
Day 298 - October 25

Jesus the Christ (5 BCE – 30 CE)

The Rise of Opposition

Readings: *Matthew 9:9-17; 12:1-21; Mark 2:13-28; 3:1-19; Luke 5:27-39; 6:1-19; John 5:1-47*

Reflections:

The Rise of Opposition

- Matthew (Levi) is Called: Jesus' call of Matthew (or Levi) the tax collector provides a wonderful window into Jesus' normal approach to life. First, he calls a man to be his disciple who was viewed as a traitor to the cause of Israel. He was a tax collector for the Romans and so he was viewed as someone facilitating the oppression of their enemies. Jesus' includes both a Zealot, Simon who wanted to overthrow the Romans through violence (see Matthew 10:4) and a Tax collector in his inner group of twelve disciples. Here we see Jesus' ongoing effort to cultivate enemy love and a vision for peace and reconciliation. Levi leaves everything as do the other disciples to follow Jesus. This shows his complete trust in Jesus.
- Eating with Sinners: Jesus then goes to his house to have a party with all of his "sinner" friends. The religious leaders are stalking him and become offended that he is partying. Jesus then responds that a doctor doesn't come for the healthy but the sick. At first you would think this is an affirmation of the religious leaders as it implies they are the healthy ones. Jesus' next statement though points out how they are missing God's heart as he quotes Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Again this would point to the relational nature of God's heart and how in the end he doesn't care about their religious addiction to ritual, particularly the sacrificial system as a means of forgiveness for sins.
- Disciples Not Fasting: Then the religious leaders contrast Jesus' approach to community (partying) to John the Baptizers (fasting and praying). Jesus' response is that the time for the wedding party has begun as the Bridegroom has appeared. The image of the wedding and wine are natural connections in their culture and so he goes on to explain about new wine and new wine skins. Here we see Jesus use an image from their culture to explain two key realities for his kingdom. He was not here to mend or repair the old but start something completely new. He does not invalidate the old he simply says that God is doing something new and he needs new containers to handle this new work. He says like new cloth on an old garment or new wine in an old wineskin, this new work can't be contained in the old

paradigm of the Torah or the existing religious system. This new work of God must find new containers. It is interesting that the new container is a party where people can hang out together to experience loving, inclusive community. We should also note that Jesus is probably implying a connection between new wine and the work of the Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit is compared to being filled with wine. Jesus concludes by saying that those who have tasted the old wine think it is better than the new. In fact he is saying something true in that old wine is better. I don't think he is implying that the old religious ways are better than the new way of grace, he is just saying that people have bonded with and love their religious ways will not naturally like the way of grace and living in loving community.

- Healing at Pool of Bethesda: The story found in John 5:1 of the man healed at the pool occurs during one of the feasts. Some speculate that this was the Passover of CE 28. Other scholars argue that the Passover comes too late in the year and would have been too cold for these people to be outside all day. In any case, Jesus is in Jerusalem for a feast and encounters a man who was disabled for thirty-eight years. Jesus first question is remarkable. He asks the man if he wants to get well. The obvious answer is yes. Yet, it presses to a deeper question. The man had found community and relationships because of his disability. He didn't have to work. Did he really want the responsibilities and completely new life that would come with being well? Many people with emotional or relational dysfunction find their identity in their dysfunction and may actually resist getting well. The man doesn't answer Jesus question but gives an excuse as to why he hasn't been healed yet. Apparently this was a pool that had a reputation of offering people healing when the waters were stirred. (Note: later copyists inserted additional verses explaining the tradition of an angel stirring the waters and releasing a miraculous healing to whoever entered first). Jesus tells the man to "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." Jesus intentionally commands the man to break the Sabbath tradition of not carrying a mat on the Sabbath. This gets a reaction from the religious leaders. The story clearly illustrates how a religious perspective values all the wrong things. Rather than celebrating God and his merciful healing of this man, the religious leaders are offended he is carrying a mat! Later, Jesus finds the man back at the temple and he actually tells him to stop sinning. Apparently, this man was looking to gain popularity among the religious leaders and had fully abandoned his community of disabled friends. Jesus tells him to stop sinning by going to the temple! The man's loyalty though is not to Jesus but to the religious leaders (Note: In John, "Jews" is used as a short-form for the Jewish religious leaders) and so as shocking as it seems, he goes back and reports to the religious leaders what Jesus said to him. Here we see John capture in his writing how the opposition was starting to form against Jesus.
- Resurrection and Life: Jesus' response to the Jewish leaders further heightens this tension. He declares that God is always working and so he is always working. Again Jesus clearly aligns himself as being the same as God. The religious leaders immediately cry blasphemy for such a statement. Jesus does not stop here but then goes on to clearly articulate his intimate relationship with his Father. Over and over again he reinforces the central truth

that he is uniquely one with God the Father. He has been sent by his Father but his mission is essentially to be “God with us.”

- Discussion of Authority: Jesus is crystal clear about the resurrection, his power to give life and to have authority over death. He is clear about his role in judging humanity at the final resurrection. Jesus then goes on to outline the evidence that supports these incredible claims. He points to the witness of John the Baptizer as well as the witness of his miracles. He also points to God’s own witness to Jesus’ true identity. Jesus is most likely referencing God’s statement of affirmation at Jesus’ baptism. He then goes on to point out how the religious leaders have no real relationship with God – “You have never heard his voice, nor does his word dwell in you...” God communicating with us is the essential quality of what it means to have a relationship with God. He goes on to say how they study the Scriptures but don’t actually recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Here we see an important insight. A legalistic approach to Scripture where we look for rules to judge ourselves and others blinds us to perceiving the heart of God and his unfolding story. They studied the Scriptures but they were using the wrong filter. Rather than growing in relationship with God and understanding his heart, they were dissecting it to discover all of the rules, rituals and regulations. In the end, they actually completely rejected God in their addiction to legalistic and ritualistic religion. Jesus concluded, “I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts.” This is obvious as they were angry about a man carrying a mat more than they were excited by God healing a disabled, broken man. Jesus warns them that he will not need to judge them for Moses and the Torah already stand in judgment on the religious leaders. What a horrible reality to face!
- Plucking Grain on Sabbath: The biographies record another example of Jesus intentionally setting out to break the Law to make a point. Jesus allows the disciples to break the Law to meet their own physical needs. When criticized by the religious leaders, Jesus points to the story of David and his men and how they broke the Law by eating the bread in the tabernacle. He then states that the religious leaders were failing to understand God’s words, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” God’s heart is ultimately about showing mercy to the most needy, not about a harsh, legalistic approach to life that demands sacrifice upon sacrifice. “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.” This statement of Jesus gives us an important clue. Every law of the Old Testament had a principle within that Law that was created to serve the well-being of the people. Therefore it is important to understand the intent of a law, principle or guideline so that it is not applied inappropriately or in a way that is damaging for people. The religious fear of sinning without understanding God’s heart or grace can empower religious laws so that they become abusive and destructive to people. Jesus wants to put things in right priority. God cares about people first. The laws or guidelines he gives is for their well-being. Jesus declares that he, the Son of Man (a title for the Messiah), is Lord of Sabbath. Again Jesus declares he is equal with God the Father and so he is free to make these clarifications about how to rightly understand and apply what God has said.

- Healing on Sabbath: The theme of Jesus breaking the Sabbath continues with another account of Jesus healing a man with a shriveled hand. The religious leaders ask him if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus gives an illustration of a man rescuing a sheep and then asks if a man's life is not worth more than a sheep's? The answer is obvious. Jesus is angered by their hardheartedness. "He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts." God gets angry not at struggling sinners but hardhearted religious people. He loves them but is angered by their willful rejection of love and grace. Jesus heals the man to prove his point and this ignites rage in the religious leaders as they begin to plot his death.
- Jesus Heals Others: Jesus' healing and deliverance ministry continues and includes regions of both Jews and Gentiles. The writers note that his approach to miraculously healing people fulfilled the prophecies in Isaiah 42:1-4 which points to the powerful work of the Spirit through the Messiah to bring justice to the nations. Here we see again a strong emphasis on the nations and the role of God through Jesus opening up a whole new way for those outside Israel to experience God's heart for justice. Justice in this case means a restoration to true and right relationships person to person without oppression or harm. It also simply meant putting everything in order and restoring community to the way God intended. Jesus' healing ministry that extended to the Gentiles was evidence that God was using Jesus to set things right in people's lives. "In his name the nations will put their hope." This is powerful reference in the Old Testament to what God had originally said Israel should be doing for the nations around them but now was being realized through the Messiah and his new movement.
- Jesus Appoints Twelve Apostles: Jesus spends the night in prayer before making a major leadership decision. Here we see the importance of prayer in discerning God's mind. Jesus models this for us. Jesus appoints twelve disciples to symbolize the twelve new tribes of his Kingdom. They are not his sons or family members but a wide range of people even including some known enemies (Matthew the Tax Collector and Simon the Zealot). They were common people and about as opposite to the religious elite that Jesus could find. Peter is listed first because he was the lead disciple. John and James are also listed at the front end of the list because of their important role. Peter (not Andrew), John (James dies early on in Acts), and James (the brother of Jesus) and Saul, the Pharisee that becomes Paul (not mentioned anywhere in the Gospels) are the key leaders of the Christian Church. Judas is listed as the traitor even at this early point in the biographies. Judas in his choice in the end to rebel against God ultimately fulfills the prophecies of Scripture. Does that mean Judas didn't have a choice? I believe that although God knew this would all happen that Judas himself made his decisions by his own volition. See John 17:12 for Jesus' comment about Judas as the one "doomed to destruction."
- Great Crowd Gathers: Jesus continues to gather more disciples and followers because, "power was coming from him and healing them all." People were drawn to his truth, challenged by his irreligious message and transformed by his healing power. We see in Luke

6 an early reference to reaching your city, country and the world. "...a great number of people from all over Judea (their country), from Jerusalem (their key city), and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon (symbolic of the world). This approach of reaching your city, your country and the world will be clearly articulated by Jesus to his disciples in Acts 1:7,8, "...and you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."