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# Introduction

People have relied on a variety of ways to solve loitering problems on their property: posting signs, increasing security and blasting classical music when their trespassers are teens. In 1830 John Hollinsbury of Alexandria, Virginia, tried something different. Horse-drawn wagons and loiterers were populating the seven foot wide alley between his home and the one next to it. So he built a seven foot wide house in the alley that still stands there today. What is today known as the Hollinsbury House, is commonly classified as a spite house – skinny homes that were built on small plots of land to defy a person or group of people. These space invading, oddball structures bring smiles to those who pass by. The owners obviously weren't overly concerned about appearances. And they weren't afraid of defying a few social conventions either. They boldly transgressed personal space to create something memorable, interesting and provocative.

When I look at one of these skinny homes, I can't help but think about Jesus. Now Jesus wasn't vengeful. He didn't act out of spite. But he did a lot of strange things. He invaded people's space and crossed social boundaries. In the most colorful, interesting ways possible, he did things that drew attention, invited questions and stirred curiosity. You can't walk by one of these space-defying, curious little homes without wondering. And Jesus was like that. Can we be like that too?

Welcome to *The Audacity of Jesus: How Jesus Defied Convention and Invites us To Do the Same*. We'll be taking five different ways Jesus lived and interacted with people and explore how we might follow after him in bold and courageous ways. We'll be looking at (1) Jesus, Questioner, (2) Jesus, Social Misfit, (3) Jesus, Provocateur, (4) Jesus, Discomforter and (5) Jesus, Mystery. We are excited to have you join us on this journey.



# JESUS, <sup>1</sup>Questioner

I never thought that planting a fence post in the ground could be a sacred act. “This is just how your grandpa taught me how to do this,” my dad said with two firm hands on his shovel as he pushed a little bit more dirt back into the hole and tamped it down until it was as solid as a rock. I don’t think I’ve ever put a fence post in since then, but I vividly remember the moment my dad taught me how to do it. He didn’t rush the process. As he filled the hole around the newly planted post, he punched the opposite end of the shovel in the ground so thoroughly that it almost looked like he hadn’t added any soil into the hole afterward at all. “If you don’t tamp the soil down hard enough, the post is eventually going to lean.” My dad really wanted me to know this process. Maybe he envisioned me doing all this work for him one day, but the way he talked about my grandpa teaching him to do the same thing when he was a young boy made me feel like it was something different. He was passing along a piece of himself.

There is something deep within all of us that loves that feeling of having shared a skill or some piece of knowledge that makes a difference in someone’s life. Perhaps it’s the simple satisfaction of showing someone a place that they can get a better deal on their favorite coffee or helping a stranger with directions to the nearest gas station. And this principle is just as true in our spiritual lives too. Followers of Jesus love to help people discover new spiritual truths that will add value to their lives.

The problem is that we are not always invited to share. And no one likes a know-it-all. Sometimes people intrude with answers like a driver cutting you off in traffic. And often the people who give the most answers are the least qualified to give them. We want to add value to people’s lives, but the door isn’t always open to do so. How can we open those doors to pass on spiritual truths that add value to a person’s life?

Jesus used questions to encourage people to consider spiritual truths. Let’s look at three kinds of questions Jesus used and consider how we might do the same.

Take a moment and consider Luke 10:25-37. How does the question the expert asks Jesus in verse 29 differ from the question Jesus asks him in verse 36?

Luke 10:25-37, says:

*On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from*

*Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' 'Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'*

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This passage is famously known as the parable of the “Good Samaritan.” But “good” and “Samaritan” were not words that Jesus’ listeners would have put together. The Jewish people’s neighbors to the north used to be from fellow Israelite tribes. But because of idolatry and intermixing with the nations, they eventually became something else. And the two nations had been openly hostile towards each other ever since. In this parable, we see two respected religious figures pass by a robbed and beaten man – the ones Jesus’ listeners might expect to help the most. Then, surprisingly, the figure they least expected to help and the one they would be least likely to call a neighbor ended up being the one who showed mercy.

A close look at the passage shows that the question the so called expert poses (“And who is my neighbor”) is different from the question Jesus asks him in return (“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”). Luke says that the Bible expert wanted to justify himself so his question anticipated that Jesus would define “neighbor” in such a way that would make him feel better about treating people close to him well and perhaps other people on the fringes not-so-well. Chances are that the so called expert had people like Samaritans in mind. Jesus never answers his question directly, and there may be good reason for this. Not everyone treats us neighborly. And therefore not everyone is our neighbor. In Matthew, Jesus tells his listeners to love their enemies. Jesus does not say that we have no enemies and therefore should love everyone. Our battle may not be against flesh and blood, but there are people who live

in opposition to God's kingdom. Enemies exist, and Jesus acknowledged that. But our obligation is to love them. Had Jesus answered the man's question directly, he would have reinforced the bias of the so called expert and given him permission to disregard those people who were not neighborly towards him.

So instead of answering the man's question, Jesus tells him a story and asks him a better question in return. He asks the man a better question so that instead of permitting him to put restrictions on his kindness, he would see the value of being a neighbor without limits. Jesus was wise enough to know where the man's question was going to sidestep it and give him a better one.

It is often said that there are no bad questions. And that may be true. But there are *BETTER* questions. As we live out our faith in the public square, people will inevitably ask us questions about it. And often those questions have to do with sin. "Do you believe that such and such an act is a sin?" they might say. It's important to understand the question behind the question, and sometimes that requires deeper insight into an individual or close attention to a person's tone or body language. That question could be an honest, open question. The person may be trying to understand your faith and how they might live it out for themselves. On the other hand, that kind of question might be like the so called expert's question in the parable. They might be trying to justify themselves or condemn you. In a case like that, a direct answer might reinforce the person's biases about your faith. So instead, maybe you can ask them a question about their question to promote further understanding: "That's an interesting question, why do you ask?" Or perhaps, like Jesus, you can put the person in a situation where they are more prone to understand your point of view and ask them how they would respond. Jesus added value to people's spiritual lives by asking the better question and we can too.

Jesus poses a different kind of question in Mark 12:35-37. Without considering the content of the question, what is unique about Jesus' approach here? Why do you think he chooses this approach?

Mark 12:35-37 says:

*While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, "Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: 'The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.' David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?" The large crowd listened to him with delight.*

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This is one of the most important questions Jesus asked because it has to do with one of the big questions of the book: who is Jesus? A little background might help with the challenge Jesus posed here. In the first century, Jews held a cultural belief that birth-order determined who had authority in certain relationships. So if you had an older brother, he was likely to carry decision making power in the family when parents weren't in the picture. A father definitely held decision making power because (as the cultural logic went), he was born first. We see this logic alluded to in several places in the Bible including John 1:15, where John the Baptist said, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me." John the Baptist was Jesus' older cousin, but in this case he was referring to the fact that Jesus existed before the beginning of the world before he took on flesh.

Jesus quotes Psalm 110 in this passage, a psalm of David. In the Psalm, David refers to two "Lords" here, one of which is God, the Father, and the other one a mysterious figure that Jesus and the Jews of his day understood to be the Messiah. Jesus acknowledges that the Messiah is elsewhere referred to as the Son of David. Here's where the conflict and the question comes in: how can David refer to one of his descendants who has less authority than him because of birth order as "Lord"?

The question can be answered two ways. Jesus, because he existed before the world was created, has greater authority than David because even though he was born after David as his descendant he existed before David. But Jesus was also the first to be raised from the dead in the final sense. The Bible refers to him as the first to be raised several times. That means that David will come *after* Jesus in the final shape humanity will take. Jesus asked the question to peak interest in either his existence before time or to foreshadow his coming resurrection.

What is strange and surprising about this for our purposes is that he doesn't answer the question. This seems counter-intuitive. And frankly, this approach is a bit different for Jesus himself. Why would Jesus raise such a profound and perplexing spiritual question without giving an answer? What if people worked on the answer for a while and eventually abandoned it like an impossible crossword puzzle? Or what if people came to the wrong conclusion? Asking thought-provoking questions like this one without providing an answer often makes spiritual people uncomfortable because of our need to control the outcome. But Jesus demonstrates a rare principle here. Sometimes the best way to help people understand spiritual truths is to raise the spiritual question and let it sit in the receiver's mind. I recently asked someone a deep question about personal meaning and value with regard to some personal ambitions. I said that I wasn't going to give that person the answer, and I wanted them to take some time to wrestle with it. A few days later I overheard them sharing that same question with a friend. If I had provided the answer and deprived



the person of the journey, the treasure at the end would not have had as much weight. Jesus added value to people's spiritual lives by asking an unanswered question and we can too.

Consider John 5:1-15 where Jesus asks an invalid whether he wants to get well. Why do you think Jesus would ask such an obvious question?

John 5:1-9 says:

*Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.*

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In verse 6, Jesus asks a man who had been disabled almost his entire life the seemingly-most obvious question in the world: “Do you want to get well?” It’s possible that this was just a convention - a way of inviting the man to be healed. What’s interesting about this episode is that most healings occur because of someone seeking Jesus out. Here Jesus goes to a place where many sick and disabled people gathered and picked out one person. Because of the location, I think that there is more to his question than convention. It’s like asking a patient who’s in the hospital because of heart disease if he hopes the doctors find a solution. Chances are, Jesus was asking a basic question to get at the root cause because sometimes we might think we want to be healed but we’re not really sure that we are ready to accept all that that involves. Perhaps it involves giving something up. Perhaps it involves taking on a new responsibility. We don’t know why the man had the disability, but Jesus says something provocative to the man a few verses after this. John writes, “Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.’” The healing of Jesus was accompanied by a challenge to change.

Have you ever asked someone if they really wanted to be healed before praying that God would heal them physically, emotionally or spiritually? Have you ever asked them if they were willing to surrender something in their lives? Many people may say they want to be healed, but they would really rather stay disabled in some capacity. Perhaps a disability has become a source of provision. Maybe they identify so much with their hang up that they can't think of themselves without it. There is a chance that they are so used to their problem that it has become a comfort to them and freedom is scarier than the alternative. A basic question can change the conversation and expose something deeper. I remember counseling an engaged man through some of the struggles he was having with his fiancé, and I asked him, "What do you want God to do in all of this?" He responded by saying, "I want him to help my fiancé appreciate me and respond with more grace." I pressed just a little bit further, "And what do you want God to give you if you can't have that?" That's when things got really interesting in our time together and his healing started to begin. Jesus added value to people's spiritual lives by asking basic questions that get at the heart of a matter and we can too.

Jesus never tells us to ask questions. The Bible never commands us to. And you don't have to be good at asking questions to live a full, meaningful life following Jesus. But Jesus gives us a powerful tool. The Bible has stood the test of time through the design of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. But there is no doubt that Jesus' unique and provocative way of interacting with people helped elevate his story above all other religious texts. We too can adopt a similar strategy to be the curious people that God wants us to be in this world, which he is advancing his kingdom in. We can encourage people to discover spiritual truths by inviting people to think about better questions, by asking thought-provoking questions without always providing answers and by asking basic questions that get at a root cause. Jesus asked more kinds of questions than these, some of which we'll explore in a future section. But putting these into practice - as risky as they may be - might open up doors for us to pass along life-giving truth that we might not have otherwise had.

# JESUS, <sup>2</sup> Social Misfit

Recent studies on volunteering and giving have demonstrated that doing some act of kindness for another person activates pleasure centers in the brain, increases the likelihood that others will do some good and actually improves longevity and overall emotional and physical health. But we don't need a psychologist to tell us just how good for us doing good for others can be. Those moments in our lives when we've had the resources to give a struggling family a little extra cash or support victims of some natural disaster make us say, I wish I could do more of that. Churches in America actually do a pretty good job of helping people. Overseas relief and development from American churches exceeded \$13 billion in 2009 as one example.

But it's a lot easier to write a check than it is to welcome someone into your home. As much as we don't like to admit it, some Christians prefer to be around people who are like them and most probably do so exclusively. Many of us don't take much joy in allowing people that are different violate our personal space. As much as we enjoy the feeling and the idea of doing good to others, we allow a monetary sacrifice to ease our guilt over failing to provide a healing touch to someone who looks, thinks, votes, speaks or parties differently than we do. And it even happens within the church. We break into tribes and limit ourselves to people within our own age, marital status or temperament because we believe we will be better understood when we are close to people like us. So even churches, which tend to fill up with people who look a lot alike and make similar amounts of money already, end up dividing along all sorts of social boundaries.

And what complicates the matter further is that the Bible often promotes disassociation. Consider these verses: "Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm" (Proverbs 13:20). "Stay away from a fool, for you will not find knowledge on their lips" (Proverbs 14:7). "Like a muddied spring or a polluted well are the righteous who give way to the wicked" (Proverbs 25:26). "I do not sit with the deceitful, nor do I associate with hypocrites. I abhor the assembly of evil doers and refuse to sit with the wicked" (Psalm 26:4-5).

Social boundaries and religious restrictions can keep us from providing a healing touch to someone across the aisle. We are going to explore how Jesus healed people in the face of these challenges. Spoiler alert: he didn't write a check.

Take a moment and consider Mark 2:13-17. The passage contains the expression "tax collectors and sinners," which shows up frequently in the Bible. Why do you think these two words are paired together?

Mark 2:13-17 says:

*Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

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Jesus' meaningful connection to sinners has remained one of the most memorable things about him. It's not uncommon to hear people who know very little about Jesus refer generally to his action here. But if Jesus had a soft spot for hanging with sinners, he could have spent time with anyone. He could have spent time with the Pharisees who questioned his associations in this passage. Did Jesus find certain sins more tolerable than others?

The expression "tax collectors and sinners" was another way of referring to social outcasts during Jesus' time. Yes, many tax collectors, like Zacchaeus in Luke 19, sinned by cheating people. But Jews had another ax to grind with tax collectors. They were viewed as traitors of their own people for serving under the regime that oppressed them. There couldn't have been a more unpatriotic role to play in Jewish society. Similarly, we understand a sinner to be someone who did not live up to standard moral expectations, but it was also used more broadly to refer to a class of people who generally did not heed some of the religious expectations of the time. All Gentiles are referred to with this title in Isaiah 14:5 and Mark 14:41. Were there people in this group who *actually* sinned? Absolutely. But it is primarily being used in this passage to refer to a class of people. Jesus was hanging out not just with sinners (which he could have done by hanging out with anyone) but the low-lives and social reprobates of society.

What made the scene more provocative to observers was that Jesus invited this group of people into intimate space with him. Consider again with me the way that Mark explains why Jesus was eating dinner with this band of outcasts. In Mark 2:15, he says, "While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's

house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.” Was Jesus at Levi’s when Levi’s friends showed up unexpectedly? No. Was Jesus invited to a “tax collectors and sinners” party and decided not to turn them down because he didn’t want to be impolite? No. Jesus brought the party. Pay close attention: this band of outcasts was there with Jesus and his disciples, Mark says, because “there were many who followed” Jesus. And Jesus didn’t hesitate to invite them in to share close space with him. It’s reminiscent of Jesus’ encounter with another tax collector, Zacchaeus, in Luke 19:5. Before he ever repented of his misdeeds, Jesus walked up to Zacchaeus who was perched in a tree and said, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house.”

This is the kind of stuff that set the Pharisees off. This group of misfits called tax collectors and sinners were the most unpatriotic, unsympathetic, irreligious group of people the Pharisees could think of. And instead of cutting them off, Jesus invited them into close proximity and friendship.

Can you imagine the position this put Jesus in? I recently heard a story of a couple that grew up in Vermont and decided to move to New Hampshire. Their parents stopped speaking to them because of it. Who would have known that crossing over from the Green Mountain State to the Granite State could end up being such a social catastrophe? When Jesus reached out his hand to Levi and invited him to follow him, it was like crossing the Mason-Dixon line. There was no going back. How was Jesus going to reach out to all people, when reaching out to a few would alienate the rest? But the challenge didn’t phase Jesus. Jesus chose to heal in the face of strict social boundaries by accepting the social cost and inviting outcasts to be his friends.

Of course, that’s easy for Jesus to do. It’s Jesus, after all. I doubt there was a moment that Jesus paused to reconsider whether he should invite the tax collector to follow him. But there are moments that we will pause, so it’s important to count the cost early. People may talk about you if they see you around certain people. People may accuse you of being involved in something you are not. People may see you at the store and turn around to walk the other way. It’s times like these when we need to do an honest self-evaluation: *How important are people’s opinions to me? And am I willing to accept the cost to be someone who readily heals anyone?*

Revisit the last two verses with me. On telling the Pharisees that “it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” was Jesus suggesting that the Pharisees were righteous?

Mark 2:16-17 says:

*When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

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Jesus was an amazingly creative story teller who came up with original, memorable quips. But not everything he said was original. The expression “it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” was used in various forms before Jesus arrived on the scene. It was probably a well known proverb at the time, and the Pharisees would likely have been familiar with it. It’s possible that they used it themselves.

The metaphor was a powerful one because it offers a clear and accepted example of a group of people crossing a boundary to serve another group for the good of the world. Some have questioned whether Jesus was classifying the Pharisees as righteous and his band of outcasts as sinners by saying this. It’s very similar to Jesus’ parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15:28 where the obedient son expresses displeasure to his father for throwing a party for the disobedient son’s return when he had never been thrown such a party for his obedience. In both scenarios, Jesus isn’t as concerned over which group is the most spiritually healthy. He is more concerned with the perceived spiritual boundary that we create between people and the bitterness that results when we see grace and mercy shown across the aisle.

So Jesus didn’t just invite outcasts to be his friends and accept the social consequence for that. He exposed the hypocrisy of the boundaries we sometimes create between people. If we are going to live like Jesus did, we need to be honest and acknowledge what some of our social boundaries are so that we are aware that we might be operating out of them subconsciously in any given moment. There is nothing wrong with being around like-minded people, but sometimes our preferences can turn into prejudices. It’s easy for Christians to look at Jesus’ example here and say, *I’m not like those Pharisees. I’m friendly with everyone.* But I imagine that many of those Pharisees were friendly with some of those tax collectors and sinners too. They just weren’t friends with them. They did not invite them and welcome them into their space. We should all take the opportunity to examine ourselves in this way. And the best way of doing so might be to consider how we view friendship. Is it something you find or is it something you give away? If it’s the first only, then perhaps there is a boundary there that God wants you to reconsider.

Jesus crossed social boundaries and exposed them. But some of his followers seemed to encourage disassociation with certain groups of people. The Apostle Paul quoted the Greek poet Menander in

1 Corinthians 15:33, saying, “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character.’” Consider two other passages from Paul, 2 Corinthians 6:14-16 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-11. Based on these readings, do you think there were some people Jesus kept off of his friend list?

2 Corinthians 6:14-16 says,

*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.*

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 says,

*I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked person from among you.*

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These two passages seem to be saying different things at face value. Let’s take a closer look. When Paul says, “do not be yoked together with unbelievers” in 2 Corinthians 6:14, he is using a word that appears nowhere else in the Bible. It’s actually a combination of two words: different and yoked. A yoke was a frame used to control working animals. When two different kinds of animals were yoked together for work, it created a significant mismatch making the work unmanageable. Paul is saying that unbelievers and believers working in intimate association create that same kind of mismatch so God wanted believers to be separate. This could certainly apply to marriages as Paul clarifies elsewhere. But Paul had in mind something bigger that probably included business partnerships. It at least included close friendships.

Rod Dreher, a Christian writer and thinker, has recently been popularized for his book *The Benedict Option*. In it he champions a Christian withdrawal from mainstream society – to be somewhat cut off from it—in order to protect its value system after having lost the culture war. On the surface, that seems to be what Paul is talking about here. Is it time to hunker down and wait for better days to fully participate in society again?

When we consider 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, Paul seems to encourage disassociation even more! In addition to discouraging close relationships with nonbelievers, Paul appears to discourage involvement with anyone who sins at all. The verb Paul uses here means to associate or mingle. If Paul is encouraging disassociation from all sinners, could he reasonably expect people to have relationships with anyone at all? No. When Paul calls out certain individuals and labels them sexually immoral, greedy, swindlers and idolaters, he is talking about a group of people that habitually engage in and embrace those practices as a way of life. You don't call someone a plumber just because they fixed a pipe once. It's just as important to know that Paul is only talking about believers here too. He says, "not at all meaning the people of the world who are immoral...in that case you would have to leave this world." And then later he asks, "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?" So Paul is not encouraging disassociation with all sinners, only believers who engage in and embrace an evil practice in such a way that merits labeling them by their practice. We will revisit that prohibition in another section. But Paul's implication here is that believers should expect to associate and mingle with nonbelievers (that is, people of the world) - even those that habitually and gladly engage in sinful lifestyles.

How do those two ideas come together? Quite simply. Paul encourages authentic friendship with outsiders but discourages *close* friendship with them because it is counterintuitive to do work with someone who is moving in a different direction. Jesus put this into practice too. He extended friendship to all sorts of people – sinners and social outcasts. But Jesus also maintained a close circle that was on the same path that he was. And that's an important distinction to make if we are going to understand this bold, audacious Jesus. He willingly crossed social boundaries and exposed them, but he also kept a close inner circle that lived out his mission as a like-minded support system.

Our country has become more divided in recent years. Politics have formed fault lines separating parents and children, brothers and sisters. And the political vitriol is pushing people to extremes. Jesus' challenge to sit down with outcasts and confront tribalism is just as relevant today as it ever was. Perhaps it's time for us to listen to someone across the aisle without trying to convince them. Maybe it's time that we re-evaluate some of the boxes we've put people in. God is inviting us to give more than a personal check. If we can uncover the lines we've drawn and label them for what they are, we will open up all sorts of opportunities to be a healer and build bridges to people we would have never expected.



# JESUS, *Provocateur*

As a child growing up in the eighties, I, like many of you, was given a lot of freedom by my mom to roam the streets on my bike. Many of you can still hear your mother’s voice: “Be back before dinner.” And sure enough, I almost always came back before dinner. There is a name for that kind of parenting today—it’s called free-range parenting. I kind of doubt that it was called that before. But with the rise of helicopter parenting in this generation, I suppose people looked back and decided they needed a name for it. There are a lot of opinions on how protective parents should be today. But nobody debates whether a parent *should* be protective. When our children are in danger, we need to step up.

Most Christians also recognize that there are spiritual dangers out there too. In Mark 9:41 Jesus said, “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.” Jesus clarifies who he means by “these little ones” —anyone who believes. Why did he picture believers this way? Chances are, Jesus saw just how vulnerable believers are to the deception of sin. He didn’t mince words when talking about the consequences of the one who caused them to stumble.

But we struggle to do the same because our desire for harmony and our fear of conflict prevents us from calling out the wrong crowd. In our previous section, we explored how Jesus befriended outcasts even if he was closest to those who shared in his mission. But there were people that he did not associate with at all. Even more than that, he provoked them. Who were the people that Jesus provoked and how did he go about doing so?

Let’s take up the first question: who were the people Jesus provoked? Based upon our look at Jesus in section 2, we know that Jesus wasn’t interested in provoking your standard sinner just because they were a sinner. No one would have been off limits. And he graciously made space for them and invited them into his life.

It might be tempting to say that Jesus targeted Pharisees and other Jewish groups that did not accept him. These groups regularly pushed Jesus for violating their religious sensibilities regarding cleanliness, eating and activity on the Sabbath. We would call this legalism. In Mark 7:6, Jesus said, “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.” But even though the Pharisees became consistent opponents of Jesus, many invited him into their homes, and he often accepted their invitation (Luke 7:36, Luke 11:37, Luke 14:1). The Pharisee Nicodemus, who Jesus spoke with in John 3, defended Jesus in front of the other Pharisees in John 7:50 and brought myrrh and aloes to honor the body of Jesus in John 19:38. And Jesus would have lined up closer to

the Pharisees theologically than many of the other Jewish sects. So even though Pharisees opposed Jesus, they were not categorically opposed to him.

Certainly, Jesus called out a lot of hypocrites, which is another word for a pretender. Many of Jesus' opponents spoke religiously but lived a life inconsistent with the standards they promoted. But there is no reason why we should assume or classify hypocrisy as a higher form of sin. The ninth commandment - you shall not bear false witness - was not more important than the rest. What was so special about hypocrisy?

In Jesus' famous complaint against the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, he consistently levies accusations of hypocrisy against them, but the heart of his complaint has to do with what their actions produce. In 23:15 Jesus says, "You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are." This is consistent with the warning we looked at in Mark 9:41: "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea." Jesus sometimes sternly challenges groups known for their legalism and hypocrisy - and, yes, that included his own disciples on occasion - because their legalism and hypocrisy effectively taught others to do the same and misled people to sin. In other words, Jesus openly challenged false teachers - both false teachers who led people astray by their words and those who led people astray by their actions.

This is why the Apostle John discouraged even welcoming someone who did not continue in the teaching of Christ: "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work" (2 John 10-22). This is why the Apostle Paul encouraged disassociation from people who said they followed Christ, but habitually practiced and embraced lifestyles of sin. They misrepresented Christ and led people astray in ways similar to some teachers and Pharisees, of whom Jesus said, "you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (Matthew 23:3). And this is why James writes: "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). The sin of false teaching may not be different in kind to any other sins, but it was different in effect. Jesus provoked false teachers on a regular basis to expose a trap and protect the people.

How did Jesus do this? Consider Mark 12:13-17. In section 1 we explored how Jesus used questions to stir curiosity and teach. How does Jesus use questions to turn the tables on his opponents here?

Mark 12:13-17 says:

*Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who*

*they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.*

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Have you ever heard the expression, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”? That’s kind of what we have going on here. The Pharisees were nationalistic. They stood in opposition to the Roman occupation even if they chose not to react violently to that rule as other Jews did. The Herodians, however, were supporters of King Herod, who served as a vassal of Rome. In this rare circumstance they came together to trap Jesus. Roman taxation was a big part of the controversy. Part of it had to do with the coins themselves which had the image of Caesar and a divine claim inscribed upon them. Both of these offended Jews, so they initially circulated their own copper coins without the image and statement. But the silver coin mentioned in this passage was required for Roman taxes and circulated throughout the land. Jews had to use it whether they liked it or not. In 6 AD one Jew started a revolt over the taxes calling his countrymen who did not support him cowards for “putting up with mortal masters in place of God.” The Pharisees and Herodians saw the tax question as an opportunity to force Jesus into the conflict and either put himself in opposition to the state or to the sensibilities of religious Jews.

Jesus does not answer the question directly. He simply says, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Jesus does not say “give” but “give back,” which is a word used for debts. If Caesar is owed something, it should be given to him. Jesus never tells his listeners what that is. More importantly, Jesus never addresses when that is in conflict with what one owes God. And certainly there are times that that is the case. But he doesn’t address those either. He may imply that both parties are due something, but he doesn’t say it directly. He doesn’t step into the conflict.

But before answering the Pharisees and Herodians, Jesus asks them to bring him a coin and identify whose name and inscription is on that coin. Jesus could have simply said, “I’m sure you have coins

with Caesar's image and inscription on them." But instead he lets the Herodians and Pharisees implicate themselves by producing the coin and acknowledging that they are carrying coins offensive to Jewish sensibilities. In addition to that, Mark locates Jesus in the temple courts in Mark 11:27, which means that the idolatrous image they carried was in close proximity to the temple of God. By asking the question, he put them in the same position they were trying to put him – even worse. Without being overtly adversarial, Jesus was able to openly challenge their sincerity with a simple question.

Jesus used questions to indirectly challenge. Asking the question put his listeners in a position that caused others to take an honest look at his opponents. Showing can be so much more effective than telling. We find ourselves in similar positions too. Leaders, spouses or parents might find themselves at the end of an exaggerated accusation. "You "never" let me go out with my friends." "You "always" cancel our nights out." "Lots of people want to see this change." A good challenge question like "how many times?" "when was the last time?" or "how many people?" can expose an exaggeration, invite people to consider their words more carefully and help them to take personal ownership of their feelings on a matter. A challenge question can also expose a character flaw or a poor decision without accusing someone directly. "How do you think your wife felt about that?" or "How would you feel in a similar situation?"

However, we can easily use challenge questions to escape our own responsibility, and Jesus never did that. When someone comes to us with a personal challenge and we played a part, the best thing to do is acknowledge it and say you're sorry. If the person is wrong, it can be better just to clarify. But if the accuser has wrong motives, that might be a good opportunity to indirectly expose an untruth.

Not all of Jesus' responses to false teachers were as discrete though. And here is where we enter some difficult terrain. Between Matthew 21:23 and Matthew 24, Matthew records several moments seemingly in the same day that Jesus entered the temple courts and was tested by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. That time in the temple ends in Matthew 23 with a specific address to the Pharisees before his disciples and the crowds. Seven times Jesus says "woe," which is an expression of pain or displeasure regarding the actions of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Six times he calls them hypocrites. Five times he calls them various forms of blind: blind men, blind guides and blind fools. He calls them snakes and a brood of vipers. At one point he says, "You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (Matthew 23:28).

One of the most challenging names Jesus calls this group is "blind fools" because in Matthew 5:22 Jesus seemingly warns against this: "I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. ... And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

How can Jesus tell his disciples not to call a person a fool and use that same name for a group of people in a speech on hypocrisy no less?

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It would be hard to make an exception for Jesus simply because of who he was especially since the crux of his complaint against the Pharisees has to do with hypocrisy there. It would also be hard to make a case for a contradiction here - even if we looked at it purely from a secular point of view. Matthew could have easily removed the name or replaced it, and it's likely he would have if he thought his readers would have been confused.

The key to understanding this likely has to do with the use of “brothers” in Matthew 5:22. The term “brother” is used thirty-nine times in Matthew, and as one might expect it simply refers to a biological sibling or siblings. But a good portion of those references refer to a person or people that one has a close affinity to. When Jesus uses it this way, he is not using it in reference to the brotherhood of mankind. He clearly uses it in ways that distinguish one group from another. The ESV of Matthew 5:47 reads, “And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” In Matthew 18:15 Jesus outlines a process for addressing a brother's wrong and encourages treating them like other groups if they do not respond to church discipline. But it's perhaps Matthew 12:47-50 that distinguishes these groups the most: “Someone told [Jesus], ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ He replied to him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’”

Not everyone was Jesus' “brother and sister.” He directly challenged people that led others astray by their words and deeds in ways that he encouraged others never to use for a brother or sister because of the unique threat those people posed to the public. This may help us see through the apparent contradiction, but it doesn't resolve the tension this causes for us who live in polite society.

Our series title is *The Audacity of Jesus: How Jesus Defied Convention and Invites us To Do the Same*. The subtitle implies that if Jesus did it, we can and should too. It's an extension of “What Would Jesus Do?” But as are most things in life, this one is a bit more complicated than that. This was the way

that all Jewish opponents talked about each other during Jesus' time. In fact, the approaches of ancient Jewish writers like Josephus and Philo tended to be worse. Perhaps it would be fair to say that Jesus' use of choice words to confront his opponents was more in keeping with the conventions of his time.

But our culture is undeniably different from Jesus' culture, and that can change how we fulfill his expectations today. Frequently, we are commanded to greet one another with a holy kiss by Scripture, but very few people do that in America because kissing is associated with something else. Some Christians will abandon commands like these altogether. But it's better to find suitable replacements within our own cultures. Maybe that means that we greet one another with a "sacred hug" or a "holy handshake" instead.

In the same manner, it's unwise to speak the same way Jesus did to his opponents because that's not considered a part of acceptable communication today. Jesus commanded us to "be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" in the midst of a hostile society (Matthew 10:16). Relying on aggressive language may hurt us more than it will help in polite society, but there is still a place for a challenge question or a firm response. If we simply ignore false teachers and pretend they are something they are not, we are ignoring all sorts of biblical expectations. I was invited to spend some time with a gentleman who had left the Jehovah's Witnesses, who deny the deity of Jesus among other things. When I was spending time with him, the Witnesses kept coming back to him. Initially, I didn't want to encourage him to be confrontational, but he opened the door to them and I started to see their influence start to creep back in. So I opened up the Scriptures to 2 John 10-11, which commands Christians not to welcome teachers who do not continue in the teachings of Christ. And he started closing the door to them.

False teachers can't always be identified by their white shirts and black ties. They are all around us. And they don't just deceive people about lofty theological subjects like the Trinity. They are the ones who mislead us to sin by pretending that what's clearly black and white is gray. They teach us to minimize egregious social injustices while expressing outrage about things that don't matter. They misuse the Bible to encourage us to strive primarily for more comforts in this life while selling snake oil on TV. They cast shadows over difficult passages in Scripture all to make them more palatable. And when their teachings go unchecked, they can lead the people we care about down a dark path.

Our fear of confrontation can get in the way of saving someone's life. The Apostle Paul reminds us that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood" in Ephesians 6:12. Our struggle is against spiritual forces. But those forces influence and use people, and we need to be firm in those major truths that are clear and undeniable. Sometimes that might mean raising a question that exposes a dangerous false truth. Sometimes that might mean being more direct. But the people we care about could very well face the consequences if we fail to act.

# JESUS, <sup>4</sup>Discomforter

Fear appeals, such as ads about texting while driving, are surprisingly increasing in popularity. While commercials that have to do with dangers like the negative effects of smoking seem infrequent, low-fear appeals for products such as cleaning supplies make up the difference. And studies have shown that fear appeals work on all levels - even better than positive appeals.

And yet, Christians are probably more hesitant to do anything that brings discomfort than ever. As believers crafted more of an evangelistic presence in America and distinguished themselves from their fundamentalist forerunners, in many ways they softened their image and approach. That's not to say that decisions like that are unwise. But if Christians become too soft in their approach, they may be in danger of losing their spiritual family to spiritual slumber. Is there a place for discomfort in church ministry today? We are going to look at three different ways Jesus rocked the boat and consider whether we should be doing the same.

Let's first take a moment and consider Mark 8:22-26. This strange story about Jesus doing a double healing includes an uncomfortable moment where Jesus spits in the eyes of a man he attempts to heal. It is widely accepted that Matthew and Luke wrote after Mark and used Mark's Gospel to write their own. But unlike Mark, Matthew and Luke do not include the story of Jesus spitting in a man's face and healing him twice. Why do you think that is?

Mark 8:22-26 says:

*They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.*

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This is not the only time that Jesus used saliva in a healing. In another healing found in Mark 7:33, Jesus took a man aside from the crowds like he does here, put his fingers in the man's ears, and then Mark says, "he spit and touched the man's tongue" meaning that he most likely spit on his fingers and then touched the man's tongue. The Gospel of John records another such instance. John 9:6 says, "[Jesus] spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes." Scholars recognize that people in the ancient world- both Jewish and Gentile - regarded saliva as a curative agent. William Lane writes that Jesus likely used both touch and spittle to enter "into the mental world of the man" and gain "his confidence."

Applying saliva on someone for healing was acceptable. But actually spitting on someone was a way of showing them disgrace. In Numbers 12:14 God alludes to some tradition in which a father spit in a girl's face and caused her to be in disgrace for seven days as a result. In Deuteronomy 25:9 a widow is commanded to spit in the face of her brother-in-law if he was unwilling to marry her according to his Jewish responsibility. Job twice explained his public disgrace by describing himself as a man whose face people spit in. Jews during Jesus' time were trying to work out specific applications. Daniel Wallace points to some ancient Jewish background that gives us a window into that conversation. Rabbinic literature tells us that spitting on the Temple Mount was outlawed, and any saliva which fell inside city limits was considered unclean. Spit that hit a man's face was accompanied by a huge fine, which may indicate exactly how angry the Jewish leaders were with Jesus when he was on trial. It's the only other instance recorded in the New Testament where someone spits in another person's face.

Let's go back to Mark's account of the double healing. What do we do with this strange passage? Well, there are two reasons Matthew and Luke may not have included it in their Gospels. They may not have known what to do with Jesus spitting in the man's eyes. And they may not have understood why Jesus needed to perform two healings for the man to become well. But Mark's placement of this story may help us understand. Jesus makes two important revelations in the following section. He confirms Peter's suspicions that he is the Messiah and then he told the disciples that he must suffer, be killed and rise again. The killing part prompted Peter to take Jesus aside and rebuke him, which caused Jesus to rebuke him in return. Chances are, the disciples looked back and saw the partial healing of the blind man as an unconventional, off-putting method and saw that that was exactly what the cross was for them – an unconventional, off-putting method of affirming and demonstrating who the Messiah was. They would need something more - a second healing, if you will - to fully embrace the reality of Jesus. Jesus' discomfiting method of healing in Mark 8 was an object lesson for the revelation of the Messiah and the offense of the cross.

This is not inconsistent with some of the ways God led the prophets to communicate to the people. Ezekiel laid on his side for 390 days (Ezekiel 4:1-5). Hosea named his children "Unloved" and "Not-my-people" (Hosea 1). Isaiah stripped down to his undergarments for three years (Isaiah 20). God



often led select people to break social conventions in order to grab attention. And in Mark 8, Jesus does the same, but he doesn't do it simply to shock people. In this scene, he intentionally takes the man away from the crowd before spitting in his eyes. But this act still pushed a social boundary to communicate an important lesson to the disciples.

Before we go spitting in someone's face, we need to consider whether something like this would transfer to our culture. Spitting on people was sometimes encouraged even if it was an act of disgracing someone. But there is no context in our current culture in which it is considered appropriate. Jesus was doing something provocative, but it wasn't completely outside the scope of acceptable human behavior.

But it does invite us to think about our culture's unwritten social code and ask ourselves when it might be valuable to cross that line. Jesus didn't do it for attention. He withdrew from the public's eye. And he didn't defy the convention just to defy the convention. He had a purpose and wanted to catch his listeners' attention.

I grew up in a pretty dry church setting. That's why I'll never forget the time a new pastor took a balloon and a needle and popped it right in the middle of his sermon. He got my attention and made a moment I've remembered for a quarter of a century. *Pop a balloon? You aren't supposed to do that in church!* That might be a small thing for some, but it shattered a religious convention in the kind of church I grew up in. When I went to college, our campus ministry invited a local pastor to share at our weekly gatherings. Neither I nor my fellow classmates ever forgot what he did during his message when he brought a stereo in and destroyed it with a baseball bat. Jesus sometimes crossed social boundaries and did things people said he wasn't supposed to do to teach a lesson. And we can too.

When many people think of Jesus rocking the boat, the first thing that comes to mind is the time he cleansed the temple. This unique story appears in all four Gospels. Whether or not all the Gospel writers were comfortable including it or not, they apparently considered it too important to exclude. How do we reconcile our loving, caring image of Jesus with the one pictured in Mark 11:15-17?

Mark 11:15-17 says:

*On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.*

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In addition to what we read in Mark’s account, John records that Jesus made a whip out of cords to drive them all out (2:15), which is cool I guess. When was the last time you saw your pastor brandishing a whip and chasing out girl scouts who showed up to try to sell thin mints? John also records the response of the Jews: “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” (2:18).

From Mark’s perspective, it’s quite possible that this was another object lesson. Right after the event, Mark writes: “And as he taught them, he said, ‘Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?’ But you have made it ‘a den of robbers’” (Mark 11:17). If we look at the broader context, this scene sits in between two encounters with a fig tree. On their way to Jerusalem, Jesus saw a fig tree and upon approaching it saw that there was no fruit because it was out of season. He said, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again” (Mark 11:14) and his disciples heard it. The next morning after Jesus cleansed the temple, the disciples saw the same tree, which had now withered from the roots. The way Mark arranged these two scenes likely informs the cleansing of the temple. In the same way that Jesus saw a barren fig tree failing to fulfill its intended purpose, Jesus saw a temple being used in a way that was inconsistent with God’s design. He cursed the fig tree and cleansed the temple in an act that foreshadowed its ultimate destruction. But this act also demonstrated Jesus’ authority. This is teased out by the same scene in the Gospel of John when the Jews asked him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all of this?” In Mark’s account, when Jesus returned to the temple seemingly the next day, the first questions the Jewish leaders asked him were similar: “By what authority are you doing these things?” And “who gave you authority to do this?”

It’s important to determine the purpose of Jesus’ action so that we can know whether to reproduce it ourselves. In the case of the temple cleansing, Jesus is making a point about fruit bearing, the purpose of the temple courts and the health of the religious institution in Jerusalem. But Jesus’ methods here rise above one of his normal object lessons and the Jewish leaders caught on. He was demonstrating the special authority he had, an authority we don’t have. So if it bothers you when you see a Christian band setting up a booth to sell their music and shirts in your sanctuary, maybe it’s better just to address them politely instead of throwing their merchandise through the stained

glass window. Jesus wasn't just making a point about right and wrong - he was demonstrating who he was.

This scene has something else to give us though. It serves as a reminder that Jesus wasn't soft, and that seems to be an image Christians have a hard time escaping. Somehow the perfect love, kindness and affection of God were simultaneously at work in this moment of justice and zeal. C.S. Lewis reminds us of this in his Christian allegory, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when one of the characters responds to a question about the safety of the lion that represents Christ: "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good." Both that wonderful line from fiction and this amazing story from history serve to remind us that it's a good thing Jesus isn't safe and that he has a strong roar. There are times in our present life that we need a lion to remind us that he expects more of us, that we often need to be woken from our spiritual slumber and that it's good to be on his side.

Making sense of Jesus' aggressive actions in the temple is tough for some, but the most difficult, discomfoting subject for most today is Jesus' talk of hell because of its eternal scope. And Jesus talked about hell a lot. What kind of circumstances might conversations about hell be profitable in, today?

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Before we determine the best circumstances to address this subject, let's first take a moment to consider how Jesus explained it. The term "hell" is often used to translate the word *gehenna*, which literally refers to a valley south of Jerusalem. Some have speculated that this valley was used as a trash heap and the smell of burning trash conjured up images of judgment, but there is no clear ancient support for this. However, it was the location where King Ahaz sacrificed his children in fire to the god Molech. Jesus refers to the fire of hell in Matthew 5:22 and suggests in 5:29 that it is a place of the body: "If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." It's not impossible to view hell as a place for the soul alone, but Jesus' metaphor here would lose some of its force if that were the case. Moreover, the final judgment is preceded by the resurrection of all people, Jesus explains in John 5:28-29. Why raise a body to be condemned, if you only need the soul? Some Christians have tried to soften the reality of hell by claiming that it is only the

punishment of the soul, but with the rise of cutting and self-mutilation, one has to wonder if physical punishment is really worse for a lot of people than psychological punishment.

Sometimes “hell” is used to translate the word *hades*, but *hades* more likely generally referred to the place the soul went after death before the resurrection. The NIV translates *hades* “the realm of the dead” in Acts 2:27. It is consistently paired with death in the book of Revelation. And Revelation 20:13-14 signals that it will come to an end: “death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.”

Altogether, *gehenna* and *hades* only appear 22 times in the New Testament. That doesn’t seem to be a whole lot. But Jesus relied on a lot of other word pictures to describe this place. And he found the word “judgment,” which appears 27 times in the Gospels, to be far more useful. “Everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken,” Jesus says in Matthew 12:36.

So Jesus talked a lot about hell and judgment. And the hell he described wasn’t pleasant. But what kind of people was Jesus interested in having this conversation with?

The promise of the Christian faith is remarkable, for though all people were condemned by their sin, in Christ they can be set free. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:1-2, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” We are saved and sealed by our faith in Christ. So talk about hell, must be for other people. Right? The Apostle John seems to reinforce that idea in 1 John 4:18: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” At face value, it doesn’t seem like fear should have a place at all in the believer’s life because punishment has been purged by this perfect love.

But in the verse preceding this, the apostle writes: “This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In the world we are like Jesus.” The test that must be met to enjoy the confidence of our final destination is simple: in this world, we must be like Jesus. Paul warned the Corinthians in his second letter that “we make it our goal to please him...For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (5:9-10). Later in 2 Corinthians, Paul charges his readers: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves” (13:5). We are saved by our faith, but the genuineness of our faith will still be judged by what we do with it.

Hell is a tough topic, but there is a place for it in our discourse. Jesus and his followers talked about hell among themselves as a call for self-examination. It’s easy to build up an emotional wall and assume that the faith we profess is the real kind that produces fruit, but so many people never take

the time to examine themselves. Hell can be a healthy reminder that consequences are real, and that kind of discomfort might be just what we need to spur each other on to think of life's bigger picture. I remember one of my young classmates confessing her sinful life across the desk in Mrs. Horner's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom with a smirk. She told another classmate her master plan: *I'm going to wait until the last minute before I die and then ask God for forgiveness.* I remember judging her and thinking how that wasn't going to work. And then I remember thinking the same thing for myself once or twice. This, of course, was only the scheme of a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader. But more people who claim to be followers of Christ live like this than they know.

Should we then embrace the street preacher who is telling strangers that they are going to hell unless they believe? Or are we still right to bristle? Earlier, we talked about the effectiveness of fear appeals in advertising. Some studies suggest that fear is effective at motivating believers and wavering believers because they acknowledge the possibility of the threat. But it's not effective for outsiders who don't share their value system. Talking about hell then may only be effective for those who buy into it already. Jesus talked about hell to the Jewish people and religious leaders who embraced it as a part of their belief system. We don't see him interact with religious outsiders enough to know what he would have done, but his Apostles give us a hint. Peter writes: "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits" (1 Peter 2:12). Peter also spoke of the potential, surprisingly, of wives with nonbelieving husbands winning over their husbands "without words [and] by the behavior of their wives" (1 Peter 3:1). He continues a few moments later by saying, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). Peter *presumes* outsiders will ask them questions about their life because of the hope they display. The Apostle Paul spoke similarly in Colossians 4:5-6: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Discomfort has a place - we just need to know what it is and apply it in suitable ways. Perhaps you need to break a social convention to get a point across. Maybe you need to express your concern to a loved one whose actions are inconsistent with their belief in Christ. Stephen Francis is the best sprint coach in the world. The Olympics consistently have the best sprinters from Ethiopia and most of them come from the same village in Ethiopia. The success has to do with Stephen who knows what makes a runner and what doesn't. Upon visiting some of the other Olympic Training fields around the world and comparing them to his own rugged field, he commented: "they are designed for comfort the most and not for improvement." That same statement could be said about the state of Christian discourse in America too.



# JESUS, <sup>5</sup>Mystery

One of the trickiest questions a person can be asked on a job interview is: “What is one of your greatest weaknesses?” Your mind might quickly shuffle through a list of different options. *Should I tell them that I have trouble showing up to work on time? No, no boss likes that one! How about I give them something more palatable: I’m just too nice to people. Yeah, that might work. Or perhaps: I’m kind of a workaholic. Those are some “character defects” that a potential employer might get along with just fine.* I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt. I trust that most of you want to be honest with your responses, but perhaps you’ve experienced some fear of being misunderstood. Maybe you’ve been concerned that a potential employer will see those deficiencies and make them out to be something bigger than they are. Or perhaps, you’ve been afraid that a potential employer won’t fully appreciate some of the personal strengths and technical skills you can bring to the job.

A lot of you likely consider yourself a long way from a job interview. But we all find ourselves in relationships where we feel overlooked and undervalued. Perhaps it’s because people overinflate a character flaw you have. Maybe it’s because there is something good about you that people don’t notice. Or maybe it’s simply because you find yourself misunderstood. The problem is that we often try to take control in situations like that. When we feel overlooked, we jump in and remind people of our experience or expertise and come across as arrogant or insecure. When we assume that people look down on us, some of us lash out and others build up resentments. We want to be known. We want to be understood. And there are a lot of ways that that can happen in healthy relationships without imposing upon people. But Jesus relied on a tool that is often overlooked because it seems so counterintuitive: mystery. How did Jesus use mystery to - surprisingly - show the world who he was? And is that something we ought to consider for ourselves?

Several times throughout the book of Mark, Jesus commands people to be quiet about what they have just seen and heard. This is known as the Messianic Secret. Carefully consider the following times Jesus does this in the book of Mark. Why do you think Jesus asks these different groups to remain quiet?

In Mark 1:24-25, a demon cries out, “What do you want to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are - the Holy One of God!” “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” Later in the same chapter, Mark explains in verse 34: “And Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.”

Mark 3:11-12 says, “Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, ‘You are the Son of God.’ But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him.”

After Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah in Mark 8:30, Jesus responded by warning “them not to tell anyone about him.”

Then, finally in Mark 9:9, after Jesus took Peter, James and John to see him transfigured, Mark writes this: “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”

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Why was Jesus so intent on keeping others quiet about who he was and what he did? Some claim that Jesus was simply trying to avoid being killed prematurely. Jesus was pretty practical, and the book of John lists this as a reason for his travel path in John 7:1, which says, “After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him.” The problem with this is that Mark never sites it as a reason, and it is in Mark that the Messianic Secret is most prominent.

Perhaps Jesus was using a form of reverse psychology to get the message out. But it would be dangerous to question Jesus’ sincerity. Mark wouldn’t have wanted to portray Jesus as manipulative when one of his major goals was to make a case for him in his book.

I think that the answer is in Mark 9:9, but before we go there, what *exactly* was Jesus trying to hide?

In the first verse we considered, Jesus tells some demons to be quiet after they call him the “Holy One of God.” A few verses later in 1:34, Mark tells us Jesus wouldn’t let demons speak because they knew who he was. So we know that Jesus’ secret has to do with his identity, specifically, his role as the “Holy One of God,” whatever that means. In Mark 3:11-12 the demons called him “the Son of God.” Jesus orders the demons to be silent. In Mark 8:30, Peter calls Jesus “the Messiah,” and Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone. So we have three titles: Holy One of God, Son of God and Messiah.

At face value, those three titles seem to be saying vastly different things about Jesus. But that’s not the case. The most mysterious of the titles is “the Holy One of God.” God is often called the Holy One in the Old Testament, but never “the Holy One of God.” “Holy” is a word that is applied to



many things like God's people, God's temple, and the hill on which God's city sat. It simply means special or unique. Jesus was the special, unique one sent by God. Messiah is the Hebrew word for the anointed one. In the Old Testament, kings were some of the most prominent figures that were anointed with oil at their installation ceremony. So the word basically became a way of referring to the king. In Psalm 2:2, David writes, "the kings of the earth and the rulers band together against the Lord and his anointed." When modern listeners hear the title Son of God, they think of Jesus' place within the Trinity. But many Jews in Jesus' day would have had a different understanding of the title. They may have thought of the special covenant God made with David and his heirs in 2 Samuel 7:14, where God said, "I will be his father, and he will be my son." "Son of God" was an expression Jews sometimes used to refer to the king God appointed to rule beneath him. And it's sometimes used this way in the New Testament. The disciple Nathaniel said to Jesus: "You are the son of God; you are the king of Israel" (John 1:49). That *does not* mean that the Son of God doesn't sometimes mean more than that. "Son of God" may sometimes refer to Jesus' special place within the Trinity. But the secret Jesus was trying to keep was one in the same: he is the one God chose and sent to be the people's king.

This brings us back to our question: why did Jesus want to keep his kingship a secret in the first place? Let's revisit Mark 9:9. In this scene Jesus goes up to a mountain, his clothes become dazzling white, Moses and Elijah appear by his side, Peter says something silly, a cloud appears to cover them and a voice says from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" When Jesus came down he ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen (which surely includes what they just heard). But he adds a time limit on that prohibition: "until the Son of Man had risen from the dead."

There is a lot of connective tissue between the kingship of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead - more than we can explore here. But something important about the resurrection that is often overlooked is the fact that God is the one who raised him. Jesus has authority to take up his life again in John 10:18, but that authority is derived from the Father. That's why almost all the language about resurrection in the New Testament says that he "was raised" instead of saying he "raised himself." It was a special act of God. Romans 1:4 says that he was appointed by the resurrection of the dead. 1 Corinthians 15:4 says that "Christ...was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." The kingship of Jesus could only be revealed in the proper time by the proper authority in the proper way - and that was through the resurrection.

Let's put ourselves in Jesus' place. He wrestled with demons, he fought against religious folk and he struggled to get the disciples on the same page. But he waits half way through the book to even ask his disciples who they think he is! And then he tells them to keep quiet about it. From a human perspective, it might seem a lot easier to come out with it at the beginning, but Jesus was convinced there was something that only God could reveal in his time and way.

It's hard to say what Jesus' strategy was here. But perhaps he found it important to lead with a personal touch instead of all the authority and power that came with him. He wanted to demonstrate

the way we should live and modeled as much when he told his disciples, “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Recently, a commissioner of the Port Authority in New Jersey did the opposite. She was caught on video berating police officers for pulling over a vehicle with her daughter in it. The police officer tried to calm her down and began with: “Miss.” But the woman interrupted: “No, don’t call me Miss. I’m Commissioner.” The video was released, and the woman resigned. Jesus didn’t start out with, “I’m the king. Come follow me.” He simply started out with, “Come follow me.” A little mystery created some space for him to move and build relationships, whereas the full truth could have turned people away.

But Jesus’ kingship wasn’t the only secret Jesus kept in the book of Mark - there was another he was hiding in plain sight. Jesus’ favorite title for himself throughout the Gospels was the Son of Man. The title appears fourteen times in Mark alone. Consider the following instances where Jesus calls himself the Son of Man in Mark. What do you think the title means based upon the way Jesus uses it?

Jesus said, “The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” in Mark 2:10. He said “the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” in Mark 2:28. He taught the disciples that “the Son of Man must suffer many things...be killed and after three days rise again” in Mark 8:31. He said that “the Son of Man” would be ashamed of anyone who is ashamed of his words “when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels” in Mark 8:38. Jesus told his disciples not to speak of the events around the transfiguration “until the Son of Man had risen from the dead” in Mark 9:9. In Mark 9:12, 9:31, 10:33, 10:45, 14:21 and 14:41 Jesus again says that the Son of Man must suffer and die. Jesus said to his disciples in Mark 13:26, “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.” And finally when asked by the high priest if he was the Messiah, Jesus responded by saying “I am...And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” in Mark 14:62.

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When most modern Christians think of this unique title of Jesus - the Son of Man - they think of it rather simply. Jesus is the son of a man, a person, a human being. So Jesus is a human being. That rather obvious fact took on heightened importance in the decades and centuries after the Bible was written because many people rose up questioning whether Jesus was a human at all. But nobody questioned the humanity of Jesus when he lived among them. Everyone assumed it. It wasn't a problem that needed to be addressed. So it would be a little out of place for Jesus to choose a title just to remind everyone he was a human being.

In the Old Testament and in other ancient literature, son of man, is used as a general expression to refer to someone. God addresses the prophet Ezekiel frequently with this expression. In ancient proverbs it is used as a way of speaking about a person generally - some "so and so" or average Joe. What makes Jesus' use of the expression different, however, is that he applies it to himself, which is not something other people did. So why did Jesus call himself this if there was no immediate need for Jesus to convince people he was a person and if it made as much sense for someone to call themselves the Son of Man back then as it does for someone to adopt the name Mr. So and So today?

We should first note that Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man in theologically pregnant statements. The Son of Man has authority to forgive sins. He is Lord of the Sabbath. He is the one predicted in Scriptures to suffer, be killed and rise again in three days. He is the one that the people will see coming on the clouds with great power and glory.

What's most helpful, however, are the two instances that Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory in Mark 13:26 and 14:62. Jesus is actually alluding to specific Old Testament prophecies. One is Daniel 7:13-14: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him." Another is Psalm 110:1 where David describes another Lord sitting at the right hand of God. Both of these texts point to a figure who eventually became known as "*the* Son of Man" in some Jewish traditions who shared unique power with God, had a level of equality with him because of where he sat, rode clouds, which was often a symbol of divine status in the ancient near east, and was worshiped. Jewish writers like the author of *1 Enoch* and others picked up on this tradition and described a powerful supernatural figure like God, but in some way distinct from God. So before Jesus even showed up, there were hints about a powerful, divine figure, distinct from the Father and yet worshiped like him. These hints stemmed in part from this figure from Daniel 7 that became known as "the Son of Man."

What's fascinating about this is that Jesus' disciples who weren't exactly Bible scholars probably would have missed the cues. But the last time Jesus used the title of himself was when he was surrounded by the Bible scholars of his day. And they got it. During the trial of Jesus, the Jewish leaders were openly trying to kill him. When they finally brought him before a secret tribunal, Mark

writes that they “were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death but they could not find any” (Mark 14:55). Finally, after several failed attempts, a thought comes to the high priest: “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” The high priest thought that he could get the Messiah on charges of sedition. The Jews lived under the hand of Rome at the time. Caesar was their king whether they liked it or not. But if the high priest could get Jesus to admit publicly that he was the king instead, he could make a case to the Roman authorities that Jesus was trying to claim Caesar’s throne and get Jesus killed as a result. What’s important to know is that there were no Jewish laws prohibiting someone from making a claim to the throne. The Jews only wanted to capture Jesus breaking the Roman laws so that they could deal with him as they desired.

With a simple, “I am,” Jesus gives the high priest exactly what he is looking for. For the first time, Jesus publicly confesses one of the secrets he was holding back: that he was indeed God’s chosen king. If that had been all Jesus had said, the high priest and Jewish leaders would have simply taken him to Pilate and Mark would have probably ended the scene there. But Jesus continues with that remarkable allusion to Daniel 7 and Psalm 110: “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Jesus wasn’t just claiming to be a human king. Jesus was claiming to be the divine figure with God’s power, status and a right to be worshiped. Jesus wasn’t just breaking Roman law, he was dishonoring God (from their viewpoint) in the most egregious way. The high priest tears his clothes and cries blasphemy. The people spit at him and strike him all agreeing he is worthy of death. Jesus was way more than a man, and he lets the people know by telling him he is the Son of Man.

Jesus was far more open about being the Son of Man - a seemingly more contentious title - than he was about being the king. But that title was shrouded in mystery. No one cried blasphemy until Jesus put it in its proper theological context and until he said it to the right crowd. Even though Jews had begun the conversation about figures sharing God’s power and sitting at his right hand, the Jewish people weren’t suddenly prepared to totally reshape their concept of God. The Jesus that Mark presents is one who slowly reveals that he is God in subtle and mysterious ways to a people who wouldn’t have been able to take it all in at once. And the only time he violated that principle was when it was time for him to go.

Not only did Jesus use mystery to create some space to move and build relationships with people, he used mystery to slowly reveal some complex and difficult truths that would have been hard to take in all at once. Jesus took baby steps to reveal the most controversial thing about himself – that he was somehow both God and yet a distinct person from his Father in heaven.

Strive Masiyiwa is an engineer who transformed the telecommunications landscape in Africa. In his interview at the 2018 Global Leadership Summit, he said that he told his people he wanted to connect all the countries in Africa and they looked at him with shock. He re-evaluated and decided to present them with short-term achievable goals instead. “Let’s connect South Africa and

Zimbabwe,” he said. The team got it, and they achieved it. Fifteen years later, they connected Cairo on the opposite end of the continent.

Sometimes we have to take baby steps too. When we rush to share our stories, we can overwhelm people. Perhaps you went through some life-defining tragedy or carry some scarlet letter. You hunger to build an authentic, meaningful connection with someone and you want to get all the hard stuff out of the way. But hard things deserve to be shared at the proper time and place. Leaving a little mystery in your stories can be an asset. People need to know that you are human - that you are like them - before you share with them something that makes things a little more complex.

Jesus demonstrated wisdom by waiting for God to reveal his purpose and by slowly preparing people for his paradigm-shifting identity. He did this even when it would have been more convenient to share everything up front. But the shortest path isn't always the best one, and Jesus invites us to consider how we too might be content with a little mystery in our own lives to build bridges more effectively as well.



# Conclusion

We spent the last five sections exploring the audacity of Jesus – ways Jesus went against the grain, rattled authorities, surprised listeners, created tension and squeezed into tiny spaces to create colorful moments. In many ways Jesus was inviting us to live a little more on the fringe. He challenges our sensibilities and calls us to live a little strangely on the occasions that merit it. Jesus rewrote the rules when he interacted with people and encouraged us to cast aside normal as something to strive for. He invites us to be different not simply for the sake of being different but for the good of the kingdom and the glory of his Father in heaven.

But the strange, wonderful life of Jesus is more than an invitation to sometimes embrace the odd as a way of encouraging people to follow after God. It's an invitation to worship the completely unique God man who charted a course unlike any other and still provokes our curiosity today. We want to emulate Jesus' character. We want to consider some of his unique methods. But ultimately, we have to recognize that we can't ever *be* Jesus. And the only proper response to this one whom the earth was created through, whom souls were saved for and whose unbreakable love we enjoy, is to worship.

