

INTRODUCTION

Following Jesus means living out our faith in the culture where we live. So how do we meaningfully engage with people in a way that allows us to make a lasting difference? We think it's helpful to consider these questions.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

Read Luke 16:16.

"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into it."

This passage comes from Jesus's teaching as he was traveling the countryside connecting with the large groups who would gather to hear his new and compelling message. Typically, Jesus's disciples were not the only ones present during these sermons. Imagine a crowd composed of people from every corner of society—from the rich Roman elite and military leadership to the poor, outcast, and sick. They all crowded close together to hear this Rabbi from Galilee who brought good news. Also usually present, probably gathered in their own little corner, were the Jewish teachers of the law, or the Pharisees and Sadducees. Many of these men held important positions on the ruling council that dictated every part of Jewish life.

The word Pharisee actually means "to separate" or "separatist." The Pharisees believed that in order to remain faithful to God, they must separate themselves from anything unclean, unholy, or impure according to the many laws of the old covenant. This posture led to an exclusive and legalistic religious culture which didn't play well with those on the outside, including those who Jesus began eating with, healing, and teaching to. When Jesus refers to the time "until John," he's talking about a definitive shift in God's kingdom, which was inaugurated with the message of John the Baptist, who "prepared the way" for Jesus—the Messiah who brought the good news of God's kingdom.

Jesus didn't come to reinforce impossible standards or to develop a following of the religious elite. He came with the good news of salvation by grace and through faith for all who would accept it. The Pharisees made a point. Jesus made a difference. When Jesus came to earth, he introduced something new. He brought the good news and the kingdom of God to earth, and it was so compelling that people were forcing their way into it. Jesus approached

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cultural and political issues brilliantly and tactfully, modeling for his followers then and now what it looks like to prioritize curiosity and love. Let's explore how we can do the same.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. Have you ever considered that the arrival of John the Baptist inaugurated a completely new way for people to approach the kingdom of God? How would you describe the differences in the old and the new?
2. What do you think was the most compelling aspect of Jesus's message and posture to those who heard him teach? How can you explain the fact that people were eager to "force their way" into God's kingdom?
3. If you imagine the diverse group that gathered to hear Jesus teach, in what category would you put yourself—rich and skeptical, broken and poor, sick and helpless, religious elite, curious?

APPLY IT

Think of one person in your life who holds opposing views about faith or life. It should be someone with whom you are tempted to make a point about how wrong they are. How might that person benefit from your sincere curiosity and love? Make a note of three ways you can express that posture with them as you interact. This could be a list of questions that show your care and interest or a few ways you could serve them or care for them. Moving in the direction of the person rather than focusing on how wrong they are (or how right you are) is what makes a difference, and it's what Jesus modeled.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION (IF DESIRED)

1. Have you ever had an experience with a church or a person who seemed to completely separate themselves from culture? Have you experienced being on the "outside" of a religious or elite circle?
2. Imagine taking a survey of a group of college students and asking, "What are some of the distinguishing characteristics of a Christian?" What do you think they would say? What does Jesus say our distinguishing mark should be?
3. If you had the chance to hear Jesus teach in person, what question would you like to ask him? Based on what you know from Scripture, how do you think he would respond?