

THE COMPASS

SHOCK TALK: Straight From Jesus' Mouth

Part 5:

Jesus Off a Cliff

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John Feeney, where are you now?

Wherever you are, John: I'm sorry! Forgive me! I was wrong! So wrong!

I grew up in a Pentecostal family in a mostly Catholic town: Griffith, Indiana, just outside Chicago.

We had Polish Catholics, Hungarian Catholics, and right across from my house on Broad Street were the Feeneys: Irish Catholics.

John and I were pretty good buddies.

But one day, somehow — I don't know how this happened — he and I were sitting on the front steps of his house, and we got into a conversation about religious faith.

Now I was only in sixth grade, so I was no expert.

But I did know the one most important thing — which was: Catholics were not going to heaven. *Pentecostals* were the ones going to heaven.

And John — poor idiot — he denied it! He said I was wrong! Crazy kid.

Well, this was no problem, really. I just headed back across the street to my house, got my Bible, and went to see my mom.

I said, "Mom, John Feeney says Catholics are going to heaven, and I told him he's nuts. Would you just show me here in the Bible where it says that we're the only ones going to heaven, so I can show him?"

My mom was horrified!

"You told him *what?* Get back over there and tell him you were wrong! The Bible doesn't say we're the only ones going to heaven! Where in the world did you get that?"

I don't know.

Somehow I had acquired the idea that heaven belonged to our little group. That God was our own private God, and Jesus was our own private mascot.

And I would love to be able to tell you that my mom got me totally straightened out that day, and I never made that kind of mistake again.

But the truth is, I have spent my whole life trying to get a handle on this tendency, because this wasn't just a one-time problem, a one-shot deal.

That day on John Feeney's front steps, I was just demonstrating one small example of our great, over-arching propensity for *exclusion*.

I understand God's design — the two most important things in life: Thing 1 and Thing 2 — loving God, loving people.

I acknowledge how dependent I am on God. OK, cool.

Then, since I want to do whatever I can to connect other people to God, I want to set up routines and systems that will help me love God and love people get other people to love God and love people.

Maybe I want to set up an organization that will supposedly help me accomplish this stuff, or get involved with an organization that already exists that's designed to help people accomplish this stuff. Maybe a church, for example.

And the organization has set up rules and policies to help people reflect what God wants.

And then when somebody breaks the rule, or fails to observe the policy, then we've got a problem — and we have to tend to this problem.

Or when somebody shows up who doesn't agree with one of the rules, or one of the policies, then we've got a problem we need to tend to.

Have to be baptized a certain way.

Must speak in tongues; must not speak in tongues.

Have to go through a membership ritual.

Got to wear your hair a certain way.

Got to take communion a certain way, or on a certain schedule.

Got to say a certain set of words.

Got to give a certain amount of money.

Got to observe certain rituals.

Got to obey these rules to keep you from breaking these other rules.

But here's what I'm saying, without realizing it:

If this is how God works in my life, he has to work in yours the same.

If you don't observe the same procedures for walking with God that I observe, you can't really be walking with God.

We put God in a box.

Like one of those puzzle boxes — you have to know the secret move to get it open.

Here's God!

Here's how he works!

Here's *when* he works.

And whole religious movements rise up.

The Methodist Church started out when the Wesley brothers, from the Church of England in the 18th century, decided to focus on a methodical approach to Bible study and Christian living.

The Presbyterian Church is named for its style of government. So is the Episcopal Church.

Quakers rejected the very idea of church government — and got their name from their style of worship.

Today we have some churches trying to do church the way Willow Creek Church outside Chicago does church.

Others try to do church the way the Vineyard churches do church.

I've worked in church leadership most of my adult life, and in planning meetings behind closed doors, I have often heard the statement, "That's not how we do it."

Well, to "do ministry," you've got to have a church building.

No, I don't.

You can't just meet in people's home and offices.

Yes, we can.

Or, coming from the other direction: You can't spend 14 million dollars on a church building!

Yes, we can.

You know, you've really got to have professional pastors.

No, we don't.

You have to have accountability to some kind of leadership team.

No, we don't.

The senior leader needs to be the main teacher.

Not true.

You know, you've really got to meet on Sunday because that's when most people think of going to church.

No, we don't.

You can't just meet whenever you feel like it.

Yes, we can.

You have to pass the plate; you have to take an offering.

No, we don't.

You have to have some kind of membership requirements.

No, we don't.

Look, you can't literally be *only* about Thing 1 and Thing 2, loving God and loving people.

Yes, we can.

You have to have some kind of program, some kind of strategy.

No, we don't.

Or, coming from the other direction: You can't have so many ministry strategies going at once.

Yes, we can.

This is a natural instinct.

I want control.

I want to know what to expect.

I want to be able to reduce God to a formula.

To a certain location, a certain time.

I want a safety zone.

I want a very clearly drawn space that I'm inside of, and John Feeney is outside of.

Here's the problem: God keeps popping out of the box.

God is not a trained seal.

He keeps devastating our safety zone.

He keeps moving in new ways, in new places.

Our role is not to dictate how God will work, or manipulate how God will act, or predict what God will do, or squeeze people into our mold so that God will be happy.

Our role is to love God by loving people. Just loving them.

Our job is really quite simple, when you get right down to it.

If we stuck to our job.

But the fact is, I have an astonishing capacity for drifting off my job description — off of loving God by loving people — and into the thicket of trying to control people, and get them to conform to *my* way of loving God, *my* way of loving people, *my* way of expressing my faith, *my* way of living out my relationship with God.

And when you cross me — when you contradict my way — I react badly. I get mad, or I withdraw, or I write you off: which isn't loving you. It's not what God designed me for. But that's where I go. A lot of the time.

Jesus actually demonstrated this phenomenon for us, in a way.

Early in his earthly ministry (**Luke 4**), he headed back to his hometown — Nazareth — big mistake, if you ask me.

People there remembered him as a pimply-faced teenager; they were gonna have trouble accepting him as their Messiah!

But he went anyway, waited till the Sabbath, went to the synagogue, and stood up to read the Scriptures.

This was the ancient Jewish equivalent of waking up on Sunday morning, going to church, and when they ask, "Does anyone have anything to share?", you stand up and speak your mind.

What Jesus did was unroll a scroll of ancient prophecy, a passage that everybody in the room knew by heart — he read it out loud, rolled the scroll back up, sat back down — and then said to the group, *You know what I just read to you? It was talking about me. I'm the fulfillment of this prophecy. I'm your Messiah.*

At first, people were OK with it.

The history in the Scriptures tells us that everybody "spoke well of him"; they were "amazed" by "the gracious words that came from his lips."

And they asked each other, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

In other words, isn't this just our local boy? Look how good he's done for himself!

But Jesus didn't leave it there. He knew what the people were really thinking.

They had heard about the miracles he had worked over in Capernaum, and they were thinking of getting in on a little of the action themselves.

They were going to say, Hey, do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum."

So he called them on it.

He said, Let me "tell you the truth. No prophet is accepted in his hometown."

In other words, the people who claim to love me the most, the people who think of themselves as the most committed, the closest to me — they're going to be the ones who miss it. The ones who shut me out.

Then he starts giving examples.

Like the time, centuries before, when the top religious leader in the country was the prophet Elijah, and it didn't rain for three and a half years, and people were starving, and God told Elijah to go help a poor widow who was at serious risk — but not a widow right there in Israel; he sent Elijah to go help a widow over in Lebanon. Enemy territory.

Which wasn't how these people saw themselves — they were the religious establishment; they were the insiders. God was supposed to do his thing,

because they were doing their thing, and their thing was God's thing. And then Jesus reminded them of the time there was an outbreak of leprosy in Israel, and God sent another prophet, named Elisha, to heal a guy — but not one of Israel's leaders; he sent Elisha to heal a big shot over in Syria. Enemy territory. Which also wasn't what these people wanted to hear — these people who had been so diligent to be good and do good and please God with all their religious observances.

But Jesus was saying to the people, You don't own God. You can't dictate how and when and where God is going to operate. You can't keep John Feeney out of heaven!

And sure enough, the people who just a few minutes before were oohing and aahing over what a great guy Jesus was — now they're furious. The Bible says they jumped up, drove him out of the synagogue, drove him out of town, took him to the edge of a cliff — which was no problem, since Nazareth was built on the side of a hill — and they were just about to throw him off the cliff — these are his neighbors! The people he grew up with! Can you believe it? — when he finally escaped. Somehow, miraculously, paralyzed the mob and walked through the crowd and went on his way.

Who is the person likeliest to push Jesus out of the picture?
 Who is the person likeliest to lose touch with what God is really doing?
 Maybe it's me.
 Maybe it's the "insider."

The guy who thinks of himself as the "good Christian."
 The member of the "established church."
 Maybe my focus on my way of "doing church" — my way of expressing my faith in God — my way of living out my relationship with God — has become so important to me, so predominant in my life, that I'm more in touch with my routines than I am with my Redeemer. The one who made my whole life possible.

And I think there is more at stake here than just my own personal relationship with God. This is going to affect, in very practical ways, my relationships with people — my ability to love people.

When I cross someone's path in life, and God has put me in a position to love them, help them, meet some need in their life, offer constructive influence of some kind — when he puts me in a position to express his grace to someone — how freely am I expressing that grace?

What kind of signals am I sending?

Maybe I send the signal that says "You have to act like me to experience God's design for life."

Maybe the signal that radiates from me is "I don't approve of you in some way."

Maybe I'm sending a signal that says, Here's the box God is in. Come on in.

Instead of just being Jesus to this person — instead of just expressing God's love to this person — I'm telling this person: Jump through my hoops in order to connect with

God.
 I'm effectively pushing Christ away from that person.
 I'm pushing Jesus off the cliff.
 It's what ends up happening when you I God in a box.

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At the end of this ugly encounter Jesus had with his neighbors in Nazareth, the Scripture says Jesus walked right through the crowd and went on his way. Where was he heading? He was going where people would give him free rein to work. God moves where people are open to him. He likes it where there are no rules. No walls. No artificial limits. No human hindrances. No religious restrictions.

Every one of us has a box. A box we keep God in.
 A set of perspectives and perceptions, our combined idea of what God is like and how he works.

But you know what?
 My box won't hold God.
 Neither will yours.
 God is bigger than my box.

We have no real frame of reference for how God wants to work in our lives and in the lives of those around us.
 God tells us in **Isaiah 55:8,9**: **"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.... As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."**

My life needs to center around just one question, and that question is not "How can our church get bigger?" or "How can I make a more positive impression on people for the sake of God's work?" or "How can I keep myself and all these other people inside the circle, doing the right thing and keeping God happy?"
 My life needs to center around one question: What can I do to love God more and love people more?
 If there's a second question, it's: How can I help you love God more and love people more?

And the answer to these questions is always going to be pretty much the same. I don't love God and love people by my perfect church attendance or my brilliant ministry strategy or how thorough my note-taking is when I listen to the sermon or how emotional I get listening to the choir or how handsome I look in my Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes.
 I love God by loving people — and I love people by loving them. Serving them. Laying down my life for them. Exchanging my own comfort for someone else's well-being. Getting involved where I naturally feel like detaching. Making an effort where I naturally feel like slinking off to the La-Z-Boy. Giving instead of taking. Whenever I lay down my life and give of myself to someone else in Jesus' name, that's when I grow spiritually.

That's when I begin to taste the fruit of God's planting in my life.
That's when I begin to experience the joy he designed me to experience.

You know, Jesus spent about three years with his disciples and then he turned them loose.

In all that time he never demonstrated that his idea of the Christian life was attending multiple church services and Bible studies.

He never nailed down how many songs the congregation should sing, or whether there should be guitar music or organ music, or whether there should be a drama ministry.

He never detailed forms of worship, forms of church government, any of that stuff that we've come to make *so very important*.

His whole thing was loving people, out there in the world of real life.

I can talk about loving God. We can sing about it. I can work up a really neat spiritual experience when we gather together for worship.

But that's not God's big thing.

I can feel great about how orderly our plan of church government is, or how comprehensive our membership assimilation strategy is.

But that's not God's big thing.

I can take pride in how utterly devoid of unsavory habits I am — or what a colossal library of Christian literature I've plowed through — or how brilliant our worship style is — or any number of other accomplishments.

But these are not God's big thing either.

Where did God say I would find him?

With the down and out. With the unlovely. He says we'll find him when we love people who are hurting. People who are searching. People who do not have it all together. People who don't look like they're *going* to get it all together. Sick people. Smelly people. Failures. Misfits.

This is where we meet God face to face.

John Feeney, wherever you are? Maybe I'll see you in heaven, buddy!