

“A Teacher and His Teachings”
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

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Isaiah 30:19-22; Colossians 3:12-17;
Matthew 22:15-40

Isaiah has this very fascinating way of describing affliction and adversity. He says that there are times where we understand life. We recognize we enter life as if we are eating the bread of adversity and drinking the water of affliction. That’s an incredible image. It may bring up that idea of a time when somebody has only bread and water to eat. It’s that sense of affliction and adversity. Certainly in the time he was speaking into, the main group of people in his day were basically peasants, people who had very little more than bread and water. They were scraping by. It is in that moment when we recognize the adversity and the affliction that we know we need something new, something different.

Perhaps it is as Helen was describing with the children. When we run up against something we don’t know how to do, we don’t understand the words, we don’t understand the way it works, perhaps there’s this pressure of adversity and affliction and we wonder if we don’t do it, what will happen to us? In those moments it feels like we are probably a lot more open to being taught, to hearing.

That’s the very thing Isaiah was saying. In God’s people’s affliction and adversity, God would send a teacher who would show them the way. I love the description of a teacher whose voice rings in their ears as they go forward and learn. We all know if we learn something, after hearing about it, practicing it in the classroom, then going on and doing it, sometimes we can almost hear what we’ve learned afterwards in our own heads.

In the passage today we hear about Jesus as teacher. I think that passage from Isaiah describes the kind of teacher he is, coming into our adversity and affliction to show us a way, to guide us. Perhaps that’s enough said. We’ve seen Jesus baptized. We’ve sung about him as son of God, and we remember he is teacher. So the question in my mind is why don’t I always just listen to him? Why don’t I really take in what he is teaching?

Isaiah may have something to say to me about that as well. You see, at the end of that passage it says when you let the teacher come and speak into your life, then you are going to throw out all your golden idols and silver idols. Well if I have golden and silver idols, I’ve invested a little bit in those things. And something I’ve invested my time and life in—it’s a little hard sometimes to just throw those away.

If I were a fellow coming to listen to Jesus when he was speaking into the situation, I would realize that he’s not the only one speaking into my situation. There are these other groups—the Sadducees, and the Pharisees, and the Herodians—that were also talking about what was right and the way things should be. So there’s partly a question of who do I listen to if I’ve started to become part of the Pharisaical school.

Pharisee means separate or explain, so one way to think about the Pharisees is that they were separatists. They wanted to separate themselves from everybody else. And

how did they want to separate themselves from everybody else? They separated themselves from the rest based on precise explanation, understanding, and following of the Torah (of scripture). If N. T. Wright is right, they felt like if they did that then God would come and throw the Romans out (or enable them to throw the Romans out) and would raise them up as a nation so that every nation in the world would look at them and say how wonderful they are, and they would be above everyone else. So there was this sense that as someone came to listen to Jesus, the question was, “Do I listen to the Pharisees and what they’re telling me, or do I listen to Jesus? He seems to be saying something a little bit different.” So that’s the context.

So in this passage, first the disciples of the Pharisees come. The Pharisees don’t want to come themselves. They don’t want to make it known yet that they are questioning Jesus. So we see a disciple of the Pharisees come and ask an age-old question. What do we do about the government? Do we have to deal with it? I guess it would be like if I pulled out a one dollar bill and said, “Whose picture is on the one dollar bill? Washington. Give to Washington what is Washington’s.” Part of the beef they had with him was that he didn’t say the Romans should just be thrown out. He said we should deal with the government. The hard piece to recognize is the other piece of what he said—give to God what it God’s. What does that mean?

The next folks to come are the Sadducees. The Sadducees don’t believe in the resurrection. Maybe that’s why they are called the Sadducees—they are so sad, you see. They don’t believe in the resurrection so they try to trap Jesus in this conundrum of what is going to happen if there really is a resurrection. It can’t really be because look at this, the family relations just don’t work. This time Jesus basically says, “You’re confused. You are trying to understand something you can’t understand.”

I always love it when somebody tells me, “You just don’t understand.” That’s not something I enjoy. It’s sometimes hard to listen in that moment. It is something that I admit I struggle with, and yet it is in that moment that he encourages them to see that it is going to be different than they expect. “When we talk about a God of our ancestors we are talking about a God of the living.” He doesn’t really completely describe the reality that they are trying to understand. It feels to me like what he’s telling them is, “You have a partial understanding now (that phrase out of First Corinthians 13), but then you will see eye to eye.” So it’s partly finding a teacher who’s telling me I only understand in part. Usually I would look for a teacher who can teach me the full thing. It’s interesting. He’s going to teach me my limitations.

Then the Pharisees at this point are a little fed up. “Let’s get down to brass tacks. What’s this really all about? We know that what this is all about is getting God satisfied by being pure enough that God will come and throw the Romans out. So what’s the greatest commandment?” You would expect that Jesus would say that the greatest commandment is to follow the Torah to a T so that God can come and throw the Romans out. Instead he goes deeper into it and says it is to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. It changes the focus a bit. It may ask the question: what is the idol that is being held up by that particular group of people? Our nation being the best. The Israelites need to be the ones everybody looks up to because we are the most powerful, because we’re God’s people. It doesn’t seem that that is what Jesus is saying. If there is any reason for looking up to

someone, Jesus will go on to say, it is because you are a servant. It's flipping things around. That could be why there is this conflict, this back and forth between the groups.

As I watch the back and forth between these groups, I see it in my own heart. I see it in my own mind. I see it in my own life, where there are times I am so sure I know the way things are, and if somebody tries to tell me otherwise I have a hard time hearing it. This passage invites me to recognize again that I have to be careful about what I think I know and instead pay attention to who I'm listening to and what that one wants from me.

The Pharisees are coming and saying it's all about doing things exactly right. Jesus says, "No, it's about trying to learn to love one another and to love God with our heart, mind, soul, and strength." There is a difference. I feel like in my own life I am continually trying to learn that difference—not simply being right, but being loving. It's a change of heart.

There's a certain way we think about learning as simply changing a perspective, learning a way to see things better, but all of a sudden learning becomes more than that. It becomes more than just a way of seeing or making a slight adjustment so I know what is right. It's almost as if the world is changing instead. My heart is changing. If we look at how the followers of Jesus recognized what Jesus was doing, what he was teaching them, he was teaching them a way of being.

In the wintertime, in the midst of a snowstorm, we know how to dress to go into that snowstorm. We know what to put on. We know what's appropriate for that kind of context. What's the appropriate thing to put on when we go into the human context? Is it competition and struggle? Is it scraping to see who can be best? Well, if Colossians is any indication, what they learned, what they were trying to put on was a deep compassion, a useful kindness, a complete dependence on God, a gentle strength, and a true patience.

When I think about learning things, those aren't the first things that come to my mind. And yet, I see the people of God, those first New Testament people trying to follow Jesus, live out what they have learned from him, and this is how it's described: a deep compassion, a useful kindness, a dependence on God, a gentle strength, and a true patience.

I love to learn and there are often times where I can change the ways I'm thinking, and I can think back and forth. Changing some of these behaviors and letting that become who I am comes as much more of a challenge. But if I think about who Jesus is, he is the Son of God come to show us the way, a teacher who will continue to speak into our lives in the midst of affliction and adversity. What is the way to live through affliction and adversity? A deep compassion, a useful kindness, a dependence on God, a gentle strength, and a true patience. When I begin to allow Jesus to be my teacher he pushes aside my own idols, however much I've invested in them, and begins to change my heart, change who I am. I put on a new way of living. He invites us, and that is good news. Amen.