Jesus and Trust

Jennie Dugan

When Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid, just trust me…” (Mark 5:36), he summed up our overall image of him. Jesus symbolizes trust. He did that by more than simple words.

As a teacher, Jesus set an example. Yet, examining a set of specific behaviors linked to trust building reveals how we often inadvertently emulate the Pharisees rather than Jesus. These intertwined behaviors spring from trust and create a climate where we are trusted and we trust, when we model Jesus. Or, on the opposite side, the negative behaviors create an atmosphere where mistrust grows, as with the Pharisees.

A climate, in this context, means an environment created by communication styles, including unspoken communication. It can be created by one person or a group. Is it open, or is it full of barriers? Does it encourage trust, or does it induce fear and mistrust at any level?

Jesus spoke of trust and also lived the behaviors found in a supportive climate, a trust-breeding environment where open communication is the norm. Mistrust is a hallmark of the opposite, a defensive climate, which is virtually synonymous with the Pharisees’ behavior.

Each side has six behaviors, opposite traits that either feed supportiveness and the trust Jesus lived or feed defensiveness and its resulting mistrust (See Figure 1). Jesus lived equality, while the Pharisees thrived on displays of superiority. Jesus was filled with empathy (compassion), as when a leper begged for healing, while the Pharisees were neutral (cold and dispassionate), as when they plotted Jesus’ death and then ritualistically declined to enter the Roman’s building so they would not be defiled before the Passover (John 18:28). The Pharisees were role models for compartments, a trust-breeding environment where open communication is the norm. Mistrust is a hallmark of the opposite, a defensive climate, which is virtually synonymous with the Pharisees’ behavior.

Equality versus superiority

Equality means fairness, justice, or absence of distinction, while superiority is “an exaggerated opinion of oneself.” Attempts at
creating levels of superiority create a sense of inequality. Some of the many synonyms for inequality include favoritism, imbalance, and injustice, which are all opposite of Jesus’ teaching. This helps clarify why superiority creates defensiveness, which creates mistrust. Jesus described equality when he said, “Students are not above their teacher, but all who are fully trained will be like their teacher” (Luke 6:40).

Superiority can be created many ways, either by acting as a superior or by behaving in an inferior or subservient manner, which places others superior. The Pharisees created a sense of superiority both by declaring themselves to be superior and by complaining that Jesus thought himself superior. Displaying moral superiority, no matter how well intentioned, creates a defensive climate, which breeds mistrust and creates barriers, the opposite of the example Jesus showed us. Because superiority is so multilayered, interchanging “superiority” with “inequality” diminishes the need to analyze or assign blame. When creating a supportive climate and reaching for trust, identifying who started the superiority battle may be ultimately unimportant, unless one is identifying it in his or her own behavior. Even then, it may not be important, because changing the behavior and changing the climate are the ultimate goals. Jesus only rarely analyzed or explained the behaviors he confronted. He simply wanted our behavior to be God’s will, purely God’s will, with no underlying motive of demonstrating worth, competing for position, or proving superiority.

When Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well and asked her for a drink, she quickly pointed out he was a Jew and she was not, because Jews refused to associate with Samaritans (John 4:7ff). Jesus slashed through levels of inequality, whether Jewish or Samaritan, when he said, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10). If she knew who said to her “Give me a drink,” she would have set aside any fears, any perceptions of inequality, and approached Jesus rather than questioning why he spoke to her. Instead, the perceived inequality created an instant barrier on the woman’s part. A threat can be real or imagined. In this case, it was imagined, because Jesus did not threaten, but, most likely, every other situation she had encountered between Jew and Samaritan involved displays of superiority or inequality. Yet, Jesus did not dwell on the topic of superiority, but went on to fulfill his mission. Further, when he pointed out her people’s lack of knowledge, the text gives no clue that it was with arrogance. Jesus simply had a history of speaking frankly. Peter was one of his chosen inner circle, and Jesus told him his faults as easily as he told the Samaritan woman hers. There was no difference, and that is the crucial point.

Labels meant nothing to Jesus. By choosing four commercial fishermen to be his disciples, his inner circle, Jesus cut through the social hierarchy. He saw through the pretenses of the established religious teachers.

Even the Pharisees acknowledged Jesus’ sense of equality in a passage that also shows the Pharisees’ manipulative strategizing: “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality” (Matt. 22:16). While this was a trap for Jesus, it backfired, because Jesus encompassed equality fully as part of his nature. A purely supportive, trust-filled personal view of the world is not subject to manipulation, because it is not intimidated (as with superiority) and consistently seeks the real issue (problem orientation).

The religious leaders were afraid of Jesus, though, because the people responded with amazement to his teaching. The following passage does not say they were afraid because Jesus threatened them, but neither does it mean the threat was imagined. Jesus threatened their core, their locus of power, which was control over the people: “The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching” (Mark 11:18). They could not conceive equality. They could not conceive that someone else—Jesus—might have a mission from God that made them equal to the average person.

Nothing was beneath Jesus. Jesus went to John the Baptist for baptism, but John resisted: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness’” (Matt. 3:14–15). Jesus seemed to take on different roles at different times, different missions with different immediate objectives, none of which seemed to create inequality for Jesus. He had no need to prove his superiority by insisting that he was the ultimate baptizer. Today, in groups where trust progressively grows, people begin automatically to shift leadership to the person in the group who has the appropriate knowledge, background, or talent for a given task. Each is trusted to handle one’s role, just as Jesus trusted John to baptize him and trusted God that it must be done that way.

What Jesus did not do is equally important for emulating him. He did not try to earn admiration. “Don’t do your good deeds publicly to be admired . . . ” (Matt. 6:1). He did not use miracle healing to elevate himself in the public eye: “Jesus sternly warned them, ‘Don’t tell anyone about this’” (Matt. 9:30). Both of these would have been attempts at establishing superiority.

---

**Figure 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trust—Jesus</th>
<th>Mistrust—Pharisees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supportive Climate</strong></td>
<td><strong>Defensive Climate</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>Superiority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Equality)</td>
<td>(Inequality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Neutrality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Feeling, caring)</td>
<td>(Distant, uncaring)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Orientation</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Focus on the problem)</td>
<td>(Limiting people’s behaviors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Facts, parables, stories)</td>
<td>(Opinions, jumping to conclusions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneity</td>
<td>Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Openness)</td>
<td>(Manipulation, plotting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisionalism</td>
<td>Certainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Possibilities)</td>
<td>(Rigid attitude, few options)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To Jesus, equality had no limits, no endpoints. Jesus demonstrated this when a Pharisee invited him to dinner (Luke 7:36), even though Jesus often condemned the Pharisees for their attitudes. Yet, during the meal, that Pharisee criticized Jesus for allowing an apparently very sinful woman to pour rare perfume over his head. Whether the issue was the perfume or her sinfulness, the Pharisee Simon was offended. Jesus responded with both equality and description (stating the facts without judgment): “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:44–47).

Yet, not only did the Pharisees fall into superiority—so much so that superiority may be the easiest of the six defensive traits to identify—but the disciples also fell into competitive struggles. In a story told in both Matthew 20 and Mark 10, the disciples James and John, sons of Zebedee, asked for places of honor at Jesus’ side in heaven, a request for superior ranking. The difference between supportive and defensive climates was beautifully illustrated by the differences between the reactions of Jesus and those of the remaining disciples. Jesus responded with facts (description): “I have no right to say who will sit on the thrones next to mine. My Father has prepared those places for the ones he has chosen.” However, the disciples reacted defensively and emotionally. They were somewhere between indignant and angry, depending on the Bible translation. Then, ever the healer, Jesus “called them together” (Matt. 20:24). What Jesus said is the foundation of equality: “You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must become your slave. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others…” (Mark 10:42–45). He acknowledged inequality in the world, yet instructed his disciples to be different. They were not to buy into the world’s superiority rankings. They were not to be like the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees: “They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called ‘Rabbi.’ Don’t let anyone call you ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters” (Matt. 23:7–8 NLT). Jesus again equalized his students by using terminology that can include both men and women.

Yet, was Jesus’ very mission based on superiority? When instructing the disciples as he sent them off on their first discipling journey, after identifying that the harvest was large with so few workers, Jesus said directly, “Do not go among the Gentiles or any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 10:5–6). He repeated it in Matthew 15:24: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

If we believe that Jesus embodied equality, how do we reconcile his drawing this distinction? In Matthew 18:12–13, Jesus used the sheep analogy again, but now referred to sheep that wander off. This supports the idea that Jesus did not focus on Israel because of status. Perhaps he focused on Israel because they had been given God’s truth previously and had now wandered astray. When the Pharisees attempted subtly to display superiority by asking Jesus for a miraculous sign, Jesus said, “Only an evil, faithless generation would ask for a sign,” again reinforcing the idea that he was sent to the Israelites because they were lost sheep, possibly terribly lost, not because they held a superior rank.

Further, only moments later, Jesus gestured to his disciples, all Jews, and told them, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:49–50), including the notion of gender in the equality concept. He continued emphasizing equality—by addressing “anyone” and by erasing age factors—when he brought in children and said, “Anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matt. 18:4–5 NLT). Finally, in Matthew 18:20, he said, “For where two or three gather together because they are mine, I am there among them.” He included everyone without regard to race, religion, gender, age, or any other distinguishing factor. The only excluding point was whether or not they belonged to Jesus: “… because they are mine.”

But did that truly include everyone? What about his refusal to help a non-Jewish woman, likening it to throwing children’s bread to the dogs (Matt. 15:24)? When Jesus referred to not giving the children’s bread to dogs, perhaps it was not an indictment or judgment. When you look at Jesus overall, he consistently acknowledged situations as they existed. This story also brought in provisionism, that sense of possibilities, when he responded to this woman’s argument that even dogs get the scraps, because he then granted her request. Although she was not an Israelite, her request may not have been as “off mission” as it seemed. Jesus was focused, not rigid. While his first objective was surely “the lost sheep of Israel,” in Matthew 28:19, he would instruct, “Go out and teach all nations.” Though his beginning mission was Israel, the mission given the disciples after his resurrection was “all nations.”

When Jesus said, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not” (John 8:23), he did not negate equality; rather, Jesus equalized all humans. He spelled out clearly that the division is “from heaven” versus “from the world,” putting all humanity in one pool together. That same essence of equality is expressed by Paul in Romans: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:23–24).

Empathy versus neutrality

Empathy refers to “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.” In other words, we feel for others whether or not we have walked in their shoes or heard their stories.
The opposite is neutrality, which means detached, disinterested, dispassionate, impersonal. Neutral is cold and unfeeling, marked by distance and aloofness, a definition that may appear superficially benign, but is part of the climate that creates mistrust and barriers, the opposite of the way Jesus lived.

Even when we feel wronged, Jesus encouraged empathy (and discouraged disinterested neutrality) when he said: "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44).

Ephesians 4:19 addresses neutrality, describing the people as "having lost all sensitivity". That is the essence of neutrality. Neither anger nor conscious rebellion, neutrality is a loss of feeling, a lack of caring. Because we strive for but do not yet live in perfect trust as Jesus did, we must realize that each side has degrees. Few people are completely caring or completely uncaring. Yet, every leaning into the defensive behavior of neutrality, of uncaring and dispassionate disinterest, creates defensive barriers, even toward God.

Christ's ability to care both as human and as God showed itself when his friend Lazarus died: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Along with everyone else, Jesus cried. After empathizing, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, even though Lazarus had been placed in a tomb four days past.

Though purely spiritual and trusting in God's will, Jesus was not dispassionate. He felt, he cared, he was moved to tears. He felt enormously for the crowds coming to him, not only for those he knew and loved personally. More, he showed the importance of caring. Because we strive for but do not yet live in perfect trust with everyone else, Jesus cried. After empathizing, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, even though Lazarus had been placed in a tomb four days past.

Jesus recognized how neutrality occurs when he said, "Because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold" (Matt. 24:12). Note that Jesus did not say the lawless will become cold. He said, "the love of many will grow cold," suggesting that neutrality becomes a reaction to wrong behavior.

Conversely, the Pharisees and religious leaders were characterized by their uncaring attitudes. In fact, even though we already know they lacked the compassion that Jesus showed, their incredible coldness is sometimes startling. They showed this defensive, mistrustful trait when they met "to discuss how to capture Jesus secretly and put him to death. 'But not during the festival,' they agreed. 'Or there may be a riot among the people'" (Matt. 26:4–5). They cared about the riot, not about putting Jesus to death. Even knowing that the Pharisees and these religious leaders lived the fear-ridden, defensive traits, this passage is disturbing. They were beyond anger. They were completely neutral, coldly calculating, dispassionate, and unfeeling, even when plotting a death.

Jesus was the complete opposite, which was obvious to anyone near him. In a touching passage, a leper approached Jesus and said, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean! Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy" (Matt. 8:2–3). Such empathetic responses occur repeatedly throughout the gospels, summed up by this single verse: "Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes" (Matt. 20:34). That explanation may have been symbolic for helping us all to see. Jesus cared for everyone and did not shy away even from lepers, those social outcasts. However, neither did he shy away from teaching Pharisees who wanted to learn. His caring reached out to everyone equally. Like his sense of equality, his empathy knew no limits and had no borders.

However, the Pharisees were imbued with neutrality. When Judas returned the thirty pieces of silver he had been paid to betray Jesus, Judas said, "I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood" (Matt. 27:4). Their response highlighted the cruelty of neutrality when they said to Judas, "What is that to us? That's your responsibility" (Matt. 27:4). They even went beyond that in dealing with Jesus, as if simple uncaring were insufficient: "The chief priests and teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself!'" (Mark 15:31).

Still, perhaps their coldest moment was yet to come. After Jesus was hung on the cross, "The Jewish leaders didn't want the bodies hanging there the next day, which was the Sabbath (and a very special Sabbath, because it was the Passover), so they asked Pilate to hasten their deaths by ordering that their legs be broken. Then their bodies could be taken down"(John 19:31 NLT). The incredible calculating coldness resulted in decisions a feeling person would be ashamed of. These religious leaders had lost all sensitivity. While we expect the average person, including the disciples, to have some struggles with pure, limitless empathy, such uncaring as these religious leaders showed was extreme.

Yet, when Jesus responded to a non-Jewish woman's plea by saying it was wrong to give the children's bread to dogs, his words seemed to hint of neutrality. While he initially denied even hearing her request, the passage shows he ultimately gave her his attention. When he did, his response was not cold, merely explanatory: that his mission focused on God's lost sheep, not the Gentiles (Matt. 15:24). Rather than an example of neutrality, he possibly showed the opposite, because, although he was sent to the Jews, Jesus heard her plea and healed her daughter. Perhaps he showed us that, as humans, we cannot be all things to all people at all moments. That does not mean we do not care, that we are cold or neutral. Our actions and our missions will need boundaries, as guides, not rigid fences outside of which we neither feel nor react.

Jesus showed empathy more than he spoke of it. Empathy combined with equality was illustrated when Jesus washed the disciples' feet and encouraged them to spread this gesture that was both humbling and caring. Jesus said, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15).

### Problem orientation versus control

Synonyms for control include power, authority, command, domination, and weight. The Pharisees thrived on control, power, and authority. Jesus sidestepped control and instead showed a consistent attitude of problem orientation. Jesus looked at the issue, the question, the present focus, rather than using situations to build his own power base. Control causes a reaction of defensiveness and precipitates fear and mistrust. Focusing on the
problem itself generates trust and openness. Because Jesus’ trust in God was complete, Jesus had no need to exert control. He already knew God was in control.

Jesus demonstrated his focus on problems with the simplest phrase: “What do you want me to do for you?” (Matt. 20:32). In this instance, two blind men were calling to Jesus, but the crowd told the men to be quiet, which only made the blind men call louder. The crowd tried to control the men and their behavior. Jesus looked to the problem, though, asking what they wanted.

When the Pharisees criticized Jesus for eating with tax collectors, Jesus stayed focused. “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). Jesus ignored the personal attack and kept his constant problem focus: I have come to call those who want healing.

Ultimate problem focus was Jesus accepting the crucifixion rather than seeking to control the circumstance. Problem focus (problem orientation) was combined with provisionalism (possibilities) when Jesus pleaded with God: “My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet, I want your will, not mine.” He focused on the problem, despite his distress, because his focus was always God’s will and his mission, not his own comfort, status, or power. Focusing on the immediate issue requires tremendous trust in God, because it puts the results—our future—out of our reach but in God’s hands. Asking us to take one step at a time without knowing where the road leads is asking us to trust God.

However, the Pharisees’ goal was to achieve control. Jesus said of them, “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (Matt. 23:4). These demands and rules were a method of controlling the people. As long as the people were under their control, the Pharisees kept power, which meant that they kept their superior status.

While Jesus maintained focus even on his impending death, Jesus showed problem orientation in small everyday questions, also. When Martha was upset that she was doing all the work while her sister Mary sat at Jesus’ feet, Jesus cut through her bustling to the central issue: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by so many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41–42). His problem focus transcended everyday distractions. Jesus seemed always able to ask and answer: What is the real issue? What is the purpose?

The Pharisees even broke commandments to keep control over the people, to build their own power. Speaking to the Pharisees and teachers of religious law, Jesus said, “But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother” (Mark 7:11–12). Keeping control meant disregarding God’s rules and disregarding compassion or empathy.

The Pharisees’ desire to control threaded through everything they did, from control of the people to controlling circumstances, especially those that affected their status. Nearly everything they did was motivated by control. They plotted to have Jesus arrested when he was isolated, away from the people, so they could control the situation, then to have him taken to the high priest Caiaphas in order to control the trial. Still, they attempted to create an appearance of proper procedure: “The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus, so that they could put him to death” (Matt. 26:59). The entire scene demonstrated control combined with manipulative strategy.

The Pharisees also demonstrated control interwoven with neutrality. Referring to Jesus, the chief priests and Pharisees said, “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation” (John 11:48–50). Their primary focus was not the people, not their true job of representing God. Again, their focus was their fear of losing power, losing control.

Did Jesus attempt to exert control over people when he told a rich man he must sell his possessions to enter the Kingdom of God (Mark 10:21)? Crucial to this story is that Jesus did not simply order this man to sell his treasures, as control would dictate. Instead, Jesus said, “Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Jesus’ message was, “If you want this result, then take this action,” which is consistent with an orientation toward solving a problem rather than a desire to control circumstances. The rich man’s attachment to his possessions reflected a desire to control his circumstances, which revealed he did not trust God to take care of his needs.

Conversely, the Pharisees used orders and threats to control people, although their control was tenuous at times, as the people sometimes merely pretended to comply. When being grilled by the Pharisees about who had healed their blind son, the parents passed it off, refusing to answer directly. “They said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already decided that anyone saying Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue” (John 9:22). The threat of being expelled from the synagogue was a method of control. Yet, as these parents showed, the control was superficial. The parents had their own thoughts about whether Jesus was the Messiah but withheld their thoughts from the Pharisees, showing yet another way defensiveness created barriers for the Pharisees. Just as the Pharisees demonstrated a lack of trust in God, the people showed little trust of the Pharisees and religious leaders.

The Pharisees’ need for control was a hallmark of their behavior. The Pharisees threatened punishment for noncompliance. Jesus presented, then let it go. Jesus trusted the results to God.

**Description versus evaluation**

Description is a discourse giving a mental image of something experienced. The opposite is evaluation, which means appraisal,
assessment, or opinion. Description tells a story; evaluation gives an opinion. Jesus often told stories instead of telling his disciples what they must believe and do. His parables demonstrate how he uses descriptive methods in his teaching. With description, rather than giving the speaker’s conclusions, the facts are presented for consideration.

When John the Baptist’s disciples asked Jesus if he was the Messiah, Jesus told them, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Matt. 11:4–5, Luke 7:22). Instead of answering, Jesus gave them an image and let them draw their own conclusions. Yet, his description was not limited to words alone. Jesus lived and encouraged a life of description. When he said, “By their fruit, you will recognize them,” Jesus counseled his disciples to observe behavior, actions, and results, not labels or titles (Matt. 7:16–20).

On the other hand, Matthew 9:3 illustrates evaluation. When Jesus healed a paralyzed man, some criticized his wording—“Your sins are forgiven”—without considering what he had done. “Blasphemy! This man talks like he is God!” some of the teachers of religious law said among themselves. Because defensive climates are based in fear and threat, their criticism focused on the part that threatened them. If Jesus had the power to forgive, their authority over the people was in jeopardy.

The Pharisees routinely engaged in evaluation, shown when a man healed of blindness openly challenged the Pharisees’ knowledge. “You were born a total sinner!” they answered. ‘Are you trying to teach us?’ And they threw him out of the synagogue (John 9:34 NLT). Notice that they did not address whether or not Jesus actually healed this man. That was indisputable. He had been blind; now he was not. They criticized the part that threatened them.

Yet, the Pharisees and religious leaders were often caught in their own words because those words were evaluative, emotional, defensive reactions. Jesus pointed this out with description when he said, “For John didn’t spend his time eating and drinking, and you say, ‘He’s possessed by a demon.’ The Son of Man, on the other hand, feasts and drinks, and you say, ‘He’s a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners!’ But wisdom is shown to be right by its results” (Matt. 11:18–19 NLT). Under attack, still Jesus did not respond defensively, but simply gave the facts and spoke the truth.

**Provisionalism versus certainty**

Think of provisionalism as possibility: “could be” or “what if?” Conversely, certainty (found in defensive climates) is rigid and dogmatic, an attitude that prevents one from hearing the truth.

In the parable of the seeds, Jesus described scattering seed, broadcasting the word of God. Rather than instruct rigidly or dogmatically, he simply presented this parable. He recognized multiple possibilities: some would not absorb the truth at all, some “sprouts” of truth would wither at the first challenge, some would grow stunted by life’s problems, and some would flourish and produce a huge harvest (Mark 4:3–9). God trusted Jesus with telling the truth, and Jesus trusted God that his mission was not futile simply because some seeds fell on rock and withered.

Jesus had more authority than any being on earth to give instruction, yet seemed to use that authority rarely. Jesus often spoke in terms of “if”:

“If a brother or sister sins, go and point out the fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” (Matt. 18:15–17)

Note here that Jesus saw many possibilities. Along with more than one possible way your brother or sister will react, another possibility is that others may find you, the accuser, to be wrong.

The account of picking grains on the Sabbath shows the contrast between certainty and provisionalism, between rigid rules and multiple possibilities. The Pharisees asserted that breaking off heads of wheat was against the law, displaying certainty as they rigidly sought to enforce a rule about working on the Sabbath. Jesus responded with stories of King David eating food reserved for priests and of priests working on the Sabbath (Matt. 12). Jesus introduced provisionalism, the notion that more than one possibility might exist. Provisionalism gives the ability to go beyond dogmatic rules to the principles that may have initiated those rules.

Provisionalism is a pause, a time to gather information, not a refusal to accept responsibility, nor an excuse to ignore sin. A “what if?” attitude does not mean we never make a decision. It means we pause to consider, resisting making emotional, impulsive judgments that we then cling to out of fear.

Certainty, on the other hand, sees limited possibilities, often only one. Although the Pharisees plotted against Jesus, death was not the only possible sentence for the crimes with which he was charged, as Judas showed when he realized Jesus was condemned to death. Judas did not seem to know that turning Jesus in meant condemning him to death. To answer the problem of what to do about Jesus, the Pharisees saw only one possibility: his death. The possibility they could work with or learn from Jesus did not seem to cross their minds: “Very early in the morning, the leading priests and the elders met again to lay plans for putting Jesus to death” (Matt. 27:1 NLT).

Yet, not all of their group fell victim to this rigid certainty. Nicodemus, a religious leader, challenged the Pharisees. Instead of responding with a possibility mentality, they responded defensively to him, “Surely, you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and see, no prophet is to arise from Galilee!” (John 7:52). Nicodemus was not alone: “Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he is working on the Sabbath.’ Others said, ‘But how could an ordinary sinner do such miraculous signs?’” So there was a deep division of opinion among them” (John 9:16
NLT). Some had room in their minds to ask questions, to think of what could be, to say, “What if?”

Certainty locks in rules. Jesus’ trial before Caiaphas ended in the early hours of the morning. Then he was taken to the headquarters of the Roman governor. His accusers didn’t go in themselves because it would defile them, and they wouldn’t be allowed to celebrate the Passover feast” (John 18:28 NLT). The Pharisees locked themselves into certain rules, disregarding principles, yet, even in their rigidness, applied rules inconsistently. They did not want to be defiled while plotting to have Jesus killed.

When Jesus threw the moneychangers out of the temple, did he display rigid certainty? What Jesus showed us is that judgment is not the same as jumping to conclusions. Certainty is an emotional reaction, a fear response often based on limited facts, if any. Jesus knew the facts, and, it is possible that this action was a thoughtfully considered part of his mission of bringing God back to the Israelites. Jesus entered the temple, looked around carefully at everything, then left (Mark 11:11). Key phrases to note throughout Mark’s telling of this story are, “He returned the next day” and “He taught them.” Note also that Mark ends this passage by telling us the people were enthusiastic about Jesus’ teaching (Mark 11:12–19). Perhaps others felt the moneychangers had turned the temple into a den of thieves, but feared the authorities too much to speak up.

**Spontaneity versus strategy**

Spontaneity is voluntary or undetermined action or movement done with abandon, ease, naturalness, and unrestraint. “Intelligent people are always ready to learn. Their ears are open for knowledge” (Prov. 18:15 NLT). Strategy in this system means a careful plan or method, a blueprint, game plan, or scheme. Think of spontaneity as openness. Think of strategy as manipulation.

Jesus instructed the disciples on how and where to spread the word and perform healings. His instruction showed his attitude of spontaneity. Filled with “if this happens, then do this” directions, Jesus essentially assigned his disciples a very specific mission—“Don’t go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans, but only to the people of Israel, God’s lost sheep”—yet simultaneously told them to be open in their experience: “Do not take money; do not take extra coats or sandals.” “Accept hospitality.” “If it turns out to be a worthy home. . . ” “If a village doesn’t welcome you. . . ” “If anyone acknowledges me. . . ” “If anyone denies me. . . ” “If you love your father or mother more. . . ” “If you cling to your life. . . ” (Matt. 10).

He recommended this spontaneously open mindset, trusting in God’s direction even in the most threatening situation, despite the fact that, when one is feeling threatened, one tends to revert to defensiveness: “When you are arrested. . . ” “Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill you” (Matt. 10). Jesus admitted bluntly that he was sending his followers out as sheep among wolves, warning them to be wary as snakes and harmless as doves (Matt. 10:16). He did not instruct them to be foolishly naive, but to be both aware of problems and open to what comes rather than trying to control and manipulate difficulties.

The opposite trait is manipulation, having a strategy, a plot, a plan. The Pharisees showed their penchant for manipulation consistently. Even when they appeared to be open, manipulation was part of their plan. The Pharisees watched Jesus closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath, so they would have some infraction with which to charge him: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” Their question was not information-seeking, but part of their strategy to trap Jesus (Mark 3:2, Matt. 12:10).

In response to the Pharisees’ demand to know where Jesus received his authority, Jesus asked a simple question in return: Did John’s baptism come from heaven or was it merely human? “They talked it over among themselves. ‘If we say it was from heaven, he will ask why we didn’t believe John. But do we dare say it was merely human?’ For they were afraid of what the people would do, because everyone believed that John was a prophet. So they finally replied, ‘We don’t know’” (Mark 11:28–33 NLT).

Even in the face of driving out demons, Jesus demonstrated his openness: “For Jesus had already said to the spirit, ‘Come out of the man, you evil spirit.’” When the evil spirits acknowledged who he was and begged for another way out, Jesus gave them permission to go into a large herd of pigs, which then ran off a cliff into the water below (Mark 5:8–13). He accomplished his objective of driving out the demons, but was open to different methods of reaching the same goal.

When Jesus healed a slave in Luke 7:1–5, he showed his openness to possibilities. This story is often cited to show faith; the slave of a Roman officer was sick and near death, and the officer said to Jesus, “Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed.” Yet, the story began when some Jewish leaders came to Jesus and begged him to help: “If anyone deserves your help, it is he,” they said. “For he loves the Jews and even built a synagogue for us” (7:4–5). Note how Jesus’ openness played in here. He responded to the Jewish leaders’ plea, though he knew his primary mission was the Jews. Jesus was open. He was spontaneous, never manipulative or strategizing.

Contrast that with the religious leaders’ actions: “Meanwhile, the leading priests and other leaders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas to be released and for Jesus to be put to death” (Matt. 27:20 NLT). “Meanwhile” indicates strategy, an undercurrent of behind-the-scenes activities.

Strategizing can go far beyond manipulating words or single scenarios. When the leaders took Jesus to Pilate, Pilate tried to turn them away: “Then take him away and judge him by your own laws,” Pilate told them (John 18:31 NLT). Yet, the Pharisees had taken their manipulation to an intense level of plotting, showing how deeply their fear ran: “Only the Romans are per-
mitted to execute someone,” the Jewish leaders replied (John 18:32 NLT). The priests and Pharisees lived by strategy, unaware of the burden they created for themselves or the walls to the truth it represented.

Jesus possibly could have rallied a crowd to counter the Pharisees, but he consistently took each situation as it came, preparing for it, teaching, and trusting the results to God instead of manipulating people to affect outcomes. He remained generous and empathetic, drawing from the supportive side—from his trust in God.

In practice

How does one put supportive, trust-building qualities into practice? Jesus’ comment to a canon lawyer shows that defensive climates and their traits create barriers. When this religious teacher showed understanding, that loving God with all your heart and loving your neighbor as yourself were the most important commandments, more important even than the religious requirements of burnt offerings and sacrifices, Jesus said, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). When we remove barriers, we move closer to God.

Because trust is a principle rather than a rule, it may help us to think of the six behaviors as attitudes more than actions, although actions feed the attitudes’ growth. At first, we focus on problems; eventually, we spontaneously sidestep control and emotions to see the real issues. At first, we coach ourselves to stop evaluating or making snap judgments, but, over time, seeing the facts first emerges naturally from our evolving trust in God. At first, we rehearse equality; then, we become equals in our hearts.

The account of the moneychangers tells so much more than simply returning the temple to a place of worship. It shows how Jesus genuinely cut through chaos to focus on problems. That focus (his problem orientation) was held with complete equality. Look how often he chastised his own disciples for wrong behavior or attitudes, ranging from lack of faith to their inability to heal. He was speaking to his own disciples when he said, “You unbelieving, perverse generation! How long shall I stay with you? How long must I put up with you?” (Matt. 17:17). He based judgments on behaviors, not the person behind the act, an indication of his innate sense of equality. Yet, we have no indication that his students felt threatened, as they immediately asked for instruction: “Why couldn’t we cast out the demon?” (Matt. 17:19 NLT).

In a defensive climate, because fear closes doors, criticism causes barriers. In a supportive climate, because it creates trust, criticism is understood as a way of addressing behavior, not the person. People feel free to speak, to admit deficiencies, to ask questions in a trust-building climate, but not in a mistrustful one.

Jesus understood the effect of inequalities. Note what Jesus said when he instructed Peter to take a silver coin from a fish’s mouth and pay the temple tax for Jesus and Peter in Matthew 17:24–26. Jesus saw that ignoring the tax set up an inequality; it put him above the law. In other words, it created an impression of superiority, which creates a barrier, even to God. Jesus said, in effect, “But so as not to get in these people’s way. . .” Defensive climates prevent people from hearing, from being receptive, from understanding, even when they hear the words. Removing that potential barrier was more important to Jesus than protesting a tax. When we seek to remove barriers to God, we also remove barriers between people, whether due to race, age, gender, or any other factor. Conversely, when we allow barriers between people, we erect barriers between ourselves and God. When we seek equality, empathy, and all the supportive traits, we move closer to God. We gain trust in God’s closeness and also gain progressively more understanding of what God entrusted to us. We are open to God’s will without knowing where it will lead. That is the trust in God Jesus had. That is the trust Jesus wants for us.

In the 1960s, psychologist Jack R. Gibb pioneered this critique of behavior that describes traits consistently found in supportive and defensive climates, opposite behaviors that either build a climate of trust and openness (as in supportiveness) or a climate of mistrust and fear (as in defensiveness). The model was developed over eight years of research for the U.S. Navy. What began as a communication study was then applied to business environments and, finally, to life in general. The model is remarkably applicable to relationships today.

Gibb’s later work was the development of Trust Level Theory, a description of predictable growth in trusting climates. Beginning at the bottom with no higher goal than controlling the chaos, trust grows in stages. At the bottom, in the chaos and control, we find the Pharisees. At the top is pure enlightenment, and, there, we find Jesus. In between is a range of relationships, progressively growing in trust.

Gibb did have a Christian background, and it was as I studied trust and Christianity, two parallel tracks in my life, that I had one of those periods of revelation that Christians cherish. The Bible spoke to me as verses leaped off the pages as I realized that Jesus lived a supportive climate, and Jesus lived trust. I, however, could work it in reverse and grow trust by living the six behaviors. In fact, at the end of Gibb’s book Trust, he refers to negating defensiveness as a means to creating a life where trust grows.

Jesus started at the top, with pure trust in God. The behaviors of supportive climates spontaneously took root in his life. However, we can also grow trust in the reverse, by consciously implementing the traits of supportive climates (and consciously reversing the defensive traits), but as principles for living rather than rigid rules.

The Pharisees used rules against people rather than as extensions of godly principles. Again, Jesus addressed the Pharisees and canon lawyers: “You are careful to tithe even the tiniest part of your income, but you ignore the important things of the law—
justice, mercy and faith” (Matt. 23:23, cf. Luke 11:42). Too often, as man and woman, adult and teenager, new believer and lifelong Christian, we think we have the superior grasp of the rules and follow them completely, but simultaneously we ignore the essence of God’s principles and the example Jesus lived. Yet, we all have the ability to learn and to help each other learn. When we accept this equality, then we welcome correction.

Jesus was open to the Pharisees, if they wanted to learn. Not all religious leaders were against Jesus. Jairus was a synagogue leader who sent for Jesus to heal his daughter, even though the crowd ridiculed his action (Mark 5:35–36). This cold-hearted crowd demonstrated the cruelty of neutrality. Providentially for Jairus, Jesus did not react defensively and return the neutrality. Jesus lived in perpetual empathy. Jesus showed Jairus and us we do not have to react defensively in any situation. We can live supportive traits even in a defensive quagmire. We can trust God in any situation.

If we want to create supportive, trust-filled personal climates that emulate Jesus’ actions, we must believe we are equals, men and women, all races and nations, children and adults, those with labels and those without. The crux is this: Inequality is a barrier. Equality opens doors to God.

Jesus lived a life of innate equality interwoven with empathy. He described, presenting facts—all of them—rather than evaluating and jumping to conclusions as the Pharisees often did. “If” appeared often in his instructions, reflecting his attitude of possibility (provisionalism). He did not manipulate. Because he trusted God, he was open to the results of the truth and of his God-led actions.

Problem focus begins in a single interaction, not a radical life change. Equality begins within us, not within someone else. Equality dictates first how we respond to others. If we place ourselves above some, then we place ourselves below others. We are all equal in God’s kingdom. All are equal in Jesus’ eyes. If we place our trust in God, we cannot disregard equality any more than we can disregard empathy or any other of the supportive traits that spring from trust.

Jesus asked us to trust him. More, Jesus showed us how to build trust by his actions, by the way he lived his life, with the way he demonstrated complete trust in God with every step he took.

Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid, just trust me. . .” (Mark 5:36).

Notes

1. New Living Translation, Life Application Study Bible (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1996).
5. Scripture quotations are from the TNIV unless otherwise noted.