

“Neither Will I Tell You”: Learning to Honestly and Openly Seek the Lord

Introduction

The Text

¹ One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up ² and said to him, “Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.” ³ He answered them, “I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, ⁴ was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?” ⁵ And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ ⁶ But if we say, ‘From man,’ all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.” ⁷ So they answered that they did not know where it came from. ⁸ And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” (Luke 20:1–8)

Lessons Learned

- A. As we continue on in this the last week in Jesus’ earthly life, Jesus is going to come into conflict more and more with the religious establishment there in Jerusalem.
 - 1. From the conflict that ensues in our text for this morning, there are quite a few lessons to be learned. And all I really want to do is bring them out for us to consider one by one. I have six in total. I’m actually not going to give them to you up front. I’ll just let them unfold as we go along.
 - a. My hope is that there will be at least one or two where the Holy Spirit just nudges your heart and says: “This is for you!” So listen up and be praying and ask God to reveal Himself to you through the course of our time together.

Lesson #1: Fight to Keep the Gospel Central

- A. We must keep in mind what has immediately preceded our text. If you recall from last week, we looked at [Luke 19:45-48](#) in particular, and there we considered what has traditionally been called the “cleansing of the temple.”
 - 1. Jesus walks in and upon seeing all the commotion—the buying and the selling, and the noise of it all, distracting from the true objectives of worship and prayer and relationship with God—He flips. Quite literally. He flips tables and chairs and drives out those engaged in the business. He’s looking to restore the temple to something of its original intent.
- B. And we spent quite a bit of time last week considering these things, but our text for this morning now brings in another detail that is worth our reflection. You see in [Luke 20:1](#), after cleansing the

temple, we're told more specifically what He goes on to do there, what He was after in the first place: "One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel" (v. 1a).

1. There it is! Preaching the gospel. Why the rage and the fury? Why the turning over of tables and chairs? Why the big scene? It was all a fight to get the gospel back at the center of things.
 - a. Jesus has good news to proclaim and that message was getting lost amongst the clamor and noise of empty religion and daily business. So He clears the stage, as it were, and then walks out upon it, to preach.
- C. Now, there is something to this. There is a lesson in this for us. Just like Jesus is fighting to keep the gospel central here in the temple, so we too must fight to keep the gospel central in our own hearts and lives.
 1. If we are going to get crazy, if we're going to get wild, if we're going to come a bit unhinged, let it be over this.
- D. I thought of Paul and his similar passion.
 1. So he says in 1 Cor 2:2: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."
 2. And later in 1 Cor 15:3 he identifies the gospel in particular as that matter which is "of first importance." This is the issue to fight for.
 3. And later with the church in Galatian he does just that: "⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:6–9). We're not playing around here. Souls are on the line.
 4. And later: "I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!" (Gal 5:12).
 - a. Does that sound a little crazy—perhaps like Jesus in the temple to you? Getting heated. Getting worked up. It's all about the gospel. Fighting to keep it central.
- E. So where is the gospel right now in your life? Is it at the center or somewhere in the margins? Are you rooted in it or drifting from it?
- F. I was talking with a brother from Mercy Hill this past week on the phone about the love of God for us in Jesus and what happens when we really get it. Everything changes.
 1. There's a peace that can't be taken. Sin loses its attraction. Hope crops up where despair once was. You can move on from past hardships and look to the future with excitement.
 - a. Because in Jesus you know God loves you, and He's got good for you, and nothing's going to change that.

- i. Sadly, the only thing that changes is where that reality is settled in relation to your heart. Is it central or out in the margins somewhere?

G. So if it's in the margins, how do you get it back at the center? What do you do?

1. Well, in some sense we've got to do what Jesus does here. What He does in the temple, we've got to do in our own hearts. We've got to turn over tables, flip over chairs, drive out the stuff that's distracting us from Jesus . . . and preach the gospel to ourselves every day!

H. Let me give you one example of what this might look like:

1. Let's say you just had a really bad day at work. It was just demanding, exhausting, frustrating. Nothing went as you thought it would, your boss is on your back, everyone's stress levels are high because of COVID and concerns about the future, you're working at home, you've zoom fatigue, you're over the day.
2. And yet it's time to walk out of your office, down the hall, into the family room, and hang with your wife and kids.
3. Now, you know, you've seen this play out before. If you come out right now, it's not going to go well. You're going to transfer some of the junk you've been carrying onto them. You're going to let your stress and frustration spill out onto the family—with your tone and your rolling of eyes and your apparent mental absence and fatigue.
4. So what do you do? You fight to keep the gospel central. You get aggressive. You just start turning over the tables and chairs of your heart until the good news of Jesus comes back into view. You preach the gospel to yourself.
5. "Soul, I know the day was tough. I know things didn't go as planned. But, listen up, God loves you. Your boss may find you lacking, but in Christ God has counted you worthy and sufficient, He's made you spotless and blameless, He accepts you, even in your mess. Jesus has covered all your shame, you don't need to dwell on it. Jesus has a purpose for all the pain. You don't need to let it define you. He has poured out His blood for your sin, risen over your strongest enemies, and He's with you right here, right now. He's writing a good end to this story. Will you trust Him for it. Let Him have the burdens of your day and walk into that family room like the free man in Christ that you are!"
6. So you preach and you pray and you preach and you pray. It may only be a few minutes, but you're touching eternity.
7. And you walk out of your office, down the hall, into the family room, and you hug your wife and your kids, and you're there. God has you. You can love on them. At the center of your heart is no longer the backed up sewage from your workday, but the gospel—the good news of Jesus!

Lesson #2: Beware of Your Lofty Stature

- A. Now we come to the latter part of [v. 1](#) and make note of who it is that comes into conflict with Jesus here: ["One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up . . ."](#)

1. Chief priests, scribes, elders. These were the three groups that comprised the Sanhedrin in Jesus' day. The Sanhedrin was the highest court of the Jews and it would ultimately be responsible for the chain of events leading to the crucifixion of Jesus.
 - a. Indeed, Jesus Himself identifies these same three back in [Luke 9:22](#), when foretelling of His rejection and death in Jerusalem: [“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”](#)
- B. But here's the point, and the lesson for us: It is always the big names, the premier people, those with lofty stature that come most strongly against Jesus.
1. We saw this most poignantly put just verses prior in [Luke 19:47](#): [“The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him . . .”](#) [“\[P\]rincipal men of the people”](#)—it's a new phrase in Luke: Gk. *prōtoi tou laou* = lit. “first of the people.”
 - a. Those who occupy first place among men are often the last to receive God.
- C. What is here illustrated, is elsewhere explicitly stated.
1. In fact, in Matthew's account of this same conflict, Jesus goes on to say this to these prominent men: [“³¹ Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. ³² For 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 when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him”](#) (Matt 21:31–32). [“You're stuck in your ways. You refuse to come, though it's quite obvious by now who I am.”](#)
- D. There's a couple of reasons for this.
1. First, when you enjoy a prominent position among men, you start to think you're always right. There's an arrogance. And the cutting edge in the message of the gospel is the call to repent—that you're not all good, that you need help from outside, grace and mercy from God, a right-standing that you can't attain by your own brains and brawn.
 2. But the second thing is, when you enjoy a prominent position among men, you have the most to lose, in coming to Christ. Because it puts you on the same level as everyone else. The cross is the great equalizer. All men—rich and poor, strong and weak, religious and secular, intelligent and ignorant, moral and sinful—are all but needy beggars before Him.
 - a. For the tax collectors and prostitutes, there's no ego stopping them from getting low, they're already low; there's nothing to lose, they're already in the dirt. So they're coming!
 - b. But the first of the people, at best they're shuffling their feet. At worst, they're looking for ways to destroy Jesus. He's not a Savior. He's a threat.

E. So the warning for us: This is Silicon Valley—in many ways the pinnacle of modern culture. There’s a lot of smart, successful, lofty people here.

1. Beware of settling down in the high seat, of relishing in your own intelligence and stature. You will be so big in your own eyes that you shall not be able to see Jesus when He comes.

Lesson #3: The Proud Heart Is Pillaged of Peace

A. Now there is an irony here that I should like to point out. For we would think that these prominent people would also be the most peaceful, right? They have it all together. They’ve got the money, the power, the intelligence to make it happen. Wouldn’t peace come along with that?

1. You would think so, but it’s quite the opposite.

B. So in our text we see that, as they go back and forth with Jesus and are deliberating amongst themselves how they should respond to His pushback, they always have to cast a glance to the people, put a thumb to the wind of public opinion, look back over their shoulder . . . they are always living in fear.

1. “If we answer this way, Jesus will have us on his hook, but if we answer that way, the people will want to stone us. What should we do?” Fear.

- a. As we read later in [Luke 20:19](#): “The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour . . . but they feared the people.”

- i. Oh they seem so confident and at ease, but inside they are pillaged of all peace—always worried about losing what they have because they have this abiding sense it’s not rightly theirs in the first place.

C. We’ve talked about this before with guys like Herod the Great. What was his deal? Why slaughter all those babies in Bethlehem?

1. Jealousy, insecurity, anxiety. Because the Magi came talking about some king of the Jews born in Bethlehem, and Herod was scared for his throne.

- a. That’s, ironically what happens when we try to exalt ourselves. We know deep down it’s not our place, so we’re always worried we’re going to lose it. We’re always having to watch our backs, keep our cupbearers close, there may be hemlock in the chalice. We can’t keep it up.

D. The moment you attach your identity, your sense of self-worth and value, your joy and satisfaction, to something other than God and His Son who died, rose, and now lives for you, you are hopelessly imperiling yourself. You are unnecessarily laying yourself open to all manner of threats.

1. And, hence, you will be shot through with anxieties.

E. The man who builds his life on a foundation of sand really only has two options:

1. Either he can bury his head down in that sand and try to remain naïve to the precarious position he's truly in.
2. Or he can worry and work himself to death trying to keep it all from going the way of the tide and slipping into the sea. You are constantly having to keep it up because it's not sure, it's not sturdy, it's not strong. And you know it.

Lesson #4: God Often Travels Down Unexpected Avenues

- A. I love going to the beach. I love taking my family to the beach. We just went last week for Bella's birthday. It was awesome. I love it.
1. But I don't love Bay Area traffic. And sometimes, you know, on a warm summer day, traffic going up the 17 over to Santa Cruz can be ridiculous.
 - a. So one day I decided alright I'm going to find an alternate route. I'm going to hit up the roads less traveled and check out beaches less populated. I'm going to find a route so that when everyone in city is going to beach we can still get there with little hassle. So instead of going up the 17 I'm driving through the Santa Cruz mountains, getting lost, and having a great time, not bumper to bumper, coming down with sweet ocean views, and then dropping in on the beach. Takes a little longer than usual, but not if there's traffic. I love taken the backroads.
- B. And listen, what we realize from Scripture is that God is often like that. We tend to think there's only one way to get from point A to point B.
1. But God often comes down from the mountain roads we've long forgotten about or maybe never even knew were there. He surprises us. He travels down unexpected avenues.
- C. John the Baptist and Jesus are perfect examples of this. They come from outside the religious establishment, outside the official Jewish power structures in their day. I mean the Jews thought they knew how the Messiah was going to come and what He was going to do and this wasn't it.
1. It wasn't the main thoroughfare, it wasn't the most travelled, it wasn't what anyone expected, and so it threw everyone off. That's the whole issue with authority here: ["Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority" \(v. 2\)](#).
 - a. "We don't get it. We didn't expect it. We don't like it. You are circumventing us and coming in here messing up the temple and things. The temple is within our jurisdiction. Who are You?"
- D. So again there's a lesson here and a warning: Beware of boxing God in. He will always come knocking on the door from outside our assumptions. He blows our paradigms. He bursts our bubbles.
1. We like to think we have God figured out—and we can put chapter and verse on it, just like these religious leaders no doubt could.

- a. But just when we think we have Him figured out, it is precisely then that God will come and mix us up and disorient us, so that rather than relying on our ideas and conceptions of God, we are left instead relying on nothing but God Himself, crying out, like a helpless child for a father.
 - i. We will not be able to fully comprehend Him. We can know Him, but we can't fully comprehend Him.
- E. I love [Psa 145:3](#) on this point: ["Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable."](#)
 - 1. Notice, here David assumes at one and the same time both (1) that we can know something of God's greatness (enough to praise Him for it); and (2) that yet still we can't even truly come close to knowing it (it's unsearchable)!
 - a. We can know, but we can't fully comprehend, and so we ought be wary of our boxes, and expect surprises. God moves in mysterious ways.
- F. So is your heart and mind open? Are you ready and willing to let God shake you up, make a mess of your plans, change things.
 - 1. I read line from John Stott that caused me to shudder a bit this past week, because it sounds a bit scary: ["If Christ is our Lord, we must open our minds to the possibility of change"](#) ([Basic Christianity, 143](#)).
 - a. We might not have it all figured out. Our ideas and strategies might be off a bit. It's all got to be on the table or we won't be able to truly hear from Him. Our ears will be plugged because our heart and mind are closed.
 - i. If we are not ready to take up our cross and follow Him, we should not be surprised when we begin to lose sight of Him.
- G. And this leads to the fifth lesson . . .

Lesson #5: Honest Questions Receive Honest Answers (and Dishonest Questions Don't)

- A. Our text may seem strange to us at first read because these guys come asking a question and Jesus, instead of answering, responds first with a question of His own and then ultimately refuses to address their original concern: ["Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things"](#) (v. 8).
- B. Now that doesn't sound very Christ-like. I mean all throughout the gospels, people ask Him questions and ask Him for help and Jesus is always ready to oblige, isn't He? What accounts for the difference here?

1. Well, it's the state of the heart. Jesus knows, as I've been saying that these men aren't honestly seeking truth.
 - a. They like their little box. They're prominent in their little box. And Jesus doesn't fit into it. So they're looking for a way to dispose of Him, to trip Him up in His words and make a swift end of Him. You see, their hearts and minds are closed, made up.
 - i. Theirs is not the question of a seeker, but of a schemer.
- C. And Jesus won't fall for it. As one commentator puts it: *"To those unwilling to commit themselves, he commits not himself. Were their faith as small as a mustard seed, he would respond, 'Truly I tell you'; but without faith, he responds, 'Neither will I tell you'"* (PNTC).
1. They ask: "Where do you get your authority Jesus to come in here acting the way that you do?"
 2. And Jesus knows: "If I were to just claim the authority for myself, it would be my word versus yours, and you'd call me a blasphemer, so let's go another way, and there are many possible routes we could take (cf. [John 5:30–47](#)). We could talk about Moses, because everything he ever wrote was ultimately about me, pointing to me, validating my ministry . . . but you won't listen to Him. We could talk about my Father and the works you see Him do through me, the miracles and signs . . . but you say I do these by the devil.
 - a. So, instead, let's talk about John. You want to know where I get my authority, I want to know where do you think he got his. Because he spoke of Me, directed people to Me, prepared the way for Me. What do you make of John?"
- D. And they're stuck.
1. Because if they say John got his authority from God, then Jesus can say: "Well, then why don't you receive what He said of Me?"
 2. But if they say John's just a confused crazy-man from the sticks, then the people will stone them because they saw John as a prophet of God.
 - a. You see, they're not after truth. They're after Jesus' neck. But Jesus is too smart for that. The trap they lay for Him ultimately ensnares themselves. They go away with nothing.
- E. So the question again for us, similar to the last point, is this: Are we honestly seeking?
1. Listen, the disciples, we know, throughout the gospels are horribly mistaken about a great many things. Their doctrine and practice is all over the place. And yet Jesus is always ready to help and correct and reorient them. Why?!
 - a. Because their hearts were open to it. That's what matters. This is more important than having the most rigorously precise doctrine, or the most demanding regimen of spiritual disciplines, or whatever.

- i. Is your heart open to whatever Jesus would say? Are you genuinely seeking truth or are you always looking for things that fit your preconceived biases? Is this honest inquiry or just a power play?

(1) Jesus stops talking when we stop truly listening. But, on the contrary, to quote from Ps 145 again: “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.”

Lesson #6: Don't Yell Louder . . . Pray Harder and Love Deeper!

A. The last thing I'd say is this. We can learn something from Jesus' approach with these leaders here too, right?

1. I think we've all got some of those people in our lives who love a good debate about the things of Christianity, but aren't truly interested in following Jesus. They like to pick fights about it all, but aren't honestly seeking.
 - a. We hit that wall with, right, where we just know words and answers and finely tuned arguments aren't going to make the difference. It's not going to change their mind. So what do you do?
 - i. Do you yell louder? “I'm going to ram this truth into your dense brain.” We see a lot of that going on these days out in the world of social media. Is that the approach? No.
 - ii. When we come to the limit of what words can do we don't yell louder . . . we pray harder and love deeper.

B. That's what Jesus does. He doesn't keep engaging them in this nonsense. Instead He goes to the cross for them, right? He lets them string Him up. And as He's hanging there on the cross, what is He doing?

1. He's praying harder: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).
2. And He's loving deeper, He's laying His life down in love for them.

a. “You won't listen to my words, so let me pray and let me love.”

C. And then what happens?

1. Well, surely some of these guys double-down on their opinions and remain unchanged.
2. But Luke speaks of those around the cross that day and says: “[A]ll the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts” (Luke 23:48). It's a sign of deep grief and even, perhaps, repentance.
 - a. On this verse, one commentator writes: “Many have seen in this reaction a preparation for the successful preaching on the day of Pentecost when three thousand believed in this city (Acts 2:41). Why so many? Part of the answer surely is that many went home from the crucifixion disturbed and thoughtful” (TNTC).

- i. Do you see it? Jesus didn't yell louder at these guys. He prayed harder and loved deeper, and, in so doing, the hearts of some of these men were softened to, at last, receive!

D. In all of our evangelism and witnessing for Jesus, may we go and do likewise!