

“Balancing Honesty and Compassion”

May 15, 2016

Mark 14:26-31

SCRIPTURE INTRO: I’m preaching a sermon series based on a book by Paul Miller called *Love Walked Among Us*. The subtitle is *Learning to Love Like Jesus*.

What Paul Miller does, and what we’re doing, is look at a bunch of stories in the Gospels where Jesus interacts with people, and look for patterns that emerge that give us insight into how Jesus loved people.

One thing this study has forced us to do is pay attention to details in these stories that we would normally overlook or just skim over as set-up for a big miracle or something like that.

But it’s often in those little details that we see how Jesus loved people.

That’s certainly the case with this story, where even the subtle things Jesus did can teach us a lot.

INTRO: Two quick stories.

One of my daughters had a roommate with really bad hygiene. She stunk. She didn't bathe enough.

When she did, she didn't know how, barely used soap. She struggled socially and that was part of the problem.

This daughter of mine was complaining about her roommate's odor and I suggested she tell her.

Gently, of course, but address it and encourage her to bathe daily.

But my daughter shook her head and said: No, I couldn't do that.

It would be embarrassing. It would hurt her feelings.

I asked if she would want her roommates to tell her the same thing if she was the stinky one, and she said of course she would.

She knew it was the kind thing to do, but she said she wasn't going to do it.

She was just going to tough it out and not room with the girl ever again.

That's the first story.

The second is about another college girl in a similar situation—my mother.

She worked in the library with a male college student who had bad body odor. Finally, my mother and the other co-eds who worked in the library had had it.

So one night they got a bunch of old magazines and they cut out every soap, shampoo, and deodorant ad they could find—several dozen.

And they went over to the library and placed them all strategically

in a big stack of filing that this college boy was going to work on the next day, along with some pointed notes that said things like—

Take a hint, you stink. BO is bad.

I asked her why she didn't just tell him and she said it was because he was so weird.

When we try to be honest with someone about a serious or sensitive matter, it often brings out all sorts of wrong tendencies we have.

Like being mean, or sarcastic, or accusing, judgmental, and self-righteous, or being wishy-washy, or fearful, or cynical.

I think we all know that if we really love someone,

love sometimes requires that we speak honestly to that person about serious and sensitive matters.

But, loving honesty is very, very hard.

We tend to go off the rails one way or the other—

either we don't say what we ought to say out of fear, mostly,

or we deliver the message wrapped in one of these other negative tendencies.

Our focus so far has been on Jesus' compassion.

We've seen how he looked at people, really saw them, saw their pain and need, or saw their gratitude and happiness.

We've seen how his compassion is contrasted in story after story with the ways his critics, and even his own disciples, viewed people and treated them.

We've seen how their judging, legalism, and self-righteousness blocked compassion as Jesus himself moved toward those same people in love.

But there is another theme in many of those stories that we've touched on but not looked at closely and that's Jesus' honesty.

We've seen it already—His honest words to Simon the Pharisee and to Martha, are two good examples, but this is such an important aspect of his love that we need to spend some time on it.

I think we would all admit this is very hard.

Loving compassion is hard.

It's hard to really see people in their need and move toward them in helpful way.

But maybe loving honesty is harder.

Because there are so many landmines we tend to trip on as we try to do it.

So let's look at this story in Mark and this subject of balancing honesty and compassion under three points.

They're a little long, but I'll mention them now and then repeat them later.

The traits of loving honesty are:

1. It doesn't try to win
2. It is kind when rejected
3. It is content to wait

MP#1 Loving honesty doesn't try to win

This is one of the famous scenes of Christ's passion.

It was the night he was betrayed. Their Passover meal in Upper Room over. They went out together to the Mt. of Olives.

Jesus knew what was about to happen because it had been prophesied. 500 years before Christ, Zechariah said:

I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.

So he tells them—You're all going to fall away. All going to desert me.

But Jesus says: I'm going to rise and want you to meet me in Galilee.

Peter immediately contradicted Jesus and defended himself.

Even if everyone falls away, I never will.

Peter was so self confident

that he automatically rejected Jesus' honest warning as totally off base.

He was confident he would make the right decisions and do right thing.

Confident in his will power. And he was proud.

He basically said: These other guys might desert you, I won't.

I know myself. I know I'm a good person.

So Jesus tries again: I tell you the truth. Today, yes, tonight—

before the rooster crows twice, you yourself will disown me three times.

At this point Peter doesn't say: Lord, I'm obviously blind to some glaring flaws in my character, please explain why you're telling me this and help me understand and see myself as you do.

Instead Peter insisted emphatically,

Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.

A little Greek grammar lesson. Adverb emphatically, again and again.

Verb tense imperfect, which implies continuous action.

Which means, Peter didn't let it go. He just kept saying it over and over.

I can't believe you would say that about me, Lord. I would never desert you.

I've been with you all these years. I can't believe you would say that.

How can you have such a low view of me? On and on he went.

What did Jesus do? He didn't respond again.

He responded once to Peter's initial rejection of his warning.

And then when Peter pushed back hard, Jesus dropped it. Jesus didn't try to win.

Who had the last word in this argument? Peter did.

Let me ask some questions:

In these kinds of situations, why do we often feel compelled to keep going when the other person doesn't want to listen to us?
Why do we feel an almost overwhelming need to respond to everything the person says that is incorrect?

We want to be heard.

We want the other person to at least concede we are right, even if don't change. Maybe we've put it off and put it off and once we finally broach the subject the dam breaks and we're on a roll and now's the time to get it all on table. (Of course, this is usually when we end up saying things we regret.)

We think it's up to us to change the other person.
If we don't say it, who will?

Why didn't Jesus keep going?

He could have devastated Peter's counter argument.
He could have brought up things about Peter's character and behavior that would have stunned that proud, mouthy man into humiliating silence.
So why didn't Jesus just come right back with some brutal honesty?
Why did he instead drop it and not try to win?

I think on a purely human level, he knew it was counterproductive.

To say more would just lead to quarreling.
But on a deeper level, Jesus was content to let his Father control events.
Because he trusted his Father's sovereign control,
he could be quiet and let Peter have last word.
If God is in control, then we don't have to be in control.

This gives us some crucial insights about loving honest.

Honesty is not an opportunity for us to get things off our chests.

Honesty is for other people, to help them.

God wants you to be his messenger, not his district attorney.

Deliver the message. Clarify if needed.

But if your honest, loving warning or concern or counsel is met with resistance, if arguments are raised against it, if it is shot down and dismissed, don't be drawn into the trap of thinking you have to have the last word.

Jesus didn't. So you don't.

Trust your heavenly Father.

MP#2 Loving honesty is kind when rejected

In Paul Miller's book he describes a brief interaction between a married couple.

He was privy to it because the husband was a friend of Paul's. This man had come home from work one day and told his wife that something incredible had happened, a conflict in his office that had been simmering for three years had been resolved in a really great way with everybody coming to a meeting of the minds. He was really excited about it and wanted to share. His wife just sort of shrugged her shoulders, blew him off. She said, Whatever. I don't even remember that situation. She communicated a total lack of interest.

A few minutes later she asked him to look at some furniture she was thinking about having re-upholstered and he said: Sure, I'd love to. And he spent some time talking about to her about it.

She had been dismissive of something that interested him.

But he didn't retaliate by saying to himself:

If she's not interested in my world, then I'm not going to be interested in hers. Paul Miller said he asked his friend why he responded the way he did, why he didn't give her a taste of her own medicine. And he mentioned some tough things his wife was dealing with.

That interaction between husband and wife is illustrative of this next point. Even if you don't insist on winning or having the last word, it's easy to fall into another trap.

That's to distance yourself when the person rejects your honest words, especially if the person does it bluntly or in a dismissive, flippant or angry way. If you're going to treat me that way when I have tried to help you, then I'm going to pull back from you. You probably wouldn't say it, but in subtle or not-so-subtle ways you communicate your disapproval to the person.

What is so remarkable about the Lord is that right after Peter rejected his loving, honest warning—emphatically, vociferously—Jesus didn't respond by radiating disapproval, however subtly.

In fact, just the opposite. He was as warm and friendly and kind to Peter as ever. We ended our reading in verse 31 where Peter refuses to listen to Jesus' and insists on getting the last word.

Listen to the next two verses.

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.

He still treated Peter as one of his inner circle.

This is one of those subtle but remarkable things about Jesus' love we miss. It would have been easy for Jesus to say: John and James, come with me. And to leave Peter out. It would have communicated his disapproval.

Often when we do this, it's for an honest reason.

We think that if our demeanor and stance toward this person doesn't change, if we're as kind and warm and friendly as ever, then this person might get the impression he has won, or she might think I agree with her.

If I don't keep waving the flag then they will think the issue is dead.

But if they sense my disapproval, then they will know that even though I've let them have the last word, this is not settled and has to be dealt with.

So it really gets back to the earlier point.

Are we willing to trust that God is in control?

There's a positive note here.

When you do this, it communicates to the other person that you aren't trying to win or prove your point. It shows that you're for them. And if the Lord moves, your relationship will be strong and sweet and you'll be there for them.

Now, this out calls for wisdom.

I can imagine situations where if someone rejects your honest words, you might have to distance yourself in one way or another.

Someone once told me about an honest conversation she had with someone about behavior in this friend's home. When her friend rejected it, this mother felt like she couldn't let her kids continue to play over there.

That didn't sit well at all.

But she didn't do it to get revenge, she has some true motherly concerns that she had tried to address and work out in the first place so her kids could keep going. You understand what I'm saying.

We're not looking for rigid rules to follow here, but ways of honest love, guided by wisdom and the Holy Spirit.

MP#3 Loving honesty is content to wait

What happened that night after Jesus gave them this warning?

Exactly what he warned them would happen.

When the soldiers came and when Jesus was arrested and when they realized

the gravity of the situation, the full weight of the Jewish and Roman legal system—all their loyal bragging evaporated.

And the most shameful fall was Peter's.

You know the story. It's just a few verses after this, 66-72. Let's read it.

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

Jesus warned the disciples because he wanted them to see that their pride and confidence was in themselves, not in God.

Or at least not in God as much as it should have been.

And he knew that if they were unprepared, not only would they fall away, but that the shame of it would be potentially debilitating.

People sometimes fall to pieces when exposure forces them to acknowledge they aren't the person they think they are, or the image they have projected. Judas killed himself.

So Jesus wanted to deal with this gently rather than have it all exposed through a terribly disruptive crisis and exposure.

Peter chose to ignore Jesus' honest words, so it was exposed through a crisis.

The very behaviors and attitudes that Peter flaunted and refused to see as a problem were his downfall.

He was concerned about looking good in front of the disciples.

Even if they all fall away, I never will—he said.

But here he is concerned about looking like a follower of Jesus in front of some servants.

Peter was a talker. He talked to much.

And he thought if he said it enough, and loudly enough, then it was true.

He kept on insisting repeatedly that he would not fall away from Jesus.

But here his proclivity to talk to much got him in trouble as he insisted not once, not twice, but three times with cursing and swearing that he didn't know Jesus. And when the rooster crowed, it hit him like a ton of bricks.

Now you see why Jesus was content not to have the last word.
Because he knew his Father in heaven
would reveal what needed to be revealed at the proper time.

Jesus once said:

There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed,
or hidden that will not be made known. (Luke 12:2)

It happened pretty quickly in this situation, but it usually takes longer.

Sometimes it takes years.

Sometimes it won't happen until the day judgment—but it will happen.

You might be there to see it and be a part of helping the person deal with
it on the other side—or maybe not. Sometimes you are just a messenger.

Maybe all is revealed and the person digs in his heels and goes from bad to worse—
like Judas.

Or maybe the Lord uses it to get their attention.

You never know. The working of God's providence is mysterious.

But loving honesty is content to wait—because God is in control.

And that means we don't have to have the last word.

And we don't have to communicate disapproval if they ignore us.

We can mention it once, wave the flag, and then move on in a friendly, kind way.

Trusting, of course, that they Lord will use the gift of honesty you gave this person
and use it in his time when all is revealed.

Do you see a theme in all this?

At every step, loving honesty—not wishy-washy honesty, not mean honesty—

but loving honesty requires trust in the sovereign control of our Father in heaven.

We aren't very good at that. Not at all.

But in the days of his life on earth, the Lord Jesus was.

He is our example and more than our example, as you trust him,

he enables you to love as he loved.