

Hagar and Ishmael

Earlier this morning we heard about Hagar and Ishmael. Have you ever tried to put yourself in their shoes? To see things from their point of view? Hagar was Sarah's slave woman, who bore a son to Abraham – which was Sarah's idea. Do you think Hagar had a say in the matter? After Sarah has her own son, Isaac, by Abraham, she makes Abraham kick Hagar and Ishmael out of the camp – that's what we read today. They're left out in the desert wilderness. What do you suppose would happen to most people if they were left out in the desert alone?

In the depths of despair, God was with them. God is always present with us – even in the moments of our deepest grief. He spoke to them, showed them where they could get water, and they were able to go on with their lives. Make no mistake – God did all the work. He is the One who took great care of them. Abraham didn't step in and help. Sarah had nothing to do with helping their situation. Hagar and Ishmael were ready to die out in the wilderness. God rescued them – just like He's willing and able to rescue us, when we call on Him!

Today we're going to talk about something Jesus said – about how things shake out sometimes when we follow Him. It's tough to follow Jesus. It's hard work. It takes persistence and perseverance. So, if you have a Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 10:24-39, so we can read what He said to His disciples nearly 2,000 years ago, and see what we glean from it for ourselves today. **Read Matthew 10:24-39.**

Be Like Jesus

Our passage starts out with Jesus saying, "The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters," (Matt. 10:24-25a). This is an important thing for us to notice here. Kendra, the girls, and I were out at a restaurant recently with some friends, and we got to talking with our waitress. She found out we were Christians, because when the meal came out, we all paused to give thanks to God for the meal. She was surprised, because we didn't "look like" the Christians she'd been used to seeing. We started asking her some questions, trying to get to the bottom of what she was saying, and you know what it was? She was referring to the after Sunday church service crowd who show up in restaurants and treat their servers rudely. In other words, many of our brothers and sisters don't practice what they preach.

That's what Jesus is getting at here. As His followers, we shouldn't expect people to wait on us hand and foot – we are the ones who should be doing the serving. In everything we do, and everything we say, we ought to look and sound like Him. See,

Jesus also indicates that people were doing some name-calling back in the day. “If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!” (verse 25b).

That’s another name for Satan. See, some of the religious folks of the day were saying Jesus was demon-possessed, and using demonic power to drive out demons. Satan, and those other angels who decided to rebel against God, will do everything they can to wreck the image-bearers of God – human beings. The thing is, they’re united about doing it – they aren’t going to fuss with each other – their focus is to keep humanity separated from God. They do that by denying what Christ has done on our behalf at the cross and the empty tomb. Satan wouldn’t give a person – in this case, Jesus – the power to drive out demons.

The old devil would want even more demons to be going into people. You understand? The devil hates God, and wants to destroy the image of God. The only way he can is to do it to people – because Satan can’t compare to Jesus Christ. Jesus whipped him when He died for our sin on the cross, and He whipped death when He came bursting out of the tomb on Resurrection morning. I want you to see here, how messed up these religious people’s thinking was in the day. What they were saying about Jesus didn’t make sense, and He’s pointing it out to them.

Tell in the Light

Look what Jesus says next, talking about these folks doing all the criticizing and trash talking. “Don’t be afraid of them, for there’s nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs,” (verses 26 and 27). The way the NRSV Bible translate verse 27 is, “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” It’s poetic, in a way. Think of the times you’ve been in the valleys of life. The low points. Maybe you’re in one right now. Today. You’re in a dark valley – it feels more like a pit – and you’re so far down, you can’t see the light of day. You can’t even see the stars in the night sky above. Have you ever been in a place like that? So deep in despair, you just can’t see yourself coming out of it.

You know what the best medicine for us is, when we get into those places? When we feel like we’re sinking down into a bottomless pit with no way out – that’s when we need to get on our knees and pray to God for Him to deliver us, to restore us, and to renew us through the presence of His own Holy Spirit within us. He will absolutely answer that prayer every time. When we cry to Him for help, from the core of our being, He hears that, and He responds – He loves us. He responds by pointing us once again to the cross, where He gave us His very best – His Son – for our sake. That’s what He does, what He tells us in the dark. That’s something we should be shouting from the rooftops!

Jesus goes on. He says, “Don’t be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell,” (verse 28). God alone is the One who we should be most afraid of, from a human point-of-view. We deserve to be sent to hell for our sins. That’s what we’ve earned. Every human, just by existing, has earned. We’re messed up. But He loves us! He does the work which is impossible for us to do, of reconciling us to Himself, through the cross.

He Gets Us

He cares for us. Jesus says, “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,” (verses 28-31). He speaks the Creation into being, spins the galaxies with the flick of a finger-tip, yet He loves us. Isn’t that awe-inspiring? To know, that One that powerful and mighty is concerned about you and me?

Look at the promise Jesus gives us here. “Whoever acknowledges Me before others, I will also acknowledge before My Father in heaven. But whoever disowns Me before others, I will disown before My Father in heaven,” (verses 32 and 33). How do we acknowledge Him before others? By talking the talk, but also, by walking the walk. We have to put our money where our mouth is. We show we belong to Him by how we say the things we say, and how we do the things we do. Now, on the flip side, how do we disown Him? When we see wrong being done, and stay silent about it. When we harm others – sometimes that’s intentional, other times that’s unintentional. When we’re unkind, rude, mean – part of that grumpy church crowd the waitress at Texas Roadhouse was telling me and some friends about. There’s a lot of ways we disown Him, we just don’t often think about it. We should always be striving, John Wesley would say, towards Christian perfection. We should be the living embodiment of Christ in the world, for the world, today.

Friends, that’s a tall order. It’s hard work! No one ever said following Jesus would be easy, or comfortable. You’ll never hear me say it’s easy or comfortable – I don’t believe in the prosperity gospel like some of the televangelists preach. Following Jesus, and letting Him be Lord of your life is hard, and a constant struggle with our human nature. Jesus tells us this. He says, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I didn’t come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household,” (verses 34-36). Sometimes the worst attacks will come from inside our own family. That’s rough.

Set Apart By Following

Following Jesus sets us apart from the society, culture, and world in which we live. If we don't have Him as our focus, we'll fall off the bandwagon over and over again. He says, "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than Me isn't worthy of Me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than Me isn't worthy of Me. Whoever doesn't take up their cross and follow Me isn't worthy of Me. Whoever finds their life will lose it and whoever loses their life for My sake will find it," (verses 37-39). See, Jesus is saying this even before He went to the cross.

Sometimes we put idols on the throne of our heart. Usually when we think of idols, we think in terms of the statues that the ancients worshiped as gods, right? Like the golden calf, or Baal, in the Bible. Maybe we think more along the lines of marble statues, like Zeus or Athena, from Greek mythology. In today's world, in western society, in particular, the idols are more sneaky. An idol in America today may be a souped up car, a large bank account, an intellectual level trying to be attained, or even a family member. Are you wrestling with idolatry? What, or who, do you spend the majority of your time each day focused on? If it's not Jesus, and doing what He wants, you may have an idol in your life!

Sometimes we think we have all the answers, and then realize – sometimes years later – that we were really clueless! To follow Him, we have to give up what we want, and start doing things the way He wants. It's hard work! And it can be pretty unnerving – downright scary – at times. Over the course of these sixteen verses, in three different places, do you catch what Jesus says? "Don't be afraid," (verses 26, 28, 31). He knows us! He knows we get scared. So He reassures us, over and over, "don't be afraid!"

His Eye Is On the Sparrow

In the late 1800's and early 1900's a lady named Civilla Martin started writing music. This lady apparently had a rough life. She was born in the 1860's, in Canada, moved to New York in the 1890's, got married to a Congregational pastor in 1891, went through a divorce shortly after – but I couldn't find any reason for it. That would have been a horribly traumatic event in this woman's life, because in those days, divorce was very uncommon – even in cases of adultery. People tended to sweep their indiscretions, and the indiscretions of their spouses under the rug, and go on with life.

I don't know what caused Civilla and Rev. Geddes to divorce, but about 1898 or so, she got remarried to a Baptist pastor, W.S. Martin. In 1906, she wrote one of her best known songs. Made famous by Ethel Waters and Mahalia Jackson, *His Eye is on the Sparrow*, is a powerful hymn, which we sometimes hear at funerals. It's based, in part, on this Scripture passage.

The opening stanza of that song says it all: “Why should I feel discouraged, Why should the shadows come? Why should my heart be lonely, And long for heaven and home; When Jesus is my portion? My constant Friend is He; His eye is on the sparrow, And I know He watches me; His eye is on the sparrow, And I know He watches me.”

“I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free; For His eye is on the sparrow, And I know He watches me.”

He loves you! He wants to take great care of you – and He does that most fully when He takes the nails for us on the cross! So friends, remember, when you are in the pit of despair, you are not alone. We are not alone! Even in the pit, Jesus is with us!

Prayer: God of power, You uphold us in times of persecution and strengthen us to meet the trials of faithful witness. As You delivered us from death through our baptism in Christ and the victory of His resurrection, send us forth to proclaim that glorious redemption, so that the world may claim the freedom of forgiveness and new life in You. Amen.