

KEEPING FOCUSED

Luke 9:43-50 (NIV)

43 ¶ And they were all amazed at the greatness of God. While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples,

44 "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men."

45 But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

46 An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest.

47 Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him.

48 Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest."

49 "Master," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us."

50 "Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."

There are three themes in these eight verses about keeping our focus on the main mission.

1. The first theme could be titled the "fickleness of mankind" We see in verses 43 through 45 evidence that Jesus knew that the amazement the crowd had with regard to the miracles would be short-lived and that their basic "unbelieving and perverse" nature would take over and the Jewish leaders (with the support of the common people) would deliver Jesus over to the Romans (hands of evil men).

An interesting side point is that the betrayal and delivering of a fellow Israelite to Gentiles was (according to the cannon of Jewish law) a major sin and was punishable by death. According to John Gill's commentary:

Now Christ intimates, that the son of man, meaning himself, should be betrayed by the Jews, into the hands of the Gentiles; which, with the Jews, nothing was reckoned a fouler action, or a viler crime; their canons run thus {*}:

``It is forbidden to betray an Israelite into the hands of the Gentiles, whether in his body or in his substance; and though he may be a wicked man, and a ringleader in sin, and though he (the one betrayed) may have oppressed and afflicted him (the one doing the betraying); and everyone that betrays an Israelite into the hands of the Gentiles, whether in his body, or in his substance, has no part in the world to come."

They forgot this rule, when they delivered Christ to Pontius Pilate. They go on to observe, that

``it is lawful to kill a betrayer in any place, even at this time, in which they do not judge capital crimes; and it is lawful to kill him before he betrays; but when he says, lo! I am about to betray such an one in his body, or in his substance, though his substance is small, he exposes himself to death; and they admonish him and say to him, do not betray: if he is obstinate, and says I will betray him, it is commanded to kill him; and he that is first to kill him, is a worthy man,"

{*} Maimon. Hilch. Chobel Umazzik, c. 8. sect. 9, 10.

What is the application for us today regarding "fickleness" of people? It is difficult to assess how people will operate (in the long term) based on a few incidental observations. However, people's behavior will ultimately be governed by their basic nature. Everyone has high points and low points in their behaviors. Usually, we tend to judge or categorize people based on anecdotal data that are typically observations of high or low points in the life of an individual or group of individuals. If we observe a couple of "high" points, then we tend to think positively of that person or group. If we observe a couple of "low" points, then we tend to think poorly of that person or group. If we see a "high" and a "low" point, then we tend to think

that the person is unstable and is on an emotional roller coaster. Jesus was NOT impressed with the “amazement” of the people and the good response that happened among the crowd when the boy was healed of the evil spirit he had.

With regard to focusing on the mission: The disciples were reminded on several occasions that Jesus was going to die. Even at this late date, they still did not “get it.” They were thinking that Christ would set up an earthly (temporal) kingdom at that point in time and the miracles that were done would be sufficient to cause the people to rally around Jesus and the Romans would be overthrown. Some apparently thought that the betrayal (with the subsequent arrest) would be the “trigger” that would “force” Jesus to take the initiative to usher in the Kingdom of the Messiah. In a sense, actions following the betrayal did result in the initiation of the kingdom BUT NOT in the way they had envisioned. They had failed to realize that the kingdom to come (as in Thy Kingdom come) was a spiritual kingdom.

How difficult is it for us to maintain focus on what we should be about in the church? Do we even know what we should be doing? Are we doing it? Why not?

2. The second theme that appears in this passage about “keeping focused” is related to the question of what defines “greatness” in the kingdom that was to come. In verses 46-48, Luke recorded that the disciples were arguing among themselves as to who would be the greatest in the temporal kingdom they were envisioning. This was not the first nor the last time they would have that argument.

The obvious point Jesus was making with the illustration in which he used the child was that those who were most humble would be the most exalted in His kingdom. The least shall be the greatest. The last shall be first. The converse of this statement is also true: the first shall be last. Another expression of this truth is that God resists the proud but exalts the humble. At other times when the “discussions” of *greatness* came up, Jesus gave a more thorough discourse on this subject. For example, in the discussion that followed the request of the mother of James and John that her two sons should sit “one on the right and one on the left” of Christ when he came into His kingdom, Jesus told them that “if you will be great, then minister (diakonos) to others and if you will be chief, then be a slave (doulos).” His Kingdom would be a completely different kind of kingdom with radically different values from the kingdoms of this world.

A sub-theme that emerges from these three verses is related to the concept of ambassadorship that is to be a key element in the operation of the church. As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth (2 Cor 5:20), “We are ambassadors for Christ.” As such, we represent the Kingdom of God wherever we go. We may do an excellent job of this, a lousy job of it, or something in between those two extremes. If people know that we are “Christian” then, we represent Christ’s kingdom. If we do an excellent job, then we will help draw people to Jesus. If we do a terrible job of being an ambassador, then we will drive people away from Jesus.

However, let’s return to the main or obvious point regarding greatness that Jesus was making with regard to the child. In our culture, children are highly valued and parents make great sacrifices for their children. (You may be thinking that there are many abused children in our city. Trust me, those who abuse their children and do not highly value them are not part of our culture - they are a different culture.) Many households with young children operate around the perceived needs of the children in the home. That has not always been the case. It was definitely NOT the situation in first century Judea. Children were not highly valued. With that cultural situation in mind, we can better interpret what Jesus was saying with regard to “welcoming or receiving” a child.

First, let's make sure we understand what Jesus meant when he is quoted as saying, "Whoever welcomes (receives) this little child in my name welcomes (receives) me." At first glance, the wording in various translations seems to say that "We (operating in the name or character of Jesus) are to welcome or receive the humble or lowly ones of our society." Considering what He said in the context of the passage, the obvious meaning is that "Those who (in the name of Jesus) come to us, regardless of their status in the eyes of the world, are to be welcomed just as we would welcome or receive Christ Himself."

Practical example: How do you perceive a man like Billy Graham? I would anticipate that the responses would be words such as "highly venerated, worth listening to, due the greatest respect, etc." How do you perceive the apparently financially poor guy in faded blue jeans and ragged plaid shirt who is in the parking lot of the flea market preaching and calling people to repent and turn to God or they will wind up in Hell? Many will think that he is some sort of nut case and that he is not worth hearing and should probably be locked up. Which of these is greatest? You cannot tell from the available information.

3. The third theme in the eight verses we are considering is found in the verses 49-50 and we could title that "Will Baptists Be the Only Ones in Heaven?" Of course, you could use the name of whatever group of which you are a part in the theme question. The situation was that a person (who was not in the immediate group following Jesus) was helping people by driving out demons in the name of Jesus. Apparently, whatever he was doing was working. We can compare that to the incident that Paul described in Acts 19:13-17 in which the seven sons of Sceva were inappropriately using the name of Jesus to do exorcisms and it did NOT work. The evil spirit in the person spoke to the seven sons and said something like, "Paul I know and Jesus I know, but who are you?" The lesson of this sub-theme regarding proper use of the "name of Jesus" would be found in the answer to the question, "When is the name of Jesus NOT the name of Jesus?"

Practically, every prayer you hear in our culture will end with the words, "In Jesus' name, I pray." I do that. You do that, also. We need to be careful to not develop a mind set in which the words "in Jesus' name" becomes something akin to a "magical incantation." Simply put, unless you are under the authority of Jesus (that is, a true ambassador of His), then you have no right to speak anything "in His name." Additionally, we may speak something that in **not** in the character nor in the revealed will of Christ and just adding "in Jesus name" to the end (or beginning) of what is said does not change the basic character of an inappropriate request.

Now, let's go back to the person who was using Jesus' name to cast out evil spirits. Who might such a person be who would believe that Jesus was the Messiah and would realize there was power in His name and yet he not be found in the company of those following Jesus from place to place? The Scriptures are silent as to the identity of this person and we (in a moment or two) will look at a likely reason as to why the person and his association with others is not given to us.

What we can say is that the man was one who believed in the Messiah and was relying on the power and authority of the Messiah over the spiritual realm. He may have seen Jesus and witnessed the miracles that he did. He was perhaps one who was looking for the coming of the Messiah and had been exposed to teaching about the coming Kingdom. In that time in history, who was proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom saying, "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand?" The obvious answer is John the Baptist. John had disciples and he was preaching, "Prepare the way of the Lord." The person the disciples encountered was likely as disciple of

John who believed in Jesus and was ministering in His name even though he did not travel around with the group of the twelve disciples.

So, why didn't the Scriptures not just tell us that this man was a disciple of John the Baptist? I believe that the reason is that we would try to draw too many conclusions about others who are not part of our "fellowship" if we knew a lot about the man and his associations. For example, we might say something like, "He may not be a Baptist but that denomination of which he is a part, is very close to being like most Baptist churches." Notice that Jesus did not say, "Well, it is OK since that man was a follower of John the Baptist." What **did** Jesus say? He quoted a proverbial saying of that day, "He who is not against us is for us." (Caution regarding proverbial statements: proverbial statements are "generally true" but there will be exceptions to those proverbs.) Where was the emphasis of the disciples? Associations! Where was the emphasis of Jesus? Actions!

What is the obvious lesson for us in viewing what others are doing in ministry to or for other people? Should we be looking at associations or actions? One can have all the right associations and be neutral to negative in results. Or one can be a part of another group that may not have the "right" eschatology, or the right view on length of hair or what one should wear to church or whether or not to have instrumental music in a church or any number of such issues but is doing something positive for the Kingdom of God. Which ministry is more pleasing to God?

The overall message of this passage is that we need to keep focused on our mission. That mission involves What? When? How? Who? Think about Jesus' mission.

What? Jesus came to establish a spiritual kingdom - not a temporal kingdom

When? In God's time - not when the crowd or the Zealots would "force" the issue

How? Create a way for people to be freed from the kingdoms of this world and to enter into the new kingdom - not by physically overthrowing the Roman government.

Who? All who would believe and come under the authority (in the name) of King Jesus regardless of the value the world placed on them or which group with whom they associated.

The obvious question for each of us is to ask these same four questions with regard to our mission in life. What is that mission for you? When are you going to be about carrying it out? How will you accomplish that mission? Who will be affected as you accomplish your mission?