

## Answering Common Challenges

As I first noted about a month ago now, Shawn and I are preaching concurrent sermon series on Sunday morning and Sunday evening, both pointing forward to our special service on April 15th. In the morning, we continue to consider the subject of the resurrection, the foremost proof of our faith, and in the evening, topics pertaining to sharing our faith with the lost.

For many Christians, this is not their favorite spiritual activity! In fact, they find it intimidating, and one of the things that intimidates them most about it is the possibility of somebody asking them something or saying something that they don't know how to answer. Some of these responses are novel, but many of them are extremely common. This evening, then, I want to consider five of the most frequent, so that all of us will know how to answer these common challenges.

The first of these challenges often arises whenever we tell somebody they need to be baptized to be saved. They've heard differently in their denominational church, so they reply, "WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?" This question, of course, is based on Luke 23:39-43. The argument goes that the thief on the cross wasn't baptized (although we don't actually know that), but he was saved anyway because of his faith in Jesus. They conclude that we don't have to be baptized to be saved.

In times past, I've made some elaborate counter-arguments to this based on differences in covenants and so on, but a few years ago, I realized there was a much simpler answer. It starts with the story recorded in Luke 5:17-25. We call this the story of Jesus healing the paralytic, but in the story itself, the healing isn't actually the point. Instead, Jesus used the healing to prove a much greater point: that the Son of Man had authority on earth to forgive sins. Jesus could do something nobody else before or since has been able to do: say to somebody, "Your sins are forgiven," and it would be true.

This is a complete explanation for everything that happens with the thief on the cross. His sins were forgiven because Jesus said so. However, because the Son of Man is no longer on earth, this story doesn't have a whole lot of relevance to us. I tell people that if Jesus walks up to them and says to them that their sins are forgiven, they can believe Him. If not, they'd better get baptized!

Another common accusation from people with a denominational background is, "YOU THINK EVERYBODY ELSE IS GOING TO HELL!" Similarly, people will also say, "You Church-of-Christians think you're the only ones who are going to be saved!"

Now, we could argue back and forth about whether that's true or not, or how it's true, or what it means if it is true, but we should avoid getting dragged into that discussion at all. Fundamentally, it's irrelevant. I'd take people who say this to 1

Corinthians 4:3-4. Paul makes the point here that it doesn't matter to him whether other people judge him. For that matter, he's not even concerned with his judgment of himself. Instead, he is concerned only with the Lord, and what the Lord's judgment of him is going to be.

The same thing ought to be true for us. I don't give two hoots whether anybody else thinks I'm going to heaven or not. My views about my own personal goodness aren't a whole lot more important. Instead, what matters is the righteous judgment of God. On that awesome day, what is He going to say to me?

We don't have to guess about that. What God considers righteous and unrighteous is hardly a mystery. Every one of us is going to be judged according to the standard of His word. Our responsibility, then, is to evaluate our conduct against that standard. Have we done what God expects us to do?

Once we make that point, we have successfully avoided an attempt to deflect the conversation. It turns the subject from what we don't want to talk about—what judgmental people we are—to what we do want to talk about—what the Bible tells everybody about what they need to do to be saved. Similarly, outsiders have been known to quote 'JUDGE NOT LEST YE BE JUDGED!' at us. The argument is that whenever we try to apply the Bible to somebody else's life, we are judging them, and so violating the Bible ourselves.

There are at least two significant flaws in this position. The first is that it's logically self-defeating. They say that we can't apply the Scriptures to their lives, but that's exactly what they're doing to us. They're taking a Bible verse, Matthew 7:1, and applying it to our lives to get us to stop doing something. As they have defined things, they are judging us. If what we're saying to them is wrong, what they're saying to us is every bit as wrong. People literally can't make this argument without unintentionally blowing themselves up.

Second, such a dramatic reading of the text doesn't stand up in context. To illustrate this, let's look at the context, Matthew 7:1-5. As we look at everything here, it becomes obvious that the problem Jesus is critiquing isn't judgment. It's hypocrisy. It's complaining about the speck in our brother's eye when we've got a log in our own eye.

If that's our position, we definitely shouldn't be judging. When we're hypocritical and apply a standard to somebody else that we ourselves don't live up to, then we are in big trouble. God is going to apply that same standard back to us and condemn us. If, however, we're not hypocrites, and we apply the same standard to others that we ourselves do live up to, we have nothing to fear from God's judgment.

Hypocrisy also figures into understanding the next charge, "Y'ALL ARE A BUNCH OF PHARISEES!" Typically, we get this one thrown at us when we suggest that it's probably a good idea to obey God's commandments when it comes to things like

salvation and the work of the church. Somebody, somewhere decided that such an interest in the law of Christ makes us Pharisaical. We all know the Pharisees were bad, so presumably, that makes concern for what the Bible says bad too.

The thing is, though, that this portrait of Pharisaism doesn't align with the Biblical portrait. Nowhere in Scripture are the Pharisees ever condemned for caring too much about the law of God. Instead, we see their actual problems emerging in Matthew 15:1-9. According to the Lord, these problems start not with God's law, but with human tradition. The Pharisees thought so highly of their human tradition that they taught it as though it were the law of God. They tried to bind their human traditions on others. Additionally, whenever they thought God's law was particularly burdensome, they used their traditions to get around it. Even though they claimed to be honoring God, in practice they weren't, which made them hypocrites.

As a result, people can legitimately call us Pharisees if we care more about our church traditions than we do about the Scriptures. People can legitimately call us Pharisees if we try to get them to do something without citing book, chapter, and verse. People can legitimately call us Pharisees when we use our traditions to evade the requirements of the Bible. However, if we're actually doing the opposite of these things, which I believe to be the case, the accusation of Pharisaism is no more than a spiteful slander.

Most of the other challenges have been around much longer than I've been alive, but the past 10 years or so have generated our final contender, "YOU HATE GAY PEOPLE!" This one follows not from any particular Bible passage or concept, but from our society's strange definition of love. According to this definition, love is synonymous with acceptance. If you truly love somebody, you will accept them and all the life choices they make, particularly when it comes to sexuality. If, however, you say that things like abortion and the practice of homosexuality are wrong, that proves that you don't love the practitioner. In fact, you hate them!

I can only think that whoever came up with this argument must not have had children. My relationship with my children proves multiple times every day that love and acceptance are not synonymous. I love my children very much, but that doesn't mean that when they leave their breakfast dishes sitting on the bar with a banana peel dangling artistically over the edge, I'm going to accept it. In fact, it is precisely my love for them that leads me to call them to correct their behavior.

The Bible confirms that this intuition about the nature of love is correct. Look at 1 Corinthians 13:6. One of the great attributes of love is that it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. I know and love people who practice homosexuality. Indeed, even as I'm saying these words, I'm seeing specific faces. I love them, but I cannot celebrate their choices. Indeed, I cannot celebrate their choices because I love them. My love for them is genuine, which means it can't

rejoice in unrighteousness. The truth about their behavior may be unpleasant, but only truth can communicate love.

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