

## Engagement vs Avoidance

Choosing today's scripture felt a little odd to me. After all, it is two stories that are not really linked. The first describes Jesus landing at Genneseret, and the people bring the sick to him in the marketplace. The second is about the Pharisees complaining to Jesus about how his disciples did not wash before eating. The text says that they (the Pharisees) always washed after coming from the marketplace. The only thing that links them is something pointed out in a book by Mark Buchanan, titled "Your God is too Safe". The question for today is: How did Jesus and the Pharisees approach the marketplace?

I would like you this morning to imagine a marketplace of the time and place of Jesus. It is like the agora of the Greeks: a bustling place with people crowding each other, in an attempt to transact their business. There would be those buying and selling produce, those buying and selling trade goods and trinkets, there would be contractors looking for construction projects. There would be tax collectors sitting at their tables with their census books and Roman guard, and there would be Rabbis, Pharisees, and Sadducees basking in their

position, waiting to be noticed by their moral superiority. If you can see it in your mind's eye, it is a chaotic place, a place where you could get lost in the crowd.

Imagine you are a Pharisee. You have been taught from birth the laws of cleanliness. You realize that your status and your position depend on your keeping those laws and so you are very, very careful. Touching a dead animal carcass, or an unclean woman, getting close to some of the vile and unseemly things that go on in any marketplace might just land you outside the camp as a result of your becoming "unclean". Unclean. This was a part of God's command to the Israelites as they entered the promised lands. Commands about what food was good, what animals could be kept for food, how to deal with sickness, and mold and mildew. In all, a pretty comprehensive "how to" as regards living your life. But over time, the Pharisees, in an attempt to reproduce holiness on their own, added additional safeguards to avoid getting into situations in which they even might come close to breaking a law. They would not only not touch a sick person, they would go out of their way to avoid meeting one. This is why hearers of Jesus' parable of Good Samaritan would understand why

the Priest and the Levite passed by on the other side of the road. Like the Pharisee, they would not come close to anything making them unclean.

You might imagine that the Pharisees would avoid the marketplace altogether. But that would conflict with another of their needs. To be seen. To be noticed and respected. This is the criticism Jesus levels at them later on: "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them `Rabbi.'" ([Mat 23:5-7](#)). So they need to be there. Their self-importance demands it. They must be recognized as spiritually superior, the religious leaders of the people.

So I imagine them walking this way through the market, prim-mannered, superior, but at the same time mincing their steps, stiffly avoiding any contact with the riffraff, and holding anything they must touch between two fingers at the end. And then, after returning home, as quickly as possible,

washing away any residue of contact they may have had with the people and things of the market.

Trying to avoid being contaminated by sin. Running from those who are less “righteous”.

Contrast that with Jesus’ experience in the marketplace.

Listen again to Scripture:

When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went--into villages, towns or countryside--they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed. [\(Mar 6:53-56\)](#)

Just imagine again with me for a moment the marketplace.

This time a new kind of Rabbi appears. People who wouldn’t think of touching a Pharisee, even with great need, come with a passion to see and hear, and yes touch Jesus. Jesus sees

the need in crowd and he doesn't hesitate. He dives into the mass of people. He understands that God desires mercy and compassion, not stiff religiosity. His way doesn't avoid and marginalize those around him, it engages and helps, and heals, both physically and spiritually. These are his lost sheep, which He, as the Good Sheppard, has now found. He is attentive to their needs, and works His miracles, not only as a show of power, but to impact the lives of those He encounters. He runs toward the people.

That is because he sees and understands their worth as God's creation. They are not objects put into his path, to be avoided, like the ghosts in PacMan, but beloved men and women, whose everyday trials and hurts matter to Him.

His ethic, His reason for being is to glorify His Father. He cares for the sick, the lame, and the demon-possessed because He knows His Father does. In meeting the physical and spiritual needs of people, He is mirroring the Father's love, mercy and compassion for them.

This contrasts, once again, with the Pharisees, who's ethic originally was "How can I avoid bringing disgrace to God?".

This is an ethic of avoidance and degenerated into a concern not with God, but with self-image, reputation and procedure. They didn't ask, "How can I make others clean?" They asked, "How can I keep myself from getting dirty?" They did not seek to rescue sinners, only to avoid sinning.

Now here's the hard part. Which ethic as followers of Christ do we follow? Well you might ask someone to define a Christian, and they would say, "Well he or she is a person who doesn't do x, y or z." We are defined by our avoidance. It's like the old saying, we don't smoke or chew or go with girls that do.

How did Jesus define a disciple? As He discriminated between those who follow Him from those who did not He said: You are My disciple if I came to you naked and you clothed Me, came to you hungry and you fed Me, was in prison and you visited Me. Jesus said the righteous are known by their fruit. We, as Christians are known by our fruits, not by our lack of tree fungus or leaf rot. This is the ethic we need to restore in our hearts and homes and churches.

It boils down to the difference of two questions. We ask “How will this act affect my witness?” rather than Jesus’ question “What will you do, where will you go, and who will you talk to, to have an effective witness?”

The first question allows us to substitute safe church work for effective Kingdom work in the world. Don’t get me wrong, serving on a committee, or helping to organize an event is essential work that needs to be done, but it is not the work Christ called us to do. There is no Scripture where Jesus says: And thou shalt cook a meatloaf and on the second day thou shalt present it in front of the believers at a pot-luck”.

Kingdom work involves seeking out the lost and communicating the Good News of Jesus. Jesus got right to the heart of the matter with our friends, the Pharisees: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former”. ([Mat 23:23](#)) Today he might say “You churchman – You serve on committees and you plan program for the members, but you neglect to go out

into your community so that the lost may see Me and be saved.”

This trap of doing church work instead of Kingdom work unfortunately comes naturally to us. Looking for effective ministry means, in every moment of every day, looking for pain in others, looking for way to right injustice or looking for opportunities to share Christ. It’s hard work, and it involves forgetting ourselves and some of our agenda as we seek to represent Christ throughout our day.

The first question is rooted in the ethic of avoidance. When we ask “How will this act affect my witness?”, we're really asking, "How can I keep the status quo? How can I prevent getting close to evil? How can I guard my reputation?"

But the second question is rooted in an ethic of involvement. With that question, we're asking, "How can I change the way things are? How can I shake it up and shape it anew? How can I bring the salt and light of God's truth to bear on this life, this situation, this place? How can I cast out evil and clean up the place where it dwelt!"

The problem is, we don't want to offend, or be ridiculed for our ministry. So we naturally retreat into the world of church where we are affirmed in our work, and we are comfortable speaking our brave faith words to each other. Jim Gear used to call that the Christian Ghetto. We wall ourselves off and function within our own little enclave.

And if we do outreach, we look for ways to meet needs, but never quite get around to bringing up Jesus, and what He can do for those we serve. It has been said that Presbyterians are those who can take a class in evangelism, and think they have evangelized.

I hope you realize that I'm preaching to myself, as well. You all know that I am a product of this church, not some 'holier than thou'. We're in this together and I am certainly not the model of discipleship. But the time has come for us to build outward together. We have been nurtured and built up and prepared for this. We have a solid foundation of Bible teaching and faithful training in the Christian life. It's time.

This clip is from the movie "A Year of Living Dangerously". In it, the grinding poverty of Indonesia during the Dictator

Sukarno's rule is vividly portrayed. The Mel Gibson character, Guy Hamilton, unlike his journalist compatriots, leaves the hotel area, guided by Billy Kwan, a photojournalist who has taken up the cause of the poor. The discussion they have ranges from impractical to idealistic.

Billy finally says: Well, I support the view that you just don't think about the major issues. You do whatever you can about the misery that's in front of you. Add your light to the sum of light.

This kind of outward living involves a change of the heart. But it doesn't mean that you and I are going to become Billy Graham tomorrow. Instead, I imagine that as time passes we will be more sensitive to those around us. Using Jesus' eyes, we will begin to see the physical and spiritual needs of those people we seek out in the marketplace. Rather than passing them by, avoiding their touch, through the power of the Spirit, we can respond to those needs, with helping and healing. Like Guy in the movie, we can leave our safe area and we can dive into the marketplace, and like Billy we can go further by adding our light to the sum of light. Jesus said "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do

people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Mat 5:14-16)

I hope you know that some men in this church have begun to look beyond their safe areas and are stepping out in faith by serving meals down at the City Mission in Cleveland. I hope you know that there is a struggling ministry that holds a Sunday service once a month in the Holly Hill nursing home that could use your help. These are just some of the ways that people in this church are getting involved in their community. They realize that the call of Christ involves more than going to church and sitting on session committees.

They are adding their light to the sum of light.

I was naked and you clothed Me, I came to you hungry and you fed Me, I was in prison and you visited Me.