

Pure or Free?

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Matthew 21: 23-32

Well, the fact is Jesus had upset the apple cart. You see, this was Jesus' second visit to the temple. His first visit had occurred just the day before. You remember that one; it was right after Jesus had made his symbolic entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. You remember it. He immediately went into the temple and set about driving out the money changers and the dove sellers.

Now, it wasn't like those were just people there doing commerce in the wrong place. The money changers were there because when people came to the temple to make a sacrifice, they didn't want any of the tainted, impure Roman currency entering the temple. So, there needed to be money changers there to make the exchange of Hebrew money for the Roman money. And the dove sellers were there really to enable poor people who could not afford a sheep to be able to buy a dove to offer for sacrifice. But, Jesus had come in and driven them all out.

Now, we've tended to make that story to be about commerce, or about you know, maybe the money changers and dove sellers were dishonest and cheating people. But, that's not it. In fact the word that gets translated as "robbers"... as in "you are making (God's house) ... a den of robbers," is "lestai." And lestai in Jesus' time had a very culturally specific meaning. Lestai were bandit-*revolutionaries*. They stole in order to finance the revolution to throw out the pagan Roman overlords. No, you see, it's the whole purity/sacrificial system that Jesus is confronting. It's the whole idea, supported by the religious attitudes and practices of the day, that some people are pure and others are disgusting, that some people are acceptable "good" people and others are just no good, that some people are morally superior to others. You remember what Jesus did immediately after driving out the money changers and dove sellers? He invited in the blind and the lame...there in the temple...the very ones who were considered disgusting and impure and unacceptable and obviously morally lacking, and he cured them.

Friends, it's no wonder they killed him. And it's certainly understandable why the chief priests and the elders were not happy to see him the next day, when he came back to the temple. It's no wonder they came up to him and ask, "hey, who gave you the right to do this?" "What authority do you have?" And, after bringing up the baptizing of John the Baptist, who of course was bringing in all kinds of undesirables, baptizing them outside of the normal, temple channels, Jesus looks them straight in the eye and says, "the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom...ahead of you." Jesus had seriously upset the apple cart.

Well, the fact is, Jesus still does that. He upsets all of our apple carts. You know, we'd like to direct this whole thing at others. You know, "those self-righteous Pharisees and chief priests!" Can you believe those guys? What a bunch of hypocrites! But, the fact is, it's all directed at us, isn't it? How many of us, when we are discussing the offering of any kind of support or service to someone, the first question out of our mouths is about whether or not the people to whom it will be offered are deserving? And then, if it's something that the church is considering doing, often the second set of questions is about what others will think if they see what we're doing. And then the third set of questions, as Sarah Breuer has said, is "all too often ... about whether there's some way we can serve people while still making sure they know how unacceptable they are, and that others know how unacceptable we find them to be." You see Jesus, in turning over the tables supporting the whole purity/sacrificial system, has overturned all those tables in our lives, too.

Some years ago, Kris Kristofferson wrote a song called "Jesus Was a Capricorn." He said it well. The song goes like this:

Jesus was a Capricorn
He ate organic food
He believed in love and peace
And never wore no shoes
Long hair, beard and sandals
And a funky bunch of friends
Reckon we'd just nail him up
If he came down again
Chorus:
'Cause everybody's gotta have
somebody to look down on
Who they can feel better than
at any time they please
Someone doin' somethin' dirty
decent folks can frown on
If you can't find nobody else,
then help yourself to me
Eggheads cussing rednecks cussing
Hippies for their hair
Others laugh at straights who laugh at
Freaks who laugh at squares
Some folks hate the Whites
Who hate the Blacks who hate the Klan
Most of us hate anything that
We don't understand

We have our own standards of purity and acceptability, don't we? Republicans/Democrats, saved/unsaved, Christian/Muslim, gay/straight, American born/illegal immigrant, rich/poor, church-going people/rabble-rousing, wild partying people. So, Jesus looks us straight in the eye and if we're Republicans, he says there are liberal Democrats entering into God's kingdom, entering into true, saving life before you do. If we're "saved," he says there are "unsaved" by our definition who are entering into the kingdom before we ever do. If we're Christian, he says that of Muslims, if we're straight, he says that of gay people, if we're blue-blooded Americans, he says it of illegal Mexicans. If we're church-going pillars of the community, he looks us straight in the eye and says, some of those Saturday night rabble rousing drinkers, who sleep right through Sunday services are entering God's kingdom ahead of you.

It's no wonder they killed him. Like Kristofferson said, "Reckon we'd just nail him up if he came down again." So, how do we enter the kingdom then? How, come these people participate in real life with God before I ever do? You know, it's not about just repenting is it? It's not about confessing Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. It's not about going to church. It's not taking all the "right" positions on the various hot-button issues. It's not even about doing a lot of mission work. Although, we might find ourselves doing or saying one or another or all of those things for good reasons. But, it's not about any of those things, because the fact is, given half a chance we'll turn each and every one of those things into our own system of purity and true acceptability. And we'll make judgments about others based on them, won't we.

I mean, we hear this scripture and we're liable to assume that well, those tax collectors and prostitutes when they repented, became the truly good, morally superior people, as opposed to those chief priests and elders. You see, we build those purity and acceptability systems over and over. But, if we hear this scripture, then we know that just as surely as we do that, Jesus busts into *our* temple and overturns the apple cart! Listen, Jesus doesn't point to these baptized tax collectors and prostitutes as now morally superior people. He just says to the chief priests

and elders that they are participating in the life that is true life...in the Kingdom of God, life as *God* intends it, *before* they ever do.

Why? I think it's very simple. They are people whose lives on the outside...whose lives as either victims or villains have made them more open to the good news of a boundless, indiscriminate love that is the Gospel of God. There was no way on their own merits, by any of the scales that society used, that they could be judged acceptable and they know that. And so the good news is truly good news to them! And salvation really is salvation...it's God's healing for them, for their broken, unacceptable lives. You see, to know what salvation is, we need to know what it is we need saving from. And what we need saving from is our constant building of systems of purity and acceptability that divide and separate us!

Friends, if we can find within ourselves again, that desperately broken sinner, the one who no longer holds any hope of being redeemed by or within any of the purity/acceptability systems in our culture, then maybe we can let all of that go and begin to celebrate the life we share together on this earth. Maybe we can let go and begin to live freely with ourselves and each other. That's the kingdom. God invites us to enjoy the freedom to take all of that energy the world devotes to issuing and trying to enforce the edicts of acceptability that divide us, and devote it instead to the celebration of indiscriminate, boundless mercy that gives us life and makes us one family, God's children.

I'm reminded of a story that I found when doing research for last week's Bible study. A woman told of going over to a colleague's house one summer evening. Her friend had a vivacious, seven year-old daughter who'd just returned home from Vacation Bible School. The little girl came running up to her and asked, "What's *your* favorite Bible story?" The woman hemmed and hawed a little bit, and then before she could answer the little girl said, "Mine's Ruth!" and ran outside to do some back walkovers.

Here's the thing, folks. Jesus would set us free to just go outside and do back walkovers. Jesus would set us free to lose ourselves in life with each other, to lose ourselves in doing what we love or in just doing whatever we do, to lose ourselves. We are free to just live and celebrate life with each other... one family, God's children, and leave all the judging to the God of love. May we be so set free.

Amen.