

How do you know a religious person when you see one?

Matthew 15:10-28

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Scene 1 Jesus reinterprets Leviticus dietary laws

The Bible is God's Word for us. This is something all Christians and Jews can agree on. Muslims also have a synthesis of both the Old and New Testaments, which they call the Koran. I have read every word of the Koran, by the way, and our news media and our popular culture have it wrong. The Koran is misquoted and is taken out of context. For example, all three religious traditions have in common Abraham and Moses, and the Koran even cites Jesus and a few of his miracles, and says over and over again that God is merciful. By the way, Allah is the Arabic translation of the English word, God. It is not the name of God. It is the Arabic word for God. What is different among these great religious traditions is not so much scripture, but its interpretation. And of course, we Christians see Jesus as more than an historical figure. We see Jesus as the redeemer who reconciles humanity to God.

Consider today's scripture. In Jesus' time, there were three marks of a religious person: Keeping holy the Sabbath day, circumcision, and observance of Leviticus dietary laws.

Leviticus was written 500 years before Jesus, in the time of Babylonian exile. The Jews were defeated by Nebuchadnezzar, and hauled off to be slaves in Babylon, in present day Iraq. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, the Jews looked around them and realized they were no longer in Kansas. They were now in the foreign city of Babylon, where fertility Gods were worshipped, and people were intimate in the streets. Where all the commandments recorded by Moses were violated. Where none of the ideals the Jews lifted up were esteemed by their captors. The exiled Jews decided they needed extra laws to keep their culture intact. Extra laws that isolated them from their surrounding culture. Scholars tell us it was the Jewish priests in Babylon, not Moses, who wrote Leviticus. But 500 years after this Babylonian captivity, after they had returned to Palestine, Jesus tells his disciples a parable. A parable suggesting Leviticus purity laws from 500 years before his day might be reinterpreted through new lens. That the 500 year old lens of using Leviticus to profile human beings into "us and them" might be reinterpreted afresh. You might be thinking that Jesus says he did not come to overturn the Law and the Prophets. You are right. But Jesus does provide us a new lens through which we can read them.

For example, Jesus tells us that the Sabbath was created for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. Jesus' fresh look at Hebrew scripture reinterprets one of his day's cherished marks of a religious person, keeping holy the Sabbath day. The Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, tells us in his letters and in Acts, that it is

not the visible circumcision of the skin, but inner circumcision of the heart, that God desires. And now, Jesus' fresh look reinterprets a third mark of a religious person. He says that what comes into the mouth is not as important to God as what comes out of the heart by way of the mouth.

But Jesus is not like Jimmy Dean. He is not a rebel without a cause. There is a reason that Jesus reinterprets the three marks of a religious person. There is a reason this is Good News.

A woman I know heard voices telling her to kill herself. So she sliced her neck from ear to ear in a failed suicide attempt, and then went into a catatonic state, and could not communicate with anyone for years. Then over a decade ago, an amazing drug became available for schizophrenics. Her doctor prescribed it for her, and she woke up. Her family brought her to their church, and she applied for membership. But the governing body of that church told her before she could join, she had to have plastic surgery to remove that scar on her neck.

All of you know people whose mind is made up, and do not want to be bothered by additional information. But the Gospels tell us we still have to reach them.

Scene 2 Jesus unmasks the injustice of purity laws

Some of you may have seen at least one episode of the TV series House. When I was a medical student a few years ago, I knew a teacher like Dr House. Dr Gene Stollerman was the chief of medicine at the John Gaston Hospital in Memphis. He was more than a little intimidating. For one thing, we medical students thought he was never wrong. In our minds he walked on water. He was more than a little like Dr House, except he seemed to have no vices. Anyway, the reason we were so intimidated was his teaching method. It was one of embarrassment. He was the master of creatively showing us how our preconceptions were wrong. At the time, I thought this was just one of his personality quirks, but now I realize he knew this was a valid way to teach. Teaching by embarrassment. It is by making mistakes and being embarrassed that we never forgot his lessons.

From the disciples' point of view, the Canaanite woman is an unclean outcast: She is a Gentile, that is, not a member of the tribe of Israel. In other words, she is unclean because she is not Jewish. She also is unclean because she has none of the marks of a religious person: she does not keep holy the Sabbath day, she does not follow the Leviticus dietary laws, and she is not circumcised. Of course no woman was circumcised in Jesus' day. Which brings us to the final reason she is considered unclean in Jesus' day. She is a woman. Religious Jewish men of Jesus' day were forbidden by law from speaking to women to whom they were not married. So Jesus ignores her. When she begs for help, instead of speaking to her directly, he turns to his disciples and says, "It is not fair to take the

children's food and throw it to the dogs." This is what is expected of a rabbi, a religious man in Jesus' day.

But the Canaanite woman kneels before him, and says, "Lord, help me!" And we are shocked by Jesus' behavior. One might suggest, that if we are shocked by Jesus' turning his back on the Canaanite woman, shouldn't we be also shocked when we turn our back on the riff raff of our culture?

Jesus, similar to Dr House and Dr Stollerman, hooks the disciples by echoing their sentiment. But Jesus knows this sentiment will evoke a response from the Canaanite woman. A response that speaks truth to prejudice and unmask injustice. In short, a response that will embarrass them.

Scene 3 Jesus teaches inclusion

It seems a man was headed up to bed one night, when his wife told him that he'd left the light on in their shed. She told him she could see it from the bedroom window. He told her he hadn't been in the shed that day. When he looked out the window, he saw that there were people in the shed, stealing things.

So, he phoned the police. The police told him that there was no one was in his area and consequently, there was no one available to catch the thieves.

He said "OK," hung up, counted to 30 and called the police again.

And he said, "Hello. I just called a few seconds ago, because there were people in my shed. Well, you don't have to worry about them now. I've just shot them all."

Within five minutes there were half a dozen police cars in the area, an armed response unit. They caught the burglars red-handed.

One of the policemen said to the man, "I thought you said you'd shot them!"

And he replied, "I thought you said there was no one available."

Sometimes you just feel like you need to get somebody's attention any way you can. There are times when you feel like you want to grab somebody by the collar and shake them until they wake up and notice what's really happening.

It is said that only 13% of communication is verbal content. 87% of communication is facial expression, body language, and tone of voice. This is why e-mail is appropriate only for communicating facts, never feelings. Because of the wonderful gift of body language, during a conversation, sometimes you realize before many words are exchanged, that you and another person are on exactly the same page. Instant rapport with a stranger. With a quick side ways

glance, a wink, and a smile, Jesus recruits the Canaanite woman into a teaching moment for his disciples. He knows what is on her heart, and he encourages her to say her peace. To speak truth to prejudice, and turn the world upside down.

With Jesus' encouragement, smile, and a wink, she accepts the racial slur that she is a dog in the eyes of those religious, holier-than-thou-disciples, and blusters out, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Then Jesus says the most remarkable thing of all. To this Canaanite woman, who has none of the marks of a religious person, to this spiritual but not religious person, he says, "Woman, great is your faith!" He never says that to any of his disciples. Remember what he said to Peter in last week's scripture, in Matthew chapter 14? All he ever says to his disciples, is, "O you of little faith." But to this decided unreligious person, this woman who has none of the marks of a religious person, he says, "Woman, great is your faith!"

Then Jesus performs an enacted parable – a miracle – showing his disciples, and us, that the good news is not just for us, but also for outsiders.

Conclusion

In the past all of us have thought of religion as what we do for one hour a week – as if God does not care what we do when we are not in church. In the past all of us have thought being religious means being in church out of obligation. All of us have thought a church is a citadel for the pure and sinless, instead of a hospital for sinners – all of us have thanked God we are not like those other people – in the process excluding and in fact creating outcasts. That is, all of us have been caught up in religiosity. And Jesus has a message for us today.

Before we use scripture to build a wall around those who look and think like us, a wall that excludes others, we try to imagine who is outside our wall with those outcasts. Is Jesus inside our inner circle, or instead, is he fellowshipping with the riff-raff? Riff-raff like tax collectors, traitors, Mary Magdalene, alcoholics, the homeless, people who wear blue jeans to church, or schizophrenics with scars on their necks. We try to imagine if a fresh interpretation of scripture will allow us to include Jesus' band of riff-raff. Will allow us to include Jesus' closest friends.

The word "angel" is a Greek word that means messenger. The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament tells us how to behave toward strangers. It tells us we should not turn strangers away, because in so doing, we might be turning away an angel from God.

Oh, that woman whose church membership was contingent on plastic surgery? She immediately left that religious church, and connected with a more spiritual

church, and became one of its spiritual leaders. I saw her the other day. She still has that scar on her neck.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...