

"A STUMBLING BLOCK"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

A Jewish comedian tells about two men of his faith who met on the street. "Abe...why are you looking so sad?" asks Isaac. Abe answers, "It's my son. I sent him off to college and now he has come back home all full of Gentile ideas. Where did I go wrong?" Isaac says, "Abe...funny you should mention it! My son, too, has come home from college, with his head all filled with Gentile ideas. There is but one course open to us. We must go see the Rabbi."

So they go to the Synagogue and obtain an audience with the Rabbi. They say to the Rabbi, "Our two sons...whom we have raised to be devout followers of the Law, have come home from college full of Gentile ideas. What can we do about it?" The Rabbi answers,

"Funny you should mention it! My son has also come back from college with all sorts of Gentile ideas. I assure you my friends, this problem is beyond human solution. We must go into the place of worship and pray".

And so the three of them go in and they spread their hands in supplication to the Lord. No sooner have they articulated their common lament that their sons have become filled with Gentile ideas than the lights go out. The building is then filled with clouds of smoke and a thunderous voice answers them, "Funny...you should mention it.....". To be theologically correct, of course...God's Son never became a Gentile. He remained a devout Jew.

DEVELOPMENT

Much of the New Testament reflects the very natural strife in the early days of our faith between Judaism and its upstart - off-spring Christianity. That this strife should continue is no credit to us. There is no greater shame that we bear than that our faith has been used as a pretext for persecuting Jewish people. Need I remind you that horrendous deeds have been done in the name of Christ. And many of our Jewish friends are quite naturally sensitive to such transgressions that blot the pages of history.

One of the major stumbling blocks in Jewish-Christian relations is the New Testament characterization of the Pharisees. The Pharisees, remember, are heroes to many Jews. They see them as reformers who saved the Jewish faith from corruption. Sure, the Pharisees were human beings with faults, but there was much more that was positive about them than negative. When the Pharisees are targeted on a regular basis from Christian pulpits in an unkind way, I'm sure it is hurtful to many Jews.

Thus, I want to make sure you understand that when I speak of the Pharisees and the criticisms that Jesus made of them, those criticisms have nothing to do with their Jewishness. They are criticisms that could be made of religious leaders of every faith in every time. For example, when Jesus said, "They love to be called 'Rabbi'", we could just as easily say, "They love to be called 'Dr'", or they love "to be called 'Reverend'".

So, be careful what you call me and remember this that people are people, and that pride is pride. And we all have pride.

Also, according to police officials, an autopsy showed that the death was caused by suffocation and that there were signs of severe wounds on the girl's back and blood in her mouth. A newspaper quoted her mother as saying she did not feel guilty about her daughter's death because it was the result of "the teachings of the group's leader and his wife." "I am a believer, and God guided me to the right path" the mother said.

One wonders how such outrages occur. They occur because a religious leader gets carried away with power. They occur because religion can easily be twisted into something cruel and hateful. And we in the Christian community have seen our share.

We're told that during the Victorian era people had many children, more children than they really wanted or could properly raise. Large broods were quite fashionable. But the arbiters of fashion didn't tell people how to cope with big families. Under the pressure of large families there developed a new fashion for strictness. "Discipline" became a watchword in Victorian homes. And this discipline all too often took the form of abusive punishment administered with a rod, or a switch, or a hairbrush, or anything else that came to hand. And, note this...while the Victorian father administered this harsh discipline, he usually invoked the specter of an angry God of wrath, who not only permitted, but ordered harsh punishment for this child's own good. "Spare the rod and spoil the child" was an ever popular saying. Thus, the message that children received was clear enough. I'm abusing you because God wants me to.

Be careful who you listen to. Listen to the words of Jesus...carefully and thoughtfully and you will never be misled. Speaking of misguided religious leaders, He said,

"And they tie up heavy loads and lay them on men's shoulders....but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men....and the love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats....and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi....But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father, for One is your Father....He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders, for One is your Leader, that is Christ!"

These are important teachings, and they are not aimed at any particular religion, but they are aimed at all of us. What they are saying to us is this:

"Be careful. People are people. Pride is pride".

GOD IS GOD

But here is what is important to remember: God is still God.

Dr. Carl Jung once said something that ought to cause every believer to reflect very carefully. What he said was this:

"One of the main functions of formalized religion is to protect people against a direct experience of God".

That hurts...but it can happen. Theological pride can be a buffer against a real experience of Christ's love and grace.

F. Kefa Sempangi, a Uganda pastor who barely escaped death under Idi Amin's persecution in the early nineteen-seventies, beautifully captures this important truth in his wonderful book, A Distant Grief. He writes about a hurtful change that came over him shortly after coming to this country and enrolling in an evangelical seminary. He says,

"In Uganda, my wife and I read the Bible for hope and for life. We read to hear of God's promises, to hear His commands and obey them. There had been no time for argument and no time for religious discrepancies and doubts.

Now in the security of a new life and with the reality of death fading from mind, I found myself reading Scripture to analyze texts and speculate about meaning. I came to enjoy abstract theological discussion with my fellow students, and, while these discussions were intellectually refreshing, it wasn't long before our fellowship revolved around ideas rather than the work of God in our lives. It was not the blood of Jesus Christ that gave us unity, but our agreement on doctrinal issues. We came together not for confession and forgiveness, but for debate."

This change in attitude towards God had its greatest impact in Kefa's prayer life. He writes,

"God Himself had become a distant figure....He had become a subject of debate, an abstract category, no longer prayed I to Him as a living Father, but as an impersonal being who did not mind my inattention and unbelief."

When he realized how far he had drifted from God due to theological speculations, Kefa repented of his attitudes and immediately his prayer life came alive once again. Thereafter, he began consciously to submit himself moment by moment to the spirit of the living God.

People are people. Pride is pride. But fortunately, God is still God.

CLOSING

A minister in Baton Rouge shares this beautiful story. A new faculty member at Louisiana State University was visiting this pastor's church. The pastor pulled out some of his best doctrinal sermons, presenting them in a superb manner in the hope of winning this choice church prospect to his flock. After a month of such profound preaching aimed at such a learned person, the professor finally presented himself for church membership. Later on, after becoming better acquainted with this faculty member, the pastor asked him, "Which of my sermons during that month persuaded you to unite with our church?" The professor, with a somewhat puzzled expression, replied,

"I don't know what you're talking about. A little old lady in a back row of the church made me feel so much at home by telling me how much she missed me when I wasn't there....that's why I made this church my home!"

That's what it all comes down to, isn't it? It has very little to do with doctrine, even less to do with the intellect of the preacher or his preaching. It all has to do with the power of the living God working through individual Christians who love God and love their church. And maybe...maybe that's why Jesus ends this passage with these words, our take home text for this morning:

"But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

Jesus was simply trying to remind us that people are people. Pride is still pride. But God is still God. Be careful who you listen to and don't get carried away in the wrong direction.