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People find it challenging to hold together Christianity's central commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves and a commitment to truth.

To escape the perceived tension, they default to "being nice," which has nothing to do with the gospel.

Jesus was never nice.

He was honest.

He put God and humans before all things, and when he was talking with hypocrites who do not, he was sure to let them know.

Often.

I hope today's reading will shed some light on how love and truth coexist.

After the Pharisees and scribes publicly accuse the disciples of committing the sin of eating with unwashed hands (they sound like a group of moms leading a field trip), Jesus instructs the crowd around him that it is not what goes into the mouth, but what comes out that defiles a person.

This truth offends the Pharisees, whose spirituality is based on being superior to others rather than on compassion.

The disciples' act calls into question the significance of the complex system of observances that the Pharisees use to distinguish themselves from others.

It challenges the Pharisees' values, the concepts that they cherish more dearly than they cherish people, and that is what makes them hypocrites, or in Bonhoeffer's terminology from last week, stupid.

For the Pharisees, in other words, the rules are more important than the people standing in front of them, a condition that describes many, perhaps most people today.

It may not be rules, but we are all armed with shibboleths to separate each other into groups, good and bad.

“Are you one of us or one of them?”

In doing so, we miss out on the beauty of people.

Our first question should be, “What do you value most?”

Of course, when we encounter people determined to divide the world into us and them, there is nothing we can do for them.

We move on.

When encountering hypocrites, Jesus is undaunted, fearless of being looked down upon by people who clearly do not care about him as much as they care about power or reputation or wealth or something else.

This gives him *freedom*, the freedom to be as God created him.

He calmly explains to the Pharisees that every plant that his heavenly father has not planted will be uprooted.

In other words, those not rooted in the gospel will eventually face the consequences, in this life or the next, when they will see themselves for who they are, will see clearly the games they have played in order to imagine themselves God's favorites.

The Pharisees see everyone in terms of obedience or disobedience to the law.

Nothing else makes it through.

They are busy positioning themselves in relation to what they find most important and miss out on the richness of others.

Jesus has no system that he must defend and therefore is free to see others as they are, to love them as they are.

This is the nature of Christian freedom.

We have nothing to defend; God can take care of godself.

Jesus calmly describes the Pharisees as the blind leading the blind, all of whom will fall into a pit.

Their eyes are on things of their own creation, not on God.

Jesus expects nothing from such people and encourages his disciples simply to "let them alone."

They have applied their own shackles, in other words, and are beyond our help.

If we do not recognize clearly those who value something more than people and God, we, too, will end up in the pit with them, equally assured of our own righteousness.

In order to lay it out plainly for Peter, who still does not understand, Jesus even becomes a bit graphic.

“Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?”

We, too, must recognize those who have chosen not to adopt the way of love and truth and leave them alone.

Instead, we are to go out and seek those who have faith and invite *them* in.

When Jesus meets a Canaanite woman, he puts this into practice.

At first, because she is foreign, he incorrectly assumes she has no faith (and even calls her a dog).

He thinks she just wants something for nothing.

People have come to me and told me that I *had* to help them because I was a Christian, or have said the I *had* to forgive them because I was clergy.

They wanted something for nothing.

They wanted to feel good, to have their way, without having done anything that deserves feeling good.

I was recently watching a Netflix series.

When an abusive ex, Ben, approaches the protagonist, Charlie, and says that he is leaving the area and wants to apologize for how he has treated Charlie, Charlie explains how worthless the abuse made him feel and ends by saying that Ben does not get to come back and apologize just so that he can feel good about himself.

Before he walks away, Charlie adds that he hopes that Ben will sincerely change at some point.

I wondered how Christians would hear this.

I mean, we are supposed to forgive seventy times seven times, right?

But the abuser wanted something for nothing.

He persisted in his evil behavior until right before leaving, and then wanted to walk away feeling fine.

In reality, the evil we do continues to cause us dis-ease until we change.

We cannot undo that for them, but Ben does not realize this.

He is looking for an easy way out.

He does what he thinks will feel good in the moment—abuse one day, apologizing the next.

This cycle of abuse and apology is a common practice for those who want to feel good without doing anything worthy of feeling good.

It will not surprise you that I was a nerd in high school, a well-dressed nerd, but still a nerd.

There was a group of guys who regularly bullied me.

That is, they wanted to make themselves feel superior without actually doing something that justified feeling good about themselves.

On the *last* day of school, one of them who had very publicly bullied me very privately said that he wanted to apologize.

I was a teenager at the time, of course, but something inside me told me that this was not repentance.

He had got all he could out of the public bullying and, now that school was over, wanted to spend the rest of his life feeling good about himself.

At no point did he care about how I felt, but only about how he felt.

This is cheap grace.

Like the Pharisees, something was more important to him than the person standing in front of him.

I just said “OK,” by which I meant “I have heard you,” and walked away.

I hope that, by now, he truly has repented, has become a new person.

That is the only thing that will relieve *his* conscience.

Forgiveness does not mean excusing.

It just means letting go of something.

I have let go, but I still see him for the coward that he was.

Jesus thinks the Canaanite woman wants something for nothing, but when she persists and reveals herself to be a woman of faith, a woman who trusts God, he realizes that he was wrong and changes his approach.

Jesus is not rigid like the Pharisees, but free to see, to adapt.

When he discovers her actual trust in God, he honors it and, in doing so, shows us how to act, how to change our approach when we realize that we are mistaken.

Interestingly, Jesus does not bother to apologize, but moves straight to changing his behavior.

There are other times when, from the start, Jesus was right.

When he is sent to Herod, who wants him to perform a trick for him, Jesus refuses.

When he stands before Pilate, a man consumed by reputation and power, he says very little to him.

Basically, Jesus knows that all words would be wasted and does not lose his dignity by pretending otherwise.

We are to be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves.

Recognizing what someone values most is essential to the gospel.

Those who value anything above people are dangerous, and we are to leave them alone.

Those who are open to the gospel, to valuing God and humans first, we eagerly invite in.

People confuse recognizing a person's true nature with judgment, but judgment is feeling superior to others, thinking we are God's favorites.

We simply are recognizing whether others are grounded in God or not, and adapt our behavior accordingly.

There is a beautiful person inside everyone, but fear prevents many from getting out.

If they prefer power or money or position, we must leave them to dig their own graves in order to avoid their pulling us in with them.

If they are open to learning what it means to put God and people first, on the other hand, then we have a duty to reach out to them.

I hope this makes clearer how love and truth not only coexist, but are part of a single package.