

Why Was Jesus So Controversial?
Matthew 26:59-68
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What are the questions about the faith that nag at you? Two weeks ago Michael Carey addressed the question: Are we really so bad? Last week he answered the question: Why did God want sacrifice? And today we want to look at the Holy Week experience of Jesus and think about the question, "Why was Jesus so controversial?"

Palm Sunday, for many, is associated with Jesus and children. I would suggest to you that we have romanticized this idea and Palm Sunday was far from what we may have portrayed – Jesus frolicking with children. The Scriptures paint a very different picture.

Jesus was a very controversial person when he rode into Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. For us to really identify with the religious community that struggled with Jesus, let me "paint a picture for you" so you might see what they saw and feel what they must have felt.

Imagine that you are members of a church that has been without a pastor for almost three years. Your search committee has offered a call to a young man who has accepted the call and has just arrived in town to begin his ministry in the church you attend. You and the whole community are very excited about the possibilities that lie ahead of you because of this new leader being in your midst.

Let's run the calendar forward and this new leader has now been with you for a year and you are being asked to attend the Annual Congregational Meeting where you will have opportunity to voice your opinion of how the year has been under this new pastor's leadership. Here is what the year has been like.

1. Shortly after arriving, the pastor eliminated the entire music ministry saying that music in worship is entertainment and has no place in worship.
2. Half-way through the year the pastor had all the stain glass removed from the church, sold it and gave the proceeds to a legal fund for migrant workers, saying that stain glass was like a "graven image" and Jesus would have been appalled at such adornment.
3. The pastor let two staff go, the staff that worked with the youth and the staff that worked with the retirement population, saying that he needed an associate pastor more because he was overworked and underpaid.

I think you get the point. What might happen at the annual congregational meeting as the congregation evaluates the previous year in ministry, emotions would be running high. What would the people want to say?

Where'd we get this jerk?

Who does he think he is eliminating our music ministry?

My grandfather gave the money for one of those windows – he's turning over in his grave right now and tempted to join the Methodist church in heaven.

Are my illustrations too far fetched? I don't think so. Let's look at this Jesus from the eyes of those who called for his head just a few days after riding into town like some self-acclaimed king. Why did He stir up such a raucous? Why was He so despised? Why did the people who shouted "Hosanna" on one day shout "crucify Him" a few days later? Let me just point out four reasons for their furry.

1. Jesus was a blasphemer – he claimed to be God.
2. Jesus was insulting – he attacked the leaders of the religious community.
3. Jesus violated the very laws of God that He claimed were His laws.
4. Jesus disrupted the entire religious system that we have followed for centuries.

Jesus was a blasphemer.

In Matthew 26:59-68 we read:

⁵⁹The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. ⁶⁰But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.

Finally two came forward ⁶¹and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.' "

⁶²Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" ⁶³But Jesus remained silent.

The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, ⁶⁴the Son of God."

⁶⁴"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

⁶⁵Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. ⁶⁶What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered.

⁶⁷Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him ⁶⁸and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

When the high priest asked Jesus directly, "Are you the Christ, the Son of God?" Jesus said "Yes, it is as you say." Blasphemy! This rag-tag low life was claiming to be God almighty.

Outrageous! But it was true. He was the Christ. He was the Son of God. It was time for Jesus to disclose his true identity and authority. He did not remain silent. He did not back away from the human authority that stood in front of him. When Jesus finally was crucified, even the Roman soldier was able to proclaim, "Surely this was the Son of God."

Jesus was insulting.

A few chapters earlier, Jesus stood before the high priest and acknowledged that He was the Son of God, the Christ; He spoke with his disciples about the Pharisees. We read what he said in Matthew 23:13-36.

*¹³ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you **hypocrites!** You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.^[a]*

*¹⁵ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you **hypocrites!** You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.*

*¹⁶ "Woe to you, **blind guides!** You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath. ¹⁷You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?' ¹⁸You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath. ¹⁹You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?' ²⁰Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. ²²And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.*

*²³ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you **hypocrites!** You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. ²⁴You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*

*²⁵ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you **hypocrites!** You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.*

²⁷ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you **hypocrites!** You are like **whitewashed tombs**, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

²⁹ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you **hypocrites!** You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. ³⁰ And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' ³¹ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!

³³ "You snakes! You **brood of vipers!** How will you escape being condemned to hell? ³⁴ Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. ³⁵ And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. ³⁶ I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.

Not the best way to "win friends and influence people." Jesus did not refrain from such words as: hypocrites, blind guides, whitewashed tombs and brood of vipers. Jesus was insulting. Why? Because to God the heart is more important than outward appearances and Jesus chose insulting words to discredit the appearances of the Pharisees. Earlier in his dealings with the Pharisees He quoted Isaiah when he said:

He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." Mark 7:6-7.

Jesus understood relationships better than anyone else and he would disclose all hypocrisy.

Jesus violated the laws of God.

Jesus healed sick people on the Sabbath. From the Pharisee's point of view, he violated the law of God, the very law He was to uphold if He were truly the Son of God, the Messiah, true God of true God. But Jesus was determined to destroy legalism and live out the spirit of God's laws. That is why Jesus said,

²³ *One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"*

²⁵He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?²⁶In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

²⁷Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

Jesus said he was Lord of the Sabbath and the Sabbath was never intended to keep God's people in some legalistic stronghold. It is always in season to heal and to bless and to lift. But imagine the dismay of the Pharisees when Jesus "blasphemed God", insulted them with language like "brood of vipers and hypocrites," compared them to whitewashed tombs that look good on the outside but smell on the inside.

Jesus threatened the religious system.

Jesus not only insulted the Pharisees but he threatened the entire religious system that they worked so hard to maintain. If the people start acting the way this "religious nut" is acting, our entire religious system will be challenged and destroyed. "We must put an end to this controversial, self-proclaimed messiah." If viewed from the eyes of the Pharisees, it's a no-brainer. This guy has to go.

So, why is Jesus so controversial today? There are probably many reasons but I have selected the one that I believe stands out against all others: His exclusivity. Although Jesus is filled with grace for everyone, and respects diversity among all people groups, he is completely narrow and non-compromising on one issue: the way to the Father.

Jesus came to make a way for all people groups to have fellowship with His Father. And on the last day Jesus spent with His disciples he said with no hesitation: I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." What do we not understand about this? No one means no one. Except through me means except through me. Jesus is the one and only way to God the Father, the creator of all and the sustainer of all.

In our world, proudly centered on pluralism, people can not live with one, and only one, way to God. We must believe that there are many roads that lead to God and Jesus is only one way. It is just too restrictive to believe He is the only way. But my friends, if you believe any of what Jesus said you must believe this as well. Jesus can not be right on everything else and be wrong on this. Controversial? Certainly. True? Absolutely. Good intentions do not lead to God. Sincerity does not lead to God. Religiosity does not lead to God. Buddha does not lead to God. Mohammed does not lead to God. Jesus is THE way, THE truth, THE life. No one comes to the Father but through Him. That is what we face on Good Friday. That is what we celebrate on Easter Sunday. In the words of Steve Brown from Key Life Ministries: "You think about that." Amen.