

“OUT TO GET JESUS: IV – THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS”

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Matthew 21:12-17

A number of years ago, a man who owned a restaurant in Georgia wanted to get a license to serve wine in his establishment. Trouble was that he lived in a “dry” county – a county where, then, in that day and time, they didn’t want any part of alcohol. Nevertheless, this man took his case to the county commissioners. And in making his case before them, he pointed out that Jesus drank wine when he was here on earth. To which one of the commissioners, who happened to be a Baptist deacon, responded angrily, “I know! And he has always been an embarrassment to me!” (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, “What We Overhear About the Church,” p. 155)

You know what? I think that statement sort of sums up the way the religious leaders in Jesus’ day felt about him as well – he was an embarrassment to them. Let’s look back together at their situation to understand what I mean by that.

When Jesus began his public ministry, the religious leaders of his day – the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians – they had it all figured out. Each of them did things in slightly different ways, each of them focused in some ways on different things, but basically they had it figured out, and the religious system was working.

The Pharisees, in particular, had a tightly knit system, based on rules and regulations. You didn’t have to wonder how to act or what to believe, it was all there in black and white, as it were. Follow the laws, to the letter of the law, and that was that. They weren’t terribly concerned about matters of the heart when it came to faith, it was all about following the laws, the do’s and don’ts.

Then along comes Jesus. Mind you, he didn’t come in with guns blazing trying to change everything they held dear – he was just himself. He did what his heart and his God compelled him to do – and that’s what started all the trouble.

He spent time with “unclean” people. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, he reached out to those that the law deemed out of bounds – and the Pharisees pounced on him. No matter that those people needed Jesus; no matter that he could totally change their lives by his love, acceptance, and encouragement. He was breaking the law that the religious leaders held dear – and that was all that mattered. How dare he?

Then on another occasion he healed someone on the Sabbath. The religious leaders went nuts – how could he do that? He was evil! No matter that a life was changed forever, no matter that health was restored. He broke the law of doing anything on the Sabbath but worshipping God – and they could not abide it!

In today's lesson, he did it again. And this time he really rankled the religious leaders – because now he was messing with their well-oiled machine. Do you know why Jesus got so angry that day, why he overturned those tables in the temple? He did it because those people were taking advantage of the poor. Remember in that day and age that people needed to bring a sacrifice to the temple, and there were people in the forecourts of the temple who were more than ready to provide them with sacrificial animals, but at an exorbitant rate. Instead the temple, one was expected to make an offering, but it had to be made in the right coins, so the moneychangers were there to do the money exchange, and they charged exorbitant rates as well. As a result, they were taking advantage of the most vulnerable in society – the poor who didn't have the finest animals, and who didn't carry the best coins – and Jesus would have no more of it – so in anger he threw them out and turned their tables over.

Well, who do you think was profiting from those businesses? Not just the dealers and moneychangers but also the religious leaders. They were practices that had served them well – lined the pockets – filled the coffers of the temple – and Jesus was upsetting that apple cart big time. Now, their patience was running thin and they decide they can't put up with Jesus much longer. He was now more than an embarrassment – he was a threat.

Put on top of that the fact that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, and that did it – that was what they jumped on when they charged him with blasphemy and brought him to trial.

They couldn't take it anymore. He had called them out on numerous occasions – calling them hypocrites for saying one thing and doing another, for not practicing what they preached, for elevating themselves and expecting to be treated as special and elite.

They, in turn, tried everything they could to trap him, to get him to say something or do something for which he could be charged – but they could never seem to pull it off.

Until they jumped on the fact that he claimed to be the Son of God. That did it. They charged him with blasphemy, we know the rest of the story, because we talked about it some last week. They took him before two “religious” trials – first before Annas, and then in front of the Sanhedrin – both on charges of blasphemy; but then, knowing that charge wouldn't rid them of him, they turned him over to the Roman authorities claiming that he was a threat to the government – a charge that could, and did, lead to his death.

It is astounding, and incredibly sad, and frankly, shameful that Jesus' death came, in no small way, at the hands of the religious leaders of his day. And while again, this could simply be a history lesson for us, I think instead we need to take heed at what happened then, so that we don't let it happen today.

Think about it - what bothered those religious leaders? – that Jesus wasn't following the rules, that he was breaking through walls they had carefully constructed, walls of do's and don'ts, that he was doing things in a new way, and letting heart overrule head. Jesus said clearly to the Pharisees that they'd lost their heart for God for the sake of their blasted rules. So fixated were they on their do's and don'ts that they forgot about the love of God.

Now, we don't have, in any way, the massive lists of do's and don'ts that they did, but I wonder –

- As they had clear ideas of who was clean and who was unclean, do we have anything of the sort? Are there people we avoid, are there people we'd rather not be around, are there people we think beneath us, are there people that we, for all intents and purposes label "unclean," that we leave out of our embrace?
- Do we, like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, focus too much on keeping our system going, instead of focusing on sharing Jesus with others? Are we, like they were, prone to focus on ourselves instead of reaching out to others?
- Do we ever think or even say, "We've always done it this way" when a new idea comes along and we're threatened by it?
- Do we ever forget that faith is a matter of the heart, it's a matter of love for God above all else? The leaders in Jesus' day let that slip away, they became legalistic and rigid, so that when grace came a-callin' in a man called Jesus, they didn't recognize that it was love personified.
- Worst of all, are we ever, like the Pharisees, hypocrites – not practicing what we preach, not living as we should be living, not doing what we should be doing? You know, a theologian named Karl Rahner once wrote, "The number one cause of atheism is Christians. Those who proclaim God with their mouths and decry him with their lifestyles. That is what an unbelieving world finds unbelievable. The Pharisees looked very much like those who honored God, but their behavior showed this was just a mask." (On-line, Stephen Sheane, "Unmasking the Pharisees," Sermoncentral.com) Oh, may that never be said of us!

Friends, the religious leaders in Jesus' day weren't horrible people, they just got lost – lost in legalism, lost in self-protection, lost in themselves, lost, like Pilate and Herod were last week, in a desperate attempt to stay in power and control. They couldn't see that, in Jesus, God was doing a new, wonderful and mighty thing. And so they sent him to his death, thinking that would end it all.

Thanks be to God – we know that it didn't. Death didn't stop Jesus. He lives, and still today, he calls us to live as he lived, and love as he loved; to err on the side of grace; to reach out and stretch in new and creative ways; to never let “the way things have always been done” keep us boxed in. Sure, if we try new things and include those who have always been excluded, we might get criticized – but oh, we'll be in good company, won't we?

As we gather around the table of our Lord today, may we pray that we never get too settled in our ways as a church and as individuals that we start to see the way Jesus loved as a threat. Rather may we pray to do as he did, letting God and love rule the day. May it be so.

Amen.