

How the Scribe Ended the Fighting

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[Deuteronomy 6:1-9](#), Psalm 119:1-8, Hebrews 9:11-14, [Mark 12:28-34](#)

It must have looked really quite disturbing. I mean, people were coming at Jesus from every side with these really tough questions. “Is it permissible for us to pay taxes to the emperor?” “This woman was married to seven different men, whose wife will she be in the afterlife?” “Is it permitted for a man to divorce his wife?”

I know that these are presented as tests and trials that people were putting to Jesus. And these stories have been handed down to us as perfect demonstrations of Jesus’ wisdom and cunning in argument. But don’t make the mistake of thinking that they were *just* these elaborate puzzles that Jesus was given to solve.

A Very Conflicted Scene

These were really difficult questions that people felt very strongly about. They were also politically charged questions that, just by being raised, would have gotten people very agitated on both sides of any issue. So, you can bet that people were not asking questions in calm and even tones. They were shouting and reacting with a great deal of anger. That’s just what it was like around Jesus sometimes. He was a very polarizing figure and I’m sure it must have been exhausting to watch the extreme reactions all around him.

What People Might Ask Today

Imagine, for example, the kinds of questions that would provoke such extreme reactions today. “**Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth,**” someone might come up and say. “Tell us, is it lawful for the emperor to mandate vaccination in order for people to dine in restaurants and go to shows?” Oh, can’t you just feel everybody clenching their fists and turning red in the face as they wait for Jesus to try and give a definitive answer to that one!

Or maybe, in the context of the church, someone might come up to Jesus and say, “Rabbi, is it permissible for us to move around the furniture at the front of the sanctuary?” Yes, right away I can feel everybody choosing sides and getting ready for a really big fight. Or, I don’t know, maybe in the American context, imagine someone coming up to Jesus and asking, “Teacher, was the 2020 election stolen by the Democrats or not?” I think we all better duck our heads because bullets are about to fly, right?

And it is not that I have any doubt that Jesus could give the absolute best answers to those very divisive questions. In fact, I would love to hear exactly how he would respond. But I can’t help but feel nervous about the thought of being in the middle of the discussion. Can you imagine the people arguing, pointing, threatening and then maybe doing more than just threatening?



Conflict is Unavoidable

It is true, of course, that conflict is a necessary part of life. It is not healthy to simply avoid all conflict and we need rather to put the effort into working out our conflicts in the most constructive ways possible. And yet, at the same time, we are certainly not designed to live in a perpetual state of conflict with one another. That is simply unbearable and it kind of seems as if it was like that a lot around Jesus – not because Jesus brought it, of course, but people certainly had a tendency to bring it to Jesus.

Identifying with the Scribe

And so, when I read our passage from the Gospel of Mark this morning, it struck me as a real breath of fresh air when I saw that one of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another. I mean, if I lived in that age with the degrees that I have received, I might be considered a scribe. So, I immediately identified with him, and I felt his distress at all of the dissension that he was observing.

And this guy is kind of my hero, therefore, because we are told that he decided to intervene in the midst of all this conflict and that he was the one who actually brought it to a close. It says that after he had done what he came to do, no one dared to ask Jesus any more questions in order to start anymore fights.

How Did he Do it?

So, what did this amazing scholar do to accomplish this incredible feat? Did he tell everyone off for being so contrary? Did he beg and plead with them all to please just get along? I definitely need to know because I need to use this wise man's strategy the next time I find myself surrounded by conflict.

Well, you heard the passage, you know what he did. All he did was ask a question. But there was something about this question that was quite different from all of those other questions that went before. Those other questions all drew attention directly to those things that people were in conflict over – things like taxes, divorce and the afterlife. His question takes us in a quite different direction.

Finding a Point of Agreement

“He asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’” Think about what he is doing here. In essence, he's asking Jesus what is one thing that we can all agree about. What is one thing that actually unites us? The law was something that was absolutely central to all of their identities as Jews. They might squabble over many things, including how to apply the law, but they would never disagree on its importance.

And here, therefore, is the first piece of advice that I would give us based on this passage. When you are surrounded by conflict and it seems as if everyone is just wasting all of their energy on disagreeing about everything, what you need to do from time to time is step back and remind everybody that there are actually things that we do all agree about. And there is always something that we can agree about.

The Power of Shared Passion

The reason people get upset and in conflict is because they actually care about something. People who are not invested in something, who are bored or apathetic, generally do not want to waste their energy on arguments or disagreements. Usually there is some shared passion that they carried into that disagreement and so it can be really helpful to step back and point out that shared passion.

The Church and Division

In the church, as you know, we seem quite capable of disagreeing about many things. The history of the church is a history of division. Indeed, there's a whole branch of the church that gets its name from its protest against all the rest. And yes, Presbyterians are definitely part of that branch, which is why they call us Protestants.

I'm not saying that some of those things that we have disagreed about are not important things. But whatever may have divided us, there is a definite need for us to step back from time to time and remember that we hold a very significant thing in common and that thing is, of course, Jesus – his life and his death and everything he has accomplished for us. I think that that scribe can remind us of the importance of pausing to recall that deep point of connection.

Jesus' Answer

But there is more in this interaction between the scribe and Jesus than just a reminder of what they all hold in common. Jesus' answer to the man takes us to what had long been considered to be the heart of the Law. Jesus was hardly the first Jew and certainly would not be the last to affirm the centrality this statement taken from the Book of Deuteronomy. To this very day, Jews of all sorts repeat this passage of scripture as their daily morning prayer. So, it was hardly controversial for Jesus to say what he said about this law. But the law itself is the perfect antidote to the conflict and disagreement that is so often a feature of people who feel passionately about anything, especially religion.

When you are arguing and disagreeing, your focus is always on yourself. It's all about you being right, you having the correct understanding. You are often so invested that it also starts to be about defending yourself against what feels like attack. So, you are very clearly directing all of your heart and your understanding and your strength towards the goal of shoring yourself up.

Where we Need to Focus

But, of course, with his answer, Jesus is telling us all exactly where we need to be directing our hearts and our understanding and our strength. When we're disagreeing, our focus in all three of those areas is on ourselves, but Jesus reminds us that it all needs to be on God. And that is absolutely the cure to much of the dissension that tears us apart. When we stop making it all about protecting ourselves and building ourselves up, we can actually start to get someplace.

Think back to some time in the life of a church where you have been involved where different factions were all caught up with fighting with each other. If you've been involved in churches for any length of time, it's probably not all that hard to think of an example. It happens all the time. But how many of the people in the thick of that conflict were really fighting because they were passionate about God.

Oh, they might have said that they were, of course. The people often claim to know exactly what God wants in those kinds of conflicts. But so often, I have observed, it's actually about people fighting for their own vision for how things ought to be, for something that has personal sentimental value for them or something that will prosper them in some other, maybe intangible, way.

So, in his answer Jesus very clearly points out to all of the bickering people around him that no one should be arguing for their point of view for their own sake. And the message is clear. If we do make this all about pouring our hearts, understanding and strength towards God, rather than about defending or promoting ourselves, I think we will find that a lot of our causes of dissension will melt away.

Jesus Cheats (a Bit)

But Jesus is not yet done with his answer. At this point, to tell the truth, Jesus does cheat just a little tiny bit. The scribe, after all, only asked for one law, but Jesus manages to sneak in a second one. He jumps from the Book of Deuteronomy to the Book of Leviticus and adds in a second law taken from Leviticus 19:18: **“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.”**

Now, again, Jesus is far from unique in making this connection. Jews, both in ancient and modern times, would certainly wholeheartedly agree with him. And of course, when we choose to love our neighbours like ourselves, obviously that is going to go a long way towards diffusing any conflicted situation.

But notice how Jesus accomplishes much the same thing with this commandment as he did with the first one. The first one, as we said, had the effect of deflecting the arguers' attention away from themselves on to God. In the same way, this commandment also deflects attention away from yourself directly onto your neighbour. And when you stop thinking about yourself and start thinking about the person you are arguing with and what they've got going on in their life and what is troubling them, your appetite for conflict will be greatly diminished.

Dealing with Conflict

I don't think that conflict in this world or in the church will ever entirely disappear. It is a necessary part of life. It's not just that things would be deadly boring if we never disagreed about anything, though that is true, it is also that healthy conflict is an important part of any good relationship. And yet I think that if we can hold on to the lessons we learn from this interaction between a pretty wise scribe and a man named Jesus, it might well go a long way towards preventing us from being consumed and drained by conflict. And that is something that helps nobody.

Shall I say it once again? When we find ourselves consumed by conflict, let us:

- Step back and consider what we hold in common rather than what tears us apart.
- Instead of spending your heart, understanding and strength on defending yourself, lavish it on God.
- Stop thinking about yourself in order to think about what your neighbour or your sibling in Christ is struggling with and needs.