

## ***Who Is In and Who Is Out?*** ***Messages on the Teachings of Jesus***

Pull out insert

Today we continue to study Jesus' teachings. We have been realizing that Jesus came to teach us how to live, and if we choose to follow him, this way calls us as well. What is this way?

Here are some examples of this from Jesus' teachings (both some we have covered and some upcoming).

- The way first is last.
- The way of success is service.
- The way of attainment is relinquishment.
- The way of strength is weakness.
- The way of security is vulnerability.
- The way of protection is forgiveness (even to 7 x 70).
- The way of life is death – death to self, society, family.
- Know your strengths. Why? Because that's the only way that you can lay them down.
- God's power is made perfect...where? In our weakness.
- Want to get the most? Go to where the least is.
- Want to be free? Give complete control to God.
- Want to become great? Become least.
- Want to find yourself? Forget yourself.
- Want honor? Honor yourself with humility
- Want to 'get even' with your enemies? Bless, love and pray for them.

Jesus' teachings show us a radically different kind of life.

Let's look a little chart that spells out Jesus' alternative wisdom. Note that the conventional wisdom listed in the first column doesn't necessarily mean the Judaism of Jesus' day, but is a larger way of seeing the more conventional culture<sup>1</sup>: (on handout)

<b>Conventional wisdom</b>	<b>Jesus' alternative wisdom</b>
God is punitive lawgiver and judge	God is gracious
A person's worth is determined by measuring up to social standards	All persons have infinite worth as a children of God
Sinners and outcasts are to be avoided	Everyone is welcome around the table

<sup>1</sup> From <http://www.united.edu/portrait/wisdom2.shtml>

and rejected	and in the kingdom of God
Identity comes from social tradition	Identity comes from centering in the sacred, from relationship with God
Strive to be first	The first shall be last... those who exalt themselves will be emptied...
Preserve one's own life above all	The path of dying to self and being reborn leads to life abundant
Fruit of striving is reward	Fruit of centering in God is compassion

We could do a lot here, but let's focus on the third box down: "sinners and outcasts are to be avoided and rejected," to "everyone is welcome around the table and in the kingdom of God."

We will start with a text that lifts up the futility of social and religious traditions over a relationship with God.

Mark 7: 1-7, 14-23

One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to confront Jesus. They noticed that some of Jesus' disciples failed to follow the usual Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating. (The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions. Similarly, they eat nothing bought from the market unless they have immersed their hands in water. This is but one of many traditions to which they have clung, such as their ceremony of washing cups, pitchers, and kettles.)

So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, "Why don't your disciples follow our age-old customs? For they eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony."

Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was prophesying about you when he said, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away. Their worship is a farce, for they replace God's commands with their own man-made teachings.'"

Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. "All of you listen," he said, "and try to understand. You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do!" Then Jesus went into a house to get away from the crowds, and his disciples asked him what he meant by the statement he had made. "Don't you understand either?" he asked. "Can't you see that what you eat won't defile you? Food doesn't come in contact with your heart, but only passes through the stomach and then comes out again." (By saying this, he showed that every kind of food is acceptable.)

And then he added, "It is the thought-life that defiles you. For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, eagerness for lustful pleasure, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you and make you unacceptable to God."

What defiles us? We don't really talk that way, so maybe a better way to get at the same question this is to ask: is: ***What separates us from God?*** Certain food? Certain drink? Certain kinds of people?

No. Instead, what separates us from God is our *thought-life*, as the text puts it. We might also say that it is our heart, what we entertain in the secret of our private thoughts, this is what can separates us from God.

Think for a minute—on which side of the chart do you more often find yourself? Conventional wisdom or Jesus' alternative wisdom? As much as we might hate to admit it, I think we mostly find ourselves on the Conventional Wisdom side—at least, our culture would. Too often we accept a view of faith where God is punitive (that is why many people want nothing to do with God), where we strive to be first and where we avoid the outcast, the outsider. Jesus' way is different.

What would change in your faith if you embraced Jesus' alternative wisdom? How would your life and our world be different if we

- pursued a wisdom that welcomes everyone, and see everyone as being of infinite worth
- embraced our identity that is born out of not what we drive but out of our relationship with God,
- followed a path that saw dying to the self as the way to find life abundant and knew ourselves to be centered in compassion?

What else have we messed up? What else isn't it about for Jesus? What else doesn't matter like we think it does? Let's look at three of these things.

The first one has to do with a sacred topic in today's culture, *the family*. Jesus teaches that like we miss how much our heart matters, we miss how big the family of God truly is. It isn't just about our family—that is, those who look and sound like us—who are loved by God. Now "the family" of God is widened to include those who seek God and do God's will.

Hear Jesus words in Matthew 12: 46-50.

While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

The family is bigger, and our shape and size, our ethnic heritage, our background, they doesn't matter like we think they do. What else doesn't matter like we think it does?

Interestingly, behavior doesn't necessarily tell us about someone's relationship with God, for it isn't the best indicator of where someone's heart is. Listen to Jesus talk about how both he and John the Baptist were rejected, even though their behaviors were at the opposite ends of the spectrum. This is Luke 7:33-35:

Jesus says, "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

Last, it isn't about having it all together, having prestige and power that matter. Hear Jesus in Luke 9:

An argument arose among (the disciples) as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."

Jesus saw things differently:

- Heart over traditions that exclude
- Larger circles over small circles where we narrowly define who is our mother and brother
- Bigger context for behaviors over judgment of actions
- Humility and child-like living over prestige and power

So what does it mean to us? It means something pretty huge, actually...

(Slight diversion):

ABC had a short-lived TV show called, "Welcome to the Neighborhood." It was billed as a new reality show in which seven families compete for a dream home on a suburban cul-de-sac, and the neighbors get to decide who moves in. Here is what press has to say about the show: "[While all of the] neighbors have their own set of assumptions and prejudices, as they learn each of the competing families' stories, an emotional journey begins that will open eyes and hearts. The show is not just about a house, but about the building of a community."

In the commercial it seemed like the show was really about how, while we may look different on the outside, when we get to know each other we find out we are all the same. In other words, we may look different—I with my pressed white undershirt and pocket protector and you with tattoos and piercing—but underneath we can both be of the same political party, so it is OK.

That sounds nice, and sometimes it is true, but just as often the truth is we are not all the same deep down. We can have very real and very serious differences. And since the church is part of the world, this happens in church in a big way.

Look around you. Some of us are old, others young, some married, some single, some in the midst of addictions, some struggling with health issues, some mature in faith, some new, some with lots of kids and others not.

Some of our differences we can see, but most we don't see. We are different from each other; we feel and see life and faith differently from one another.

I bring this up because here is the big deal: Sometimes it seems there is a new Holiness Code around, a new way we say who is loved by God and who isn't. This code is used both by the left and by the right. As I can stand in both streams, I have experienced from both groups being told that a Christian only believes this way and not that way. But that is not my experience. As I experience this journey of faith (and I certainly could be wrong), it seems to me:

There is no ONE “Christian” viewpoint, whether that be on *stem cell research, abortion or homosexual marriage*; no ONE “Christian” viewpoint on *end of life issues, capital punishment, and whether those from other religious traditions will go to heaven*.

How do I know there is no one Christian viewpoint? I know this because I know people of real and living faith on both sides of the issues.

Yes, I do have my beliefs on these issues, which are based on scripture, tradition, experience and reason, and I am happy to share with you what I believe and hear what you believe and give your viewpoint serious consideration. I am not saying everything is up for grabs and there is no orthodox belief. I am saying that what unites us—because of Jesus—is more than the views we hold.

So, if you understand the current war differently, it isn’t an option for me to discredit and put you down, to call you names, or to label you as evil. In fact, as my brother or sister, I am to listen deeply to you, as we are part of one another.

What unites us as people of faith, no matter who we are—our age, our past, our income, our addictions, our struggle, our opinions—is the relationship in which we are all rooted, our relationship with God in Christ. And because of this, what unites us will always mean more than what divides us, that is, if we make that choice.

In a time when people line up to say who is really a follower of Jesus and who is not, we are called to abide in Christ. He is our unity and he is what keeps us in relationship with one another. Together.

To abide (the Greek word is *meno*) means to be present, to be held, to be kept continually; to *remain as one*, not to become another or different. This is our foundation, no matter who we are—righteous ritual follower or sinning tax collector. For as we abide in Christ, we both, we all, are welcomed.

Let me close with some questions, a challenge and with words of Jesus.

### **The questions:**

How do you deal with differences? Can you have a close friend who sees major things differently?

How do you talk to those who disagree with you? Do you talk louder? Do you act as if your opinion is obviously right and their opinion is wrong? What might you do differently?

### **The challenge:**

My challenge is for you to invite someone to church next week. And I want you to invite someone who is not like you. It may be something obvious to the eye or something only you see. But if we are to be the church in today’s world, we need to be about welcoming people the way Jesus did, and he welcomed people just as they were.

### **And here is our text. Listen to these words of Jesus:**

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower....Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever

does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.