

Glimpses of the Kingdom
Jesus vs the Pharisees
Luke 5:17–6:11
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I absolutely love this time of year because of one thing: football. It is by far my favorite sport. Even though my favorite team, the Green Bay Packers, came up short last night, our win versus the Cowboys a week ago was epic. Football is a game to be enjoyed, but it also has its fair share of controversy. Controversy is a disagreement, typically when prolonged, public, and heated.

The biggest controversy in all of football this year came during the Buffalo Bills vs. Kansas City Chiefs game on Sunday, December 10. The Chiefs were down by three points with 1:25 left in the fourth quarter, and they were on the Bills' 49-yard line and approaching field goal range, which would tie the game. However, thanks to an all-time heads-up play by Travis Kelce, who threw an open field lateral, Kadarius Toney walked into the end zone for the go-ahead touchdown. But wait! There is a penalty flag down. Toney lined up offsidelines on the play, which wiped out the touchdown and led to Buffalo's defense making a stand. The Bills won, and the controversy began.

Patrick Mahomes, the Chiefs' quarterback, said after the game that he's never had it called in his seven years in the league. He said, "It's every week we're talking about something."

Andy Reid, coach of the Chiefs, said, "Usually I get a warning before something like that happens. [...] It's a bit embarrassing in the National Football League for that to take place. [...] I've been in the league for a long time. Haven't had one like that."

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said this: "I think almost everybody, [to] my knowledge, is acknowledging the officials were absolutely correct. That's their job: to call when there's a foul. There was no question about that foul. It was absolutely the right call. If you don't call that, [then] our officials would have been subject to criticism also."

If you're a Bills fan, you agree with the call. If you're a Chiefs fan, you hate the call. And so, we have ourselves a good old-fashioned controversial play.

Now I know that it's a game, and in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't really matter, but this example sets the stage well for the controversy that we find in the next section of Luke's gospel. For the first time, Luke introduces us to a religious group known as the Pharisees, and Jesus continually finds Himself up against them. They are the primary earthly opponents of Jesus' kingdom message.

In this portion of Luke's gospel, Luke describes a series of controversies that explain the kind of opposition Jesus' ministry receives. In each case, Jesus' authority is expressed or implied, either because of who He is or because it reflects the new era—a new kind of Kingdom He brings.

Let's look at this first controversy in Luke 5:17-26.

¹⁷ One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. ¹⁸ Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. ¹⁹ When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

²⁰ When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

²¹ The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

²² Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? ²³ Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? ²⁴ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ²⁵ Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. ²⁶ Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

It appears that, by now, the news of Jesus's miracles and teachings had travelled well beyond the cities of the region of Galilee. Pharisees had come from as far as Jerusalem in the south to hear Him speak.

Who are these Pharisees? They were teachers in the synagogues, religious examples in the eyes of the people in their communities, and self-appointed guardians of the law and its proper observance. They considered the interpretations and regulations handed down by tradition to be virtually as authoritative as Scripture.

Some of these Pharisees traveled close to 110 miles one way if they were to avoid Samaria—which they more than likely did because of their dislike of Samaritans—and go by way of Jericho. The religious community had Jesus firmly on their radar, and perhaps the reason they were present at this occasion was because they had come to investigate the miracle worker for themselves. This may seem a bit excessive; why should they gather like this to check out a young prophet who is doing and saying strange things? The answer is that their particular cause—for which they were, from time to time, prepared to take drastic action—was the coming kingdom of God, and if someone else appeared on the scene who seemed to be talking about the same thing but getting it all wrong, they wanted to know about it. And these Pharisees couldn't believe what they were hearing.

They know that only God forgives sin, so for Jesus to claim and to do what God does is blasphemy, a slander against God. And for the Pharisees, this was the most serious sin anyone could commit. It was worthy of death. Let the controversy begin! Jesus is claiming to be the Son of Man, and the Pharisees are basically saying that's impossible.

Jesus makes clear that the healing of the paralyzed man is intended as a testimony to the Pharisees that He does indeed have the authority on earth to forgive sins. Jesus is saying "I am the Son of Man." He is saying "I am human just like you are, and I am the coming Messiah, who has been given authority by the Most High to reign over His Kingdom. I can both heal and forgive and bring the Kingdom here to earth."

This episode should have altered the evil thinking of the Pharisees. Their thinking or reasoning should have changed to something like, "Well, this is clearly God's power at work, so

our preconceived notions must be wrong.” That appears to be the reaction of the crowd. The crowd perceived what the Pharisees did not—they perceived the power of the Lord.

There is little doubt that they were amazed at the miracle that healed the man who was paralyzed, but their astonishment was likely over more than just this miracle. They were probably amazed at the confrontation between Jesus and the unbelieving religious leaders. The Pharisees were established authorities who thought Jesus was a blasphemer. Jesus revealed the healing power of God as well as the power to forgive sins. Jesus scored an undeniable victory while the Pharisees suffered humiliating defeat. If you are keeping score: Jesus–1, Pharisees–0.

Now that Luke has established that Jesus is the Son of Man, the coming Messiah, what does this Kingdom look like, which God has asked Him to usher in? Let’s read Luke 5:27-32.

“After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, ²⁸ and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

²⁹ Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

³¹ Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

I want to make note here that Luke refers to the tax collector by his Hebrew name, Levi. His Greek name is Matthew. This is the same Matthew that wrote the Gospel that bears his name. I’ll be referring to Levi as Matthew the rest of the way since, for us, that is the name we commonly use.

Tax collectors were the most hated group of people in the Jewish world. Even though tax collectors themselves were Jewish, they worked for the oppressive Roman government. They were viewed as traitors to the Jewish people, because the Roman tax system was deeply flawed.

It was unfair. It was easy for tax collectors to exploit the people. It was an ongoing extension of Rome oppressing Israel, so Matthew was seen by many as a sinner and a traitor.

Jesus, though, sees something different in Matthew, and after observing and watching him, Jesus says, “Follow me.” After being called, Matthew throws a party celebrating his new career of following Jesus. He naturally invited other tax collectors as well as whatever sinful company they kept, because those were the only friends that he had other than now, of course, Jesus and the other disciples.

And here come the Pharisees. This truly is a celebration: Matthew has chosen to follow Jesus, and yet the Pharisees come not to celebrate but to complain—to stir up controversy. We shouldn’t be surprised because that is what they do. In verse 30, they ask the disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

What?! You’ve got to be kidding me. The Pharisees are now worried about who the disciples are dining with?! The reason they ask this question is because the law does say that we are to distinguish between what is holy and unholy, what is clean and unclean. The issue is, though, the Pharisees enforced that law among people by emphasizing salvation by segregation. They believed having a meal with a sinner contaminated a person’s holiness, and that would then make them unclean.

Jesus’ response in verse 31 is quite logical. “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” He is saying, “I am with people you acknowledge need spiritual healing. I am a spiritual physician. I need to be in their presence. I need to be with them to bring healing.” The tax collectors might recognize their need, or they might just enjoy a meal at their friend Matthew’s expense. Regardless, Jesus is found eating with the tax collectors and sinners because He has a deliberate mission of spiritual healing.

Jesus ends His response to the Pharisees’ challenge with His conclusion in verse 32: “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” Jesus did not come to socialize among those who think they are righteous. He is telling the Pharisees, “I didn’t come to hang out with you. I came to show compassion and offer help to sinners in need of spiritual healing—to lead them to repentance, a change of heart.”

Jesus is saying, “This new Kingdom I am ushering in is inclusive.” Having a meal or interacting with sinners does not make you unclean, unholy. In fact, it’s the complete opposite. To isolate ourselves from befriending sinners is to actually be at odds with the gospel ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus–2, Pharisees–0.

For the Pharisees, this last controversy pushes them over the edge. Jesus has claimed to be the Son of Man. Then He was hanging out with sinners. What will He do now? Let’s read Luke 6:1-11.

“One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. ²Some of the Pharisees asked, “Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

³Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.” ⁵Then Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

⁶On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. ⁷The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. ⁸But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Get up and stand in front of everyone.” So he got up and stood there.

⁹Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?”

¹⁰He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was completely restored. ¹¹But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

What does Jesus do? Jesus and His friends, the disciples, work on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a holy day for the Jews, which was set apart by God. The Sabbath was a day of rest.

It was given at creation, even before the law was established. Its rhythms served as a constant reminder to all Jews that God is the Creator, and they were God's people. And once the law was handed down by God through Moses in the Ten Commandments, God made sure that we would observe the law by saying in Exodus 20:8-11,

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

In order to keep this commandment, “you shall not do any work,” the Pharisees developed four major orders, 39 categories, and 1,261 regulations around it. Those numbers might be a bit off, but you get my point. They added their own man-made rules to God's command. For example, it was illegal to travel more than three-quarters of a mile on the Sabbath. You also couldn't light a fire on the Sabbath. In trying to keep all the rules and regulations, they lost the point of the Sabbath and ultimately didn't find rest at all. The religious leaders lost mercy, compassion and understanding. They did not think about God or about needy people but only about what could and could not be done. They became very legalistic and lost the original intention of the Sabbath.

The Pharisees had dangerously put themselves in the place of God, and Jesus was not going to have that. When Jesus said that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath, He was declaring, “I am God, and I decide what is lawful to do on the Sabbath—not you!” Jesus—3, Pharisees—0.

Jesus furthers His point with the healing of a man with a shriveled right hand on the Sabbath. The Pharisees should have been shepherds for the man and cared for him when he entered their synagogue, but instead, they totally ignored his suffering and wanted to use him

to trap and accuse Jesus. This man was likely very poor because his withered hand would have made it difficult for him to find work or earn a living—especially if he was right-hand dominant as most people are. He also probably endured a measure of social rejection, because it was a common belief in those days that the reason a person was handicapped was because of some sin that they had committed against God and that their disability was God’s punishment against them.

Jesus knows what is happening, but He asks the question anyway in verse 9: “I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” The answer is obvious, but the hearts of the Pharisees were hard, so they did not answer.

Jesus then speaks out of deep love and compassion, and the man’s shriveled hand was completely healed and restored. Not only was his hand restored, but his agonizing life problem was solved. He found deep rest in Jesus. Jesus—4, Pharisees—0.

The Pharisees had just witnessed a miracle of God’s grace. They should have given glory to God and apologized to the man for not caring about him. Instead, they were furious. They began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus. Jesus’ life was now in danger. This was the cost of healing the man with the crippled hand.

These confrontations with the Pharisees would end up leading to Jesus’ trial, conviction, and death on the cross. It’s the beginning of the end. And as we will see when we walk through Lent next month, the Pharisees will think they have won, but thanks be to God that Jesus will and always does come out on top.

So, what is it we are to learn from these confrontations? The Pharisees were literally in the presence of God and missed Him because they were too focused on keeping the law. May we not be so focused on the dos and don’ts, but rather may we, like the crowd who witnessed the healing of the paralyzed man say, “We have seen remarkable things today.”

We must be in proximity with those who don’t know Jesus. We can’t, like the Pharisees, segregate ourselves from them. And while in their presence, we love. We listen. We don’t judge or question.

And finally, we must show compassion and be willing to offer help even when it’s not under ideal circumstances for us. It is to do good, not evil. It is to save lives, not destroy them.

I grew up in the 1990s, and during that time, there was a popular question in Christian culture: WWJD—What Would Jesus Do? It's a great question, especially for those new to faith who honestly don't know what Jesus would do. But for us who have been believers for a long time and already know what Jesus would do, we need to go a step further.

Dallas Willard says, "'What would Jesus do?' will be of little benefit to serious seekers until they link it to the deeper question, 'How would Jesus do it?' Answers to the former question will prove baffling, and very likely disastrous, if put into action without detailed answers to the latter."

The Pharisees' issue wasn't in answering what Jesus would do. The issue came when they needed to answer how Jesus did it. And for the Pharisees, it proved disastrous. They missed out on truly experiencing the presence of God. They missed out on entering into the Kingdom of God right here, right now. A Kingdom that befriends sinners. A Kingdom of compassion, grace, and mercy. A Kingdom that sees the humanity in one another above all else. They missed it all because they refused to see how Jesus was doing it.

Friends, it is easy for us to say, "Oh, I would never fall into the trap the Pharisees did of legalism, of self-righteousness." But if we were really to look at our lives, we do. I certainly do. I don't want to miss out on experiencing God's beautiful, loving presence. I don't want to miss out on ushering in the Kingdom of God right here, right now. I don't want to just do what Jesus did. I want to do it in the way He did it.

So, I ask you—I ask myself—how would Jesus do it?