

“The Point of the Sword”

Reading: *Jeremiah 20:7-13; Matthew 10:24-39*

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Today we listen in on one of the more challenging teachings of Jesus. He seems uncharacteristically combative today: Jesus had no problem with getting into a heated debate with the religiously self-important, but here He seems to be attacking, or at least pushing against, the sorts of things that you might not think would need attacking. “I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother,’” and so on? How does that fit with the command to honor your father and mother? That’s one of the big ones, and in other places Jesus clearly upholds that commandment. And then He’s also saying that He came to bring a sword to the earth, not peace. How does that reconcile with Jesus being the Prince of Peace, and proclaiming that “blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God,” and the song of the angels at His birth, proclaiming “peace on earth”?

It’s clear enough that Jesus is insisting that those who would follow Him must take a stand, but the difficult part is discerning where that stand is. That’s the critical question. Perhaps it’s a unique aspect of this modern, always-connected age we live in, or maybe it’s a byproduct of American optimism, but we do love taking a stand. We love getting riled up for a cause; we love signing petitions and sharing videos and tweeting hashtags in support. I learned long ago that if you click to sign one online petition, you will very likely find your inbox flooded with other similar causes to support. There are so many options, and I’m willing to give most of them the benefit of the doubt and assume that they’re usually worthwhile.

And yet there are *so many* options, so many good causes, so many people and organizations asking for your time and money and support. We can easily wind up with hyperactive attention spans. I think of the horrific abduction in April of 276 female students from a Nigerian school by the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram that caught the attention of the world. The girls have not been rescued, and yet in spite of the initial outrage, their plight seems to have disappeared from the news. Other causes and problems have cropped up in the meantime, and we’ve moved our attention elsewhere. The words of Jesus to us today call us to focus, to evaluate our priorities, and to count the cost.

Because the shocking truth of the kingdom of God is that there are many good, worthwhile, even godly causes you can devote your life to that are not the kingdom of God, and in the end they can even pull you away from the kingdom. Again, we love having a good cause to fight for, but the kingdom is not based on causes, it’s based on the person of Jesus Christ, and while He may call us to causes in His name, He calls us to Himself first.

This is all taking place during an interesting period in the ministry of Jesus. He has just given authority to His twelve disciples to go out into the towns of Israel to “proclaim this message: ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near,’” and to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.” They are to be ambassadors of this new kingdom, heralds proclaiming the arrival of the king. They certainly don’t look like ambassadors, though, and this kingdom and its king don’t look like what people are expecting, and so there is a certain risk involved in their mission. He tells them that they are being sent as “sheep among wolves;” they may be arrested and flogged and called to account for their message. “You will be hated by everyone because of me,” Jesus says, even

to the point that their own family members may turn them in. Even so, part of their message involves a complete reliance on the protection and provision of God: they are to take no money, no extra clothes, no prepared speeches for their defense. Instead, since their message is that the kingdom has arrived, they are to put it into practice by trusting that God will give them hospitality and the words to say when they are needed.

So the context of the passage we read is Jesus giving His followers a mission to go out and preach the word and do the actions of the kingdom, fully aware of the fact that they will be opposed. They should expect that their message will force people to make a choice. It is in the nature of the message of the kingdom of God to cause division, in other words, because we go about our lives content in our ignorance or our self-righteousness or our selfishness, and then we're confronted by the kingdom of God and we have to decide whether we're in or out, because being in the kingdom involves a change. There is the decision to follow Christ followed by repentance from the things that are not of Christ followed by living in a holiness-inducing trust in Christ.

Some people might hear these words of Jesus and take them to be an acceptance by Jesus of some level of violence. "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" might suggest that maybe Jesus isn't as peaceful as He is sometimes made out to be, and that there may be times when violence is justified in His name. But no, given the context, it makes more sense to understand this sword not as a weapon of violence, but as a sharp instrument that cuts and divides one thing from another. He brings a sword not of violence, but of division, dividing truth from falsehood, holiness from sin, commitment from complacency.

That kind of choice will in turn divide you from other people. Even today, there are parts of the world where choosing to follow Christ will lead to you being disowned by your family. We're not as likely in our context to face such extreme consequences for following Christ, but these are still very real possibilities for many of our brothers and sisters around the world. And even for us, though the choice may not be as obviously traumatic, the central point remains: we must choose our priorities.

Jesus quotes from the prophet Micah — "A man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" — who was warning of a time of upheaval and chaos that would come as a result of God's judgment on His people. Jesus is taking that image of the breakdown of basic relationships and applying it to His own time: as the kingdom arrives, it is bringing with it a new age of God's presence among His people, and His presence demands a choice of loyalty or rebellion, and that choice then brings sifting and judgment, for good or bad. Division and separation result. The sheep get separated from the goats.

The thing is that often when we read these confrontational, judgmental-sounding passages of Scripture, the temptation is always to assume that they're judging someone else. "That's right, sinners, Jesus came to bring a sword, so you'd better watch out! You'd better be afraid of God who can send you to hell!" But the word of God rarely cuts others before it cuts you and me. "It is time for judgment to begin with God's household," Peter says in one of his letters. The point of that sword is pointing at you and me, pointing at each thing in our lives and evaluating whether those priorities need some surgery. Good things can still lead us away from the kingdom of God if they take a higher priority than following Jesus.

Jesus' example was shocking when He first said it, and it's still shocking today. Your family was extremely important in that setting; it was crucial to religion and inheritance and business and social standing. And, like we've already noticed, one of the Ten Commandments specifically lifts up the importance of honoring one's parents. Neglecting your obligations to your parents was a slap in the face to God and His community. Today, of course, much of the church in America is very focused on "family values;" they have a lot of influence over how we vote and act and speak in society. Family is and always will be extremely important. There are many people for whom their love of their family is their greatest pride, and at their funeral everyone will be able to say, "He loved his family."

And that is certainly commendable. But Jesus shocks us here with the assertion that even this most sacred of our institutions can become an idol in place of God. "He couldn't tell Jesus from a smack in the head, but he loved his family." There are many good causes. Families are important, and family values are important. But family values are not necessarily kingdom values. These are hard words.

But if this is the cost of following Jesus, if preaching His kingdom can get you run out of town if you're lucky and flogged if you're not, if the word of God ends up tormenting the great prophet Jeremiah, who was so faithful and gave so much in service to God but ended up with almost no one to support him, why would we pursue Jesus Christ? What makes holiness worth it, if I can so easily choose from so many other good ways to spend my life?

The simplest answer is that life ends one day. The worst thing that can happen to you in this life is pain and death, but that's not the end, and so that's not what you should fear. "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul," Jesus said. "Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." He's talking about God; there are eternal consequences for our priorities in life.

And yet fear is not the best motivator, and I think Jesus recognizes this, because He continues by saying, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." Bring all those other priorities in life under your Heavenly Father's care, because He is good. A life of holiness lived following and knowing Jesus begins eternal life here in the present, and that is life truly worth living. Let the sword of God's word trim away anything in you that would keep you from such a life.



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