

I want to ask the question 'When is fence-sitting a good option?'

You might say 'Depends'.

Would you call yourself a fence-sitter? Generally non-committal. Or are you the sort of personality who wants to sign-up, dive-in, get on board?

There are lots of recognised fence-sitters. Undecided voters at elections.

Investors seeing how the market behaves before buying in?

Sometimes in relationships. Holding back for fear of hurt or disappointment.

Non-committal is a word often used with our dealings with one another.

Sometimes for good reason. Sometimes not.

Fence-sitting can sometimes be a matter of indecision. We're anxious about making the wrong choice. Other times a matter of indifference. Care Factor Nil. Or perhaps because we're indignant. We actually want to convey our disagreement by not making a decision.

As I reflected on these verses in Matthew that there is no fence to sit on when it comes to Jesus and the Kingdom of God. No neutral territory. Jesus makes this explicit in v 30:

***Whoever is not with me is against me...***

Or the last verse of our reading:

***By your words you will be acquitted and by your words you will be condemned***

Indifference or indecision is the wrong position when it comes Jesus.

Observe the absence of fences in the choices of Matthew 12:

**Vv 15-21: Concealing or revealing; Vv 22-29: Dividing or conquering; Vv 30-37: Gathering or Scattering.**

**Concealing or Revealing? (vv 15-21)**

Concealing or revealing.

In v 15 Jesus withdraws from the discussion in the grain fields with the Pharisees we heard about last week. V 14 tells us they planned to take his life.

Jesus withdraws not because of their threats. He predicts later in his ministry that his life will be given. In God's timing, not theirs.

This makes sense of the unusual words of v 16.

***A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. <sup>16</sup> He warned them not to tell others about him.***

Sometimes been called *The Messianic Secret*, Jesus conceals his ministry so that it would be revealed according to God's timing and not human expectation.

It was very much tied to his journey towards the cross. Where of course his ministry met its fulfilment. Matthew tells us why Jesus conceals as he quotes from Isaiah 42.

The chosen one has God's Spirit and approval. He will proclaim justice to the nations and they will put their hope in him. His message is world changing.

**But the Messiah will not be who you expect.**

If you are a follower of Jesus then you know this reality. Before you were a follower of Jesus the notion of a humble servant who would give his life as a sacrifice for you was likely met with indifference. Or indecision. Or maybe you were indignant. The idea of your sin needing to be dealt with was laughable.

It is a striking contrast in our lives that we enter all sorts of relationships not knowing what to expect. Marriage. Parenting. Friendship. The work place. The school yard. The neighbour. The church. All sorts of unknowns.

Yet when it comes to Jesus we think we have him all sorted. Boxed into some religious package the church has constructed. Compartmentalised into our busy lives. Contained so that any change he wants to bring about our lives can be managed according to our expectations.

**Proverbs 19:21:**

*Many are the plans of a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.*

Have you felt that recently?

**Concealing and revealing is the way of the Kingdom. There's no middle ground.**

Matthew is asking us 'Do you know who are dealing with?' Or perhaps we should say 'Do you know who's dealing with you?' V 20:

*In his name the nations will put their hope.*

Where's yours?

**Dividing or Conquering? (vv 22-29)**

**Concealing or Revealing. Here is the second way the Kingdom works in our world. Vv 22-29. Dividing or conquering.**

Note what sparks this dividing-conquering dispute. V 22:

*<sup>22</sup> Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. <sup>23</sup> All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"*

The Servant of Isaiah is also the Son of David. The one promised in his line. The Messiah anointed and appointed to bring a lasting peace to God's people. Even beyond what David had been able to deliver to Israel.

Jesus would bring in the eternal Kingdom promised to David's descendants in 2 Samuel 7. So when the Pharisees see the dots being joined by the crowds it is time to launch a high-level discredit campaign. V 24:

*"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."*

I don't know if this is the first-century version of 'Throw enough mud and some will stick' but it's not an unknown strategy.

Jesus' ministry of rescuing those trapped by evil spirits was prolific throughout his ministry. If the Pharisees could stick the 'Beelzebul Prince of Demons' tag to him his whole ministry was questionable.

But their tactic was as flawed as it was desperate. V 26. Why would Satan want to drive out Satan? How could releasing those captive by demons be of benefit to the evil purposes of Satan's kingdom? Such an act could only further divide his influence.

Jesus says to his opponents v 27, 'If you are right, then by whose authority do those of your own drive out demons?'

But if you are wrong, then know this is the work of the Spirit of God, and the Kingdom of God has come upon you.

No fence-sitting here. Divide, or conquer. Jesus says to the Pharisees, your accusations only fuel the work of Satan's Kingdom. Lies will always do that.

**Jesus comes to divide and conquer.** He dealt with the Kingdom of Beelzebul. Of God's chief opponent Satan.

V 29. He bound the strong man and plunder his possessions in the conquering work of the cross.

**His conquering is also a dividing.** There's no middle ground. No neutral territory. Have you made the confession of Colossians 1:13?

*For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

### **Gathering or Scattering? (w 30-37)**

**Concealing and revealing. Dividing and conquering. And finally, gathering or scattering? Vv 30-37.**

Jesus widens his anti-fence-sitting teaching to include all of us. V 30:

*"Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.*

Who gathers? And who scatters?

Jesus gathers into his Kingdom. The Pharisees scatter by opposing it. It's explained by the intriguing verses that follow about blasphemy and sin against the Son of Man and the Holy Spirit. V 31:

***And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup> Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.***

Jesus acknowledges the human condition, and his authority to deal with it through the gospel of forgiveness. He is the Son of Man, the Daniel 7 figure given authority to rule God's Kingdom and grant entry to it.

Our sin and words spoken against him can be forgiven. No one is beyond the grace of God when they turn and repent. Whether you've lived a life of indifference, indecision, or perhaps been indignant, entry into the Kingdom remains open.

Repent now. Jesus is gathering for the day of his return. There is no middle ground. V 34. Your words are your destiny, for the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. Let your heart be filled with the grace and forgiveness of Christ and your words will bear fruit that will last into eternity.

And yet, surprisingly, there is a sin that cannot be forgiven. And we may assume that the Pharisees have committed it. Seen and recognised the work of God through his Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus. Unequivocally. And yet remained unreservedly opposed. Even to the point that they would have him crucified on the cross.

Unrelenting opposition to the work of Jesus recognised as the power of the Holy Spirit inherits what it only could: eternal condemnation. By their words the Pharisees are condemned.

Was Jesus just speaking to his opponents who witnessed his Spirit-empowered ministry and so vehemently opposed him? Or is he speaking to us?

All too often Christians have taken this teaching on the unforgivable sin and applied to themselves or to others.

If you have a fear within that this may be your sin, then that alone would be testimony that you haven't, and the forgiveness and mercy of Christ is always available to you.

If you have applied this teaching to others, then beware the Pharisee within you. You are in territory that only God should occupy. And there is only one man that can stand in that place and issue such judgment. And yet he brings a message of mercy and forgiveness.

Colossians 1:13 again:

***For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.***

Concealing and Revealing. Dividing and conquering. Gathering or scattering.

If you are unconvinced of the hope of the gospel today it may be that you believe sitting on the fence is a perfectly reasonable position. And no one should tell you otherwise.

All I can say is that we've all been there. And we're only not there any longer by the grace of God. Hear the life saving words of Jesus that will acquit us on the last day.

If you are a follower of Jesus today when was the last time he exceeded your expectations? Challenged your plans? Changed your heart? Rearranged your regimented ways?

This is the Spirit of God at work in your life. He's not into drift. There's no idle. At the very least ask God to take you to the next gear and watch the change Jesus can bring about. The blessing will not just be for you, but all who follow him with you.

Is fence-sitting a good option? Not if the Kingdom of God has come upon you.