to discount it. They say something about Jesus and we automatically think what they're saying is ridiculous because, well, they're the Pharisees and we know they're the bad guys. But there are good reasons we might want to listen to the Pharisee's concerns in this passage because they have good reasons to be concerned about the company Jesus keeps. Three good reasons, in fact.

First, Jesus' companions are bad people. We tend to classify wrongdoers along a spectrum. On the one end of the spectrum are Loveable Rogues. Some sinners make us smile. Robin Hood is a thief, but he steals from rich bad guys and gives to the poor! Sure George Clooney and Brad Pitt are thieves in Ocean's Eleven, but they are so handsome and charming. Or think of Ferris Bueller—sure he skips school and lies to his parents and talks his friend into 'borrowing' his dad's Ferrari with catastrophic results, but he's so cute and spunky. Loveable rogues. On the other end of the spectrum are sinners who evoke nothing but disgust. Let's call them the filthy animals. Those include abusers, con artists who scam old people, and traitors to their country. People such as Bernie Madoff who swindled people out of their life's savings. People such as Benedict Arnold who betrayed his country in the American Revolution. People like Harvey Weinstein and Joseph Epstein. We see these people as filthy. Literally filthy. So much so that if you shake hands with them, people look at you like you did something disgusting. Like you are contaminated.

Because Jesus hung out with them, we tend to put tax collectors on the lovable rogue end of the sinner spectrum. But that's not how anyone in the first century saw them. In the first century, they were seen as filthy animals. Literally. They were traitors and thieves. They were Bernie Madoff and Benedict Arnold combined. According to William Barclay, Jewish law barred tax collectors from the synagogue, and included them "with things and beasts unclean." Filthy animals. So the Pharisee's complaint had the weight of public opinion on their side.

Second, the Pharisees also had the Bible on their side. There are multiple Old Testament passages which warn Israel against associating with sinners. The Pharisees could make a strong case that Jesus was not following scripture. "Brothers I ask you, does not Psalm 1 say *"Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked, or sit in the company of mockers."* Remember also the good word of Psalm 26:4. *"I do not sit with the deceitful...I abhor the assembly of evildoers."* Consider the counsel of Proverbs 13:20: *"Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm."* And let us not forget Proverbs 14:7 *"Stay away from a fool for you will not find knowledge on his lips."* The Pharisees could make a strong case that Jesus was simply not following Scripture.

And finally, the Pharisees have the weight of common sense on their side. Didn't our mothers and fathers warn us against associating with the wrong people? "Make sure you choose good friends! It's so important to find people who share your values! If you find yourself at the wrong sort of party, just walk away!" Isn't this the wrong sort of party? Shouldn't Jesus just walk away?

But Jesus doesn't walk away. He does the opposite of walking away. Read through the gospels and you see that Jesus goes towards the messy places, He touches the untouchables and He embraces the unclean. It's His practice. He does it here. He does it in Luke 15. When Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep, once again He's surrounded by a crowd of tax collectors and sinners. In John 4 Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well. Because she was both a woman and a Samaritan, convention said Jesus shouldn't talk to her. But Jesus engages her messy life. In Luke 19 Jesus gets himself an invite to Zaccheus' house, even though Zaccheus isn't just a tax collector, he's the chief tax collector, the king of the filthy animals. In Luke 7 at the house of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus lets a prostitute whom He has forgiven bathe His feet. Simon is disgusted: "If this man were a prophet he would know who was touching him and what kind of woman she is!" In Mark 1, as part of a healing, Jesus touches an unclean leper, something specifically forbidden in the law because lepers were unclean. Filthy. Read through the gospels and, despite the Biblical warnings, Jesus keeps going into messy places, touching the untouchables and embracing the unclean. It's a practice of Jesus. Why does Jesus follow this questionable practice? He does it because the Kingdom of God is at hand. He does it because the King has

come to His people and everything is starting to change. The King is here and now the polarity, the balance, between good and evil is starting to change.

How has the balance changed? In the Old Testament, if a clean child of God touched an unclean thing she became unclean. But now Jesus can reach out and touch the unclean leper and Jesus doesn't become dirty, the leper becomes clean. In the Old Testament good was contaminated by evil. But now, evil is contaminated by good. In the Old Testament, you avoided the company of sinners, but in the New Testament, Jesus sits at Zacchaeus' table and by the end of the meal what happens? Zacchaeus is giving away his money and salvation has come to his house. Evil is contaminated by good. In the Old Testament, Israel's life was confined, ethnically and geographically, to the Promised Land. Strangers were welcomed of course, and their righteousness was meant to be a witness to the nations, but they didn't go out. In general, the Old Testament is wary of gentiles and their influence...but in the New Testament, the mission of God goes out! Filled with the Spirit, the disciples become God's witnesses in Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth. Paul stands up in the middle of Athens—where he's surrounded by the world's greatest philosophers, surrounded by idols – he preaches the gospel and people listen. Do you see the change? Evil is contaminated by good. The balance has shifted. Jesus is here, the Kingdom of Heaven is upon us. The King has arrived and by His death and resurrection, He will put the ancient powers of evil in confusion and retreat! Now we don't have to be afraid of the mess. We don't have to shrink back from the untouchable things. We can go into the darkest, dirtiest places and bring hope. *Of course the work is still dangerous.* The devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may destroy. And the potential for corruption is still there. Of course, we are often tired and perplexed and sometimes afraid, but we keep going. We pick up our cross and we go out into the world. We go out into the world with the mercy of Jesus, because the mercy of Jesus is the strongest thing. It can crack the hardest soul. It can clean the foulest thing.

In his book *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson tells the stories of his work for the Equal Justice Initiative. Stevenson is a Christian man who works to bring justice for folks who've been unjustly convicted or unjustly sentenced. He ends up bringing God's mercy into some dark and dangerous places. For example, Stevenson tells the story of what happened to him when he tried to help a man named Avery Jenkins. Avery Jenkins was on death row for a murder he committed as a teenager. Even though Avery was clearly mentally ill, the judge didn't consider the mental illness in his sentencing. Stevenson went to the prison to try to see if he could help Avery. When he arrived at the prison, as he walked through the prison parking lot, he saw a pickup truck completely covered with angry confederate stickers. Not just confederate flags but hateful messages about outsiders and people of color. One of the bumper stickers said 'IF I'D KNOWN IT WAS GOING TO BE LIKE THIS I'D HAVE PICKED MY OWN DARN COTTON.' Only it didn't say darn. Stevenson is African American so you can imagine how that made him feel.

As a lawyer on a legal visit, he should have had a relatively simple entry into the prison to see his client, but this time Mr. Stevenson met a muscular guard with close cropped hair and a confederate flag tattooed on his arm. The guard stepped in front of him and said, "If you're going to come into my prison you are going to go into that bathroom and take everything off." Stevenson tried to explain that as a legal visitor that wasn't necessary, but that only made the guard angrier: "In my prison you either strip or go back to where you came from," he snarled. Eventually Stevenson was forced to go into the bathroom and undergo a strip search. After the humiliating search, Stevenson was just about to enter the interview room when the guard grabbed his arm and gave him a cold look. "Hey, did you happen to see that truck in the yard, the one with the stickers on it? I want you to know that's my truck!" Only then did he release his arm so that Stevenson could finally see his client. Avery Jenkins was a broken human. His prison records indicated that he suffered psychotic episodes in which he would scream for hours and had to be restrained. When Stevenson talked to Avery Jenkins on the phone, he was so broken that he couldn't track with conversations, he ranged all over the place. When Stevenson met Jenkins face to face for the meeting, Jenkins couldn't seem to comprehend what was going on. He kept asking about milkshakes. "Did you bring me a milkshake? I was really hoping you were going to bring me a milkshake. I really love milkshakes." Jenkins goes back and forth between moments of screaming psychosis and moments of childlike innocence where he wants milkshakes.

Eventually Stevenson gets a sense of why Avery Jenkins is this way. He was orphaned at age 1, and by the time he was eight he had been in 19 different foster homes. Early on, he showed signs of cognitive impairment and mental illness. His behavioral problems suggested schizophrenia. When he was 10, he ended up in an abusive foster home. He was beaten and confined. Eventually his foster mother took him out into the woods,

tied him to a tree and abandoned him there. He was found three days later by hunters. It left him damaged. He started mistaking people for demons. When the court date finally came, Stevenson spent three days presenting this evidence to the judge, he brought in expert witnesses and showed how the combination of Avery's mental illness and this terrible treatment had contributed to the crime. Eventually he won a retrial for his client, got him off death row and into a mental health facility.

Just before the resentencing, Stevenson went back to the prison to visit his client, and who should be standing at the door but the same guard, the one with the racist bumper sticker. Stevenson braced himself for abuse, only this time the guard's demeanor was totally different. 'Hello Mr. Stevenson, how are you?' he said. 'I know the drill I'll just step into the bathroom and take my clothes off.' 'Oh no, you don't need to do that, I know you're okay,' he said. 'Well then I'll go sign the log book.' 'Oh no, you don't need to do that either! I took care of everything you can go right in.' Stevenson noticed that the guard was nervous. He was wiping his forehead with a cloth. 'Mr. Stevenson may I tell you something? I want you to know I appreciate what you're doing. You see I took Avery to court during his trial so I heard everything you said. I was a foster kid too. They moved me around like I wasn't wanted nowhere and it was pretty rough. I still get angry sometimes. I thought no one had it as bad as me, till I heard about Avery.' 'Anyway I just want to thank you for all that you did and I want you to know that on that last day coming back from court I got off the interstate on the way home in the prison van, and I went through the drive thru and I bought Avery a chocolate milkshake.'

Jesus stands in the middle of the mess and says to the Pharisees, 'Learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' Bryan Stevenson, moved by his faith, moved by the Holy Spirit, stands in the middle of his mess. He goes into the filthiest, darkest place you can imagine and he lifts God's mercy as high as he can and things start to change. The evil begins to give way. What dark and dirty places are you facing in your life right now? What darkness, what fear, what shame are you carrying in your heart right now? Carry it all to this table. *Jesus is here and He is not ashamed to eat with you.* He is not afraid of your mess, your dirt, you past. Let Him touch your heart and wash you clean. Let Him feed you with His mercy so that you can be changed. Then go out into your dark and dirty places and lift that mercy as high as you can.

© Rev. Peter Jonker