

Title: The moral high ground is quicksand
Text: Matthew 22.15-22
Theme: A damning argument
Series: Matthew #104
Prop Stmt. We endanger our souls when we presume to occupy the moral high ground.

Historians agree that the Battle of Gettysburg turned the tide of the Civil War. And while there were a number of factors that gave victory to the Union forces, one of the most significant was the fact that they occupied the high ground on the field of battle. To occupy the high ground gives you a decided advantage. What if, in the Battle of Gettysburg, the Union troops thought that they were on the high ground, but failed to realize that to their flank was a ridge of rocks and trees that was actually higher than they were! Their relief would be short-lived when Confederate cannons began pounding their positions. We all live with an innate tendency to assume that we occupy the moral high ground in comparison to others. But, the consequences of that are serious. On Sunday mornings, we are studying through Matthew's account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. He is truly amazing. He is actually wonderful. He is kind, compassionate, safe, and powerful. He appears to be incredible, but is even better up close than at a distance. There is no disappointment with him. He is tender to the needy, sensitive to the broken, compassionate to the lonely, merciful to the sick, kind to the hurting and absolutely trustworthy! Week after week we have been utterly amazed at him. But, through this gospel account, there is another theme at work. The leaders of the nation, dismiss him, then distrust him, then isolate him, are threatened by him, and now, they hate him and are very, very close to figuring out a way to kill him. It is Tuesday of Passion Week, the final days of Christ before his death. He is in the Temple area teaching and the leaders are trying in vain to stop his influence.

Read Text:

I am preaching this morning with 3 audiences in mind. 1) Some of you are committed followers of Christ and I am hopeful that this message will increase your sensitivity to the enemy of self-righteousness that is always lurking and always trying to draw your affections away from Christ. 2) Some of you claim to be a Christian, but you are in name only. You are deceived and in grave spiritual danger, but you do not know it. 3) Some of you are not followers of Christ and you know it. You are curious to find out a bit more and perhaps investigating. To you, I am so glad that you are here and pray that this account about Christ will draw you to him. But, this morning I am speaking primarily to audience number 2.

I wish that I could somehow get you to listen to this sermon as if you were the only person who was hearing it and the only person to whom it applied. Because, here is my challenge: I know that there are people in your world who have sinned against you, or you perceive that they have sinned against you. It is so easy to believe that in comparison to them, that you occupy the moral high ground. Has it ever occurred to you that you might be the one who is actually in the wrong? Think of the arguments that you get into

with your spouse. Or, think of the arguments that you get into with your mother, or your kids, or your co-workers, or neighbors... You argue in the context of your relationship. Your past experience with that person has formed this picture of reality in your mind. So, in your mind, you have this belief about this person. "You know how they are! One time they did" Or, "they always think this, or do this, or say this...."

Now, that picture of them is how you perceive them. But, what you perceive is not necessarily true, or not necessarily the whole truth. Or, it may be true, but you ignore what you did to provoke them, or what you did in response. However, you hold on to that one thing and you are tempted to use that event, or memory as a brush with which you paint them again and again in your mind as that person. And now, in contrast to that image that you have painted, you are tempted to presume that you are much better by contrast. You believe that you occupy the moral high ground. And when you presume that, you are standing in a very dangerous place.

As I read this text this week, I kept getting caught up on the word "how" in v.15. "How" refers to action. But, behind action is reason. Behind how is why. Why are they so driven to take down Jesus? My tendency is to say, "Wow, these guys are really evil. They are really bad. I would never do something like that." But, then I wonder if that is really true. Did they realize that they had set themselves against God?! I cannot image that any of the Scribes or the Pharisees set out to be in an organization that was sworn to the destruction of God, right!? Seriously, if you join yourself to a group of Satan worshippers you are made aware rather quickly that you want Satan to be god and you want to help throw God off the throne. While the entire idea is absurd, there are thousands who are attempting to do just that. However, most people do not join religious organizations in order to put themselves in direct opposition to God. But that is what is going on here. These Pharisees, Scribes, chief priests are attempting to destroy the ministry of Christ. And if they cannot destroy his ministry and credibility, then they are going to destroy him. How did they get to this point? And, could this happen to me?

Think about it. The Pharisees were very dedicated to their group and to their rituals. They believed that their group was better than the others and that their rituals made them better. They studied the Bible and discussed the Bible and argued about the Bible all of the time. They were extremely dedicated to this. The Scribes were involved in copying the Bible. They were meticulous in their care of the Bible and their reverence for it. If these guys, who were way more dedicated than us, who spent that much time in the Scriptures, who were both driven and devout, missed the whole thing, then don't you think it is possible that some of us are deluded as well?

Presuming to occupy the moral high ground is toxic! Presuming that I am in a place where I know more information than God, or I know what is better, or that I am actually better is like trying to build a house on quicksand. It will never work and not only that, but it will destroy me. Think of the account like this. The Pharisees are like hunters or trappers who view Jesus as their prey. They presume that they are better and that they are smarter and therefore, they can outwit Jesus. Watch how this plays out.

- V.15 – The hunters plan to outwit their prey (Jesus)
- V.16 – The hunters bait the trap
- V.17 – The hunters “catch” their prey
- Vv.18-21 – The prey eludes the trap (and sets the trap)
- V.22 – The hunters are outwitted (and trapped)

If you believe that you are better than God (BIG LIE), then you will believe just about anything. The arrogance and folly of these men is astounding. They are not interested in asking legitimate questions in order to gain wisdom. They have talked themselves into believing that Jesus is bad and that he must be eliminated and they will do anything they can in order to pull it off. They are on a mission.

I. **You cannot find fault with God.** (15)

These guys actually think that they can come up with some plot that will reveal a flaw in Jesus. There is no flaw in Jesus. There is absolutely no legitimate reason why anyone can ever find not to believe in him. You may try to manufacture one. You may try to come up with one on your own, but there is no actual reason to not trust Christ. But, when you convince yourself that Jesus cannot actually be trusted, then you believe the lie that you are superior. You have found his fault. You have exposed him. You are better than him. You have a reason to doubt him and hold out on him and withhold worship and affection from him. And now, your mission is to show that he is not who he claims to be. However...

II. **You cannot fool God.** (16)

Notice the details here. The Pharisees create the plot and they think that they have created the perfect trap. They write the script and recruit the players to carry it out. The success of a trap is linked in large measure to the effectiveness of its disguise. A trap, by its very definition is based on deceit. The hunter pretends to offer something that is desired by the prey, but in such a way that the prey does not realize who is actually behind it. They get their disciples and they get the Herodians to go along as well. By sending the disciples of the Pharisees, they presume that fresh faces will fool Jesus. He will not know who is actually behind all of this. And by also sending the Herodians (people who were supporters of Herod and therefore supporters of Rome), they will have official witnesses who can charge Jesus with rebellion, sedition and/or insurrection. So, the disciples of the Pharisees are sent to Jesus and what they say is actually stunning! Look at it.

“We know that you are true.” They are saying that Jesus is actually true. “and teach the way of God truthfully” And they are saying that he is not only true but he is skilled and that he interprets the Scriptures flawlessly. And not only that, “and you do not care about anyone’s opinion for you are not swayed by appearances.” That is a powerful admission. They are saying that Jesus is true, that he teaches truthfully and that he teaches truthfully all the time. He does not change what he says in order to please people, even if they are powerful people. The problem is, they do not believe what they just said. But, where did they get this? The fact is, everything that they say about Christ is true. No one can find

fault in him. No one can find fault in his interpretation of the Scriptures and Jesus is not impressed with status or position. Jesus does not play by our rules. And yet, while these guys see all of the evidence for this, they do not believe it. It is right there! In fact, they not only see the evidence of this, but they know that this is what Jesus wants them to believe about him, so they pretend to believe it.

Flattery is the food on the trap that is supposed to fool Jesus, but God is not impressed with pretend respect. God is not a man who is vulnerable to flattery. So, why do they try this? Because this is what works on them. They are vulnerable to flattery. They are swayed by appearances. They are impressed with respect, even if it is pretend respect. This event captures and exposes the essential and critical difference between Christianity as a religious tradition and true authentic Christianity.

These were truly disciples of the Pharisees weren't they? They were saying things that they did not believe, but were saying them because in the moment it made them look good. Is that not what so much of religion is built on? Here, say these things! This is our tradition. Say this. Repeat this. Learn this. Recite this. There, now you are a Christian.

No you're not! Saying the words does make you a Christian. A profession of faith is only authentic when there is actual belief in the heart. Belief in the heart is going to produce not only a profession of faith, but it is going to produce fruit in one's life that matches the profession of faith. Jesus did not die on the cross in order to get a bunch of people to repeat a formula like a magic spell from Harry Potter. But, by telling Jesus what they presume he wants to hear, and by presuming to believe that this is all that he cares about, they think that they can convince Jesus that they are on his side and that how he answers their question is safe with them. And now, having baited the trap, they are ready to spring it upon what they think is their unsuspecting prey.

III. **You cannot trap God.** (17)

They cannot wait for this moment. In their plotting, they have examined this trap and have concluded that there is no possibility of escape. If he says "yes" then he will lose all credibility with the Jews who obviously hate the Romans and the Pharisees can use this against him to convince the people that Jesus is really just an agent of Rome. If he says "no" he can be charged with sedition by the Romans and dealt with accordingly. If he refuses to answer them he would obviously be one who is swayed by human appearances and his refusal to answer would be used as a reason to distrust him because he has something to hide. In their minds, there is no escape. They can barely contain themselves as they anticipate the look on the face of Jesus when they spring the trap. Snap! Gotcha!

What they do not realize is that you do not set the terms of the argument with God. You cannot trap God in some kind of an ethical dilemma or coax him to grab on to the third rail of politics. He is God! Do you remember Psalm 2?

*Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?*

*The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed saying,
Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast their cords from us.
He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision...*

IV. **God knows the truth about you.** (18-21)

Jesus is not trapped. He is aware of their malice. Although they speak truth about him, they do not believe their own words because they are trying to use flattery to get him to take down his guard. But, in springing their trap they said, “Tell us then, what you think” and he did. He told them what he thought, first of them and in so doing, he did exactly what they said about him. He was not swayed by appearances. It’s kind of funny, maybe more ironic than funny, but they asked for it, didn’t they? You are not swayed by appearances, so tell us the truth and he does. “Why put me to the test, hypocrites?”

That question is never answered, but it demands an answer. Why? Why did these guys think that they had the right to test Jesus and to try to trap him? Why did they think that it was all right for them to lie right to his face? Why? The answer to that is that they deluded themselves into thinking that they occupied the moral high ground and by occupying the moral high ground they had the right to do anything they wanted because they were justified. Let me give you three scenarios:

First scenario: a man and a woman are married. She consistently argues with him, disagrees with him, undermines him and flat out refuses to obey him because, she reads the Bible more than he does. Or she went to a year at Bible College and he didn’t. Or, she has attended church longer than he has. Or, she knows where the book of Nahum is and he doesn’t. In her mind she has convinced herself that she occupies the moral high ground and therefore, she is fully justified in disobeying the plain teaching of the very Bible that she claims to read because he is not as knowledgeable as she is. But, what kind of knowledge does she have? It is not godly knowledge. It is Pharisaical knowledge. Listen, if you refuse to obey the Bible, you are better off NOT reading it. God is not impressed with your ability to retain facts about the Bible if you are unwilling to be humbled and obedient to his truth. Knowing information about the Bible or attending church does not give you the moral high ground to be disobedient to God.

Second scenario: A man and a woman are married. Years ago, she became attracted to a guy at work and went out with him to a bar one evening. She lied to her husband about it, but someone saw her and told her husband. She confessed and in fact, thanked God that she was caught because it probably saved her from going further down that road. But ever since then, he uses it as leverage. If he spends too much money, “well at least he didn’t go to the bar with someone else’s spouse.” If he fails to do things around the house, or fails to follow through with a promise, or if drinks too much or rents a movie on Netflix

he shouldn't, you know what he is going to say, "well at least I didn't go to the bar with someone else's spouse?"

Third scenario: A co-worker attends church on Sunday, but most of the people he works with do not. Therefore, he gives the impression that he's more than a little better than others and therefore he seems angry all of the time. He exudes this basic level of disgust with others and dissatisfaction with the world. He is just never happy. No one is ever good enough for him. His work is fine, but he's just not a kind person and no one is really impressed at all with the fact that he goes to church. He feels like people are persecuting him for his faith when in reality; they dislike him because he simply doesn't seem to care about anyone but himself.

In each case, each person presumes to have the moral high ground and is blinded to his own sin. You can hold their sin right in front of them but they excuse it away because they have "reasons".

Do you presume to occupy the moral high ground over someone else? What is the reason that you hold on to for why you think that you occupy the moral high ground? If that is you, then you need to listen to Jesus. He is calling you a hypocrite. You are, what you are accusing the other person of being. That is obvious in this text. These men assumed that Jesus was a hypocrite. The truth was, they were the hypocrites and instead of trapping Jesus, Jesus in his answer, springs the trap on them. He asks for a coin that is used to pay the tax. This coin had been minted with the image of the emperor on it and it read, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus." They were using Caesar's coinage! They had no ground to accuse him of selling out the Jews if he thought that paying taxes was legitimate since they were using Caesar's money to conduct business.

By the way, in his answer, Jesus makes it clear that in our submission to God, we are to submit to the government that God has placed us under. What Jesus says here is the basis for further teaching on that issue later on in the New Testament. I am not going to go into all of that here, because that is not primary purpose of this text. But the gist of it is clear. Caesar gave you this money. You are under Caesar's authority, so give back to Caesar what belongs to him and give to God what belongs to him.

V. **God will expose the truth about you.** (22)

SNAP!! The trap was just set on them. Instead of frustrating Christ, Christ has frustrated them. They cannot charge him with sedition. They cannot arrest him. They are consistently frustrated by him. They marvel, but they do not repent. In fact, they will stop at nothing in order to kill him, after all, they are convinced that they occupy the moral high ground. That is how far people will go in an effort to prove that they are not wrong and that they do not need a Savior. The gospel begins with humility and genuine followers of Christ are consistently marked by that fruit of the Spirit.

Conclusion:

In a nutshell this is what happens three days later. The Pharisees conspire to kill Christ. They get the Romans to go along with their plan. They “trap” Jesus by accusing him of claiming to be God. What they accuse him of is true, but they do not believe it. They arrest him, try him, convict him, sentence him and execute him. What they do not realize and what Satan does not realize who is motivating them through all of this, is that while they think they are setting the trap on Jesus, the death of Jesus is actually setting the trap on Satan. What they do for evil, he absolutely overturns and does for good. In the end, Jesus rises from the dead, our sins are atoned for, Christ is vindicated, death is crushed, Satan is vanquished and all enemies of Christ are defeated.

When all you have is Christ, you will find out soon enough that Christ is all that you need.