

Pride And Prayer

by Steve Zeisler

The first and foundational relationship we have with God is as recipients of his grace. We receive mercy from his hand through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for us. Now in this series of messages we have been observing some men and women in the Gospels as they received the ministry of Christ. We saw for instance, a woman who received the love of Jesus, a centurion who received the approval of Jesus, and a prophet who received the counsel of Jesus.

Not too long after becoming Christians we discover that we are not only related to the Lord as recipients of his grace but we become his representatives also. We become his disciples his followers. We have the honor and the responsibility to minister in his name to a world that does not know him. And Jesus is hard to represent. None of the skills that come naturally to us do us any good in this task of standing for his truth. Jesus was terrible at public relations, at the art of compromise. He seemed to choose leaders without regard for aptitude, education or skill. He operated differently than any organization we have ever been part of or any cause we have ever stood for. We need to learn therefore how to be his representatives. We need to have him teach us how we ought to minister and how we ought to serve as disciples.

In Mark 9 there is a passage where the Lord teaches his disciples how they ought to stand for him. Let us look at that passage this morning. Mark 9:14:

And when He came back to the disciples, He saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. And immediately when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed and began running up to greet Him. And He asked them, "What are you discussing with them?" And one of the crowd answered Him, "Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever It seizes him, It dashes him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth, and stiffens out. And I told Your disciples to cast It out, and they could not do It." And He answered them and said, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me! And they brought the boy to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him Into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling about and foaming at the mouth. And He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And It has often thrown him both Into the fire and Into the water to destroy him. But If You can do anything take pity on us and help us!" And Jesus said to him, " 'If You can!' All things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the boy's father cried out and began saying "I do believe; help me In my unbelief." And when Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to It, "You deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again." And after crying out and throwing him Into terrible convulsions, It came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, "He is dead!" But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up. And when He had come Into the house, his disciples began questioning Him privately, "Why is it that we could not cast It out?" And He said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer."

Let us try to picture this scene in our minds. Here is a large crowd of people, a great multitude surrounding some men who are arguing. The arguers are on the one side, the scribes—the educated elite of Judaism—and on the other side, Jesus' disciples (in particular the nine members of his chosen twelve who remained after) Peter, James and John went away with the Lord to a retreat in the mountains.

The argument centers around a boy and his father. The boy has been oppressed by a demon which periodically

throws him into convulsions, and the nine disciples are unable to cast the demon out. They cannot relieve the boy of this oppression he has suffered all his life. The father and his boy by this time apparently are on the periphery of the crowd. They have been pushed out of the way and are now somewhere on the edge of the large crowd. The reason I say that is because as Jesus and three of his followers approach, the crowd begins to run toward them and among the first to reach them are this father and his son.

In the section just before the one we read, we see that the Lord had taken Peter, James and John—only those three—to the mountains on an intimate retreat with him. (No one else knew it at this point, but on that occasion Jesus was transfigured before them.) The nine disciples are left behind to hold the fort as it were, while Jesus is away. They are left as his representatives to minister in his name; they are left with responsibility.

By way of further background look down at Mark 9:34. Jesus asks them soon after this incident:

"What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest.

It is clear that part of the problem these nine who were left behind faced was the notion that in some way they were not as important as the inner ring of three who got to go with Jesus to the mountains.

Lastly by way of background, we should note that Mark tells us in chapter three that Jesus had commissioned his disciples to have the power to cast out demons. We know from Luke's gospel that all of these twelve had already been sent on a preaching-teaching-healing mission in which they were specifically commanded to cast out demons in Jesus' name. It is reasonable therefore for them to expect that they ought to have been successful in casting the demon out of this boy.

These nine men who were left behind to represent the cause of Christ were very anxious that they be successful. They wanted Jesus' name to be honored in the crowd. They wanted the educated elite from Jerusalem to think highly and respectfully of Christ. They wanted to advance his cause and win converts to the gospel. This was a high motive on their part. But we also need to see that part of the reason for their defensiveness for their arguing was that they also wanted to advance their own cause. They wanted to be more respected as Christian leaders so they were asking, "Who is the greatest among your followers?"

I have to admit that I can sympathize very much with their point of view. How they felt at that moment is exactly the way I feel most of the time. I want to be a good servant of the Lord. I want Christianity to be respected in my culture. I want the cause of Christ to advance as a result of my ministry. I want more people to appreciate the Lord. I am anxious that many more are convinced that Jesus is Lord but I am also interested in being more highly thought of myself, as his servant.

During my six years as college pastor here at PBC I spent a great deal of my time on Stanford University campus. I remember being very emotionally sensitive in these areas. I was very concerned, first of all, that the Christian community at Stanford was doing well in the face of those who ridiculed us. Were we gaining acceptance? Were we respectable? Was Jesus more highly thought of as a result of our ministry there? What did the campus newspapers report about us? Did we win the debates? (Occasionally we would hold debates—the Christian point of view versus some non-Christian point of view.) Were we growing in numbers? Were impressive people being converted? I paid a great deal of attention to those things because my sense of well being was tied to how the cause of Christ was doing in the face of opposition.

I was also very aware of the fact that there were other Christian ministries on campus, such as the Navigators, Inter-Varsity, Campus Crusade for Christ, and ministries from other churches in the area. I was keen to see that the things we did in our ministry were successful when compared with others. Were the key student leaders on campus revolving around me and those whom I was discipling or were they going to other meetings instead? Those things concerned me. If Jesus had been present and had invited three people to go with him to the mountains for a special retreat, I would have wanted to be one of the three! I would

have wanted to be successful enough to be considered part of the inner circle.

I can understand these men, therefore, and the situation they had gotten themselves into. Nine second-string disciples left behind to stand for Christ are given an opportunity to do something impressive but they blew it. Now they are trying to recapture the opportunity to impress the crowd. They are trying to rationalize their behavior. They are trying, through argument and defensiveness, to convince those listening that their cause is right and that they themselves are important.

They are doing a poor job of representing their Master, however. Despite their desire to be good ministers, to be faithful representatives, they are representing him very badly. We can say that with confidence because Jesus himself acts very differently when he shows up on the scene. His priorities and his interests are utterly different than those of the nine disciples and their way of handling the situation. First of all, notice that the Lord does not care a whit about the crowd. He does not make any comments to them. He does not try to win their approval. In fact, if anything, the crowd gets on his nerves. He brings his ministry to a close when he sees the crowd gather (Luke 9:25). Precisely because things are getting out of hand he decided it is time to end the whole scene.

What did matter to Jesus, however, what did concern him very much was the fact that there was a boy present who had been oppressed by demons, whose life had been threatened, who was terrified and afraid, and that the heartbroken father of this boy was hungry for spiritual truth, desperate to find answers. That mattered very much to Jesus. The disciples, the scribes and the crowd had managed to push these two to the edge, but Jesus centered his attention on them.

And he loved them enough to not treat the situation with some kind of exorcism formula, to not run through a demon casting out routine with them. He saw clearly enough to realize that it was not merely the boy who had needs but the father had needs as well, so he began his ministry by asking a simple question which allowed this man to open up the things that were inside him. "How long has this been going on?" he asks. The father responds, "My son's life is in danger. He has repeatedly fallen in these convulsions in such a way that he might have died. It has been terrifying.

He is utterly out of control on these occasions and I don't know what to do about it. I love my son and I'm scared to death." Jesus lets this man speak out the things that are in his heart because he cares about him. "If you can do something," the father says, "please help." Jesus then takes it a step further: "I can do something, certainly. That is not the issue. The issue is, will you grow in faith?" "I believe," the father responds, "help my unbelief." What a magnificent statement! The Lord is patient and interested and gentle enough to allow this man to confess his hurt and to ask for help.

Jesus' first concern is to minister to the father's spiritual need. He then turns to the boy and demands that the demon come forth and leave him alone.

Do you see why Jesus was so frustrated? Do you see why he cried out in Luke 9:19, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you?" His own followers and the scribes, the religious leadership who ought to have known better, were engaged in a childish debate: "You couldn't cast out the demons. " "Oh yeah, says who? You should have seen us last week. We were really good then. You guys aren't so sharp yourself." A multitude of religious curiosity seekers stands around, applauding the circus, but nobody in the whole panorama cares about this boy and his father. Nobody put his arm around the ones who were really hurting. Nobody has prayed for them. Nobody has forgotten about himself long enough to be servant-hearted instead of self-centered. The whole generation is utterly faithless. It is important to notice Jesus' cry of frustration, because if we are going to represent him, if we are going to be disciples, we need to have the kind of heart he had.

Finally, when they are alone later, the disciples ask him, "Why couldn't we cast it out? We've cast out demons before. We expected to be able to do it this time." Jesus' answer to them is that in that situation they should have prayed. What they ought to have done when they ran into circumstances which contradicted their expectations, where they failed when they didn't expect to fail, where things didn't go the way they thought, was pray. I don't

think he is saying here that they ran up against a "super demon." That's not the point. Any disciple of mine—these nine—who casts out a demon does so on the basis of the authority of Jesus' name. It does not matter how strong the demon is. In the name of Christ he has to respond. No, they had not run into a "super demon." The problem was that in the wisdom of God it was the Father's decision that things not go exactly the way the disciples thought they should. It was the choice of God to hold back at that moment in history. God had something else in mind, and when faced with a situation like that, the disciples should have prayed. Instead of defending themselves they should have prayed. They had a choice: pride or prayer, defensiveness or dependence, and they made the wrong choice.

Let us look at the apostle Paul, another representative of the Lord, only this time a grown-up one. The nine disciples we looked at in Mark were at the very beginning of their learning experience. One of the lessons they learned was the very scene we just examined. When Paul wrote this, however, he had begun to see serving Christ for what it really was. 1 Corinthians 1:18 and following:

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

It does not bother God that fools regard him as foolish. When confronted with failure and public embarrassment, these nine followers of Christ could have drawn near the Lord, they could have prayed, they could have sought answers, or instead they could have tried to take away the embarrassment, which is the choice they made. They tried to explain away the apparent difficulty. They themselves tried to defend the cause of Christ from the charge that they were inadequate. The problem is that God does not need defending. He is perfectly glad to be considered foolish. It is all right with him. It is his choice, in fact, that the debaters of this age, those who are committed to this world system, will look at the message of the gospel of his Son and laugh at it.

We need to learn to live with that point of view. I regularly find myself wanting to explain away God's choice of lumpy clay pots to hold this treasure. I have no idea why he would choose people like us. It seems like a bad move to me, so when facing hostility I try to take away the sting, to take away the foolishness, to deny that it is a little embarrassing to have such a cause. I try to explain away the choice of our Lord that the weeds will be allowed to grow up with the wheat, that we will not do anything about it until the end, therefore every time you see a Christian congregation like this one you will see hypocrisy; you will see all manner of things you can deride and ridicule. That is all right with God. He does not mind being thought foolish.

My family and I live on a one-block long street in Palo Alto that is rather like a miniature United Nations. There are Blacks, Chinese, Caucasians, Jews and Arabs living on my street; there are all categories of family life—single parents, married parents, new-born babies, retired people, teenagers—all on our little one block long street. Everybody else on that street, as far as I know, except the Zeisler family, is free to be democratic, pluralistic and open-minded, while we are stuck believing a message that is very exclusive. That message says that there really is one law that applies to everybody in the whole universe, that all of us need to face it, and the fact that we are different in many ways does not excuse any of us from hearing the ethical commandments of God, from hearing his decision that Jesus is the only way that men and God can be reconciled. It is kind of embarrassing, a little archaic, not a lot of fun at cocktail parties, but we are stuck with it.

It is getting to the point at weddings, I have found, where it is harder and harder to read Ephesians 5 these days: "Wives be submissive to your husbands"! You sort of mutter it. Even if you go to pains explaining what it means, you are bound to be accosted by somebody's aunt at the wedding reception, who wonders what in the

world you think you are doing talking about stuff that went out years ago.

The problem is that we will never be able to make people who are not interested in believing in Christ like him anyway. We will never have a respectable Christianity, a highly thought-of cause except among people who are willing to believe it. Others are going to laugh at it. We need to be willing to tell the truth, to not try and fudge it, to not try and leave out the parts that do not sound so good because we want to be well liked.

Later in 1 Corinthians, in his description of what it means to represent Christ, Paul goes on to talk about the apostles, the most venerated Christian leaders who have ever lived. Among a lot of other negative things, Paul says that the apostles are the scum of the earth. Do you know who are the most scorned, rejected, mistreated group around? They are Jesus' most important servants. His most respected, his most venerated servants are the scum of the earth. So I worry about my reputation! I worry about looking good. I worry about breaching the inner circle. That's ridiculous. There is no inner circle. There is no first string. I need to be the kind of man God calls me to be in the place he calls me to be and not worry about my reputation.

I don't need to worry about his reputation either. The nine disciples should not have argued with the scribes. They should not have defended themselves. It is wrong for people like you and me to try and defend the Lord or defend ourselves in the face of a hostile world, in the face of people who really hate the gospel. (Of course, we should distinguish clear, loving proclamation of the truth from trying to cover up "Christian failure.") It is all right if Jesus treats some of his servants differently than others. There is nothing we can do about that anyway. It is up to him. We should not try to reverse that. We should not try to gain a place of greater approval and more applause. Rather, we should be grateful to have the assignment he has given us. It was wrong of those nine disciples to be motivated by a sense of wanting to climb the ladder in discipleship.

What, then, should we do? What choices should we make? I would suggest that if we are going to be representatives of the Lord, disciples, that we handle things the way he would, that we fairly represent him. When we are faced with circumstances like these men were—where the ministry that they attempted to do did not work, although they had a legitimate right to expect it to work—we always have the freedom to identify, to give priority to, to care for the hurting people, to listen to the spiritually hungry, to show compassion for those who need compassion.

Secondly, we can always pray. It may not be apparent why God is operating the way he is, but we can talk to him about it, we can ask for understanding, for wisdom. We can beseech him to intervene and do something different. We can implore him for the grace to wait, to have courage enough to let him do in his time what he intends, to express the fact that we are faithful, that we do trust him. We can always pray. Identify with those who are needy, be compassionate, and be prayerful—when we are that kind of people we are a faithful generation, not a faithless one. We are adequate servants, we are good representatives because those are the kind of priorities the Lord has.

Thank you, Our Father, for the gift of being able to serve you. We want to be good servants, we want to be good representatives, those who stand for you as you are. We ask you to make us men and women of prayer especially, who will not defend ourselves and react with pride, but who will react with prayer instead. In Christ's name, Amen.

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Steve Zeisler
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