

THE PERILS OF CONFRONTING EVIL

“The only thing necessary for the triumph [of evil] is for good men to do nothing” (Edmund Burke, English Philosopher).

Confrontation is never easy. It is probably the last thing any of us really wants to do. When we see a brother or sister in Christ behaving sinfully, we might do a quick self-analysis before approaching them and then decide that we are no better. And when we see an evil committed in society our natural tendency may be to assume that someone else will address the problem.

There are those who seem to have no trouble with confrontation. If we glance at Samson in our text today we may note a few unsavory characteristics. Samson was constantly goading the Philistines into a fight. One of the reasons for this is that he didn't give a rip what anyone thought. Unless you don't like having friends you can go ahead and be like Samson and tell everyone off. It doesn't look attractive does it?

Confrontation, be it the sin of a brother or the sin of a society, is necessary. Someone once said, “Life without confrontation is directionless, aimless, and passive. When unchallenged, human beings tend to drift, wander and stagnate. Confrontation is a gift, a necessary stimulation to jog one out of mediocrity or prod one back from extremes.”

In our passage today we learn that there are perils to confronting evil. There are the perils of ignoring evil and there are the perils of challenging the status quo. Knowing what we know about Jesus Christ and his worldview concerning sin, we cannot be passive about the evil in our lives. The story of Samson in this episode of his life teaches us about both sides.

1. When evil is ignored

A cycle of revenge and violence greets us as we read Judges 15. Samson goes to visit his wife but finds his wife is now given to another man, his supposed friend. Samson decides to get even by capturing 300 jackals, which are like foxes, ties torches to their tails and sets them off to burn up the livelihood of the Philistines. They in turn burn his ex-wife and her father in their own home. Samson retaliates and slaughters a good number of them, then hides in a cave.

Violence begets violence. Revenge only stirs the pot of anger and hatred. It is a tragedy when Christians in particular do this to each other for perceived wrongs. Though Samson is unorthodox in his methods, God actually uses this for his purposes. God wanted a confrontation with the Philistines. Why? Because the presence of evil was being ignored in the nation of Israel.

What happens when evil is ignored? What happens when believers who love God ignore evil? I want to propose three results to you that have disastrous consequences:

a) Believers accept the status quo – After Samson's slaughter of Philistine citizens, the Philistines paid a visit to the tribe of Judah. The Philistines wanted Samson but they were ready to go to war with all of Judah to satisfy their vengeance.

In response, no less than 3000 men of Judah found Samson and questioned him, “**Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?**” (v. 11). Confrontation is so much easier when you go in a group, isn't it? We feel validated when we have a crowd on our side. It took the men of Judah a crowd of 3000 to feel bold enough to confront Samson.

But notice the problem here: Judah has accepted the fact that the Philistines rule over them. They don't want any trouble. In fact, they accuse Samson of being a troublemaker. If these people had recognized what God was doing in their midst they would have supported God's man. It is possible that their numbers matched that of the Philistine army. All they needed to do was beg Samson to lead them into battle and trust in the Lord's help and plan. Instead they decided to hand over Samson to the Philistines who wanted to kill him.

That is the danger of the status quo. Things are fine the way they are – don't rock the boat. It's not perfect but when is it ever perfect? Judah had compromised with evil so far that they didn't even recognize it anymore.

Another sad fact of accepting the status quo is that those who compromise have no use for the committed. And when Christians who are committed to growing and maturing in Christ find themselves thwarted by other Christians who have become accustomed to a wishy-washy spiritual life, it is a sad, sad thing.

b) Believers are no threat – Another result of ignoring evil or compromising with it is that believers become a non-issue with the enemy. You are not a threat.

When the Philistines camped near Judah, God's people asked **"Why have you come to fight us?"** (v. 10). Paul said to the Corinthians, **"What fellowship can light have with darkness?"** (2 Cor 6:14). Judah had every reason to fight the Philistines and wipe their evil off the map. But they are no threat; they just want to live and let live. Judah would rather bind and betray their savior than have him upset the balance.

Does that sound familiar? Seems there was a man who healed the sick, gave sight to the blind and walked on water. This man was a threat to the status quo, however, and Israel wanted rather to hand over Jesus to death than be at odds with the Romans. They would give up Jesus for the sake of peace.

If you want to be at peace with our enemy then Christianity is not for you. Once you commit yourself to living for Jesus and serving him with all your heart, then Satan will attack because then you are a threat to him.

A man approached a preacher with the comment, "What is all this talk about Satan? I have never met him in my life." The preacher quickly responded, "Of course not. You never meet someone when you are going the same way he is. But if you turn around and start going the other way, you will meet him soon enough."

c) Believers do the work of the enemy – A very sad result of ignoring evil is that believers will ultimately join evil in its work. The men of Judah said, **"We've come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines"** (v. 12). This just proves that there is no such thing as a harmonious co-existence between the church and the world, for where there is no conflict, and where there is compromise such as this, it is because the world has taken over.

Many historians have said that if the church had stood for Christ, Adolf Hitler would not have been so successful. But the Church rolled over for him and even supported him. Martin Neimoller, one of those Christians, wrote this after the war: "When the Nazis came for the communists, I remained silent; I was not a communist. When they locked up the social democrats, I remained silent; I was not a social democrat. When they came for the trade unionists, I did not speak out; I was not a trade unionist. When they came for the Jews, I did not speak out; I was not a Jew. When they came for me, there was no one left to speak out."

2. When evil is confronted

Samson may not be our poster boy for Christian style confrontations, but we can learn from his stand just the same. Where Samson confronted his enemies with violence and savagery, we are implored by the Apostle Peter, **"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..."** (1 Peter 3:15). Admittedly this verse is not so much about confrontation as it is about witnessing for Christ, but that is our supreme goal.

When evil is confronted you can expect these results:

a) Believers sometimes have to stand alone – Samson found himself alone against the Philistines. He then relented, **"Swear to me that you won't kill me yourselves"** (v. 12). We find in this a moment of tenderness for his own people. Samson didn't want to kill Israelites and so surrendered willingly.

In our world it is most often true that when everyone agrees we must be right. The one who stands alone must then be an antagonist, a troublemaker and a complainer. If might makes right, we could also say that numbers represent the truth. This is the philosophy of the world and so it is wrong. What if everyone agrees and they are united in error? What if the one voice is right against the many?

Sometimes when you stand for your convictions you will find yourself standing alone. Everyone will say you are wrong or stubborn. But if you know you are standing on the truth of Scripture, are you willing to pay this price of alienation?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes.

b) Believers find their strength in the Lord – When Samson was brought before the Philistines they yelled a guttural and wild cry. And they approached him to kill him. Then we read, **“The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men”** (vv. 14-15).

Those who stand alone for God’s truth will find their strength in the LORD. He will not abandon you when you stand for him. Samson had a unique purpose and we will not find ourselves in his position, but we can know that God gives strength to the faithful.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a prisoner in Russia. He was on a program of hard labor and slow salvation. One day he felt like giving up. He felt his life could not make a difference. He sat down on a bench knowing that when he was spotted by a guard he would be ordered back to work when he failed to respond the guard would bludgeon him to death. As he sat waiting, head down, he felt a presence. Slowly he lifted his eyes. Next to him sat an old man with a wrinkled, utterly expressionless face. Hunched over, the old man drew a stick through the sand at Solzhenitsyn’s feet deliberately tracing out the sign of the cross. As Solzhenitsyn stared at the rough outline his entire perspective shifted. Yet in that moment, he knew that the hope of all mankind was represented by that simple cross - and through its power anything was possible. Solzhenitsyn slowly got up, picked up his shovel and went back to work - not knowing that his writings on truth and freedom would one day enflame the whole world.

c) Believers may experience defeat following victory – Following Samson’s great victory, having slaughtered a thousand Philistines with a jawbone, he was done in. He was spiritually and emotionally exhausted. But he was actually physically empty; he was thirsty and could find nothing to drink

This is the first time we hear him pray and he cries out to the LORD saying, **“You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?”** (v. 18). Three things stand out in this prayer: he recognizes that he is God’s servant; he gives God credit for the victory; and he cries in despair and God answers him. There is a certain amount of faith in this walking screw-up; he is not unredeemable. But that’s the beauty of Jesus – to him, no one is unredeemable.

Victory will often make us vulnerable to defeat. We were told following our baptism that we will experience a wonderful high on Sunday, but on Monday we could expect the day to be a little depressing. The applause dies down; life carries on as it always has; nothing seems different. Satan may try to convince you that you aren’t worthy of baptism and you can never live up to Christ’s standard. What he says is true but it is not the truth.

God’s victory is not fleeting. He will not let you go down to defeat. Samson received the water he longed for because God provided it. God will provide what you need. Secondly, God established Samson’s judgeship for twenty years. And finally, because Samson was willing to stand alone, God used him. And God will use us to when we courageously stand for his truth.

Finally...

Few have stood alone against evil. I have mentioned some: Martin Neimoller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Samson himself. Our Lord Jesus stood alone against sin and evil and triumphed over them on the cross.

If we don't see anything in our world to confront then we have something to be concerned about. Have we become used to our world system? Are we blinded to the collision of the Church and the World so that we cannot tell the difference?

You don't need to be a Bonhoeffer and protest our government. Or maybe you do. Maybe that is what God is calling you to do. More likely we can look in our own homes and in this community and we will find the seeds of sin, the fruit of evil. In this place you must take a stand for Jesus and declare this is not of God.

May the Spirit show you what that is and give you strength to stand, even to stand alone.

“Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).

AMEN