

Ministry in the Midst of Conflict: Part 2

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Have you ever wished that God would show up in such miraculous, amazing ways that it would remove every shadow of doubt that remains in the hearts of the people you love who just won't follow Jesus? And it doesn't even need to be, like, parting-the-Red-Sea big, or turning-water-into-wine big (though, that would be cool, too). Just a coincidence that's too hard to ignore. Give our friends a sign that would light the way that they couldn't deny. Or maybe you've wanted this for yourself. Remember that time when faith in God didn't seem to work so well? You had this hard decision to make, but you just didn't know what to do. But God does! God, show me a sign! Or the time when you were depressed? Or when you were confused or hurting? So you waited for that star to shoot across the night's sky, or maybe for that voice to whisper in the woods. If God was just a little more obvious, it would be so much easier to believe. We hear it happens for others; why not me or for my children?

Sometimes we envy the people in the Bible. Sure, we love our modern conveniences (would hate to give up indoor plumbing), but the disciples, Paul, the people of Galilee and Judea, Moses and the people of Israel, they saw miracles with their own two eyes. According to 1 King 18, the prophet Elijah got into a contest with the prophets of Baal; whose God would show up with a display of power? Baal obviously didn't. When it was Elijah's turn, he built an altar, sacrificed a bull, dug a trench around the altar and then had people dump buckets of water over the entire sacrifice and altar; so much water that the altar and sacrifice were drench and the trench was filled with water. He prayed to God and this is what happened (vs. 38-39). Look! Miracle performed and people believe. So, how come God won't do that for us?

We get some help with that question today from Luke 10. Last week we began looking at this new chapter with an eye on the conflict for those who are on mission from God. Jesus accomplished his mission not by conquering others through violence and force, but through enduring the violent hostility of the Evil One with faith in God. That's exactly how we conquer the adversary, too. Remember how we talked about Revelation 12 and the symbolic description of this cosmic conflict? In vs. 11 we read, "And they [*they are followers of Jesus, people like you and me who believe Jesus died for ours sins*] have conquered him [*the devil*] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, *for they loved not their lives even unto death.*"

Do you see that last phrase? Why is it there? For they loved not their lives... that means they didn't love their lives; they didn't cherish their lives. They didn't love their lives to what end? For what goal? To stay alive! To avoid death! So, get it: Followers of Jesus conquer over the Evil One and his forces by the gift of God's grace through Jesus death on the cross and holding firm in their testimony *even when it costs them their very lives*. Why would they give their lives for Jesus? Because we love something more than our life. Jesus! We love God and Jesus more! Why would we love Jesus more than life! Because he first loved us and (Ps. 63:3) "Because the steadfast love of the Lord is better than life, we will praise him!"

I remind you again of the cost of the mission, but with the reward of the sacrifice in mind. Jesus is worth it; the mission is worth it. The steadfast love of God is better than life so don't be hesitant in trading your life for God's love. Keep enduring. But let's move on to our new topics for today. First, let's read our passage again (READ Luke 10:1-20). I want to focus on two points that are found in this passage; which are somewhat unrelated. The first point I want to draw your attention to is faith the 72 needed to place in God for the mission (we won't spend a ton of time here). Secondly, related to the intro on miracles, we going to talk about the role of the miraculous in people following Jesus.

Much of Jesus' instructions for us in this passage relate to the provision of help from God while on their mission. Jesus doesn't explicitly state his promise of provision, but instead he implies his Father's provision and calls people to trust him. So, again, remember the image: you are sheep, you are going to the wolves. And bring nothing! That's probably not what I'd do if I'm sheep going to wolves. I'd probably borrow my brother-in-law's AR-15. I'd bring plenty of cash. Like Frodo and Sam, I'd want to bring some food for the trip, maybe a tent and sleeping bag. Maybe a satellite phone just in case I needed someone to call.

Look at vs. 4 and the words of Jesus, "Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road [which means, 'don't get distracted']." This command screams, "Trust God! He will provide." And you can because he provides. He provides a home to stay in (that's in vs. 5) and hospitality from others to feed you (that's vs. 7). So, be content with what God provided and don't go from house to house. He will provide for you.

You and I need faith to be on God's mission, too. The entire task even down to the smallest details are too big for us to handle on our own. This is God's mission and he will provide for his people when we obey the call to serve. Maybe not exactly as we would prefer, but God will come through.

Can we make a short list in our minds as to what we might need faith in God for? What might we see as obstacles? How about words. I've heard from so many, "I just don't know what I should say. I'm afraid I say the wrong thing." Guess what? I feel that way, too. I don't always know what to say either. That's why I love this promise from Jesus (Mark 13:11), "And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit." That's precious. When I'm on mission, I can trust that God will give me the words to speak.

How about money? Will I have enough money for my needs if I keep giving so much away to God's work? Yeah, he will provide. Seek first his kingdom and righteousness and he'll give me all that's needed.

I need faith in God for my soul-care. When you keep giving and giving it feels like you run out of gas, right? If I'm taking care of others all the time, who will take care of me? God will.

But we need faith to believe that. Faith in what? Well, here's a promise: Ps. 41:1, "Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble the Lord delivers him." So, yes, give of yourself to others; the Lord will help you when it's your turn.

Let's turn to this issue of miracles. Look what Jesus says in Luke 10:13-14 (READ). Let's make sure we know what Jesus is saying. First of all, he's pronouncing a curse on the towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. These are primarily Jewish towns in Galilee. That means Jesus is displeased with his fellow Jews so much so that he curses them. Why? Well, it's because they have not repented. That's what he's getting at when he says, "Tyre and Sidon (those are foreign towns in Syria) would have fully repented a long time ago; why won't you?" People who have no connection to your God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, would have repented by now. But you, my own people, won't repent. But what would have compelled, what would have caused Tyre and Sidon to repent? Look at vs. 13, "For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes (a sign of humility and sorrow)."

That term, *mighty works*, is a specific reference to the miracles that Jesus performed. So, think of it: people who saw the miracles of Jesus still wouldn't follow him. He gave them signs; they even ask for signs (we'll see that in chapter 11), but even when they see the signs, the miracles of Jesus, they don't produce the kind of faith where people follow him.

It's a remarkable thing to discover and learn. It should make you rethink all of those times when maybe you've thought, "God, if you just give me a sign; if you would show up to my son, my daughter, in a miraculous way one time, then they will know... then they will believe." It doesn't work that way. And do you know why? It's because faith is not a matter of the intellect; it's not a matter of the mind. We don't believe in God and follow Jesus when we get enough information, when we get enough proof, to believe in him. That's not what faith is. Faith is a matter of our will; it's a matter of our heart. When we refuse to follow Jesus it's because we want to. Sure, learning new info is helpful, but that's not the last hurdle. The last hurdle is our desires. We don't want to follow. We have made up our minds on what we believe and we're not interested in changing. Maybe the cost is too high for us. Maybe we're not ready to give up control. Maybe we're too proud.

Dwell on this with me: we (meaning, you, me, others... human beings) are tempted to not follow Jesus because of our hearts, because of what we desire. Or put another way: our desires shape the direction of our life, whether that's following Jesus or something else. It starts here and seeing the most amazing miracles won't change that. Paul located the heart as the origin of our refusal to follow Jesus in Eph. 4; he said (vs. 18), "They [those who don't follow Jesus] are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, *due to their hardness of heart*." It starts there in the heart. A hard heart, a refusal to change directions and desires leads to ignorance, which leads to alienation from the life of God, which keeps us living in darkness. I know what I want; and I'm not giving that up. And that sets the course of our life.

I recently heard a psychological study that measured how our prior beliefs and desires impact our acceptance of truth. Graduate level students were given an article about the negative impact of coffee on people's lives. And the students (the subjects of the test) were told to study the article and discover all the flaws of the research. Guess who found the most flaws in the research? Coffee drinkers! The more regular the coffee drinkers the more likely they found flaws in the study. Why? Because they didn't want to believe the information. They were already committed to what they believed: that the coffee bean is magical and good for you.

And this is the good news of the new covenant, the new relationship we have from Jesus. Because, as I know many of you have heard me say and you see yourself in God's word, the glorious promise of the new covenant is that God gives us a new heart when we follow Jesus with new desires. New desires for God. New desires for Jesus. A new love for his word and his wisdom. New wants for his righteousness and for his kingdom. And here's what's so cool. I've seen these new desires emerge in your life. I've been here now 14 years; I've had the joy and privilege of walking with some of you the entire time you've been born again; meaning, I've seen you come to new life in God and then walk accordingly. And your desires are different; they are not what they once were. Surprisingly new, even. And it's amazing; it's wonderful. And I thank God for it. Nothing short of the miracle-working power of God changing our hearts can alter our desires, not even seeing the miracles of Jesus healing the sick and delivering the oppressed.

One last thing: as we progress further into Luke, this rejection of Jesus is more and more pronounced, which in a certain way seems strange. Here's what I mean: all the chapters we've read so far, Luke has been telling us over and over again how the people are flocking to Jesus. They can't get enough of him. He's got huge crowds coming and everybody wants a piece of him. It's making the other religious leaders and rabbis jealous. Yet, Jesus is saying that these towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum (and no doubt others... these are just representative of the entire Galilean region) are cursed because they are not repenting, because they are not following. So what does that mean?

Here's what it means: it means the kind of attention Jesus is getting is not the kind of faith he's looking for. People really aren't following Jesus for the treasure he is; they are following him for the treasure they can receive from him and once they get that they are gone. Basically, their faith is superficial. As soon as they get bored, they'll find someone else to follow. As soon as times get tough they will bail ship. And Jesus knows this and he curses them for it. In fact, we see this more on display in a parallel passage in John 2, it says (vs. 23-25), "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the sign that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man."

That's exactly what we were talking about. People flocked to Jesus for the signs, but something was missing. They were holding back on Jesus not ready to follow him. And, consequently, Jesus held back on them because he knew what was going on in their hearts.

The conflict with the darkness, with the Evil One, is so great, so comprehensive, the battle ground is actually in the hearts of men and women. And not even seeing the Red Sea split in half will dislodge our love of the darkness; neither will hearing God's voice in the woods or seeing your name in the clouds. Only one thing can: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ given to men and women like you and me by God's Holy Spirit when we hear this word. And when that miracle happens, we become followers of Jesus believing that his death on the cross paid for my sins, believing that his resurrection guaranteed my new life, and believing every word that he says is true. Friends, do you have that faith? Have you taken that step? I hope so because that's where life is found... following Jesus.

Questions for the week

- What would you define as a miracle? Have you ever seen one?
- Why don't you think miracles produce saving faith? What did you learn about that today?
- What's one change you know you need to make with God's help?