

Historical Jesus 10: Conflict

“Conflict plays a large part in the Gospel narratives of the ministry of Jesus...Jesus is shown in conflict with Satan (Mt 12:28)...with natural calamities like storms...with mental illnesses...with religious leaders of his people...with the crowds he draws...with his family...with his disciples...and he is in conflict with his own instinctive clinging to life...when it comes in the way of his Father’s will. Conflict, then, is not a secondary dispensable element in the ministry of Jesus; it is of its essence. Not for Jesus the ecstasy of the frolicking Krishna who is beyond all conflict, nor the serene smile of the Buddha who is wholly untouched by it. His is a short and agitated ministry, ending in a violent and untimely death.”⁴⁴

As we’ll see, Jesus endured conflict throughout his ministry. As such, we should not conclude we are walking with God just because we have peace in our lives, nor should we assume that conflict necessarily means we are doing something wrong. Although Jesus faced difficulties with the Samaritans⁴⁵ and Herodians,⁴⁶ the bulk of his conflict—at least until the last week of his life—resulted from interactions with the Pharisees.⁴⁷ I have organized the Pharisees’ disagreements with Jesus into three groups: legal issues, challenges to his legitimacy, and problems with Jesus’ style of ministry. Once we look at these three, we’ll consider Jesus’ criticisms of the Pharisees.

Legal Disagreements

The most common legal disagreement we find in the Gospels pertains to Sabbath observance. One time, Jesus’ disciples were plucking grain, rubbing it in their hands, and eating on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28). The Pharisees asked, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” Jesus defended them, saying, “Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?” After pointing out this classic exception to the rule, he said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

In the other incidents related to the Sabbath, Jesus healed people, which raised the ire of the Pharisees. He restored the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1-6), the woman doubled over (Luke 13:12-16), the man with dropsy⁴⁸, and the lame man at the Bethesda pool (John 5). Why did Jesus heal on the Sabbath? He does not give an explicit reason. We know he healed other days as well. Either Jesus did not consider his miracles work, or he felt he had solid precedent to lawfully break the Sabbath. For example, the Law allowed for priests to work on the Sabbath or rescue a person or animal in danger. Here is an example of when the synagogue ruler confronted Jesus for healing on the Sabbath:

Luke 13:11-16

11 And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” 13 And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was

⁴⁴ George M. Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2003), p. 164.

⁴⁵ As we saw last time, the Samaritans refused Jesus hospitality in one city (Luke 9:51-56).

⁴⁶ The Pharisees tipped off Jesus that Herod Antipas wanted to kill him to which Jesus replied, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course’” (Luke 13:31-33).

⁴⁷ As we will see later, the Sadducees were instrumental in Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

⁴⁸ Dropsy is edema—a swelling due to abnormal collection of fluid that causes severe pain.

made straight, and she glorified God. 14 But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." 15 Then the Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? 16 And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?"

"A number of Jews would have agreed with Jesus that healing takes precedence over the Sabbath; others might have thought that a chronic, nonpainful condition could wait until sundown, lest the healing in this case give the impression that the healer did not honor the day or the commandment....The story highlights Jesus' action as in contradistinction from what the synagogue leader would have preferred. But the crowd – that is the Jewish majority – has no problem with Jesus' healing the woman, and they would have recognized his argument to be a standard form for discussion of legal matters. He argues on the basis of what is called in Hebrew a *gal v'homer*, or "from the lighter to the greater," model.... If you already do X, then you should surely do Y, which is even more important." Jesus' healing itself is a matter of touch, which is not forbidden on the Sabbath: he makes no potions; he unties no cords."⁴⁹

A second issue the Pharisees raised is related to purity (Mark 7:1-15). One time they saw Jesus' disciples were not washing their hands prior to eating. They asked, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" Jesus replied, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" Jesus did not even bother to debate the purity requirement, but instead attacked their underlying practice of adhering to the traditions of the elders.

Jewish rabbis debated what reasons God allowed for divorce. Shammai had taught unseemly conduct qualified whereas Hillel said a man could divorce his wife even if she merely spoiled his food.⁵⁰ The Pharisees brought the subject up to Jesus in an effort to test him (Matthew 19:3-9). They asked, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" Jesus balked at their question, insisting, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." However, they came back at him asking, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus responded, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." It is not clear from this interchange what these Pharisees believed about the subject, but Jesus' position probably struck them as rather strict.⁵¹

Another time a lawyer came to Jesus to test him (Luke 10:25-37). He asked, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The lawyer answered, "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said, "You have answered

⁴⁹ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), pp. 32-3.

⁵⁰ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin, Folio 90a

⁵¹ Jesus also mentions his position on divorce and remarriage in Matthew 5:31-32. Later on, when dealing with the complications of Christian and non-Christian mixed marriages, Paul gives more instruction on this topic (1 Corinthians 7).

correctly; do this, and you will live.” Obviously the conversation did not go as the lawyer intended. Wanting to justify himself, he asked, “And who is my neighbor?” This is when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. In it, an ethnic and religious enemy shows compassion on an injured man whereas his own people refuse to help. Jesus asked, “Which of these three, do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” The lawyer answered, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said, “You go, and do likewise.” Although the initial question was about eternal life, it really focused on the statement, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Thus, this conflict was another legal disagreement. Jesus defines a neighbor as one who acts neighborly rather than a member of one’s own group.

Challenges to His Legitimacy

Although there were some Pharisees who believed that Jesus was a genuine prophet, most of them challenged his authority. One time Jesus claimed, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12-19). The Pharisees said, “You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true.” Jesus went on to explain that his Father also bore witness about him.

Another time, the Pharisees and Sadducees asked Jesus to show them a sign (Matthew 16:1-5). Ironically, though Jesus’ ministry was chock full of miraculous signs and wonders, he refused to perform one to prove his identity to his critics. He said, “An adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” The sign of Jonah, as it later becomes clear, referred to his time in the grave and subsequent resurrection.

In another similar incident, the Pharisees asked Jesus when the Kingdom would come (Luke 17:20-37). In one sense this was a reasonable question. Jesus went about with his disciples from village to village proclaiming repentance because the Kingdom of God was near. Naturally, one would ask, “Well, when is the kingdom actually going to get here?” Alternatively, they could have been attempting to bait Jesus into setting a date or fixed sign that they could later use to discredit him. Jesus answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:20-21). Here they were asking about the Kingdom while the King is standing right in front of them. Jesus was preaching the Kingdom gospel, teaching to live in light of the Kingdom, enacting the Kingdom through his healing, exorcisms, and other acts of restoration. He was bringing the Kingdom to bear right in their midst, and they couldn’t see it. Then he turned to his disciples and explained that when the Kingdom would come, it would happen suddenly when people least expect it and used two examples: the flood in the days of Noah and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. When it arrives, they’ll know it just like how lightening is visible when it flashes across the night sky.

Jesus’ Style of Ministry

In addition to the conflict we’ve already seen, the Pharisees also took issue with Jesus’ particular style of doing ministry. Early on, some people brought a paralyzed man to Jesus for healing (Matthew 9:1-8). Jesus saw the man’s faith and said, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” Some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” Jesus replied, “Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, and walk?’ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” he said to the paralytic, “Get up, pick up your bed and go home.” Remember, we need to be careful not to side with Jesus’ critics. They thought he was taking God’s authority onto himself by forgiving sins. That is not what the text says. Jesus does not say, “I forgive you,” but “Your sins are forgiven.” Jesus is pronouncing forgiveness. This is why when the

crowds saw it, “they glorified God who had given such authority to men.” After his resurrection, Jesus told his disciples, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:23). (See also Matthew 18:18 on binding and loosing). Jesus was operating in a way that they misunderstood, so they jumped to the conclusion that he was blaspheming when he was really doing God’s will.

Although the scribes and Pharisees quibbled with Jesus about minor issues like fasting,⁵² they crossed the line when they accused him of casting out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons (Luke 11:14-32). Jesus had been casting out a mute demon to the amazement of the crowds when they leveled this slanderous accusation against him. Jesus replied, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste...and if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?” Then he went on to say, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28). I know this insult against Jesus was particularly egregious because he said, “Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12:31-32). Apparently, the skeptics and naysayers could not refute Jesus’ miraculous powers so that alleged they were from Satan. Rather than recognizing the signs as testifying to Jesus’ credibility, they found a way to slander him. However, since Jesus’ miracles really were from the God’s Spirit, they were blaspheming God Himself!

The third and most prominent issue the Pharisees brought against Jesus regarding his way of doing ministry was associating with sinners. So frequently did Jesus attend dinner parties that his enemies spread rumors about him saying, “Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Luke 7:34). Pharisees tended to separate themselves from sinners, whereas Jesus spent a great deal of time with them. Jesus even called the tax collector Levi (also called Matthew) to follow him as a disciple (Luke 5:29-32). That night, Levi made a great feast in his house and entertained a large company of tax collectors and others. The Pharisees grumbled, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Another time a Pharisee, named Simon, invited Jesus over for dinner (Luke 7:36-50). While he reclined at the table on a cushion with his feet behind him, a woman came weeping. She was a known sinner in the town. She stood behind Jesus and washed his feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with expensive ointment from an alabaster flask. Simon thought to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” Just then Jesus told a story about two debtors who were forgiven. One of them owed much more than the other, then he asked, “Now which of them will love him more?” Simon said, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” Jesus explained, “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” Then, turning to the woman, he said, “Your sins are forgiven.” This caused those at the table to ask, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” Jesus said to her, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” They were probably right. She was a sinner. However, they missed that she was convicted and sorrowful. They couldn’t see that she wanted to repent, that she could change and have a fresh start. Jesus gave her that second chance. He saw her obvious repentance and told her that she was forgiven. All of this rubbed the Pharisees the wrong way.

⁵² The Pharisees asked Jesus’ disciples why they didn’t fast. Jesus told them they would not fast so long as he was with them, but after he was gone, they would fast (Luke 5:33-35). Jesus recognized the newness of his ministry style when he talked about putting new wine in new wineskins and new patches on new garments (Luke 5:36-38).

Later in his ministry, some Pharisees and scribes said, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." This time, Jesus narrated a triple set of parables (Luke 15). He told them about a shepherd whose sheep had gotten lost. He left the ninety-nine to go find the one. When he found it, he rejoiced. Jesus explains, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." In the second iteration, he told about a woman who lost a valuable coin. After she found it, she called together her friends and neighbors and rejoiced with them. "Just so," says Jesus, "I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Lastly, he related the tale of a son who asked for his inheritance from his father and promptly went off and squandered everything. After ending up destitute as a pig feeder, he came to himself and journeyed home, asking to work as a hired servant. His father wouldn't hear any of it and embraced his son, saying, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." His other son, the "righteous one," however, was sulking out in the field and would not come into the party. He was too self-centered to rejoice. He was angry that his father never gave him a young goat to celebrate with his friends. I'm sure the Pharisees must have felt the heat when Jesus got to the end of that parable. They are all about doing what is right, which is commendable, but they also need to compassionately help those who have strayed to find their path.

Jesus' Criticisms

Now that we've considered the major areas of conflict the scribes and Pharisees had with Jesus, we will look at what issues Jesus brought against them in return. I want to mention just two before moving on to Jesus' most sustained critique in Matthew 23.

Once, Jesus told a parable, a zinger, to convict some people "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt." Here is what he said:

Luke 18:10-14

10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus valued humility highly. He taught the last would be first and the first, last. He saw the showoffs on the street corners with their broadened phylacteries and long fancy prayers. When they fasted they made sure everyone knew it by leaving their faces unwashed, neglecting to anoint their heads, and disfiguring their faces. Jesus saw this as a major problem for the religious leaders of his time.

Another issue Jesus criticized the Pharisees about was greed. Jesus had told his disciples a parable about an unjust manager who used his money wisely to make friends (Luke 16). He said, "You cannot serve God and money." However, the Pharisees ridiculed Jesus since they were lovers of money. To confront their lack of generosity he told them the parable about Lazarus and the rich man. The moral of this story was that they should use their money to help the needy rather than hoard it and face God's judgment.

In addition to pride and greed, Jesus also confronted the Pharisees on several more issues. Here is his critique:

Matthew 23:1-33

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, 3 so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, 6 and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues 7 and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. 10 Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. 11 The greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. 15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' 19 You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. 22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. 24 You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, 30 saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. 33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

34 Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, 35 so that on you may come

all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

As those who are trying to follow Jesus, we need to be careful not to find ourselves in conflict with him. We can't allow our hearts to harden or to focus on holiness so much that we forget compassion. We have to ward off the sickness of greediness with the cure of generosity. We must be genuine, for there is nothing Jesus rails against more than hypocrisy. We need to do the right thing, but for God to see it not other people. We humble ourselves and seek God's glory and he will exalt us in due time. Let us be the kind of believers who recognize our limitations and depend on God's empowering grace to help us do his will in our own time.