Section 5 - The Interdicted Exorcist

Mark 9:38-41; Luke 9:49-50

The messages delivered by our Lord were not the kind we are used to hearing in a sermon today. He did not resort to one-way communication, nor did He speak on topics that were formally announced. For the most part, He used something that was similar to the Socratic dialogues in which He was the principal speaker. The disciples, then, contributed their part by asking Him questions, making remarks, or expressing their conscience on a matter. In the discourse on humility, two of the disciples - Peter and John - took part in the dialogue. Toward the end of the message, these two disciples asked a question about forgiving offenses. When this was done, the other disciple, John, shared an anecdote that came to his mind while his Master was teaching. Jesus had been talking about receiving little children in His name, and the truth He expressed in this teaching seemed to have some bearing on John's story. So the facts that John brought to Jesus' attention led Him to make some comments. These remarks give us an interesting illustration of how the doctrine He taught related to specific cases or questions. These comments, along with the incident they relate to, now call for our attention.

The story told by John went like this: On one occasion, he and his fellow-disciples found a man, whom they did not know, who was engaged in the work of casting out demons. They told him to stop. The reason? That though he used the name of Jesus in practicing exorcism, he did not follow or identify himself with them, the Twelve. We are not told when this happened. However, there is a high probability that the incident was similar to what happened on the Galilean mission. During that time, the disciples were separated from their Master and were busy healing the sick, casting out evil spirits, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom.

It should be noted that John does not remove himself from responsibility for the arrogant way they dealt with the man. Rather, he speaks as if the Twelve had acted unanimously in the situation. It may surprise some to find him, the Apostle of love, consenting to such an unloving act. But the surprise is based on superficial views of his character as well as ignorance of the laws of spiritual growth. John is not now what he will be. He differs from his future self as much as an orange tree in its second year of growth differs from the same orange tree in its third year of growth. The fruit of the Spirit will ultimately ripen in this disciple, producing something
very sweet and beautiful. In the meantime, it is green, bitter, and fit only to cause one's mouth to pucker. At present, he is committed to Jesus with his mind and is tender and intense in his attachment to Him. But he is also bigoted, intolerant, and ambitious. He has already played the part of a very important leader in the church by suppressing the exorcist who would not conform to his way of doing things. Before long, we will see him playing the role of a persecutor by proposing, with his brother, to call down fire from heaven to destroy the enemies of the Lord. And, at still another time, we will find him, his brother, and their mother engaged in an ambitious plot to make their place of distinction secure in the kingdom. This took place immediately after the Twelve had been arguing about it.

An External Test Only

By refusing to recognize the fellow-worker who performed the exorcism as a brother, however humble, the disciples were proceeding on very narrow and shaky grounds. The test they used was totally external. They did not even ask about what sort of man it was who was stopped from performing the exorcism. For them, it was sufficient that he was not one of them, as if all inside that charmed circle - Judas, for example - were good; and all outside, even Nicodemus, were utterly Christless! Two good things, on their own merits, could be said of the man they silenced. First, he was doing a good work; and, second, he seemed to have a very high regard for Jesus, for he cast out demons and did it in Jesus' name. Truthfully, these were not decisive marks of discipleship. It was possible that a man could practice exorcism for personal profit and use the name of Christ because it had proved to be a good name by which to practice exorcism. But the two good things about this man ought to have been taken into consideration before they stopped him. If one looks at the facts, it is probable that the exorcist who had been silenced was an honest and sincere man. His heart had probably been impressed by the ministry of Jesus and His disciples. In all likelihood, he desired to imitate their zeal in doing good. It was even possible that he was more than this. He could have been a man who possessed a higher spiritual endowment than the disciples who censored him. He might have been some local prophet who had not yet become well-known. How absurd, then, was that narrow-minded, outward test: “Because he was not following us!”

Here is an illustration of what this kind of judging does. It is about one little fact from the celebrated history of Sir Matthew Hale, who wrote *Contemplations*. Richard Baxter tells of this distinguished judge who retired from the judicial bench and lived in a certain part of the country (Great Britain). The good people who lived there did not have a favorable opinion of his religious character. They believed him to be a very moral man, but *not converted*. It was a serious conclusion to come to about another human being. It makes one curious about the basis for this kind of judgment. But we are told that the religious people around Acton believed the judge to be unconverted because he did not attend their private, weekly prayer meetings! It was the
old story of the Twelve and the exorcist retold in a Puritan setting. Baxter did not sympathize with the harsh and unloving opinion of his less enlightened brothers. His thoughts breathed the gentle, gracious, humble, loving spirit of Christian maturity. He wrote: “I that have heard and read his serious expressions of the concerns of eternity, and seen his love to all good men, and the blamelessness of his life, thought better of his piety than of mine own.”

**Mixed Motives**

In silencing the exorcist, the Twelve probably had mixed motives. One part of them was jealous; the other part found them with sincere doubts and hesitations. We can only imagine that they disliked the idea of anyone using Christ’s name but themselves. They desired a monopoly on the power that was used in His name to cast out evil spirits. And they probably thought that it was unlikely, if not impossible, that anyone who kept aloof from them could be sincerely devoted to their Master.

As it pertains to their jealousy, their conduct toward the exorcist was based on the same moral issue as their recent dispute about who should be the greatest. The same spirit of pride revealed itself on both occasions. When they silenced the exorcist, they displayed the same kind of arrogance as those who claim their church is the only true church of Christ. In the dispute that the disciples had among themselves, they displayed false humility and played the game of being ambitious, self-seeking, church leaders who were fighting for seats of honor and power. In the case of the exorcist, the Twelve said in effect, “We alone are the commissioned, authorized agents of the Lord Jesus Christ.” In the later case, they said to each other, “We are all members of the kingdom and servants of the King; but I deserve to have a higher place than you, even to be a prince sitting on a throne.”

Let’s suppose, for a moment, that the intolerance of the Twelve was really caused by their honest doubts about the exorcist. If so, it would be deserving of more respectful consideration. When anyone *honestly* tells us something is a matter of personal conscience, they must always be seriously listened to, even when the conscience is mistaken. We say “honestly” with emphasis. We cannot forget that there is much that is considered right and proper that is not honest. Conscience is often used as a disguise by proud, quarrelsome, self-willed men to promote their own personal goals. Thomas Fuller said, “Pride is the greatest enemy of moderation. This makes men fight for their own opinions so they can make them essential for everyone else. Proud men who have deeply studied some additional point in theology will strive to make their findings necessary for salvation. They do it to enhance the value of their own personal worth and their efforts. And it must be essential in religion, because it is essential for their reputation.” These shrewd remarks are true for more than doctrine. Opinionated, pragmatic people would love to make everything in religion essential on which they have dogmatic positions. And if they could get their own way, they would exclude from the church everyone who did not agree with them on
every minor point of belief and practice. But there is also such a thing as a person holding to right and proper convictions with honesty. It is more common than many imagine. There is a certain tendency that seems to be prevalent in the life of every sincere person who is young in the Lord. It is the tendency to demand that others hold their views (and not tolerate anything less) and to be severe in judging others. The conscience of a young disciple is like a fire made with green logs. It smokes first; then it burns with a clear blaze. A Christian whose conscience is in this state must be treated as we treat a dull fire: He must be tolerated until his conscience is cleared of the bitter, cloudy smoke, and it becomes a pure, pleasant, warm flame of zeal that has been tempered with love.

We believe the consciences of the Twelve were of the honest kind, because they were willing to be instructed. They told their Master what they had done so they could learn from Him - whether it was right or wrong. People whose conscience is a sham do not behave in this way.

**Jesus’ Counsel**

Jesus promptly communicated with the disciples who honestly wanted instruction. He presented a clear, definite judgment on the case and gave a reason for it. He said to John, “Do not hinder him...for he who is not against us is for us” (Mk. 9:39-40).

The reason that is given for Jesus’ counsel for the Twelve to be tolerant reminds us of another saying spoken by Him. It occurred when the Pharisees made the blasphemous charge against Him, accusing Him of casting out demons with the help of Beelzebub (“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters” - Mt. 12:30). On the surface, the two sayings seem to be contradictory. One seems to say, “This great thing that has happened - you are not to be against it.” The other says, “This great thing that has happened - you are to be for it.” They are harmonized by a truth that underlies both, that the most important matter in spiritual character is the bias of the heart. Here Jesus says, “If the heart of a man is with Me, he is really for me - even though he seems to be against me because he doesn’t know any better, or because he made an honest mistake, or because he is not a part of the group of those who have declared they are My friends.” In the second case, He was saying, “If a man is not with Me in his heart (the case of the Pharisees), then he is really against Me - even though he seems to be on God’s side (and therefore on Mine) because of his orthodoxy and his zeal.”

Mark adds the following words that Jesus spoke at this time: “There is no one who shall perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me” (Mk. 9:39b). One can hear the united voice of wisdom and love here. The emphasis is on the Greek word which is translated “soon afterward.” In the first place, this word causes us to admit that the case cited could actually happen. In fact, such cases did actually occur later on. Luke tells us about certain Jews who were drifters and took it upon themselves to mention the name of the Lord Jesus to
people who were possessed by demons. They had no personal faith in Him. Rather, they were making a living by performing exorcisms. Even the demons expressed contempt for these vile traders, exclaiming, “I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” (Acts 19:15). So our Lord knew beforehand that these types of cases would happen. And since He knew the depths of human depravity, He could only admit the possibility that the exorcist mentioned by John was motivated by unworthy motives. But at the same time, He was careful to say that, in His judgment, it was not likely. In fact, it was unlikely that someone who did a miracle in His name would speak evil of Him. He desired that His disciples be on guard against being too quick to believe that any man could be guilty of such a sin. Until there were strong reasons for thinking otherwise, He wanted them to graciously think about the outward action as the measure of the person’s sincere faith and love. They might more easily do this now, when there was nothing to be gained by using or professing Christ’s name, except upsetting the Twelve who had the characters and lives of others in their power.

**Applications for the Church**

These were the wise, gracious words spoken by Jesus concerning the case brought for judgment by John. From His teaching, is it possible for us to make any applications to the church in our own time? We must be somewhat reserved when we attempt to answer this question. For while we all bow to Jesus’ judgment on the behavior of His disciples, as recorded in the Gospels, Christians disagree over the inferences to be made from it. However, we may dare to make the following reflections:

1. We can learn from the wise and loving words of our great Teacher to beware of hasty conclusions about the spiritual condition of others when those conclusions are based only on outward appearances. Do not say with the Church of Rome, “If you are not in our church, there is no possibility of salvation or of goodness.” Instead, admit that even in a church where there is corruption, there may be many who are building on the true foundation even though, for the most part, they are doing so with highly combustible materials. In all probability, Christ has many friends who are outside the bounds of all the churches. Do not ask with Nathanael, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (Jn. 1:46). Rather, remember that the best things may come out of the most unexpected places. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some have entertained angels without knowing it (Heb. 13:2). Keep in mind that, by agreeing with the words of the disciples - “Because he was not following us” - in insignificant and unimportant matters, you may be tempting God to withdraw His influences from you for your pride, exclusiveness, and self-will, while giving His Holy Spirit to those whom you think are not in His family. In addition, He may turn your uncompromising beliefs into a prison in which you will be shut out from the fellowship of God’s people. Then you would be doomed to experience the humiliation of looking through the bars of your cell at God’s people walking around, while you lie locked up in a jail.
2. In light of His verdict, “Do not hinder him,” we must read with a sad, sorrowful heart, many pages of church history in which the primary spirit is that of the Twelve instead of that of their Master. One may confidently say that many things in this history would have been different if Christ’s mind had dwelt more in those who were called by His name. Separatism, censorship, intolerance of those who would not conform, and persecution would not have been so common. Conventicle Acts and Five-mile Acts would not have disgraced the book of statutes of the English Parliament. Bedford jail would not have had the honor of holding the illustrious dreamer of the Pilgrim’s Progress as a prisoner. Baxter, and Livingstone of Ancrum, and thousands more who were like-minded and who stirred multitudes to a new spiritual life by their words, would not have been driven from their churches and their native lands. They would not have been forbidden, with the threats of heavy penalties, to preach that Gospel they understood and loved so well. Rather, they would have enjoyed the benefits of the law of toleration which they purchased, with a high cost, for us, their children.

3. The divided state of the church has always caused grief for good people. Attempts have been made to correct this evil by trying to form unions. All honest attempts have as their goal the healing of divisions. Since the Reformation, these divisions have multiplied so much that Protestantism has been disgraced. All efforts at reconciliation deserve our warmest sympathies and our earnest prayers. But we cannot be blind to the fact that because humans are sinners, these projects are likely to miscarry. It is extremely difficult to get a whole community of people who have different temperaments and who are in different stages of Christian growth to come to the same conclusions about the terms of the fellowship. What, then, is the duty of Christians in the meantime? We may learn from our Lord’s judgment in the case of the exorcist. If those who are not a part of our group cannot be brought into our ecclesiastical organization, let us still recognize them from the heart as fellow-disciples and fellow-laborers. Let’s use all the appropriate ways of showing them that we care infinitely more about those who truly love Christ, in whatever church they are in, than those who may be in the same church, but in spirit and life are not with Christ but against Him. Then we will have comfort in the fact that, even though we are separated from the people we love, we are not trying to be divisive. We will also be able to speak about the church being divided as something we do not desire but must endure, because we cannot help it.

Many religious people are at fault here. There are many Christians who do not believe in these two articles of the Apostles’ Creed: “the holy catholic church” and “the communion of the saints.” They have little or no concern for those who are outside the boundaries of their own fellowship. They practice kindness but have no love. Their church is their club where they enjoy associating with a certain number of people who agree with their own opinions, whims, hobbies, and church politics. Everything else in the vast world in which they live is regarded with cold indifference. Sometimes they even have a passionate hatred or abhorrence toward those things. It is one of
the many ways in which the spirit of religious legalism, which is so prevalent among us, reveals itself. The spirit of adoption is a universal spirit, whereas the spirit of legalism is a dividing, sectarian spirit. It adds to the essential, foundational doctrines. It transforms uncertain beliefs into principles. And, so, more and more new religious sects or organizations are manufactured. Now an organization, religious or otherwise, is a wonderful thing, but it is a luxury. It ought to be remembered that besides the organization - even all the organizations combined - there is the entire Body of Christ (the Church Universal). This fact will have to be more recognized than it has been if individual churches continue to see themselves as more than mere outposts for the gospel and become ineffective and weak in their isolation from other parts of the Body. To save us from this outcome, one of two things must take place. First, religious people must overcome their doting fondness for the fellowship of denominationalism, which involves absolute uniformity from people in their opinions and practices. Second, a kind of Amphictyonic council (note: an amphictyonic council was an assembly in ancient Greece which was composed of delegates from the states associated in a confederation of states which were centered around a religious shrine or center, as at Delphi) must be set up as a counter measure to individual religious groups. Here, all the groups can find a common meeting place for discussing the great, universal questions which bear on morals, missions, education, and the defense of cardinal truths. Such a council (it will be thought of as being utopian) would have many open questions in its constitution. In the ancient Amphictyonic council, men were not known as Athenians or Spartans, but as Greeks. In our modern utopian one, people would only be known as Christians and not as members of a particular denomination. It would not be an amateur, self-constituted entity, patronized by people who are alienated from all existing ecclesiastical organizations and who lean toward substituting it for a new church. Rather, it would consist of representatives who belong to the different sections of the church. They would be elected and empowered by these different groups.

There is one more remark we will make on this theory of church fellowship. When it is worked out, it will accomplish at least one goal. It will break Christians up into small groups and insure that they will meet in twos and threes. Unfortunately, it does not, at the same time, guarantee the blessing which is promised to the two or three. The spirit of Jesus does not dwell in groups comprised of self-willed, opinionated people. He dwells in the great commonwealth of believers, especially in the hearts of those who love the whole body more than any part, even the one they belong to. To these, the Lord and Head of the church fulfills His promise. He enriches them with enormous, heroic graces, and causes them to rise like cedars above the general level of the character of the current generation. And He endows them with a moral power which exercises an expanding influence that lasts well beyond the debates of their lifetimes - long after the people who loved this strife have sunk into oblivion.