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“Jesus is Being Followed”

Part III of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Following”

Matthew 12 (9-14 is read)

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Our Lenten sermon series offers biblical perspectives on following. We hope the series will help us better understand how we can live into our church’s identity statement: “Finding Direction by Following Jesus.”

The hope, of course, is for the right kind of following. There *are* negative ways to follow. When you hear, “*We’re being followed*,” in a movie it is not good news. Think of stalkers. Think of trolls online. Restraining orders have been needed. Sometimes, there are tragic consequences.

Jesus was followed in this way, and I want to look at a chapter where he is followed from beginning to end. If I were in the mood to read all of chapter 12 and you were in a mood to listen to me do it, I would. But neither of us is, so trust me when I report that the chapter tells of a series of controversies between followers and Jesus. We are going to jump to the middle of the chapter. While Jesus’ followers in our passage listen for heresy, we should listen for God’s Word in the reading of Matthew 12:9-14:

⁹ He left that place and entered their synagogue; ¹⁰ a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, “**Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?**” so that they might accuse him. ¹¹ He said to them, “**Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out?**” ¹² **How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So**



it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”¹³ Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other.¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

You can tell that we are in the middle of something, can't you? These Pharisees point out to Jesus a man with a withered hand and basically say, “I dare you! I dare you to do something godly to prove you're *not* of God!”

How did we get here?

Of course, not all Pharisees are to be judged by those who are portrayed at their worst in the Gospels. I've said that before but I would add today that maybe we should not engage in biblical cancel culture with these particular Pharisees. I think I'm playing good odds in guessing that these religious leaders, being religious and being complicated human beings, *do* have hearts and *do* care about people's needs. But the irony of this passage is that when they present this man before Jesus, they do not present a person, they present a condition. They do not present a need, they present a test case. “What's your stand on this, Jesus? This man has a withered hand. It is not life-threatening. Are you going to heal him on the Sabbath?”

Again, how did we get here? Let's go back through the chapter and follow those who follow Jesus. Let's start with who they are.

Pharisees at their best are Jesus' kind of people. They take the Torah seriously. They care about such things as God's justice, mercy, and compassion. They have day jobs, but the passion that gives them their identity is the interpretation of scripture. More to the point, they want to understand and teach how to live as a Torah-people... how to live as people of the Word of God. They appreciate the rule of Law and the value of boundaries to keep people safe and to maintain Jewish identity. The Pharisees of our passage do not come off very well, but it is too easy to think of them as bad people because of our passage's portrayal. But then we start to believe that we can always trust that good, well-meaning, religious people cannot do harm. We even begin to think *we* would never do such a thing. Let's trust that these Pharisees mean well, that they think they are on the right side of the controversies of the passage, and that they are in the right when they plan what they plan at the end of the chapter.

So, let's follow them. Before the stories of chapter 12, something already got triggered in them. Jesus has been flagged. He did some remarkable things that have drawn a huge following. That can be good if Jesus is an influencer in service of their agenda- their cause- but it can be concerning if he is an influencer who draws people in a different direction.

And they *are* concerned.

- His healings are great, but his methods are unorthodox. He *touch*ed a leper!
- Like them, Jesus is an interpreter of the Torah. He has interpreted the Torah in *fresh* ways, but some ways which the Pharisees are concerned might be *heretical*.
- And they are concerned about the company Jesus keeps-
 - a tax collector
 - women in public
 - identified sinners.



They have a bias for the Torah and now they have a bias against Jesus. In Chapter 12, their motivation to follow Jesus grows through phases.

- Phase 1: Monitoring him
- Phase 2: Testing him
- Phase 3: Spinning about him
- Phase 4: Canceling him (or at least planning to)

Chapter 12 begins with the Pharisees monitoring. They see Jesus' disciples walk through a grainfield plucking grains to eat. *And it is the Sabbath.* It is the holy day to be set aside to worship and rest and the disciples are harvesting grain. They point out the disciples' behavior to Jesus.

You might think that plucking grain to pop in one's mouth isn't harvesting, but a strict interpretation of Torah-Law doesn't like sliding scales.

A group of Jewish teenagers taking a class at their synagogue came to our worship service last Sunday and I preached about the *woman with the flow of blood*. I checked in with the class after the service and their teacher, a woman, told of a friend who grew up in a highly orthodox family. After giving birth to one of her children—it may have been her friend—she had some normal post-partum bleeding. The father could not touch the mother while that was going on. So, they could not hand the baby to each other. The baby had to be placed on a bed, table or floor so the other could pick her up. That family had an aversion to sliding scales.

Still, this is not to say that exceptions can't be made, even for the orthodox. Even for the strictest of Pharisees, rules can be broken when the situation is life-threatening. Jesus makes that point by directing these Pharisees to a passage in the Torah where an exception was made to save King David's life.

Still, this is not a life-threatening situation. So, Jesus goes on to say that God cares more about compassion than about strict rules. And then Jesus says something that suggests that he has an authority given him by God.

There is more to explain about the first third of chapter 12, but let's just say that the Pharisees and Jesus do not find common ground.

- No consensus is reached.
- No agreeing to disagree.

The Pharisees are triggered even more than they were. I would say the amygdala part of their collective brain has been engaged. And since they are not the sort of folks to flee or freeze, they fight.

Or, if "fight" is too strong a word, they contest—they debate—they confront.

Now we can better understand how we got to the point of the passage I read. The Pharisees have moved from monitoring to testing in their choosing a test case.

You know how that is done.

- On a first date, a woman says she's cold when she isn't. She just wants to see if the guy will offer his coat.



- An employer assigns a difficult task just to see if the employee is up to the job.
- Four African Americans sit down at a lunch counter, not to eat, but to put Woolworth's to the test.

The man's condition is not fatal and is obviously something that can be looked at during normal operating hours. They want to know. If on the Sabbath Jesus is going to mistake hunger for starvation, maybe he will mistake medical need for a medical emergency. Let's see.

So, they put him before Jesus and ask, is it legal to heal this man on the Sabbath or not?

You can see a switch has been flipped, can't you? As I said earlier, probably under normal conditions, they would see the person more than the medical condition. But controversies have this way of turning people into types. I could give obvious examples and talk about people seen a certain way because of their race, or clothes, or political affiliation, or nationality. But those are social and political examples. What I want us to think about is how the wrong kind of tracking, monitoring, and testing can turn people we care about into types.

The problem with this kind of testing is that it is usually a practice of confirmation-bias. Excuse me for giving an example from my profession, but I've seen too many ministers fail in pastoring congregations because of what I call *biased tracking*. Maybe the minister enters the relationship fearing the congregation will fail the Gospel in ways professors or peers have led them to expect congregations to fail. Maybe the congregation fears that the minister would not be the leader it needs. An antenna is up. And because every minister is human and every congregation is made up of human beings, there is always evidence to be drawn in by the right bias magnet. It can lead to monitoring, texting, gathering intel and even cancelation—In extreme cases, careers end and congregations close.

(By the way, I never get tired of telling you how grateful I am that your bias has always been that Elizabeth, Ben and I will be OK as pastors).

Let's get back to more common relationships. In 1964, two movies were released with the same title. Only the subtitles distinguished them. One was *Anatomy of a Marriage; My Days with Françoise*. The other was *Anatomy of a Marriage; My Days with Jen-Marc*. The movies tell of the dissolution of a marriage, one from the man's point of view, the other from the woman's. I have never seen the movies and I don't know if they are any good, but I like the idea of making two movies from two different points of view. If they were well made, I bet both made a compelling case for why the other was more at fault. My guess is that the husband and wife of the movies

- develop a bias,
- then monitor each other to see if their bias is justified,
- then test each other,
- then gather intel for the purpose of using it against the other to cancel the other out.

It needs to be said that with some humility, honesty, empathy and respect, many relationships in a contested state can be turned in a more positive direction. That's what needs to be remembered when you are in the middle of it and before full confirmation-bias gets too much



ahead of steam. It is in the middle—

- when people can or cannot become types,
- when flagged concerns can or cannot become biases to be confirmed,
- when conflict can or cannot lead to new growth and new understanding,
- when wrongs done can or cannot become evidence for later litigation-

... it is in the middle where people need to summon the courage to intentionally

- calm down,
- listen,
- think,
- try to see things from the other's perspective,
- accept that disagreeing doesn't have to mean rejecting.

It could even be when wise council should be sought from someone who can offer an outside perspective.

- A little mediation, maybe.
- Guidance to an acceptance of each other even when you can't fully agree.

That is what we hope for in the middle of chapter 12. Because they can work this out. It can happen. After Jesus is resurrected from the dead, most of those who become a part of “The People of the Way”—that is what early Christians are called—the vast majority of those who become a part of the early Jesus movement will be Jews.

Many will be Pharisees. Historians tell us that there will be a whole community of Jewish Pharisees who will find that the Torah is fulfilled in remarkable ways in how they come to know Jesus—how they come to understand his teachings, his life, his death.

That day is coming. Why can't that day begin today with these particular Pharisees when Jesus points out that God cares more about compassion than he does sacrifices? They know that, the prophet Micah said it. Why can't these Pharisees find some common ground is agreeing that while keeping the Sabbath is important, maybe the man in front of them is not a case study but a man in need whose healing could make this Sabbath a very special day? It can happen.

But it doesn't happen. It doesn't happen because the “Fight” part of their collective brains has been activated and a bias is in place that will only allow exquisite rationalizing that filters out any evidence that doesn't support the bias. And now a good person has become a demon in the eyes of these good people. That is what the last third of the chapter, which is about spinning and canceling, lets us know.

If we need to declare a winner in this perceived contest Jesus has with these Pharisees, it has to be Jesus. He not only wins the debate by appealing to common sense, he also heals the man as a



way of fulfilling the Sabbath intent to glorify God.

But that someone has to win or lose shouldn't be the point, should it? The Pharisees perceive they are in a contest and their being seen as losing in the eyes of the crowd only increases their desire to stay in the fight to win it. Their bias now has an agenda and that is to bring Jesus down. They commit to gathering intel for the purpose of spinning to justify canceling.

In the very next story, Jesus does one of the most remarkable acts of God imaginable. A man possessed with demons is brought to him and Jesus casts the demons out. And how do these Pharisees spin this? **“Only a demon can cast out demons.”**

Isn't that the Go-To for trying to cancel another? Demonize her. Demonize him. My goodness, it is easy to come up with examples. I have them, and you have them, from the harm done in relationships to the harm done to entire populations- when people or populations are monitored and tested, and intel is gathered for the purpose of spinning and justifying their cancelation... even to the point of justifying nailing a healer like Jesus to a cross.

But I don't want to end the sermon with tragic stories. I want to go back to when I said that it is possible by grace to change narratives. A different kind of following can lead to more graceful endings. Sometimes it means asking for God's help to shape your bias.

For we all have biases. Even Jesus in our story has a bias. He clearly stated a bias in the passage. You heard it. He prefers compassion and mercy over the literal keeping of a law that would prevent a man with a need receiving help. His bias is toward seeing the person in front of him and acting in that person's best interests. He shows it here in healing the man. He later says we need to do this even if the person in front of us is someone we would call “an enemy.”

What would that bias look like in the way we follow those who have their hooks in us: our family, our friends, our enemies, those who are described by others as being a type (Jews, Palestinians, criminals, refugees, the poor, the rich) but which we know are human beings. What would happen if we stubbornly kept to

- a bias toward empathy and understanding so the person can be seen,
- a bias toward reconciliation over retribution,
- a bias toward common good over what's good just for me.

No promises and no guarantees, but I certainly think the odds would shift in a more graceful direction.

