

“Interviewing Jesus”

By Mat Taylor

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Matthew 21:23-32

²³When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” ²⁴Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” ²⁷So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

If you could meet anyone, dead or alive, and interview that one person for an hour, who would it be? Chances are you’ve been asked that question. It’s a staple of dinner parties and get-to-know-you gatherings. I know it’s not original, but I always give the same answer: Jesus. It’s also the answer that Dr. Phil gave to the same question some years ago.

My old preaching professor from Columbia happened to be watching the show that day, and this is what he wrote:

As soon as Dr. Phil spoke, I remember thinking, “oh no, you wouldn’t! You would not want to sit down with Jesus, treat him line an interviewee, and ask him about the meaning of life. You would be crazy to do that. He would turn you upside down and inside out. He would confound all your questions and probably end up telling you to sell everything you own, give the money to the poor, and come, follow me. No, Dr. Phil, you do not really want to interview Jesus, and I do not want to either. It would not go well.”

Perhaps Chuck is right; we would quickly find ourselves discomforted by such an encounter. I think that’s true of just about all of us. It doesn’t matter if you’re a fiery Pentecostal, a fundamentalist Primitive Baptist, or mainline, liberal Presbyterian: whether we dunk or sprinkle, thump or Bibles or read our commentaries, drink wine or grape juice, or dance, or not, all of us are going to get an earful if we think for one minute that Jesus would be patting us on the back and saying, “You’re pretty much fine. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Too often, religious insiders become self-affirming, unrepentant religious insiders, with all the trappings and accoutrements of said vocation: self-righteousness, a holier than thou attitude, an unshakable certainty in having all the right answers to all the right questions. For those in the mainline church, we become an awful lot like those Sadducees—shrewd, political, powerful, and absolutely dedicated to institutional survival and the maintenance of the status quo. Those on the right on the Christian faith, often end up like the Pharisees—legalistic, ideological, unbending, and angry, and suffering from a hyperbolized sense of righteousness brought on by feeling marginalized and ignored.

Jesus would have words for us, words for us all. Just about the only people he would let off the hook are the people the rest of us had already given up on. I bet he’d feel a lot more comfortable and at home eating with the sinners down at Stewpot, then having lunch with the likes of me at Walker’s or Nick’s or Bravo’s. (I say that only because I like to eat at those places.) He’d probably feel more comfortable wearing clothes from Goodwill, than Brooks Brothers or Dillard’s or Joseph A Bank. (Again, places I like to shop.)

To say that Jesus would like to hang out with the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed, doesn’t exactly mean he would let them off the hook entirely. He’d certainly have something to say about gangs, violence, drugs, and the disappearance of family structures. But, I think the difference would be that most of those folks, when they sat down with Jesus for some honest talk, would be ready to hear about the wages of sin and the power of forgiveness. The problem with religious insiders is that we think we don’t need much to hear about the wages of sin (‘cause we have so few of them) and we think we already know all there is to know about the power of forgiveness, since we’re certain we’ve been chosen and forgiven.

In Jesus own day, he found that it was the folks who weren’t at all sure about their own forgiveness and “choseness” who respond readily and deeply to the Gospel, and not the religious insiders. Jesus even had a story about it. [He had a story about everything.] I’ll let him tell you the story in his own words:

‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. 11The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. 12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

In our story this morning, some religious leaders, specifically Sadducees, confront Jesus, and they do so with the intent of tricking him. They ask him what appears to be a simple, straightforward and fair question: By what authority do you do these things? The question however is a trap. If he argues from the law or the Scriptures, they will simply argue from their scriptures, refer to their lawyers, and thus refute him. If he says, by God’s authority, they have him in a corner; as far as the law is concerned, they are the mediators of God’s will. You can’t have rogue brokers of God’s grace and mercy running around. If he says that his teaching and works are given by his own authority, well, that sounds like something akin to blasphemy. It is a question he cannot rightly answer without opening himself to a potentially devastating attack.

Do you know what the word “amen” means? It’s simply a way of affirming what someone’s said. If you say “God is a God of love and grace,” you say “amen” as a way of affirming that claim. It’s like saying “ditto,” “I agree,” or “let it be so.” Jesus had the strangest habit of putting the amen at the front of what he was saying: “Verily, verily I say unto you.” He was “pre-amening” himself! No one had ever done that in all of Judaism. I told my rabbi friend about the pre-amens of Jesus, and he couldn’t believe it. Who amens himself as a way of introducing his own thoughts?

But, if Jesus were to claim to be an authority unto himself, the religious leaders before him would have plenty good reason to arrest him, or worse. SO, Jesus does what any good Rabbi would do, and answers their question with a question of his own. I’ll tell you, he says, if you tell me by what authority John’s baptism was given. That’s a question they also can’t answer. If they say it was by God’s, then he could say to them, why didn’t you then listen. If they say it was by his own authority, or by Beelzebub’s, they run the risk of inciting the crowd—something Sadducees most certainly want to avoid. SO they say nothing, and Jesus tells them a story.

A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?

As religious insiders, the danger for us is that we put on a big show of saying Yes. We say Yes to the Gospel and to Jesus and to the great call of discipleship. We say yes to sacrifice and to carrying our cross

and to serving God even with our dying breath if need be. We say yes, and then do nothing. We end up living like everybody else.

By virtually every statistical measurement, Christians and non-Christians are indistinguishable from one another in America. Crime, divorce, abortion, extramarital affairs—it's all pretty indistinguishable. People who call themselves "Christian" are statistically just as likely to do any bad thing you could imagine as those who don't call themselves "Christian."

There are a few exceptions. Christians attend church more than non-Christians, and they tend to be more charitable than non-Christians. In fact, when it comes to charitable giving and volunteerism, Christians give much more substantially of both time and money. Admittedly, this comparison is between Christians and people who show no interest in religion. I would imagine that religious people in general are more prone to giving than non-religious people.

But, before we pat ourselves on the back too much, I can just hear Jesus saying to the Pharisees,

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

Great, we give money and time. Great. But if we can't muster to live out the weighted requirements of the law, our generosity doesn't quite manage to get us off the hook.

We say Yes to God, but because our lives are practically indistinguishable from those who don't, we can pretty much rest assured that Jesus would consider us do-nothings, and me chief of the do-nothings, just like the son who said, "Yes! I'll go!" and never bothers to show up.

Yeah, yeah, yeah...I know we give, and we work, and we volunteer, more so in this church than in any other I've ever served, but do we really live out the Gospel in a way that gives us scars. Maybe some here today have those scars. But, I don't.

G K Chesterton said that "The Christian faith has not been tried and found wanting; it's been found difficult, and left untried."

Even more damning is what Mahatma Gandhi said: "I like you Christ, but I don't like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ."

WE are not like our Christ, because we are too much like the ones who say: Yes Lord, Send me, I will go. And then we get busy. We procrastinate. More important things come up that need to be taken care of first, like hitting the big sale at Brooks Brothers, and we just haven't gotten around to it, yet."

Meanwhile, there's a whole bunch of religious outsiders down at the Stewpot, former drug dealers and prostitutes and thieves and gang bangers, who actually "get" what the Kingdom of God is really all about.

For one thing: they are ready to hear about sin—their lives have been full of it. They have no illusions about being good and righteous and deserving of anything. They don't look down on others, because they know where they've been and they still have the scars. They know they have no claim to being more righteous or godly than the next person.

Secondly, they're ready to hear about salvation. They know that they are still alive because of God's grace. And the ones who aren't in prison, they know that it's only by God's grace that they are free. They, my friends, are eager to hear about a God who forgives all and accepts all who come seeking the kingdom.

Finally, they are ready to live in the kingdom. Even though they lived much of their lives saying "NO," they go and feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and look after the sick, and visit those suffering in prison. They do it because that is what God had done for them in their time of need. They do it because they want to help those caught in the trap that once ensnared them. They do it because they have grateful hearts and a story to tell—the story of the Gospel of Christ Jesus. They do it because that's what you do in the kingdom. They do it because what you do for the least of these, you do for him.

My friends, let us stop being self-affirming, unrepentant religious leaders and let us become grateful, recovering sinners. Let us stop being do-nothing Christians, and let us attend to the weightier matters of the law: justice, compassion, and faithfulness.

Amen.