

## **Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: The Battle for Jesus!**

**February 18, 2024**

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This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! I want to read a passage of Scripture that comes from the book of Mark, chapter 11, verses 15 through 18. As we begin this season of Lent, all the messages will be taken from the last week of Jesus' life before the crucifixion. This event takes place on Monday, after Jesus came into Jerusalem on Sunday.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. As He taught them, He said, "It is written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.' But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at His teaching.

May God bless the reading of His Word.

A long time ago in a land far, far away, I was taking my third seminary class on preaching, and we were learning different styles of delivering a message. One was called a dramatic monologue. A dramatic monologue is where you presented your message through the persona of someone else. For instance, I gave a message on salvation through the eyes of the Roman soldier, the centurion who was responsible for the crucifixion of Christ, the one who said when Jesus died, "Surely this man was the Son of God." My classmates, some of them chose figures from the past, biblical figures. Some of them chose contemporary figures. Some of them did very creative and very good jobs, and some of them very not good. But one was perhaps the most memorable sermon I have ever heard in my life. Thirty-five-plus years later, I still remember it vividly. He did a sermon on adultery through the persona of Mr. Rogers. He already looked a little bit like Mr. Rogers to begin with, and he came out with his hair slicked back and his sweater vest on, and he had a stool to sit on, and he came out singing, "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood." And he had us cracking up! And he sat down on his bench, and he said, "Good morning, boys and girls. Today we're going to talk about a big word. That word is adultery. Can you say adultery? Yes, you can. Adultery is when adults have sex with people they shouldn't." And he began to talk about the effects adultery has on families. And it was hilarious, and it was poignant, and it was memorable. And when he finished, we stood and gave him a standing ovation. One of the most memorable sermons I've ever heard in my life.

Many of us grew up with a Mr. Rogers Jesus, and that's okay to a point. At some point, your Jesus has to grow up. For those who are still hanging on to the Mr. Rogers image of Jesus, the specter of Jesus with fire in His eyes and thunder in His voice, a whip in His hands, flipping tables in the temple, is a specter they are uncomfortable with. But that, too, is an aspect of Jesus Christ. This is an aspect of Jesus and we've got to deal with it. Not only do we have to deal with it, we have to adopt it. If we claim to follow Jesus Christ we cannot pick and choose, but embrace all of Him. Just as a way of understanding this aspect of Jesus, what was it that set Him off? What was it that made Jesus so mad? What made Jesus so mad is people were being exploited in the name of

religion. The money changers were charging exorbitant rates. Those who were selling sacrifices were doubling, tripling, and quadrupling the price of the sacrifices inside the temple. But what ticked Jesus off more than anything else was that all of this exploitation, this robbery, this lying, was all taking place in the Court of the Gentiles, the only place that people like you and I could worship. And Jesus said, "My Father's house will be called a house of prayer for all nations, and you have made it a den of thieves." And he would not tolerate it.

This morning, I am wondering if Jesus might have a similar reaction to parts of the modern church, but for different reasons. You say, "How?" I fear that sometimes we are guilty of emphasizing certain aspects of Jesus that we are comfortable with, and minimizing those that we are not. Different groups emphasize different aspects of Jesus Christ to the exclusion of others. Then we have the audacity to argue about who's right: "Well, my Jesus is better than your Jesus." And instead of following Jesus, we argue, we battle over who Jesus Christ is.

Now, very quickly, I am going to give you two very distinct aspects of Christ, two views of Christ, if you will. And I want you to listen very carefully and see if you can hear anything wrong with this depiction of Jesus. Are you ready? Jesus came to lead people to do God's will. Jesus came to promote a society where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus came to lead us in following His directions in Matthew 25, where He said, "I was hungry and you fed Me. I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited Me in. I was sick and in prison and you came and visited Me." Jesus came to demonstrate radical servanthood and how we should serve one another. Jesus came to teach us to love our neighbors and even to love our enemies. Now, did you hear anything wrong with that description of Jesus? You better not have, because that came right out of Scripture. Now, I want you to hear another depiction of Christ. Jesus came to seek and to save those who are lost. Jesus came to invite us to be born again. Jesus came to offer His life so that we might be saved. Jesus came to call us to follow Him in personal holiness. Jesus came so that we might have a relationship with God through Him. Now, did you hear anything wrong with that description of Jesus? You better not have, because that came right out of Scripture. That is who Jesus is. So, if I were sitting in your seat right now, I would be saying: "What is your point?"

Here's my point. If either of these pictures of Jesus is your picture of Jesus, to the exclusion of the other, than your Jesus is too small, and He needs to grow up. It cannot be either/or; it must be both/and. If you change the heart, the behind must follow. Neither alone is consistent with the Gospel account of Jesus Christ. I fear that the modern church very often splits the one Gospel Jesus preached and lived into two, emphasizing one over the other. And the result of that is it polarizes and divides the body of Christ.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a season of introspection. It is a season that we look within and examine ourselves and our beliefs. And today I am challenging you to be honest. Are you embracing all of Jesus, or just the part you're comfortable with? Are you guilty of dividing the one message Jesus preached into two? Jesus invites us to be born again, to be saved from our sins, to have a personal relationship with God through Him, to pursue personal holiness. But He also invites us to do Kingdom work, to love others as He loved us, to seek justice for the oppressed, and to give our life in a life of service. Anything less is not following Jesus.

Our mission is to preach, to teach, and to live the whole message of Christ, and not part of it. Jesus calls us to radically embrace Him and His message. Half of Jesus is not enough. If we are still embracing the Mr. Rogers Jesus, don't turn loose of Him but embrace the rest, His whole message: the Mr. Rogers Jesus and the guy with fire in His eyes, thunder in His voice, a whip in His hand, flipping tables because of injustice, because people like you and I were being denied the opportunity of worship. The challenge, as we begin Lent, is to embrace all of Jesus, not just some of Him.

Let us pray. So, I'm going to give you an opportunity. I'm going to give you a few moments to think, to look within. Are you embracing just those aspects of Jesus you like, those that you are comfortable with, or all of them? Only you can answer that.

Lord, forgive us if we have not embraced all of You, if we have neglected Your whole message. Lord, show us where we need to change and adjust. In Your name we pray. Amen.