

## Who Judges Whom?

### **Religious Police.**

In Saudi Arabia, if you're not too careful, you're likely to be confronted by the Islamic religious police. These 'foot soldiers' in short, white robes and unadorned headdresses stop and question people as they like. They rebuke men and women for mixing in public and clamp down on uncovered hair, insisting women wear head-scarves if not the hijab. On the beaches, if a woman wants to swim in the sea, she has to wear a full body costume which covers everything except her face. Even western women have to be fully covered if they venture out into public places. Women have recently been allowed to drive cars, however the vast majority of women do not have licences and if a man is seen giving a woman a lift, he is likely to be stopped and rebuked for getting too near to a woman.

These are the religious police on morality patrol. To ensure that everyone is behaving properly. According to their religious rules. These are not Islamic rules.

I guess for us, the question is, are we as Christians any different?

An Australian current affairs TV programme recently gave some examples illustrating why they believe religious instruction should be banned in schools. A religious instruction teacher had told a pupil that her mother was going to hell because she is single. Another person reported that a teacher had told her daughter she was going to hell because she'd held a naming ceremony for her dog. Dog's don't go to heaven because they don't have souls she was told. There are any number of such instances. These are Christian religious police.

If I had a child in a school like that, I'd also want to stop the 'religious instruction'.

You may have experienced something like this yourself. A Christianity, or a form of it, full of rules, laws and legalisms telling you what is right and what is wrong. Rammed down your throat. If you don't ensure you carefully keep all the rules, you're condemned. Sadly, that's how too many people view Christianity today. A lot of rules and laws, which are used to judge and condemn people.

### **Judging Jesus.**

This is all of interest as we come to John's gospel. If you were listening to the chapter Alan read, you might have noticed this is exactly the sort of religion we're dealing with here. One that judges others, in this case one that judges Jesus. Here the religious police want to put Jesus to death. They use the flimsiest excuses to judge and condemn Him.

We see this happening as the chapter unfolds. It starts with the amazing healing of the man by the pool. You would have thought this would result in people turning in awe to Jesus. But let me give you a 'heads up'. The Pharisees, who represented the Jewish religion of the day, were somewhat fixated on the Sabbath. Israel had been punished by God and exiled to Babylon for 70 years some 500 years before. The reason being their neglect of God in their lives. Public and private.

The religious leaders were determined this wouldn't be repeated. One of the most important laws that had been neglected was the law regards the Sabbath Day. Everyone was meant to stop work on that day. One in seven. They were meant to consciously turn their thoughts to God, rededicating themselves to His service and enjoying a break from their normal routine.

Over the years the rabbis (teachers) added numerous other laws, which they believed, if you kept them, you'd never break the Sabbath law. The supreme sabbath law being that a person is not to work on that day. And rules are still being added right up to this day by strictly religious Jewish people.

You can today purchase 'Sabbath mode' ovens and fridges and lights, that switch themselves on and off at set times, so that you don't have to switch them on or off on the sabbath. This because it has been decided by the latest Jewish religious police that pressing a button, to switch an appliance on or off, is work. It's not work to place a meal in the oven to be cooked, just switching it on or off.

This is not a new thing. The religious police have always been out 'to get' Sabbath law breakers.

But we're jumping ahead of ourselves.

The chapter starts with Jesus coming to Jerusalem for a festival. He stops by the pool at the Sheep Gate. Legend had it that people could be miraculously cured there. So, there are crowds of people with all kinds of ailments and disabilities lying next to the pool waiting for the water to be stirred up. Because the first one in, they believed, would be healed.

And there's one guy who's been an invalid for 38 years. Just lying there, because he's paralysed. Jesus sees him and says to him, v6, "Do you want to get well?" And the bloke replies, "Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred.. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

What a conundrum. If this is really a pool that heals, you've got to get yourself into it, and you've got to be first! If necessary, push others out the way. But if you're paralysed, well, you don't stand much chance.

Jesus says to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk."

And the man get's up, takes up his mat and walks! You'd imagine that when people saw this man, who'd been an invalid for 38 years, they'd celebrate. It's astonishing what's happened. But there's a problem.

v9 tells us it's the Sabbath Day. No work to be done. Healing a person and carrying a mat, both are deemed to be work. So, when the religious police see the man carrying his mat, they say v10, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat." The man replies, "The man who made me well said to me, 'pick up your mat and walk.'"

Do you see what's going on? This guy has been lying at the pool for 38 years and now he's up on his feet walking and carrying his mat, presumably going home. It's stunning. Someone has the power to do that simply by saying a word! The sheer delight and joy you'd feel for a fellow human being who'd just been freed from such a life of misery... But not from these Jewish religious police. They dismiss the breathtaking miracle. All they have is a complaint. This man has been healed on the Sabbath and he is carrying his mat. That's forbidden.

### **Who is this fellow?**

So v12, they want to know who gave the man the instruction to pick up his mat and walk. Not because they want to meet the person who exercises such extraordinary power. No, they want to persecute him for breaking their laws. Talk about not seeing the forest for the trees.

The healed man has no idea that it was Jesus, which says something about him and his character. Why no thanks, why no asking "Who are you that you can cure me like this with a word?" We are told that a little later Jesus finds him at the Temple and says, "Stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you." Worse than being paralysed for 38 years. It's hard to imagine.

But get this. Instead of thanking Jesus and perhaps following Him, v15 the man returns to the Jews and tells them it was Jesus who told him to carry his mat. He reports Jesus to the religious police. What's he thinking. It's interesting that in chapter 9 there is a similar story, of a blind man healed on the Sabbath. And he too finds himself up against the religious police. They threaten to exclude him from the synagogue. But he backs Jesus all the way.

In the passage in chapter 5, the man makes the opposite choice. He's healed, but he thinks there's too much to lose. So, that guy told me to carry my mat! It's him. Not me. The result is v16, Jesus becomes the object of persecution by the religious police.

### **Judging Jesus.**

This story, as much of John's gospel, is like a court case. It's the Jewish leaders against Jesus. Yet even before Jesus makes His defence, the Jewish leaders have reached their verdict and decided on a sentence. Persecute Him.

Nevertheless, Jesus makes His case v17. Persecuting Me won't help, I'm just like my Father. Do you reckon He takes a day off on the Sabbath? Do you think He stops caring, providing, upholding things and healing.... just because it's the Sabbath? I'm just like my Father, He is always at work, every day and so am I.

This infuriates the Jewish leaders who decide they've been too lenient on Jesus. They're dealing with an inveterate and callous lawbreaker v18. Not only does He break the Sabbath but He blasphemes calling God His Father as if He is God's equal. Persecution is not enough, He must be killed. The really sad part, is they almost certainly think they are defending God, doing God's work. Because they know the rules.

This approach had worked for them in the past, or so they think. But now, unbeknownst to them, God has come in person. And being the maker of the rules, He is not subject to them, He is greater than them.

The rules He'd given were meant to help people see their own failings and be loving towards God and their fellow men. The Sabbath law had been given so that people would have a day of rest, have a break and spend quality time with each other and with God. The Sabbath was meant to be for them, not against them. It was never meant to inhibit compassion and love. But they had made themselves into religious police, thinking that it was all about whether you press a button or not, whether you carry a mat or not. And so these experts, these self-appointed religious critics, these religious police conclude they must get rid of Him.

Their assessment is completely wrong. And that's not unusual for experts, or critics.

It has been demonstrated in numerous studies that professional wine judges, those who rate various wines around the world, are unable to give the same wine the same rating in blindfold tests where they are presented with the same wines from different bottles. In one test these professionals were only able to tell just over 50% of the time, whether they were drinking a red or a white wine! They may as well have been tossing coins.

Famously Dick Rowe of Decca Records listened to some songs by a new group and turned them down. He wrote a polite letter to the group's manager saying, "Guitar groups are on their way out."

The letter was addressed to Mr Epstein, the group, The Beatles.

The president of IBM said in 1943, "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers."

In cases like this, the judges become the judged. The tables are turned. Which is exactly what happens next in our story.

### **Jesus judging.**

Jesus answers His critics, His judges, in v19-30. They have judged Him and want Him killed because of the alleged blasphemy of claiming equality with God.

We can sum up His argument this way:

He says, 'you think you have the right to judge me, the truth is I will be judging you. I am the One who gives life. Just like the Father. What He does I do. The Father has given Me authority to judge.' Look at v22, v26 and 27.

*<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him.*

*<sup>26</sup> For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. <sup>27</sup> And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.*

These are massive claims! He's saying He judges because the Father has entrusted judgment to Him. He is saying He speaks for God. He is saying He is the source of life – something He has surely demonstrated with the healing at the pool.

You'll note that Jesus has spoken of Himself throughout this section as 'the Son'. But in v27 He suddenly refers to Himself as 'the Son of Man'. The Father has given Him authority to judge

because He is the Son of Man. The Jews would immediately have thought of Daniel's vision, Daniel 7:13,14

<sup>13</sup> *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.*

<sup>14</sup> *He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*

Jesus is saying, "I am that Son of Man. The Father has given to Me authority, glory and sovereign power. He has given Me authority to judge."

So, Jesus is saying He is the judge, not the Jewish leaders. Not the religious police or anyone else. Therefore, if they honour Him, they honour the Father and if they dishonour Him they dishonour the Father.

The religious police think they honour God by being sticklers for rules and regulations. The Islamic moral police are just the same. They genuinely think they honour God by making sure women are covered by scarves and hijabs and so on. The Jewish moral police genuinely think they are honouring God by making sure you don't press any buttons on a Saturday.

Christian moral police genuinely think they're honouring God by setting all kinds of rules and condemning people who don't follow them.

And to all of them Jesus says... I'm the judge, not you. So, honour Me. And when you do. You're honouring my Father who sent Me.

How does this challenge you? Jesus isn't interested so much in your religious rules and rituals as in whether you honour Him in what you say and do. Do you recognise that it is this historical flesh and blood man Jesus who is at the same time God? Who reveals the Father to us? Do you recognise that He will judge your every thought, word and deed? He is the judge. He sees and knows everything about you down to the darkest secret. Things you'd never want anyone else to know. You will answer to Him as your judge.

The key question will be, how have you judged Him? And what have you done about it? Perhaps not given Him much thought? Perhaps seen Him as an interesting teacher or prophet? Perhaps just seen Him as a constant niggler in the background? Or have you recognised Him as the One sent from God the Father, from heaven to be with us as one of us, the One around whom we should shape our lives, our priorities, ambitions and attitudes?

The way Jesus describes judgement is interesting, look at v28 and 29. Jesus says that after death comes judgment and v29 seems to say the sort of thing many people automatically think, 'those who've done good will rise to live, and those who've done evil will rise to be condemned'. But you can't read these verses in isolation. You must read them in the context of what Jesus has already said. You see Jesus isn't talking about being 'good' in the way we might think, or being 'good' at keeping religious laws, even the 10 commandments. He defines the good, those who inherit eternal life in v24

*'Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has got eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.'* In other words that person won't be condemned.

You see, it's not about being baptised or dedicated, or whether you're a single mum. Neither is it whether you did or didn't break a Sabbath law like the Jewish leaders seemed to think. It's all about how you respond to Jesus.

The irony is that the Jewish leaders and others think Jesus is on trial, when all along He is the judge.

### **Testimonies.**

Jesus recognises that because the Jewish leaders are seemingly putting Him on trial that He needs to demonstrate that what He says is true. That's what v31f is about.

If He was just speaking by Himself, He agrees that His word would not be valid v31. So He lists four other witnesses on His behalf. He's not making it up.

The list starts with John the Baptist in v33. We met him last week, saying 'don't look at me, look at Jesus.' But there's far greater testimony than John.

There is the witness of the works Jesus has done v36. He's just healed a guy who's been an invalid for 38 years, something that seems to have been lost on these 'leaders'. He was just lying there, had been all those years. Now he's walking around with his mat! Isn't that astounding?' Can't you see that the very works I'm doing testify that the Father sent Me?' is what Jesus is asking them.

And of course, there's the Father. 'He testifies about Me,' says Jesus v37. And he continues v38, 'But you guys don't know Him because you don't know Me.'

Then finally there are the Scriptures v39,40. It is as if Jesus says, 'You think you know the Scriptures so well. But you miss the point. This in spite of spending so much time studying them. You see, the Scriptures, the whole OT from the Law of Moses through to the prophets, are all about Me. But you refuse to come to me to have life. You'd rather play at being religious, moral police.'

Then v41-44. The key here seems to be the hearts of the Jewish leaders. They love to receive praise but do not love God. Seeking their own glory, they become blind towards the things of God and thus have an inability to recognise what He says through His word.

The sad truth is that it therefore becomes quite possible to read the Bible your whole life and miss the point. And in a further great irony the very Scriptures they think they are believing and implementing then stand in judgment against them v45-47.

### **Your verdict.**

In the light of this passage it's worth checking where we stand this morning. It would be really dumb to make the same mistakes as the Jewish leaders, thinking that it's okay to ignore Jesus so long as you are outwardly keeping a few commandments. Which is what some who think they're Christians sadly do. They have their particular favourite laws and rules and go around like moral

police passing judgment on others. It is a multiple tragedy. They are lost, yet the world thinks they represent Christianity.

Don't confuse Jesus with the moral police in this passage. He couldn't be more different. He does not go around looking for who is breaking His laws, so He can condemn them. He's the one who says to all kinds of broken people, get up, pick up your mat and walk. I'm the one who's come to bring life. No matter what day it is. All you have to do is place your trust in me and turn away from your sins, which means turn away from living life as if there is no God who will judge you in the end. Jesus does not judge now. He came to save. But He will judge one day. In the end it's not so much what you judge Jesus to be, how you see Him. It's all about how He sees you. We think we are the one's who must decide about Jesus. It is actually He who decides about us. The only thing any of us can do, is throw ourselves onto His mercy and seek to honour Him in our lives.

Amen.