

# MIXED MESSAGES

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March 24, 2019

Lent 3

[Isaiah 55:1-9](#)

[Luke 13:1-9](#)

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(prayer)

I read an [article](#) on Friday where an American Congressman compared the current flood victims in the US midwest with those in New Orleans who dealt with Hurricane Katrina in 2005. He praised the people of Iowa and lambasted the people of Louisiana, claiming the latter were expecting too much help in the (literal) wake of their disaster.

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There is so much *wrong* with this attitude.

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First of all, the 2019 spring flooding (making its way down the rivers of the US midwest) pales in comparison to 2005's **category five** hurricane whose devastation was compounded by inadequate dikes and levees. Case in point: as of a few days ago, this year's midwest floods have killed 3 people. Over 1,500 died because of Katrina.

And... there is an obvious racist overtone to these comments. Not surprising, given that this particular politician had all of his congressional [committee assignments withdrawn](#) because of recent comments like "White nationalist, white supremacist... -- how did that language become offensive?"

Given his track record, I am not surprised that Rep. King never even mentioned the impact of Cyclone Idai, and the devastation it is still causing in eastern Africa.

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This is an extreme example of applying different attitudes to similar situations.

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"Mixed Messages" always reduce a person's credibility. Jesus famously once said: "Woe to the hypocrites!" In Matthew, chapter 23, Jesus complained that certain Scribes and Pharisees were not practicing what they were preaching. He told his followers to listen to their teaching but not to follow their example.

That's actually more respect than hypocrites usually get. If their actions don't match their words, the more natural reaction is to not listen to them at all.

As an old friend of mine once said: *Who wants to go to a hairdresser who has messy hair? - unless, of course, that is the going style.*

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I like Jesus' more temperate instruction: it invites us to look more deeply when something doesn't make sense, rather than ignore the situation completely.

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Let's be honest... the bible itself is not immune from sending mixed messages.

A very obvious example is to [compare](#) Mark 9:40 and the first half of Matthew 12:30 - both quoting Jesus.

Mark 9:40 *Whoever is not against us is for us.*

Matthew 12:30a *Whoever is not with me is against me.*

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They kind of say the same thing... but not really.

*Whoever is not against us is for us.*

*Whoever is not [for us] is against [us].*

Mark takes a passive approach to support: unless you are being active in your opposition to me, I will assume the best about you.

Matthew is not so trusting: either show me your support, or I will assume the worst about you.

So which is it?

Do we just throw up our hands and call Jesus inconsistent and ignore anything else he has to say?

Do we assume that one of the gospel writers got the quote it wrong? If so, how do we figure out who?

What do we do with this mixed message?

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When something doesn't make sense, maybe our first step is to look a little deeper.

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The Jesus-quote in Mark (*Whoever is not against us is for us*) is part of a story about where the disciples said that they saw someone (not part of their group) casting out demons in Jesus name. They *tried* to stop this wannabe healer.

I read the word "tried" to mean they were unsuccessful.

Jesus responded by telling them: *Do not stop [them]... Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.*

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Matthew's quote (*Whoever is not [for us] is against [us]*) - on the other hand - comes from a completely different story. In that one, Jesus had just healed a person whose deafness and blindness was said to have been caused by a demon - a common pharasaic view of all sorts of illnesses at the time. Some on-looking pharisees complained that *only Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, could allow someone to cast out demons like Jesus was doing; therefore...*

Jesus layed out some arguments as to why that made no sense, not the least of which was to point out that the pharisees had exorcists of their own who offer the same healing, but they don't get accused of being in league with Beelzebul.

It is in the face of this obvious opposition that Jesus is quoted as saying: *Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.*

This is less of a general statement of Jesus, and more of a specific rebuke against a specific group of opponents.

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So, after a little closer look, we can see that each quote made sense within its own context.

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In preaching circles, there is a technique called "proof texting" where one starts with a desired theme or message and then seeks out bible passages to support it. There is a real danger for proof texters to take the bible out of context in order to make the end justify the means.

So, if I wanted to make the point to not trust anyone outside of our inner circles, I might pull a single verse out of Matthew and pretend I never heard of Mark's version. And I probably wouldn't want you to hear the fuller context of the pharisee healing story because that might expose my proof-texting.

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The Christian scriptural heritage is complex enough that (with some determined proof texting) you can use the bible to support almost anything.

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The bible gives us mixed messages, especially if we only look at it a few verses at a time.

But, even longer sections can have conflicts with other sections.

Sometimes it is a function of different authors writing into completely different contexts: maybe even hundreds of years apart.

Sometimes, it is because of a theology that evolves over time.

And sometimes because a particular biblical writer has an ax to grind.

And, sometimes, we are just left scratching our heads.

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Today, the [Revised Common Lectionary](#) offered us an Old Testament reading from Isaiah and a New Testament on from Luke.

- **Isaiah:** come and enjoy without payment or price; coming to the table is enough.
- **Luke:** you'd better work hard and get results or nothing good will come to you.

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Seems like mixed messages to me.

What is it?

Are we graced regardless of our efforts?

Or do we have to earn it?

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I guess this warrants a closer look.

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The 55th chapter of Isaiah is part of the section written during the time of the babylonian exile. King Nebuchadnezzar's armies had laid seige to the lands of Judah. The Empire brought a significant portion of the population back to Babylon to live as refugees: a very effective, anti-revolution technique.

The exiles had to start from scratch: building homes, starting up farms. They had to struggle for just the basics of life.

Into that context, the prophet paints a picture of an vast display of all of the daily goods that the people could imagine. I wonder if the judeans could see (from the vantage point of their refugee camp) a babylonian marketplace off in the distance.

So close.

So promising.

But inaccessible.

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The prophet reacts to that longing to teach on the providence of God. One thing that the Babylonians couldn't take away was the judeans' faith.

Although that faith was severely tested by this experience. Over the hundreds of years since Jerusalem was built and King David had brought the nomadic worship tent there permanently, the people began to view the tabernacle (and later the stone temple) as the physical dwelling place of God. It was, literally, God's house. Now that this temple had been ransacked and laid to ruin, the people had to reach back into their theological history and consider a less constrained deity. *More on*

*that in a minute.*

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The prophet spoke of a providing God... who sets a magnificent market table. But this bounty was **not** beyond their reach. Their pockets may have been empty, but - still - the people could come and eat.

Now, Isaiah says they can buy without money, without price, but a closer look does imply a price of sorts: to enjoy the banquet, they need to “come”. The prophet makes this a bit more clear as we read on: *incline your ear; listen, so that you may live.*

The post-temple, broader vision of God allowed the people consider that they were not alone. The prophet invites the people to *seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon the LORD while he is near.* Come to God's table. The price of holy mercy and pardon is not money; it is, simply, to come.

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In Luke, Jesus' teaching seems to be that you have to earn the blessing. He starts off similar to Isaiah, calling people to *repent* - a way of saying “come to God”. But the parable he tells certainly implies that coming to God is not enough; you'd better bear fruit as well. Or does it?

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Today's Luke reading starts with an interesting debate on the nature of suffering. The implied argument is that the victims of a slaughter of worshippers must have earned that fate somehow. We aren't given any details, other than: some Roman soldiers must have killed some Galileans who had come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. We don't know what Pilate's reasoning was for ordering the crackdown, but some in the crowd around Jesus figured it must be a holy retribution for their sinfulness.

This view is a minor, but still popular, theology that bad things simply don't happen to good people. We deserve the bad things because of something we have done - even if we are unaware of what that might be.

The book of Job displays this attitude too, as that is exactly the argument made by Job's friends.

But Jesus didn't wholly subscribe to that way of thinking: *those galileans weren't any worse than anyone else from Galilee; just like all those 18 people who were killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed - they were no worse than other Jerusalemites.*

Jesus' point was their sinfulness did not cause their suffering - Pilate's actions and the structural integrity of the tower were unrelated to the state of the people's faithfulness.

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The doctrine *that bad life events are holy punishments* is the other side of the theological coin that purports that the super-righteous will know nothing but good blessings. The so-called [prosperity gospel](#) says that God will “rich”ly bless the faithful. Richly can be heard literally in many cases. The Prosperity Gospel is a staple in the faith lives of some mega-church, TV preachers as a way to justify their multi-million dollar homes, private jets and obscene salary levels.

Prosperity Theology is hard to reconcile with New Testament teachings like: *you can't serve God and money (Mt6:24); the love of money is the root of all evil (1Tim6:10); and the greatest among you will be a servant (Mt23:11).* I wonder when was the last time Joel Osteen or Kenneth Copeland preached on one of those passages.

But they might like today's parable. Prosperity gospel-ers could proof-text it like this: *I did the hard work of faith; I kept the soil loose; I spread the manure; I watered and pruned; I deserve all the fruit I*

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*can get; you want some fruit, find your own tree. This one's mine.*

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And yet... when Jesus told that parable of the unfruitful fig tree, I wonder who *he wanted* the crowd to envision as the characters in the story. We have....

- The vineyard *owner* who wants to give up on the unproductive tree.
- The *gardener* who wants the chance to really encourage fruitfulness.
- The fig *tree*. Inanimate or non-human objects can be important characters in Jesus' stories.

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Jesus' teaching stories are most often metaphor for life and faith. A good way to delve into a parable is to ask:

- Where is God in the story?
- Where am I in the story?

Are we the tree, not measuring up to our best potential? Are we the owner (ready to turn our back in search of greener pastures), or the gardener (the one who is ready to kick our effort up a notch)?

What about God?

Is God the owner who wants to give up on the tree and plant something with more promise? Is God the gardener (willing to put in every effort possible)? Is God the tree waiting to be paid attention to before releasing its fruit?

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You know, I can imagine the seed of a sermon in **each** of those possibilities.

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Interpreting our scriptures is not an exact science.

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But I'll give it a try.

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In both Isaiah and Luke today, I am hearing of the possibility of sharing in an abundance that relies on circumstances beyond our control.

And... both passages can be heard as asking us to do something, but it is not necessarily proportionate to the reward.

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Isaiah wanted the judeans to know that - in spite of the hardship of their exile - that their God was with them in Babylon as sure as God had been with them in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, for the more practical among them, the *free food* was probably more metaphor than reality. Behind the words were a proclamation that their God is still their source of strength. As food and drink feeds the body, God nourishes the soul of the people. Even without their land and power, they were still a bountiful nation. Faith, not land or temples of stone, defined their relationship with their maker. The prophet invites them to look beyond their hardship and see an ever-present God!

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A good number of the people who came to listen to Jesus understood well the ways of agriculture. So, when Jesus used metaphors of growing grain or planting trees, he was speaking their language.

The fig tree (for some reason) was not living up to its best potential. Jesus' audience probably could think of a few reasons why: the soil was bad; too much rain; too much sun; maybe the tree was too old and past its prime; or (most likely) that it was too young - a new tree needs to familiarize itself with its new home before it bears its first fruits. For its first few years, its energy has to focus on

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growing taller and taking firm root in the soil; it is quite possible that this fig tree wasn't bearing fruit yet because it wasn't ready yet... at least I imagine that Jesus audience saw that possibility.

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The vineyard owner doesn't seem to have understood this, but the gardener does. It's a fair reading of the parable to assume that the gardener (who clearly knows more about the trees than his boss) sees that this for tree is ripe for bearing fruit - it could happen next season, if it was given the chance... so the gardener begs for the fig tree's life and commits to giving it the care and nurture it will need to be fruitful. I suspect that when the gardener knows that, when he tells the owner that the tree can be down next year it is still fruitless, [that] it will be full of new figs by then.

Is Jesus as confident in our ability to bear fruit, when our time is right?

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Isaiah: coming to God as your source of strength and life is the first step of embracing one's faith.

Luke: God nurtures us to bring out our fullest potential and is confident that we will when our time in right.

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The world is full of conflicting advice for us.

It can be quite a chore to sort out what makes sense for each one of us.

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The people of New Zealand are ready for wholesale gun law reform less than a week after a mass murder.

People in a closer country get a different message - at least on a national level.

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In Alberta, we are in the midst of a provincial election. This fall, all of Canada will choose MPs.

Elections are times of trying to sort of the mix of messages and balancing personal desires with the common good.

I can't tell you how to vote. I would risk the church's charitable status. Churches can certainly be political (blame Jesus for that), we just can't be partisan.

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But, the skills you have as people of faith, in delving into the mixed messages of the bible and countless numbers of conflicting preachers, will serve you well in sorting out the mixed messages of election times.

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What is important to you?

What are your guiding principles?

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My scriptural hallmarks:

- **Micah:** fairness, kindness, humility.
- **Jesus:** love God, neighbour and self. In other words: how you treat the least among you is how you treat your God.

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One thing that I hear plan and clear in today's bible lessons: ***Faith can feed us, if we let it.***

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Let us pray:

God of the open door and welcome table, you feed the deep places in our spirit. Guide us to trust in Jesus' way. Amen.

#460VU "All Who Hunger"

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