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“Breaking Boundaries”

Sermon Series: *Jesus’ Healthy Habits*, No. 5

July 28, 2024

Luke 7: 29-39

(All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they had been baptized by John. 30 But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)

31 Jesus went on to say, “To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? 32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other: ‘We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.’ 33 For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ 34 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ 35 But wisdom is proved right by all her children.”

36 When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. 37 A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. 38 As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”

Have you ever noticed that, as things age, they tend to lose their flexibility? As things get older, they tend to get hard and stiff and rigid.

I think of stuff made of rubber...like tires and gaskets, bushings and seals...the kind of seals that go around windows, not the kind that swim in the ocean...although they may get stiff as they age too, I don’t know. That don’t talk about it much.

Vinyl and plastics too. The vinyl siding on your house...on this church building. When it was new, you could bend it. After a few years, you try to do that and it’ll snap in half.

Paper, wood, leather, even cloth to some degree...the older these things get, the less flexible they are, and so when you try to manipulate them, they just crack and fall apart.

Things tend to become rigid as they age.

And, frankly, so do people. Many people...maybe most...are like that.

It almost always happens, to some degree, physically. As we age, we can't bend or move or stretch as we once could. When we're up, it can be hard to sit down, and when we're down, it can be hard to stand up.

But there can also come with age a stiffness and rigidity of the mind and the attitude. People get set in their ways...and they become inflexible. They **won't** bend. They **won't** open themselves to new things, new ideas, new perspectives.

That's another sort of rigidity, isn't it?

Now of course...there are **some** people who **assume** that just because something is **new**, it must be **better**, and people like that will jump on any bandwagon that comes by without even really thinking about it. They're so open-minded that their brains fall out, and of course that's not a good or healthy way to look at things either.

But usually, the greater danger of **age** is the tendency toward inflexibility and rigidity...since those things...they can keep a person stuck in the past and preclude us from participating in any new...truly good thing...that God is doing.

That was the case with the Pharisees and especially the Scribes – the teachers of the Law – of Jesus' day.

On the whole, the Scribes were the more physically aged of the two groups, but of course rigidity is not always just a function of age, is it?

Rigidity...inflexibility is also a function of the **will**.

Is a person **willing** to see things differently?

Are you **willing** to broaden your perspective?

Are you **willing** to consider the fact that that your opinion may not constitute the last word?

Certainly there is an element of will involved.

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Now, **again**, I'm **not** talking about "anything goes, brain-falling-out-openmindedness" here. I don't mean any of this in the context of the **essentials** of the faith...not at all.

**But**...in other matters...are we inflexible of will?

Are we stiff of perspective?

Have we turned far too many things into...essentials?

According to Jesus, the Scribes and Pharisees of His day had done just that...they had turned a whole raft of non-essentials into essentials, and in those things, it was their way or the highway.

And here in this text, we get a great example.

If you haven't already, would you take a Bible...there are some in the seats if you need one...and turn back to Luke chapter 7. It's good to have the text there in front of you because, if the sermon gets boring, you can, at least, have something worthwhile to read.

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Luke summarizes the situation in chapter 7, verse 29 there where he says, ***“All the people (even the tax collectors) – when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But...the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves...”***

For the crowds who'd heard John the Baptist and who'd now heard Jesus, the pieces were beginning to come together. What John had said and done out in the wilderness...and what Jesus was saying and doing there in the villages was beginning to make sense to them. They were coming along. They were open to, as Luke puts it there, ***“God’s purposes.”***

But...the religious leaders...the ones who were educated and trained in all this...the ones who were supposed to be Israel's spiritual guides...***they*** were ***not*** open to what John and Jesus said and did...not at all.

Why not? Because...***it was not what they thought it should be...***and they were simply not open to a change of mind.

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Jesus describes them with a little parable, saying, in effect, that they're childish.

Those who reject Him and His message...and also John and his message, Jesus says, are like immature children complaining to their friends about their other friends...whining that no one was doing what was expected...what was right, in their eyes, to do.

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Think back to when you were a kid. You'd get into a group to play some game, and there would almost always be at least one in the group who became the rules Nazi. ***They*** were the ***authority*** on the rules and everybody had to play the game ***their*** way, and if you weren't playing the game the way they wanted, they'd start complaining and whining, "This isn't right! This isn't fair. This isn't the way it's supposed to be! You fouled me! You're cheating!"

And if everyone didn't give in to their way...they'd walk off with their arms folded and sulk in a corner somewhere.

You remember that happening?

You remember that kid?

Were ***you*** that kid...that kid who got mad and took your toys and went home when things didn't go as you expected?

That's the image here.

The Scribes and Pharisees were complaining because the game wasn't being played according to their rules...their expectations.

And they were trying to lead the people along their path. They thought their expectations were right! They thought their expectations had to be right!

You see? Rigid...stiff...inflexible!

Look at what Jesus says in verse 33 there. The Scribes and Pharisees...they complained about John and his crazy preaching out in the wilderness. What he was doing out there...that was just wacko to them. He wore strange clothes. He refused to drink. He wouldn't eat what normal people ate.

And his preaching...he was, what we'd call, "fire and brimstone." John the Baptist made Jonathan Edwards look like Joel Osteen, and the Scribes didn't like that.

To them, John was way too serious, way too caustic. He was too political, too bossy, too austere. He was nowhere near what they expected...and frankly, he was not what they wanted.

So...they said he was demon possessed.

And *yet*...the very same ones who complained about John also complained about Jesus, who was doing, in a lot of ways, *just the opposite of John*. Jesus was friendly and approachable. He talked with Gentiles...and with women...and with Gentile women! He not only ate normal things, but he ate normal things in the homes of normal people...all sorts of different people...even people whom the Scribes and Pharisees considered sinners. Jesus apparently drank. He was friends with ungodly people...He hung around them, and they hung around Him...and they liked Him!

But the religious leaders didn't like that either, so they called him a glutton and a drunk...a friend of people whom proper Jewish society despised and shunned.

And they concluded that Jesus, too, was demon possessed.¹

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That strategy has been around for centuries...and it's still with us today, isn't it? If you can't beat someone with logic or reason, then call them a name.

It proves not one thing, but it makes you feel better.

Actually, that's the strategy that a lot of rigid, inflexible people choose. If someone does something they don't like, they call them a name. "Liberal! Heretic! Hypocrite!"

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Now, again...don't get me wrong...there absolutely *are* such things as liberals and heretics and hypocrites where the gospel of Christ is concerned. There are people who absolutely deserve those labels.

But *these* are the sorts of names that the Scribes and Pharisees called *Jesus Himself*, you see?

And they called Him these things because He was *breaking their boundaries*.

¹ Matthew 12:22-32; Luke 11:14-23

He was *not* breaking the boundaries of *God's* laws or *God's* standards or *God's* morals, but Jesus was breaking *the Scribes and Pharisees* boundaries and standards and mores.

He broke the borders and the fences that the Scribes had erected through the decades. He wasn't meeting their expectations of messiah, which had become completely rigid and inflexible...let's say...with age.

You know, I think that Jesus was even breaking the boundaries that John the Baptist had in mind for the messiah, or he wouldn't have sent people to ask Jesus, "Hey are you really the one?"

You see, even the best of people can have these "boundary blind spots" that make them rigid over time.

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So how did Jesus break boundaries?

Well, generally speaking, Jesus always said, "No," to people-pleasing. He never played up to crowds. He never told people what they wanted to hear just because they wanted to hear it. He did not come to seek people's approval, so He just wasn't concerned about people's expectations.

It's not that He was some James Dean "rebel without a cause."

On the contrary, Jesus was a rebel *with* a cause...and His cause was simply to do what God wanted Him to do...and God wanted Him to reach people with the *possibility*...with the *good news*...of *redemption*.

And sometimes doing that broke human-imposed boundaries.

Sometimes the boundaries Jesus broke were religious in nature...like when He cleared the temple of the moneychangers who were dishonoring God in their practices.<sup>2</sup>

Or when He told Nicodemus, a big kahuna Pharisee, "*Don't think you're on your way to heaven, Nicodemus. Despite what you believe, you're still a sinner who must be born again!*"<sup>3</sup>

Or when He broke Levitical protocol to heal a crippled man on the Sabbath.<sup>4</sup>

That's only the beginning.

But religious boundaries weren't the only ones Jesus broke.

In His determination to do God's will, Jesus also broke ethnic and economic boundaries of His day.

To the shock of the Jews, He healed both the child of a Syrian woman and the servant of a Roman centurion.<sup>5</sup> He engaged positively with Gentiles.

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<sup>2</sup> John 2:13-17; Mark 11:15-19

<sup>3</sup> John 3:1-16

<sup>4</sup> John 5:1-47; Mark 3:1-6

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10

He ate with tax collectors, whom the religious elite called the dregs of society.<sup>6</sup> He befriended wealthy Zacchaeus, but also commended that impoverished widow who'd slipped two small coins into the offering.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus looked past rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, accepted and outcast since He knew that all were sinners in need of a Savior.

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Jesus also broke age boundaries, engaging with both young and old. He honored the elders and also loved the children.

He broke gender barriers.

In a highly patriarchal society, even though He chose twelve men as His disciples, He welcomed women to serve with him in ministry...many of whom actually did what the men didn't...staying faithful to Him to the very end.⁸

Jesus looked past gender because, again, he knew that both male and female were sinners in need of a Savior.

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Jesus also broke health barriers.

Getting near, and even touching those who were considered unclean – both men and women.<sup>9</sup> Everyone else avoided these people out of fear, yet Jesus loved them and had compassion on those who suffered in body and mind the effects of life in a fallen world.

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And then, most importantly, Jesus broke the sin barrier - the reason for all the other barriers.

In Mark 2, when Jesus healed a paralytic, he also said to him, ***“Son, your sins are forgiven.”***

You remember that some scribes were sitting there and they questioned in their hearts, ***“Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming!”***

Jesus made them furious, but He was willing to be misunderstood at best and rejected at worst so He could complete the mission God had given Him.

Where other people backed away, Jesus charged forward. He spoke truth no matter what other people thought. He knew when to speak and when to be quiet, yes, but He never took a poll to test the waters. He never favored one group above another, because He knew they all needed God's truth spoken in love.

Jesus never minimized people's sin, nor did He maximize people's power in society. He didn't try to please the rich. He didn't placate the religious. He refused to overlook the poor and the downtrodden.

⁶ Mark 2:15-17; Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34

⁷ Luke 19:1-10; Mark 12:43b-44

⁸ Luke 8:1-3; Mark 15:40-41, 47; 16:1-8

⁹ Matthew 8:1-4; Luke 5:11-14; Luke 13:10-17; Mark 5:25-34

Jesus was a people-lover, but not a people-pleaser, and there's a big difference between the two. He didn't worry about what the Scribes or Pharisees might say because He cared more about people's hearts than He cared about optics. He took their criticism because He didn't care about the approval of the human boundary-setters. Only His Heavenly Father's approval mattered.

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Jesus had a healthy habit of breaking those boundaries that conflicted with God's will and purposes...and that's a healthy habit He'd like His followers to learn.

How do we do that? How do we follow Jesus in His habit of breaking boundaries?

Well, like the others we've talked about, we follow the guidance of His word and His Spirit. We don't break boundaries just for the sake of being edgy...appearing rebellious...making a name for ourselves, or feeding our egos.

Some people are motivated by those things, and that's simply not Christ-like.

So check your motive.

A better way is to start asking ourselves some hard questions, like:

What people are we seeking to please by following human traditions and preferences...even in our spiritual lives...instead of doing what God is calling us to do?

It's not that traditions are automatically bad, but they are when they become boundaries that keep us from accomplishing God's will for our lives.

Another question to ask ourselves might be, "Where are we prejudiced against those from different ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds?"

What goes through our minds when we meet someone different than us? Do we intentionally try to befriend people unlike us for the sake of the gospel?

In our hearts, do we despise or neglect those who seem either too young or too old for our company? Do we disregard or withhold respect from people based on age?

Do we honor the equal value and worth of both genders, or is there chauvinism or bigotry hiding within us?

Do we avoid or fear the disabled or chronically ill? Do we try to avoid them because engaging with them may cost us something? Time? Energy? Compassion?

These are all boundaries that Jesus broke in His life, and He calls His people to break them too. That's part of what following Him means.

So...if some of these boundaries need broken in your life...if the Spirit is speaking to you about a boundary that needs broken, first of all, give thanks, because this is discipleship...this is becoming more like Jesus.

And then, second, just say “yes.” Say, “yes” to whatever boundary God is calling you to break, for the sake of doing His will...for the sake of becoming more like Jesus.

Break the boundary and move forward with His presence and His blessing.

### **Closing Prayer:**

Jesus, what boundary did you break that you’re asking us to break today...to make a habit in our lives in order to follow You?

Does it have to do with pleasing people too much?

Is it religious in nature? Some rule someone made that has no real basis in Scripture?

Is it social...ethnic...economic? Does it have to do with age, gender or health? Do we avoid the very people we should be running toward with the message of forgiveness?

Whatever it is in our lives, Lord, help us to follow you in the habit of breaking boundaries, for no other reason than to become more like You...to show more people who You really are.

### **Closing Songs:**

— O To Be Like Thee

— I Want To Be Like Jesus

### **Closing Word:**

We can theologically sing the last line of that song: “Stamp Thine own image” ... “Stamp You own image deep on my heart. We can think that is all internal ... it’s all about what’s going on inside. And to some degree it certainly is.

But the image of Jesus’ in part means that we treat people differently. And we engage people differently. It’s an outward living out of the stamp of the image God puts upon us. We act and live as Jesus did. And often times, people did not understand Him, and especially the ones who were so inflexible and so rigid.

May His image be upon us, and may it be visible ... even when it calls us to break the boundaries that our world sets — never God’s, but the world’s.

Thanks for coming to worship this morning. The Lord bless you and keep you. Amen.

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