

Was Jesus Religious?

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Matthew 15:10-18 — Then Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" Jesus answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles."

So, this question here in your bulletin: Was Jesus religious? Just for fun, let's take a poll—if you're willing, raise your hands if you want to say, "Yes, Jesus was religious." Alright, now, raise your hand if you want to say, "No, Jesus wasn't religious." Well, there are plenty of good reasons to say "Yes." Jesus was raised within Judaism and was a practicing Jew throughout his life. People called him "Rabbi," which means a religious teacher of Jewish law—so, that sounds pretty religious. And of course, there's this whole thing called "Christianity" (which most of us would call a religion), and since Christianity is all about Jesus, it makes sense to call Jesus religious.

But here's the problem: Jesus's religiousness is unconventional, radical, shocking. He takes the religion of everyone around him and does something with it that no one has seen before. He shakes it up so much, in fact, that many people call it sacrilege or blasphemy. So, if the answer to our question is "Yes," we have to immediately follow it with, "but not the kind of religious that people expect."

What did people expect? Well, in Jesus' day and age, religious people were highly concerned with purity. See, there were certain things, certain actions, and certain people who were deemed unclean, and if you came into contact with them—if you ate this food or touched this person or did this thing—then you would become unclean, too. So, to be a good religious person in Jesus' day meant, in part, to know what was clean, to know what was unclean, and to stay away from anything that was unclean, so that you could remain pure.

Now, this religious mentality wasn't a recent invention in Jesus' day; it had been around, for Judaism and for other ancient religions, for hundreds and even thousands of years. If you flip through the book of Leviticus, for example, you'll see plenty of laws that told Jesus' ancestors, the ancient Israelites, what they could eat and what they couldn't eat, what they could touch and what they couldn't touch, etc. And these laws played an important role within Judaism. When Leviticus was written, Judaism was still a relatively young religion, and it's important for

religions, especially when they are young, to define themselves, to carve out a specific identity for themselves, to make it clear who they are and who they aren't. And these laws, this system of separating the clean from the unclean, is one way of doing that: it allows a religious community to say, "*Other* people will eat and touch these things, but we're not going to, because we're going to be different." There's nothing necessarily wrong with this mentality, this way of being religious. But it's not what Jesus is after. According to our passage this morning in Matthew 15, Jesus is religious in a very different way.

"It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person," Jesus says. "Rather, it's what comes out of the mouth that defiles." It's difficult to overstate just how significant and how controversial Jesus' teaching here is. Jesus is saying that the Jewish system of categorizing clean and unclean foods doesn't matter. He is upending one of his own religion's most dearly-held beliefs. It'd be sorta like Jesus walking into a church and saying, "You know, this whole prayer thing, it doesn't really matter—what really matters is what you say to your neighbor, not to God." Or, "You know, this whole going-to-church thing, God doesn't really care about that—what God really cares about is what you do during your week, not what you do on Sunday morning." Those kinds of comments would upset a whole lot of Christians—and the more religious those Christians consider themselves to be, the more upsetting the comments will likely be! "What do you mean prayer doesn't matter! What do you mean God doesn't care whether or not I go to church! What do you mean people can eat whatever they want and still be pure?" These are big religious rugs to rip out from under someone.

So, what is Jesus after here? Why does he want to do away with these longstanding religious customs? It seems to me that Jesus is wary of religion that focuses too much on protecting and preserving, too much on maintaining one's purity, because if we're always trying to keep ourselves "pure," then we're probably not taking good care of those who have been deemed "dirty." And friends, Jesus spends way more of his time with *those* people, the so-called "dirty" people, than he does with the especially religious folk. For Jesus, religion shouldn't be a self-centered practice that helps you keep yourself squeaky clean; it should be, at least in part, an others-centered practice that helps you love people as God loves them. That's why Jesus tells us, "Don't think about what goes *into* your mouth and how that's affecting *you*; think about what's coming *out of* your mouth and how that's affecting the world around you." For Jesus, being religious doesn't necessarily mean following all of the longstanding customs and rules; but it must mean loving others well—including those who don't fit neatly into those customs and rules.

Some of the religious leaders around Jesus will tell people that if they don't follow certain religious conventions, then they are not welcome. But in our passage this morning, it seems that Jesus would rather dispose of religious conventions so that people will be welcome. When Jesus has to choose between honoring a religious norm and including those people who that norm excludes, he chooses inclusion over religion, because his religion—the message of his gospel, his good news—is all about inclusion: through Jesus, all people are invited into the family of God, whatever they eat, however they pray, whoever they are.

This is a controversial message, seeing how much of religion thrives on excluding people. After Jesus' mic-drop moment, the disciples come up to him and whisper, "You know, the Pharisees didn't really like what you had to say." These Pharisees, these are the good upstanding religious folk we're talking about here. We then get this famous line from Jesus about "blind guides of the blind"—he doesn't seem to care that the religious folk are bothered by what he says, because he's not saying it to be respectable in their sight; he's saying it because he believes that it's true. Then Peter asks, "Jesus, could you run this by us again? Explain to us what exactly you meant?" Like Jesus, Peter is a devout Jew, and he's having a hard time wrapping his mind around this new teaching. And believe it or not, Jesus responds with a poop joke. "How much do you think God cares about the food you eat, really? It goes in, and then it goes out, into the sewer. God has bigger things on God's mind," Jesus says. "God cares about your heart and what comes out of your heart. God cares about love."

Friends, if any of our religious customs aren't helping us love, if any of them are impeding our ability to share the good news of God's love for all of creation, know that we wouldn't need to hold onto them for Jesus' sake. The way I see it, there is no sacred cow that Jesus won't touch, no plant that Jesus won't uproot if that cow or that plant has led us to focus on protecting our own purity more so than on loving our hurting world. This week, friends, let's be mindful of our religious tendency to navel-gaze, to practice our piety in self-centered ways. And this week, let us prayerfully consider how Jesus might be beckoning us to be religious in a different way. Amen.