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The Priests & Scribes: So close and yet so far



Part 9 (021222PM)

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This evening we need to meet a final member of the cast of Christmas. We have seen Joseph always in touch and responsive to God. Then we saw the Magi who were insistent upon seeing and worshiping Jesus. Then this morning we met Herod, insecure and unwilling to bow before the true king.

But ever worst than the insecure and self-serving Herod are the indifferent and Christ neglecting Religious Leaders.

- They lived in the presence of God.
- They saw all day long the symbols and pictures of salvation.
- They held the Holy revelation of God's Word.
- They sang each day from the Psalms.
- They recited, memorized, and discussed the Word of the Lord.
- They wore the clothing that reminded them in every way of God.
- They only held God's Word in their hands - not in their hearts.
- God was only near in their mouths - and not in their hearts.

What a sobering warning for us this Christmas these Priests & Scribes can be. But before we look closely at their lives let me remind you of the cast members we have **already met**.

The IN TOUCH Joseph: Faithful and following second fiddle ([Matthew 1:18-25](#); 2:13,19)

- Willing to be obedient and obscure!
- Obey even if you don't understand what God is doing.
- Joseph sought the Lord with his problems (1.18-20a)
- Joseph listened to the Lord for His guidance (1.20b-23)
- Joseph obeyed the Lord by his actions (1.24-25a)
- Joseph honored the Lord through his obedience (1.25b)

The INSISTENT Magi: God can use the rich and powerful ([Mt. 2:1,7,16](#))

- Come to Him (they didn't send their gifts, they came. God wants you, in person, to come to Him).
- Sacrifice your time, freedom, and comfort for Him(they traveled 1100 to 1200 miles across deserts and mountains from the regions of Babylon or Persia or Media)
- Present what you have to Him (a little boy's lunch; an upper room; an unbroken colt; an unrequested flask of perfume ...)
- Personally Worship Him (they came, bowed and worshiped Him).

THE INSECURE Herod: The earthly minded, was not looking for Jesus. [Matthew 2:1](#) *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem (NIV)*

- Lessons from the Tragic Life of Herod show that Herod gained the whole world but lost his own soul. [Matthew 16:26](#) For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul.

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Part: 1 The Fullness of Time: The Day Jesus Was Born

1. HEROD HAD IT ALL IN THIS LIFE. **You can have it all in this life and fail in the next.**
2. HEROD LIVED FOR THE EARTH, NOT HEAVEN. **If you live for the earth and not heaven you will lose everything.** John 3:19-21 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." (NIV).
3. HEROD HAD DEMON FAITH. **You can tremble before God and still be damned.** Demon faith means God scares you but you never change. King Herod believed the Scriptures! Herod believed God's Word enough in that crowded court to dispatch a corps of butchers to Bethlehem to slaughter innocent children, in hopes of destroying this rival to his throne. But he was too late. The magi had come and gone and Jesus was by now safe in Egypt. All Herod's exposed to God's Word many trembled none changed! James 2:19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!
4. HEROD PUT HIS FAITH IN HIMSELF, HIS POWER, HIS RICHES, HIS WEALTH, AND HIS PLEASURE. **You can gain the whole world and lose your own soul.** King Herod - more concerned about his crown than his soul. Matthew 16:26 For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? John 3:19 And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. John 3:36 He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."
5. HEROD MISSED HIS CHANCE. **You can get as close as Herod and still miss heaven.**
6. Few people were as close to salvation as the Herod family was. Few had so many opportunities to meet the Messiah and to hear His teaching. Look up the following verses, and notice the encounters the Herod family had with Jesus and His message. The Legacy of Herod the Great is that few families in history have come as close to Jesus' message as the Herod's. Many members of this ruling family knew of Jesus and His followers. Yet, one after the other, they killed or tried to kill anyone connected to Him.

1. Herod the Great	Matthew 2:1-8, 13-18
2. Antipas (son of Herod the Great)	Mark 6:14-29 Luke 23:8-12
3. Agrippa I (grandson of Herod the Great)	Acts 12:1-5, 18-24
4. Drusilla (wife of the governor Felix and daughter of Agrippa I)	Acts 24:24-26
5. Agrippa II (great-grandson of Herod the Great)	Acts 25:13,23,26:1-29
6. Bernice (great-granddaughter of Herod the Great)	Acts 25:13,23,26:1-29

Please stand and turn with me to Matthew 2.4-6 and see with spiritual sight the tragedy of these religious leaders.

Who were these priests and scribes? Most likely the priests were descendents of Aaron and Zadok and the scribes were descendents of Ezra the scribe.

Just to see the character of these men look with me at Ezra 7:10.

For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

But by Christ's time this personal devotion had waned for the most part. And we will find that far worst than the insecure and self-serving Herod are the indifferent and Christ neglecting Religious Leaders.

- They lived in the presence of God.
- They saw all day long the symbols and pictures of salvation.
- They held the Holy revelation of God's Word.
- They sang each day from the Psalms.
- They recited, memorized, and discussed the Word of the Lord.
- They wore the clothing that reminded them in every way of God.
- They only held God's Word in their hands - not in their hearts.
- God was only near in their mouths - and not in their hearts.

How clearly Jesus would warn us of this type of person. Remember Matthew 23.3-5. Especially look at v. 5 "But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments."

The word translated[1], borders or hem, is actually referring to the fringes, or tassels (called tzitziyot, in Hebrew), required to be on the four corners of all clothing of Jewish men, in accordance with God's instruction. (Num. 15:37-41a)

In ancient Israel, men wore four-cornered outer tunics with these tassels, or **tzitziyot**, tied to the four corners. This outer garment became known as a **tallit**, and eventually evolved into the more formal prayer shawl.

But, why tassels? These tassels were to remind each Jewish man of his responsibility to fulfill God's commandments. In fact, these tassels are tied into 613 knots to constantly remind them of the 613 laws of Moses. There are 613 letters in the Ten Commandments, as well as 613 specific laws that are recorded in the OT. Of which there are 365 prohibitions (The "thou shalt not" laws), and 248 affirmations (the "thou shall" laws).

The knots also correspond with the ineffable name of God, the unspoken yod-hey-vav-hey, Yahweh. Because they were hanging on the four corners of your garment. in full view of everyone including yourself, they would be a constant reminder to walk according to God's Laws. The Hebrew word we translate as Law, is *halacha*, and it

literally means , "walk." You see, following God's law is a daily walk. And to stay on His path of righteousness, we all need constant reminding. Wearing these tassels would be comparable to us wearing a large Bible on a rope around our necks. How would we behave in public. how would we speak to others, where would we go? God intended them to be a constant reminder of His Word when he told the Israelites to wear these fringes.

The Talitha (prayer shawl) has[2] 5 knots to symbolize the Torah; it has 4 spaces to represent the letters YHWH. Keep all 613 laws, make tassels long. The Rabbis taught that Messiah's tassels would heal and forgive so that is why Jesus responded as He did when the dying woman grabbed His tassel. She confessed her faith by grabbing His tassel.

Yet all that exposure to God ended up only in their head, not in their hearts. They did not choose to let those truths invade and take over their hearts and wills. The spiritual skin of their lives, overexposed to the Light of God's truth, had developed the deadliest cancer of all – spiritual indifference.

- They cared not for God.
- They loved not the Lord.
- They longed not to know and worship Him.

Matthew 15:8 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.

Think of the dangerous place these religious leaders found themselves in.

- Every day they came home with blood stained clothes from the substitutionary sacrificial animals they offered according to God's Word.
- Every day their hands and clothes were deeply filled with the indelible scent of incense as the fragrant smoke rose before God as a picture of their prayers of worship.
- Every day as they dressed in their priestly vestments the sacred anointing oils made with the secret and unique formula mandated by God, causing them to smell like no one else on earth ever could as they approached the Lord.

the INDIFFERENT RELIGIOUS LEADERS were not looking for Jesus. **Matthew 2:4-5** When he had called together *all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: (NIV)* They were over familiar with God.

1. **They missed the Word.** GOD WORD PASSED BY THESE MEN. They dealt with God's Word, but God's Word was never allowed to deal with them. **Isaiah 29:13** Therefore the Lord said: "Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths And honor Me with their lips, But have removed their hearts far from Me, And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men.
2. **They missed the Worship.** THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE RELIGIOUS NOT WORSHIPFUL.
 - **John 4:24** God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."
3. **They missed the Way.** THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE ACQUAINTED NOT EXPERIENCED WITH GOD. They were good at the outward motions but not the inward worship.
 - **Joel 2:13** So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the Lord your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm.
4. **They missed the Walk.** THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE HEARERS NOT DOERS. THEY WERE TALKERS NOT WALKERS.
 - **2 Peter 2:19** While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage.
5. **They missed the Witness.** THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE SELF-RIGHTEOUS. They felt they were GOOD enough for God. Consequently God's word isn't for me here and now, its something for out there or something. So they knew about the texts but failed to notice the significance of this event.
 - **1 John 5:10-13** He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son. 11 And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.
 - **Matthew 23:27** "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.
 - **Luke 5:17** Now it happened on a certain day, as He was teaching, that there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come out of every town of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was present to heal them.
6. **They missed it all!** GOD COMES TO THE LOST SEEKERS. They knew all about God, but didn't care enough to go five miles south of town and experience it.
 - They pointed others to seek out the Savior but never went to worship themselves.
 - They knew the prophets, but did not believe prophecy. The immediate reaction of the theologians of Herod's court who knew the Scriptures well—was "in 'Bethlehem". What is amazing is that as they recited these words they showed the terrible condition that though they knew the Scriptures, they did not believe them! What a sad indictment upon these Bible students that they did not even bother to travel the five or six miles to Bethlehem to see their Messiah. God can only be found when we seek Him!

Deuteronomy 4:29 But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if

you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul. (NIV)

Luke 18: 13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

Luke lists a cast of 10 more (turn to Lk. 1-2).

1. Zacharias - doubts, but believes
2. Elizabeth - humble [mother of my Lord]
3. Gabriel - stands in God's presence
4. Innkeepers - helpful, but distracted
5. Angels - proclaiming
6. Shepherds - in tune
7. Simeon - looking and seeing
8. Anna - waiting and praying, waiting and worshipping
9. Caesar Augustus - set the stage, too big to notice
10. Quirinius - followed, failed to know

One was too important for the Lord. Augustus: Holding to high and estimation of yourself. He thought too big of himself. There was no room in his Empire for another King named Jesus.

- **Luke 2:1** And it came to pass in those days [that] a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. (NKJV)
- Augustus was too big to notice the significance of this event
- GOD COMES IN SMALL THINGS. LISTEN TO PAUL: I [Corinthians 1:26-27](#) For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, [are called.] ; (NKJV)

One was thinking of only far away things. He didn't look closely around him. Look too far beyond yourselves. There was no room in his career for Jesus. He missed what was right in front of him. Second, there was BEYOND QUIRINIUS:

- **Luke 2:2** (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) (NIV)
- Quirinius was too far away to notice the significance of this event.
- GOD COMES IN THE THINGS THAT ARE CLOSE. LISTEN TO PAUL: [Romans 10:8](#) But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: (NIV)

One had too much going on around him to notice Christ's birth. There was no room in his inn for Jesus. He was too busy as the INNKEEPER:

- **Luke 2:7** and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (NIV)
- The Innkeeper was too busy to notice the significance of this event.
- GOD COMES TO THE SIMPLE. LISTEN AGAIN: I [Corinthians 1:27-28](#) But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise: God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things -- and the things that are not -- to nullify the things that are, (NIV)

That there was no[3] room in the inn was symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus. The only place where there was room for him was on a cross. He sought an entry to the over-crowded hearts of men; he could not find it; and still his search—and his rejection—go on.

Shepherds: God can save the most distant, defiled and outcast

- Listen to God.
- Come at once (they heard and responded and were first to see Jesus)
- Come like you are (in wonder, in fear, in uncertainty, in hope)
- Come no matter what (who would watch the sheep?)
- Go against the tide/crowd (they were unwelcomed in public. They smelled.

Anna: Waiting and Worshiping (Lk 2.36)

- Willing to be what God wanted her to be, even if its not much by others estimation! She was a nobody except to God.
- Giving what she had – time to pray and fast.
- Staying faithful and fruitful to the end of her life. Anna had grown old but kept on serving the Lord, as she "worshiped Him by prayer and fasting".
- Avoiding/Resisting the crippling attitudes of despair, disillusionment and bitterness. Anna had known pain, but kept on trusting the Lord as a "widow".
- Praising the Lord immediately when she saw an answer to her prayers.
- Willing to share with others what God was doing.

Appendix

2:4 chief priests. These were the temple hierarchy. They were mostly Sadducees (see note on 3:7). **scribes.** Primarily Pharisees, i.e., authorities on Jewish law. Sometimes they are referred to as "lawyers" (see note on [Luke 10:25](#)). They were professional scholars whose specialty was explaining the application of the law. They knew exactly where the Messiah was to be born (v. 5), but lacked the faith to accompany the Magi to the place where He was.[4]

The scribes

When they returned, Ezra, a priest and a scribe (an interpreter of the law), had a commission from the Persian emperor to teach the Jewish people the law ([Ezra 7:12-26](#)). Everyone who returned stood to listen to the law all one morning ([Nehemiah 8:1-8](#)). The teachers then moved among the crowd explaining it to them. As a result the scribes became important in the community as teachers of the law. A scribe also wrote letters for people and could be recognized by the inkpot that was stuck into his belt ([Ezekiel 9:2](#)).[5]

In relation to their knowledge of the Scriptures the scribes occupied themselves with a number of tasks (Sir 38:24–39:11).

3.1. Interpretation and Preservation of the Law. On the basis of existing regulations and by recourse to ancient customs which had become binding as common law (Mk 7:5–8), the scribes applied the general instructions of the Torah to daily living.

3.2. Teaching the Law. Instruction usually began at an early age (Josephus *Life* 9; *b. Gitl.* 58a). A student was expected to give allegiance to his teacher above that of his parents and, certainly after the NT period, teachers were generally addressed as "my lord" or "master" (*rabbi*). A student was expected to reproduce every word and expression of his teacher.

3.3. Scribes As Lawyers.

3.4. Scribes As Theologians.

3.5. Scribes As Guardians of Tradition.

3.6. Scribes As Curators of the Text. Copying Scripture was considered divine work (*b. Soṭ'a* 20a), and Temple funds may have been used to pay for corrections in scrolls (*b. Ketub.* 106a). Even though the sacred text was known by heart, a written edition had to be before the copyist (*b. Meg.* 18b) who would read aloud the text as he worked (*m. Meg.* 2:2). The Qumran scriptorium may have been modelled on something similar in the Jerusalem Temple (see Dead Sea Scrolls).[6]

[1] Clarence H. Wagner, Jr., *Lessons from the Land of the Bible*. Jerusalem, Israel: Bridges for Peace, 1998. p. 26-27.

[2] Ray Vander Laan video oral comments.

[3] Barclay, William, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Luke (Revised Edition)*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2000, c1975.

[4] John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, (Dallas: Word Publishing) 1997.

[5] Gowers, Ralph, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago) 1987.

[6] Green, Joel G.; McKnight, Scot; Marshall, I. Howard; editors, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press) 1998, c1992.

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