

LIFE OVEN WITH JESUS: Holy

Three curious stories are our focus this morning. They're all found in the Gospel of Matthew, if you want to follow along in a Bible in your own hands.

The first story's in Matthew 12. Jesus and his disciples walk through a grainfield on the Sabbath day. They get hungry, so they break off heads of grain for a snack. That sounds like a reasonable thing to do, unless, I guess, the grainfield belonged to someone else. But tension arises in the scene not because of who owns the fields, but because of who's watching as the disciples eat from the grainfield. It's Jesus' arch nemesis, the Pharisees. Legalists that they were, they say to Jesus, v.2 Your disciples are breaking the law! Jesus' answer to their objection is priceless, I think. Let's pay attention to it. 3-8....

What's all that mean? Jesus says, my disciples picked grain eat on the Sabbath because they were hungry, just like David did when he and his companions ate bread that had been set aside for special worship.

What a delightfully practical response: They ate on the Sabbath because they were hungry! But there's more. At the end of the passage, Jesus says, you Pharisees don't understand Scripture: God doesn't want your sacrifices. God wants your mercy. Translation: God doesn't want you to enforce every syllable of the law if doing so distracts you from meeting needs, from caring about people.

The Pharisees thought they knew right from wrong. There was a law in what we call the Old Testament that commanded the execution of people who violated the Sabbath. See for yourself. Exodus 35.2.... So the Pharisees thought they had Jesus' disciples cold. They had violated the law! But the Pharisees were wrong because they didn't understand what it means to be righteous, what it means to be holy.

Today's other two stories are in Matthew 15. The first is quite similar to the story we just read, at least in final conclusion. More Pharisees, this time they ask Jesus why his disciples don't wash their hands before they eat. This hand washing was not for hygiene or food safety. This hand washing was a religious ritual, a habit of the Pharisees. In response, Jesus says, they don't wash their hands in allegiance to some religious practice. You know what you guys don't do, Jesus asks them? You don't tell people to honor their fathers and mothers. You tell them it's okay to use money that could be used to help their parents for other purposes in the name of what you claim is your tradition. So you violate the commandments of God because you don't understand what it means to be holy, what it means to do the right thing.

Two stories, both deliver the same gut punch to the Pharisees who think they're so good. The third story is from Matthew 15 as well. Let's read it, and see if you see what I see - that someone in the story gets an attitude adjustment (21-26.....)

The core conflict in this story is simple: A Gentile woman - that just means she isn't Jewish - wants her daughter healed and Jesus doesn't want to do it because he thinks his mission is only to the Jews. That's the conflict. In the last two stories, when Jesus had a conflict with the Pharisees, who won? Jesus did, and both times with a flourish. So when his conflict arises with this non-Jewish woman, we gotta favor Jesus. If the educated and powerful Pharisees went down in flames to Jesus' simple responses, what's going to happen to the woman?

We left the conflict at its emotional high point - or low point, depending on how you view it - Jesus having just compared the woman and her Gentile kind to dogs. She responds in v.27 A pretty good come back, don't you think? My daughter and I might be dogs, but we're deserving dogs, she says. Jesus responds to the woman by granting her request. And her daughter is instantly healed.

Who won that battle? The woman won because she opened Jesus' eyes to the reach of the mercy God sent him to distribute. That mercy wasn't just for one group of people; it was for all people. It wasn't just for people who looked like him, talked like him, acted according his expectations. His mercy was for all people, she and her daughter included. To be merciful, to be righteous, means to reach the world, not just your own kind.

Three compelling stories, at the center of each of which is a conflict that resolves with somebody gaining a better understanding of mercy's big picture, and righteousness' true nature. What is that big picture? Righteousness and holiness are not about following rules or commands. They're about obedience to God in ways that make a difference in people's lives.

- It was okay for the disciples to eat on the Sabbath because as a result, hungry people ate.
- It was not okay for the Pharisees to authorize the taking of money away from parental care because as a result, people who deserved care didn't get it.
- And it was okay for Jesus to heal a Gentile woman's daughter, because that's what mercy does - it makes a difference in people's lives without notice of who they are or where they come from.

I've spent more time than usual unpacking Bible stories today because I think they're fascinating stories and because my word for you today won't take long. As you live your life this week, check your righteous impulses. Are you one of those rule book people? One of those people who say, the Bible says you're not supposed to do that, so I'm not going to do that. Are you one of those people who define holiness on the basis of what someone taught you in Sunday school? Great! But learn from our stories today that holiness and righteousness and mercy - behaviors that are at the core of the characteristics of the kind of life we're called to live - are not about rules. In fact, we can get so caught up in rules that we forget the purpose of mercy, which is to make a difference in somebody's life.

In the grain story, the first one we visited, Jesus told the Pharisees they needed to learn the meaning of this Scripture: God wants mercy not sacrifices. What's that mean? Sacrifices were made because there was a biblical rule that mandated them. Mercy is not a rule, it's a desire of the heart to change somebody's life for the better.

This week, think about these important words - mercy, righteous, holy. Ask yourself, what does it mean to do the right thing in this particular moment? As followers of Jesus, doing the right thing isn't just following commands; it's taking actions that love God and love neighbor.

If you're one of those people who's big on the thou shalt this and thou shalt not that, good for you. I hope you have lots of verses memorized to tell you how to live. But just know that Jesus is going to correct you. He's going to thank you for knowing something about holiness, but he's going to tell you that you don't know enough about holiness. Holiness is about standing apart, being different. Different enough to take actions, not because some preacher told you that you have to, but because by doing so you can make a difference in somebody's life.

That's what our church ministries are for. That's why we serve at the meal site. That's why we help vets. Not because the Bible says we have to. What kind of living religion is that? But because that's what mercy does. It finds and meets needs.

And how do we know that's true? Jesus didn't die for us because some rule dictated it, but because love and mercy compelled him to the cross. And because he says to us, go and do likewise.

Have an amazing week. Change somebody's life in the name of the one who changed your life forever.