

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Mark 9:38-41

Sermon Title: "No More Lines in the Sand" (Traveling through Mark's Gospel)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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I was watching a preacher on TV a few weeks ago. Nobody else was in the room, so I decided to surf channels. I came across this one preacher, walking slowly back and forth, speaking softly and informally with his congregation. At one point he said this, "There are not a lot of preachers out there who preach the Old-Time Gospel anymore. There aren't many of us left." He wasn't yelling, when he said this. He sounded sad, regretful, as he said it. His statement was an interesting statement to me.

Here I am, a pastor/preacher listening to this statement, and I had no real idea what he was talking about. What is the "Old-Time Gospel"? Is it the kind of gospel that this one preacher preaches, and if others aren't preaching it then they are pagans, un-Christian? I wondered if we met, if he would lump me in with those who don't preach the Old-Time Gospel, because I certain don't preach like he does. I would not presume to do so.

I had no clue what he was saying, because this preacher continued on with another thought. He

never got around to explaining his last statement. He continued to speak with his congregation about turning from sin, because sin keeps us knowing who Jesus is. Again, he didn't yell – he spoke evenly and informally about sin and salvation.

Mark tells us a story in his Gospel about the disciples speaking with Jesus about an encounter they had. John speaks up and tells Jesus about someone who is casting out demons, and this someone isn't one of the twelve disciples. It seems as though John is tattle-taling on this man: “Jesus, guess what we saw today? We saw this guy who isn't a part of our group, and you know what he was doing? He was casting out demons like we do, and he was using your name, Jesus, to cast out those demons. And you know what we did? We told him to stop it, because he wasn't one of us.”

Actually, what John said was, “We forbade him, because he does not *follow us*.”¹ Interesting choice of words. Who was this someone supposed to follow? The disciples or Jesus? Whose brand of faith is this someone supposed to share, the disciples' brand? “He was not following us,” John said.

“There are not many Old-Time Gospel preachers

¹ Mark 9:38 (NKJV), italics mine.

out there anymore,” the TV preacher said. If it is not branded “Old-Time Gospel preaching”, and people are coming to Christ, we should negate it nonetheless? Too many times preachers make these bold statements about other preachers. The ones speaking are correct, of course, and those preachers they speak about are always wrong. Such bold statements only draw lines in the sand, separating preacher from preacher and not uniting us in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Such statements only draw people into camps, in which they say, “You have to follow us in order to follow Jesus.”

Of course, I’m sitting on my couch thinking ill thoughts about this preacher’s statement. I was turned off by it, and even began to judge his preaching style and some of the words he was using. Who was I to do that? I am no better than this one preacher, and he is no better than me. His ministry is different from mine. His audience is definitely much larger than mine. But in our realms of ministry, both of us had better follow Jesus and not some idea, not some person. Both of us are responsible to Christ, and before we tell anybody to follow Christ, we had better be following him ourselves. Preachers cannot judge each other – they should pray for each other, and hope the kingdom of God expands through our different yet combined efforts.

It isn't just preachers who draw lines in the sand and judge other preachers from time to time. We all do this as Christians. We all have our little groups in which we feel comfortable, and if somebody is outside of it – yes, even if he or she is a Christian – he or she is counted as a stranger.

Where I come from, near Pittsburgh, around 50% of Christians are from the Roman Catholic Church. And if you aren't a Catholic, according to some Catholics, you are a nobody. You are outside the group of real Christian according to them. Down south, I have heard that some Baptists feel the same way with others. If you aren't Baptist, you are a nobody, and I heard this rumor from people who are Baptists. However, to be fair, I have known Presbyterians who acted the same way. I have known Presbyterians who thumbed their noses at other denominations, because they are not properly reformed like we Presbyterians are. I remember a fellow student and friend from seminary who would bad-mouth other denominations from time to time. I am a former Catholic with a side of Methodism in me, so I tried to argue that those churches worship differently but they are not altogether wrong. No, no, this fellow student would say. He would go down the

list of how un-theological and un-worshipful those denominations are, because they are not Presbyterian, which is the true reformed denomination according to him. We could go around and around without ever swaying each other, and we still stayed as friends.

I once knew a pastor in PA, who told me about the issues of “church turf”: that arises between churches. Church turf means that I belong to this church and you belong to that church, but my church is the best. Some people may get down-right snippy about it: “You might go there, but I go here, and let me tell you all the great things we are doing for Jesus Christ,” as though you over there aren’t doing anything good for Jesus. Church turf also means that whatever ministry we are doing here, we cannot share it over there. Try to get churches together to do any ministry, and that ministry will die before anybody takes the reigns to make it work. Thank goodness we don’t act this way with the Baptist and Methodist churches nearby – we’ve been more than happy to open the borders, so to speak, and share in any ministry that God would have us do. We share our turf to the glory of God.

However, some churches are protective of their ministries. This might occur withy churches in the same denomination: they don’t want anybody messing with their turf. It’s almost as bad as the Crips and the

Blood.

Jesus ran into the same sort of trouble with people drawing lines in the sand and protecting their theological turf. The Pharisees and Sadducees were notorious for arguing against Jesus, because he was not one of them. They thought of him as an oddball, a non-conformist to the way things should be. Back in Mark 8, the Pharisees confronted Jesus and demanded that he give them a sign from heaven. They wanted to see some miracle that Jesus could produce to conjure faith in them. Actually, the Pharisees were testing Jesus – they wanted to see what sign he could produce to verify what kind of person he was. Jesus wouldn't respond. He would not produce a sign, because he was not going to play their deceitful game of drawing lines in the sand.

Jesus was not going to support his disciples either, when they told somebody to stop casting out demons in Jesus' name. "Do not forbid him," Jesus told them. "No one who works a miracle in my name can soon afterward speak evil of me."² How can a person think that what another person says can be evil, if what he or she says is about God? If the disciples are worried that this other person might be working against God's

² Mark 9:39.

kingdom, Jesus assures them that the other person isn't. If it is a ministry of God, it must be carried out. We cannot think it to be evil, just because it doesn't fit our perfect pattern of Christianity. We cannot forbid such ministry, just because it isn't the same ministry we are carrying out in Jesus' name. Our "perfect pattern of Christianity" chooses to judge rather than understand. It would rather condemn another than to pray and bless another.

One of my Bible commentaries puts it this way, "[Jesus] knows that both he and his disciples are locked in a life-and-death struggle against evil, and he is prepared to accept any ally willing to join the fight. Jesus concedes the possibility that good can come from circles outside of his own."³ It doesn't matter if somebody comes from another church or another denomination, if that somebody feels called to do ministry he or she is an ally. He or she is obligated to God to think and act and speak as God wants. So are we. We are just as obligated to God to do what he wants us to do.

They may use different words, they may believe different miracles, and they may act in completely different ways. Jesus tells his disciples and us: If they are not against us, they are for us. They are for God,

³ David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*, 368.

which is most important.

Our mutual ministry can only be weakened “by cutthroat competition among” ourselves. Such competition has only one goal, to determine who is in and who is out, which is not what God calls us to do.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells a parable about handing out talents to three people. One man receives five talents, a second man receives two, and a third man receives one. Jesus does not say in the parable that the man with only one talent looked at the other two and wondered why he was gypped. The parable doesn't say that the man with one talent begrudged the other men, so he decided to judge them on their work. The man with the one talent buried his talent, and this was the wrong move to make, because he was supposed to invest it. But as much as he did not invest his talent, he did not draw a line in the sand, either, against the other two. He did not choose to judge them or even work against them.

And, the parable doesn't say that the man with five talents drew his own line in the sand, and acted superior, “all that”, in front of the other two. He received his talents, used his gifts to invest them, and gained five more talents. With his arms full of talents, he returned all of them to the owner. He did not keep

one talent for himself but gave back the five talents he received plus the five talents he earned. He had only one goal in mind: to accomplish everything the Master wanted to his glory.

“Whoever gives a cup of water to drink in my name,” Jesus said, “because [he or she] belongs to Christ, assuredly, I tell you, he [or she] will by no means lose [the] reward.”⁴

We will get caught off-guard from time to time. We will watch some preacher on TV, and want to judge or even laugh. We may become jealous of what a friend is doing in her church, and might judge the work her entire church is doing in their community. It comes down to this: It is all about God and not us. It is all about doing his ministry, so that many more may know Christ and his salvation.

There are many thirsty people out there. They need a drink. God hands us the cups of water, in different amount and with different tastes. God hands us the cups, and tells us to go out and quench people's thirst.

⁴ Mark 9:41.

