

## The Greatest Provocation

We're in the midst of a sermon series where, in effect, we've been sitting as a jury in a murder trial, trying to figure out who was responsible for the death of Jesus and why. This week we're studying a passage that offers a fourth critical clue.

1. Warm up question. Have you ever sat on a jury for a trial? What was it like?
2. Which of the following three quotations most speaks to you – and why?

“Normalcy is a paved road; it's comfortable to walk, but no flowers grow on it.”

*Vincent Van Gogh*

“For too long, we've called unbelievers to ‘invite Jesus into your life.’ Jesus doesn't want to be in your life. Your life's a wreck. Jesus calls you into his life. And his life isn't boring or purposeless or static. It's wild and exhilarating and unpredictable.”

*Russell Moore*

“We say we want to be the hands and feet of Jesus . . . , but we forget that Jesus' hands and feet were pierced by nails.” *Craig Greenfield*

3. The “off-road” path Jesus followed was so wild and unpredictable, he ended up with nails in his hands and feet. So before we go too far with Jesus, we'd better be sure we know what got him in so much trouble and what it will cost us to follow him. Our fourth Gospel passage exposes us to Jesus' most revolutionary idea. But first let's remind ourselves of a bedrock principle that defines the way our world works.
  - a. Genesis 3:17-19 says, “Cursed is the ground. . . . In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. . . . By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground. . . .” The idea here seems to be that we live in a world characterized by scarcity, struggle, and hard work – not enough to go around, dog-eat-dog, winners and losers, survival of the fittest. So, if you want something in life, you've got to earn it. Do you agree that's how our world typically works? If so, why? Should it work that way?
  - b. Can you think of a time in your life when you learned the importance of working hard to get what you want? What happened?
  - c. Given the way our world works, it's easy for us to assume that, if we want God's favor, we've got to earn it. So we try to follow the rules and be the best person possible, hoping that will be enough to get us into heaven. Has there been a time in your life when you were operating on this principle, trying your best to earn God's favor? How did it go? How did it feel? Did it work?
4. Read Luke 18:9-14.

- a. Which of the two characters in this parable do you most identify with – and why? The righteous do-gooder (Pharisee) or the irreverent rabble rouser (tax collector)?

- b. In what tone do you think the Pharisee prayed his prayer? Do you see him as genuinely thankful or proud and pompous?
  - c. Think of someone you know who's in jail for a crime. Aren't you genuinely thankful you're not them?
  - d. What do you think was going on in the heart and mind of the tax collector when he prayed his prayer? What was he thinking and feeling?
  - e. Have you ever been in a place where you felt like the tax collector?
  - f. So what's the point of Jesus parable? Why was the tax collector justified and the Pharisee not? What saved the tax collector? What was the Pharisee missing?
5. Jeff mentioned a prominent modern-day sinner – Casey Anthony, who was accused of killing her infant daughter. We're all thankful that we've never done something so dastardly. But then Jeff went through an example of spending \$200 on a consumer item that could have instead been given to UNICEF to immunize 336 children from polio. Because he chose to spend the money on himself, some of those 336 kids are now dead or crippled. From this, Jeff concluded that he is responsible of the death of children – as we all are. What do you think of that example? Is it fair? What amount of good works would be required to compensate for the death of children?
6. The New Testament teaches that we are justified by grace, not good works (Ephesians 2:8.). Grace means God's unconditional love. In this view, the only thing that saves us is opening ourselves to receive God's unconditional love – the way a child receives unconditional love from a wonderful parent.
- a. Read Luke 18:15-17. Why do you think this story immediately follows the one about the Pharisee and tax collector? How are they related?
  - b. In the Gospels, Jesus compares God to the best parent ever. The child of a good parent knows that she doesn't have to do anything to be loved. She is loved simply because she is. She may do things that disappoint her parent, but there's nothing she could ever do to outstrip the infinite love of that parent. Children get that. Do you? Do you feel unconditionally loved by God? Why or why not?
  - c. Jeff showed a video clip of a little girl named Leah answering questions from her Mom. At the end, Mom asks Leah, "What is love?" Leah says, "God." How would you describe the relationship between that Mom and her daughter? Do you feel you have that kind of relationship with God?
  - d. Why is it so intuitive for a "sinner" to receive grace? Why is it so hard for a self-righteous person to receive grace? Is it possible to be saved apart from grace?
  - e. Which path do you feel you're on – the path of "receiving God's grace" or the path of "earning God's favor"?