

June 24, 2011

ZEAL WITHOUT LOVE

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Have you ever been asked a “loaded question”? A loaded question has a built-in assumption, which is often a presumption of guilt. The classic example is, “Have you stopped beating your wife yet?” or, “Do you use a club when you beat your wife”? Whether a person answers *yes* or *no*, he’s admitting guilt!

This happens all the time in politics and in media interviews. A good example is the exchange between Madeleine Albright, US ambassador to the UN, while being interviewed by Leslie Stahl on *Sixty Minutes* in 1996:

Leslie Stahl: “We have heard that a half million children have died (as a result of sanctions against Iraq). I mean, that is more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?”

Madeleine Albright: “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price, we think the price is worth it.”¹

Now, Leslie Stahl’s figures were completely fabricated. She said, “We have heard,” not “We have evidence.” And as it turns out, the whole premise was flawed. Certainly there were children who died in Iraq while the country was under UN sanctions; but children die every year in Iraq and any other country, and Leslie Stahl offered no comparison to pre-sanction death rates or even any kind of time frame for the alleged half million child casualties. She threw a figure out there with the assumption that UN sanctions under US leadership had caused that many children’s deaths. And Madeleine Albright fell right into the trap. She later wrote that she knew it the instant she had said it.

In today’s passage, the religious leaders are going to try to trap Jesus in a “gotcha!” moment. They have patiently endured Jesus’ breeches of tradition, which we discussed last week; but now they smell blood in the water. They believe they’ve got Jesus right where they want Him, ready to show everyone that He really is not trustworthy. Let’s read Mark 3:1-6:

¹ *And he entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a withered hand.*

² *And they watched him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him.*

³ *And he saith unto the man which had the withered hand, Stand forth.*

⁴ *And he saith unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace.*

¹ Douglas E. Hill, “Albright’s Blunder,” *Irvine Review*, 1.6 (June 2003). Available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20030603215848/http://www.irvinereview.org/guest1.htm>

⁵ *And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other.*

⁶ *And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him.*

You get the impression that the Pharisees are just sitting there, rubbing their hands, thinking to themselves, “HA! We’ve got Him *now!*” All through the last half of Mark chapter two they’d been finding fault in what He was doing, but He always had an answer. First they wondered why He would eat with publicans and sinners; then they pressed Him about His disciples not fasting on the traditional fast days; and finally they had been scandalized because He allowed His disciples to get handfuls of food as they passed through a field on the Sabbath. They accused Him of breaking the commandment regarding keeping the Sabbath Day, but He told them their understanding of the Sabbath was upside down. Now, though, they’re sure they’ve got Him. They’re going to ruin His credibility and restore the status quo, with themselves on top as the highest religious authorities. They were zealous to protect their position within the religious status quo, but they had no love!

The funny thing is that they reinforced that they knew Jesus to be a good man. They knew that when he saw that man with the withered hand He would just *have* to help. He wouldn’t be able to refuse because He loved people. The Pharisees had no love for this injured man; to them, he was only useful the bait that they would use to trap Jesus. They wanted the man to be healed, not out of any sense of compassion for the poor man, but from a misplaced sense of justice. They wanted a good thing for an evil reason.

What does Jesus do? He springs the trap! He calls that man front and center. He looks at those who hated Him, those who wanted to destroy Him, and He says two things that should have gone straight to their hearts. He says, “Whose purpose today is closer to the purpose of the Sabbath? My purpose is to do good to this man, but your purpose is to harm me. My purpose is to heal this man, but your purpose is to kill me. Which is closer to the reason for the Sabbath?” You see, Jesus would never break the Law; but He was not afraid to break the traditions that men had built up around the Law; and these traditions of men had been put on equal status with the Law itself.

Wow! Any reasonable person would have halted right then; but sometimes people aren’t reasonable and are in fact beyond reasoning. We blind ourselves, we harden our hearts, and we choose to believe what we want to believe. And if you’ve ever been frustrated by someone like that, you’re in good company because Jesus was frustrated here. He was angry for the hardness of their hearts. They would not let anything penetrate!

Jesus heals the man to reinforce His point. Though they had been unwilling to listen to reason, they had the opportunity to respond to His miracle. But, unfortunately, despite the best reasoning, and despite a wonderful miracle, they only hardened their hearts further.

They were driven to the counsel of their sworn enemies, the Herodians. Remember, these Pharisees would no sooner be seen in the company of the wicked Herodians than they would be seen in the presence of the publicans and sinners with whom Jesus had feasted. In approaching the Herodians, the evil in their own hearts was exposed. That’s what Jesus does—He drives evil out into the open where everyone can see it. Oh, how they hated Him!

You know, friends, there are any number of attitudes that will destroy a church or any other organization. One of those attitudes is a love of or trust in money. Another is this inflexible adherence to tradition: "That's not how we've always done it." We can have a lot of zeal for our traditions, but what about love? What about compassion? Friends, there is nothing wrong with zeal; in fact, do you realize in this story today that Jesus was also full of zeal? Yes, He was! The Pharisees had zeal to maintain the status quo and to protect their traditions; but Jesus had zeal to fulfill the Law in righteousness and love.

I want this church to be the kind of church in which anyone will be fully welcomed and appreciated. I don't want anyone to walk in those doors, only to have us size them up, thinking to ourselves whether or not they'd make good members. We need to realize that people don't come to visit a church to solve that church's problems; they come to visit a church so that we can meet a need in their lives! We get that turned around and we think, "Well, I'll bet that person would be a good Sunday school teacher," or, "I doubt they'll amount to much around here."

The bottom line is that we need to be zealous, yes, but let that zeal be full of love! If you're here today looking for love, won't you let us show you the Savior, who gave all to restore you, to heal you, to lovingly bring you into His home for eternity?