

The Puzzle of His Conduct



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 4:12, 13; 8:28–32; 11:18, 19; 21:12, 13; Luke 2:41–51; 5:32; 1 Cor. 1:26–28.*

Memory Text: “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners” ’” (*Matthew 11:19, NIV*).

Last week's lesson focused on sayings of Jesus that leave contemporary people scratching their heads. This week's lesson probes similar issues, but in respect to His conduct.

One of our problems with Jesus is our perennial temptation to recreate Him in our own image. The revolutionary makes Him out to be one of them; social conservatives believe they have Him in their corner. To an extent, that is unavoidable. After all, our own culture and situation form the matrix through which we both consciously and even unconsciously view reality. But to be conscious of this fact offers some hope that we can begin, at least in some limited way, to transcend it, and attempt as objective an approach as we can to the Jesus we find in the Gospels.

Once we do that, we discover that it is not easy to pigeon-hole Him, not easy to place Him in a tidy little package with the word *solved* on top. Instead, we find ourselves genuinely puzzled by aspects of His conduct, wondering, *Does He expect us to do that, and in the same way?*

This week we will look at some of the more puzzling actions of Jesus in order to learn what we can apply and, perhaps, not apply to our own lives.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 17.*

Neglecting Parents?

As stated earlier, the Gospels are almost totally silent on the first 30 years or so of Jesus' life. Though not much is given, there is one account of this time frame that gives us pause.

Read Luke 2:41–51. At first sight, what impression does the passage leave about Jesus' regard for His parents? On the other hand, what else might have been going on here? What hint could be found in verse 47?

The incident, on the face of it, gives the impression of an irresponsible lad, utterly uncaring about the pain and anxiety of his parents. What parents would not be terribly angry at such apparently callous disregard for their convenience and the rules of their home?

This is one of those events that show the limits of using Jesus' conduct as a model in every case. What is happening here, it would seem, is that Jesus' Messiahship has already begun to shine through at the tender age of 12. He is becoming conscious of an allegiance to a Power infinitely higher than His parents, however much He respected them. The brevity of Luke's account leaves a dozen questions unanswered, such as Who fed and housed the lad those three days? Did the priests have any concern to find His parents?

Read Jesus' response to His parents. What was He telling them, at least indirectly?

“But,” Luke reports, “they did not understand what he was saying to them” (*Luke 2:50, NIV*). Jesus would return home with them and, as a child, be subject to them (*vs. 51*); but He had taken pains to establish the position of a higher loyalty. Nor is there any indication that He ever apologized for the terrible inconvenience He had caused His anxious parents.

Jesus' entire life was guided by the supremacy of God and God's kingdom, even at the cost of being misunderstood. In what ways might your loyalty to God be misunderstood by others? If this has ever happened to you, what did you learn that could, perhaps, help someone else going through a similar experience?

Displaying Anger?

When Jesus descended the Mount of Transfiguration, a man emerged from a crowd at the base with a request that Jesus heal His son. He had taken the boy to the disciples, the man explained, but they had been unable to cure him. Jesus' response, as it comes through in translation, gives the impression of being peeved by the request. " 'O unbelieving and perverse generation,' " He replied, " ' . . . how long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me' " (*Matt. 17:17, NIV*). At the very least, such words seem uncharacteristic of the One we have come to know as the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." How might we explain Jesus' tone here? It is a difficult call. The Gospels mention other occasions when Jesus certainly appeared angry, as well.

How do you understand the following passages? (*Matt. 21:12, 13; Mark 3:1–5*).

Many Christians consider that the way for us to proceed with choices in our complex, contemporary world is to ask, What would Jesus do? It sounds simple enough, until one asks the logical preliminary question, What *did* Jesus do? Here we discover that the answers are not always as simple as we may think. What, for example, are the implications of the above passages for our own conduct today?

"Presuming that what Jesus would do today has some correlation with what he actually did then—in first-century Roman Palestine . . . —how in the world might a contemporary Christian go about replicating and applying these bizarre incidents of tree-cursing and temple-disrupting? If our favorite grocery store happens not to stock a particular fruit we are craving—because it's out of season!—do we proceed, with Jesus' blessing, to curse the fruit bin, the produce manager, and everything else in sight? And if the preacher goes on too much about money one Sunday or if we are just generally miffed at various church personnel and programs, do we bust in during a worship service and start upending pews, pulpits, altars—anything not nailed down—and bouncing ushers from the premises?"—F. Scott Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?* p. ix.

What principles should we bring to bear upon such questions? Where does spiritual common sense come in? Jesus came as the Messiah, the Savior of humanity. How do we distinguish what He did strictly in that role from that which He intends for us to follow?

Destroying Personal Property?

An underlying concern of this week's lesson centers on the way we use Jesus as our model. How straightforward is the goal of "following His example"? And what we are noticing is that it is a matter that calls for the most careful thought and discrimination. There are certainly cases—the majority, in fact—sin which we detect a clear, ethical example to follow; in others the principle is not very clear. Two cases:

Read Matthew 8:28–32 (compare Mark 5:1–20, Luke 8:26–39) and **Matthew 21:18, 19** (compare Mark 11:12–14, 20, 21). **Why do you think Jesus allowed the demons to enter the herd of swine? Would He have done the same thing if the animals had been sheep? Where is the sympathy in Jesus' action here? Was there a concern on His part that, regardless of His own dietary strictures, the herd, nevertheless, represented the livelihood of one or more families in the town? How would the idea of compensation fit into this picture?**

"If these swine were owned by Gentiles, we should be left without a real explanation for their destruction. To say that the devils were ordered merely to leave the men, and that their entering the swine was their own act, contradicts their request to Jesus and the plain statements of Mark and of Luke that Jesus gave them permission."—R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), p. 353. Another Bible scholar sees in Jesus' action "a powerful protest." "The name 'Legion' and the pig mascot," he says, "both signify Roman military occupation." Thus Jesus' intention was to "protest against oppressive Roman possession of Israel."—F. Scott Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?* p. 101.

Ellen G. White says that "it was in mercy to the owners of the swine that this loss had been permitted to come upon them. They were absorbed in earthly things, and cared not for the great interests of spiritual life. Jesus desired to break the spell of selfish indifference, that they might accept His grace."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 338. While these comments might help us to understand certain calamities that come upon us personally, how do you see it setting any precedence in regard to our own action? Or is this one of those actions pertaining to Jesus' role as Messiah-Prophet, and not intended as an example for us to follow, as such? How would you make the case that the same is true in regard to the cursing of the fig tree (which probably had a personal owner)?

Neglecting the Persecuted?

In His most dramatic depiction of the last judgment, Jesus tells about when He will divide the nations gathered before Him into two groups, the sheep and the goats. To the sheep He says, among other things, “‘I was in prison and you came to visit me’” (*Matt. 25:36, NIV*).

Read the following texts in the light of Jesus’ judgment pronouncement. Give your immediate impression on how you think the text relates to His prison reference in the judgment.

Matt. 4:12, 13

Matt. 11:2, 3

Matt. 14:1–13

How is Jesus’ conduct during the imprisonment of John to be explained? Upon first hearing of John’s incarceration, He returns to Galilee (*Matt. 4:12*). And all the evidence suggests that John did not receive a visit from his illustrious contemporary while in the dungeon, a clear implication of Matthew 11:2, 3. According to the passage, John dispatches his disciples to Jesus with a question; that being, apparently, the only means of contact available to him. Following the visit of John’s people, Jesus launches into high praise for the embattled prophet but does not visit him.

One of the most persistent questions we face as human beings centers around the issue of suffering: Where is God when we hurt? In the experience of John, we have a partial answer, in terms of Jesus’ conduct. Though He was God in human flesh, with power to act, Jesus does not intervene to rescue the one who had helped prepare the ground for His own ministry. And following John’s murder, all we get from Jesus (who, we suspect, felt it keenly) is silence. Nor is it likely that He or His disciples attended John’s funeral.

How would you explain Jesus’ conduct during this dark time for John? What were the probable extenuating circumstances that might have played a role in His decision? (See *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 316, which suggests that the authorities were attempting to silence both John and Jesus.)

And how can His behavior during the entire episode with the Baptist help us understand the silence of God in our own times of trouble?

Hanging Out With *Undesirables*

Most of us have a doctored image of Jesus. And however often we hear that He associated with those whom His own society considered unacceptable, our imagination either holds back from going all the way or goes too far. Often, rather than quietly coming to grips with what that aspect of Jesus' life should mean for us today on a personal basis, we use His behavior to beat one another on the head, for being too exclusive, too conservative, in regard to the more seedy elements of society. One suspects, however, that a careful examination of Jesus' relations with the *undesirables* of His day would leave most (if not all) of us feeling at least a tad uncomfortable.

Examine the following passages. What message can we take from them? *Matt. 9:10–13; 11:18, 19; Luke 5:32; 1 Cor. 1:26–28.*

If we apply these passages to our times, our imagination should see Jesus sitting down with people of questionable morals in settings of deepest fellowship (as was mealtime in the ancient world). Eating and drinking are taking place; loud and raucous music is heard; practicing prostitutes lurk in the shadows. That is the setting, and that is precisely where Jesus went.

Interestingly, it is from Jesus Himself that we learn about the most pejorative labels His enemies promulgated about Him: that He was “a glutton and a drunkard” (*Matt. 11:19, Luke 7:34, NIV*). “These slurs would never work against a John the Baptist or a Gandhi, but for one who spends as much time as Jesus does frequenting and talking about dinner parties and banquets, they make a point, even if exaggerated.”—F. Scott Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?* p. 90. However exaggerated, it was nothing short of extraordinary for the Savior of the world to be charged with inebriation and overeating.

What can we learn from these texts that we can apply to our own lives? What should we not apply? As you answer, think about what purpose Jesus had for being with these people. How does that answer help us understand what practical principles we can take away?

Further Study: “Jesus saw in every soul one to whom must be given the call to His kingdom. He reached the hearts of the people by going among them as one who desired their good. He sought them in the public streets, in private houses, on the boats, in the synagogue, by the shores of the lake, and at the marriage feast. He met them at their daily vocations, and manifested an interest in their secular affairs. He carried His instruction into the household, bringing families in their own homes under the influence of His divine presence. His strong personal sympathy helped to win hearts.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 151.

“Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with [people] as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What is *righteous anger*? When is it legitimate, and when is it not? Take your thoughts to class for discussion.
- 2 How is Jesus’ relationship with the *undesirables* of society a guide for us? Under what conditions might our association with sinners become a peril to our own souls? In all His social contacts, Jesus seemed to be in charge. What should that say to us in our own attempts to penetrate the more questionable areas of society?
- 3 To what extent is Jesus’ conduct a model for us today? To what extent is it not? What are other examples of His conduct here that might be problematic for us to follow?
- 4 Think more about this idea of being misunderstood by others as we seek to follow God’s will. Though we see examples of this, such as in Jesus’ early life, why must we be careful? That is, some people have done some very damaging things to themselves and to others, all because they believed that God told them to. How do we know for sure that God is calling us to do certain things that might cause us to be misunderstood? Why should we be open to the counsel of others before we do things that we are convinced that God told us to do? At the same time, how can we be careful not to impede someone who is being led by God in ways that might seem strange to us?

Daniel's New Song

by DANIEL NEWMANN

I was born in Brazil, but my parents took me to America when I was still a baby. I was a good kid, but in junior high things changed. I got interested in punk rock music, and it changed my life. I wore punk-style clothes and hung out with punk friends. I started drinking and smoking marijuana with them, and soon I was part of their culture.

When my mom realized what I was involved in, she freaked out. She had sent me to a good school so I would make good friends, and suddenly I was going the wrong way. Although my mom had some weird religious ideas, she started telling me how much God loves me and how Jesus died for me. Because of her prayers and encouragement I stopped smoking and drinking.

But I still loved punk music, and it drew me into a culture that spelled trouble. Mom tried to show me the dangers hidden in the lyrics of my music, but I would not listen.

My punk friends never made fun of me when I refused to join them in drinking or smoking. However, in time I realized that there was no future in the gang, and I began to pull away. But when the gang realized that I wanted to leave, they told me that if I left they would kill me. I was afraid, for they had killed another boy who had betrayed the gang.

I told my parents that my life was in danger. My mom understood and suggested that I go to Brazil. I had spent summers there, so I agreed. She found a Christian school on the Internet and enrolled me.

I arrived at school—an Adventist boarding school—and liked it immediately. Everyone was friendly. And the music I heard there touched my heart. One Sabbath as the choir sang, I felt God speaking to me through the music. I knew that I was where God wanted me to be. I could relate to the speaker, who told how God had rescued him from a terrible life. By the end of the service I knew that I wanted to be a Christian. I began studying the Bible, and I shared with my mother what I was learning.

Mom had enrolled me in this school to save my life, but God used this school to save my soul. I want my mom to believe in God the way I am learning to believe. I once loved punk music, but God has given me a new song, a song I love to sing.



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