

GETTING INTO TROUBLE

Matthew 21:15-22

We see someone staggering on the side of the road. Or we see a neighbor in distress. Or the person across the hall is crying. Or someone always sits by himself in the dining hall. Or someone at work is strangely quiet. What do we do? Do we help?

We might end up looking like an idiot when we discover there is no problem. Or do we have time to get involved? This might get us into something over our heads. Or we could be taken advantage of and end up enabling someone to do wrong. Or maybe they will get offended when we offer to help, looking at us as if to say, “Mind your own business!” It is so possible that we could get into trouble. Why not turn away and avoid it?

Jesus in Matthew 21 is confronted with a situation that can get Him into trouble. His opponents want to trip Him up. What was He to do?

Politicians have a solution for that kind of situation. It is called “obfuscation.” Obfuscation—it is a fancy word for “double talk.” It is the art of saying something without really saying anything. Politicians are masters at it, because the purpose of the reporters who interview them is not to find out the truth (which is what they say they are doing), but to get the politicians to say something controversial. That is what makes news. The reporters love hearing a “gaff,” or a “sound byte” that can easily be quoted and “go viral” through the media. Even though now we have two candidates running for president who are noted for their gaffes, still most politicians want to avoid them, but the news loves them. That is what gives newscasts good ratings and makes reporters stars.

I think of the 1984 election. The Democratic primary was won by Walter Mondale over Gary Hart when Mondale quoted the ad from Wendy’s hamburgers where the old woman asks, “Where’s the beef?” indicating that Hart was all show and no substance. Then in the presidential race Mondale thought he had a chance against Ronald Reagan when Reagan did poorly in their first debate. People were saying that Reagan was too old and out of touch. In the 2nd debate when Reagan was asked about the issue of age he replied, “I refuse to let my opponent’s youth be a factor in this election.” Mondale laughed, but inside he told himself, “I just lost the election.”

We see that same desire to trip someone up in the people who are “interviewing” Jesus in the temple in our Gospel lesson. This is during Holy Week. Jesus has made a name for Himself in the north in Galilee where He concentrated His ministry for three years. But the leaders of the Jewish community are in the south, in Jerusalem. They could always discredit Jesus by saying that the people in Galilee didn’t know any better. But now Jesus is in Jerusalem. He has recently healed people in nearby Jericho; He raised Lazarus, who is well known to many people, back to life. He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday with a great parade of pilgrims who

come every year to Jerusalem for Passover. He has cleared the temple of money changers and animal sellers, which seems to threaten the lucrative businesses many of those leaders have. These leaders cannot arrest Jesus because too many of His supporters are around. So they are seeking to discredit Him.

On the Monday and Tuesday of Holy Week Jesus goes to the temple to teach. He is in public. It seems like the perfect opportunity for Jesus' enemies to get Him to say something that will get Him into trouble. And they try to do this using any unfair advantage they have, like the Astros won the World Series in a season in which they stole the signs from opposing catcher to their pitchers. First they ask Jesus to tell them where His authority came from. Instead of answering them, he first asks them, "By whose authority did John the Baptist do his ministry?" This might seem to us like avoiding the question, like obfuscation, but in the world of the rabbis of Jesus' time one of the best answers is to ask what is called a "higher question," a harder question. It is like raising the stakes in poker instead of showing your cards. Jesus' enemies cannot answer His question. If they say John was not from God, the people, who see John as a prophet from God, will be angry with them. If they say he was from God, then why didn't they follow him?

In the next scene Jesus tells the story of two sons, one who says he will do his father's will and the other who says no. Later the one who said yes doesn't do anything, but the one who said no does what his father wanted him to do. Jesus asks, "Which son did his father's will?" Of course the answer is the son who said no. Jesus then says that those who didn't follow God at first, like the tax collectors, but who later turn to God are like the son who said no and Jesus' enemies are like the son who said yes but didn't do his father's will.

Then Jesus tells the story of the tenant farmers who kill first the servants sent from the landowner to collect the harvest, then the landowner's son. Jesus' enemies know He is talking about them. They are the tenant farmers who have killed God's prophet and will later kill Jesus.

Jesus goes on to tell the story of the wedding banquet where the people invited by the master don't show, so he has his servants go into the streets to get guests. The enemies of Jesus are like the guests who were invited, but refuse to come.

Then we look at the scene right after our text. Jesus' enemies try to get Him into trouble by asking about a man, who is the eldest of 7 brothers, who dies leaving his widow. Following the Old Testament, the next oldest son takes her as his wife. He dies, and the next oldest marries her. This happens until all 7 brothers are dead. Then the woman dies. They ask Jesus, "In the resurrection whose wife will she be?" Jesus answers by saying that in the resurrection there will be no marriage. He exposes that the enemies asking this question are Sadducees who don't believe in the resurrection anyways.

Finally Jesus stumps them by asking, "If the Messiah is the son of David, then how could David call the Messiah in Psalm 110, "Lord"? If he is David's son, how can he be David's lord? The enemies of Jesus cannot answer this question.

This takes us to the words of our text. Here we may see the most extreme effort to trap Jesus. They ask Jesus if taxes should be paid to Caesar or not. Before looking at this question it helps to see who is asking it. Both Sadducees and Pharisees come to Jesus. Pharisees and Sadducees are having Tea Party Republicans and liberal Democrats together. It is like having Sean Hannity and Rachel Maddow team up. Or the Chicago Cubs and St. Louis Cardinals become good buddies. They normally are at each other's throats. But they both so hate Jesus that they work together to trap Jesus.

Their question leaves Jesus with a dilemma. If he says, "Pay taxes," the people, who hated Rome and their taxes, will hate Jesus. If he says, "Don't pay them," then they can turn that as evidence to the Romans who are quick to punish those who defied Rome. What will Jesus say?

Jesus can just stay silent, as He did at other times. He can avoid trouble. He asks for a coin. Is He just stalling? A coin is given to Him. That may not seem like a big deal to us, but He asks, "Whose image is on here?" They answer, "Caesar's." Again we may ask, "Is He just stalling?" But we need to see that this is all happening in the temple. The Roman coin not only has Caesar's face on it, but he is depicted as a god. The Jews had received from the Romans special permission to have coins like that exchanged for special temple currency so that the image of Caesar as a god did not have to be seen in the temple of God. I am sure that the coin is given to Jesus by a Sadducee, who isn't so strict about following God's law. A good Pharisee, who strives to keep all the laws perfectly, will never be caught dead doing something like that. Before even saying a word, Jesus has already exposed their hypocrisy.

In that context Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesars, and give to God what is God's." Instead of Jesus getting into trouble, His enemies are humiliated. They are the ones discredited. They feel that all they can do now is eliminate Jesus.

We can look at this section of Scripture and all kinds of direction on how to obey the government, about marriage, about the resurrection of the dead, about the ministry of John the Baptist, and about Jesus being the Son of God, the Messiah. But what is really important is that Jesus doesn't back down. He doesn't avoid the conflict that will lead to his death on the cross.

Later on Jesus is brought on trial. He is given the choice to defend Himself, to clear Himself. But He is totally quiet until the high priest asks Him who He is. Jesus can stay quiet. He can say something benign. Instead He says, "I am." He makes it very clear to them that He claims to be God, Himself. They can now indict Him for blasphemy, saying He is God. Jesus will not let anything get in the way of getting into trouble by going to the cross.

Jesus got into trouble—for you and me. He went to that cross to take your sins and my sins, to take all the trouble we have caused, and die with it on the cross.

So what do we do? Do we go across the street, the dorm hallway, the backyard, the office corridor and risk getting into trouble?

Since Jesus was willing to get into trouble, we can too. That doesn't mean we go looking for it, but we won't avoid it. We will go the way that follows Jesus. We will offer to help someone even if it means a loss of our own precious time. We will stand up for someone who cannot defend him or herself, even if we offend others. We will make decisions to do the right thing even if our friends encourage us to do something else. We will give generously even if it means less security for us. We will tell the truth even when it can get us into trouble. We will because Jesus got into the ultimate trouble on the cross for you and me.