

Title: Missing the point  
Text: Matthew 9.9-13  
Theme: How traditions tend to obscure the truth  
Series: Matthew #52  
Prop Stmtnt: Religion is effective at missing the point of true religion

Read Text:

Donald Sterling's words and life revealed a heart of pollution. But, racism is not the root of his problem. Racism, like other sins is the manifestation of a root that believes that I am, fundamentally, intrinsically, better than you. This root problem is in every one of us and looks for ways to manifest itself. This saga is a mess from so many angles, I will address one. Apparently Sterling had made a sizable contribution to the LA chapter of the NAACP and was scheduled to be honored with a lifetime achievement award. People rightfully began to scream about how Pharisaical this was. What a Pharisee! He gives money to a cause in order to divert attention away from his own sin.

When we say Pharisee, we mean hypocrite. When we say Pharisee, we mean someone who uses religion, or morality as a pretense to cover a wicked heart. But, that is not how the people in Jesus' day, understood a Pharisee.

While Israel was ultimately under the control of Rome, Rome attempted to rule Israel through her own government. There was the political arm - the King and the religious arm - the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was made up of the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees tended to be the more liberal of the two, only embracing the Torah and being, in the minds of some of the Jews, way too cozy with the ways of the world. They also tended to be wealthy and from some of the elite families.

The Pharisees however were different. They originated as a movement amongst what we would call the common people who wanted Israel to return to the Law. They did not start out to be hypocrites. Their goal was to help the Jews live under the Old Testament law. This was not a bad thing. However, over time, they created a system that eventually lost sight of the goal. That is a battle that Christianity has fought for 2,000 years.

As we study the life and ministry of Christ, it seems as if he is constantly sending the Pharisees and the Scribes into apoplectic fits of rage. But, here is the difference. Jesus is not doing things just to set them off so that he and the disciples can laugh about it. Jesus is telling them things that they and others really need to hear because their beliefs about what it means to be right before God are fundamentally wrong. The initial hints of tension between Christ and the Pharisees begin to manifest themselves in this chapter. In chapter 12 they take a very ominous turn that seems to solidify their opposition to Christ. As I see it, there are five interconnected sources of frustration and conflict for the Pharisees:

- 1) Jesus' miracles

Initially his miracles were more of a source of curiosity, then of concern, then (raising of Lazarus from the dead) they became a crisis that had to be dealt with because these miracles gave credibility to Christ, in the eyes of the people and Christ was saying these that disagreed with the Pharisees. Therefore, the miracles of Christ were a major public relations problem for them. After all, Christ healed many people and that was impossible to deny. What do you do with that? Jesus obviously had an authority that the Pharisees could not duplicate. And Jesus used the occasion of his miracles to say things that the Pharisees did not agree with. Such as:

2) Jesus' claim to be God.

The Scribes and the Pharisees had no category in their theology for the Godhead. They would only read the Scriptures through the lens of their tradition, and in so doing they consistently missed the entire point of the Scriptures. So, when Christ claimed to be God, instead of going into humble mode and re-examining the Scriptures, they went into hate mode. And of course, going into hate mode only revealed the poison that was in their hearts. We saw an example of that in the text from last week.

3) Jesus' teaching exposed the hypocrisy of the man-made rules and the men who made them.

Jesus refused to play by man-made rules. The Pharisees created rules in addition to Scripture and they tried to use the Scripture to support their rules. Jesus taught the Scriptures in a manner that they were supposed to be taught. But, his teachings while authoritative, consistent, and irrefutable were nonetheless not accepted because Christ exposed the sins and the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. This is why the Pharisees, with the exception of Nicodemus did not engage in honest dialogue with Christ. They asked accusatory questions. They asked questions that were designed to be full of trickery and deception in order to trap Christ. They were not interested in having an honest-to-God conversation. In the end they resorted to slander and distortion because they did not have the truth.

4) Jesus associated with the wrong kind of people.

You see, he wasn't "one of the boys". He did not graduate from the right school, or come from the right city, nor did he come from the right family. Jesus did not keep to the code.

5) Jesus healed on the Sabbath.

This was like the other four all rolled up into one. First of all, Jesus healed, which irritated the Pharisees. Secondly, he did it on the Sabbath claiming that he was Lord of the Sabbath (meaning that he was God. Thirdly, he demonstrated love for people on the Sabbath, while they refused to help people on the Sabbath, although they could take care of their animals and personal property if they needed to. Fourthly, Jesus was not playing by their rules. He was not in their club. Jesus did not deliberately pick a fight with these

guys, but neither did he avoid confrontation. He was going to do what he needed to do and let the chips fall where they may. This text is a great example of that.

This entire section is about following Christ. Chapter 8 begins with 3 miracles followed by a call to follow Christ. Then there are three more miracles with a call to follow Christ. Then there are three more miracles with a call to follow Christ. This story is the account of Matthew's call to follow Christ, but that is not really the main point. Matthew's call to Christ is the occasion for Jesus to teach something that is just astounding. It is so counter-cultural and it is so refreshing. So, in other words, this text is not only a call to follow Christ, but it is telling what you can expect as a follower of Christ. Then we discover that what you would expect is not what you would expect.

### 1. **Some followers of Christ do not fit the mold.** (9)

Matthew was a tax collector. This is not your neighborly IRS agent with an accounting degree who is investigating fraud. This is different. Tax collectors were in business with the Roman Empire. They were the minions of the Emperor who exacted monies from the conquered people of Israel in order to support the Roman government and her armies. Tax collectors were Jews who were like tax farmers. In other words, they were awarded a particular allotment of territory based on their ability to deliver the highest amount of revenue from it. You got your tax position based on your bidding. Then you had to get the money from the citizens in order to deliver what you bid. Anything else that you were able to get above that, you kept for yourself. Tax collectors were not honorable people. However, they were probably fluent in at least a couple of languages, and knew how to keep good records. You can see why a person like this would be very helpful to Christ. At the same time, keep in mind that Matthew was in the Capernaum area, though he was apparently not in Capernaum itself. He may have been on the border between the territories of Herod Antipas and Philip and had a booth on the side of the road. I am guessing (personal conjecture) that some of the disciples, including Peter and Andrew who lived in that area knew Matthew. Matthew (previously known as Levi, son of Alphaeus) probably collected tolls and customs on the goods that were being transported from one territory to another. He would most likely have collected taxes on the trade goods that had been transported across the lake, including fish that were caught by the commercial fisherman (Peter, Andrew, James and John).

So, when Jesus called Matthew to follow him and join the disciples, it may not have been received real well by the boys. I am guessing that when Jesus stopped at the booth and called Matthew to follow him, that some of the disciples were stunned. Besides, Peter and Andrew had to go home. They had family there. Peter had a mother-in-law. Matthew was one of "those guys" to the Jews. And now Peter, Andrew, James and John were hanging out with Matthew. Jesus called him anyway. He said, "Follow me." Meaning, you come now, and you don't turn back. And Matthew got up and followed him.

By the way, Matthew did not remain as a tax collector. Neither did Zaccheus. There are certain occupations that you cannot continue if you follow Jesus. The brothers could go

back to fishing, but Matthew left it all. He could not go back to tax collecting. The brothers still had their boats, Matthew “left everything” (Luke 5.28).

Do you know someone who has come to follow Christ who (from your perspective) does not “fit the mold”?

Is there someone that you do not even bother to witness to or even pray for because they do not “fit the mold”?

Is your attitude consistent with the gospel?

2. **Following Christ demands association with people who “do not fit the mold.”**  
(10)

Matthew obviously invites Jesus and the boys to his home for dinner. This is not a “hey, let’s pick up some pizza on the way home” sort of deal. Oh no! They are reclining. That is, they are lying on couches facing a central table on which the food is served. Jesus and the boys are doing this. Couches take up a lot more room than chairs. My point is that Matthew had a big home and he served a big dinner. This was a big event. Matthew was now publicly associated with Jesus and what is even more amazing is that Jesus is associated with Matthew! But it does not end there. Matthew tells us that there were a bunch of other tax collectors and sinners who joined them. Jesus is willing to be associated with them too!

Do you want to know something that is even more amazing than that? Jesus is associated with you! Listen, we are not very good for the reputation of Jesus, are we?

I.e. following Christ will most likely NOT be good for your reputation. Listen, if I did what Jesus did, I would have been kicked out of Bible college! (Matthew 11.18-19)

3. **Following Christ is only for sinners.** (11-12)

News about this meal became public. The Pharisees are stunned and they challenge the disciples about Jesus’ choice of crowds accusing him of eating with tax collectors and sinners (a term used for pimps, prostitutes, thieves and gamblers). Jesus hears of it and responds with an extremely insightful phrase. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”

Jesus really bears down on them and drives this point home. Here is what he is not saying: He is not saying that there are two categories of people, the righteous people (those who are well) and the sinners (those who are sick) and that he has come only for the sinners because the righteous people already have it all together and do not need him. Oh no!

Jesus is taking their categories and turning them inside out and exposing them for what they are. The Pharisees believe that there are two categories of people: the righteous

people and the sinners and that God is going to validate the righteous and judge the sinners. So, when Jesus hangs out with sinners and calls sinners to follow him, well, according to the Pharisees it is obvious that God is not on the side of Jesus! That is ludicrous. The problem is that the Pharisees have created their own categories and have attached their own labels to them.

Jesus knows that there is one fundamental and foundational category for the entire human race: sinners. Every person is in the sinner club. Every person in the sinner club is spiritually dead, hopeless and in desperate need of being rescued because no sinner can rescue himself. However, unless you admit that you are a card-carrying member of the sinner club, you will never confess your need of a Savior. If you refuse to admit your need of a Savior, then you cannot be rescued from your sin.

But, like the Pharisees, we like to pretend that there are other clubs besides the hopeless sinner club. For example, many people imagine that they are in the “not so bad” club. The “not so bad club” does not claim to be perfect, but they are “not so bad” as others. They say things like, “Yea, I cheat a little, get drunk too much, but, BUT, I don’t molest children.” Or, “Yea, I’ve got a weakness for porn, or for gambling, but at least I’m not teaching a S.S. class and doing it.” As if God is going to say, “That is so great that you do those things and you don’t teach a S.S. class! That is awesome. Thank-you, thank-you for being so honest and upright and decent.” Every person in the “not-so-bad club” has a problem or two, but they just aren’t as bad as others.

Then there is the do-good-stuff club. The do-good-stuff club is a division of the better than most club. The other division of the better than most club is the religious self-righteous club. The people in this club believe that they can do good stuff, particularly religious things in order to earn the approval of God and make up for their problems. If you do enough good stuff, then you are entitled to some bad stuff. It’s kind of a deal that you have with God. He is so grateful for the stuff you do for him, that he will wink at the bad things.

That was apparently the thinking of Donald Silverton, the embattled owner of the L.A. Clippers. He was well known for his immoral lifestyle and publicly flaunted his faithlessness in marriage. His racism was no real secret, but his wife gave a lot of money to charity and served on fund-raising committees, and Silverton even gave \$45,000 to the NAACP. Isn’t that how it works? If you give a lot of money to charitable things, or volunteer for religious causes, then you are better than most. Not perfect, mind you, but better than most. The Pharisees were in this club. Inside this club there were ladders and levels, know what I mean? You climbed the ladder of doing good, or of religious sacrifice in order to achieve higher and higher levels of better than most. Your club was not only better than most, but within the club there were ways for you to be better than most in the better than most club. What you aim for is to be the best better than most, which means that you are in the least need of grace, right?

Now, let’s look at these three clubs: 1) Sinners 2) Not so bad and 3) Better than most. What kind of a Jesus, what kind of a Savior do the sinners club need? They need a Savior

who will save them completely because they are a complete mess. What kind of a Savior do the people in the “not-so-bad” club need? They need a partial Savior. They do not need to be completely saved because they have already done part of it themselves. They could use some help from Jesus but, they just aren’t quite as desperate as others for it. What kind of a Jesus does the better than most people need? They only need a little Jesus.

So, if we were to borrow the language of Jesus we would say that the people in the “not so bad club” need a physician who will give them some strong antibiotics because they need some help getting over their illness, while the people in the better than most club only need a Vitamin B-12 shot. The people in the sinner’s club? They are on the organ donor’s list. They need a complete heart transplant, without which they have no hope.

Here is reality. Every person needs a heart transplant from the Great Physician. But, only those who realize and admit their need will put themselves on the donor list. This was and to this day remains as the biggest stumbling block to people really understanding the gospel. People who believe in Jesus to save them a little bit are not saved at all. People who only think they need a little bit of Jesus have none of him.

#### 4. **Following Christ IS the point!** (13)

So, then Jesus says to the Pharisees, “Go and learn what this means...” Notice that they called him “Teacher” in v.11. So, the Teacher is giving them some homework, isn’t he? Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” This phrase, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” comes from the OT book of Hosea. Hosea was a prophet to the northern kingdom and warned them of God’s judgment that was coming because of their unrepentant sin. The people presumed they were fine because they were faithfully observing their religious rituals. But God said then that rituals without heart are useless! In fact they are worse than useless because the person who is doing the ritual is usually deluded into thinking that what he is doing is worth something. Jesus does not want your sacrifices, your volunteering, your money, or your church attendance, in place of your heart. But, only sinners who realize how helpless they are will cry out to him for a new heart.

Conclusion:

1. Appeal to trust in Christ
2. It is very easy to become a Pharisee

The Pharisees did not start out to become self-centered, legalistic, hateful, power-hungry control freaks who would be known for leading the charge in crucifying the Son of God. The Pharisees actually originated as a group of men who were trying to help make the Scriptures practical for every day life. They discussed things such as: what was work? What does it mean not to work on the Sabbath? Their initial desire resulted in creating rules that overshadowed God’s Word. Christians are notorious for doing the same thing.

For example, the Bible is very clear that parents are responsible for the training of their children. Some parents interpreted that to mean this: If you are a really good parent, you will send your kid to a Christian school. Others said: Oh no, if you are a really good parent then you will homeschool your child. Others said: Oh no, if you are really good parent, you will train your child to stand on his own in a public school. The same thing goes on with food. If you are a good parent, then you will only feed your children organic stuff. Oh no, if you are a really good parent, then you will be vegan. Oh no, if you are really good parent, then you will vaccinate your children, or you will not vaccinate your children, or you will breastfeed, or you will have your kids potty-trained by 6 months, or you will never let them sleep on their stomach until 18. Hold the phone! Listen, you should be able to have humble, reasonable discussions about these matters, but when you make your opinion a new law, as if you have discovered the missing secret for raising perfect kids, then you have just joined the Pharisees. If you will only associate with families who eat organic food, then you cannot hang out with Jesus! When you hear people doing this sort of thing, warn them. These laws become clubs and these clubs divide the body of Christ and they all distract from and distort the gospel.

3. What kind of a people (church) does this kind of a Jesus create?

He creates a messy church, full of messy people who are looking more and more like Jesus.

The Kingdom that Jesus brings is not like any other kingdom this world has ever known, because he is a King who exposes the root issue of our problems by exposing our hearts. He does that so we can agree with him about our sin, so that we will repent of that sin and trust in Christ alone as our Savior.