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"No Law Against Love"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on July 23, 2023, from Matthew 12:1-21*

In this age of unprecedented division between right and left, republicans and democrats, conservatives and liberals, traditionalists and progressives, there is one thing we all have in common, one thing that unites us; one thing everyone can agree on: America has gone to hell in a handbasket. Isn't interesting that we hear the same thing from both sides of the aisle. No matter how divided we are, we all seem to agree that there's something seriously wrong in America today. We are united in this belief – "One nation under degradation! One nation under condemnation!" From the farthest reaching economic, political, and theological poles, we all seem to know where America has gone, we just can't seem to agree on why it went there, or how to fix it. But at least we agree on something, right?

Things were not that different in the first century. The Jewish community in Jesus' day was sharply divided. There were many Jewish groups in Jesus' day, and they all had their own specific philosophies. Matthew paints all of Jesus opponents in a disparaging light, but it is important for us as modern interpreters to understand the differences between these groups and the context of the disputes they were engaged in. The scribes, the teachers of the law, the Essenes, the Zealots, the Sadducees, the chief priests, the authorities, the Sanhedrin, and of course the Pharisees, all had their own distinct positions. It was a complicated and divisive time to be Jewish when Jesus came along and added something new, which upset the entire menagerie.

There's a scene in Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*, where Brian asks a group of religious leaders, "Are you the Judean People's Front?" And they respond, "Beg off. How dare you! Were the People's front of Judea. Judean People's Front, come on!" Brian says, "Can I join your group? I hate the Romans." And they respond, "If you want to join the PFJ you'd really have to hate the Romans." Brian replies, "Well, I hate them a lot." And the leader of the PFJ says, "Alright, your in." Then he says, "Listen Brian, the only people we hate more than the Romans are the Judean People's Front." "Yeah" another one says, "And the Judean Popular People's Front." Yeah, another replies, "And the People's Front of Judea." "Wait a second," the leader says, "Were the People's Front of Judea."



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Because of the way the author of Matthew portrays the Pharisees in an unfavorable light, they've become paradigmatic enemies of Jesus—stereotyped as self-righteous and legalistic, overly focused on the letter and not the spirit of the law. Historically, the Pharisees have been the source of a lot of antisemitism because by the time this gospel was written, the Temple had been destroyed and the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus were in battle for control of the synagogue and the future of Judaism. However, the reality is the Pharisees were the group Jesus was the closest to and had the most in common with, which is why he engaged with them more than anybody else. Unlike the Sadducees, scribes, chief priests, and elders, the Pharisees were not agents conspiring with Rome. The Pharisees were a reform movement within Judaism. They believed that the Temple had become corrupt with greed and polluted by collaboration with the Roman Empire, just like Jesus. The Pharisees and the followers of Jesus both believed that Judea had gone to hell in a handbasket, but they did not agree on why it went there, or how to fix it.

According to the Pharisees the reason Judaism had been corrupted and polluted was due to the lack of ritual purity, and that the way to reform Judaism was to place a new emphasis on modes of purity practiced by individuals, largely in the context of the household. These purity observances worked from the outside in and were concerned with matters of physical and material practice: food and cooking utensils, clothing and hair, bodily functions and the handling of disease and corpses, Sabbath observance and other matters of cleanliness and purity. This is why Jesus and the Pharisees found themselves in contentious debates about washing hands before eating, dining with tax collectors and sinners, touching people with disease, plucking grain or healing on the Sabbath. It's not that Jesus did not believe in ritual purity or outright condemned the Pharisees notion that these practices mattered. But Jesus taught his followers to focus on what he called "the weightier matters of the law," which Jesus said in Matthew 23 are justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Just like the first century, hyper focus on individual moral purity is what divides traditional evangelicals and progressive Christians in America today. And not just any kind of individual moral purity, but sexual purity specifically. Have you ever noticed that all the primary issues evangelicals spend their energy on have to do with sex? Abortion, homosexuality, the subordination of women, pre-marital sex, adultery, even sex trafficking—they're all about sex! This has led some scholars to proclaim that evangelicals are obsessed with sex!



Anyone here who grew up in the evangelical church like I did in the 80s and 90s who was subjected to True Love Waits, the Silver Ring Thing, with promise rings and abstinence pledges, can tell you first-hand there has been an extreme fetishizing of sexual purity in the evangelical community. And I could spend an entire sermon talking about the physical and psychological harm this movement has caused the people, but I want to stop here to say—can you see how similar evangelicals’ answer to the problems in America are to the Pharisees answer to the problems in Judea—individual morality, personal responsibility, and purity—ritual or sexual purity.

If individuals were just purer and cleaner, then Judea and America would be saved from hell. This is the moment when you’d hear the preacher say, “if my people who are called by my name would humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” It was the most searched for verse in 2020, the only problem is it has nothing to do with sex.

My uncle Mike has a joke about Puritans he likes to tell that come from journalist H.L. Menken, “Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere might be happy or having a good time.” Evangelicals have reduced the gospel to a Victorian sexual ethic to avoid having to follow what Jesus actually said. It’s easy to cast dispersions on evangelicals for being a prude, boring, grumpy, overly pious, and deeply repressed group of individuals. And while I believe their intense focus on sexual purity has been a colossal distraction from real problems we face as a country, I must admit when I give evangelicals the best reading (which is what we should always do with our opponents) what I see underneath all the rhetoric is that it’s not really sex they’re worried about—it’s the nuclear family. All their issues are about protecting what they believe is the bedrock of American society. They believe there’s been a breakdown of the nuclear family, and that’s what has caused America to go to hell. The reason they’re hyper-focused on sexuality is that they’re convinced that “the wrong kind of sex” has broken the nuclear family, and consequently sent America to hell in a handbasket.

Purity is always about protecting something, isn’t it? Often, it’s about protecting something that doesn’t need protecting. Jesus did not believe in the nuclear family. It did not exist in the first century, and Jesus also said, “Who are my mother and brothers? Those who do the will of God are my family.” No one who said, “I have come with a sword to set son against father, daughter against mother, and create foes in one’s own household” has “traditional family values.”



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How did the followers of a person who said, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me,” become associated with protecting the family? Jesus didn’t believe in the nuclear family and would not support any theology or church organized around the idea of protecting it. Jesus believed in creating chosen family among the poor and outcast, the marginalized and oppressed. For far too the American church has focused on the family instead of the “weightier matters of the law,” and we lost our moral witness. Now we have conservative writers like David Brooks saying that the nuclear family was a mistake.ⁱ

We cannot forget that the nuclear family wasn’t built for women, for communities of color, for poor people, for people with disabilities, or for LGBTQIA individuals. It was built for straight white heterosexual males, which means that protecting the nuclear family is first and foremost about protecting the power of patriarchy, which we know needs to be dismantled. This doesn’t mean the family isn’t important, it just means it shouldn’t be the focus of our faith. It is astonishing how little Jesus said about sex and family given how much evangelicals talk about it. They say so much about the things Jesus said so little, and so little about the things Jesus talked about so much...like poverty, sickness, exclusion, and oppression. It’s become clear that our priorities out of order and we’re focused on the things that Jesus was focused on. Part of the reason attendance is declining, churches are closing, and organized religion is floundering is because the world can see our hypocrisy—they can see we’re not focused on the same things Jesus was, and they don’t want any part of it and I’m not sure I can blame them.

I was talking with a friend and mentor of mine recently and she said, “The church was an agent of colonist work in the world—an institution that used the Bible to justify a system for exploiting people, extracting resources, and taking their land. And until those things are discussed and dealt with, I have no place in there. It is harmful to me. So, until everybody is on board with decolonizing Christianity and is serious about dealing with the long legacy of patriarchy, racism, homophobia, ableism, and ageism; repair the damage these things have done people and the planet, let alone the faith we profess, then I have no place there.” This is a person who I believe we desperately need in the church, which means it’s not just the evangelicals who need to reset their priorities, we progressive folks have a lot of work to do as well.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

I don't think the Pharisees lacked compassion for the poor. I don't think they didn't care about people. I just believe like a lot of us—they simply were focused on superficial things, the pursuit of purity, the protection of tradition, their personal preferences, pet peeves, social tastes, cultural norms. I'm not even sure it's fair to imagine were intentionally being indifferent, apathetic, or avoidant of the weightier matters of the law. I think they were just distracted. I don't think the average evangelical in America realizes that their hyper-focus on sex and family is upholding a patriarchal institution that Jesus would have wanted to destroy. I think they are distracted. Politics is the art of distraction. Tricking people. Look over here, but don't look here. Look at this thing, but not that thing. Some will use a war, an earthquake, a heat wave, or other massive event as a distraction from what's really going on. They try to hide the real problems behind a heavy news cycle.

When we're focused on ritual or moral purity, like the Pharisees, we can be distracted from the real problems that are plaguing our community and blind to the suffering that people are experiencing everyday right around us. In our stories from Matthew 12, Jesus wanted to feed people who were hungry and heal people who were sick, but the Pharisees challenged him because they couldn't shift their superficial focus on ritual purity to see the human beings who were suffering. Focusing all our attention on ritual, moral, or sexual purity is not only the opposite of what Jesus was focused on, not only a distraction from the true problems of human suffering, but it's also completely futile and pointless because there is no one who is pure. Purity is impossible. All of us miss the mark. All of us fall short. All of us are complicit in systems of oppression like patriarchy. If purity is the goal, then what's the point of grace? If purity is the goal, then what's the good news?

Jesus would not allow the Pharisees hyper focus on purity to prevent him from focusing on what was really going on in first-century Judea. The Pharisees were focused on purity, but Jesus was focused on people. You can look through every gospel and you will find the same thing—Jesus was constantly aligning himself with the sick, the suffering, and the sinners. He was always spending time with the ostracized and oppressed. Never once did he demand ritual or moral purity before he healed someone, welcomed someone, or liberated someone. As you've heard me say before, Jesus talked about money more than any other subject, but he also entered into the financial and economic reality of the first-century world and liberated people from ways that Roman imperialism and purity were increasing their suffering. Healing meant people could participate in community again, go back to work, provide for their families. Jesus' ministry of healing was not just an act of compassion, but a political and economic activity as well. So was exorcising demons, feeding the hungry, and forgiving peoples' sins.



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Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

The Pharisees focus on purity was a grand distraction from the harsh economic disparity of the first century world filled with huge disproportion and disparity between the small group of the socially and economically secure and the 90 percent who were chronically insecure, with no middle class. It is estimated that the tiny group of the elite (2-3 percent of the population) controlled most of the land and consumed 65 percent of its production. They were supported by a slightly larger group (7-8 percent) of retainers: soldiers, merchants, priests, town or village elders, petty officials, and tax collectors. These were powerful agents of the empire in a situation where the empire laid claim to all land and where all foodstuffs like crops, animals, fish; all the essentials of life were heavily taxed. Together these two groups—the elite and their retainers, exercised all the power in society, yet constituted only 10 percent of the population. The remainder of the population, the socially disenfranchised, were field laborers, unskilled workers, beggars, and of course fishermen, whom the famous Roman lawyer Cicero ranked as the occupation with the lowest social standing.

Why would anybody who wanted to build a movement start by recruiting fisherman? It could only be because God had sent you to the suffering of the world. It could only be because God wanted to turn the world upside down. It could only be because God has a preferential option for the widows, orphans, foreigners, and fisherman. It could only be because the Spirit of the Lord has anointed you to bring good news to the poor. I could only be because, as it says here in Matthew 12, that the Spirit of the Lord has been put upon him to proclaim justice to the nations and hope to the Gentiles. You don't start a movement with fisherman if your focused on purity. You start a movement with fisherman if your focused on people and their problems.

The Pharisees of the first and twenty-first century want us to focus on purity. They say it's a lack of sexual purity that has broken the family and taken American to hell in a handbasket. But there is something far more powerful than sex that has had a negative impact on the American family—and that's our economic system. If anything, that is what has led to the breakdown of the family! You can track it historically. The advent of long hours and companies requiring employees to work in the evenings and on weekends has made it impossible for families to spend quality time together. They can either have family time or they can starve. Which would you choose?



Just like the first century, we too have eliminated the middle class. Low wages, horrible health care, skyrocketing housing costs, lack of affordable childcare, the catastrophic defunding of public education, the erosion of every social welfare program, the privatization of all public goods—these are the forces that are hard on marriages and children—these are the forces bearing down on the American family—these are the forces causing it to bend, bruise, and break. You really want us to talk about sex while people are sick, starving, and sleeping outside? You really want to talk about sex while people are suffering? No thank you.

Focusing on sex and protecting the nuclear family is a grand distraction from the issues that are really killing us and destroying our communities. For far too long, American Christianity has been focused on sex and purity, superficial symptoms, and vision of the family that does not work for all people. We need new vision, new eyes, new perspective, a new worldview, and a new focus. We need to see the world with the eyes of Jesus and to focus on the things that Jesus was focused on. The world wants us to focus on purity, but Jesus is focused on people. The world wants us to focus on the symptoms, but Jesus is focused on the system. The world wants us to focus on sex, but Jesus is focused on suffering. The world wants us to focus on the superficial, but Jesus is focused on the serious and weightier matters of the law—like justice, mercy, and faith.

Myers Park Baptist church, where will we put our focus? Where will we put our attention? Where will we put our energy? Where will we put our resources? Everybody on all sides of the aisle agrees that America is going to hell in a handbasket, and nobody seems to think that the church can do anything to help turn things around. They know we're part of the reason things are the way they are. But maybe, just maybe, if we could bring ourselves to focus on the things that Jesus focused on then we could be the church he talked about building on a rock, because that church is so laser focused on justice, mercy, and faith, Jesus said "even the gates of hell cannot prevail against it."

ⁱ David Brooks, "The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake," *The Atlantic*, March 2020.