

Being a Force for Good

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The first Thursday of every month I get the joy of leading songs for the preschool kids M&Ms (for those who don't know, we have a fantastic group of moms who organize a team of appreciated volunteers to serve the moms of FBC and the greater Taylor County area... if you want to know more, check out the Welcome Center because we have a little brochure spelling out what M&Ms is). One of the songs that I love to lead is the simple, but all-time great "Jesus Loves Me." What a simple and glorious message. Jesus loves me / this I know / for the Bible tells me so.

There's a part of me that wants to change the lyrics a tad and say, "Jesus loves you / this I know / for the Bible tells us so / little ones to him belong / they are weak, but he is strong / Yes, Jesus loves you / Yes, Jesus loves you / Yes, Jesus loves you / The Bible tells us so." One of the reasons I like this subtle change is because sometimes we don't believe God loves us. When our sins looms large in our minds eye, sometimes we just can't say, "Jesus loves me" with conviction. There's almost a right humility to wonder if Jesus really does love me. And at times like that we need someone else to say to us, "Jesus love *you*. Not because I say it, but because the Bible, God's word, says it." There's something powerful about hearing the good news from others, based on the authority of God's word, that Jesus loves you.

So, I want to begin this morning declaring: Jesus loves you, FBC. Jesus loves young people and old people. He loves men and women. He loves people of every color, of every nationality, and of every culture. He equally loves people with high IQs and low IQs; rich people and poor people. He loves people who have messed up; he loves people who make mistakes. He loves people who drink too much or who can't stop doing drugs. He loves people who make a mess of things with money or with sex. Jesus went to hell and back to make sure we know how much that he loves us.

But Jesus hates sin, too. And that kind of throws a wrench in the plan. Do you know why Jesus hates sin so much? Well, first of all, it brings shame on his Father God. There is nothing or no one greater, more magnificent, more worthy of praise, more splendid than the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing is uglier, nothing is more destructive, nothing is more hideous than sinfully turning your back on God and dishonoring him. That's the first reason why Jesus hates sin so much.

Do you know another reason why Jesus hates sin? Because it hurts us. Sin hurts people whom he loves. Do you know that when you sin you hurt other people? When you steal, you take something that belongs to others. When you lie, you are betraying someone's trust. When you look at pornography, you contribute to a culture that degrades women. When you gossip, you marginalize your classmate or neighbor and ostracize them from the community. Your sin, my sin, hurts other people, people Jesus loves.

Our passage this morning, the one we studied last week, too, gives us an important insight of Jesus' love for people. If you want to find yourself in alignment with Jesus, on his side, then let's read our passage and see what's so important (READ Lk 11:37ff)

We started last week's message highlighting Jesus' anger. He's so boiling mad politeness gets thrown out the window. We talked about how much he hated the hypocrisy of the lawyers and teachers of the law; no doubt, it's discouraging to see. But, I don't think Jesus' main problem with these people is their own hypocrisy. Let me show you what I do think is the main problem by putting up a number of Jesus' accusations and rebukes and see if you can see a theme.

- Vs. 42 says, "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God." Examine that verse; ask yourself this, "justice for whom?" Justice is about doing right to others. The Pharisees are neglecting justice, neglecting the right thing, due to others.
- Vs. 44 says, "Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it." This is actually a dig at the Pharisees. You see, they think they are pure; they think they are righteous. Jesus says they are the opposite. You're like a dead, rotting corpse. But then he adds that next phrase, "and people walk over [you] without knowing it." Do you know what he's saying? He's saying, "You're infecting others with your impurity." Go figure. They were so worried about others making them impure, but Jesus is saying you make others impure.
- Vs. 46 says, "Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers." Jesus isn't pleased with these lawyers either, is he? Why? *You load people with burdens hard to bear.* I bet you can see a theme emerging. But let me show you one more.
- Vs. 52 says, "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering." Something very similarly is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. In 23:13 Jesus is recorded as saying, "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in."

A theme I see in all of Jesus' rebukes is impact the religious teacher's actions and hypocrisy is having on real people. It's not just that these people's behavior is hypocritical; their behavior is harmful. Vs. 42 says they are neglecting and depriving justice to others. Vs. 44 says their impurity is infecting those around them. Vs. 46 says the lawyers load people down with burdens too hard to bear. And finally, in vs. 52, Jesus says they have taken away the key to knowledge. That's a damning charge.

I think Jesus is so angry, he's so upset by these religious teachers because of what they are doing to people whom he loves - remember, that's what we talked about at the beginning of the sermon. God loves people. He wants their good. He wants them to be saved and to know

the love of God. But the leaders are working against them; they are hurting them and depriving them justice. By their impure actions and motives they are negatively influencing the people to do likewise. And maybe worst of all, they are hindering people from entering the kingdom of God. I'm so struck by Jesus' words, "You have taken away the key of knowledge."

I wasn't smart enough or committed enough to enjoy more of the riddle-like, puzzle-like video games when I was younger. *The Legend of Zelda* comes to mind (PIC). Remember that game, all you late Gen Xers and early Millennials? I'm not talking about the new versions; I'm talking about the game from the 80s and 90s with pixelated characters and screens like this one. Keys were so important to this game; you had to get the right key to advance to the next stage. But I didn't get very far (I was hindered from entering the next stages) because I didn't get the keys. I suppose I needed to stick with the dumb-jock games.

The religious leaders held a very important key for themselves and for others to enter the kingdom of God. They were entrusted with the truth of God and his way. And they took it away from the people. They hid it from them. They shut the door to the kingdom of God; they didn't enter it and they prevented others from entering it, too.

So, here's the big idea that I think is so important to see: Jesus' anger at these teachers and lawyers reached such a high intensity because their behavior was so harmful to people whom he loved. It's one thing to sin against God that has limited or minimal social impact; sure, it's wrong and God isn't going to be happy about that. But when your actions significantly impact others in a detrimental way, that's going to make Jesus angry.

There are some important implications for you and me so let's talk about those. We all have the potential of being like these religious teachers; harmful to others. But the capacity or the opportunity to do harm isn't always the same. Some people can be more harmful, more damaging, than others. Take Archbishop Donald Wuerl of the Catholic Church (PIC). If Mr. Wuerl looks familiar to you, that's probably because he's been in the news in recent months. Mr. Wuerl was most recently the Archbishop in Washington DC. Before that he was the Archbishop in Pittsburgh. In October of this year the Pope accepted Mr. Wuerl's resignation because of the scandal surrounding his failure to protect children from sexual abuse from Priests during his time in Pittsburgh.

Mr. Wuerl has done incredible damage to many people including some of the priests who he managed. He did far more damage than most people could do. Do you know why? Several reasons. 1) He had authority that most people do not have. 2) He was entrusted with spiritual responsibility. You know, I bet almost every person in this room, certainly every adult, has been entrusted with both authority and spiritual responsibility to some degree; so let's break these down for our sake for the sake of those we serve.

I don't know how many times I've read 2 Cor. 10-13, but when I was teaching it to the men a phrase jumped out at me like never before. Two times (once in chapter 10 and once in

13), Paul tells us why God gives some people authority. In 10:8 Paul says of his authority, “which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you.” Think of those words: God *gives* authority to *build up* and not to *destroy*. Oh, the good we can do with authority. With authority, military sergeants and generals build into soldiers integrity, sacrificial service, competency, strength, and resilience so that a country of millions can be defended faithful army. With authority, bosses and managers can make employees be happy to come to work and can lift morale around the office even while helping everyone make money (both employees and employer). With authority, coaches and teachers can help kids believe they can do more than they realize and help them develop skills that will last a lifetime. With authority, moms and dads can point their children towards the path of life that will be filled with joy and service. The good one can do with authority is amazing.

But in the same way, when authority is abused, the damage can be catastrophic. By abusing authority, sergeants and generals can turn men and women into a ruthless army that kills the innocent. By abusing authority, managers and business owners can make their employees live in a constant state of fear causing great stress at home and at work. By abusing authority, coaches and teachers can beat a kid down making him or her feel like they are a complete failure and that they will never mount to anything in life. By abusing authority, moms and dads can all but determine a deadly path for their children to walk for the rest of their life.

If you are one given authority, remember why God has given you that authority: to build up and not destroy. Remember who those are under your authority: they are people loved by God. Your calling is to use your authority to help them and not hurt them. God will hold you accountable.

So, that’s authority, but let’s look at spiritual responsibility. Not everyone with authority necessarily has spiritual responsibility. If you’re a teacher at the public schools; if you’re a coach; if you’re a manager at your place of employment, you’re not entrusted with spiritual responsibility. But if you are a parent, you have spiritual responsibility. If you are a Sunday school teacher; if you are a youth group leader. If you are a pastor or a counselor or Bible study teacher, you have spiritual responsibility. And with that responsibility, again, comes great power to do good and great potential to do harm. You can give people they key of heaven or you can take that key away. I’m reminded of two verses; let me share them with you now.

The first passage I thought of comes from Jude. Now, to understand what we are about to read consider this: First, Jude is concerned with false teachers (spiritual teachers failing to give people the key of knowledge). As we read, pay attention to how unhelpful and destructive these false teachers are, which of course, is why the Bible spends so much time talking to us about the danger of false teachers (READ Jude 12-13).

So unhelpful! So destructive!. But in addition, look at the consequence: God has prepared the gloom of utter darkness for them.

The second passage I thought of was Jesus's words from Matthew 18:6-7 (READ). Wow, those words wake me up. If you are a parent, God has given you spiritual responsibility to lead your children to life and not death. If you are a Sunday school teacher, a Bible study leader, an elder, a youth group volunteer, the responsibility you have to give others words of life and not death is really, really serious, isn't it?

Certainly, the warning is needed; the warning helps us take seriously our call. But I like to dwell on the positive. With authority and spiritual responsibility, God is entrusting to me the incredibly important task of leading people to life, to encouraging them, to lifting them up. Think of it, FBC: you have the opportunity to change a person's life for the better. What an awesome way to make a difference and to stand strong during changing times.

Key vs. Luke 11:52

Questions for the week

- Did you realize Jesus' love for people is so great? What did you hear today that reminds you of God's love for you?
- If you are a person with authority, how do you want to use that authority to help others? Be specific; tell someone.
- If you've been entrusted with spiritual responsibility, what do you need to exercise that responsibility well? Are you willing to ask for help?