

Working With The Voice Transcript

WWTV Episode 016

The Context of Jesus's Teachings

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Hello Listeners! This is Juliet Mee, your host for the Working With the Voice Podcast. This is a course designed to help you learn to communicate directly with the Holy Spirit. For that reason, its best to listen to the episodes in order. If you want to learn from the Holy Spirit, it's appropriate for you to understand the history of the life of Jesus, who is the representative example of the life we are being guided to. This episode contains an important history lesson that I never knew about and is necessary to understand before we go into the next episode which will take us back into the Sermon on the Mount. I ask myself repeatedly why these things that I am finding aren't emphasized in Christian teachings today. These are deep subjects that include belief, history and culture. I am going to only include what is necessary for the points I am making. I will include links that explain and back up today's teachings in the show notes.

Understanding both the content and the backdrop of the culture of the Sermon on the Mount is essential for many reasons. It is the longest written teaching from Jesus that is recorded in the bible. These are his specific directions about living as a member of the kingdom of heaven that he says is coming in the future, and he also says that it is here now. He is teaching directly in the Sermon on the Mount which is unique. A lot of the rest of his life he will many times choose to teach in a little less obvious way though parables or his works of healing. Jesus had to change his teaching style because, very shortly after this sermon, the established leaders of the Jewish people in Jerusalem will begin to question him in ways that will lead to his death. Some people think that Jesus's teachings were all completely different from other Jewish teachings because he presents a new type of world where things seem upside down to the ways they are experiencing. It seemed obvious that the power will be in the military and the rich; but Jesus says that in the kingdom of God, the poor, gentle, peacemakers are the ones who hold true power. He says that a person's inside motivation is as important if not more important than the outside actions, also God is our Father who is good to us, can be trusted, and provides for us every day. The Sermon on the Mount is a practical way to get to the best life possible, even though it seems impractical at times. In the next episode we are going to arrange the material a bit differently than we have before so that the practical nature of the teachings is revealed.

Is biblical content more important or is context and interpretation more important? The content of what Jesus said as well as the context in which he said it are necessary things to understand if you are truly going to grasp his message. At the time Jesus was teaching, there was no religion called Christianity, and there wouldn't be for hundreds of years. These are Jewish people who are following one specific Jewish teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. The major sects of Judaism at the time were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots. There were probably at least 20 other smaller Jewish sects, with Jesus's followers constituting one of them. We won't be talking about the Essenes. Although their contribution to Christianity through the Dead Sea Scrolls is interesting, they are not mentioned in the New Testament and it would be a rabbit hole for today.

Let's first talk about time. I know this is elementary education. Time doesn't really have an arbitrary midpoint called the year 1 but we have to count time as if it does because it makes things easier to discuss. We are living in the time called the "Common Era" or CE. BCE or "Before the Common Era" is used now instead of "BC" which was "Before Christ" to determine that something happened before Jesus was born. In deference to non-Christians, the terms were changed. Events can be confusing if you don't pay attention to if they are CE or BCE. For this reason every time I say either of the terms "CE" or "BCE" I will make sure I am clear by enunciating them in a way that I assume will irritate a couple of you. And another thing, don't forget that this creates an opposite relationship between numbers depending on which era we are discussing. 100 CE is more recent than 99 CE, but 99 BCE is more recent than 100 BCE.

The Jewish people followed rules and regulations that God gave to Moses on Mt Sinai in approximately 1200 BCE. These teachings were considered to be God's laws and are called the "Torah". There was a written Torah that contained the first five books of the bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In addition there were also explanations and examples that Moses was given that told him how to interpret the law that were not written down, but were considered to be the oral Torah. There weren't two Torahs, there was only one, and it contained written information as well as oral information that made it relevant to the time. After Moses, the Jewish people would recognize prophets who would be sent by God to settle disputes in the people's understandings. Their teachings would be added to the oral Torah. Jesus would refer to the totality of these teachings as "The Law and the Prophets" many times. From the time of Moses to Jesus's time, the oral Torah had never been written down. In fact, there were prohibitions that forbid the Jews to write the oral traditions down. The written Torah and the oral Torah combined were set up as a set of facts and their interpretation. The written Torah can also be thought of as the content of the material with the oral Torah being the context of the material. The reason for the prohibition of writing down the oral Torah was that once it was written down, there would then need to be a never ending amount of books written to make the explanations clear. The prohibitions made discussion and debate about the Torah necessary. The explicit and strict method of copying the written Torah to make sure that the written information that was copied from scroll to scroll was exact continues to this day. The oral Torah was taught from one person to another and it was understood that a person should learn the oral Torah from the best teacher they could find. The teachers were commanded to not deviate from what they had been taught. Their students could take notes, but it was expected that they would work to be able to recite and truly understand the oral Torah. These traditions were passed down from generation to generation. It was a part of the culture that students would choose a teacher then diligently work to understand the religion deeply and accurately, whether the material was written or oral, and these methods of teaching cultivated a unique environment that is still today a part of the Jewish religion; discussion and debate were and still are a regular part of the study. The oral Torah was ultimately written down even though there were the prohibitions against doing it because the rabbis felt that it was possible to lose the information if they didn't. It would take hundreds of years for the material to be agreed upon and would consist of 2700 double-sided pages. This massive document is called the Talmud.

The Pharisees and Sadducees didn't agree on the application of the written and oral Torah. The Pharisees felt that both were very important and it was from this combination of material that they created the 613 specific obligatory practices that Jesus said were so detailed that no one could keep them all. It would have been reasonable for the Pharisees to say, "This is what the Torah says we are to do, and this is what that means. Realistically it's hard to do, so try your best. No one gets it right all the time" But in Jesus's time that wasn't what they were saying. They were saying, "You must do every single thing correctly like I do" even though the truth was, they weren't. They were high and mighty

hypocrites who didn't want to admit any type of weakness. They probably initially justified their behavior because the stakes were so high in the environment they were in. They felt there was a possibility of losing their entire religion if the Romans and the Sadducees had their way. The Sadducees were much more liberal and felt that the written Torah was the only true Torah, and that left them open to do many things that were prohibited by the oral Torah. I can imagine that the Sadducees felt that the way of the Pharisees was not only impossible, but it was dangerous because it threatened their relationship with the Romans, the group who they worked alongside to create their living and status, even though it was a second class citizen status. I can imagine that the Pharisees felt that the Sadducees took a lot of liberty with things that they shouldn't in the eyes of God. So these differences weren't just a "you say potato, I say potahto" kind of thing in Jesus's time. The two groups were required to work together to determine the application of the law through the Sanhedrin and the atmosphere in Jerusalem was a cauldron that was beginning to boil. Jesus's relationship to that cauldron was a bit different than I initially thought.

As I was studying for the upcoming information that is contained in the next episode, the question I kept asking myself was, "I wonder how the Sadducees got in control of the Temple and the court system of the Sanhedrin when they were the minority?" What I found out explained so much more than I ever anticipated. There's an important part of history that I didn't understand that makes many things in the New Testament make sense, and it's the Maccabean Revolt.

In **400 BCE**, Alexander the Great created one of the largest empires of the ancient world that stretched from Greece to India. Following his military campaigns there was an imposition of Greek culture, religion and language on the people he conquered. This was called **Hellenization**. The Greeks were significantly different from the Jews. Something that illustrates the severe contrast is that the Jews believed in one God, and that they were this one God's chosen people, the people who were to carry his message to humanity. Their entire way of life and identity was wrapped in this concept. The Greeks worshipped many gods and goddesses, specifically the 12 on Mount Olympus who were headed by Zeus. Magic was practiced widely in Greek culture. There was a big reliance on astrology, oracles, and charms. Philosophically, they were a hedonistic society whose aim was to find the good life of pleasure. This wasn't just a search for comfortable life; in many cases it was a life of over eating, overdrinking, individualism, and self-indulgence. If you read about the Gods on Mt Olympus, you can understand the massive difference between that way of thinking and living in relationship to the one-God way of the Jews.

In **167 BCE**, these two massively different cultures, Greek and Jewish, collided in a way that set a precedent in human history; it is the first-ever religious war called the Maccabean Revolt. Through Alexander the Great's successful military defeats, there had been over 200 years of Hellenization. The Jewish people had resisted it but also had been greatly influenced by it. The upper class Jewish people living in Jerusalem were integrating more of the Greek ways into their daily life because in some ways it was necessary and practical. In other ways it was financially advantageous. The middle class Jews in Jerusalem and the people living in the country outside of Jerusalem were much more orthodox. They integrated much less willingly as they fought to preserve what they felt was the true Jewish religion; the one that their ancestors had practiced based on the oral and written Torah. You can see the Maccabean Revolt as a war against the Greeks, which it was; but it was also a civil war between the orthodox Jews and the Jews who were culturally aligning with the Greeks.

What touched off the rebellion was a situation based upon the fact that the Jewish people had many commandments related to cleanliness and uncleanness. These rules weren't just the "wash your hands

after using the restroom" type of thing. They were the basis of the most holy practices of their religion, and their religion was the thing their lives were formed around. The concept of cleanliness was about identifying how a person related to God and the regulations involved many different types of circumstances, dietary laws, and other practices. The rules relating to clean and unclean animals that could be sacrificed to God by the Jewish people were of paramount importance. A blood sacrifice was the way you atoned for your sins and "got right" with God. Pigs were considered unclean animals that shouldn't be touched, much less used for sacrifice. An orthodox Jewish person would never have sacrificed a pig to God. In **167 BCE** the persecution of Jews by the Greeks was in full swing. The Greek troops showed up in one town and demanded that the Jews there sacrifice a pig to the Greek gods. The established priests absolutely refused to do the sacrifice because, as you can imagine, they felt it was an unspeakable act to make them sacrifice an unclean animal to a god they didn't believe in. There was a Hellenized Jew in the town who was willing to do the sacrifice. Right before he performed the sacrifice, one of the Jewish priests stabbed him as well as the Greek official who made the demand, killing them both. The priest announced that anyone who believed in the covenant should follow him and his five sons into the hills to organize a guerilla army to fight the Greek response that they knew would be coming. (The term Maccabee is after one the son's nicknames which meant "The Hammer".) The Greeks were trained professional soldiers with equipment. They even had a herd of war elephants. The Jewish soldiers did an amazing job even though they were outnumbered in every way. After the first three years the Jews were able to retake Jerusalem. By this time the great temple had been defiled and turned into a pagan sanctuary where pigs had been sacrificed to statues of Greek Gods and Goddesses. This place of the most holy beauty and honor was totally unclean by their laws. They immediately began the process of ritually cleansing it so it could be considered holy again. The laws required that they use a pure lamp oil in the menorahs but they could only find one vial that was still properly sealed. This oil would normally have only lasted one day. Miraculously it lasted eight days which gave the Jews time to press fresh, pure oil. The impressive and unlikely victory of the Jews over the Greeks as well as the miracle of the oil is the basis for the eight day celebration of Hanukah. But the fight wouldn't be over yet. It would take many years before the Greeks had enough of the fighting and signed a peace treaty with the Jews.

Later, the Romans would come into the area and conquer the Greeks to become the dominant political power. The Romans waged wars and conquered many people in their fight to place as much of the world under their command as possible. They didn't just fight and kill their enemies, they brutally slaughtered them. There was not a high regard for human life by the Romans at that time. In addition, when the Romans took over, they were intent on forcing the Jewish people to worship not only their gods and goddesses, but also to worship the emperor. However, these same brutal Romans were great administrators and engineers who built amazing structures, administratively organized a taxation system and institutionalized a system of law. Throughout all of this though, they maintained their brutal blood-thirsty ways. Roman citizens would spend their days entertaining themselves by watching people and animals be butchered in shows held in over 200 amphitheaters they built. They were sophisticated and at the same time cruel people who held very little regard for human life. This was completely against the ways of the Jewish people who highly regarded human life.

When the Romans came into Israel they set up a puppet Jewish ruler who was tasked with dealing with the day to day problems of running the country and also for the important job of collecting the taxes to be sent to Rome. By this time the independent state of Israel that had been established in the peace treaty was gone, but previously, while it was in place, one of the Jewish rulers had made a practice of forcing the people they conquered to convert to Judaism. This was a practice that had never happened before or since and turned out to be a very misguided thing to do. Jewish people discourage converts.

The Romans understood that these forcibly converted Jews were not really Jewish but they could be used productively. If they were placed in power, they could insure that the “militant monotheism” of the Maccabean Revolt wouldn’t be a problem again. This is how the famous King Herod the Great, who came from a family that had been forced to convert to Judaism, became one of the most famous kings of the Jews. Herod the Great ruled until his death in the year **4 CE**. During his reign the Romans took a back seat role in the day to day life of the Jews, even though at that time, religion and state went together in all the nations of the ancient world. The Romans made a pragmatic decision to allow the Jews to be exempt from practicing the state religion as well as granted them certain privileges because they knew that there was no way the Jews would conform to the official pagan state religion which included emperor worship.

The privileges they were granted created them as a distinct group of second class citizens. It’s a matter of debate whether the Jews had actual civil rights but they did have a special status that allowed them to be exempt from worshipping the emperor, and also exempted them from military service. They had special rights granted that permitted them to settle inter-Jewish legal disputes through their own laws and traditions in the Sanhedrin. They were allowed to administer their own funds. This pertained especially to the temple tax that almost all Jewish people were required to pay for the upkeep of the temple. All of this came with a literal cost. The Jewish people were charged a specific punitive tax that they had to pay for these privileges. On one hand, this was a very smart and tolerant arrangement between the two groups, but on the other hand it created ill will and didn’t go near as smoothly as it might have seemed. The Romans gave the powerful positions to the Jewish people they felt they could rely upon the most, and these Jews would become more and more like the Romans.

The Jews felt that God had given them the land that was now the Roman area called Judea over a thousand years before in the time of King David. Judea with its capital of Jerusalem wasn’t just a piece of land like all the rest. It was not only one of the most agriculturally productive pieces of land in the Middle East, it contained several very important trade routes that connected it to the rest of the world. Due to the special nature of Jerusalem, it has been fought over many times. Herod had Rome’s complete support to rule this area starting in **40 BCE**, specifically because he made huge profits from legitimate trade as well as the heavy taxes on the Jews. Herod was a cruel and paranoid man and also one of the most impressive builders ever. He built relentlessly while he ruled. Look up the cities, palaces and fortresses he built, some of which are still standing to see how advanced these buildings were. Herod’s most ambitious building project was the rebuilding and expansion of the Great Jewish temple in Jerusalem that had been a modest structure originally built in Jerusalem in **516 BCE**. He didn’t do it because he was an observant Jew who recognized the importance of the Temple. He did it to keep the peace with the Jews, but also to gain revenue from the three annual visits that all able bodied Jewish men were required to make. The temple was the world’s largest functioning religious site. Even today it remains the largest man-made platform in the world. It was the size of 20 football fields and took 10,000 men ten years just to build the retaining walls. For sure, Herod was an ego maniac but there was a practical need for the temple to be HUGE as well as beautiful. There were estimated to be 6-7 million Jewish people in Judea and hundreds of thousands of people would be in Jerusalem during each of these three annual festivals. The revenue produced from their presence was immense. The end result of Herod’s rebuilt temple was spectacular. From a distance, the historian Josephus says that it looked like a mountain covered with snow. Even though the Holy of Holies was covered in pure gold, everything else was white. The walls and columns were made of white marble, the floors of Carrera marble. The tapestries inside the temple were blue, white, scarlet, and purple. It was reported in many historic texts from a variety of sources that it was the most beautiful, magnificent building that had ever been seen, with its beauty surpassing any palaces or other regal structures.

Herod wanted to be sure that the Jews would continue to be kept in line, pay their taxes and that the Temple would be run as he saw fit, so after the huge roman eagle he had placed at the main entrance was smashed by Jewish Torah students, he burned them alive, put to death 46 leading members of the Sanhedrin, and appointed his own high priest. He was not playing around with these people. So when the information came to Herod that the Messiah had been born, all the Jews were looking for a Messiah who would overthrow the Roman rule, and so it would fit with his behavior to kill all the boy children in the area to insure that the Messiah would not ever be able to fulfill his mission.

Herod would die when Jesus was just a child in **4 CE**, and following his death there would officially be a brief period of peace that was free of revolt and bloodshed by the military powers but the corruption of the temple hierarchy continued on. It was in this time of peace that Jesus began his ministry to the people. Not all of his teaching was done in Jerusalem at the temple. A lot of it was done in the surrounding area but those people would have been greatly influenced by what happened in Jerusalem. By the time that Jesus began to teach in the Temple, ironically built by the man who tried to kill him, three main groups of the Jews were in deep and complex conflict with one another. The Sadducees who were wealthy and collaborated with the Romans so they could retain their power, now controlled the Temple. In addition, the Sadducees were the tax collectors and we will see them mentioned many times in the New Testament as being somewhat criminal and thuggish in their methods of collecting these taxes from their own people. The Sadducees held the majority of the power positions, but from a total population, they were the minority. The majority of the Jewish people were the Pharisees however they held a minority of the power positions. The disagreements between the two groups were intense and real. In addition, there was a minority group of Jewish people called Zealots who wanted to take the Roman powers down by force and violence and both the Sadducees and the Pharisees worked to control this group. The Essenes didn't have to be controlled because they separated themselves and were living outside of Jerusalem.

I mentioned earlier that there were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots, and probably at least 20 other smaller Jewish sects. It would have been like today where Christian churches believe a lot of the same things, but not all of the same things, but these two main groups, the Sadducees and Pharisees, were required to cooperate by the Romans as well as by their own religious rules to make this whole religious and political and economic system work. The system was based on a hierarchy with Roman citizens at the top and slaves at the bottom. Very few Jews were Roman citizens. Roman citizens had many special privileges and protections that the Jews did not have. The Sadducees had the closest connections to Roman citizens and they didn't want to lose those rights. The Pharisees had less power than the Sadducees but more than the slave population. The orthodox Pharisees and the more liberal Sadducees knew that the balance of power was tenuous, that it was in their best interest to keep the peace. The Zealots didn't care about keeping the peace, and this would create havoc in the future. They wanted to force the other Jews into fighting for their freedom. The Pharisees wanted a Messiah who would bring peace, acknowledge them for maintaining the religion, and restore them to their full power. They expected a powerful person who would be a military leader. The message of Jesus didn't seem to fit that bill. Maybe Jesus was exactly who they needed. The Sadducees didn't believe in a coming Messiah or an afterlife, so they didn't look to one to take care of the situation.

So Jesus began his ministry in the middle of this complex time of military peace, civil unrest between the different groups of Jews, and temple corruption. His message is not what any of these three groups want. The Romans want the Jews to just keep paying their taxes, doing their work, and keeping the peace within their various groups. The Jewish Pharisees want a Messiah who would restore them to

their right positions, to take away this oppressive Roman system that made them second class citizens, and would give them control of the things they saw as theirs, the land that God had given them, the money and products that this area produced, and to bring about peace for them as a nation. The Sadducees wanted their ability to prosper to continue. But Jesus came in, and in his short three year ministry, he gave the instructions on how to live in the kingdom of God, and said that if you lived like he directed, everything else you wanted would be given to you. The majority of those directions are given in the Sermon on the Mount. Something we can be sure of was that Jesus's followers had one belief that the other groups did not have. They believed Jesus was the Messiah. He became a threat to the other group's ways of life because he was gaining significant popularity. To stop his influence, the Jewish leaders conspired with the Roman political leaders and Jesus was crucified. This event would change the world when his followers would see him resurrected, confirming their belief in him as the Messiah and also confirming that his teachings came from God.

The day to day concerns that the Pharisees and the Sadducees had with one another and with the Romans were real. The issues were substantial and needed a solution. The solution Jesus presented through peacemaking and non-violence, love for your enemies and a full trust in God to handle things was rejected, and today we can see that there was one factor that changed it all. They didn't believe that He was the Messiah. Had they believed that, it is my belief that the world would have been a very different place then and today.

Jesus's crucifixion didn't change the fact that Jerusalem would continue to be a place of conflict where the different Jewish factions worked together at times and at times worked against one another. In the year 66 CE the Zealots would become a much bigger influence when they wage a war against the Romans after the Romans stole vast amounts of silver from within the Temple. The Zealots believed that all means were justified to attain political and religious freedom, and the end result would be one of the most catastrophic events in the history of Judaism, second only to the Holocaust. In 70 CE, the Holy Great Temple of Jerusalem would be destroyed in this war and over a million Jews would be killed. Just as an aside, after the destruction of the temple, was when the Jewish leaders decided to write down the oral Torah. They knew that there was a possibility of losing the entire history of the religion if they did not, and the Sadducees did not exist after the destruction of the temple .

Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple, and he never said that there was a way to stop it. He told the Jews that they could not trust the world, they definitely could not trust the Romans, and that they needed to put their trust in God. They had suffered after the imposition of the Greek way of life imposed upon them and had fought back in the Maccabean Revolt. Now they had suffered under the Romans and fought them in the battles that would result in their losing the Great Temple and their place in the city of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, the holy city of the Jews, is a place that has been an important city but a city of near constant strife. Wikipedia's page "The Timeline of Jerusalem" says that in its long history, it has been fought over 16 times, destroyed twice, besieged 23 times, attacked 52 times, and captured and recaptured 44 times. It has gone through many vicious cycles of violence and loss. For the Jews, there has always been a desire to rebuild what they had in the past. To this day, it has not yet happened.

Jesus taught a lesson that is still correct today, which is that the world will keep you turning in vicious cycles that result in destruction until you figure out the way to be transformed. The Zealots did exactly what Jesus said not to do and created a situation that almost removed the Jewish religion from existence. In episode 013, Salt and Light, we went through a short analysis of the application of Jesus's

principles of non-violence that Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez made that resulted in the Indian people gaining independence from the British, and the tremendous advances in the civil rights movement in the United States. Maybe the people were wrong to think that Jesus's message wouldn't have changed their situation. Maybe his methods were the military methods necessary to change the violent cycles that plagued the Jews and the city of Jerusalem. On the day the temple was destroyed, there were extreme amounts of people in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. What if the throngs of Jews had just sat down and refused to be moved like they did in India and the United States in this past century instead of fighting? It seemed crazy when Gandhi, King and Chavez did it but it WAS effective.

So what do you believe? Was Jesus the Messiah? What might happen in your life if you believe in him and follow his instructions for being a citizen of the kingdom of God even if it seems a bit crazy? In the next episode, we will finish the section of the Sermon on the Mount that shows a carefully constructed and symmetrically ordered teaching that isn't the ordinary way of looking at the content in the teaching. There is an astonishing group of 14 triads contained within the Sermon that includes these three things in each; the traditional way of thinking about how to live your life, the vicious cycle that each of these things exposes, and the transforming action that gives you the power to change your circumstances and stop the vicious cycles that dominate every day, normal life.

As you put together the composition of what you believe, I hope that today's episode deepened your understanding of the world Jesus was teaching in and the pitfalls that the people were falling into with one another that led to his death and ultimately their destruction. Now the job is to work so those things don't happen in our lives and that we can live in the kingdom of heaven that Jesus ushered in. I'm Juliet Mee, and this is Working with the Voice.