

August 21-25, 2023 Edition

Following The Year_(s) Of Jesus Part 86

Jesus, A Pharisee & A Prostitute
The Parable Of The Two Deadbeats

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: We are in week 3 of a series looking at the stories or parables of Jesus... stories that were illustrations of the Kingdom of God. And the Kingdom was something just about everybody misunderstood... but every once in a while someone would come along that seemed the least likely to get it and they'd show they somehow understood in a way that nobody else did... and Jesus always rewarded that:

While on the cross Jesus was suspended between two thieves. One ridiculed Jesus but the other one said this...

"We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 10:25-26 (NLT)

What was the thief thinking? When was Jesus going to come into His Kingdom? How did he know to ask Jesus for a favor? So many unanswered questions... but one thing we know for sure. Jesus' statements that His Kingdom was "not of this world" to Pilate may have been overheard by this guy. Nobody else thought anything about it but for some reason this thief saw something that nobody else did and made a request.

Talk about pulling it out at the last minute, huh? The first person to enter into Jesus' Kingdom and he was the least likely person on earth to be allowed in. What's up with that?

Well, I figure it was just another way of Jesus making the point that everybody's welcome in His Kingdom. All you have to do to get in is ask to only One Who knows the way in and He will grant you access.

To set up this week's devotionals I want to quickly tell you 2 stories and then tomorrow we'll look at the "official" parable for this week. The first story takes place generations before Jesus was born. This story revolves around a woman named, Rahab. She lived in the most ancient city on the face of the planet, the city of Jericho. It was a fortress city that was the first place that the children of Israel got to after they officially entered the promised land. Joshua wasn't sure how to take the walled city so he sent some spies in to check it out.

The spies were discovered by the King of Jericho and they only survived because Rahab hid them in her house. And what an interesting place that must have been... because Rahab was a prostitute. But in spite of her profession the spies told her that since she had saved their lives they would save her life when Israel conquered Jericho. And that's what happened. Rahab was spared and in fact, she fell in love with an Israelite and married him. The story ends with Rahab and Salmon living happily ever after.

The next story happens a few generations later. Israel has inhabited the land and a man named Eli is the priest of God at a place called Shiloh. There is no temple yet so God at that point was worshipped in a tent. A woman who had not been able to have children went and prayed to God. She promised that if God gave her a son then she would dedicate him to the LORD. Not long after she realized she was pregnant.

When her son was old enough she took him to the Tabernacle and told Eli what had happened. She left Samuel there and that night as they slept (Eli in one room and Samuel out in the larger part of the tent), Samuel heard his name called out and thought it was Eli. He ran into Eli's room and woke the old man up. Eli hadn't called Samuel and told him to go back

to sleep. After the same thing happened a few more times, Eli realizes what is going on. He told Samuel, "God is calling to you. The next time you hear your name say, 'speak LORD, and I will listen'".

Samuel went back into his bedroom and waited. Can you imagine what must have been going through his mind? How he must have felt? When he heard his name again he said, "speak LORD, for Your servant is listening."

And Samuel's life was forever changed. So was the history of Israel. So was the history of the entire world. All because one boy was willing to listen when God spoke. What does this have to do with the parable of the two debtors? Tune in tomorrow and read all about it ;o)

Tuesday Reflection: Ok, so the story about the two deadbeats that Jesus tells needs a little setup in order to make sense. Jesus has been invited over to a man named Simon's home for dinner. Simon is a Pharisee and if you've spent much time in church then you probably know that most of the Pharisees couldn't stand Jesus. He was their arch enemy as far as they were concerned. So Simon must have been unusual. He was curious about Jesus... so much so that he invited Jesus to eat with him (which was a BIG deal back then).

So Jesus comes to dinner. While they're in Simon's house a prostitute walks in and falls at Jesus' feet, weeping (how she got in I have no clue... Simon is probably wondering the same thing at this point). Her tears land on Jesus' feet and because people wore sandals back then and there were no paved roads, his feet were pretty dusty. The tears made a mess so she let her hair down and wiped Jesus' feet clean with her hair (which would have caused another scandal... even prostitutes would never in a million years let their hair down in public... it was totally scandalous). As far as shocking the nice, polite people you couldn't really do a better job... maybe if she had stripped naked and streaked all around the room saying something that they considered blasphemous? Maybe...

Then she takes some perfume (we'll talk about the perfume a little later) and massages it into his feet. As all of this is happening Simon thinks 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." Luke 7:39 (NLT)

He may have thought he was having his own private thoughts but Jesus heard him clearly. And so he turns to Simon and says,

"Simon, I have something to tell you." Luke 7:40 (NLT)

Now if you've been with us through this year of studying the life, teachings and interactions of Jesus then you might think right about now would be a good time for Simon to RUN!!!!

Run, Simon, run!!!!

Because any time Jesus says the words, "I have something to tell you," He's getting ready to drop some serious truth on you. And that's what He does with Simon. Here's what He says:

"Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had

the bigger debt forgiven.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.” Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

We will spend the rest of this week unpacking what exactly it is that Jesus is saying, but for today spend some time reflecting on this parable and what Jesus might want you to be hearing in it.

Wednesday Reflection: What is the first concept that we need to get from this parable? That nobody is too far gone. When the woman enters Simon’s house it would have been immediately obvious who/what she was. A prostitute in the first century dressed in such a way that EVERYBODY knew exactly what they were looking at... and no woman who was not a prostitute would dress in a way that would make people wonder if maybe she was a prostitute.

So it was pretty obvious. She would have had very heavy makeup on. She would have been wearing fancy clothes. And she would have had a small jar that hung around her neck where she kept one of the most important tools of her trade... perfume.

Why perfume? Because people stank back in the first century. Hygiene was not an easy thing to practice and so once people took off their clothes and were in very close proximity the “smells” would have been overwhelming. So prostitutes carried perfume in a vial around their neck to create a more bearable workplace.

The point is, everyone would have immediately known who and what she was. But she’s oblivious to what everyone else thinks about her... she is focused on one person. This man named Jesus Who lives His life as though there’s a sign around His neck that says, “Everybody’s Welcome.” It sounds too good to be true, but if it is true... what then?!?!? Can I afford to not find out? Can I afford to let Him get away if it’s true?

I imagine the only One she saw that day, the only One that she really worried about being rejected by was Jesus. She already knew what everybody else’s reaction to her would be. But people were saying this Jesus was different. If that’s true then maybe it will be worth risking everything to see Him.

And risk she did. When she poured her perfume out on Jesus’ feet she was laying everything before Him. She was pouring out her profession. Because if she didn’t have perfume, then she wasn’t going to find many “Joseph’s” to take back to her place of business (Joseph was the most common name for a Jewish man in the first century... sort of like “John” is or at least was the most common name for an American male which is why they called a prostitute’s customer a “John”... so do you see what I did there? In Israel a customer might have been called a “Joseph”. Alright... maybe that’s lame but I was amused ;o)

When she poured her perfume out on Jesus' feet she was giving Him her all. She was making Him the center of her life. And Jesus' response?

Then Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven." The men at the table said among themselves, "Who is this man, that he goes around forgiving sins?" And Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Luke 7:48-50 (NLT)

Can you imagine what that must have felt like? All her life she had been told she was unacceptable. Now Jesus tells her she's forgiven. She's been made acceptable. Why? Because she came to Him. She is justified by Him... not by anything she could have ever done on her own.

But that's hard for us, isn't it? We like to do things for ourselves. Small children have two very annoying tendencies, don't they? They either want you to do everything for them (carry me!!!!) or they want for you to stop and wait for an hour while they try to handle their business their own way. And if you try and help what do they say? "I can do it myself!"

So little changes as we age. We want to be able to justify ourselves. In fact, we love it when that happens. But that's not what's going on with this lady. She's totally unacceptable. The only thing that justifies her is, Jesus. Most of Jesus' parables revolve around this simple and yet completely mystifying concept. Nobody can justify themselves... but everybody can be justified by trusting Jesus. Just like that thief on the cross who at the last possible minute asked Jesus to "remember him." Just like Jesus told the religious expert with His story about a "Good Samaritan". Just like this lady here.

She was a prostitute. Everybody knew she was a prostitute. And everybody assumed that she was one of God's least favorite people on the face of the earth. Everyone thought they knew how God felt about her... including the prostitute herself. If you are told anything often enough for a long enough time you'll believe anything.

But Jesus had a soft spot in His heart for prostitutes. Why? Well, for one thing most women who were prostitutes didn't grow up dreaming of joining the worlds oldest profession. Most women were forced into that life through circumstances beyond their own control. And when they became desperate enough they sold the one thing that they had to sell.

And it broke God's heart. It was never supposed to be that way.

Another reason Jesus had a soft spot in His heart for prostitutes is found in the opening pages of the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (His family tree).

I always thought genealogies were boring.

Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Tamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram;

Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzz. Huh? What? Oh, sorry... I fell asleep. At least that's how I used to look at the genealogies of Jesus. But then I noticed in Matthew's genealogy there are four women mentioned (that was unheard of... nobody cared about the women in the ancient world... who cares what women were in the family tree... all that mattered were the men). For some reason God wanted to make sure we knew of at least four women in Jesus ancestry. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth & Bathsheba.

Now all four of those women have something in common. They all had questionable sexual exploits that they were involved in. Tamar tricked her father-in-law into sleeping with her by pretending to be a prostitute and got pregnant that way (her husband/husbands had all died before giving her a son and... well, go read the story... it's incredibly sad and messed up), Bathsheba was the woman King David committed adultery with and then tried to cover it up by arranging to have her husband killed, Ruth's story is a little tamer but still, there's some interesting stuff about her "uncovering" her future husband's "feet" before they even really started dating (go ahead... google what "uncovering the feet" was a euphemism for in ancient Hebrew), and Rahab was the former prostitute who married an Israelite after the battle of Jericho.

Salmon was the father of Boaz (whose mother was Rahab). Matthew 1:5 (NLT)

All of them in Jesus' family tree. All of them ancestors of Jesus. All of them singled out in the Bible to make sure we remembered they were there in that incredibly dysfunctional family tree.

Why? Well, I'm guessing God wanted to make absolutely sure that we knew that there is nobody that is too far gone for Jesus to save them. And that Jesus story was a story about the power of God to pick up the broken pieces of our lives and turn them into something brand new, something beautiful, something whole. He's the master at that as it turns out.

And He would take this broken woman's life and turn it into something beautiful. He forgave her sins. He's still doing that today. He'll do it right now if you ask Him to. Nobody is too far gone for Jesus to save them, not even you.

Thursday Reflection: Another important lesson in the parable of the two deadbeats is that we are truly all in the same boat. When we as humans look at people we often make snap judgments based on their appearance or what we may already know about them as to where they rate on the acceptable scale. Everybody's rating system is different but we all have one. For some people a pastor may be at the highest levels of acceptability and for some that same pastor may be in the basement.

But for Jesus... we are all of us on equal footing (well... basically we're all on equal footing). Did you notice in this story that as Jesus tells His story about the two deadbeats to Simon the Pharisee that each deadbeat owes a different amount?

A man loaned money to two people-500 pieces of silver to one and 50 pieces to the other. But neither of them could repay him. Luke 7:41-42 (NLT)

One owes 50 and one owes 500. To us it seems like one deadbeat is a bigger deadbeat than the other deadbeat. But the point that Jesus is making is found in the very last line of that scripture:

But neither one could repay him.

In the first century if you couldn't repay a loan then you were a deadbeat and you were sent to prison. Neither one of these people could repay their debt so for all intents and purposes they were on equal footing, even though one did owe 10 times as much money. The amount of debt really doesn't matter if you can't pay.

When people looked at Simon and then looked at the prostitute they thought they knew who was acceptable and who was unacceptable before God. But they were wrong. As it turns out, both were unacceptable without Jesus' help so they were both on equal footing.

It's like the story of a man who had been a deacon in his local church who died at a ripe old age of 85 and found himself in a line waiting to see St. Peter. He was standing right behind a woman who had obviously had a rough life and it was pretty obvious to him that she wasn't good "church goin' folk". There were signs everywhere that instructed the people in line to be prepared to tell St. Peter why they deserved to be granted access into Heaven (1,000,000 points were needed to get in). The deacon started trying to arrange his thoughts and list his accomplishments even as he wondered what the young lady in front of him would have to show for her life.

When it was her turn, the deacon watched as the girl who had been right in front of him walked up to St. Peter and started crying before she even reached him. She fell down in a heap and sobbed something and Peter picked her up, gave her a big hug and ushered her past the Pearly Gates and into the presence of God.

When the deacon finally stood before Peter here's how the interaction went:

Deacon- I was a Sunday school teacher for 60 years.

Peter- Awesome! That's worth 5 points.

Deacon- 5 points!?!? And I have to get to one million?

Peter- That's right.

Deacon- I was a deacon at my church for 40 years...

Peter- Another 5 points... you're at 10 points now.

Deacon- I served at the local soup kitchen once a week for the last 20 years.

Peter- Another 5 points... you're at 15 now!

Deacon- Well Lord Jesus help me! I don't know how I'm ever going to get to one million...

Peter- Wait... what did you just say?

Deacon- I don't know how I'm ever going to get to one million?

Peter- No... before that.

Deacon- Ummmm... Lord Jesus help me?

Peter- That was it... ding ding ding... that one's worth one million points all by itself. Come right on in deacon...

The way I see it is, nothing justifies us before God except Jesus. Some of us have mighty impressive resumes when we compare them to other people's resumes but the problem is, we aren't compared to other humans. The standard we are measured against is God's standard. And compared to that standard... none of us measures up. Only Jesus has ever lived a life that measures up to that standard. He lived the life I should have lived and died the death I should have died so that I could share in the reward that is rightfully His alone. That's the gospel. That's why Paul says this:

*We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins.
And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done.
Romans 3:22 (NLT)*

There are a lot of confusing scriptures in the Bible that we have a tough time trying to figure out what they mean. Romans 3:22 is not one of them. This is as simple as it gets. No matter who we are or what we've done we are all saved the same way. By trusting Jesus.

In the story that Jesus tells Simon the key is that the two deadbeats have one thing in common... their deadbeatedness (I know... probably not a word but I like it). Sure, one owed more but neither one could pay so really, they were on equal footing before God.

So are you. So am I. None of us can pay what we owe. We are all deadbeats before God. Lucky for us Jesus loves the deadbeats... all the deadbeats of the world (did you grow up in Sunday school singing Jesus Loves The Little Children? If not that reference made no sense to you... sorry).

Hi, I'm Ed, and I'm a deadbeat.

Friday Reflection: DISCLAIMER- Danger! Very Long Reflection For Today... Sorry

Ok... so this is the practical devotional for the week. At least it's the practical one for me... maybe it will be for you too. This is where this story gets really personal for me. For me, this is the most important question you or I will ever answer and it all goes back to something Jesus says to Simon the Pharisee right after He read Simon's mind. Remember... Simon watched as the prostitute cried and massaged perfume into Jesus' feet and was thinking to himself that if Jesus was really a prophet then He would know who was touching Him and wouldn't be letting her touch Him... not even his feet.

But Jesus' mad spiritual skills don't just inform Him of who/what the woman touching Him was but also what was on Simon's heart. As soon as Simon thought those thoughts Jesus says this:

Then Jesus answered his thoughts. "Simon," he said to the Pharisee, "I have something to say to you." Luke 7:39-40 (NLT)

Whoa! I wonder what Simon is thinking at this point? Did I say that out loud? Did He just read it on my face? What's going on??? One thing I've learned as I've studied the story of Jesus' life is that any time He says, "I have something to tell you," He's getting ready to drop a bomb. Not because He's mean or vindictive (unlike us...), but because He's trying to wake us up. To get us to become all that He created us to become. It's like Max Lucado's tagline from his book, Just Like Jesus:

God loves you just the way you are... He just loves you too much to let you stay that way. He wants you to become just like Jesus.

And that's always Jesus' motivation whenever He's dealing with whomever He's dealing with. Turns out Jesus will talk to you if you're willing to listen. Turns out He's always trying to talk to you... the only real question is, will you listen? Will I listen? This is how it has looked in my life:

When I was 20 years old I found myself in a place where I had spent the last 3 1/2 years throwing my life away. Living a completely self-centered life in fog of drug and alcohol induced haziness. I had come to the place where I knew what I was doing was killing me and I

wanted out. I just couldn't figure out how to change. I tried multiple times and nothing worked. In the end the very thing that represented freedom to me (drugs, alcohol and living however I felt like living doing whatever I felt like doing) enslaved me. I was a slave.

One night I was driving home and it was FOGGY. Sometimes in Southern California we get such thick fog that it's very dangerous to drive. You can't see very far and so if a car is stopped you just crash right into the back of it without even knowing it was there until it's too late. It was eerie. I felt something strange that night. Like I wasn't alone. I wasn't sure if God even existed at that point in my life but felt like maybe there was somebody trying to talk to me. I had grown up in church but never really took it very seriously but right about then I was intrigued. I started talking to God (it was one of those, "if You're really there then let's talk..." sort of conversations).

Why would He want my life? What could He do with a life like mine that had been so thoroughly messed up? Looking back it's as though Jesus tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Ed, I have something to tell you..." "What is it, Lord?" I asked. And Jesus said to me very clearly, "Your sins are forgiven. And I can salvage your life if you let Me."

Looking back it totally reminds me of the woman from our story (the prostitute, remember?). She was obviously messed up but Jesus redeemed her. And if you remember she responded by opening up the bottle of perfume she kept around her neck and pouring it on the feet of Jesus. She gave him her all. Her profession. She could no longer sell her body if she didn't have the perfume to use while she worked (so to speak).

I didn't really know what I was doing or getting into but in a nutshell what I did that night was take the figurative flask I had around my neck (we all have one that contains whatever is most important to us) and poured out the drug/alcohol/self-centered life at His feet. I had to give it all to Him or I sensed none of this would work. And now I know that when I did that Jesus said, "son... your sins are forgiven."

And so I dedicated my life to learning all about what it is that saves a person. I started reading the Bible (I do not recommend starting your study of God with the Old Testament... I was thoroughly confused). I didn't get it so I started looking into what my church taught. We were a strange group. We had issues with EVERYBODY. Every other church was doing it wrong and therefore were going to Hell. We disagreed with other churches on baptism, how a worship service was supposed to be conducted... even what a church should be named. All of those issues were serious enough (in our eyes) to send a person (or an entire denomination) to Hell just because they disagreed with our interpretation of baptism, worship services or what to name a church.

Basically we took an issue like baptism (that just about every church on the face of the planet does) and then said, "if you don't agree with our interpretation of how to do it, what it means and what a person should be thinking when he/she gets baptized then you're wrong and we condemn you (and by extension we let them know that God also condemns them just to make sure we covered all our bases). It sounds silly but it's a very serious game to God and it turns out He really doesn't like that.

I had debates with people in person and even wrote letters to seminary professors across the country (this was WAY before email or I would have been all over the religious message

boards condemning people left and right) telling them how wrong they were and that they were going to Hell. I know what you're thinking... that doesn't sound like you, Ed. Well, not anymore, because of something that happened one day.

I was at a church on a Sunday night and the preacher was talking about the Pharisees and how they accused Jesus of breaking the Law of the Sabbath. I always thought Jesus did break the law but that was ok because... well because He was the Law. Turns out that's not what was happening. Jesus wasn't breaking the Law, this preacher pointed out to me that night, He was breaking their interpretations of the Law.

They would take something like the fourth commandment to honor the Sabbath, to rest on the Sabbath, to not work on the Sabbath, and they would then determine for themselves what constitutes work and what constitutes rest. Then if you did something that they considered to be work... well then you had broken the Law in their minds.

But not in Jesus' mind as it turns out. This is what Jesus said to them:

Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.' For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition." Mark 7:6-8 (NLT)

The preacher (who was from the tradition I was a part of... he agreed with all the things I agreed with) said, "Jesus wasn't breaking God's law... He was breaking their silly traditions and what Jesus is saying here is, 'I won't be bound by your silly traditions!'"

And at that moment I felt Jesus tap me on the shoulder and say, "Ed... I have something to tell you. You've become a Pharisee."

I. Was. Stunned.

I had learned to really dislike the Pharisees. They were about the only people on the face of the planet Jesus had problems with. They just didn't see their own hypocrisy. And neither had I. So I took the little figurative flask that hung around my neck that I had filled with superiority and the absolute need to be right and to be able to accurately interpret the Bible and I poured it out at Jesus' feet. I had to start all over again.

So I dropped all my ideas about what saves a person that I had received from my church and decided to read the gospels and see what Jesus said about salvation. And I was amazed. It was Him. Nothing but Him. Not my ability to do the right things. Not my ability to accurately interpret the scriptures. Just Jesus.

A story Jesus told once about a Tax Collector (one of the worst sinners a Jewish person in the first century could imagine) and a Pharisee who went into the Temple to pray. In our society a Pharisee is seen as the bad guy but not in Jesus' day. The ordinary people thought the Pharisees were God's favorites and they believed everything the Pharisees said. Jesus says the Pharisee stands off by himself and basically prays, "Lord, I thank You that I am on of the good guys and not like that Tax Collector over there." Meanwhile, Jesus says, the Tax Collector stands off by himself and beats his chest and won't even look towards Heaven but simply says, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Then Jesus drops the bomb:

I tell you, when this man went home, he was right with God, but the Pharisee was not. All who make themselves great will be made humble, but all who make themselves humble will be made great." Luke 18:14 (NLT)

I was so glad I was no longer a Pharisee. I'll never forget when I went to a conference once and one of my favorite pastors told this story. I was looking forward to when he congratulated all of us on not being Pharisees but being good, Grace centered pastors now. Instead he said this:

"In an ironic twist of theology so many of us who have left legalism and become more Grace centered people now look at this story and say, 'Lord, I'm so thankful that I'm not like that Pharisee who's over there saying that he's so thankful he's not like that Tax Collector.'"

And at that moment I felt God tap me on the shoulder and say, "Ed, I have something to say to you." And I said, "I don't think You need to say it, Lord... I've become an oblivious, reverse Pharisee who only is judgmental towards other Pharisees?"

And God said, "bingo!"

Are you kidding me? Can I not catch a break? Can I not win, even once? That was what ran through my mind. And then I realized... it's not about winning. At least it's not supposed to be. The only thing Jesus wants to win is the heart of every Tax Collector/Prostitute (literally and figuratively speaking), every Pharisee and ever Oblivious-Reverse Pharisee.

I had to rethink everything. Or maybe more accurately I had to shine this new light on everything I thought. Now I hold on very loosely to what I think I believe. In fact, the longer I do this the less sure I become about everything except Jesus Himself. He is the One constant through all of this for me. Whether I was more like the Tax Collector/Prostitute when I was 20 years old or more like the Pharisee when I was 25 or more like the Oblivious Reverse Pharisee when I was 35... Jesus has been there for me through all of it.

He never gave up on me. He always waited til I was at a place where I could hear Him and then He'd tap me on the shoulder and say, "Ed, I have something to tell you."

How about you? How well do you listen to Jesus when He speaks to you? The more you listen and then then react to Him the clearer you will hear His voice and the more beautiful your life will become.

The Apostle Paul puts it like this in Romans 12:

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. Romans 12:2 (MES)

To me this is what listening for Jesus' voice is all about. And the more I do it the better things go for me. Now I hear Him just about everyday giving me small course corrections. Really, it's mainly about self awareness. I'll see someone do something and get all Judgy McJudgerson on them (internally speaking ;o) and I'll hear Jesus say, "Ed, I have something to tell you."

And immediately I realize... I do exactly the same thing... when someone else does it it's intentional and rude but when I do it... well it's complicated. There are reasons when I do it...

Listening to Jesus is paramount if I want the life I was designed to live. And os now, I'll stand by His way of doing life... Everybody's Welcome. Those whose lives are very obviously messed up who are more like the prostitute. Those who think they have it all together and are in that surreal place of judging those who they used to be like... and even those who are like what I struggle every day not to be... someone who says, isn't God so lucky that we're not like those pharisaic cretins who just don't get it and aren't as enlightened and fantasmagorical as we are?

Because I know how easy it is to end up in all three of those places. And the only thing that makes it at all possible for me to be like Jesus is a willingness to listen when He says, "Ed, I have something to tell you," and then quickly respond to His voice.

So how about you? Are you willing to listen? Because I'm pretty sure that God's got something to say to all of us in this room tonight. I have a feeling He's tapping you on the shoulder as we speak saying, I have something to tell you. Will you listen?