

Preparing the Apostolic Evangelists, Part IV

Call to Worship: Psalm 84

1st Scripture: Micah 7:1-7

2nd Scripture: Matthew 10:34-39

Introduction

We have been working through a lengthy section in Matthew, Chapter 10, where the Lord is preparing His Apostles for their Apostolic ministry, which would continue on beyond His own death, resurrection and ascension, and ultimately to the end of their own lives. This morning, we begin to work toward the conclusion of these important instructions, and as we do so, we will wrestle through a sobering declaration made by our Lord, which seems to contradict what the Scriptures teach about the nature of His overall ministry. And furthermore, once again, we will come to an Old Testament quote (taken from Micah 7, which we read for our first Scripture reading), which our Lord utilizes as a description of His own ministry, in this regard. To this end, *next time*, Lord willing, we will catch another glimpse of how our Lord (along with the NT writers) affirmed an immediate and future relevance to many of those Old Testament prophecies which ultimately spoke of Him; albeit, the greater fulfillment ending with Him.

I. Jesus Came to Bring *Division*?

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword” (vs. 34). Now, at first glance, this statement really is quite striking, isn’t it? This is probably not a text you are going to hear spoken from Joel Osteen or the “health and wealth” ilk, because it certainly doesn’t fit their agenda, and to think that it came from the mouth of Jesus would probably be repulsive to them. But, think about this for a moment. Isn’t Jesus the Prince of Peace? Didn’t the angelic beings chant, in the presence of the shepherds, “Peace on earth and goodwill toward men,” when the Lord was born? Indeed, when you think of the Lord Jesus Christ, one of the first words that ought to come to mind is “peace.” This was one of the words He spoke to His disciples just following His resurrection, wasn’t it?

And yet, here, our Lord declares, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.” Doesn’t this seem to be a contradiction to everything that is “Jesus of Nazareth?” Well brethren, here is a “case in point” reason for why context is extremely important, when seeking to understand the meaning of any particular verse of Scripture. If context is ignored, you can virtually make the Bible say whatever you want it to say. You can point to one text and state, “Jesus came to bring peace,” and you can apply that in all kinds of ways, beyond its intended scope, and actually contradict the fact that “Jesus also came not to bring peace, but a sword.” And this kind of textual abuse is common in the development of all kinds of theological concepts and ideas, which if left unchecked, would turn the Bible on its head, and make it devoid of any essential meaning. But, that is what people do, all the time. And so, context is extremely important.

What then is our Lord stating here? Well, for starters, let’s ask the question, “In what sense did our Lord bring peace on earth?” What were the shepherds rejoicing over, and in what way is Jesus the very “*Prince of Peace*?” Well, in a world that is given over to hardship, misery, wickedness, destruction and division, because of the curse of sin, Jesus came to deal with that curse. He came to remove it. And ultimately, His work will spill into a world of complete peace, which will know no more hardship or conflict anymore, when He returns. In other words, there is no peace, nor would there ever be peace, for anyone in this world, apart from Jesus Christ, because He alone deals with the utterly destructive problem of sin. And so, to this end, Jesus brings peace (indeed, is the only source of peace), in that, He brings peace where it is needed most; peace with God, and peace with one another (among those who first have peace with God). Jesus breaks down the wall of separation between God and man, which has existed since our first parents fell in the Garden. He enters into our fallen world as a man, He lives a faithful and righteous life (fully obeying the commands of God, at all times), and He dies, as a substitute, on behalf of the wicked, so that, they can receive His righteousness and thereby be welcomed into the presence of our holy God, forever! And all who benefit from His sacrifice obtain that glorious, incomprehensible peace!

Now, there is a bridge into that state of peace, isn’t there? One must be united to Christ to benefit from His death and resurrection, and we are only united to Christ by faith. And all

who have such faith, are united, as one, in Christ, which further extends the peace that they now have with God, toward one another. They are part of the family of God now, and enjoy peace both with God and one another. This reality, which comes to the world through the proclamation of the Gospel, is offered to all people. This is the peace with God, which Jesus brought, and which is offered to all of mankind. That said, not everyone will have faith. In fact, the great majority will not have faith. Not everyone will benefit from Jesus's sacrificial atonement, leaving them in a state of enmity with God and condemnation. And because they willingly reject God's offer, in their rejection of Christ, they also reject and oppose all who have received Christ. And herein, is where the sword comes down, separating individuals, even blood relatives and immediate family members.

And brethren, this goes back to our Lord's proclamation back in Genesis 3, as He pronounced a curse upon the serpent. There, He stated that He would put enmity between the Seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. It wouldn't simply be the case that God would separate a people for Himself in Christ (the ultimate Seed of the woman), but furthermore, He would separate a seed belonging to satan, as well, and the two seeds would be *enemies*. And where there is enmity, there is strife, contention and division. Jesus is here addressing this reality, and it would have really had a sobering place in the heart of the Jews, who thought that simply being Jewish in an ethnic sense, automatically meant that you (and your loved ones) were eternally blessed. But, not so. Indeed, Jesus Himself would be the dividing line, and only a remnant from among the Jews would be united to Him. This would create division among families, such that, those who had converted to Christianity would be ostracized, excommunicated, persecuted and even put to death by their own family members. Isn't that what we considered back in verses 21-22 (read again)?

To this end then, Jesus did not come to bring peace on earth, but rather a sword. Jesus didn't come to be a "midway" man, letting people settle down where they think best. No, He came as a King, to call a people into His Kingdom, by means of His atonement, and all who remain outside are not merely "neutral" individuals; they are His enemies. This is His world. And we are His creation, and we were born to (and are obligated to) live for His glory. We don't rob Him of the glory that He has invested in our lives, and claim some kind of independent

neutrality. We don't breathe His air, in bodies and souls designed by Him, in a world that is saturated with His bounteous blessing, and say, "No thanks, Lord. I'll just steal what you have designed for Your glory and use it for my own sinful purposes." That is high treason. You are either with Him or you are against Him. Unwilling to embrace the truth; indeed, hostile toward and offended by this truth, those who belong to Satan will persecute and attack those who have embraced it. No, the Gospel is not your typical "everything is honky dory" fairytale. It involves a King laying hold of and dying for what is rightfully His, and conquering and destroying all who oppose and refuse to bow the knee to Him.

Notice verses 35-36, "For *I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'*; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.'" God had stated from the beginning, "*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed...*" Who would set that enmity in place? Who would put the sword of division down, setting even family members against each other? *God!* God sets the division (He puts the wall up), based upon His elective purposes, in light of the train wreck that has become mankind because of His rebellion against God. The great gulf that is fixed between heaven and hell is only the ultimate, predictable conclusion, to what has already begun to take place in this life; the division of God's people (the separating of God's people) from those who remain under Adam's curse, and united to Satan. Yes, the Gospel unites all of those who come to Christ by faith; it brings about the greatest quality, value and duration of peace between God and redeemed sinners, and between redeemed sinners themselves, but it also divides the redeemed from the unredeemed, separating close relations and bloodlines even, forever! And this would be outwardly manifested by the persecution which the Jews would receive from their own family members. And historically, this has proven to be the case, such that, some Jewish families have even had funerals for their loved ones (children, parents, siblings...etc) after they had embraced Christ.

Now, this division which Jesus is speaking about is certainly a hard pill to swallow. One has to be willing to walk away from his/her own family, if by doing so, they are seeking to follow Christ. When the line is drawn in the sand, they must stand on Christ's side of the line, no

matter who stands opposite them, on the other side. And that is why the Lord attaches this sobering warning to all that He has just stated:

“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (vs. 37-39).

It being the case that the Lord came to bring division, and to draw a dividing line between those who would follow Him and those who would reject Him, He gives this stern and sobering warning to those who would desire to follow Him. Following Christ is not going to come without significant sacrifice. And sometimes, one’s own family will even pressure him to choose between Christ and family. And so, Jesus states that His followers must be willing to put Him first; to honor Him first, even over mother and father, son or daughter...etc. And those who are unwilling to disappoint and to be ousted from their families for the cause of Christ, are not worthy of Christ. And those who love even their closest earthly connections more than Christ are not worthy of Him. Christians must be willing to forsake all for the cause of Christ, when such a calling is necessary.

Indeed, the Lord never said that following Him would be easy. The life of a Christian necessitates bearing a cross. And bearing a cross implies bearing a burden of daily self-sacrifice; indeed, a willingness to be cut off from anything that would hinder you from faithfully following Christ, in accordance with His will. For some, that may include missing out on certain career opportunities. For others, that may include losing friends and even close friends. And yet, for others, that might even include losing family. You see, following Christ means setting off on a path of commitment and obedience to the One who has laid His life down for you. And along that path, you will discover various offshoots and opportunities in the world, that can look so promising and comforting in this life. But, to take those paths, you would have to abandon the path of Christ, as defined by His Word. And at such times, you have to decide which path is more essential and important to you. You can’t have it both ways. It’s either Christ (and obedience to Christ) or another path which promises some level of temporary fulfillment, but not without compromise. It’s like that one soil in the parable of the sower, which seems, at first, to

be good soil, but in reality it contains thorns and thistles. And as the seed begins to sprout, seeking to move in the direction of bearing fruit, the thorns choke the life out of that small sprout. Jesus states that that is representative of those who seem to desire to genuinely follow Him at the first, but then, the cares of this world choke out whatever desire they had to follow Christ. This is why Jesus says count the costs, and that all who love this world, do not have the love of the Father in them. You cannot love this life; you cannot live within the sphere of settling your life comfortably in this world, and expect to follow Christ into the next. It's impossible. And all of us who profess faith in Christ, throughout the course of our journey, will be tested in this way, to prove or disprove the genuineness of our faith.

“Whoever does not take up his cross and follow Me...” Where was Jesus heading? He was ultimately heading to Golgotha to be crucified! “Whoever does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. It's an all or nothing commitment. “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.” We have to be willing to let go of, and to forsake, all of this. We have to be willing to let go of all that is temporary, if we are to gain what is eternal. But, you see the good news is this. Once we let go of what is temporary; once we make the commitment to lay hold of that which is eternal, then we will find true life in the process. And that true life, while certainly including eternal life, is not simply a *quantitative* blessing. It's the *quality* of that eternal life which really takes hold of the heart. It is not merely to live forever, but it is to live forever having fellowship with the living God, who created all things, and who is eternal and infinite. What is eternal life? To know God and His Son, Jesus Christ, whom He sent. And friends, here is the greatest, most to be valued, mystery which rests at the foundation of all things, visible and invisible. There is no greater joy; there is no greater blessing; there is no greater reality of life, than to know God personally, and to be the object of His perfect love. Indeed, the Psalmist says, “Thy lovingkindness is better than life!” Nothing... nothing in this entire material universe; indeed, all things combined together in this entire material universe could not measure up to a fraction (a tiny fraction!) of the wonder and eternal joy that belongs to those who walk with, and know God! That is an absolute fact that is beyond the realm of any dispute. And anyone who has even tasted a drop of the kindness and love of God; even a morsel of His presence and glory, can testify to this! When you go there; when you

let go of this life and experience God, in truth, you never, ever, ever go back. And anyone who does go back, has never truly been there. You can't find life, true life, and walk right back to the graveyard. It's not possible!

And so, the Apostles were to proclaim this reality; this was the nature of the Gospel (the "good news") that they were to proclaim, in every city and town that they had travelled to. The Gospel is glorious! It's the way (the only way) of salvation, for sinners who are at enmity with God. It's a wonderful message, but it doesn't come without a commitment on our part; a commitment to be willing to forsake all (even family and friends if necessary), to follow Christ. And this is the message which must continue to be proclaimed today. But sadly, so, so many have decided to cheapen it, and to remove the cross, attempting to make it more palatable for sinners, who would naturally not respond favorably to such a message. And that is one of the greatest pitfalls of the "health and wealth," "easy-believism" gospel. It completely undermines and rejects the power of the Holy Spirit, who only uses the *true* Gospel to call sinners into the grace of Christ. And because their message is devoid of the Spirit, they simply transfer the dead into a building, where they are always entertained, while never gaining true life. True life only comes through the cross. True life only comes when one dies to self. And that is a painful reality. But, it is a reality nonetheless, and a glorious reality at that. Because once this life is truly lost, eternal life is truly found.

Conclusion

Christianity is an offense for many reasons, but most of all, it is an offense because at the core of our faith, is a Gospel of exclusion. It is not "all inclusive." It does not present an "all paths ultimately lead to God" philosophy. At the very foundation of everything we believe, the entirety of our faith is bolted behind a steel door with these words written above it, "Jesus is *The Way, The Truth, and The Life*. No one comes to the Father, but through Him." And one cannot walk through that door, without being willing to leave his sin, on the other side of it. To be sure, one doesn't walk through that door perfectly, but she must be committed to forsake all that is necessary, to follow Christ. That is the mindset, from the outset, that one must have, if he is to enter in. And that is offensive to the world.

And so, brethren, we ought never to be surprised by the fact that the Gospel is an offense. It is repulsive to the natural man. A Christ; a Savior, who calls us to leave our own righteousness at the door; who declares that all of our righteous deeds are like filthy rags, so that, we might enter, clothed in Him alone, is an offense to the world. This is a message and a reality that is, and will be, hated by the natural man...unless, the Spirit of God awakens them unto this truth, humbling them, emptying them of themselves, so that, they might be filled with Christ. We cannot cheapen this message, because when we do, we strip it of all of its power, and offer the world a mirage (a sham gospel) which does absolutely nothing to redeem them, and to reconcile them to God. The Gospel divides! The Gospel cuts! We present it graciously. This truth doesn't lead us to present it arrogantly, but the message itself cuts [Acts 2- They were "cut" to the heart...]. And yet...and yet, it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. God will save His people. Christ will call His true sheep through this Gospel; through the true proclamation of a free salvation for all who repent of their sins and believe into Christ (in truth). Let us never, ever compromise this message. In doing so, we may make more people comfortable. We may appease and alleviate our own natural fear of man. We might make many more friends and fill the church with people. But, we do a great disservice to all people, and especially to the Lord Jesus Christ. Because a trimmed down, cheapened, dull, gospel; a commitment-less gospel, which removes all offense, is no Gospel at all. And it would actually be better to present no gospel at all, than to present a "half-way," cheap, sugar-coated gospel, which does nothing more than give assurance to those who remain dead in sin, and under the wrath of God.

[To the unsaved. The way to eternal life is indeed narrow...etc]

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25