

AN INSULT WITH A LESSON

MARK 15:1-32

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“He saved others, but He can’t save Himself.” These are the words spoken by the chief priests and teachers of the law as they mocked Jesus during the first three hours that he hung upon the cross. Taken point blank, the words are absolutely false. However, by simply changing the tenses of the two verbs found in this compound sentence, we discover the most wonderful and the most challenging truth about the Christian faith.

Let’s first see how wrong the chief priests and teachers of the law were when they hurled this insult at Jesus.

First, it is obvious that they were being mean and nasty when they did not have to be mean and nasty. They had gotten what they wanted. Jesus had been arrested and condemned, and now He was about to die. They didn’t have to mock Jesus at the time of His death. They had judged Jesus as a bad person, deserving a death sentence. But even if they were right, they should have left Jesus alone at the time of His suffering. These religious leaders desired justice, and we cannot fault them for that. But they were also people who were mean and cruel, and that was wrong. It is not right to gloat over the death of an enemy. Many hundreds of people are killed each day in the name of justice, but the death of those being killed should not be a cause of rejoicing. Those religious leaders were wrong to make the statement in the first place, because a human being should never gloat over the death of another human being, even if there is just cause for the death.

Another reason why the religious leaders were wrong in making this statement is because the statement itself reveals their misunderstanding of who Jesus was.

What did they mean when they said, “He saved others, but He can’t save Himself?” They admitted that Jesus saved others, but they also felt that He did so in a way that was not legitimate.

Earlier, these religious leaders had accused Jesus of using the power of Satan to perform miracles. In their mocking, they said that Jesus saved others. However, they believed that Jesus’ power to save others came from the evil one.

Today we would call it black magic. In their minds, Jesus was a man who was condemned and about to die, and His soul was about to go to hell where it belonged. No longer would He be able to stir the crowds with His black magic and lies. And so they mocked Him saying, “He saved others. He cannot save Himself.”

But, the chief priests and teachers of the law were wrong. When Jesus saved people by giving back to them their life or their health, the healing was always complete and whole. People who received a healing touch of Jesus were not only restored in body but also in mind and in spirit. I have met people who claim to have received physical healing. But after some observation I conclude they are worse off than they were before they received the physical healing. Such is the nature of healing that comes from Satan. The net result is always negative and never positive. But what Jesus did in the lives of those He saved always had a net positive result. So the religious leaders were wrong in their evaluation of our Lord’s earthly ministry of saving and healing people.

And, they were wrong when they said, “He cannot save Himself,” implying that He was powerless to do so. Jesus could have saved Himself had He wanted to. And the fact that He did not save Himself is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is a sign of strength. There are several things Jesus could have done to save Himself.

First of all, He could have said something to Pilot on His own behalf. MARK 15:3 says that the chief priests accused Jesus of many things. But verse five says that Jesus remained silent. Pilot was amazed at His silence. He said to Jesus, “Aren’t you going to answer?” Jesus could have answered if He had wanted to. He could have tried to drive a bargain with Pilot. But, Jesus did not say a word. He chose not to try and save Himself.

Second, Jesus could have made an appeal to the crowds. The crowds were easily stirred and swayed, and the religious leaders knew it. They were afraid of the crowds. They could not arrest Jesus on other occasions, because He was so popular among the crowds. His miracles and teachings made Him a crowd-pleaser. The Pharisees knew this, and one of their biggest concerns was crowd control.

But, it is very interesting to note that, in the days prior to His arrest and following the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, there is no mention of Jesus performing miracles that stirred the crowds. Jesus chose not to stir the crowds. It was the religious leaders who chose to stir the crowds. Verse 9 says that the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Barabbas released instead of Jesus. When the crowd yelled, “Crucify Him, Crucify Him!” they were not speaking from a deep conviction. The religious leaders stirred them up emotionally. They had been told a bunch of lies. Jesus also had the opportunity and the ability to stir the crowd; and

by doing so, He could have saved Himself. But, Jesus chose not to save Himself.

The third way that Jesus could have saved Himself was to use His supernatural power either to escape or to destroy His enemies. At the end of the eighth chapter of John's gospel we find an account where people picked up stones to kill Jesus, but Jesus hid himself, and escaped from those who were attacking Him. And MATTHEW 26:53 says that Jesus could have asked God to send twelve legions of angels to save Himself. But, He chose not to do this. Jesus chose not to save Himself.

Now, this brings us to a very important point. It actually requires greater strength to restrain ourselves when under attack than it does to fight back. And I know that people argue there are times we should fight back, even to the point of killing those who are a threat to our security, and I will deal with that argument shortly. But right now, I just want to make the point that it requires more strength to exercise restraint than it does to fight back.

The natural tendency is to want to defend ourselves when we are wrongly accused. The natural tendency is to be on the side of the majority, to win the favor of the crowd. And, we naturally desire to fight the bad guy, to go to battle and win a victory for what is good. What Jesus did when He chose to go to the cross was completely against human nature, and it required a lot of strength to do it.

The mocking words of the priests and teachers of the law were wrong. They thought Jesus could not save Himself, because He was weak. The truth is that Jesus could have saved Himself, but He didn't because He was strong.

And now, let's look at their insult from another perspective. Notice the tenses of the two verbs used in this compound sentence. The religious leaders looked at the past and said, "He saved others." Then, they looked at the present and said, "He cannot save Himself." But, the correct point of view is to look at the past and say, "He didn't save Himself." And then, look at the present and say, "He saves others." Because Jesus chose not to save Himself, he is able to save others. That's the glorious truth. The only reason why any person has ever and will ever be saved is because Jesus chose not to save Himself. This is a magnificent truth, but it is also the most challenging truth we will ever have to deal with in the Christian life.

It's challenging, because we are supposed to imitate Jesus. If we are not supposed to imitate Jesus, then we could simply acknowledge the fact that Jesus used this particular method to save people. We could then refuse to use this method ourselves based on the belief that we cannot really influence the outcome of another person's salvation one way or the other, so why even try?

I am sometimes tempted myself to keep my nose out of the eternal affairs of other people. If they want to believe in Jesus, let God do the telling and let God do the convincing. Let me attend to my own affairs. But, everything I understand about the scriptures contradicts this way of thinking. If we claim to be Christians, then the eternal destiny of people around us is our business. We must do our part in communicating the gospel to others. We must be a vessel that God can use to reveal truth to people around us. This is our primary reason for existence.

And, the best way we can communicate truth to others around us is to imitate Christ by choosing not to save ourselves so that others might be saved. But, to imitate Christ in this way will be the most challenging and the most difficult thing for us to do.

During the two years Janiene and I studied Chinese in Taiwan, we got to know a young woman who had graduated from a Bible college and then found employment with a trading company. After working for a short period of time, she discovered the sad truth about trading companies in Taiwan; namely, it is next to impossible to work for a trading company without lying on a daily basis. Her boss demanded that she make appointments with buyers and tell them she was working for the factories where the items were being manufactured. And then, she would be forced to go to the factories and tell them she was the buyer. Without revealing her true identity to either party, she would be able to make more money quicker. She felt funny about the lying part, but she told us it was a matter of survival. A person cannot be honest and, at the same time, survive in that kind of environment.

What usually happens when a person in that situation decides to challenge the system? In most cases, the person will receive unkind treatment both from the boss as well as from the co-workers. The unkind treatment might include lies and false accusations. After all, the whole company is based on the principal of lying in the first place, so it is easy to lie again when your own security is at risk.

My sister told me about an honest nurse who worked for a nursing home where the other nurses and aids constantly cut corners and made false reports. When the honest nurse decided to report the behavior to the governing board of the nursing home, all the other nurses immediately attacked her. They falsely accused her of all kinds of wrongdoing. This resulted in her immediate dismissal from the nursing home.

There is no doubt about it. Standing up for the truth will sooner or later make certain people dislike us. And sometimes, the people who dislike us will have the power to make our lives miserable. When that happens, it really is a challenge to imitate Jesus. It really is a challenge to choose not to save ourselves in order to

save others.

And, I know the American way is to go to court and sue in order to bring about justice. But, that is not always an option. And, even when it is an option, it is not always the best way to help save the people who are being sued. Often when people go to court to sue other people, the main thing they have on their minds is the money they will receive to offset their own personal loss or the fact that they might be able to prevent the crime from being repeated in the future. And, even though these reasons may not be bad, these were not the main things on our Lord's mind when He stood silent before His accusers.

The main thing on the mind of our Lord was the salvation of his enemy and not their defeat. Jesus stood His ground against the religious and political leaders. And, so they made His life miserable. But in the very end, many of those leaders ended up respecting what Jesus did and even trusting in Him as their Savior and Lord.

One of the most beautiful verses in the Bible is ACTS 6:7. Listen carefully as I quote this verse of Scripture. "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." Please note that this is an account of things that happened after Jesus had been crucified. And, please note the fact that a large number of priests from Jerusalem became obedient to the faith. This is the same group of people that mocked Jesus while He was on the cross.

If Jesus had tried to strike a bargain with Pilot in order to save His own life, I don't think that these priests would have responded in the same way. Our willingness to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of truth will eventually move the hearts of people to accept the truth. It will help salvation to come to the lives of the very people who try to make our lives miserable.

We imitate Christ when we, for the sake of the salvation of those who are able to make our lives miserable, restrain our anger and respond in a way that will actually help those who are treating us cruelly to experience salvation. And, I am not trying to suggest that a wife who is being beaten by her husband should submit herself to such beatings. I don't believe that is the best way to help an abusive husband experience salvation. We imitate Christ by exercising restraint in a way that will help others receive eternal life.

And, we imitate Christ by breaking away from the crowd and walking the lonely road. Breaking away from the crowd is not fun, because it makes us stand out as being odd.

Public opinion these days does not consider aborting a human fetus to be a sin. And public opinion does not consider homosexuality to be a sin. Some of you have already taken a stand in your school or workplace that contradicts public opinion. You already have tasted what it is like to walk the lonely road.

But, don't feel sorry for yourself. The very crowd that opposes you also desperately needs you. They will watch you as you come under fire. You need to love them. Jesus never lost His love for the multitudes, and we must imitate Jesus. For the sake of the crowd, don't be afraid to break away from the crowd. I am not talking about becoming anti-social. We can't express love by being anti-social. Crowds are easily swayed, and sooner or later the truth will be revealed to the crowd, and the crowd will cheer the person who walked alone. The crowd will actually lift that person up as an example. Leaders who always go with the crowd will some day be forgotten by the crowd. But, leaders who stood for the truth when everyone else went the other way will never be forgotten. By breaking away from the crowd, Jesus actually brought salvation to the crowd. We need to follow this example.

And finally, we must imitate Christ by seeking to love our enemies instead of killing our enemies. This is a controversial point in light of all the wars taking place around the globe these days. Killing the enemy is now the politically correct thing to do.

Just like the person going to court to sue another person who has done him harm seems to be the best way to make up for damage done or prevent a reoccurrence of the crime; likewise, killing another human being for the same reasons seems to be perfectly justifiable.

But, as we make our choices in life, let us never forget that killing people does little to help them receive salvation. On the other hand, showing kindness to those who want to kill us will do much to help people recognize their need for salvation.

During the American Civil War, President Lincoln once said some nice things about the Confederates. Hearing him, a woman asked how he could speak kindly of enemies he should be trying to destroy. "What, Madam?" said Lincoln. "Do I not destroy them when I make them my friends."

The only way we will be able to imitate Christ when we are engaged in conflicts with people who are trying to kill us is to remember that our real conflict is not against people, but against Satan. And, our real goal is not our own security, but the salvation of those with whom we are fighting.

Once a missionary tried to get this point across to a professing Christian caught up in the current Middle-East struggle. When the person was challenged to pray for their enemy and exercise restraint for the sake of the salvation of their enemy, he responded by saying, "But they deserve to go to hell."

We should understand how a person who has lost a loved one at the hands of an enemy could feel this way. War drives people to feel this way. But Jesus calls us to go think another way and act another way. It is a way that requires more strength than our own strength. It requires the strength of God. Jesus chose not to save Himself so that He could save others. Let us marvel at the strength behind such a decision, and let us ask God to give us the same kind of strength so that salvation can come to many people.

Application

This topic can easily raise questions that have no absolute answers. For instance, the question, "Is it right for a Christian to kill another person in a war-time situation?" cannot be answered without taking motivation into consideration. I would advise asking questions and sharing experiences that are personal and current. This will give others opportunities to minister to your needs.