

## Message Notes August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020

### Beautiful Outlaw: Encountering the True Personality of Jesus

Week 8: The Cunning of Jesus (Matt. 10:16-20, Matt. 22:15-22, John 4:10-26)

#### • Labels and Traps

- Have you ever been “labeled”? Labels can be really helpful for us to understand ourselves and others—we need some labels to identify who we are and aren’t. But they can also be really damaging. Have you ever been labeled falsely, or accurately but with judgmental intent? *Do you know what that feels like?* What about this—do you ever do that to others?
  - We humans like to use labels: just look at the predominant public discourse today—the conversations and comments on talk shows and social media. We throw out labels *all the time*.
  - *The Left doesn’t want you to know this. The Right is trying to take over. You’re just a socialist, you’re just a homophobe, you’re just a liberal, you’re just a bigot, you’re just a millennial, you’re just an intellectual-elitist, you’re just privileged, you’re just a [fill-in-the-blank].*
  - In a culture like ours, rapidly labeling people allows us to be lazy with our conversations and our thinking, because if the person matches the labels that we like and we trust, we don’t have to pay attention to what they’re saying anymore—because they’re automatically right, they’re in, they’re part of the winning team, *my team!* In the same way, if they fit one of the labels that we don’t like and we don’t trust, we can be just as lazy—because they’re automatically wrong. Forget about personality, forget about life stories and experiences, forget about context and nuance and uniqueness: we can quickly sort through *who is who* and navigate life without having to really engage with people *as people*, or pursue genuine wisdom, or love when it’s messy. Just label someone and you can write them off.
  - I know I’m coming in hot here. But I’m trying to shoot straight. I’m saying it, because I see it: I see my fellow Christians doing it. I’m saying it, because I do it.
- The topic we’re covering today addresses situations Jesus faced in the climate of his culture that bear a lot of similarities to what we see in our society. Jesus walked around in a context that was *at least* equally as politically charged, divisive, and chaotic as we are seeing right now. He wasn’t there to please everyone and build a platform; he had a mission, and he faced opposition and threats from all angles. Yet, somehow, he knew how to navigate that minefield with the brilliance and skill of a *social-ninja* until the time came for him to complete the Father’s plan. And he knew how to look past peoples’ self-expressed or given labels in order to engage their hearts—and speak truth.
  - Jesus was *brilliantly* cunning in dealing with his enemies and in rescuing human hearts.

#### • Jesus’ Cunning with his Enemies

- To understand this, we’ve got to see the context. Jesus and his disciples ministered in a politically, socially, emotionally, economically, and religiously *charged* environment. Why do you think people wanted to kill him? There were lots of competing factions, tribes, and labels: *Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, Herodians, Scribes, Samaritans, Jews, Romans, Gentiles, Pagans, Philosophers, Righteous, Sinners*, and the list goes on. (Humans are complicated, aren’t we?)
  - It’s really interesting to think about the fact that Jesus’ biggest enemies were supposedly the good, religious folks. It’s even crazier to consider the different backgrounds of his 12 disciples and other followers: working-class merchants (i.e. Fishermen), a Zealot (i.e. a political revolutionary), a Tax Collector (i.e. a direct supporter of the political system), a thief (who would eventually betray him)—those were among The Twelve. Then there was Paul, who was a Pharisee and a religious zealot. Other than Paul, who came later, these vastly different people walked with Jesus, shared life together and became *friends* who gave their lives to his mission.
  - Think about starting a movement today and drafting to your Leadership Board a far right conservative, a far left liberal, a law enforcement official, a Black Lives Matter activist, and a commercial farmer. (You know, the global Church *is* made up of all these and more today—

we just don't seem to be able to get along much after all these years.) *How did Jesus make this work? Is the Kingdom of God big enough for all these different people?*

- When Jesus launched into his public ministry, he quickly began to draw large crowds *and* large enemies. There were mobs that were ready to forcibly exalt him as their Messiah to spark uprising and overthrow Rome. There were powerful religious leaders who wanted to catch him in a trap that would allow them to convict him with the authorities—eventually, they succeeded. He knew it was coming, but he knew how to avoid their games until the time was right. And this is where you most obviously see Jesus' genius and his cunning.
  - This is exactly why he told his disciples they would need to be as “shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.” (Stop a second—have you ever thought about “shrewd as a snake” to be a Christ-like characteristic? It kind of blows up our categories doesn't it?)
- Once Jesus ticked off the religious leaders enough to make them want to kill him, you see a lot of stories of these guys coming up to Jesus to try and publically incriminate him. They bring little tests and tricks and traps by asking him questions that *no one agrees on* so they can pin him down into some pernicious category.
  - You know those “hot button issues”? I call them “hot potatoes” because no matter where you try to grab them from, *someone is going to get burned*. No matter how you answer, someone is going to be offended. Pastors deal with this stuff a lot.
  - Now, Jesus obviously wasn't afraid to speak truth and take a stance—nor should we be. But he was also too smart to play into their political games and see everything from their narrow, worldly ways of thinking.
- In Matthew 22, the religious leaders come up with the perfect test. They start off with flattery, “Teacher...we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are.” True. Then they lay their trap: “Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”
  - Oh, they are tricky. Remember the context. God's people, the Israelites, have gone through generations of being captive to Godless empires. They were not able to live in the land and serve God freely; they lived with the daily oppression of a massive Empire. Nobody likes paying taxes in a free nation. Imagine paying taxes as a *conquered* nation. Paying taxes as a Jew in the Roman Empire meant *feeding the enemy*.
  - If Jesus said, “No, it is not right to pay taxes to fund this Godless Pagan Empire,” he might have gotten some cheers, but the Pharisees would have *everything they needed* to label him a revolutionary and get him squashed by Rome as quickly as you could snap your fingers.
  - If Jesus said, “Yes, it is right to pay taxes to Caesar,” he would be slapping his people in the face, publicly endorsing the evil empire. They thought they had him.
  - But watch as he just steps *right over* their trap: “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax...Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar's,” they replied. “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.”
  - “When they heard this, *they were amazed*. So they left him and went away.”
  - Jesus repeatedly demonstrates an intelligence, a perception, a wisdom, and a cunning in the face of complex public challenges that, honestly, make even the most seasoned politicians look amateur. *You do not want to spar with this guy!* Jesus is brilliant—do you expect any less?
- **Jesus' Cunning with Human Hearts**
  - But where Jesus' brilliance shines through most beautifully is not with the challenges of his enemies, but in his cunning engagement of human hearts for redemption. The human heart is a tricky thing, desperately broken, shrouded in self-deception—a very hard thing to rescue. Like trying to save a person from quicksand, you're always at risk of going in too hard and tearing them apart, or pushing them away and losing them completely. Think about it.
  - Last week we started with the story of the Woman at the Well, let's pick up where we left off in John 4: remember, this is a scandalous encounter between a Samaritan woman and a Jewish man, a Rabi no less.

- If you read carefully, you can see this woman’s spunk in her comments to Jesus—she knows how to spar too, she knows how to hold her own in a society where a *lot* was set against her. Being on her sixth relationship in a culture where that would get you labeled very harshly, she knows how to deal with men, no matter what their status is.
- When Jesus, against all social protocol, asks her for a drink, the typical response of a first-century woman might have been to just keep her mouth shut and do what the man asked—no matter what she was thinking. Be subservient and do what you’re told. But *this* Samaritan woman not about to let *this Jewish man* tell her what to do. She goes right after him, “You’re a Jew and I’m a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” She shoots him down, she dishonors him without blinking or stuttering. Pretty bold.
- Jesus is thirsty after a long walk in the heat of the day; he just wants a drink! But rather than taking offense, perhaps intrigued by this spunky Samaritan, he hits her with this: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” He doesn’t cave to her attack, he doesn’t feed her combativeness, instead he shifts the focus to a bigger issue.
- She’s not going to back down now, she goes ahead and plays the culture card: “You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than *our father* Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself...” Jews believed Samaritans were half-breeds, *less than* Israelites—so, she implies, “This is *our* well you’re asking a drink from, Jacob’s well, the father of the Israelites, on *our* land—you still think you’re better than me?” My goodness, she has some fight in her! “Them’s fightin’ words!”
- But Jesus still won’t take the bait. He keeps pressing in to the issue behind the issue. “These wells, you keep coming to them again and again, looking to be satisfied, but they leave you thirsty every time. The water I give will become a spring within you welling up into eternal life, you will never be thirsty again.”
- Something shifts in her. She was ready to fight him and now she is interested in what he has to offer. Ever so carefully he has exposed in her the longings she’s been chasing after all this time. Now she asks *him* for a drink, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty again...” Is she maybe even starting to come on to him a little bit? Jesus won’t fall for *that one* either—he gets ready for the knock-out punch: “Go, call your husband and come back.”
- “I have no husband,” she replies. Ah, yes *maybe* she is just a little interested in him now. “*I’m not seeing anyone...*” And here’s the knock-out—this is another place where I can see that twinkle in Jesus’ eye: “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” Oh, Jesus is good! She is now *totally disarmed*—she has lost her fight and her charms, and her heart is exposed. “Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. Tell me more about this...” They talk about the human religious differences that cloud the real issue—God is after people who will worship him in *Spirit and in Truth*.
- She shows that she does have a real faith underneath it all, “I know that the Messiah is coming...he will set everything straight and make sense of all this.” Jesus says, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”
- This one encounter with Jesus is enough to win her over. She goes into her village to tell everyone about this Jew she met at the well—*could he really be the Messiah?* She, a morally questionable Samaritan woman, becomes the first person to proclaim Jesus outside of Jewish culture—some people refer to her, in a sense, as the first missionary. Jesus did that. Wow.
- Jesus is cunning in his navigation of the minefields of human divisiveness and cunning in his navigation of the minefields of human hearts.
- **Why it Matters**
  - Once you add this lens to his personality, it’s hard to miss how brilliant he was as you read the Gospels—you’ll even start to see it with how he works in your own life. But why does it matter? What do we do with this?

- Understanding Jesus' *cunning* matters for at least two reasons: it matters for your heart, and it matters for your mission.
- Do you realize the condition of your heart? Do you realize your tendencies to be like the Pharisees, *controlling everything and everyone through your self-righteousness*, or to be like the Woman at the Well, *searching for satisfaction in everything but the true source of life*? Do you realize that God in His cunning brilliance has orchestrated a Divine Conspiracy to win back your heart and the heart of humanity from the powers of darkness?
- He pursues your heart. He pulls out the rug from underneath you, then offers a hand to catch you. He gets you to the place where at last you are vulnerable enough to ask him for a drink instead of pushing him away or running away. You can choose to open up and let him do his work, or you can keep trying to put up those walls and go after those empty wells. But be warned. He's cunning. And he's on to you. It is a beautiful thing to lose your fight with the Son of God and let him have your heart. You might walk with a limp, but you'll be blessed.
- It also matters for your mission, or should I say God's mission for you: do you remember what Jesus said to Peter and his friends when he invited them to be his disciples? "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."
  - It takes a certain kind of cunning, tactful, courageous love to engage people for redemption—to become a "fisher of men." We need to follow the footsteps of our Master in all his ways. We need to become cunning like our Lord if we're going to be a part of his mission to rescue the lost—"shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves."
  - Learn how to pursue peoples' hearts, not react to the labels they loudly project or have been given by others.
- Can you see past the labels, can you avoid the traps and the mines and the smoke screens, can you accept the judgements thrown at you in order to go after their hearts the way Jesus does? Learning to fish for people means you have to become cunningly-Christ-like. But first, you have to let him capture you.
- **Celebrating Communion**
  - And now, for the first time in months, we get to celebrate Holy Communion together.
  - Nowhere is the masterful brilliance of God displayed more powerfully than in this saving event we celebrate as we take Communion. Here, we remember the secret wisdom of God, hidden for ages, a plan not even the Enemy knew—that in giving up his life to death, he would conquer death and set the captives free from the Enemy's claim on us. As we eat and drink from his table today, we celebrate our cunning, beautiful, loving King and anticipate his return. Let us remember him and feast on his love. Let us see him *as he really is* with more and more clarity.