

The Jesus You Can't Ignore

What You Must Learn From the Bold Confrontations of Christ

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Summarized for Leadership Training

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Prologue:

Jude 3 states: “*contend earnestly for the faith.*” This is a straightforward command to fight for the truth that has been delivered to us. However, a common theme amongst many in today's church is that if Christians want to reach unbelieving people in a postmodern culture, we need to be less militant, less aggressive, less preachy, and less sure of our own convictions. According to some, Christians should meet other worldviews with conversation, not conflict. They assume a friendly quest for common ground and mutual goodwill is always morally superior to any kind of earnest contention.

Those that hold such a position typically show a strong bias against any kind of certitude. They are bothered by the fact that unbelievers usually think Christians sound arrogant and small minded when we declare that the Bible is infallibly true AND Jesus is Lord over ALL. They are especially uncomfortable with the idea of saying that other religions are false.

Some would say that we should carefully avoid points of truth that are likely to offend and instead seek out common ground. In other words, we should approach differing faith perspectives as peace-mongers rather than as preachers.

Some suggest that a dance is a better metaphor than warfare to describe how Christians ought to interact with other worldviews. So much for verse 3 of Jude.

Often, **Jesus deliberately provoked the hostilities of others to condemn them** as fools and hypocrites. **Read Luke 11:40; 12:1; 13:15; 18:10–14.**

AVOID FOOLISH & IGNORANT DISPUTES

We need to keep this in proper perspective. **I'm not suggesting that every disagreement is an occasion for open combat.** Not every issue on which we might hold strong opinions and disagree is of primary importance. Most of us know people who are overly pugnacious. That is not at all what Jesus was like. **See Romans 12:18.**

But sometimes—especially when a mightily important biblical truth is under assault; **when the souls of people are at stake; or when the gospel message is being mangled by false teachers—sometimes it is simply wrong to let a contrary opinion be aired without any challenge or correction.** See Psalm 129:4–8 & 1 Corinthians 16:22.

The notion that an **amiable conversation is always superior to open conflict is quite contrary to the example Christ himself has given us.**

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

Scripture makes clear, that **we must take a zero-tolerance stance toward anyone who would tamper with or alter the gospel message. Read Galatians 1:6–9. AND... anyone who denies the deity of Christ or substantially departs from his teaching is not to be welcomed into our fellowship** or given any kind of blessing – read 2nd John 7–11.

The principle is clear: **the closer any given doctrine is to the heart of the gospel, the core of sound Christology, with the fundamental teachings of Christ, the more diligent we ought to be on guard against perversions of the truth—and the more aggressively we need to fight the error and defend sound doctrine.**

Differentiating between truly essential and merely peripheral spiritual truths does require great care and discernment.

Scripture suggests that the gospel, not a 3rd century creed, is the best gauge for determining the true essentials of Christianity. If you go astray on any vital principle of gospel truth, your whole worldview will be adversely affected. Misconstrue the gospel or adapt it to suit a particular subculture's preferences and the inevitable result will be a religion of “works” or a system that breeds self-righteousness.

That is exactly what Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees was all about. **They represented a style of religion and a system of belief that was in direct conflict with the very heart of the gospel.** Israel's religious leaders manufactured massive systems of “works” in ceremonies that in affect made justification itself a human work. See **Romans 10:3.**

A TIME TO REFRAIN FROM EMBRACING

Jesus never took the soft approach with heretics or gross hypocrites. He never made the kind of gentle private appeals contemporary evangelicals typically insist are necessary before warning others about the dangers of a false teacher's error. **He took on their errors boldly and directly.** He was not “nice” to them by any postmodern standard. **He didn't carefully couch his criticisms in vague and totally impersonal terms so that no one's feelings would be hurt.**

Jesus did nothing to tone down the reproach of his censures or minimize the Pharisees public embarrassment. **He made his disapproval of their religion as plain and prominent as possible** every time he mentioned them. He seemed utterly unmoved by their frustration with his outspokenness. Knowing that they were looking for reasons to be offended by him, **he often did and said the very things he knew would offend them most.**

It is significant that the approach Jesus took is so sharply different from the methods favored by most in the church today.

The way Jesus dealt with his adversaries is in fact a **serious rebuke** to the church of our generation. We need to **pay more careful attention to how Jesus dealt with false teachers**, how he defended the truth, whom he commended and whom he condemned - AND **how little he actually fit the gentle stereotype** that is so often imposed on him today.

Furthermore, his attitude towards false doctrine should also be hours. We cannot be men pleasers and servants of Christ at the same time.

We must take the same approach to false doctrine that Jesus did, by refuting the error, opposing those who spread the error, and contending earnestly for the faith.

You wouldn't expect a firefighter to be gentle with the flames. – JDP

Introduction:

Spiritual truth is not academic. What you believe about God is the most important feature of your whole worldview. What you think of God will automatically color how you think about everything else—especially how you prioritize values; how you determine right and wrong; and what you think of your own place in the universe. That in turn will determine how you act & live.

The hypocrisy of the superficially religious has a practical and ideological impact that is as profoundly consequential as the faith of the believer or the unbelief of the atheist. In fact, hypocrisy has potentially even more sinister implications than outright atheism because of its deceptiveness.

It is the very height of irrationality and arrogance to call Christ Lord with one's lips while utterly defying him with one's life. Yet that is precisely how multitudes live. See **Luke 6:46**

The hypocrite is actually doing gross violence to the truth while pretending to believe it. Nothing is more completely diabolical. Satan is a master at disguising himself – **2 Corinthians 11:14–15.**

It is no accident, then, that **Jesus' harshest words were reserved for institutionalized religious hypocrisy.** It was the main reason they conspired to crucify him. **Jesus' campaign against hypocrisy is a prominent, if not dominant,** emphasis and all 4 Gospels.

*WHAT DO HISTORY & SCRIPTURE SAY ABOUT
the IMPORTANCE of SOUND DOCTRINE?*

What a person believes about God is basic to everything else.

One of the central themes of the Bible is the importance of believing the truth about God. Read *Hebrews 11:6; John 3:18; 1st John 4:6.*

In biblical terms, **the difference between true faith and false belief, or unbelief, is the difference between life and death, heaven and hell.** Read James 5:19–20; 2nd Timothy 2:15–26 & 2nd Thessalonians 2:13–14 and John 8:31–32.

These days it seems the “**visible church**” is dominated by people who simply are not interested in making any careful distinctions between fact and falsehood, sound doctrine and heresy, biblical truth and mere human opinion.

Certainty and conviction are badly out of fashion. **Dogmatism is the new heresy**, and all the old heresies are now welcome back at the evangelical campfire. The word “faith” itself has come to signify a theoretical approach to spiritual things.

In this post modern climate where no truth is held, nothing is more dissonant or strident sounding than the person who genuinely believes that God has spoken, and that he will hold us accountable for whether we believe him or not. **Postmodern views argue nothing is ultimately clear or incontrovertible—least of all spiritual, moral, or biblical matters.**

WHERE ARE TODAY’S EVANGELICALS HEADED?

The evangelical movement used to be known for **two non-negotiable, theological, convictions.** One was a **commitment to the absolute accuracy and authority of Scripture** (see 2 Peter 1:21 & 2 Timothy 3:16–17). The other was a **strong belief that the gospel sets forth the only possible way of salvation from sin and judgment** – grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's evangelicals seem unable to put their finger on anything that makes them truly distinctive. **Conformity to this world and its way of thinking has become the very thing that defines them.**

Cool values such as diversity, tolerance, and academic freedom seem to have eclipsed the biblical truth in the evangelical hierarchy of virtues.

Today's worldly evangelicals are clearly caught in the rip tide of popular postmodern opinion.

Zeal for the essential doctrines of biblical Christianity has become virtually unacceptable among evangelicals. **The new rules call for perpetually friendly conversation, and ecumenical tranquility.** After all, we mustn't ever be so passionate about what we believe that we express any serious disdain for alternative ideas.

The goal isn't to arrive at any common understanding or settled conviction about what's true and what's false. Instead, the whole point seems to be to get as many different opinions into the mix as possible.

HOW SHOULD WE THEN DEFEND THE FAITH?

Here are the new rules of post-evangelical engagement: **all our differences over biblical and theological matters are supposed to remain congenial and detached from any sort of passion in a purely academic style exchange of ideas.** Truth isn't our primary goal. Confessions of faith are seen by secular society as schools of tyranny and repression. Such things breed certitude, moral judgments, and charges of heresy, and these are all out of place in our culture. **No one is supposed to take his or her own theological convictions seriously enough to regard anything as absolute truth.**

Above all, we're not supposed to lodge any serious objection to someone else's religious opinions.

No idea is more politically incorrect than the old **fundamentalist notion that truth is worth fighting for.** Many believe that arguments over religious beliefs are the most arrogant of all conflicts. But where **God's Word speaks clearly, we have a duty to obey, defend & proclaim the truth.** We should do that with an authority that reflects our conviction.

The **spiritual warfare every Christian is engaged in is first of all a conflict between truth and error. The chief aim of Satan's strategy is to confuse, deny, and corrupt the truth with as much fallacy as possible,** that means the battle for truth is a very serious. **Being able to distinguish between sound doctrine and error should be one of the highest priorities for every Christian—as should defending the truth against false teaching.**

WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?

Even some of the better minds in the evangelical movement seem to have capitulated to this notion that it is always better to have a friendly conversation than a conflict over doctrinal differences.

Some might question: What would Jesus do? Wasn't His own ministry characterized by kindness and pacifism instead of combat in contention? Didn't he say, blessed are the peacemakers?

Of course, no credible Christian who is committed to Scripture as our supreme authority has ever proposed a literal, earthly holy war. That's not what spiritual warfare is about. See Ephesians 6:12 and 2nd Corinthians 10:4.

Christians are not to be pugnacious. Love of conflict is no less sinful than cowardice.

Zeal without knowledge is spiritually deadly (see Romans 10:2). **Even the most sincere passion for the truth needs to be always tempered with gentleness and grace (Ephesians 4:29 & Colossians 4:6).** Eager enthusiasm for calling down fire from heaven against blasphemers and heretics is far from the Spirit of Christ – Luke 9:54 and 55.

To acknowledge that the church often needs to fight for truth is not to suggest that the gospel – our one message to a lost world – is somehow a declaration of war... it's a plea for reconciliation with God – 2nd Corinthians 5:18–20. Conversely, **those who are not reconciled to God are at war with him all the time, and the gospel is a message about the only way to end that war.** Ironically, the war to uphold the truth is the only hope of peace for the enemies of God.

Usually it is far better to be gentle than to be harsh—Matthew 5:9. In fact, to be pugnacious is to be disqualified from ministry leadership due to the character flaw it represents – **Titus 1:7.** We always ought to listen sufficiently before we react—Proverbs 18:13. **A kind word can usually do far more good than a harsh reaction—Proverbs 15:1 and 8.**

So **our first inclination when we encounter someone in error ought to be the very same kind of tender meekness prescribed for anyone in any kind of sin—Galatians 6:1.** Moreover, brawlers aren't qualified to serve as elders in the church – 1st Timothy 3:3 and 2nd Timothy 2:24–25.

If those were the only verses in Scripture that told us how to deal with error, we might be justified in thinking those principles are absolute...

But that is not the case. **We are instructed to contend earnestly for the faith – Jude 3.** Immediately after Paul urged Timothy to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness in 1st Timothy 6:11, **Paul went on to exhort Timothy to fight the good fight of faith** in verse 12, and to guard what had been committed to his trust in verse 20.

A CLOSER LOOK AT SPIRITUAL WARFARE

it's vital that we understand why **Scripture so frequently employs the language of warfare with regard to cosmic spiritual conflict** – especially in **reference to the battle for truth**. This idea permeates Scripture.

Whether we like it or not, as Christians we are in a life or death conflict against the forces of evil and their lies. **It is spiritual warfare**. It is a serious war with eternal consequences.

Because this spiritual conflict is 1st and foremost a theological conflict—a war in which divine truth is set against demonic error—**our goal is the destruction of falsehoods, not people**. **The result, if we are faithful, will be the liberation of people from the strongholds of lies, false doctrines, and evil ideologies that hold them captive**. In 2 Corinthians 10:3–5, Paul says we are to wage war against every idea that exalts itself against defined truth.

There is nothing mean-spirited about the stance Paul was describing. **He was set not only for the defense of the truth, but also for an offense of incursion against false belief systems**. His strategy involved the demolition of those false ideologies, by systematically dismantling their erroneous doctrines, and exposing their lies with the truth.

In other words, **truth was his only weapon**.

Paul's aim was the annihilation of false doctrine, not the false teachers per se.

Paul, like Jesus, was not always gracious and gentle with the false teachers. Often he **displayed righteous anger against them**. Read Galatians 1:7–8.

Paul's first recorded encounter with a false religious teacher is found in Acts 13:10–11. Listen to the words that Paul used: “full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?” Notice that in verse 11 God affirmed Paul's confrontational approach by a miraculous judgment coming upon the man being spoken to... The stakes were very high, because people were listening to the false Gospel, and souls were at stake. In any case such as that, **the direct and severe approach to dealing with an overt false teacher is actually preferable to a misguided display of approval and brotherhood** (2 John vv.10-11; Psalm 129:5-8; 2 Timothy 3:5).

Paul was certainly fair with his opponents. He never misrepresented what they taught.

But Paul plainly recognized their errors for what they were and labeled them appropriately.

Paul spoke the truth. When circumstances warranted a stronger type of candor, Paul could speak very bluntly—sometimes even with raw sarcasm—see 1st Corinthians 4:8–10. Like Elijah in the 1st Kings 18:27, John the Baptist in Matthew 3:7–10, and even Jesus in Matthew 23:24...

Paul didn't seem to suffer from the same over-scrupulous angst that causes so many people today to whitewash error. We never once see him inviting false teachers or casual dabblers in religious error to dialogue. When false teachers seek refuge under the umbrella of your fellowship, John said, don't give them the time of day—read 2 John verses 9–11.

WHAT DID JESUS DO?

Let's be candid: refusing even the hospitality of the greeting sounds awfully harsh in this age of diplomacy, doesn't it? What are we to make of that passage from John, the apostle of love? What was to be withheld from any false teacher were not casual, common words of passing courtesy, but any solemn pronouncement of blessing. John is cautioning against any undue deference to a peddler of lies.

There's nothing wrong with asking: What would Jesus do? But an even better question is: **What did Jesus do? How did he deal with the false teachers, religious hypocrites, the theological miscreants of his time? Did he favor the approach of friendly dialogue or did he in fact adopt a militant stance against every form of false religion?**

There is no shortage of data on the matter. **The interactions Jesus had with the scribes, Pharisees, and hypocrites of his culture were full of conflict from the start of his earthly ministry to the end. "Hostile" is not too strong a word to describe his attitude. Jesus never shied away from conflict. He never softened his message.** He never suppressed any truth in order to accommodate someone's artificial notion of dignity. **He never bowed to the intimidation of scholars** or paid homage to their institutions.

Jesus never, never, never treated the vital distinction between truth and error as a merely academic question.

Chapter 1: *When It's Wrong To Be Nice*

Jesus' way of dealing with sinners was normally marked by extreme tenderness. When he encountered even the grossest of moral lepers, Jesus always ministered to them with marketable benevolence—without delivering any scolding lectures or sharp rebukes. When such people came to him, they were already broken, humbled, and fed up with their life of sin. He eagerly granted such people forgiveness, healing, and full fellowship with him on the basis of their faith alone.

The one class of sinners Jesus consistently dealt with sternly were the professional hypocrites, religious phonies, false teachers, and self-righteous peddlers of plastic piety. These folks cared more for customs than they cared for the truth. They were concerned mainly with keeping up appearances and holding on to their power. Authentic **godliness always took a backseat to more academic, pragmatic, or self-serving matters.** *They were the quintessential hypocrites.*

THE SANHEDRIN & the SADDUCEES

The Sanhedrin had ultimate authority over Israel in all religious and spiritual matters. The Council's authority was formally recognized even by Caesar.

The Gospel accounts of Christ's crucifixion refer about a dozen times to the Sanhedrin as the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Note: the scribes were predominantly Pharisees as well.

Although Sadducees were vastly out-numbered by Pharisees in the culture at large, the Sadducees nevertheless maintained a sizable majority in the Sanhedrin, and they held onto the reins of power tightly. The Pharisees were such devoted traditionalists that they bowed to the authority of the high priestly line—even though they strongly disagreed with practically everything that made the Sadducees' system. In general, the Sadducees were not as rigid as the Pharisees in most things—except when it came to the issue of forcing law and order.

In most respects, the Sadducees were classic theological liberals. Their skepticism with regard to heaven, angels, and the after-life automatically made them worldly minded and power-hungry. They were much more interested in politics than religion.

MEET the PHARISEES

Nevertheless, it was the Pharisees, who became the main figures of public opposition to Jesus. The word Pharisee is most likely based on the Hebrew root meaning of separate—so the name probably underscores their separatism. **Their obsession with the external badges of piety was their most prominent feature.**

The Pharisees made it their business to try to enforce their customs on everyone in their culture - even though many of their traditions had no basis whatsoever in Scripture. Most of their conflicts with Jesus centered on precisely those issues. Yet, **the Pharisees set themselves against Jesus with the fiercest kind of opposition.**

As a rule, **the interactions Jesus had with the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and leading priests was marked by public rebuke to their faces.** He repeatedly said harsh things about them in his sermons and public discourses. **He warned his followers to beware of their deadly influence.** He consistently employed stronger language against the Pharisees than he ever used against the pagan Roman authorities or their occupying armies.

That fact absolutely infuriated the Pharisees. Notice, **Jesus did not speak a word against Caesar, while treating the entire religious aristocracy of Israel as if they were more dangerous tyrants than Caesar himself.**

Their false teaching was far more destructive.

False teaching led to a spiritual disaster of eternal and infinite proportions, resulting in most Israelites in that generation rejecting their true Messiah – and multitudes of their descendents have continued the relentless pursuit of religious tradition for almost 2000 years.

The Pharisees legalistic system was in effect a steamroller, paving the way for that tragedy. Paul—a converted Pharisee—said in **Romans 10:2–3**, *“I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.”*

The Pharisees did indeed have a kind of zeal for God. On the surface, they did not appear to pose a great threat. In fact, **the Pharisees were genuine experts, knowing the words of Scripture.** They were also fastidious in their observance of the law's tiniest external details.

To the eye of a superficial observer, the religious culture of the Pharisees had cultivated was certainly not one of false religion.

No one could accuse a Pharisee of any over tolerance for pagan beliefs, right? Plus, for safety sake **they had added many surplus rituals of their own making**, extra shields against accidental defilement.

From a human perspective, these things all had the appearance of profound devotion to God. They were profoundly religious, not careless or profane. They certainly weren't avowed atheists openly undermining peoples faith in God's Word. **They promoted piety. They**

advocated zeal, rigor, and abstinence—not worldliness or indifference to spiritual things. Their religion was there whole life.

Their “religion” even took precedence over God himself.

And therein lay the problem. **The Pharisees had devised a slick disguise, concealing their self-righteousness and hypocrisy under a veneer of religious zeal. They were careful to maintain the appearance of—but not the reality of—sincere devotion to God. They had so thoroughly blended their man-made religious traditions with the revealed truth of God that they themselves could not even tell the difference anymore. They insisted on viewing the Scriptures through the lens of human tradition.** Tradition therefore became their primary authority and the governing principle in their interpretations of Scripture. **Under those circumstances, there was no way for Scripture to correct their faulty traditions.** The Pharisees thus became the chief architects of a corrupted brand of cultural Judaism. **By the time Jesus was born the acting Judaism was already a monstrous, burdensome system of rule keeping, ritual, superstition, human custom, legalism, and self-righteous pretense.**

The Pharisees who blindly followed the party line in the name of tradition were false teachers, no matter how pious or noble they might have appeared to the superficial eye.

They were the worst kind of wolves in sheep's clothing—corrupt rabbis wearing the wool robes of the prophet and devouring the sheep of the Lord's flock under the cover of that disguise... No wonder Jesus dealt so sternly with them.

THE EVIL OF FALSE RELIGION

Men and women who lack a biblical worldview tend to think of religion as the noblest expression of the human character.

In reality, nothing is more thoroughly evil than false religion, and the more false teachers try to cloak themselves in the robes of biblical truth, the more truly Satanic they are.

History is full of such people, and **the Bible continually warns about such false teachers – 2nd Corinthians 11:13–15.**

Delivering his farewell speech at Ephesus, the apostle **Paul told the elders:** *“I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves” – Acts 20:29–30.* Paul was warning them that false teachers would

arise not only from within the church, but that they would creep unnoticed into the leadership of the church – **Jude verse 4**. False teachers robe themselves in the garments of God. **They want people to believe that they represent God, that they know God, that they have special insight into divine truth and wisdom, even though they are representing Hell itself.**

In **1 Timothy 4:1–3**, Paul prophesied that **the church of the last days would be assaulted by false teachers with a pharisaical approach.**

Again, nothing is more diabolical than false religion, and we are warned repeatedly and explicitly not to take false teaching lightly because of its close resemblance to the truth.

To thwart the gospel and to try to frustrate the plan of God, Satan unleashed everything he had against Jesus Christ, including the infiltration of Judas, the false disciple, whom Satan himself influenced, in dwelt, and empowered to commit the ultimate act of treachery – Luke 22:3.

It seems almost unthinkable that the fiercest opposition to Christ would come from the most respected leaders of societies religious sector. **But it is true.**

Paul's whole point in **2 Corinthians 11:14–15** is that secret subterfuge is and always has been the devil's primary tactic. **Therefore it should come as no surprise that enemies of the gospel have always been and still are most formidable when they are religious.** The more successful they are at convincing people they are within the circle of orthodoxy, the more effective they will be at undermining the truth. **The more deeply they can infiltrate the community of true believers, the more damage they can do.** The closer they can get to the sheep and gain their trust, the more easily they can devour the flock.

DANCES WITH WOLVES

Any literal shepherd would be thought deranged if he regarded wolves as potential pets to be domesticated into the fold. Suppose he actively sought and tried to befriend young wolves, to mingle with his sheep. **Such a shepherd would be worse than useless; he himself would pose an extreme danger to the flock.**

Nearly as bad would be a **shepherd whose vision is myopic.** He has never seen the wolf clearly with his own eyes. **He therefore believes the threat of wolves is grossly exaggerated.** Even though his sheep keep disappearing and are getting torn to shreds by

something, he refuses to believe it is wolves that are harming his flock. He begins telling the story of the boy who cried wolf to anyone that will listen. Finally, concluding that other people's negativity toward wolves poses a greater danger to his flock than the wolves, he takes out his reed and plays a gentle tune to lull the sheep to sleep (John 10:12-13).

Self-seeking hirelings, myopic shepherds, and wannabes wolf-tamers are all too prevalent in the church today... so are wolves in sheep's clothing.

Contemporary evangelism in general seems to have no taste whatsoever for any kind of doctrinal friction—much less open conflict with spiritual wolves. Paul's systematic outline of the gospel in Romans begins with the words: **“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven” –Romans 1:18.** Paul then goes on for almost 3 full chapters expounding on the depth and universality of human ungodliness and unrighteousness. Only after he has made the bad news inescapable does Paul introduce the Gospel's good news. He follows the very same pattern in shorter form in Ephesians 2:1–10.

As we are going to see, **Jesus was not always positive before being negative.** Some of his longest discourses, including all of Matthew 23, were entirely negative.

In today's context, **the problem is that the needed reformation within evangelicalism won't occur at all if false ideas that undermine our core theological convictions cannot be openly attacked and excluded.** When peaceful coexistence with our deepest differences becomes priority one and conflict per se is demonized as inherently sub-Christian, any and every false religious belief can and will demand an equal voice in the conversation.

Indiscriminate congeniality, the quest for spiritual common ground, and peace at any price, all naturally have great appeal, especially in an intellectual climate where practically the worst gaffe any thoughtful person could make is claiming to know what's true when so many other people think something else is true.

Avoiding conflict is not always the right thing. Sometimes it is downright sinful. Particularly in times like these, while the Lord's flock is being infiltrated by wolves dressed like prophets, declaring peace, peace where there is no peace (Ezekiel 13:16).

WAS JESUS ALWAYS NICE?

The great Shepherd himself was never far from open controversy. **Almost**

every chapter of the Gospels make some reference to his running battle with the chief hypocrites of his day, and he made no effort whatsoever to be winsome in his encounters with them. He did not invite them to dialogue or engage in a friendly exchange of ideas.

Jesus' public ministry invaded what they thought was their turf. One of his last major public discourses was the solemn pronouncement of 7 woes against the Scribes and Pharisees. These were formal curses against them. That sermon was the farthest thing from a friendly dialogue—see Matthew 23. **Those words of Christ were entirely devoid of any positive or encouraging word.**

Jesus' dealing with the Pharisees is a blistering denunciation—a candid diatribe about the seriousness of their error. **There is no conversation, no dialogue, and no cooperation. Only confrontation, condemnation, and curses against them.**

Jesus' compassion is certainly evident in two facts that bracket this declaration. first, Luke tells us that He drew near the city and paused and wept over it—Luke 19:41–44. And 2nd, Matthew records a similar lament at the end of the 7 woes in chapter 23, verse 37. So we can be absolutely certain that as Jesus delivered this diatribe, His heart was full of compassion.

Christ's compassion is directed at the victims of the false teaching, not the false teachers. There is no hint of sympathy, no trace of kindness, no effort on Jesus' part to be nice towards the Pharisees. Indeed, with these words Jesus formally and resoundingly pronounced their doom and then held them up publicly as a warning to others.

Jesus doesn't say, they are basically good guys or that they have some valid spiritual insights. Instead, He says, "...keep your distance. Be on guard against their lifestyle and their influence. Follow them, and you are headed for the same condemnation they are."

Christ's approach to the Pharisees utterly debunks the modern infatuation with engaging all points of view in endless conversation. By today's standards, Jesus' words about the Pharisees in his treatment of them are breathtakingly severe.

As we take a closer look at Jesus' ministry, I think **many readers will be surprised to discover that it was Jesus who fired the first shot.** And it was a shockingly powerful broadside.

Chapter 2: Two Passovers

Passover in Jerusalem—Scene One

it is likely that Luke 2 is describing Jesus' first ever Passover in Jerusalem. It was customary for boys in their last year of childhood to experience their first feast at the Temple. The preparation for Bar mitzvah included instruction in the Law, including familiarity with Jewish customs, rituals, feasts, and sacrifices.

Read **Luke 2:43-47**. Christ's true humanness never shows more clearly than it does in this account. This is a unique picture of Jesus, seated among Israel's leading rabbis, politely listening to them, asking questions, and amazing them with his comprehension and discernment.

Because he was still a child, it is only reasonable to assume that Jesus maintained the role of a very respectful student. We're not to think he was rebuking, challenging, even instructing those rabbis. In fact, **Luke seems to include this brief vignette about Jesus' childhood precisely to stress the full humanity of Christ** – “*how he grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men*” – verse 52. Again, **Luke is saying that every aspect of Jesus' development into full manhood was ordinary, not extraordinary**. That means **even though he was God incarnate, with all the full attributes of God in his infinite being, in some mysterious way his divine omniscience was normally shrouded**. His conscious mind was therefore subject to the normal limitations of human finitude. In other words, as Luke says here, **Jesus truly learned things. Although he knew everything exhaustively as God, He did not always maintain full awareness of everything in his human consciousness**.

It is worth noting that in Luke 2:46 we find the only record in all the Gospels of any extended friendly exchange between Jesus and any group of leading rabbis.

One other distinction, **Luke 2:52 is not a denial of the deity of Jesus; it is an affirmation of his true humanity**. The stress is on the normalcy of his development. In his progress from childhood to manhood he endured everything any other child would experience – except for the guilt of sin.

Passover in Jerusalem - Scene Two

Fast-forward, Jesus is back in Jerusalem for another Passover. **John is recording the very earliest close-up look at Jesus in a public, urban context**. In fact, this Passover is really the first major public event of our Lord's ministry. He chooses the biggest event of the year in Jerusalem to make his public debut.

As we see, Jesus makes no attempt to come across as positive before provoking a confrontation. **Read John 2: 14–16**.

The abruptness of Christ's appearance at the Temple is a literal fulfillment of Malachi 3:1–2.

A portion of the massive outer court had been turned into a bazaar, filled with animal merchants and moneychangers. In effect, **Temple authorities were housing and profiting from a den of thieves** –Mark 11:17 –exploiting the very people they ought to have been ministering to.

Imagine what all this did to the environment of the Temple grounds.
It was certainly no atmosphere for worship.

It was carnal chaos.

Jesus' response reflects an amazing degree of patience... **He carefully made/braided some cords together to make a whip**.

Jesus' response is amazingly bold, especially when we consider that at this point he was largely unknown, **acting out publicly against the most powerful Confederacy in Judaism**, intruding on their turf—or so they thought—and setting himself against a large number of unscrupulous profit-mongers who probably would not hesitate to use violence against him.

He cleared the area in short order. **Christ's decisiveness and anger is evident; his zeal is grand and imposing; and the force of divine authority of his words is unmistakable.**

He accomplished exactly what he set out to do.

Jesus was clearly acting as a prophet. **He implicitly declared himself more than a prophet in the reformer – the very Son of God.**

He unapologetically issued harsh commands with emphatic finality that discouraged any comeback. He was not making suggestions or requests, much less asking for friendly dialogue.

In the midst of it all, Jesus appears unruffled—fierce in his anger, perhaps, but resolute, single-minded, stoic, and totally composed. He is the very picture of self-control. **This is truly righteous indignation, not a violent temper** that has gotten out of hand. Read Psalm 69:9 and 119:7–39 to gain greater insight on this encounter.

A Cross-Examination—Scene 3

Jesus' assault on the money changers was a bold first strike. He did this without warning. It was a prophetic action in the style of Elijah.

Since Jesus' words and actions in cleansing the temple contained an implicit claim of prophetic authority, the Temple leaders demanded a sign – a miracle – as proof of that authority. It was a formal demand with all their legal authority behind it. Their likely motive was to intimidate him into submission. They probably never dreamed he would have any kind of answer to their demand for a sign.

He had already given them a major sign. The cleansing of the temple was itself a dramatic initial fulfillment of the passage in Malachi 3 – a clear demonstration of Jesus' messianic authority. Near the end of Jesus' ministry, John would say, although he had done so many signs before them, they did not believe him.

Perhaps that is why here, during his initial confrontation with the Sanhedrin, Jesus gave them no miraculous sign. Instead, he made his very 1st subtle prophecy about the greatest sign of all: destroy this temple, and in 3 days I will raise it up.

His words were purposely cryptic.

No one understood what he was saying at the time,
but the resurrection made the meaning of both prophecies clear.

The Temple authorities were visibly stunned by Jesus' reply.

To them, his statement seemed like the words of a madman.

Amazingly, the Temple authorities did not take Jesus into custody. **Clearly, Jesus' point about the defilement of the Temple hit its target.** The people in the Temple courtyard certainly knew they were victims of the swindling merchants agreed. Their sympathies would certainly have been with Jesus.

It is interesting to note, the religious leaders never forgot or forgave this incident. 3 years later, on the night of Christ's arrest, the testimony given by the false witnesses referred back to this very first public skirmish between Jesus and the hypocrites...

As we shall see in the closing chapter of this study, Jesus cleansed the temple once more at the end of his ministry, early in that final week before his crucifixion. **These 2 public assaults, exhibiting his divine authority and righteous indignation, are like bookends on the public ministry of Christ.** They give context and meaning to all his other encounters in between the religious elite of Israel.

For those who would prefer to meet a perpetually friendly, sentimental Messiah reaching out and engaging in scholarly dialogue, instead of challenging them... this may seem to establish a troubling precedent.

The Prince of Peace is no peace-monger when it comes to hypocrisy and false teaching.

Matthew 10:34 makes this clear: *“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”*

Chapter 3. A Midnight Interview

Jesus taught and healed chiefly among the common people. Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees often hung around the edges, watching through critical eyes. It is **key** to **observe that practically all of Jesus’ recorded encounters with the Pharisees involved conflicts.**

A Few Friendly Pharisees

Jairus was a ruler in the Capernaum synagogue, and possibly even a Pharisee. He is a rare example of a ruling Jewish leader whom Jesus blessed rather than condemning. This man came as **a desperate father and Jesus brought his daughter back from the dead.**

The **Rich Young Ruler** was likewise a religious official of some sort. He might well have been a Pharisee. Mark's record of his exchange with Jesus was without any tone of scolding. In fact, **Mark 10:21 expressly tells us that Jesus loved him—reminding us that Christ's hatred was for their hypocrisy, and his opposition to their errors were by no means inconsistent with authentic love for them.**

Those who think it is inherently unloving to confront, admonish, or correct need to re-examine Jesus' approach.

Read Revelation 3:19.

On at least 3 occasions Jesus had dinner in the homes of Pharisees. They all ended with Jesus denouncing the Pharisees doctrine and practice... no major change from the pattern of Jesus’ contentious interactions with Israel's religious leaders.

Nick At Night

The account of Nicodemus in John 3 is the most unusual of the encounters with Pharisees—and the only significant example of an extended friendly dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisee. **What makes this meeting so unusual is Nic's response to Jesus. Jesus was no less blunt in this case. But evidently Nicodemus came to Jesus truly wishing to learn.**

It is clear... that Nicodemus's interest in Christ was genuine.
Still, **it fell short of authentic saving faith**...
Jesus made that clear.

Here is a practical lesson from this account:

a positive response to Jesus should *never be taken as proof* of authentic trust in him.

There is a shallow, fickle brand of belief that is not saving faith. **There have always been people who accept Christ without truly loving him, without submitting to his authority, and without abandoning their self-confidence and trust in their own good works.**

At this point in the narrative, Nicodemus is one of those almost-believers.

In fact, the story of Nicodemus is a vivid example of how perfectly Jesus knows the human heart. **Nicodemus, meanwhile, demonstrates how easy it is to respond positively to Jesus and yet fall short of authentic faith.**

Rare Affirmation From a Pharisee

When Nicodemus first met Jesus in John 3, the Pharisee was not yet truly a believer. He was clearly intrigued by Christ. He showed him the utmost respect. By acknowledging Jesus as a Rabbi sent by God, Nicodemus regarded Jesus as an equal, and intended his comments to come across as a great complement.

An Impossible Demand From Jesus

Jesus' reply was abrupt and to the point. *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* Ignoring the verbal honor Nicodemus had paid to him, changing the subject away from his own ability to do miracles, **Jesus made a statement that was plainly intended as a remark about Nicodemus' spiritual inability & blindness.**

It was a breathtaking reply.

Nicodemus was no doubt accustomed to being shown great honor. Jesus' words conveyed the clear and deliberate implication that this leading Pharisee was still far from the kingdom of heaven...

But Nicodemus was clearly being drawn to Christ by the Holy Spirit. We know this based on the response which showed no sign of resentment or chill. Instead, he continues to show Jesus respect, asking a series of questions designed to draw the meaning out of Jesus' words – words that must have hit him like a hard slap in the face.

Jesus' reply must have stunned him! Nicodemus had honored Christ. In return, Jesus suggested that Nicodemus was not even a spiritual beginner yet. He had no part in the kingdom whatsoever.

Jesus wasn't being unkind or merely insulting; he was being truthful with the man who desperately needed to hear the truth.
Nicodemus's soul was at stake.

Jesus was asking him to make a whole new start. That was a lot to ask of someone like Nicodemus, who believed he was accumulating merit with God. What did Jesus want him to do? Cast all that aside like garbage? **That is precisely how the apostle Paul would later describe his own conversion in Philippians.**

With that, Jesus demolished Nicodemus's entire worldview and value system. **Jesus was demanding that Nicodemus forsake everything he stood for, and start all over from the beginning.**

A Cryptic Reference From the Old Testament

Jesus was drawing a parallel in his response to Nicodemus from **Ezekiel 36:25-27.**

He was confronting this leading Pharisee with the truth that he needed a whole new heart – a new life; not just a cosmetic makeover or another ritual. In all likelihood, Nicodemus, thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament prophecy, now understood exactly what Jesus was telling him.

Another Difficult Saying From Jesus

Jesus continued by further emphasizing that spiritual rebirth is wholly a work of God, not the result of human effort.

To a typical Pharisee, what Jesus was saying would likely have come across as highly offensive. Jesus was attacking the very core of Nicodemus's belief system, plainly implying that Nicodemus was lost, spiritually lifeless, and ultimately no better off than an immoral Gentile without God.

This was a direct answer to Nicodemus's questions. **Jesus was telling Nicodemus, in language Nicodemus was sure to grasp, that he was in fact calling for something Nicodemus was powerless to do for himself.** This punctured the heart of Nicodemus's religious convictions. To a Pharisee, the worst imaginable news would be that there was nothing he could possibly do to help himself spiritually.

Jesus had equated his distinguished heresy with the lowest kind of sinner. He had described Nicodemus's case as utterly hopeless.
Talk about harsh!

But that is, after all, the very starting point of the gospel message. Sinners are dead in their trespasses and sins. Furthermore, Scripture says we are hopeless to redeem ourselves, or earn any kind of merit in the eyes of God. **Even the very best of people, apart from Christ and his Holy Spirit, are helplessly in bondage to sin.**

Let's face it: the idea that the entire human race is fallen and condemned is simply too harsh for most people's tastes. They would rather believe that most people are fundamentally good.

Scripture says we are hopelessly corrupted by sin. All who do not have Christ as Lord and Savior are in bondage, condemned by a just God, and bound for hell.

The Gospel Distilled for Nicodemus

Nicodemus' response was utter astonishment: *How can these things be?* Jesus responded with his most direct, personal, scolding of Nicodemus yet: *Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?* The average Pharisee would have lashed back at Jesus. Not

Nicodemus. He was completely silenced either rebuke. He is not mentioned again until chapter 7, where he says a word in defense of Jesus, and is promptly shouted down.

The focus of John 3 then turns exclusively to Jesus, who delivers one of his most important discourses ever – an extended lesson on Gospel truth. Its centerpiece, of course, is perhaps the most beloved verse in the Bible, a beautiful single verse summary of the Gospel message – **John 3:16.**

But the surrounding context of John 3:16 stands in rather stark contrast to the familiar sweetness of that verse. Jesus' discourse, taken as a whole, is an extended indictment of the spirit of Pharisee-ism. As Nicodemus listened in total silence, Jesus proceeded to draw a clear contrast between believers and unbelievers, the humble and the hypocrites, the truly reborn and the merely religious.

First, notice that Jesus directly implicated Nicodemus as an unbeliever in verse 11 and 12. To postmodern ears, that sounds extraordinarily harsh. Contemporary evangelicals typically bristle at the thought of challenging anyone's profession of faith. **Religious television networks are overrun with teachers who profess to be Christians but whose doctrine and lifestyle show no fruit of salvation.** People like that have flourished and even begun to dominate the non-Christian public's perception of what Christianity is, mainly because more sound and solid evangelical leaders are reluctant to call them by name and say plainly that they are charlatans and false teachers. **To oppose another minister publicly just doesn't seem nice.** So false teachers are given free reign to promote their false teachings and flaunt their extravagant lifestyles.

Nicodemus' ignorance about his need for regeneration was proof of his unbelief. He had studied the Old Testament in an academic way but he had never bothered to apply its teaching to his own heart, therefore Jesus was perfectly blunt with him.

Second, don't miss the point of the Old Testament allusion Jesus makes in verse 14 and 15. The whole story, taken from Numbers 21, was an illustration of justification by faith, and that was the point Jesus was making here.

But consider the difficulty of that analogy from Nicodemus' perspective. As a ruler of Israel, he had always thought of himself in the role of Moses. But the analogy suggested that Nicodemus needed to see himself in the place of the sinning Israelites.

The Old Testament imagery Jesus used was a contradiction of the Pharisees spiritual self image. **To a casual observer and anyone trained in political correctness, it might seem as if Jesus was deliberately trying to provoke Nicodemus, demeaning his pride in every conceivable way.** In reality, Jesus was not being mean-spirited, precisely the opposite. **Nicodemus needed to recognize his spiritual poverty and see his need for a Savior.**

Jesus cared more for the truth than he cared about how Nicodemus felt about it.

Before Nicodemus could receive any help he needed to see how desperate his situation was. When a patient has a life-threatening illness that urgently needs treatment, the physician needs to give him the bad news candidly. That was the case with Nicodemus.

Third, notice the way Jesus ended his discourse on the gospel by bringing the emphasis right back to the problem of human depravity and God's condemnation of unbelievers.

This too, is contrary to most contemporary ideas about how to do personal evangelism.

If you think the gospel can be proclaimed in a way that is always appealing and **never upsetting to unbelievers,** you have the wrong idea about what the gospel message says.

John 3:16's eternal truth is not good news for those who remain in unbelief.

Therefore, Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus ended on a harsh and sobering note about the severe condemnation that rests on all unbelievers and hypocrites.

The Rest of the Story

it is clear that despite Jesus' severity and directness with Nicodemus – or perhaps because of it – Nicodemus retained an interest in Jesus throughout the Lord's earthly ministry. And at some point he did believe, making the passage from death unto life.

There is every reason to conclude that Nicodemus became a genuine believer. John 19:39 shows Nicodemus preparing the Savior's body for burial, and act that could well have cost him everything. He clearly had become a different man than he was when he 1st approached Jesus as an unbelieving Pharisees.

Notice, directness was precisely what Nicodemus needed. No one else in all of Israel would dare speak that way to a religious leader. But **Jesus was telling him the most important thing he could possibly hear, in a voice that rang with authority.**

All the Pharisees and religious leaders in Israel needed a similar wake-up call, and that explains the tone of Jesus' dealings with them throughout the Gospel accounts. Sadly, however, apart from this one conversion, all Jesus' public interactions with the Pharisees ended badly, with the Pharisees being offended and/or angry.

Might Jesus have gained a more positive response from the Pharisees if he had shown them the kind of deference they demanded? What if he had sought common ground with them and focused only on what he could affirm in their belief system? What if Jesus had stressed where they were right rather than constantly attacking what was wrong in their teaching? Is it possible that the Sanhedrin would have been more open to Jesus?

**Jesus knew something evangelicals today often forget:
truth doesn't defeat error by waging a public relations campaign.**

The struggle between truth and error is spiritual warfare,
and truth has no way to defeat falsehood except by
exposing & refuting lies & false teaching.

**That calls for candor and clarity, boldness and decision—and sometimes
more severity than congeniality.**

The fact that Nicodemus was the only Pharisee to listen to Christ is no indictment of the way, Jesus dealt with Israel's chief religious leaders.

Rather, **it is a gauge of how truly evil their whole system was.** From here on, that becomes one of the central themes of all 4 Gospel accounts.

Chapter 4: *This Man Speaks Blasphemies*

“We have plenty of men made of sugar, nowadays, that melt into the stream of popular opinion; but these shall never ascend into the hill of the Lord, nor stand in His holy place, nor wear the tokens of His glory.”

– Charles Spurgeon

Scripture gives much detail about the 2nd half of Jesus' ministry, revealing a pattern of increasing conflict. As Jesus gained fame and followers, the religious leaders seem to have taken measures to keep him under surveillance. All of a sudden, every time he appeared in public—Pharisees always seemed to be present. **His conflicts with Scribes and Pharisees began to increase steadily in both frequency and intensity.**

A key to notice is that **so far, the Scribes and Pharisees have done nothing overt to provoke any conflict with Jesus**. He incited that first clash with them in Jerusalem by driving the money changers out from the Temple.

Jesus' Move To Capernaum

Jesus returned to Galilee via Samaria, taking a route no Pharisee would have taken. The Samaritans were considered unclean, and merely traveling through their land was thought by the Pharisees to be spiritually defiling. Yet, while traveling through Samaria, Jesus had his famous encounter with the woman at the well. That account consumes all of John 4. Christ led her to salvation—and she subsequently brought many from her town to Christ.

Jesus' Reputation Grows

Soon crowds of people flocked to see and hear Jesus. He had to steal away into a deserted place in order to get away from the demands of the crowds. They pursued him everywhere. Multitudes continued to follow Jesus wherever he went. **What Luke describes is a tireless, nonstop campaign of daily teaching and public ministry.** Crowds pursue Jesus constantly, daily, from sunup to sundown. News of Jesus' ministry reached all the way to Jerusalem, and came to the attention of the Sanhedrin.

Enter the Pharisees

When Luke first mentions **the Pharisees, they are watching Jesus from the sidelines**. **They have come as critical observers, looking for reasons to condemn him.** It is clear that they had formed this agenda ahead of time.

Here's a pattern you will notice **in almost every confrontation between Jesus and Pharisees: in one way or another, His deity is always at the heart of the conflict.**

On this occasion, the issue at stake was the forgiveness of sins. Remember that Jesus had been performing public healings for several weeks all over Galilee. Demons and disease, like always fled at his word—sometimes even at his presence. **In Jesus' own words, this was the proof of all his claims and the confirmation of all his teachings: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them (Luke 7:22).**

Who Can Forgive Sins But God?

A hopelessly paralyzed man was brought by 4 other men to Jesus. Their journey could not have been an easy one. When they arrived, they must have seen instantly that they had no hope of getting close to Jesus by any conventional method.

The fact that the man was carried on a pallet rather than seeded in some kind of cart suggests that he was probably a quadriplegic. **He was a classic object lesson about the fallen human condition. He was unable to move; utterly reliant on the grace and goodness of others,** completely impotent to do anything whatsoever for himself.

Here had a disability that **would require a true miracle for healing.** Not like the invisible ailments we often see addressed by people who claim to pose as gifts of healing today.

The sheer desperation of the man and his 4 friends can be measured by what they did when they realized they would not be able to get close to Jesus. What a dramatic entrance this was!

Who Is This?

Jesus had deliberately put himself at the center of a scenario that would force every observer to render a verdict about him. That is also true for those who read this account in Scripture. **There are only 2 possible conclusions.** Jesus is either God incarnate, or he is a blasphemer and a fraud. **There is no middle ground, and that is precisely the situation Jesus was aiming for.**

Jesus purposely erased all possible middle way alternatives.

Which Is Easier?

Before the Scribes and Pharisees could give voice to what they were thinking, Jesus pressed the issue by asking them: “*Why are you reasoning in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, your sins are forgiven, or to say, rise up and walk?*”

Notice: the question was not whether Jesus could make this man better, but whether he could instantly make him whole and healthy.

Jesus’ healings always bypass therapy.

People born blind were given not only their sight but also the instant ability to make sense of what they saw. When Jesus healed a deaf person, he also immediately healed the resultant speech impediment—no therapy required. Whenever he healed the lame people, he gave them not only regenerated muscle tissue, but also the strength and dexterity to take up their beds and walked. It strikes me as ironic that when the modern “faith healers” and charismatic charlatans nowadays claim to heal people, the patient usually falls over immobile, or in uncontrollable convulsions. **Jesus’ healings had exactly the opposite effect.**

That is just what this man needed: an act of divine, creative power such as only God can perform.

Notice carefully the way Jesus framed his question: “**Which is easier to say?**” He was picking at their thought process. **They were indignant because he had granted this man forgiveness.** Obviously, both forgiveness & healing are impossible for any mere man to do. The power to heal all sickness presupposes the power to forgive any sin.

Both are humanly impossible. But Jesus could do both.

Jesus knew the Pharisees would be offended if he declared this man's sins forgiven, yet he was not deterred. In fact, he did it as publicly as possible.

Shouldn't we avoid public controversy at all cost, especially in circumstances like these, where so many simple people are present?

Jesus had no such scruples. The point he was making was vastly more important than how the Pharisees or the people felt about it.

Unlike the phony healings featured on religious television by today's celebrity fake healers, Jesus' miracles involve serious and visual infirmities. He healed all kinds of people and all kinds of conditions as they came to him, with no screeners, security guards, or backstage antics.

Imposters, fake healers, staged miracles, and counterfeit healings were as common in Jesus' time as they are today... **So it is significant that no one ever seriously questioned the reality of Jesus' miracles** – including the Pharisees.

They always attack him on other grounds...
questioning the source of his power.

Now his entire reputation hinged on an impossibility. He would demonstrate in the most graphic way possible that he has authority to do what only God can do.

The Critics Silenced

Luke's account is notable for its straightforward simplicity. Of the paralytic, Luke says, *“immediately he rose up before them, took up what he had been lying on, and departed to his own house, glorifying God.”*

A lot happened in that one instant. Bones hardened perfectly, muscles were restored, joints and tendons became sturdy in mobile. Elements of his physiology that had atrophied were regenerated. His nervous system switched back on, etc.

See his profound gratitude: verse 26 tells us, **all the way home he was glorifying God.**

He was cleansed of his sin. All his sins were forgiven and he had been created new. No wonder he glorifies God.

The miracle had a corresponding effect on the people.
Verse 26 says, they were all amazed, and they glorified God...

Sadly, we know from subsequent events that most of the people in this area had an admiration for Jesus that would turn out to be fickle... **Many in that crowd were halfhearted disciples and “hangars-on” who would quickly fall away when Jesus' teachings became harder.**

With a stealth that will soon become a pattern, the Pharisees simply lapse into utter silence and fade out of the story. The religious leaders slunk away—silently seething with anger, unable even to rejoice in the man's good fortune, and silently plotting their next attempt to discredit Jesus.

This first Galilean controversy seems to mark the start of a pattern of increasingly hostile public conflicts with Jesus whereby their hearts would be completely hardened against him.

The idea that Jesus would instantly and freely justify a paralytic contradicted everything they stood for.

They had their own idea of what God should be like...
Jesus simply didn't fit the profile.

He was also a threat to their status and the more he humiliated them in public, the more their own influence is diminished.

After this episode, critical Pharisees become commonplace in all the gospel narratives. Hence forth, they were opposing him at every turn, even resorting to lies to discredit him.

Notice, his tenderness never overshadowed his severity in any of his dealings with them.

Chapter 5: *Breaking the Sabbath*

“Some men, nowadays, talk of Jesus as if he were simply *incarnate-kindness*. It is not so. No... no one ever spoke with such thundering indignation against sin, as did the lips of the Messiah. He is like a refiners fire. We speak of Christ as being meek and lowly in spirit and so he was. But his meekness was balanced by his courage, and by the boldness with which he denounced hypocrisy.” – Charles Spurgeon

When Jesus called him to discipleship, Matthew would have been one of the most hated and despicable men in the entire region. He was a tax collector. He was therefore regarded by the entire community as a traitor. **Matthew was the polar opposite of the Pharisees—in every conceivable way.**

Tax collectors were overwhelmingly crooked, well known for using their office to line their own pockets. They were the lowest and most despised of all the social outcasts in all the land. They were considered the most despicable of sinners, and they often lived up to that reputation.

A Short Timeline

The Gospels place the calling of Matthew immediately after the healing of the paralytic; immediately, on that same day.

Matthew was perfectly positioned at that unusual crossroads so that he could intercept and tax traffic in all directions, whether by water or by land. Matthew was perhaps the least likely person in all of the region to become one of Jesus' 12 closest followers. The other disciples, undoubtedly despise the way he had made himself wealthy off their livelihood.

Follow Me!

But on that day, as **Jesus passed the tax office, he caught Matthew's eye and gave him a simple two word greeting: "Follow Me!" No more, and no less.** Yet, upon hearing that simple command from Jesus...

Matthew left all, rose up, and followed him.

For a man in Matthew's position, leaving everything behind so quickly was a dramatic turnaround comparable to the paralytic sudden ability to walk and carry his own structure.

**Matthew's heart change was a spiritual rebirth,
no less miraculous than the paralytic's instant physical healing.**

Matthew's perspective was the polar opposite of the Pharisees.

**He yearned to be free from his sin;
they would not even admit that they were sinners.**

Why Does He Consort with Tax Collectors & Sinners?

Matthew decided to host a celebration reception for Jesus that very day. **Like all new converts, he desperately wanted to introduce as many of his friends as possible to Jesus without delay.**

Luke tells us: a great number of tax collectors and others came to the banquet. The others would, of course, be the kind of low-lives who were willing to socialize with a group of tax collectors.

**That a Rabbi would be willing to associate with such people
was utterly repugnant to the Pharisees**

It was diametrically opposed to all their doctrines about separation and ceremonial

uncleanliness. **Jesus was openly violating their standards, knowing full well that they were watching him closely.**

Remember, all the friction that has taken place out in the open thus far between Jesus and the religious leaders has entirely been at his instigation.

Even now, **the Pharisees were not willing to complain to Jesus directly. They sought out his disciples and murmured their protest to them.** It was an attempt to blindside Jesus by provoking a debate with his followers. Luke Chapter 5, verse 30, says *“the Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling, at his disciples.”*

Jesus answered them directly, *“it is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

**For sinners seeking relief from the burden of their sin,
Jesus had nothing but good news.**

To the self-righteous religious experts, He had nothing to say at all.

Harsh? By postmodern standards there was virtually no possibility that a comment like this would help sway the Pharisees to Jesus' point of view. It was likelier to increase their hostility against him.

Yet it was the truth they needed to hear. The fact that they were not open to it did not alter Jesus' commitment to speaking the truth, without toning it down, without bending it to fit his audiences taste.

**Jesus never set the facts of the gospel aside
to speak to the “felt needs” of his audience instead.**

The Pharisees had no answer for Jesus... their attempts to discredit Jesus were by no means over. In fact, the Pharisees had only just begun to fight.

The Conflict Crystallizes

Near the mid-point of His 3-year ministry, in the 5th chapter of John's Gospel, we read: *“After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem”* (John 5:1). That trip resulted in **Jesus' next major showdown with the Sandhedrin.**

This is a crucial passage... marking a **major turning point** in Jesus' conflict with that Sanhedrin. After this incident, they were not content merely to discredit Him; they were determined to put Him to death (John 5:18).

From that point on, their challenges to His authority would be open, brazen, and increasingly shrill.

Likewise, the rebukes and admonitions Jesus aimed their way would become more and more severe from this point forward.

John 5:9 notes that Jesus healed on the Sabbath... **this is the turning point of the narrative, sparking a conflict that will mark yet another escalation of hostility between Jesus and the chief religious leaders.** From this point on, they will not rest or let Him rest – until they have completely eliminated Him.

Remember that matters concerning obedience on the Sabbath were the Pharisees' home turf. Jesus knew full well that they were almost fanatical about it. They had invented all kinds of restrictions for the day of rest, adding their own super-strict rules... in the name of tradition. They believed this was a pathway to greater holiness.

Ultra-strict Sabbatarian legalism thus became the defining cultural emblem of life & religion in Israel.

Jesus, however, refused to bow to the Pharisees' man-made rules. **Jesus broke their Sabbaths openly, repeatedly, and deliberately.**

The Sabbath traditions and His divine authority became the twin issues upon which all the Pharisees' conflicts with Jesus now crystallize.

Virtually every public controversy He will have with them from here on will be sparked either by His refusal to bow to their legalism, His claims of equality with God, or both.

Not Lawful To Carry Your Bed

Tradition demanded no one could walk thru Jerusalem carrying **anything** on the Sabbath.

Predictably, before the formally disabled man had traveled very far (after Jesus healed him), a band of religious authorities stopped him and challenged his right to carry his own sick-bed on the day of rest... (John 5:10).

The man explained that he had just received a miraculous healing, and that, "*He who made me well said to me, 'Take up your mat and walk'*" (v.11).

These religious leaders were more concerned about manmade traditions than they were with the well-being of a man who had suffered for such a long time.

It takes a peculiar brand of hyper-religious self-righteousness to behave as callously as these religious leaders did.

Jesus Equating Himself With God

“Afterward, Jesus found him in the temple and said to him; “*See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you*” (v.14).

We’re not told anything about the spiritual state of this man. Jesus did not declare his sins forgiven, as He had in the case of the paralytic at Capernaum. Nor did Christ comment on the man’s faith, as He often did when healing people.

Jesus’ solemn warning to the man suggests that his original illness may have been a direct consequence of some sin. The verb tense Jesus used literally means: “**don’t KEEP sinning.**”

Jesus’ admonition was a call to repentance, and that would indicate that the man had not yet come to faith in Christ. Jesus did sometimes heal people of their physical maladies before they came to saving faith (cf. John 9:35-38; Luke 17:11-19).

What especially calls this man’s faith into question is the way he reacted after meeting Jesus in the Temple and discovering the identity of the One who had healed him. If he expressed any praise, John doesn’t mention it. Instead, the text simply says: “the man departed” (John 5:15).

He not only departed the presence of Jesus; he went straight to the Jewish authorities who had confronted him and basically turned Jesus in.

It’s difficult to imagine any noble motive for him to go groveling to the religious leaders. In the worse case, the man was being sinfully self-serving; in the best case, he was being naively stupid.

As soon as the man confirmed who had healed him, the religious leaders make a beeline to Jesus and threatened Him with stoning. **Under the Mosaic Law, any violations of the Sabbath was grounds for stoning... So the religious leaders believed they had a convenient, biblically defensible motive for stoning Jesus... that’s why the Sabbath quickly became the central motif in their conflict with Him.** It also explains the obvious change in their strategy from here on out...

They are no longer trying merely to discredit Him; they are bent on destroying Him.

They began to watch Him with intense scrutiny on the Sabbaths. Hence forth, whenever Jesus heals on the Sabbath, there are always Pharisees present who will challenge Him.

Even though Jesus knew full well that every such occasion would provoke open conflict with them...

Jesus never once backed off.

Sometimes he announced to the Pharisees beforehand that He intended to work a miracle, practically daring them to condemn the act before He did it
(cf. **Matthew 12:10; Luke 14:3**)

He did this, not out of any love for contention, but because it was the best way to highlight the error and injustice that was embedded in the Pharisees' system.

Now their mood took a turn for the worse: *"Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God"* (John 5:18).

The accusation was true... He was indeed equating Himself with God.... then all hell broke loose against Him.

And yet, even here, Jesus' deadliest opponents, apparently fearful of His powerful presence and uncertain of what the public would think (cf. Matthew 24:46), suddenly faded into the background again.

Jesus, by contrast, stood resolutely against them.

Not only did Jesus claim to be equal with God in His person, but He also claimed equality with the Father in His works; *"Whatever [the Father] does, the Son also does in like manner"* (v.19).

Jesus also equated His own sovereignty with that of the Father: *"As the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will"* (v.21).

Jesus also proclaimed that the Son is worthy of honor equal to that of the Father (v.23).

So He was indeed making Himself equal with God. Jesus even went on to ascribe to Himself resurrection power in v.25.

Jesus said, despite their super-religious veneer, they did not have the love of God in them (v.42).

The whole discourse is one more example of Jesus' candid straight-forwardness. Much of what Jesus declares in this discourse serve as explicit denunciations of Israel's top religious leaders... including several statements that rebuke them as total unbelievers (v.44).

Jesus is not doing any bridge-building with the religious establishment here...

He portrays them as utterly unregenerate.

Jesus is not trying to provoke them merely for sport. He had a gracious reason for using the kind of harsh speech: ***"I say these things that you may be saved"*** (v.34).

The religious leaders were lost & progressively hardening their hearts...

They needed some harsh words.

Jesus would not permit them to ignore Him, or to ignore His truth.

Might Jesus have averted all further conflict with the Sanhedrin by toning down His message? Could He have softened their opposition? ***Perhaps***. But the cause of truth would not have been served... and the price of compromise would have been the loss of redemption for sinners.

Jesus was showing the utmost righteousness and grace even though He was deliberately provoking them.

The Aftermath

Jesus returned to Galilee... almost immediately His ministry was marked by a series of conflicts with the Pharisees over His repeated failure to observe the Sabbath on their terms.

The first Galilean conflict over the Sabbath occurred when some Pharisees observed Jesus' disciples picking grain on the Sabbath...

Jesus cited that works of necessity & acts of mercy override the strict requirements of ceremonial law.

He was making a clear distinction that the moral intent of the law always trumps picayune ceremonial technicalities.

Filled With Rage

Shortly thereafter Jesus healed a man with a withered hand (Luke 6:6) in a synagogue on the Sabbath... in v.7 we are told that Jesus knew the religious leaders were watching Him to see if He would heal on the Sabbath... He knew they wanted to accuse Him of wrong-doing and He said to the man with the withered hand: *“Get up and come forward!”*

Again Jesus deliberately did something that He knew would cause friction.

Jesus brought the man to the front of the synagogue and made the healing an emphatically public event. He even preceded the healing by openly challenging the Pharisees error (v.9).

Jesus made deliberate eye contact with each of His adversaries just before He healed the man: *“When He had looked around at them all, He said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand’” (v.10).*

The Pharisees were unmoved by the miracle. Instead, they were aroused with fury against Jesus. *“They were filled with rage” (v.11).*

Conventional wisdom of our age would suggest that the way Jesus handled His differences with these Pharisees was wrong... that He should have taken them aside privately... that He should have tried to be a bridge-builder vs. a wall-builder. Why pick a fight?

But again, Jesus was not provoking them for sport...

The bigger underlying issue was still the principle of justification and how sinners can be made right with God.

Justification is not earned by merit, nor is it gained thru rituals.

The difference between Jesus and the Pharisees was not that they had differing customs... they held contradictory views on the way of salvation.

The truth was too important to bury under the blanket of an fake civility.

The Gospel MUST be defended against lies and false teaching.

And the fact that gospel truth often offends even the most distinguished religious people is NEVER a reason for trying to tame the message or tone it down.

Jesus Himself is our model.

The religious authorities' course was set, and their hearts were steadily hardening. Their determination to see Jesus put to death developed into a full fledged plot.

Neither Jesus nor His religious adversaries showed any sign of backing down...

Chapter 6: *Hard Preaching*

“Does this offend you?” – John 6:61

Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees was not a quiet disagreement... Nor did Jesus seek to tone down the public aspect of His feud with the religious leaders.

Jesus had none of the scruples about propriety and politeness that are so prevalent in public theological discourse nowadays.

On the contrary, Jesus' preaching was probably the most important aspect of His relentless polemic/fight against the leaders of the Jewish religious establishment and the institutionalized hypocrisy they embodied.

The Pharisees' teaching was one of Jesus' primary targets
in His own preaching & teaching.

The whole theme of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) was a critique of the Pharisee's "religion."

He condemned their doctrine, their phony approach to practical holiness; their pedantic style of Scripture twisting; and their smug over-confidence.

The "Bread of Life" discourse in John 6 likewise provoked conflict with the Pharisees... In fact, most of Jesus' own "followers" became seriously uncomfortable here and "many followed Him no more."

In order to understand Jesus' preaching style, we need to examine a typical message or two... We especially need to note the main traits that epitomize the prophetic and provocative nature of Jesus' preaching.

The Sermon On The Mount

The Sermon on the Mount came about half way thru Christ's earthly ministry and it is His best known and longest recorded sermon.

Note the context... Just before preaching the sermon, Jesus went to the top of a nearby mountain and spent the entire night in prayer (Luke 6:17). At daybreak, He summoned His apostles and chose 12 of them to accompany Him on a daily basis. He also commissioned them to preach as His representatives. And He gave them authority to cast out demons.

The Beatitudes

Jesus' sermon begins with the "Beatitudes."

There are (8) beatitudes in Matthew's account, and combined, they describe the true nature of saving faith.

The first (4) beatitudes ("poor in spirit," "those who mourn," the meek," and "those who hunger & thirst after righteousness") are all INWARD QUALITIES of authentic faith. They describe the believer's state of heart... More specifically, they describe how the believer sees himself before God: poor, sorrowful, meek, & hungry.

The final (4) beatitudes ("the merciful," "pure in heart – a.k.a. holiness," "the peace-makers," and "persecuted for righteousness") describe the OUTWARD MANIFESTATIONS of the first (4) beatitudes. The final (4) focus mainly on the believer's moral character... they describe what the authentic Christian should look like.

The order is significant. The more faithfully a person lives out the first (7) beatitudes, the more he or she will experience the persecution spoken of in the 8th and final beatitude.

ALL of these beatitude qualities are radically at odds with the ways of the world and its inherent values.

Jesus could hardly have devised a list of virtues more at odds with His culture.

Consider this... the Pharisees, as a group, stood on the wrong side of every one of those lines in the sand.

Spiritual self-sufficiency defined their whole system.

They refused to acknowledge their sin, much less mourn over it.

The Beatitudes were a rebuke to the Pharisees' whole system.

If there is any doubt of His intentions, proof that Jesus MEANT to chide the Pharisees is seen throughout the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

In fact, the central message of the sermon is summed up in v.20: “I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes & Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The Beatitudes are merely an introduction, contrasting the spirit of authentic faith with the hypocrisy of pharisaical self-righteousness.

You Have Heard... But I Say

After the Beatitudes, Jesus goes straight into an extended discourse on the true meaning of the Old Testament. The rest of Matthew 5 is a systematic, point-by-point critique of the Pharisees’ interpretation of Moses’ law.

What is most important to notice here is that Jesus deliberately sets His description of authentic righteousness against the religion of the Pharisees.

That is the singular theme that ties the whole sermon together.

The brunt of the Sermon on the Mount is aimed squarely at the Pharisees.

Jesus was publicly denouncing what they taught.

**Jesus made no effort to make the dichotomy subtle...
He even mentioned the Pharisees by name
and expressly stated that their righteousness was inadequate.**

He began dismantling their whole system...

Jesus went for the jugular against their most closely held beliefs.

The major arguments in this section of the sermon are structured in a way that contrasts the Pharisee’s interpretation of the law with the law’s real meaning... “You have heard that it was said... BUT I say to you...” **Six times in the second half of Matthew 5, Jesus used that formula or a variation of it (vv.21-22, 26-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44).**

Superficial readers are sometimes inclined to think Jesus was modifying or raising the bar on the standard of Moses’ law... or that He was making a new law that stood in contrast to what the Old Testament had always taught. But Jesus denied both of those notions in vv.17-18.

Jesus is actually unpacking the true & full meaning of the law as it was originally intended.

The Sermon on the Mount must be understood as Jesus' exposition of the Old Testament law, not a different moral standard altogether.

He was simply refuting the Pharisees' false teaching about the law's moral precepts.

Matthew 5 ends with a brief passage aimed at the Pharisees' self-righteous style of separatism. It is part of the section where Jesus is expounding on the duty to love one's neighbors.

The law demands absolute perfection... No sinner can possibly live up to that standard, which is why we are dependent on grace for salvation. Our own righteousness can never be good enough (Philippians 3:4-9).

The Pharisees epitomized the central fallacy of all human religion...
seeking to establish their own righteousness.

They believed their best WOULD be "good enough."

Jesus was as direct as possible. He could hardly have spoken any words that would hit them harder.

According to Jesus, the Pharisees' religion was utterly worthless.

Do Not Be Like The Hypocrites

Jesus was far from finished... Most of Matthew 6 continues with a hammering, point by point critique of the most visible traits of Pharisaism.

Chapter 5 was a warm-up for chapter 6

Where chapter 5 critiqued all the misinterpretations of the law, chapter 6 addresses the main "badges of honor" within the Pharisees' religion

Most of Matthew 6 is about Jesus contrasting the religious exhibitionism of the Pharisees with the authentic faith He had described in the Beatitudes.

Faith has its primary impact on the heart of the believer.

The Pharisees' religion, by contrast, was mainly for show.

Pharisee-style religion is motivated mainly by a craving for the praise of men (v.2).

Jesus was using sanctified mockery to expose their system.

Today's over-tolerant evangelical sub-culture deems such satire as cruel. Yet Jesus went even further, rebuking the hypocrisy of their loud, long public prayers.

It was at this point that Jesus first gave the model prayer that has become known as the Lord's Prayer. **That prayer's brevity, simplicity, and Godward focus set it apart from the Pharisees' style of praying.**

Next, Jesus turned to the subject of fasting... **Legitimate fasting is supposed to be a means of helping us set aside worldly concerns in order to focus on prayer & spiritual things.**

The Pharisees instead had turned their fasting into another means of parading their piety in public, proving again that they could not have cared less about heavenly things.

What the Pharisees really cared about was worldly applause... and Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of it.

Jesus was condemning the Pharisees' infatuation with external things... which showed them to be pathologically superficial.

When Jesus says, "**Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.**" He was teaching yet another truth that directly assaulted the Pharisee's value system (v.33).

Bad Trees, Bad Fruit

Matthew 7 continues and concludes the Sermon on the Mount with some of Jesus' most devastating denunciations of Pharisaism.

Jesus starts off by conjuring up imagery of someone with a large piece of wood imbedded in his eye trying to remove a tiny speck from someone else's eye (vv.1-5). This is yet another verbal caricature about the Pharisees.

It is crucial to understand verse 1 properly...

"Judge not, that you be not judged" is not a blanket condemnation of all kinds of judgments – just the hypocritical, superficial, and misguided kinds of judgments the Pharisees made.

The context makes clear that this is a call for charity and generosity in the judgments we make, *“For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back on you”* (v.2).

Jesus’ own words make it clear that He expects us to make discerning judgments, because He goes on to say in v.6: *“Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine.”*

“Swine” & “dogs” in that verse refer to people who are chronically antagonistic to the gospel.

Obviously, in order to obey that command, we have to know who the swine and dogs are.

So.... we MUST judge carefully and biblically.

What is most intriguing here is that Jesus was clearly alluding to the Pharisees – not the Gentiles and moral outcasts who were normally labeled “swine” & “dogs.”

In short, **swine & dogs represent the spiritual antitheses of “those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.”**

NOTE: Jesus deliberately concealed truth from arrogant and self-righteous people... His parables served this very purpose...

NOTE: Although the Sermon on the Mount is full of criticisms aimed at Pharisee-style religiosity, remember that it started with words of grace for the poor in spirit, parched souls, and the pure in heart.

As Jesus begins to close... His message returns to the same theme.

Jesus’ sermon summary is a single verse... the so-called Golden Rule... (v.12). **Jesus said the true governing moral principal of the law, rightly understood, is LOVE** – meaning preemptively doing to others what you want them to do to you.

Jesus made it clear that the law demands love for God as well as love for one’s neighbors.

Matthew 5:45 states that loving one’s neighbors is the way to be like our heavenly Father.

The Broad Way To Destruction

The final plea of the Sermon on the Mount is a general invitation to **“enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it...”**

The narrow gate and difficult road are references to the gospel’s demand for total self-denial and humility – and all the other qualities highlighted in the beatitudes.

Proud & unbroken sinners ALWAYS choose the wrong road.

The broad road is wide enough for everyone from total libertines to the strictest Pharisees. All of them like it because no one has to bow low or leave any baggage behind.

Notwithstanding the truth, ALL the road signs promise heaven.

Jesus says the world is full of false prophets who steer people onto the broad road. **Beware of them.** They *“come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves”* (v.15) & *“You will know them by their fruits.”*

This was a verbal portrait of the Pharisees.

Moreover, Jesus repeats what John the Baptist has prophesied earlier... *“...every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”* (7:17-20).

No one could possibly miss the fact that Jesus was stepping directly on the toes of the Pharisees & Sadducees.

A Message For The Masses

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that the Sermon on the Mount was only – or even mainly – preached for the benefit of Israel’s hypocritical religious leaders...

Jesus was speaking to EVERYONE on the broad road.

NOTE: His description of the judgment that awaits the broad road travelers is chilling... See for yourself by reading **Matthew 7:21-27**. Notice how many times you read the word **“many.”**

NOTE: The “many” refer to **people who profess to be Christians/disciples...**

More Hard Words For Disciples

Christ’s closing words in the Sermon on the Mount left people breathless... People weren’t exactly delighted by Jesus’ approach. They were “astonished” at first, but soon they would grow angry.

The more Jesus preached, the more His messages were filled with rebukes and urgent pleas for repentance.

NOTE: Jesus was never impressed with the size or enthusiasm of the crowds.

Jesus was not interested in accumulating the kind of disciples whose main concern was for what they might get out of the relationship.

Jesus never upholstered His message to make it more cushy for popular opinion, and He never turned down the rhetorical heat in order to keep the congregation comfortable.

If anything, **His approach was the EXACT OPPOSITE...** He seemed to do everything He could to disquiet the merely curious who were unconverted.

Matthew 11:20-24 records another sermon that Jesus preached shortly after the Sermon on the Mount. In that sermon, Jesus began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done – primarily because they had not repented...

Christ’s harsh words of reproof signaled another major change in Jesus’ public ministry. **From this time forth, He moved around more and increased His focus on private instruction for a steadily decreasing circle of the most devoted disciples...** His discourses tended to be more urgent and more severe.

The Bread Of Life Discourse

John 6 contains one of the best-known examples of Jesus’ hard preaching.

John 6 also chronicles the rejection of Jesus by a large number of people who had once followed Him closely enough to be numbered among His “disciples.”

When Jesus’ message began to sound harsh and offensive, they turned away in droves.

At the start of John 6 enthusiastic multitudes were coming to see Jesus from far away regions. The people were excited about His miracles and were devoted “enough” to come and “learn” from Him in person.

The natural human response to such dynamics would be to take this as a wholly positive sign that Jesus was making a major impact on His culture... It looked like it might be the start of a grassroots movement that had the potential of influencing the whole world...

But the big picture was not nearly as positive as it first appeared... **Jesus’ strategy was not to accumulate “crowds” whose main interest was seeing miracles.**

His energies were focused on training (11) disciples who were the back-bone of His entire plan.

His (11) disciples were the key to the church’s eventual world-wide expansion.

As for the crowds, there were no doubt many true believers among them, as well as many half-hearted hangers-on. **Jesus fearlessly & unapologetically gave them ALL the gospel message – in unvarnished terms.**

Jesus was impossible to ignore...
and the truth He taught was impossible to miss.

John 6 is a record of how all the good will that was generated around Jesus’ miracles gave way to anger and outrage because of the message Jesus proclaimed.

The massive crowds dwindled down to virtually nothing in the course of a few verses.

John 6 continues with the proofs of Jesus’ deity as He feeds the 5,000, walks on water, and declares Himself to be the “Bread of Life.”

When word got out that Jesus had fed the 5,000... many followed Him the next day hoping to see and benefit from a repeat performance.

Jesus’ begins his message by rebuking the multitudes for their motives.

Jesus wanted to talk about spiritual matters.... but the people were only willing to listen if He would give them physical food (v.31).

The people were basically looking to make a deal with Jesus: they would believe in Him if He would agree to supply them with physical food every day...

NOTE: Jesus “could have” given them the food they wanted... By today’s standards, that would be a very “seeker sensitive” way to ensure your crowds would not shrink...

Who would not be willing to forsake everything and become His disciple if He would promise a life of ease, complete with perpetual food supplied from heaven? **But Jesus was not there to barter for their faith by doing miracles on demand. Instead, He simply told them: “I Am the Bread of Life.”**

The crowd immediately began to murmur because it was clear that Jesus was implying that He was more than a mere man...

Jesus met their murmuring head on. **“He who believes in Me has everlasting life” (v.47).** Here Jesus was giving them the heart of the gospel... by laying out the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

When the people did not like or understand that Jesus was connecting Himself with the Passover lamb, NOTICE... Jesus did not stop the grumbling and say: “Hey... you don’t understand... Let me explain what I mean...”

They had shown no interest in understanding so Jesus continued with His difficult analogy. In fact, He pressed the metaphor even harder (vv.53-56).

The more Jesus resisted their interest in literal food and pressed into the analogy of eating His flesh & drinking His blood spiritually, the angrier the crowd became and the more offensive His words sounded to them...

Eventually, even some of His disciples began to grumble & eventually walk away.

Jesus knew from the beginning who would walk away and betray Him... (v.64).

Twice in this discourse Jesus said explicitly: **“none can come after Me unless the Father draws him.”**

From that time on, **“many of His disciples followed Him no more” (v.66).** They heard Jesus preach, they saw Him do miracles, they even followed Him around like genuine disciples. But they turned away without ever really knowing what it was to have a true disciple’s heart. **They had not come to know saving faith.**

NOTE: Jesus did not chase after them... Once the others left, Jesus turned to the 12 disciples and asked: “Do you want to leave also?”

NOTE: Jesus declares that He chose the 12... AND that one of them was a devil! He was not being pugnacious, though many of today’s sensitive evangelicals would no doubt accuse Him of being so...

Too many sensitive evangelicals today think conflict is always unspiritual.

Jesus was being truthful in a bold, clear way that was calculated to force them to declare whether or not they too loved the truth.

Jesus was asking the TRUE disciples to declare themselves such... He was forcing the half-hearted fence-sitters to pick one side or the other.

Clearly, there were aspects of the Pharisees’ doctrine that Jesus could have utilized to build upon if He was seeking to find and exploit “common ground” to build His crowd.

Jesus did the exact opposite – deliberately!

Jesus was not interested in adding to the ranks of half-hearted disciples.

Jesus preached to declare truth... not win the accolades of men.

For those who were not interested in hearing the truth, He did not try to make it easier to receive...

Instead, He made His words impossible to ignore.

Not A Tame Preacher

Let’s be candid: **Jesus’ preaching was nothing like most of the “popular” preaching we hear today.** His preaching would not create the kind of “feel good” atmosphere that so many Christians like nowadays.

Ask most church-goers today what constitutes great preaching & you will likely hear things like: *trendiness, funny anecdotes, slick packaging, short, stylish, topical homilies on themes borrowed from pop culture.*

Favorite preaching topics include: marriage, sex, human relationships, self-improvement, personal success, the pursuit of happiness, & anything else that pleases audiences.

Such shenanigans come under the rubric of relevance by most contemporary church-growth strategists.

Sadly, sermons that contain straight Bible exposition, detailed doctrine, tough truths, or negative sounding topics are strongly discouraged...

Many people filling churches that claim to be evangelical are demanding the first category of preaching and walking away from the second.

“Speak to us smooth things” (Isaiah 30:10) is their constant demand.

Teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16-17) **are out...** *Catering to itching ears* (2 Timothy 4:3) **is in.**

Many modern pastors study pop culture as diligently as the old Puritan pastors used to study the Scriptures.

Many modern pastors let congregational opinion polls determine what they preach, and they are prepared to shift directions quickly if that latest survey tells them that their approval rating is beginning to drop.

That is precisely what Paul told Timothy NOT to do... “Preach the Word!”

The contemporary craving for shallow sermons that please and entertain is at least partly rooted in the popular myth that Jesus was always “likable,” agreeable, and winsome.

Even a cursory look at Jesus’ preaching ministry reveals a totally different picture. Jesus’ sermons usually featured hard truths, harsh words, and high-octane controversy.

Christ’s own disciples complained that His preaching was too hard to hear!

Jesus’ preaching heads the list of things that make Him impossible to ignore.

No preacher has ever been more bold, prophetic, or provocative.

Jesus made it impossible for any hearer to walk away indifferent.

Some left angry; some were deeply troubled by what He had to say; many had their eyes opened; and many more hardened their hearts against His message. Some became His disciples, and other became His adversaries.

No one who listened to Him preach for very long could possibly remain unchanged or apathetic.

Qt: "I believe it to be a grave mistake to present Christianity as something charming and popular with no offense in it. Seeing that Christ went about the world giving the most violent offense to all kinds of people, it would seem absurd to expect that the doctrine of His person can be so presented as to offend nobody. We cannot blink at the fact that gentle Jesus, meek and mild, was so stiff in His opinions and so inflammatory in His language that He was thrown out of church, stoned, hunted from place to place, and finally gibbeted as a firebrand and a public danger. Whatever His peace was, it was NOT the peace of an amiable indifference." - Dorothy Sayers

Chapter 7: Unpardonable Sin

One other major turning point in Jesus' public dealing with the Jewish leaders must be mentioned. Some of the Pharisees suddenly went from accusing Jesus of blasphemy to committing an unpardonable blasphemy of their own.

Jesus was about to pronounce their sin UN-forgivable.

After the Sermon on the Mount but before the events of John 6, Jesus had a significant run-in with a group of Pharisees.

The Pharisees were so set on discrediting Jesus that they committed an act of gross blasphemy against the Spirit of God and thereby sealed their doom with absolute finality.

Jesus' condemnation of their blasphemy stands out as one of the most chilling warnings in all of Scripture.

The Pharisees would have hated Him no matter what He did, as long as He refused to affirm and honor them... Their own words revealed their evil hearts.

NOTE: the crucifixion was still at least a year away at this point... In the meantime, the Pharisees would resort to whatever means they could to discredit Him.

From here on, whenever Jesus taught in public, the Sanhedrin had their representatives there.

The Healing & Deliverance

“Then one was brought to Him who was demon-possessed, blind, and mute; and He healed him...” (Matthew 12:22).

The miracle was instantaneous, comprehensive, and triumphant on multiple levels.

Matthew tells us that “multitudes” witnessed the miracle. The response was unusually strong... they were “amazed” – a Greek word that suggests that they were practically out of their mind with awe... No doubt, because the man’s case was so severe.

No one, including the Pharisees, could dispute the fact of the miracle.

The miracle had the Pharisees seriously pondering the possibility that Jesus might indeed be the promised Messiah.

The Blasphemy

Hearing the multitudes affinity toward Jesus, the Pharisees reacted quickly with the strongest denunciation of Jesus they could possibly put into words: *“This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.”*

Beelzebub was a name borrowed and slightly altered from Baal-zebub (literally, “lord of the flies”), a diety of the Philistines (2 Kings 1:2-3, 6, 16). This name was used of Satan in Jesus’ time...

In other words, the Pharisees immediately began to insist that the power to perform the miracle came straight from Satan.

As usual, they muttered that charge in the midst of the multitudes, but out of the direct ear-shot of Jesus.

They did not want another public confrontation with Jesus... Every public clash with Him ended in embarrassment for them.

The Pharisees were not bold enough to confront Christ directly.

See Jesus' omniscience... particularly His ability to know what is going on in people's hearts, which has been **a consistent theme in His disputes with the Pharisees**

NOTE: You and I cannot assess/trust other people's hearts, much less our own (Proverbs 28:26; 1 Samuel 16:7; John 7:24). Therefore, we are also cautioned repeatedly to deal with others as patiently and as gently as possible.

IMPORTANT: So let's be clear... Jesus' harshness with the Pharisees does not give us an unrestricted license to deal roughly with others every time we happen to disagree.

Gentleness should characterize our relationships with people, including those who persecute us (Luke 6:27-36).

LOVE "suffers long and is kind... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4 & 7).

NEVERTHELESS... Jesus' constant friction with the Pharisees does show that conflict is sometimes necessary.

Harsh words are not always inappropriate.

Unpleasant and unwelcome truths sometimes need to be voiced.

False religion always needs to be answered.

Gross hypocrisy of false teachers desperately needs to be uncovered – lest our silence perpetuates a damning delusion.

The truth is not always "nice."

In this case, Jesus took the Pharisees' murmured accusation, set it front and center before the whole multitude, and then deconstructed the logic of the charge.

**FURTHERMORE... Jesus drew a stark line in the sand:
"He who is not with Me is against Me" (v.30).**

Those on-looking could not remain half-hearted and aloof while pretending to be His followers...

By trying to sit on the fence between Jesus and the Pharisees, many were actually hardening their hearts against Christ. **Judas was the classic example of this...** He had never once been overtly hostile against Jesus... UNTIL the day he betrayed Him.

That made it clear that Judas was never really *with* Jesus to begin with (1 John 4:19).

There are more people like that in evangelical churches than the typical Christian imagines... Such people may identify with Jesus superficially and blend in well with true disciples, but they are not truly committed to Him and therefore **they are “against” Him.**

Jesus’ line in the sand was a challenge to such people... calling them to examine themselves honestly at the heart level.

For the Pharisees that uttered the blasphemy, Jesus had even stronger words...

Brood Of Vipers!

Jesus was pronouncing a final judgment of damnation against these Pharisees right then and there (vv.31-32; also cf. Mark 3:28-30).

Jesus referred directly back to them: “**Brood of Vipers!... For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks**” (Matthew 12:34).

Their own words demonstrated their true character (v.33)...

Their condemnation was just.

Forgiveness & Unforgivability

People are often troubled that there is “unforgivable sin.” Some worry they might have inadvertently committed it...

NOTE: These Pharisees were guilty of unpardonable sin because they knowingly – not in ignorance or by accident, but DELIBERATELY – wrote Jesus’ work off as the work of the devil.

Their blasphemy simply demonstrated beyond a doubt how inexorably hardened their hearts had become. They turned on Him and did all they could to get as many others as possible to do the same...

Blasphemy is a sin motivated by the intention of dishonoring God.

Of all sins, this one is purely and simply an act of defiance against God.

NOTICE that Jesus refers to the unpardonable sin as “the” blasphemy against the Spirit (Matthew 12:31). The use of the definite article (“the”) is significant. Jesus clearly was speaking about one particular act of blasphemy – the ultimate, conclusive, in-your-face expression of blasphemy.

Some people labor under the delusion that if they even question any of the various phenomena that people claim are manifestations of the Holy Spirit’s power today, they risk committing an unpardonable sin...
Consequently, their fear squelches their discernment.

Jesus was dealing with one very specific exhibition of gross blasphemy, and THAT is what He said was unforgivable. It was the sin of those Pharisees: closing one’s heart permanently against Christ even after the Holy Spirit has brought full conviction of the truth.

Jesus’ miracles were done in the power of the Holy Spirit... yet the Pharisees claimed He was operating in Satan’s power. In effect, they were calling the Holy Spirit the devil – giving the devil credit for what the Spirit of God had done.

The fact is, their hearts were already settled. **They would never believe, no matter what Jesus ever did or said. Therefore, their sin was unforgivable.**

Immediately after that day, Jesus began to teach in parables (13:3 & 34)

The parables were at least in part an expression of judgment against the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees. Jesus made this clear by quoting Isaiah 6:9-10 & 44:18 in His words recorded in Mark 4:11-12.

If Israel’s religious elite were so determined to reject the truth, He would conceal the truth from them with parables, while using those same parables to illustrate the truth for His disciples.

Jesus always withstood the religious leaders, and He invariably put them to silence.

He often warned His disciples about the tendencies of the Pharisees' system, referring to their hypocrisy as "leaven."

In the end, during that final week before the crucifixion, He would sum up His views about Israel's religious leaders and their hypocrisy in a scalding diatribe in their front yard – the Temple...

That (last) sermon would leave them fuming and outraged, and it would seal their determination to kill Him as soon as they possibly could.

Chapter 8: Woe

"See! Your house is left to you desolate."

(Matthew 23:38)

Matthew 23 records the last public sermon Jesus ever preached.

Matthew 23's sermon is a powerful onslaught of rebuke against the religious sins of Israel... and her *leaders* in particular.

It was the middle of Passion Week. The events began as Jesus entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey (as the O.T. said the Messiah would do), with the shouts of "**Hosanna!**" reverberating through the city.

However... the people did NOT want Jesus' hard preaching.

The people were shocked that Jesus seemed more interested in challenging their religious institutions than He was in conquering Rome.

The people were stunned to see Jesus treat their religious elite as if they were pagans.

Jesus spent more time calling ISRAEL to repentance than He did criticizing her oppressors.

On top of that, the people did not appreciate Jesus' refusal to be Messiah on *THEIR* terms (see John 6:15).

Before the week was over, the same crowd who praised Him with Hosannas would be screaming for His blood.

Not In My Father's House

On Tuesday morning of that fateful week, **Jesus repeated the cleansing of the Temple.** Almost 3 years to the day had passed since He first came on the scene as a Prophet with a whip.

Mark 11:15-18 gives the fullest account of the second Temple clearing/cleansing...

It makes perfect sense that Jesus would conclude His ministry by making the very same point He made at the onset...

What is truly remarkable is that Jesus did not do this every time He visited Jerusalem over the course of His ministry... He did it just once at the beginning & then again at the end, bracketing His public ministry.

These dramatic public displays of Jesus' divine authority highlight His opposition to the religious institutions.

NOTE: the Temple courts became both classroom and headquarters for Jesus' public teaching ministry... right under the Sanhedrins' nose. During that final week, the religious leaders repeatedly challenged Him, trying to trap Him or confound Him in some way.

"But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him."

(John 12:37)

Making An Impact

Some might wonder why Jesus continued teaching in the Temple when He knew the hearts of so many of His hearers were dull and cold...

He was fully aware of where all this was headed.

A pragmatist might suggest that He ought to have kept a lower profile – perhaps even gone under-ground... rather than continually antagonize people whom He knew would never believe anyway.

But as we have seen consistently from the very start, *THE TRUTH MATTERED MORE TO JESUS THAN HOW PEOPLE FELT ABOUT IT.*

Jesus wasn't looking for ways to just make people "like" Him

Jesus was calling people who were willing to bow to Him unconditionally as their Lord.

Jesus stressed (and reiterated again and again) the points of doctrine that were most at odds with the conventional wisdom of Pharisaism.

NOTICE: Christ's own strategy would not likely be any more welcome in the typical 21st century evangelical church... than it was by the Sanhedrin in His day...

YET... in modest but significant ways, Jesus was making an impact...

"Nevertheless, even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees, they did not confess Him – lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." – John 12:42-43

SADLY... it seems the vast majority of them were convinced but uncommitted... and therefore, not yet authentic believers.

Clearly, some of them continued to be double-minded.

NOTE: some of the earliest heretics in the primitive church were former Jewish leaders who had been persuaded of the truth about Christ, but rather than repenting of their own self-righteousness, they had dragged their pharisaical perspective into the church, corrupting the message of Christianity.

That is why the apostle Paul was so emphatic about His own breaking from Pharisaism. He described his former religion as "dung" in **Philippians 3:8**.

Among the common people, spurious faith and half-hearted Messianic hope in Jesus was likewise a significant problem.

Insufficient faith has always been a significant problem.

John 6 described in detail how such half-hearted faith so quickly gave way to hostility.

Yet, there was remnant in both groups – the Jewish leaders and the common people – who either were or would become true disciples.

Jesus kept preaching for their benefit.

The Final Sermon

The content of Jesus' final message demonstrates that He was teaching not only for the benefit of the believing remnant, but also as a final warning and instruction to the Jewish leaders themselves.

He delivered His message *“to the crowds and to His disciples”* (Matthew 23:1).

Jesus still knew their thoughts and He confronted the people more directly than ever before.

Jesus used some of the sharpest language He ever employed...

He called them names & pronounced woe after woe against them. (“Woe” was the strongest conceivable prophetic curse.)

He let loose with waves of condemnation against their hypocrisy, their scripture twisting, and their self-righteousness.

How To Lose Friends & Inflame Enemies

From His opening words to His final sentence, Jesus was stern, candid, passionate, and intense – **even fierce.**

Someone might allege that His message and style were insensitive and hurtful to His intended audience. That would be a **GROSS** misjudgment.

What would have been **TRULY HURTFUL** would have been for Jesus to pretend the spiritual danger posed by the Pharisees' doctrine and behavior was not really so grave after all.

So... as ALWAYS... Jesus told them what the most needed to hear, declaring the truth to them in unvarnished language.

The tenor of His words reminds us that spiritual warfare is just that: warfare. It is a fierce conflict against spiritual lies, damnably erroneous doctrine, and destructive false religion.

NOTE: Jesus was the most sensitive Person ever to walk the earth, and yet in circumstances like these, He refused to tone down the message or handle His spiritual adversaries as fragile souls.

Too much was at stake.

Jesus began His message mocking the Pharisees' proud self-righteousness and calling His followers to be as humble as the Pharisees were arrogant: (read **Matthew 23:2-12**)

The root problem was their belief system, not jus their behavior.

What Jesus abhorred about them was not what they said people should or shouldn't do; it was their failure to live in accord with their own teaching.

The Pharisees were concerned with how they were perceived by other people but NOT so concerned with what God thought of them.

“Don't be like the religious leaders...” that was the starting point and underlying message on the whole sermon.

Then Jesus turned His attention directly to the scribes & Pharisees:
“But woe to you, scribes & Pharisees, you hypocrites!” (v.13).

From that point on to the end of the message, Jesus speaks directly to the Jewish leaders – with His most blistering attack on them to date.

It is worth reading the entire portion that was addressed directly to Israel's religious leaders.

While Jesus had said many of these same things before, this was the first time where it is recorded that Jesus had made such a sustained attack on official Judaism publicly – in Jerusalem, at the Temple, no less.

Eight (8) times Jesus pronounces “woe” against them.

Remember... the Sermon on the Mount began with eight (8) “beatitudes.” These pronouncements of “woe” are the polar OPPOSITE of the beatitudes.

These (8) woes, by contrast, are curses rather than beatitude blessings.

NOTE: yet even in the curses, there is a poignancy that reflects Jesus' sorrow. He is not expressing a preference for their condemnation, because, after all, He came to save, not to condemn (John 3:17).

The other word that dominates this sermon besides “woe” is “HYPOCRITES” – which likewise appears EIGHT (8) times.

Jesus' (8) declarations of “hypocrites” included references to their: **Pretentious Praying** (v.14); **Misguided Motives** (v.15); **Swearing** by Things that are Holy (v.18-22); **Loose Vows** (v.18-22); Perverted **Priorities** (v.23-24); and above all their Horrible **Hypocrisy** (v.27-31).

One other characteristic that makes this sermon stand out is Jesus' liberal use of derogatory epithets.

Those who think name-calling is inherently un-Christ-like and always inappropriate will have a very hard time with this sermon.

In addition to the (8) times Jesus emphatically called them “**hypocrites!**” He calls them “**blind guides**” (vv.16, 24); “**fools and blind!**” (vv.17, 19); “**blind Pharisees!**” (v.26); and “**serpents... brood of vipers!**” (v.33).

Jesus was not attempting to persuade them with smooth words or a friendly overture...

Jesus told them the truth... exactly what the Pharisees (and those who were being influenced by them) desperately needed to hear.

Not So Meek And Mild

Sadly, this sermon was also a pronouncement of final judgment against the religious leaders and their followers.

At the end of the message, Jesus said: “**See! Your house is left to you desolate**” He was pronouncing **ICHABOD** (“the glory has departed”) on the Temple.

NOTICE... Jesus referred to the Temple as *“My Father’s house”* in John 2:16 when He first came thru clearing & cleansing... BUT NOW... Jesus refers to the temple (after declaring that God’s glory has departed from it)... as *“your house.”*

Remember... we can learn a lot from observing how Jesus dealt with false religions/teachers.

The boldness with which Jesus assaulted heresy is very much in short supply today, and the church is suffering because of it.

We don’t need to return to the brand of fundamentalism whose leaders fought all the time over practically anything and everything...

However, the very last thing we can afford to do in these post-modern times, while the enemies of truth are devoted to making everything fuzzy, would be to pledge a moratorium on candor or agree to a cease-fire with people who delight in testing the limits of orthodoxy.

We MUST REMEMBER that being friendly & amiable is sometimes simply the WRONG thing to do (cf. Nehemiah 6:2-4).

Someone who makes a loud profession of faith but constantly fails to live up to it needs to be exposed for his or her own soul’s sake.

More than that, those who set themselves up as teachers representing the Lord and influencing others while corrupting the truth need to be denounced and refuted.

We MUST confront and refute such people for their own sake, for the sake of those who are victimized by their errors, and especially for the glory of Christ!

NOTE: Jesus reminded us of this necessity in the last biblical passage in which He spoke to His Church.

Epilogue:

“I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants.”

(Revelation 2:20)

To be crucified was the most drawn-out and demeaning form of execution they could possibly subject Jesus to...

Thus, the conspiracy first hatched in John 11:43 had finally come to fruition. And the true evil of Israel's religious establishment was manifest in the most wicked act of cruelty & injustice ever committed.

The “*sons of those who murdered the prophets*” (Matthew 23:31)
finally murdered their Messiah.

Walking As He Walked

Some people question whether Christ is really the example we should follow in confronting error because, after all, He was God incarnate... and we are not. He could see into people's hearts, read their thoughts, and can't. Moreover, they would rightly say, we are prone to error...

Plus... (*their argument would continue...*) didn't Jesus say we should NOT try to separate wheat from tares (weeds)? *“Lest while you gather up the weeds you also uproot the wheat with them. [But] let both grow together until the harvest”* (Matthew 13:29-30).

Moreover... didn't Jesus say: *“Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned”* (Luke 6:37).

Who are we, some say, to step into that role and usurp authority that is explicitly given to Christ.

That is EXACTLY RIGHT when it comes to judging the **SECRETS** of men's hearts – their motives & private thoughts.

We cannot see those things, so we cannot judge them... We're not even supposed to try (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:4-5; Romans 14:4; Romans 2:16).

NOTE: the whole point of the parable of the wheat & the weeds is that the weeds ("tares") LOOK exactly like wheat in every superficial way. Until they bear fruit and it ripens it is virtually impossible to tell wheat from weeds.

The weeds therefore, represent people who look and act like Christians – false professors. They blend into the fellowship of the church, give a fine-sounding testimony about their faith in Christ, and otherwise seem exactly like authentic believers.

**But they are not authentic.
Their faith is a sham.
They are unregenerate hangers-on.**

From time to time, one of the weeds will abandon the faith completely, embrace some damnable heresy, and/or sell out to some sin. In such cases, we ARE supposed to CONFRONT the individual, CALL them to REPENTANCE, and PUT THEM OUT of the church if they steadfastly refuse to repent (Matthew 18:15-18).

Read 1 John 2:19.

NOTICE: people who actively TEACH serious error – especially doctrines that corrupt vital gospel truth – are to be confronted and opposed.

Their false ideas & claims are to be refuted.

They are to be called to repentance... and if they refuse and continue to assault against truth, we have a duty to denounce their error and do everything we can to thwart their efforts to spread it.

NOTE: such false teachers are not "tares" to be tolerated in the Church; they are accursed antichrists (1 John 2:18) to be exposed.

Unrepentant false teachers are not "weeds" but wolves! - JDP

Read Galatians 1:6-9!

Read 2 John 7-11!

At the same time, NEVER forget... We do indeed need to exercise due caution in making judgments about the gravity of someone else's error and... **We must NEVER judge superficially.**

"We all stumble in many things." - James 3:2

Almost every time the Bible holds up Christ as our example to follow, the stress is on His humility – especially His willingness to bear personal insult without lashing back or being belligerent... see 1 Peter 2:20-23.

Immediately after washing the disciples' feet Jesus said: *"I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you"* (John 13:15).

John writes in 1 John 2:6.... ***"He who says he abides in Him (Jesus) ought himself also to walk just as Jesus walked."***

NOTE: the context of 1 John 2:6 is **ALL ABOUT LOVE.**

Following Christ's steps starts with being willing to give of oneself – being willing to suffer as He suffered, loving as He loved, and being humble as He was humble.

"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, & self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Scripture commends meekness, commands us to be peace-makers, instructs us to be gentle, and forbids us to judge what we cannot appraise righteously.

Judge With Righteous Judgment

But none of that gives us any reason to suspend judgment altogether.

In fact, it would be sinful to stop judging altogether...

DISCERNMENT is every Christian's DUTY!

*“Test all things; hold fast what is good.
Abstain from every form of evil.”*
(1 Thessalonians 5:21-22)

“Judge with righteous judgment”
(John 7:24)

We are also called to be soldiers for the cause of Truth. The spiritual conflict between the forces of darkness and the truth of God is, after all, WAR.

That means we have some fighting to do.

**The popular notion that “conflict”
is always to be avoided is simply WRONG.**

There are times when we MUST BE CONFRONTATIONAL
rather than collegial.

*“For there are many rebellious people, both idle talkers & deceivers,
especially those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be silenced.”*
(Titus 1:10-11)

If you wince at that...
**you need to review & rethink what the entire
New Testament says about false teachers and how
Christians should respond to them.**

A Final Word From Christ

Jesus’ crucifixion did not put an end to His conflict with false religion – neither did His ascension into heaven.

In His final recorded message to the Church, given to the apostle John in a vision (Revelation) decades after Christ’s resurrection & ascension, we see that the silencing of false teachers was still one of our Lord’s primary concerns – even from His throne in heaven.

In Revelation chapters 2 & 3, Jesus addressed (7) churches...

Only (2) churches were commended for their faithfulness without any hint of rebuke. Both of the those churches had remained true to Christ despite the influence of “**those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan**” - (Rev. 2:9 & 3:9).

All (5) other churches received various measures of rebuke, based on how corrupt, unfaithful, or spiritually lethargic they were.

It's as if they were utterly insensible to the INTERNAL dangers that came with a tolerant attitude toward deviant doctrines.

Their lack of zeal, lack of energy, and lack of life was a direct result of their failure to keep themselves pure.

**They had not been sufficiently wary of false teaching...
Consequently, they had not remained devoted to Christ alone.**

A prominent theme in practically all Jesus' messages to those (7) churches is the issue of how they responded to false teachers & rank heretics in their midst.

The warnings Christ gave them are chilling reminders that churches do go bad.

When churches do go bad...

It is almost never because they succumb to dangers from the outside. Rather, it is almost always because they let down their guard & allow false doctrines to be disseminated freely inside the church.

Apathy usually sets in, followed inevitably by spiritual disaster.

The (7) letters of Revelation to the (7) churches... makes it quite clear...

Battling heresy is a duty that Christ expects EVERY Christian to be devoted to.

Whether we like it or not, our very existence in this world involves spiritual warfare... (read Ephesians 6:10ff)

Life was never intended to be a party or a picnic.

Our Lord Jesus Christ's style of ministry ought to be our model...
and His ZEAL against false religion ought to
fill our HEARTS and minds as well.

If Christ devoted so much of His time & energy to the task of
confronting and refuting false teachers, surely that
must be high on our agenda as well.

***“He who has an ear, let him hear
what the Spirit says to the churches.”***

(REPEATED in Revelation 2:7; 2:11; 2:17; 2:29; 3:6; 3:13: & 3:22)