

***Who Is This Man? : The Provocateur***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Psalm 81:8-14; 1 John 4:1-6; John 2:13-22***

Our final Scripture reading is from John 2:13-22. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy and inspired word. “When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!” His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.”

Have you ever picked a fight? I have. Now I’ve never thrown a literal punch in real life, but I’ve had my share of battles. If you’re like me, you’ll go online and say, “Something is wrong with the internet!” I’ve gotten into verbal sparring matches with complete strangers. I’m not proud of it, which is why I don’t post personal opinions online much any more. But I never started an online argument without a purpose. I usually wanted to change someone’s view to the right one – which was, of course, mine.

But getting us alarmed and up in arms sells. The lead news story is never “kitten saved from a tree” but “violent things are happening all around us!” Why do people still remember the show *Dallas* from 35 years ago? Because of the mystery – who shot JR? Movies ramp up the special effects – they make us want to go to the show because we’ve never seen *that* before. Provocative things intrigue us as long as they reinforce our points of view or give us a thrill. We’re OK with provocative things as long as we’re not personally provoked.

Sometimes, being provocative is a really good thing. Screaming “fire” in a crowded building can save lives if there are flames overhead. If I’m walking on the tracks and a train is coming, I don’t want someone to walk slowly my way and whisper, “I think someone else is planning on using these tracks today.” I want you to shout and holler and get my attention and say, “Get off the tracks, you fool!”

But even if it’s for our benefit, we don’t like our religious views provoked. We don’t like our deeply held beliefs to be challenged. We want everything to be good and nice and pretty. I’ve seen a lot of pictures of Jesus in people’s homes over time. There’s the brown one with Jesus staring off mystically into space. There’s Jesus with a lamb around His shoulders. There’s Jesus smiling in the middle of a bunch of children. I’ve seen pictures of the crucifixion, which because it’s central to our faith has become a lot less provocative than it should be.

But I've never seen a portrait of Jesus cleansing the temple in someone's home. I've never seen a portrait of Jesus preaching to confused or upset or aghast people. I've never seen a portrait of Jesus nearly being pushed off a cliff by angry villagers. We like portraits of Jesus to be tame, for Him to be approachable, someone we can relate to, the guy who turns the water into top shelf wine, not the guy who makes everybody at the party uncomfortable talking about God.

But to get a fuller picture of who Jesus is, as we're doing in this series, we've got to look at Jesus as provocateur. As we've seen previously, Jesus was and is a healer and storyteller. But before we go on to other traits we like, we need to see that He was also outrageous to the people of His day. He sees us on the train track of sin and warns us to walk another path.

In the beginning, communication with God was clear and personal. God spelled out His expectations in ways that Adam and Eve easily understood. What's more, God had the habit of walking in the garden with Adam and Eve. They were in constant contact with Him. There was no question about what He desired of them and what He had forbidden. For a short time, they enjoyed close fellowship with God.

At the fall, not only is that relationship broken, but the human race becomes totally deaf and disinterested in the voice of the LORD. Our hearts are hardened towards God. Even the chosen people of the LORD don't listen. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, faithful people eventually, they all struggle with listening and believing. And the Israelites constantly refuse to listen. They won't go into the promised land when God tells them to go. They beg for an earthly king even when God tells them they won't like who they get. They constantly revert to the worship of idols. And that's our story too. When God speaks to us, our first instinct is to stick our fingers in our ears and yell, "Sorry, I can't hear you!"

But God is not silent, and He uses amazing, provocative, and even disturbing events to get our attention. God appears to Moses in a burning bush that doesn't burn up. God sends plagues on Egypt. God goes before the Israelites as a pillar of wind and a pillar of fire they can see in the camp every day. He sends them bread from heaven to eat. When they disobey, there are serious consequences. The sons of Aaron who make offerings they shouldn't die. The rebels against Moses are swallowed up in an earthquake. The memory of these events was so provocative that they are still the basis of Jewish worship today.

God works through strange events, but He also speaks through His servants the prophets. Now there were a lot of false prophets in Israel. The false prophets continually said "peace" when there was no peace. They whitewash flimsy spirituality rather than tearing it down and start over; they put a bandaid over the gaping wound of the people's sin. It's the same today when false churches preach forgiveness and acceptance without repentance and turning away from sin. God shows us love, but He requires us to change and to ask for forgiveness.

It was the provocative prophets, the ones people didn't like, that spoke the truth of God. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, Micah, the list goes on. Their words were harsh. Through them, God likened the people of Israel to a harlot selling herself to other nations and their gods, as an adulteress who fled God her rightful husband. They preached judgment if Israel did not turn away from her sins. They predicted disaster.

The actions they took were provocative too. Ezekiel lay on his left side for 390 days to symbolize the 390 years the Israelites had sinned in the land. Hosea named his children “not loved” and “not my people” to describe God’s judgment on the Israelites. Isaiah preaches barefoot in his underwear for three years to symbolize how Assyria would carry away Israel’s allies in his era naked and barefoot because Israel relied on them rather than God. All of their words and actions were screaming, “You’re going the wrong way!”

When Jesus comes, He comes with the power and persuasion of a prophet. He leads people back to God, back to who they are meant to be. And while Israel of Jesus’ day had abandoned the ancient sins like blatant idol worship, their sins were subtle and insidious.

The most religious people assumed God owed them something because they followed the Old Testament law completely...at least as they interpreted it. Their sin was interpreting God’s laws in ways that allowed the rich and well-connected to break the Sabbath, to steal from the poor, to abuse others, all the while condemning people less righteous than themselves. You can’t repent of a sin and turn from it if you don’t acknowledge it’s wrong in the first place.

So Jesus came as a radical prophet unafraid to confront anyone. Our main passage today is maybe the most famous incident where Jesus took controversial action to honor God. When He entered into the outer temple courts, people were purchasing animals for sacrifice and changing Roman money into funds acceptable in the temple. We might think, “Why was Jesus upset about people purchasing what they needed for their sacrifices to get right with God?”

The problem was not buying and selling; it was where it was happening. The outer courts were the courts of the Gentiles. God-fearing people who weren’t Jews couldn’t go any further into the temple under penalty of death. With all the buying and selling going on, no one could worship in the outer court. By allowing the marketplace, the religious leaders kept people from glorifying God. So Jesus turns over tables; he drives out the animals. He is so zealous for the honor of the LORD that He is willing to look crazy in order to restore God’s worship.

But the provocation doesn’t end there. When the religious authorities ask what sign He can give them that He has the authority to do this, He says, “Destroy this temple and I will rebuild it in three days.” They misunderstand what He’s talking about, but that’s the point – Jesus’ words are intentionally provocative. They are meant to kindle discussion. When He dies and rises again, the disciples believe because they finally understand that He predicted it.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, the primary target of Jesus’ challenges are the people we least expect. It is an unspoken rule in ministry that you tread lightly with the people who pay the bills, who regularly tithe. If you go after a tither, even if they’re in blatant sin, you risk losing your salary and the money that keeps the lights on. Is this cowardly and wrong? Yes. It’s also real.

But who does Jesus go after hardest? The tithers. He tells the Pharisees, “you tithe everything even to a tenth of the mint and dill that grows in your garden, but you should have paid more attention to the weightier matters of the law.” He doesn’t stop there. He calls them whitewashed tombs, pretty outside and dead inside. He calls them hypocrites, false teachers, and children of the devil who make converts twice the sons of hell they are.

He tells them the tax collectors and prostitutes are getting into the Kingdom of God ahead of them. These are folks who, if Jesus had gone along with their desires, they would have bankrolled anything He wanted to do, even revolution against Rome. But Jesus was not interested in their support or their cash. Jesus wanted to glorify His Father in everything, and He used inflammatory language to make it clear just how off the religious leaders were.

But that's not to say that Jesus was easier for the average person to accept. He was loving and kind, full of compassion and mercy. Anyone who turned away from sin and toward the Kingdom, Jesus showed immense grace. But His words were provocative enough to turn away anyone who wasn't seeking after the Kingdom of God with their whole hearts. Want proof?

Jesus' teachings show everyone's guilt. Thought you were OK because you never committed adultery? Think again, because when you looked lustfully at your neighbor's wife, you became guilty. You've never lifted your hand against anyone, but you despise the rich butcher down the street or hate the beggar on the corner? You're guilty of murder. He demands the impossible. You must be born again. (When Jesus' host Nicodemus hears this, he says, "Who can possibly go back into his mother's womb and do that?") He says the only way you can have life is to eat his flesh and drink his blood – and he says it well before the Last Supper and the institution of communion that we'll celebrate later today.

Jesus broke all the rules of church growth. That bit about eating his flesh and drinking his blood? He told that to the crowd of 5,000 who followed him after He miraculously fed them. After that saying, they all scattered. Jesus regularly sends away huge crowds and goes to solitary places to pray where they can't find Him. He told them that to follow Him, they needed to start right away – to the rich young ruler, He says, "Sell everything you have and come." To the man who wants to wait for his father to die, Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their own dead – you come follow me." Jesus tells everyone, the only way to follow me is to die to your own desires daily.

And if that's not enough, Jesus talked about hell – a lot. He talks about it more than any other person in Scripture, and He mentions it more than He mentions heaven. And He says to avoid it in provocative terms. If your hand or foot causes you to sin, get rid of it – better to go into heaven maimed than into hell in perfect condition. His point is not to get out the knife but the need to amputate all sin from our lives. Sin is so devastating that Jesus has to yell about it. Don't let it be your destiny. Come to God and find peace; but woe if you stay in your sins!

Now let's bring this home and see why this matters. Jesus provoked people – He provoked the religious leaders enough that they had Him murdered on trumped-up charges. Should we go and do likewise? Probably not...but let's see what we can learn.

First, *the volume of God's message proves that God must be the one to open our ears.* If we turn to Jesus for forgiveness and turn away from our sins, praise God, because He's the One who made it happen. God is responsible for curing our spiritual deafness. Because when we read the Bible, God is speaking at 120db. He's got the amps turned up to 11; He's louder than a metal concert. The way that God speaks, the means He uses, the provocative way He works, they're meant to get our attention. And people far "better" than ourselves, people with more good deeds and more righteousness, have missed the music.

Why does God speak at this decibel level? It's to show that we are morally responsible; our guilt is on our own heads; it's not as if God expects things from us He hasn't said loudly. But no matter how loud a jet engine might be, if you're truly deaf, you won't hear anything.

Do we think we opened our own ears? Do we think we responded to Jesus out of the goodness of our hearts? I'd encourage us to think again. We are saved by God's grace. He opens our ears; He makes it possible for us to respond. He should get all the glory and honor and praise for our salvation. Do we respond? Absolutely – that's our responsibility, and we'll talk about that in a moment. But our response only happens because God took the cotton out of our spiritual ears.

Second, *we must trust and believe in Jesus who actually exists, not the Jesus we wish existed.* We have to embrace Jesus who provokes and challenges us for our own benefit and salvation. So much of our society wants a polite Jesus, a Jesus who would never condemn anyone to hell, who is all love and no judgment, who requires just a prayer for salvation and not a lifetime of discipleship – imperfect and flawed, but still a permanent commitment that grows over time. It's not just the secular world that wants this; it's the church that wants to make it easy to join and easy to follow so that the numbers go up.

But Jesus in Scripture is incredibly complex. He offended even His closest followers and was misunderstood by them. He was harsh, calling them out on their lack of faith. He did not do this to be cruel; that's not in His nature. But He had to show them just how much of themselves had to die in order that they might find real, good, and true life in Him.

The Jesus who both loves and judges is the only Jesus who can right the wrongs in this world. The Jesus who provokes anger in His enemies is the only One who can save them when they turn to Him. The Jesus who only does what we want is a false god. Jesus says things that are embarrassing to modern sensibilities about judgment and sin and religiosity, but they were embarrassing in His own day. But if we get past the embarrassment, we see that those tough words to swallow are words that point us to life in Him. Those words get us past our high view of ourselves and bring us into right relationship with Him and with His Father and His Spirit.

So that leaves us with a question: *will you listen to and embrace Jesus the provocateur?* God loves you so much that He sent His Son to die for you, which is as provocative as it gets. He has been speaking throughout the centuries to bring us back to Himself, even though He had no obligation to do so. He speaks in inflammatory ways and does shocking things to get our attention. Even if He's opened our ears, it doesn't mean we will respond the way we should. Will you listen and respond today? Because one day, all the shouting will stop, and the only question will be whether or not you turned to the real Jesus who knows you and saves you.

Jesus was meek and mild, a servant to all, but He was also willing to say and do whatever was necessary to bring us back to the Father who created us. And while He came as a servant, He is also the risen and reigning King described in Revelation with fire in His eyes and His face shining like the sun in all of its brilliance. He isn't safe, but He is good. Will you embrace Him for everything He is? If you do, you will know His grace throughout all of eternity – and you will be thankful that His provocative words helped to bring you into His Kingdom.