

## The Design and Danger of Religion Luke 5:17-6:11

There's a popular quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson that's a good reminder for those who have become so focused on reaching a particular goal that nothing else really matters anymore. The quote goes like this: "*Life is a journey, not a destination.*" It's a quote that helps people see there's value in the journey of life, not just the goal they're aiming for.

One of the slogans that flows out of that quote is: "*Focus on the journey, not the destination.*" This seems like good advice when it comes to a number of things:

- Education. When I was in college, I treated education like a steppingstone to get to the destination that I wanted, which was a college degree. I didn't embrace the journey and try to learn as much as I could. I did what I had to do to get a good grade and then moved on. Education was a means to an end. So, I learned a lot of things for a short period of time but I quickly forgot them. It would have been good if at that time I would have told myself: "*Focus on the journey, not the destination.*"
- Work. Most people work for 40 or 50 years of their lives. I've seen some people who treat work as just a way to make money. So they choose their line of work based on how much money they can make rather than what they really enjoy. Oftentimes that doesn't go very well. They hate their job and end up living for the weekends. I don't recommend it. It would be better to look for a job that's fulfilling and enjoyable, even if it's less pay. Brad Marquand says: "*If you love what you do you'll never have to work a day in your life.*" So when it comes to work, it's a good idea to "*focus on the journey, not the destination.*"
- Parenting. One of the most common things I hear older parents say is: "*Enjoy it while it lasts because it goes really fast.*" And I can see what they're talking about. The problem is that parenting is super busy. There's so much going on it can be exhausting and I find myself looking forward to the end of the day or the end of the week or sports season so we can finally get a break. I need to keep reminding myself: "*Focus on the journey, not the destination.*"

So you can see that in a lot of ways it's a good idea to focus on the journey, not the destination. But what if you do that when it comes to religion? What happens

if religion becomes all about the journey and not the destination? There have been a lot of Christians that have gone down that road and this morning I want us to see what happens if you do. It's something we need to watch out for as we live the Christian life. We are going to be looking at 5 short stories in the book of Luke that all involve a group of religious leaders who became so focused on the journey that they lost sight of the destination and we're going to see what that did to their religion.

The first story is in Luke 5. At this point Jesus is continuing his ministry in Galilee – very busy with crowds of people coming to hear him preach and be blessed by his healing ministry – and these are some of the stories of what happened...

Read Luke 5:17-26.

*On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. <sup>18</sup> And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, <sup>19</sup> but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. <sup>20</sup> And when he saw their faith, he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." <sup>21</sup> And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" <sup>22</sup> When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, "Why do you question in your hearts? <sup>23</sup> Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? <sup>24</sup> But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the man who was paralyzed—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." <sup>25</sup> And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God. <sup>26</sup> And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen extraordinary things today."*

I want to focus on the interactions between Jesus and the religious leaders. You can see that after Jesus told the paralyzed man that his sins were forgiven, they had a major problem with that: "You can't do that! Only God can forgive sins!" As I try to think of it from their perspective, I think what bothered them is that they already had a process by which people's sins were forgiven and it was through their religious practices – walking in obedience to the Law of Moses. There were

rules to keep, steps to follow, sacrifices to offer. It was all about the journey. God alone could forgive sins and the way he did that was by adhering to their religion. He would never give people forgiveness as a free gift through Jesus of Nazareth!

Their religion had become all about the journey and they lost sight of the destination. They couldn't see that the law of Moses was given to point people to Christ and it was only through his life, death, and resurrection they could be forgiven, and no other way. The journey couldn't save you, only Jesus of Nazareth could. He was the destination and the journey was meant to lead them to him.

So when Jesus forgave the man's sins they accused him of blasphemy instead of rejoicing. Their religion was empty legalism. A dead end. The form was there, but not the heart, and it completely lost its purpose.

The second story is in Luke 5:27-32.

*After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me."<sup>28</sup> And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.*

*<sup>29</sup> And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. <sup>30</sup> And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" <sup>31</sup> And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>32</sup> I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."*

So here they had a major problem with the people Jesus was eating with. They were tax collectors and sinners – they weren't following the Law of Moses. They weren't obeying the rules and keeping the necessary religious practices. And because of that, Jesus should have nothing to do with them. They were outsiders and outcasts and should be avoided, not associated with.

They were so focused on the journey they completely lost sight of the destination. Jesus told them: *"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."* Jesus was eating with them because he knew they needed him for salvation – and they didn't need to go through religious hoops to get to him – they just needed him. So did the scribes and Pharisees. He was the destination. But they were so fixated on

the journey that they couldn't see it. They thought they were already saved because of their adherence to the rules. But the rules could never save them – they were given to reveal their unrighteousness and point them to their need for the Messiah.

The journey was supposed to lead them to the destination, but because they focused so much on the journey, they had no idea what the destination was. And again you can see that their religion became nothing more than empty legalism that in this case excluded sinners rather than reached out to them. That's what happens when the journey becomes the only focus.

The third story is in Luke 5:33-35.

*And they said to him, "The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink." <sup>34</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? <sup>35</sup> The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days."*

So here they were bothered that Jesus didn't make his disciples fast like they did with their disciples. Fasting was a big deal to them – an important part of their religion. But Jesus pointed out through the illustration of the bridegroom that fasting was actually supposed to be about him – acknowledging their dependence on him. He was the destination of fasting. Therefore it didn't make any sense for his disciples to fast while he was right there with them. The Pharisees were so focused on the journey that they completely missed what it was about. And again it turned into empty legalism, just going through the motions.

The fourth story is in Luke 6:1-5.

*On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. <sup>2</sup> But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?" <sup>3</sup> And Jesus answered them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: <sup>4</sup> how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him?" <sup>5</sup> And he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."*

So they were upset that his disciples were violating their Sabbath regulations. But the Sabbath was given by God to point people to him – a day of rest to draw near to God in worship so that people would remember to rest in God and trust in him. It was a day to enjoy God’s blessing and he didn’t want people to suffer and go hungry because of just following some legalistic Sabbath regulations. The Sabbath laws weren’t just about keeping rules, they were the means to communing with God. And the Pharisees had missed that.

The final story is in Luke 6:6-11.

*On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. <sup>7</sup> And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him. <sup>8</sup> But he knew their thoughts, and he said to the man with the withered hand, “Come and stand here.” And he rose and stood there. <sup>9</sup> And Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?” <sup>10</sup> And after looking around at them all he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” And he did so, and his hand was restored. <sup>11</sup> But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.*

This is similar to the last one and another example of how the scribes and Pharisees had missed the whole point. They were enraged that Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath rather than obeying their rules. But Jesus pointed out that God’s will in the Sabbath was to do good and bless his people. To not heal the man who was suffering would be evil and totally miss the point of the Sabbath.

So in every one of these stories you can see that the scribes and Pharisees were so focused on the journey that they completely lost sight of the destination. It was all about the religious practices and not about Christ. They fulfilled the slogan well: “Focus on the journey, not the destination.” But when it comes to religion, this is not the thing to do. It’s a dangerous trap of legalism that many people fall into that ends up removing the very heart and purpose of the religion we’ve been given.

Christianity is all about the destination and the journey is all about getting you there. If you focus on the journey and forget about the destination, all you end up

with is empty legalism that becomes a deterrent to Christ for yourself and everyone else.

There are a lot of important things we do when it comes to Christian practices – things like going to church, giving tithes and offerings, reading the Bible, fasting and prayer... These are important, but only because they help us draw near to Christ and become like him. That's their goal and that's what gives them meaning and purpose. And if they become our only focus, we will totally miss the point. The journey is all about Jesus.

So as you look at your life and your Christian practices, is it all about the journey? Are you just going through the motions? Maybe they're really important to you, but you've lost sight of what they're all about and need to refocus on the destination. The journey is important, but only if it leads us to the destination. Embrace the journey, but keep your focus on the destination.