

"He Who Is Not Against Us"

Have you ever been a member of some exclusive club? Maybe some fancy health club, or gym, or business group? Or maybe in the past you wanted to be a member of such a group, but were always looking in from the outside?

The disciples in our passage thought they were part of something exclusive. They were part of Jesus' official disciples, and for that matter, part of his inner circle of twelve who followed him everywhere. And so when they encountered a man who was casting out demons in the name of Christ, but who wasn't part of their ordinary group of followers of Jesus, they objected. They tried to stop the man because he wasn't one of them. The disciples evidently thought they were part of something exclusive.

And in one sense, they were right. The Christian message is in many ways an exclusive message with exclusive claims. For example, Jesus says that salvation is *only* through him. In some important ways, however, Christianity can be very inclusive. For example, Jesus calls us to deliver the gospel of salvation to *everyone* in the world.

But looking specifically at our passage for today: Did the disciples do the right thing here? Jesus says no, and teaches them more about being a part of his kingdom. The disciples didn't properly understand the scope of Christ's kingdom. And so as we think about the exclusiveness and the inclusiveness of Christ, we have to look to Christ to define that for us. In other words, we see the disciples here didn't fully understand what made someone a part of Christ's kingdom. And so we'll look today at what Christ teaches us about who is with him and who is not.

And so beginning in verse 38, we find John coming to Jesus with a question. John explains to Jesus how they had tried to stop a man who had been casting out demons in Christ's name. From the way John describes the man, it seems that this man was regularly casting out demons. But he was not casting out demons by his own strength. John clearly explains that the man was casting out demons by the name of Jesus.

And so an immediate question that comes to mind as we read this: Why did the disciples try to stop this man? Why would they try to hinder or forbid this man from this good deed, especially when he was giving the credit to Jesus? The simple answer is right there in verse 38. John said, "Because he does not follow us."

But that only begs the question all the more. Okay, we understand the man isn't formally following Jesus and the twelve disciples. But why is that a reason to try to stop him from casting out demons in Christ's name? In other words, what's the underlying motive for the disciples here?

One possibility could be a very genuine concern on their part. They could have been genuinely concerned to protect Jesus and his ministry. Maybe they didn't want people to lose focus on Jesus. Maybe they were afraid this man would misrepresent Jesus. Maybe they saw this man as an unknown variable in the equation of Jesus' ministry. And so it's quite possible that the disciples' motivation came from a genuine concern for Jesus to be glorified and for his ministry prosper.

It's also possible they had bad motivations in trying to stop him. Maybe they were selfishly looking to protect their ministry and place of privilege with Jesus. Notice how they elevate themselves here. In verse 38, they said that the man did not follow "us". They actually say that twice in verse 38. They don't criticize the man for not following "Jesus", but for not following "us". So the disciples are looking for this man to not be a mere follower of Jesus. They want the man to be following Jesus along with *them* as the core group of disciples.

When you notice their subtle choice of words here, you can't help but think back to our passage from last week. Remember, last week we saw the disciples arguing amongst themselves about who would be the greatest in Christ's kingdom. They were vying for leadership and control, and even trying to compete against each other for the highest position. Jesus of course corrected them on their misplaced desires. And so we already know that the disciples had a competitive heart even with each other. They were in a sense threatened by each other, each looking to get ahead of the other.

How much more might that have been the case here with this man who was casting out demons in Jesus' name? Maybe the disciples felt threatened by him. Maybe they were afraid he might gain a better position in Christ's kingdom than they would. They must have thought that wouldn't be very fair. They were the ones following Jesus everywhere and spending almost every moment with him! But you can see why they might have felt threatened. Remember, just earlier in this chapter we read that the disciples had failed to cast out a demon in a demon-possessed boy. Then the disciples encounter this stranger who was regularly casting out demons in Christ's name. And so I think it is quite possible that they could have felt threatened by this man who was doing the very thing they had just failed to do.

Of course, that's possibly why they bring this up here to Jesus. Maybe that's part of their motivation for asking Jesus about this situation. Maybe after Jesus just taught them to become least of all and the servant of all, that they felt guilty about how they treated this man. On the other hand, it's possible that the fact that they are telling Jesus about this means that they didn't think there was anything wrong with their motivation.

Now I'm speculating quite a bit here about the motivation of the disciples. I'm speculating about why they tried to stop this man. At the end of the day, we can't know for certain. Looking at the situation, we can see some hints at their motives. Their motivation might have even included some or all of these things.

But that's really my point here. Proverbs 16:2 says that all a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the Lord. In other words, our motives can often seem so innocent and pure to us, while being so questionable to others. Often if we really stop and examine our motives, we can find that they aren't as innocent as we had thought. And so the disciple's motivation was questionable here, and I hope that reminds each of us to be considering our motives as well.

And so the disciples' bring this issue to Jesus, with all the baggage of their questionable motivations, and Jesus clearly corrects them. Jesus doesn't comment on their motives - presumably his teaching in the last passage already taught the disciples about what their motives should be - looking to serve and exalt others above themselves. Jesus instead goes straight to their actions. In verse 38, the disciples reported that they tried to forbid the man, and Jesus immediately responds in verse 39 saying, "Do *not* forbid him." In other words, Jesus immediately tells them that they made the wrong decision. They should not have tried to stop the man. But why? What are the reasons Jesus gives?

Well, Jesus basically gives two different reasons in verses 39-40. First in verse 39 Jesus tells the disciples: Don't forbid the man because "no one who works a miracle in my name can soon afterward speak evil of me." And so Jesus points to the miracle. The miracle is the first reason why the disciples should not have tried to stop the man. The miracle testified that this man was from God. Remember, humans don't have the power to do miracles. That's part of the definition of a miracle. It's something extraordinary and supernatural that only God can do. And so the fact that this man was performing a miracle showed that God was at work through the man. And so to try to hinder this man was trying to hinder God!

And notice one clarification by Jesus. This was a miracle in Christ's name. Of course, no one does a miracle by his own strength. And so it goes hand in hand that a miracle will give glory to God. And that's what this man was doing. He was doing this miracle explicitly in the name of Christ. And so even though this man was not one of Jesus' normal followers, he was obviously a follower. He may not have been a follower in the ordinary sense, in the sense that the disciples expected, but he was indeed a follower of Christ.

That's why Jesus was at work through this man. The man casted out demons by the power of Christ. This is proof that this man was indeed a follower of Christ. This suggests that this man was in conformity with Christ and his message. You see that's the purpose of miracles. Hebrews 2:4 talks about how miracles have testified to the validity of the gospel message. In other words, the very purpose of miracles is to testify. They are signs that tell us something. The disciples should have seen this man performing miracles in Christ's name and realized that the miracles testified that he was indeed a follower of Christ.

And so that is why Jesus says that this man will not speak evil of him soon after working a miracle in his name. The miracle testifies that the man is being used by Christ. It shows that Christ is in control working through this man. And so Christ will not allow a miracle he performs through this man to be used to validate a false message.

The second reason Jesus gives the disciples of why they should not hinder this man is found in verse 40. Jesus says, "For he who is not against us is on our side." Jesus said something similar, but with a different nuance, in Matthew 12:30, "He who is not with me is against me." Taken together, these two statements by Jesus present an important truth: There are only two camps. You are either a follower of Christ, or you are not. There is no middle ground. But the specific nuance of Jesus in this passage is that this man was not openly opposing Jesus. Actually, we see by the miracle that he is actually a follower of Jesus - serving in the name of Christ. And so this man should be seen for what he is: one who follows Jesus. He's on the same side as the disciples! He's not a threat, he's an ally!

But of course, these two reasons Jesus gives means that the disciples needed discernment. They had to assess the situation. They needed to see that there were genuine miracles done in the actual name of Christ. They needed to discern that this man was not against Christ in his actions and message. All this should have made them conclude that this man was actually on their side. This discernment is important. It's not just a blind acceptance of anyone who may make some surface claims either to be a Christian or to be performing miracles. This discernment is important because Jesus will later warn the disciples of false Christ's and false prophets who would rise up and perform what appear to be miracles to try to lead people astray. And so Jesus is not telling the disciples to just blindly accept anyone, but he is challenging them on the criteria they had used to reject this

man. Jesus gives the disciples some criteria to discern that this man was actually a fellow servant of Christ!

So if the disciples had rightly discerned that this man was not a threat but an ally, what should have been their response? Well Jesus addresses that in verse 41; but he actually addresses that indirectly, by instead talking about how people should respond to them - the twelve disciples. Jesus says, "For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in my name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward." These words are directed to the twelve disciples. Jesus says it is good for people to show kindness to you, the twelve, because you belong to me. Think about that. It's always a nice thing for people to do to give someone a cup of water. Especially at that time and place, there weren't just public drinking fountains all over. So it's always a nice thing for people to give someone a cup of water. But Jesus isn't commending that alone here. Jesus is commending giving someone a cup of water because they belong to him, because they are his followers. If someone formally welcomes and blesses a follower of Jesus, just because they are a follower Jesus, then that is a very good thing Jesus says. It is something that they will even be rewarded for in heaven.

And so Jesus seems to change the subject and start talking about how people should welcome and receive the twelve disciples. But in light of the fact that Jesus had just said that there are only two camps - those who belong to Christ and those who do not, this contains an implied instruction to the twelve. The twelve disciples should have welcomed and received this man in the same way. When the disciples discern that someone is on their side, the side of Christ, they must welcome and receive that person.

So how should they have responded to this man casting out demons in the name of Christ? They should have welcomed and received him. They should have blessed him and encouraged him. They should *not* have tried to thwart him in his ministry. Maybe they could have even given him a cup of water, or bought him lunch. They could have prayed with him and sent him on his way. And if indeed they were concerned about the man not formally following Christ, they could have lovingly called the man to more formally follow Jesus, instead of just trying to deter him. Or they could have even arranged things so the man could meet Jesus and get more direction from there. In other words, with this principle of welcoming those who belong to Christ, we can think of a number of great ways to apply it to how the disciples should have responded to this man.

I can think of three other good examples from Scripture that illustrate the sort of response Jesus is demanding of the disciples. Each of these three examples, have some similarity with the disciples situation, but are not exactly the same. But I actually think that's what makes them good complementary examples. They flush out the sort of attitude we should be having when we encounter others who are actually serving on the same side and for the same cause, but not quite coming from where we might have expected.

The first example comes from Numbers 11. Joshua learned that two men were prophesying in the camp because the Spirit had come upon them like it was on Moses. And so Joshua went to Moses and told Moses to forbid them! But Moses said to Joshua, "Are you zealous for my sake? Oh that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them" (Num 11:29). Joshua seemed to have good but misplaced motives. Joshua wanted to protect Moses' ministry, which he knew was from God, but didn't realize that God might work through others as well. Moses knew that the ministry was not about himself and desired that all God's people could participate in the Lord's ministry.

A second example comes from the Gospel of John. In John 3, some of John the Baptist's disciples came to him, concerned that Jesus had begun a ministry of baptism, and that everyone was starting to flock to Jesus. John the Baptist's disciples were worried that John's ministry would be overshadowed by Jesus' new ministry. But John the Baptist replied that since Jesus was the Christ, Jesus and his ministry must increase, and John's ministry of preparation must now decrease. John's disciples were zealous for ministry, but didn't need to feel threatened by Jesus, because Jesus was who John was actually serving in the first place. Again - well intentioned motives by loyal disciples, but they failed to understand the side they were really on - even as John's disciples, they were really Jesus' disciples.

A third example comes from Paul in Philippians 1. This is a little different example. Paul is in prison at the time, and rejoices that there are people continuing to preach Christ, even though many are doing so with wrong motives. And so Paul recognizes that people can be on the same side, and working for the same cause - namely Christ - even when there are sin issues involved in their service.

These three examples from Scripture complement what Jesus is teaching the disciples here. Jesus is teaching the disciples to discern who belongs to Christ and who doesn't. They'll run into Christians from places that they don't expect. This man was not formally following along with them, but he was a follower. Just like with Paul, the other Christians that we run into might not always be in ideal situations, but that doesn't make them an enemy. We must understand who is on our side, and who is not. We must understand who we are really serving: not ourselves or the leaders we look up to, but we are serving Christ. Anyone else who is doing the same thing, is on our side!

What's the final assessment? At the end of the day, it matters if you belong to Christ or not. Jesus says here that there are just these two camps. You are either for him, or you are against him. Which are you? Which of these camps do you belong in? If you want to belong to Christ, then turn to him in faith and repentance. Believe that Jesus died on the cross to forgive you of your sins, and then turn from your sins and strive to live a life of obedience to Christ. As you do that, you won't live a perfect life, but you'll live a life of humble reliance on Christ - and you'll see his grace at work in your life. That's part of discipleship, and that's part of belonging to Christ.

And so all this boils down to our relationship with Christ. This man who the disciples tried to stop at the end of the day had a relationship with Christ. The disciples were concerned that this man was not organizationally united with Christ and the other disciples. But the man was certainly organically united with Christ as we have seen. And so when we think of being a disciple, we recognize that there is both an organizational and an organic aspect of our relationship with Christ. Organizational and organic. Fundamentally, if you had to pick just one, the organic aspect is the most important. We have an organic unity with Christ through faith. This means we are spiritually connected with Christ and other believers even when we are not organizationally connected. The disciples should have recognized this man's organic unity with Christ. However, this doesn't mean that organizational unity is not important either, but it does set the proper perspective. And so ultimately, we must all find our identity in Christ. We must recognize who all belong to Christ. But we must define who belongs to Christ, not by our own standards, but by Christ's. Christ defines who does and does not belong to him.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, do we have a spirit of narrow exclusivism; more narrow than Christ? Yes, the gospel is inherently exclusive, but do we try to setup an even more exclusive group than what Christ does? Think about this. Think about

this first in our denomination, the OPC. Do we find ourselves saying, well if you are not in the OPC then I am going to try to hinder your ministry? Well I don't think we'd outwardly say that, but is that how we actually act? Do we encourage other Christian churches and denominations, or do we strive to hinder them? Or what about even within the OPC? Do we segregate ourselves into smaller theological camps or parties? Or what about even in the local church? Even in the local church we can have factions and divisions that try to hinder the other side. Just think about our sermon from last week - we talked about how we might be tempted to competitively protect the specific ministries that we are a leader in. But that's not what Moses or John the Baptist did. We must welcome others who are willing to serve. Especially as we grow, we'll be bringing in more people that will have gifts to use. Those gifts might cross over with your gifts. Welcome those gifts and partner together with others!

Of course, this attitude will affect how we interact with other churches in the area as well. Will we bless and encourage the other Christian churches, or will we hinder them and try to thwart their ministries?

This brings up an interesting dilemma doesn't it? Many of us have come to our denomination and our church because we are committed to obeying God's word. Many churches and denominations are becoming less and less committed to the Bible. Some churches disregard the passages in the Bible that they don't like. Some churches encourage members to interpret the Bible very relativistically, so that the Bible no longer contains any absolute truth, but just what you understand it to say to you. Some churches believe the bible is full of errors. Some people redefine key elements of the gospel, often making Jesus more of an example of godly sacrifice than a savior who redeems sinners. Are we just supposed to welcome anyone and everyone who claims to be a Christian and follower of Christ? Is that what this passage tells us? No. It doesn't say we just welcome anyone and everyone who makes some claim to be Christian. But it challenges us to not be more sectarian than Jesus. This passage tells us that we must be both exclusive and inclusive, and that Jesus defines who is and isn't "in" - not us.

And Jesus is telling us to be discerning in this passage. The disciples should have discerned that this man was a Christian, even if he maybe suffered from being on his own instead of being more organizationally united with the rest of Christ's followers. So if we want to be discerning, where do we draw the line between who is a Christian and who is not? Well, ultimately, we look to Christ to define that as he does in Scripture.

The Westminster Confession of Faith 25 provides some helpful summary of Scripture here. It says in point 2 that the visible church "consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, and of their children." So it says that Christians are those who profess the true religion. That's a summary of what Jesus says here in our passage too. This man in our passage evidently was consistent in professing Christ. But of course, that just begs the question, who defines what is the true religion when so many churches have varying degrees of differences on how they interpret and use the bible? Well the Westminster Confession of Faith goes on to clarify. In point 4 of chapter 25 it acknowledges that the universal church "has been sometimes more, sometimes less visible." And it says that individual churches are "more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them." The Confession goes on to say in point 5, "The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan."

You see the Confession introduces an important concept here. It says that some churches are more pure and some are less pure. Their purity is measured in terms of the faith it professes and to what degree it is in line with Scripture. The same is true for individual Christians. There is no perfect church and there is no perfect Christian. And the Confession acknowledges that some churches or Christians have so deviated from the Christian faith that they are no longer to be considered Christian. So why do I quote these items from the Confession? Because I want to show you that our Reformed tradition agrees with Jesus here. We can't be so narrowly exclusive in our definition of Christian that excludes those whom Christ would call a Christian. We must not hinder the ministry and service of those who are truly Christian, even if they have some differences from us that we would consider a less pure expression of the faith.

And so both the Confession and Jesus are calling us for discernment. We must discern when others profess Christ if they are professing the same faith we are or not. If so, then they are our allies, not our enemies. That's true even if they hold aspects of their faith in ways we would consider less pure. There are ways we can acknowledge that other Christians and other churches are fellow servants of the Lord, even if there are real issues that we are divided on right now. For example, we believe that Scripture would have us to baptize infants. Many churches do not believe that. Only one side can be right about that issue, and so one side would be more pure to Scripture than the other. We can lovingly debate with each other about this issue. We can even understand how that issue would hinder us from practically being in the same church (in practice you either have to baptize the infant or not). But we can still recognize a unity in the vitals of the faith with many who differ from us, even on important issues such as baptism.

And so yes, we need to draw lines some times. Jesus himself will do that in the next passage, distinguishing between those who go to heaven and those who go to hell. But let's make sure our lines are drawn in the same way that Christ would draw them.

And so as we seek to apply this passage, pray for a spirit of humility and discernment as you engage with other professing Christians. Pray for Christ's wisdom that you would be both inclusive and exclusive, in the way that Christ is. Repent over the ways that you have been too narrowly exclusive up to this point. Pray for our church and our denomination that we would likewise have this same attitude when we interact with other churches and denominations. And pray for the unity and healing of the church, that we could find greater organizational unity with those who we are already organically united to in Christ. This was Christ's prayer in John 17, that his people would be united. May it be our prayer too, even as we look forward to his return where he will gather up all who belong to him to bring us into the eternal fellowship of heaven. If we will have this unity for all eternity, let's strive to live like that even now. Amen.

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