

Confronting Evil

Acts 13:1–12

November 4, 2001

It is hardly the kind of thing we expect to find in the Bible, but how refreshingly honest it is that Paul looked intently at Elymas the magician and said: “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.” And no sooner had Paul said it than it all came true. How in the world did he do that? Well, he did it by the power of the Holy Spirit, of course, and I will get to that in a moment. For now, suffice it to say that Paul named and confronted the power of evil, and he did so in the name of, in the power of, in the service of, and for the sake of, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

You see, there is good news here, and then there is good news about that good news. The first layer of this good news is the gospel of Jesus Christ. We hear this over and over again in the Bible. Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of God, come down from heaven to live with us as one of us. He was crucified, dead, and buried for the forgiveness of our sin. He was raised from the dead to a new and different life for the promise to us of eternal life. This is what Paul and Peter and all the rest of the apostles preached over and over again. This is what thousands then and billions now have come to believe. This is everywhere assumed in today’s reading if not explicitly articulated, and it is referred to as “the word of God,” “the faith,” and “the teaching of the Lord.” Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God, come to forgive our sin and to raise us to life eternal. This is the good news.

Today’s reading contains even more good news about this good news of the gospel. This second level of good news is that the gospel of Jesus Christ keeps on advancing despite continuing opposition by the forces of evil. The gospel marches on. The good news is preached. The Holy Spirit works. People are converted to believe in Jesus Christ. Lives are changed. The gospel keeps on advancing. There is always somebody trying to get in the way. There is always somebody trying to stop the gospel. There is always somebody opposed to the forgiveness of sin, opposed to the promise of eternal life, opposed to the truth, opposed to goodness, mercy, faith, hope, and love. There is always somebody trying to tear down humanity, tear apart community, and tear up anything good and worthwhile. And yet, the gospel goes on.

In today’s reading, this opposition to the gospel comes in the person of Elymas Bar-Jesus, a magician, a Jewish false prophet, who sought to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Sergius Paulus sought to hear the word of God, but Elymas tried to keep him in the dark. Sergius Paulus wanted to know the truth, but Elymas tried to keep him bound in falsehoods, lies, and deceit. Sergius Paulus wanted to know what was good and right, but Elymas tried to keep him content with what was evil, wrong, and crooked. But the apostle Paul would not stand for this. More to the point, the Holy Spirit would not stand for it. God worked in and through Paul to silence Elymas, to sweep aside his evil, to put away his opposition to the truth, and to cast him into darkness. This is not something that happens every day. It is not something we can compel or command. But on that day, it silenced the opposition. On that day, it allowed the gospel to be preached. On that day, it allowed Sergius Paulus to believe in Jesus Christ. And in the great scheme of things, look at which side is still winning: here it is, two-thousand years later, and the

same gospel of Jesus Christ is still being preached today all over the world! It has not been stopped.

This does not mean that there is no more opposition to the gospel. There is, if anything, more and more opposition to the gospel. The good news about the good news of Jesus Christ is not that there is no opposition to the gospel but that the gospel keeps on advancing despite the opposition and in the very face of opposition. So, how can the gospel keep on advancing despite continuing opposition by the forces of evil? This can be accounted for only by the content of the gospel itself, that the power of evil has already been defeated. This is the good news underlying today's affirmation of the ongoing victory of the gospel: the power of evil has already been defeated. That gives us great courage for the living of our lives, great confidence in the preaching of the gospel, and great hope for the future.

Jesus Christ defeated the massed powers of sin, death, and evil in his death on the cross. He suffered the worst they could do, but they could not break him. He suffered evil without becoming evil and without responding in kind. He suffered the punishment for sin not only without having been sinful but also without becoming sinful. He suffered death without fear and without resistance, and God vindicated his faithfulness by raising him from the dead. The great truth of the gospel is that the power of evil has already been defeated. The war has been won. We need to know this, to remember it, and to hold fast to it every day.

It was this great truth of the gospel, and the great confidence which it gave him, which allowed Paul to confront evil directly. Without any fear at all, Paul looked intently at Elymas the magician and said: "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." And no sooner had Paul said it than it all came true. Paul did not do this by his own power or strength. He had no capacity to strike anyone blind. Clearly he did this only by the power and the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit.

The point here is that, empowered by the Holy Spirit, Paul did not mince any words. He called evil evil. He spoke the truth. He confronted evil with the gospel. Paul did not worry about hurting the man's feelings. He did not try to be tolerant or inclusive. He did not try to be pluralistic or politically correct. He did not suggest an inter-faith dialogue. He did not suggest that the other man was entitled to his own opinion or that his opinion was correct. Paul did not seek mutual respect or understanding. He did not suggest that all roads lead to goodness, that all religions lead to God, or that only sincerity of belief matters. Paul called evil evil. He confronted evil with the gospel.

You see, Paul was on a mission. He had been called by the Holy Spirit, set apart with prayer and the laying on of hands, and sent into the world to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was not about to let some two-bit magician stand in the way of that. Thank God for Paul's courage. Thank God for Paul's determination. Thank God for his audacity. Thank God for his willingness to speak the truth even when it was unpopular. Thank God that he confronted evil. May God grant us grace to learn from Paul in the life and mission of the church today!

It was the intent of evil on that day to block the progress of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Anything which stands in the way of the gospel today is still evil and should be identified, named, and pointed out as such. Evil may come in the form of opposition by another faith. It may come in the form of government opposition to making public claims for truth. It may come in the form of political correctness suggesting that faith is nothing more than personal opinion and

emotion. Or it may come in the form of our own fear, our own indecisiveness, our own cowardice, our own laziness, our own unwillingness to share the gospel, to name the name, or to say a good word for Jesus Christ. No matter what the form, evil is evil. When it intends to squelch the gospel, it cannot be tolerated. We need to confront it, name it, and let God set it aside.

What happened when Paul so boldly opposed Elymas? Elymas was struck blind, and Sergius Paulus saw the light. Elymas was groping in the darkness, and Sergius Paulus saw what happened. Elymas was looking for help, and Sergius Paulus found all the help he needed; he apprehended the power of the gospel, and he came to faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What does this good news about the good news have to say to us today? First of all, we can be brave and bold to believe in, and to share with others, the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is where we start. The power of evil has already been defeated. Our sin has been forgiven. We have been promised eternal life. Jesus Christ has won all this for us. Our place is to believe and to share this good news with others.

We are to believe in the goodness and the victory of Jesus Christ. He, and not sin, is lord of our lives. He, and not evil, is the ruler of the world. He, and not fear, is the guide of our lives. He, and not despair, is the way we live. He gives us faith, strength, hope, and courage. If this is of interest to us, if this is of help to us, if this is of benefit to us, if this is saving for us, then it is our privilege and our responsibility to share this good news with all those about us.

At the same time that we believe in, and share, the gospel of Jesus Christ, we can also be brave and bold to name and to confront the powers of evil. There are plenty of candidates in the world today. We do not need to hold back from naming and denouncing them. Evil is evil. For us to be able to say this, for us to be able to recognize evil as evil, it is required that we have a prior knowledge of the good, a knowledge of Jesus Christ. Only then, by way of contrast, can we know what is evil. Only then, by way of knowledge, can we name and confront evil. The ways of the Lord are straight, and those who try to make them crooked are full of deceit and villainy. That cannot be tolerated in the church or in the world.

It is hardly the kind of thing we expect to find in the Bible, but how refreshingly honest it is that Paul looked intently at Elymas the magician and said: “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.” So shall the powers of evil today be led away into darkness.

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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