



Jesus FaceTimes with The Pharisees

[Matthew 9:9-12]

The Issue: *Would Jesus Attend an LGBTQ Wedding?*

As Senior Pastor of Parkside Church near Cleveland, Ohio, the Rev. Alistair Begg is one of the leading evangelical voices in America. His program, *Truth For Life*, is broadcast on radio networks and social media platforms. He has authored best-selling books. His gospel preaching and teaching has touched millions since he began his ministry in Scotland in 1975.



Yet, in today's polarizing culture, 50 years of faithful ministry can be canceled by a single debatable answer to a difficult question. On a recent radio broadcast, the Reverend Begg responded to a grandmother who was in a quandary as to whether she should attend the wedding of a grandson marrying a transgender person. He asked her if she was a Christian. She said she was. He asked if she opposed LGBTQ weddings on biblical grounds. She did. He followed with another question: "Does your grandson know how you feel?" He did.

Begg then went where angels might fear to tread, by saying she should go to the wedding. He also suggested she bring a gift. If she didn't go, she would affirm to the couple and their friends that Christians are judgmental and unloving. His answer created a firestorm. Within days, he was accused of

“condoning sin” and “pastoral malpractice.” The American Family Radio Network canceled his *Truth for Life* program. A few days later, John MacArthur disinvited Rev. Begg to speak at his pastor’s conference. All of this proves cancel culture is as prevalent in conservative and evangelical circles as it is on the progressive left.

Three questions in response to Pastor Begg’s cancellation: 1) Was his answer to that grandmother biblically sound? 2) Was the negative reaction on the part of many Christians biblically correct? 3) How should we respond when faced with a question like the one that torpedoed Pastor Begg? These are critical questions for those of us who navigate tricky situations in a world of dizzying social changes.

As Christians, we have to turn to the only One who can give us the answers: our Savior and Lord, Jesus. We can begin by looking at Jesus’ FaceTime with the Pharisees over his eating with tax collectors and prostitutes. Let’s focus on the gospel account of a tax-collector-turned-saint, Matthew:

“As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me,’ he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ Upon hearing this, Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”
[Mt. 9:8-12]

If you think Alistair Begg is in hot water, it’s nothing compared to Jesus. Alistair got canceled; Jesus got crucified. If you do things Jesus’ way, you will get whacked from the right, the left, and everywhere in between. This passage is as relevant to Christ followers today as it was to his disciples 2,000 years ago. So, let’s unpack it to answer to the question: Would Jesus attend an LGBTQ wedding?

First, CONTEXT MATTERS. What I am saying is there’s no easy, one-size-fits-all template you can put over every situation. Before you fire off an easy answer to how a follower of Jesus should respond to a sticky situation, you need to ask a lot of questions. Many situations look the same, but few really are. The Pharisees had an easy answer: Jesus was a teacher. The Hebrew word for teacher is *Rabbi* or *Rabbani*. Rabbis were interpreters of the Law and the Prophets. They represented the Holy God who gave the Jewish Scriptures, and, as such, were expected to maintain purity in their lives. No respectable Rabbi would go into the house of “unclean” people (those who lived in disobedience to God’s laws).

It's important that you catch what I am about to say next: **to socialize with those who violated God's law was tantamount to affirming their godless behavior.** Isn't this exactly the argument we might give to Jesus' followers who attend an LGBTQ wedding? "You are dishonoring God's biblical institution of marriage, and tacitly approving its perversion by your presence." That's the easy answer. And maybe it's the right one. Except for this and other passages that show Jesus doing what seems to contradict this argument.

We can understand why the Pharisees were upset. Tax collectors were traitors collecting taxes for the Romans. They got filthy rich by adding exorbitant surcharges to the taxes they collected. When people refused to pay up, their enforcers beat them half to death. These guys were brutal gangsters. The only folks who dared socialize with them were prostitutes and reprobates. This word "sinners" in verse ten was a common euphemism for harlots. They traded sexual favors for the gangsters' ill-gotten gain. Jesus might as well have been slurping down spaghetti and wine with Mobster Tony Soprano, his Mafia enforcers, and pole dancers at the *Bada Bing* club. How would you feel if you



saw your pastor eating and drinking with such people? Maybe, what the Pharisees felt.

Let me add to the picture here. Jesus is eating food purchased by dishonest gain. He is sitting with prostitutes who regularly break all of God's commandments—in a single night of plying their immoral trade. Talk about a gross violation of God's plan for sex and

marriage! You need to really let this sink in. Jesus might have been canceled by some of today's radio networks. He surely wouldn't be speaking at many pastors' conferences! The point is: Jesus seems to muddy the waters here. Or maybe he clears up some things. We can glean at least these principles:

One: Jesus never compromises on biblical truth. The Pharisees don't have to school him on right or wrong. He is the God who gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. He is the Word that has become flesh and dwelt amongst us. [John



1:14] He is God's final word on everything in these last days. [Hebrews 1:1] He doesn't disagree with the Pharisees when they call those at the dinner table "sinners." In fact, he responds in verse 12, "it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." These people he's eating with are soul sick. What they are doing to themselves is sick. What they do to others is

sick. Their way of thinking is sick. They make the world around them sick. Nothing about them is healthy. You could say the same thing about so many people in our world today. You can even declare their thinking and actions to be sick. God gave his Laws to keep us from living sick lives. We should be deeply concerned today when Jesus followers, and especially their leaders, try to redefine sick thinking as healthy. Let's make it clear: the LGBTQ agenda is sick. People trapped in those lifestyles are not healthy. We do ourselves and others no favors when we compromise the truth to make sick people like us better by saying they are okay. To do so is to betray the Savior who came to redeem us from sin sickness. But let's also be humbly honest: sexual sins aren't necessarily the worst sicknesses in the world. There are so many other sickness—like racism, sexism, materialism, slothfulness, gossip, and slander—that are often practiced by the same religious folk who are undone by LGBTQ sins.

Two: Jesus is the only Doctor who can heal the sick. The Law of God can't heal the sin-sick person any more than a doctor's warning or prescription can heal. The Pharisees were good at diagnosing what was wrong with *others*. They were



pros at telling them what they needed to do to make themselves better. No one laid the Law down better than the Pharisees. But laying down the Law (then or now) never healed anyone. Sick folks have to get the right medicine. And, then, they have to take it. Doctor Jesus is the only one who can fix soul sickness. And his followers have been called to bring the Great Physician to those who are sick. Harping at them about their sin, trying to get them to listen to reason, or pleading with them to change their unhealthy views or lifestyles didn't work for the Pharisees, and it won't work for you. Your job is to introduce people to Doctor Jesus, and his is to do the heart surgery necessary to change them..

Three: Healers have to go where sick people hang out. Jesus makes that crystal clear to Pharisees of any era. In **verse 12** he says, "It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." The sick were there in that tax collector's house. Jesus had called Matthew to follow him, but that ex-tax collector still wasn't healed. His nefarious friends for sure weren't. So Jesus goes into the house where the sick are. Sure, they are still wallowing in their sick ways in that house, but Jesus has to go there. People can't clean up their act through their own flesh efforts. Sinners only have one job description: to sin, and sin all the more. The Pharisees were all about cleaning up the *outside* of people; getting them to conform to religious rules and traditions, without changing



their hearts. Jesus later points out the dangers of that kind of religious spirit when he says, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, hypocrites! You clean up the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are filled with greed and self-indulgence!" [**Matthew 23:25**] In another place, he calls them "white-washed tombs with dead men's bones rattling around inside." [**Mt. 23:27**] The

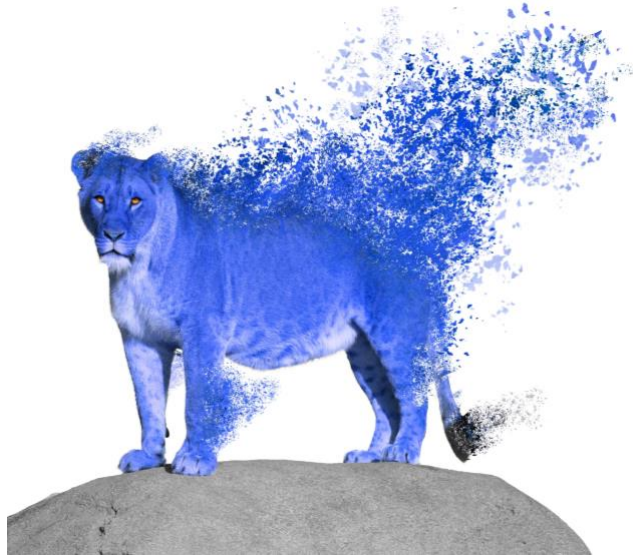
heart of the matter is the *heart*. Religion seeks to clean up someone's behavior. Jesus does heart surgery. But he can only do that when he goes to places where people are sick at heart. And he takes his disciples into the dark places where heart sick people do things that offend a holy God and break righteous people's hearts.

It would be easier to stay in the Temple with the religious Pharisees, and avoid those whose sickness offends us. The problem is: religious folk can be just as sick, or maybe even more so because they think they are healthy. Jesus says to them in **verse 13**, "Go and learn what it means, 'I desire mercy and not

sacrifice.” He is quoting from Hosea 6:6. The teachers of the Law should know their own Old Testament prophets. But they don’t. And too often, we Christians are more concerned about fighting cultural and political wars that only clean the outside of the cup or whitewash the tombstone, than we are about learning what our Master says in the Gospels. God’s wants us to be merciful to those who are the worst of sinners out there. He wants us to go where they are, and bring Jesus to them, even if we have to go to places that make our religious skin crawl.

Four: We have to go where the sin sick are for the right reasons and with the right motives.

Some would say that we have to “hang out” with sinners. I would counter that by saying, we have to “reach out” to sinners. Jesus said of his disciples, “They are *in* the world but not *of* the world.” [John 17:13&15] We are not called out to hang out with those who flaunt God’s laws, lest our own morals are corrupted, our biblical



worldview is compromised, or we even abandon our Faith and go over to the dark side. We are living in days when too many Christians are doing just that. We should always be aware of the devil’s seductions. St. Peter wrote, “Be sober, be vigilant, for your adversary the devil goes about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” [1 Peter 5:8]

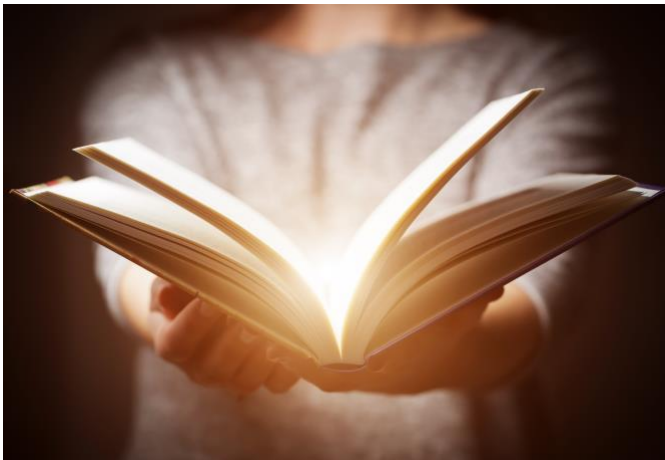
We must go with vigilance but go we must. Jesus went with a purpose. It wasn’t to party with gangsters and hookers. He never forgot they were sick. He went to bring healing. He didn’t join in to their coarse jesting, or let the prostitutes sit on his lap. He didn’t get drunk. He was perfect holiness in a den of iniquity. Yet he wasn’t “Debbie Downer” either. His presence was so unlike that of the Pharisees. It was holiness wrapped in love. They knew that he didn’t approve of their behavior, but they sensed that he loved them. Jesus had a perfect blend of godly convictions and godly compassion. He never forgot his mission in life: “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save those who are lost.” [Luke 19:10]

Motive is the key to everything we do as followers of Jesus. Take this issue of going to an LGBTQ wedding. You have to ask the hardest question of all: “Why am I going?” Jesus knew exactly why he was at the tax collector’s party. What’s your endgame in anything you do? That requires some soul searching

best done alone with God. Don't let other people tell you what you should do or not do. You are accountable to your Master alone. Not to your relatives, neither to fellow Christians, nor to what a pastor or radio preacher tells you is okay or not right, and especially not to some fear that you might alienate someone if you don't make the choice that pleases them. Jesus was clear: we have to be able to lose everyone we love if we are going to follow him.

There is only one reason you can go to a gay wedding, or to any other gathering where people flaunt the laws of God: you are convinced that by going you can bring Jesus and his healing to those who are there. And, if you are convinced before the Lord that's why you are going, don't let Pastor Begg, the American Family Radio Network, John MacArthur, or anyone else tell you otherwise.

Five: The easy answer is seldom the right one. It would be easy to take the way of the Pharisee: stay separate from sinners lest their uncleanness pollute you. Don't go to that place lest Christians accuse you of affirming what takes place there, or, even worse, cancel you. Or, it would be easy to shrug your shoulders and say, "Jesus could go there, but he was the sinless Son of God. He could handle himself in a place like that. But we are not Jesus. We are too prone to sin if we go where Jesus went." And there are some places some of us shouldn't go because our abiding sin might render the temptations of those places too great. Alcoholics might not be best suited to go into a bar to share Jesus. Christians who struggle with sexual addictions are wise to stay away from places and sites where the seductions might draw them back into those sins.



But Jesus took his disciples into the tax collector's house. And later he sent them into Samaritan villages, and other places where Orthodox Jews would never go for fear of making themselves unclean or affirming uncleanness by their presence. It's never easy to walk the straight and narrow way, holding on to your convictions and compassion at the same time. Jesus said that the wide way was easy, and many take the easy way. But it leads to destruction. Christians too often look for the failsafe formula. The easy answer to every hard decision. But sometimes Jesus calls us to go the way that gets us whacked by people on both sides of the issue. Why does he do this? Because he knows we too easily depend on the easy, stock answer instead of Him. The Christian life is a call to

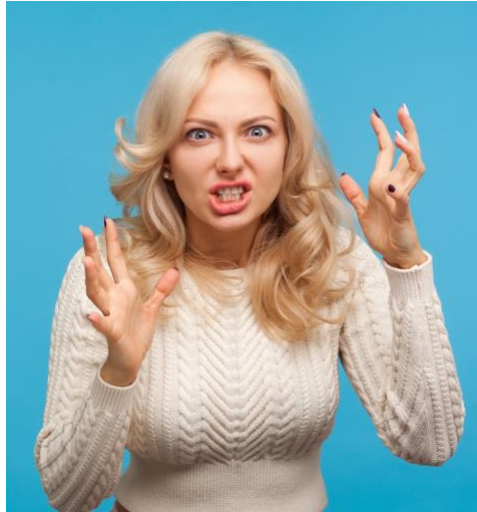
difficult decisions that can only be made alone by searching Scriptures, spending time alone with Jesus (as he did with his Father), and allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us in obedience to the Word of God.

I believe that Pastor Begg made a mistake by telling that grandmother to go to her grandson's wedding. I think he should have laid out some timeless principles, and then told her to go to Jesus to find his answer for that particular situation. But he fell into the trap of taking Jesus' place and telling her exactly what she should do. And, in doing so, by implication, he told all the rest of us what we should do in the same situation. I'm not going to judge Alistair Begg. I am so indebted to his 50 years of ministry. Yet, as a pastor, I know how easy it is to take the place of Jesus in a parishioner's life, and tell them what only Jesus has a right to. I am not Pastor Begg's Master. Jesus is. He, like me, is accountable to Jesus alone, and not me. Otherwise, I would be playing the Pharisees who came to judge Jesus and his disciples for going into that tax collectors house.

A Second Concern: How would Jesus respond to the way some Christians have responded to Alistair Begg?

I think this dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees gives us some insights. The first is critical: **When it comes to matters where God's people can disagree, we are free to disagree without being disagreeable.** We

shouldn't disagree on the essentials of biblical truth. Jesus didn't disagree with the Pharisees when it came to God's Law, or the call for his sons and daughters to live righteous lives. He agreed with them on the issue of what constituted sin. And the tax collectors and prostitutes *were* sin sick. Where he disagreed with them was in what to do about it. His strategy was different. There is a difference between fundamental Christian truths and how we apply them to practical situations. And there, followers of Jesus can disagree. But we shouldn't cancel each other out because we have differences when it comes to social, cultural, or political applications of our Faith.



We are not the final judges on what other followers of Jesus do. We are too quick to jump on our social media posts and take potshots at each other. I wonder if The American Family Radio Network succumbed to pressure when they took Rev. Begg off the air. And a lot of Christians took great delight in gossiping about Begg's troubles. Nothing is more delicious in a *People* magazine culture than watching a celebrity toppled. If there are people sicker

than the tax collectors and prostitutes, it's the religious Pharisee who loves to stir up trouble among God's people. We should keep our mouths shut, pray that we don't fall into the same trap, and let our Master do the judging of those who belong to him.

We had better be very careful whom we crucify. The Pharisees eventually saw Jesus as a "clear and present danger" to their religious system. When they engineered his crucifixion, they didn't even know they were nailing the King of Glory to that Roman cross. Religious people have labeled our Lord's best servants as heretics and burned them at the stake, thinking they were doing God's work for him. We no longer burn saints at the stake. We just crucify them on social media. Beware, dear brothers and sisters, of the Pharisee spirit.

Finally, the world is watching. Jesus said, "All men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another." [John 13:35] Jesus assumed that all people would be watching us to see if our actions matched our beliefs. How



do you think Jesus would have responded to Alistair Begg? We can't know for sure. We know how he answered the Pharisees that day. He told them to go take another look at the Scriptures and to see if there wasn't a better way of thinking. That's what we need to do when we think (rightly or wrongly) a brother or sister is in error.

DR. BOB'S QUESTIONS TO PONDER



1. Do you see any significant difference between the tax collectors and prostitutes of Jesus's day and the LGBTQ people today?
2. Is going to a wedding different than going to a social gathering with LGBTQ folks? What are the key differences if any?
3. Why is going directly to Jesus, apart from the Scriptures, a risky proposition?
4. On what basis do we have the right and/or responsibility to call fellow Christians to account for their choices? What about Pastor Begg or any other leader?

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