

Whoever Is Not Against Us Is For Us

April 26, 2020

Mark 9:38-50

Read Mark 9:38-50

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

OK. Where to start here? There's a lot in these verses: some humbling things and some scary things.

Let me begin with John – on behalf of all the disciples – complaining to Jesus because someone else was casting out demons in Jesus' name. Though John comes across as a bit of a whiner here, this episode is incredibly important for the church to study. Why? It is incredibly important for us to study because we are *all* like John and the disciples here. I am not simply pointing fingers at any one in our congregation because I am fully guilty.

I have been watching other pastor friends' services online. I confess that it sometimes makes me feel like a 4- or 5-year old, "Hey, that's not fair that they can do that." I have felt a little better when I have seen the live feeds buffer, the sound not match the video, and some other glitches. I am not proud of myself for that, by the way. The point is, we all get a little jealous when we see someone else doing better something we want to do well.

Have any of you ever experienced anything like that?

In our verses today, there was more to it than a little petty jealousy. Here, the irony was that the disciples were upset that someone who was not specifically commissioned by Jesus was able to do something that they – just a few verses ago – could not do: cast out a demon. Remember when Jesus and the three came down the mountain? They encountered the remaining disciples arguing with the scribes about why they could not cast out the unclean spirit that tormented a young boy. Now, to add to that embarrassment, they ran into someone else successfully casting out unclean spirits. That cannot be right, can it? I mean, they were closer to Jesus so they should be better at those kinds of things.

Mark did not give us a specific time reference, but it seems like this episode immediately followed the conversation about which of the disciples was the greatest; again, as they were jockeying among themselves for position in relation to Jesus.

This is not a good stretch of events for the disciples. Thank God, because their folly shows us our own folly. The disciples were unconsciously operating with a couple of fundamental misconceptions that I still find prevalent in the church today.

Misconception 1: The role of the Christian is to protect and defend God.

When the disciples were complaining about the unknown man casting out demons, they pitched it to Jesus as if they were defending Jesus' honor. They may have even believed that themselves; that their job was to prevent enthusiasts from doing ministry in Jesus' name incorrectly or without official sanction. They were acting like the theological police.

In their own way, the disciples were gravitating to the kind of behavior that they had seen Jesus reject in his interactions with the scribes and Pharisees. They were setting themselves in the position of experts to evaluate the faithfulness of others. Now, I want to spend a moment here because there is a difference between being discerning *with* someone and making judgment *about* someone. The interaction John described to Jesus was quick: the disciples saw, they reacted because they judged. There was not any relationship. There was no attempt at a relationship. They saw and they reacted – and, the way John told it, they were not able to effectively assert the authority they thought they had. If they had been able to stop the other man, they would have been proud of themselves and felt vindicated in their actions. In that case, they might not have told on the other man to Jesus.

I am cringing right now. I suspect some of you are cringing, too. I can unfortunately think of more than a few occasions where I have acted just like the disciples here. Whether it was a passing conversation, a large meeting, or just in a social situation, I have passed judgment on others and their efforts to be faithful to Jesus' call. "No, no, no; that's wrong, you shouldn't do that," is the essence of my input for the situation.

Jesus' response takes me to task for presuming that authority. He does so gently, but firmly. "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me." In other words, the person who is doing the deed of power in Jesus' name is acting on Jesus' behalf – regardless of whether *we* have been informed ahead of time. Jesus' perspective seems to be that someone who is doing deeds of power in his name – whether in word or action – someone who is doing deeds of power in Jesus' name effectively is not likely to speak badly of him later.

But I do not always see it that way. There are times when I have passed judgment on another because I was not comfortable with what they were doing or saying. A quick case-in-point: have you ever encountered a street-corner, soapbox preacher, crying out for people to repent? My first reaction has been, "Dude, what are you doing? Don't you know that you are driving away more people than you are attracting?" And then I hear Jesus' reply, "And you know that, how?" I may not like the way someone else is being faithful, I may not like the style they are pursuing, I may not like the emphasis they are making; but if they are acting in a manner consistent with the gospel Jesus proclaimed, I have to check my own ego and trust that God is in charge.

To be blunt: God does not need me to defend him. God has not called me to defend him. God does not need me to protect his reputation, his purity, his power, or any other aspect of his being God. God is God and fully capable of being God. I am not capable in any respect. Until and unless I am walking *with* someone to build up and strengthen the body of Christ, I am in no position to criticize someone else's faith walk in Jesus' name.

Man, this is hard; except it is not. It is actually incredibly freeing. If I am not carrying the burden for how everyone else is doing discipleship, I am empowered to be faithful to what God has called me to do. And that brings me to the second misconception.

Misconception 2: Someone else doing ministry means we are failing in ministry.

There had to have been an element of jealousy to the disciples' reaction. Having been embarrassed, it would have been even more frustrating to see someone else succeed in the very thing that had gone

wrong for them. Jesus had commissioned them to be able to cast out unclean spirits – that was *their* thing. So, how could this interloper be doing it? How could this guy be succeeding at something that was supposed to be theirs?

As we look at the disciples, we can see clearly that this was a mis-read of the situation. However, can we see it as clearly when we are in the disciples' position? If I am answering honestly for myself, I think, "not so much." Even if I know differently intellectually, I absolutely struggle internally with this notion of being incompetent, lesser than, or a failure. I know that's not right, but I am not going to pretend I do not have to work through it.

And I am not alone. Pastors must be a vulnerable population right now. We must be ripe for sales pitches. I am seeing a TON of marketing online targeting pastors, all playing on this exact struggle. I received this one Wednesday: "Is your stream worth watching? Production quality is what keeps a viewer engaged. *We have 3 ways to help.*"¹

Another said, "If your church is seeing a huge influx of people to your online and live-streamed services, click the DOWNLOAD button to *get your FREE Live Stream Guest Follow-up Plan* to start connecting with them now!"²

Yet another said, "*What EVERY Leader Should Be Doing: What does it take to become an effective missional leader? Download this free book to gain practical insights and tips into leading in the context of mission and ministry.*"³

The starting point for each of these is: you are failing. The implication is that someone else is doing it better and so I ought to pay them for their service so I can stop being a failure.

And, if I am reading between the lines of what John said here, the disciples are right there with me.

This is a "taking their eye off the ball" problem. What someone else is doing in ministry is not necessarily related to us at all. It has everything to do with how God has gifted them and called them to serve. It is delusional to think that God has so gifted us that we are the only ones anywhere, at any time, in any and all circumstances who is equipped to offer that specific gift. When I phrase it that way, I hear it myself just how crazy it is to entertain those emotional reactions. Still, I need to hear Jesus say it, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Why is this so hard for us to understand? In large part it is because we are subject to the false teaching of our world and culture: you are the center of all existence. That is a lie: the center of the story is not me. The center of existence is not me. God's will and plan for the redemption of all creation is not dependent on my job performance. Further, how someone else is doing in ministry is not the reference point for evaluating how I am doing following Jesus. Everyone else is not simply a prop or bit-character in God's plan for *my* life. *My* life is not a reference point; in fact, it is not really *my* life. Paul's letter to the Corinthians makes this abundantly clear, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the

¹ <https://www.ridgeav.com/?fbclid=IwAR3tJ1zVkc75c52N742YCjLHZqkcV02W4IYnHi59VTQIznZ7egNJFMTPMqs>

² https://textinchurch.com/?fbclid=IwAR06EX2plANaiCw5MQPJyLYfrxjRP_BJaY6jgt37idF2oQXxKICMqy30Bro

³ <http://www.vergenetwork.org/?fbclid=IwAR0AT2US2YvTAWynfXBtMnNLmpicJkUPrBp2xY1QohHcWA8n0TpAwXrXEZo>

Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? ²⁰ For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Jesus is the center of the story. Period. Our focus needs to be on him. Our sights need to be set on him. Our service needs to be focused on him. That is what Jesus was telling the disciples when he said, “Whoever is not against *us* is for *us*.” There was an “us” and that “us” was more than the twelve. Jesus did not cut anyone from the team. None of the twelve were sent home because someone else was doing better. They were all still with him. And, so it is with you and me: we are part of Jesus’ “us”.

In the gospel of John, Jesus talks about being the vine and we are the branches. If we are so focused on the fruit we are bearing or not bearing, we are losing touch and contact with the vine that is our life. If we are focused on the fruit someone else is bearing, we have elevated that person to an idol and have taken our eyes off Jesus completely.

Paul’s entire discourse in 1 Corinthians 12 and the illustration of the body speaks truth to this misconception.

1Cor. 12:12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

1Cor. 12:14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

1Cor. 12:27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸

You – plural, as in we, -- we all are the body of Christ and individually members of it. At times the walk can seem so lonely and that we are not part of a body or part of *the* body. And that leads to the third misconception.

Misconception 3: Someone else exercising in ministry means God loves us less.

Just like the disciples: we see someone else who is doing great things for Jesus, we do a quick check of ourselves, and we decide that God must no longer care about us. Because God clearly loves that other person, God cannot love me or does not love me nearly as much.

Someone else succeeding does not mean God loves us less. God is not a God of scarcity. This is so foreign to our experience we need constant reminding: God is not a God of scarcity. God is a God of abundance: abundant power, abundant mercy, abundant grace, abundant joy, abundant hope, and – for our purposes right now – abundant life. The scarcity we experience here and now as we await for the fulfillment of the coming kingdom of God is a reflection of the consequences of brokenness, sin, and death. Our experience of these things now necessarily drives us to our knees so that we remember, recognize, and hold fast to God who is the source of all good things.

Building up one another is an expression of God's love for us. When we rejoice in another's success in Jesus' name, we build up the body. When we help someone else succeed in Jesus' name, we are building up the body. When we do the slightest thing – offer someone a cup of water to drink because we are Christian – we are building up the body and pleasing in God's sight. We are not earning God's favor by our works, but because we are in Christ those things are pleasing in God's sight.

“And, I mean it...”

Now, if ever you wondered if this was what Jesus meant, let's go to the next section. Jesus gave them a big “come to Jesus” wake-up moment by describing God's displeasure with the opposite behavior. “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” Uh, oh.

The key here is the phrase “who believe in me.” We are to encourage, not discourage, anyone who believes in Jesus and is seeking to grow.

We understand this with children. With children, we tend to extend grace and have patience and rejoice at the steps they are taking. Who has not been inspired and encouraged by our young musicians using their talents in offerings before God? But do we do the same thing with adults or those we think “should know better already”?

Then, Jesus turned from how they treated others to how they disciplined their own behavior. So often when we are looking at others for their flaws and reasons they should be excluded, we overlook or excuse our own flaws and our own sin. When we get competitive spiritually we are like sheep wandering off and away from the shepherd.

The illustrations Jesus used were designed to shock the disciples, to gather them in, and to re-capture their attention. They had become distracted by the topic of greatness. Jesus re-framed the conversation by contrasting life and entering the kingdom of God with being cast into hell. That must have hit them like a smack in the face. “Wait...what?” They all knew what “Gehenna” (the word for hell) meant:

The term “Gehenna” means the valley of Hinnom, referring to the valley south of Jerusalem that was used in ancient times as a crematorium, where children were sacrificed to the gods of Canaan (2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 32:35). The deep gully later became a refuse dump, where fires were kept continually burning, and the name became associated with the place of fiery punishment.⁴

In short, Jesus was warning the disciples that they could be concerned about greatness in comparison with others or be concerned with their own standing before God. One commenter summed it up this way, “God shows more concern for the little ones’ fragile faith than for the great ones’ fragile egos, which cause them to lord it over or ignore others.”⁵ This is the humbling part of the lesson: we always hold in front of us that we are in need of a savior. We have no standing in the kingdom of God without the saving grace we have received in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

So, let me state positively what we should take from these verses:

1. We are beloved children of God, not defense attorneys for God;
2. We can celebrate the ministry of others because it is an encouragement for the truth of our own faith; and,
3. We can celebrate the ministry of others because God’s love for us is not diminished by someone else’s success – God loves us to the point that our cup overflows.

We do not need to worry or argue about who is greater. We do not need to worry or argue about who is doing faith right. We need to keep our eyes on Jesus, listen for his voice, discern his command, and follow his lead.

Amen.

Questions:

1. What are the areas of your life that make you insecure about your standing with God?
2. Who is the center of your life – you or God? Does it vary; that is, do you have to check yourself on occasion to remember who is supposed to be at the center? How does that happen and what has helped you remember?
3. Who are the people around you who need encouragement, support, and connection? With whom do you find yourself in competition?

⁴ David E. Garland, NIVAC New Testament, Mark, p. 377.

⁵ Ibid., p. 370.