

Welcome

The Star Wars universe gained a new hero with the premier of *The Mandalorian*. The titular Mandalorian is named Din Djarin. The Mandalorians are a race of aliens who follow a creed to adopt orphaned children and raise them in the Mandalorian Way. Djarin is a bounty hunter, travelling the galaxy doing jobs for various less-than-upstanding folks.

But when he learns that his newest acquisition is a baby, everything changes for him.

That's right, Baby Yoda (who we now know is called "Grogu") stole the hearts of everyone in the world. And Djarin found himself on the run because he couldn't bring himself to leave Baby Yoda with the bad guys who certainly didn't have his best interests at heart.

So from the beginning of the series, we have a man motivated by a religious code: protect children.

But we learn quickly there's another code for the Mandalorians - he must never allow another person to see his face.

That matters a lot in the season 1 finale, when Djarin is dying. The only way for him to live is for his droid companion to remove his helmet and do a minor (for a robot) operation. Djarin decides that droids don't count as people, so he consents. The droid saves his life and he and Baby Yoda ride off into the sunset.

But it's worth noting that Djarin had to think about it. He seriously considered dying rather than betraying The Way.

We needed that scene in the first season of the show to set us up for an incredibly powerful conflict in season 2. Poor Yodito has been captured by the fearsome Empire, and Djarin has *one chance* to get him back. He disguises himself as a storm trooper and sneaks into an imperial base so he can find the secret location where Yodito is being held.

The only problem? The room is filled with Imperial troops, and the data console requires a retinal scan.

If Djarin wants to save Baby Yoda, which is one of the tenets of The Way, he has to show his face to other people - which breaks another tenet of The Way.

We have to be clear here: Djarin's religion has put him in an impossible scenario. He *can't* follow his faith perfectly. To follow either precept means he has to break the other.

That is the tension I want to explore with you today. What do we do when tenets of our faith contradict each other? How do you know which Way is the right Way when the path you're following forks?

The good news is that Jesus has already shown us how to resolve that tension, so let's begin by worshipping him!

Message

Welcome to CataVision! This summer, we're going to explore some of our most beloved television shows. Why? Because we're practicing listening well and creating spiritual conversations.

The shows we're engaging have been popular, which indicates they resonate with us. There's something about them that connects with us - not just as individuals, but at a cultural level. So this summer, we're going to ask, "Why?" What message in these shows is resonating? And how do we engage that message in a faith-filled way?

So that's what we're doing this summer: first, listening to the show and second, responding in faith. We began with WandaVision, a show about learning to see past our self-deceptions and be honest with ourselves. Reality TV helped us understand our need for authenticity. Then we spent a couple of weeks in Heaven and Hell with The Good Place and Lucifer. Sonya Brown took us into the Upside Down, where we saw that it's not quite as scary as Stranger Things makes it out to be. And Breaking Bad helped us recognize our capacity for sin and need for Jesus.

Today, we're heading out on a space western with the Star Wars sensation *The Mandalorian*. Now, if you know Star Wars, you won't be surprised to find religious parallels in this show.

The Mandalorian's Way is a pretty obvious example, one that becomes even clearer in Season 2. Djarin meets another group of Mandalorians who almost immediately take off their helmets. When he expresses indignation and disbelief, they call him a member of a "cult of religious zealots".

That's right - the Mandalorian's "Way" is apparently legalistic fundamentalism.

That's something a lot of us are probably familiar with. It's easy to vilify fundamentalism - overly strict religious people who are against everything. But fundamentalism never starts out that way.

Every religious movement that turns into fundamentalism begins from a place of real concern. The fundamentalism movement in our own country has its roots in a time of massive social upheaval. People felt as though they were losing their grasp on how to follow Jesus, so they turned back to the 'fundamentals' of faith.

Or take Jesus' day.

Turn with us to [Matthew 9](#).

If there's a villain in the Gospels, it's probably the Pharisees. Which is strange because, of all the religious groups in Palestine in Jesus' day, Jesus was most closely aligned to the Pharisees.

So who were the Pharisees? They were a group that had emerged over a century earlier after the Maccabean revolt (which is what Hanukkah celebrates). They saw how their government was behaving, how their religious leaders were acting, and they didn't like it. God had created Israel to be a light to the world. God created Israel to show the whole world who God is, and how to be in relationship with God.

The Pharisees decided that, since their priests and kings weren't going to do that, they would have to. So they committed to live out God's principles in their own lives, rather than relying on the priests and kings.

This was actually super revolutionary - today, we all see faith as something personal, something that is primarily on our own shoulders. But in the ancient world, religion was a public thing. It was centered not on the individual or the home, but on the temple and the palace. The priest and the king.

So for the Pharisees to take religion on their own shoulders was a move I bet most of us here today would celebrate.

But by Jesus' day, the Pharisees had morphed into something else. They started as a group whose rules and practices oriented them toward God. Their rules and practices helped them be God's examples in the world.

But somewhere along the way, they lost sight of the goal. Those rules and practices that had been guides to being like God became gods in and of themselves. And rather than being invitations into God's kingdom, the Pharisees became gatekeepers.

No wonder they were so often in conflict with Jesus. This particular story in Matthew's gospel is the story of Jesus calling a tax collector (also named Matthew). Imagine if IRS agents did business by showing up to your house and forcing you to pay any amount they wanted. If you owed \$5,000 in taxes, they could make you pay \$10,000 and keep the other \$5k and no one would say anything about it.

Yeah... they weren't awesome. So it's a big deal that Jesus calls one to follow him. And it's an even bigger deal that the guy throws a party and invites all his friends to meet Jesus. (Imagine, for a moment, what sort of 'friends' a guy like that has.)

And *then* imagine what the Pharisees thought of Jesus attending that party. Let's read:

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.

Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" -- Matthew 9:9-11

I love the way the NLT renders their disdain. It really captures the connotation of the Greek word there. These men are *disgusted* that Jesus is eating with sinners.

And this moment encapsulates the twin impulses in religion - holiness and hospitality. Holiness is all about being like God. And remember - that is the Pharisees' goal. They originally formed because they were dissatisfied with the lack of holiness they saw in the world around them and from their leaders.

Especially in times we feel afraid or threatened, when the world feels unsteady, we turn to religion to get away from all that. So holiness becomes about following the rules, doing everything we can to keep out the bad and keep in the good.

We end up becoming gatekeepers who care more about protecting our rules than caring for those God created and called us to care for.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees illustrates how they've gotten it wrong:

When Jesus heard this, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do." Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.' For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."

Jesus doesn't just rely on his own authority. He quotes the Bible - the prophet Hosea, where God says, "I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifice." -- Matthew 9:12–13 (NLT)

Sacrifice is connected to that first way of being religious - it's all about purity. We don't sacrifice today, but we do have religious codes. All the ways people are supposed to be in order to be right with God. Certain ways we talk, certain people we love, certain policies and parties we support and so on. You know the lists.

But Jesus points to another expression of religion - Mercy. This is how we treat other people - especially the people who aren't "good enough". People who don't act right, believe right, think right.

Should we shun those people because they're not keeping the rules? The purity folks (like the Pharisees) say Yes!

Jesus doesn't just say, No. Jesus says No *while he's at a public party with all those impure people*. He's walking his talk.

Let's go back to the Mandalorian. Djarin has a purity rule - no one can ever see his face.

And he has a mercy rule - care for the orphans you encounter.

And now his purity rule and his mercy rule are in conflict. The fundamentalists would tell him to keep his helmet on, leave, and offer a prayer for Baby Yoda. After all, he must keep to The Way.

But in those moments in the Imperial station, Djarin realizes that he must live in mercy. He removes his helmet and gets the information. He violates the Mandalorian Purity Code in order to follow The Way, caring for the orphan.

He chooses mercy over sacrifice.

And friends, when we're watching, we know he made the right choice. There's not a doubt in our mind. Because when real lives are on the line, it should be a no-brainer.

Friends, in good times, there's no conflict between our impulse toward purity and our impulse toward hospitality. I wish I could tell you that's how life always is.

But we all know that's not the case. Life is messy. Life is complicated. And we're all going to face times when those impulses conflict. How do I know? Jesus did.

So let us always look to Jesus' example: God desires mercy, not sacrifice. When faced with the choice between remaining pure in heaven and welcoming us, Jesus left the purity of heaven to enter into our mess. He let himself be broken open, and it is that very breaking open that enables him to welcome us into his family.

Let us be a church that chooses mercy over sacrifice. Let us understand God's holiness as radical welcome.

Communion + Examen

By welcoming us to his table, Jesus offers us mercy.

How have I sought to look like Jesus this week?

What has kept me from looking like Jesus?

When in the next week might I have to choose between law and love?

How can I show mercy in this next week?

Assignment + Blessing

Who is God calling you to welcome this week?