

“Justification, Sanctification, Vocation” based on Matthew 15:10-20

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, August 20, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

After he had hung up the phone on me while I was yelling at him, my body still seethed with anger. The kids retreated to their rooms and Claire stayed with me waiting to find out what happened.

I had just ordered four tickets for the Jurassic World Tour in South Carolina. I ordered the tickets from what I had thought was Ticketmaster. I followed a Google shortcut that I thought came from the arena. They seemed more expensive than I had remembered when I had looked them up earlier. But hey, it was the night before the event. And then I checked my Ticketmaster account. There were no tickets.

That’s when I realized I had ordered from Tickets Center, which is a ticket reseller site. They sent an email and were supposed to send the tickets to my Ticketmaster account, but I couldn’t figure out why their three-step easy process wouldn’t work. While in my Ticketmaster account, I looked up the tickets and they were \$25 each. My charge with Ticket Center was nearly \$300.

I started to panic. I called the Ticket Center number. I demanded a refund – a cancellation of the sale. He just kept repeating “no refunds, no refunds.” I kept repeating, “No tickets! No tickets!” I said many mean, awful, nasty things. And he hung up on me.

In my panic, in the wave of feeling so stupid and crushed, I was so, so very angry. As Claire convinced me to calm down, I was able to transfer the tickets over. As it turns out, for my Google email and my browser which was Google, don’t communicate with each other on my phone. Now, the only problem was that I overspent by nearly \$200 for the tickets. I could have taken 12 people for what I paid for four. When we got there the next night, there were certainly plenty of empty seats in the arena. But after I had calmed down, I thought of something – What if that guy on the phone Googled me and found out what I do for a living? What do my kids think of their pastor dad?

Now, I am not the first Mangione to have a temper, but I have done a lot to work on it over these many years. For the most part, I do have my ways of managing it and avoiding the big explosions. I think it’s important to know and not excuse our flaws, saying, “That’s just who I am.” No, I need to be better. One area of particular weakness for me still is telephone customer service. Normally, I have strategies before getting on the phone. I acknowledge in advance that something will most certainly go wrong. I remind myself that even though I cannot see them, there is an actual human being on the other side. I pray and then I take a deep breath, and I make my call.

On the night of the ticket fiasco, I called in the midst of my panic and in the midst of my shame for wasting money. And in the process, I acted like a person I don’t want to be, as un-Christ like as I could be. I belittled and berated a man, who, even if he were an actual enemy, Jesus says I would still have to pray for him. Now, you might console me and say, “You’re only human,” and that is correct. It is normal for a human being to respond in this manner. But it is not Christ like. As I said, what if that man Googled me? What if he saw I was a pastor, and thought to himself, “Yep, another one of those crazy Christians. A real hothead.”

Over the years, from many I’ve talked to who are skeptical of faith. People who don’t understand my faith, and certainly don’t understand Christianity. They’ve attributed a quote to Gandhi, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” Never mind

that Gandhi didn't say it but an Indian philosopher named Bara Dada who said it. It's amazing how we have the ability to assume if a quote came from India in the 1920s, it must be from Gandhi and not the actual philosopher who said it. The truth is this is the real perception of many nonbelievers, that we are the biggest impediment to Christ.

Now, I know this feels unfair. We know people have been terrible in every single religion and every single philosophy. It's not as though the atheists are free from racism, sexism, violence, hypocrisy, intellectual dishonesty, or any other sin that would invalidate in their eyes our Christian belief. Many atrocities have been committed by atheists, by Hindus, by Buddhists, by Muslims, by Pagans, by Communists, by Fascists, by Socialists, by Capitalists, by Right and Left Wingers. I guess this has been pretty much human beings in general.

Yet, the truth is that my actions on the phone that night did not reflect Christ to my kids. My actions did not reflect Christ to that man on the other end of the line. As believers, what we say and how we act matters because it reflects our God. We are not supposed to be like everyone else, but like Christ. The Apostle Paul said we are to put on the mind of Christ, and regard others as better than ourselves, just as Christ, who being equal to and in the form of God, became equal to and in the form of humanity, obedient to both natures, in humility, even to the point of death on a cross.

Indeed, our justification is not found in the excuse that, "Well, everyone else does it." Our justification is found in the God who humbly shared in our human life and limits, revealing the fullness of God through our humanity by dying for us, rising for us, and sending to us the Holy Spirit to reside in and among us, empowering us. I've said "us" a lot because it's you, me, and all of us mere human beings who are called to share in the work of God to reconcile all things in Christ, so that we might share in the true Son's true inheritance - life, which is abundant and eternal. What I've heard many a Christian decry as unfair is the high standard we are held to in culture around us. But this is in fact the standard set by Christ.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus explains this standard in response to the Pharisees, who are upset that he and his disciples did not wash their hands before eating bread. He says that it is not what goes in one's mouth that defiles us, but what comes out. It's easy for us to miss what this means, because when we hear the word "defile," we think of something that has been spoiled, ruined, or violated. In the translation we read today, the first time Jesus said it, you heard "defile," the word used since 1525 for this verse. But in the later uses of the Greek word, "*koinoi*," the translation rendered it as "common." This is important to understanding Jesus.

This is not to somehow imply that the great William Tyndale 500 years ago and the translators of the King James Version 400 years ago had gotten their translations wrong, but it reflects a change in how we as English speakers hear and understand the word "defile." You see, "defile," was a relatively new word in English when Tyndale used it and it generally meant, "unclean," because the French word it came from was one that meant "trampled underfoot," coming from Latin words, for "out of line," meaning in the way of marching soldiers.

Tyndale used this "defile" to mark a Hebrew word rooted in a verb meaning "to pierce," but which when used in context with the concept of holiness, means "polluted" or "unclean." And likewise, he used "defile," again to translate the Greek word for common, when it was being used again in the context of the concept of holiness.

You might be wondering, “Why has he gone down another linguistic rabbit hole? What on earth does any of this have to do with his temper and Christians being judged?” Well, permit me one last linguistic rabbit hole to bring it all together. The word holy – “kadosh” in Hebrew and “hagia” in Greek – mean “set apart” or “different.” It means set apart or different because it is marked by God.

The Pharisees in the story today are not bad people. They’re not villains. They are us. When they think of holy, they think of appearances, and outward piety. Jesus called them the blind guides leading those who are blind, but how is our vision sometimes? How many of us have worried about if we really “look” Christian, primarily when we are among other Christians and it’s to our advantage? How many of us have Christian propaganda signs in our house, verses in the finest Hobby Lobby script? I do. How many of us feel it is harder and harder to express our identity as Christians in an increasingly secular culture? I do.

But the truth is that our Christianity is not best expressed by outward shows of piety. We are not called to engage in a culture war, fighting fire with fire using worldly tactics. We are called to rise above, to be holy, to be set apart, to be different from the rest of the world – to be uncommon, always doing so to glorify God as Christ glorified God uniting us in him. Christ came in our humanity and appearing “common,” in order to be our grace, our justification before God, because we cannot be perfectly holy without him.

We will always be common, sinful and error prone like all humans. But we are to know that we are loved. If we focus on that love that God has for us, we can be holier with the help of the Spirit, by loving others and loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. Friends, the point of Jesus’s words is not to mark us with shame, as if we are ruined, or spoiled, or violated – defiled as we define it today. No, the point is that we who are unclean by our commonness, can be washed by the holiness of Jesus, washed off by who he is and what he did, so that we can do better the next time.

The point is not to have our sins or the inclinations of our hearts define who we are, but to believe that we are truly loved by God and let that motivate us. I wish I could call back the guy at Ticket Center whom I berated and abused. But I can’t. However, I can pray for him, and I have, this morning again. I can also confess my mistake as I have to you and learn from it to do better next time by focusing on the fact that I *am* loved by God, and things like that (meaning the lost tickets) don’t matter. Even in my commonness, when I am not Christ-like and make a big deal of things that don’t matter, I make my God look like a false god.

Sisters and brothers, this is the point of Jesus’s words today. It’s not about looking Christian. No, he speaks to us about being a Christian, by knowing what makes us common. The world is right to judge us when we do not live up to our ideals, but we believe in a God who does not desire for us to be judged, but calls on us to avoid the common ways of this world and instead live into our calling of gentleness, patience, and humility, bearing with one another in love.

We are called to humble ourselves as Christ humbled himself, by putting on the mind of Christ, regarding others as better than ourselves – even those whom we think cheated us out of \$200, because Jesus said to pray for even our enemies and those who persecute us. Now, I’ll be the first to admit this is not easy and admit that I miss the mark. I miss the mark every day, but in my sin, I can turn to the grace of God, the grace of God in Christ, and let the Holy Spirit guide me so that I might be sanctified, or made holy to do better.

Beloved, you were made in the image of God and God loves you more than you even realize. You are beloved. The Father sent the Son while we were still sinners out of love for all of humanity and with you in mind. Everyone we encounter is made in God's image and loved just as we are.

Let us all strive then to be holy as God is holy, set apart and different, not engaging in the consideration of evil as the world does, but loving others as we are loved by God. Take this divine love, which the Holy Spirit pours in our hearts, as Paul said, and let it wash away the considerations of evil so that we do not engage in killing, unfaithfulness, promiscuity, theft, false witness and blasphemy. That last one blasphemy is often translated as slander, but I like it as blasphemy because it sums up the problem with all of these sins – as these actions make God look less than God is. They make God look distant from us, uninvolved in our lives and quite frankly, like another god altogether.

This is not only an injunction against personal conduct, but a caution against using the ways of this world, even in defending our faith. There was a meme on the Internet a few years ago that said, "There is coming a time when good men will have to do bad things." Let me tell you, when good men have to do bad things, they cease to be good men.

The best response to God's love and defense of our faith is to be Christ like. It is to know that we are loved by God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, so that by our sanctification, we might live into our vocation, our calling, to be fully human not as the common is, but as God intended. We are to be fully human as revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Matthew, Chapter 15, verses 10-20, translation read in service:

Having called the crowd of people to him, Jesus said to them, "Hear and understand! It is not what enters the mouth that makes a person defiled, but it is what comes out of the mouth that makes a person defiled."

Then, having come near, the disciples said to him, "You know that the Pharisees were scandalized, having heard your word." He said in reply, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted, it will be uprooted. Let them be. They are blind guides of those who are blind. Now, if those who are blind lead those who are blind, both will fall into a pit."

Then answering, Peter said to him, "Interpret for us the parable."

And Jesus said, "Even now again you are unable to understand? You do not recognize yet that everything that journeys into the mouth, goes into the stomach, and it is thrown into the sewer. But the things journeying out of the mouth, come from out of the heart, and these make a person common. For from out of the heart comes consideration of evil - killing, unfaithfulness, promiscuity, theft, false witness, and blasphemy. These are the things that make a person common, but to eat with unwashed hands does not make a person common."