

In Nomine Iesu

***Oculi*, the Third Sunday in Lent 2023**

The very word of God – Luke 4:31-37

“Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbaths, and they were astonished at His teaching, for His word possessed authority. And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are – the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent and come out of him!’ And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. And they were all amazed and said to one another, ‘What is this word? For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!’ And reports about Him went out into every place in the surrounding region.”

Grace be to you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose authority and power frees sinners. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

Jesus now lived in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. Why He and His mother moved from Nazareth is unknown. Perhaps it had to do with carpentry or the death of Joseph. We do not know. But it was there that He began to teach on the Sabbath in the synagogue, being recognized by the synagogue’s elders as One who knew the Scriptures. One day, Luke tells us, a disturbing incident took place. A man in the synagogue cried out with a loud voice, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are – the Holy One of God.” Luke tells us, the people “were astonished at His teaching, for His word was with authority.” (v. 32) Jesus held the attention of the people in the synagogue that day. His words were not at all like what they were used to hearing from the priests, scribes, and teachers of Israel. His word had authority. It was different also in that the demons of hell were compelled to obey His word. His word had power.

I

So, what was the difference between Jesus’ teaching and that which the people normally heard? There are many factions or divisions within the church of that day. We do not have the time to consider all of them. Instead let us restrict our focus to the two major divisions among the Jews, the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

The Pharisees are mentioned by name more often than the Sadducees, though it is clear when the Gospel writers speak of “the chief priests and the Pharisees” or “the scribes and the Pharisees,” that by pairing “chief priests” or “scribes” with the term Pharisees they are identifying them with the Sadducees. The Pharisees were those who took the Scriptures of the Old Testament seriously, even literally. The Bible was for them God’s law, prescribing everything one should or should not do. Those who kept the rules earned God’s favor. The Sadducees did not take the Scriptures literally, accepting some parts at face value, others not. For them the Bible was a book of stories and sayings whose value lay in their deeper meaning. The Sadducees tended to be more worldly than the Pharisees. The power base of the Pharisees was in the many synagogues of the towns and smaller cities of Palestine. The Sadducees’ power base was the temple administration, which they dominated.

These two factions were constantly trying to wrest power from each other. They debated in public and argued in private. Each tried to sway the people to their way of thinking. They agreed on little. But they were all one in their opinion of Jesus; both disliked Him. Their dislike quickly became hatred when He called them wrong in the hearing of the people. The Sadducees He showed to be doubters of God’s word and the Pharisees self-righteous. In time these fierce rivals who controlled most of the membership of the great council, the

Sanhedrin, would plot His destruction. He would be put on trial before them on the night in which He was betrayed. Together they would cleverly accuse Him of rebellion against Caesar to the Roman governor and so secure a sentence of death.

As we look at these two denominations within the church of Jesus' day, we can see that their ways of thinking have not disappeared. In fact, they represent the natural way of man's thinking whenever he is confronted with the pure, unchanged word of God. This should be no surprise to us, for Solomon pointed out long ago, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:9) Pharisees and Sadducees have their counterparts in our day. Both are to be found seated in churches, leading home Bible study groups, standing in pulpits, and striding about the guitar and drum strewn stages in so many churches today.

II

Modern day Pharisees, like their ancient counterpart, take the Bible seriously. In this they are to be commended, for the Bible is the very word of God, without error, authoritative in all of which it speaks. But God did not give His word to us as a rulebook for living. That is not its purpose. To be sure, it does tell us how to live. It tells us what is and is not pleasing in the sight of God. But in doing so, it shows us that we have not lived that way, that we have sinned and come short of the glory of God, all of us. We all share in Adam's sin. We are all under God's wrath. Like Pharisees, we can try to use the Bible as Adam and Eve once used leaves to cover their nakedness, but in truth it shows our nakedness.

For the modern Sadducee the Bible and the word of God aren't the same thing. The Bible is a storybook; and whether this or that part is true doesn't matter so much. It tells us how people long ago understood God and His working in the world from which we can perhaps learn some things. But God's word teaches us something different today, they say, as they interpret God's word in the light of their own lives rather than examining their lives in the light of God's word ... as God intended.

Despite differences between Pharisee and Sadducee, whether ancient or modern, they have one thing in common. Both demand that Christ submit to their teaching, that they, not He, have authority to interpret God's word. But the Bible is not the rulebook of the Pharisee nor the storybook of the Sadducee. It is what Christ, the Only-Begotten of the Father, said: "You search the Scriptures for in them you think you have eternal life, and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life." (John 5:39-40) Christ is more than just the heart and center of the Bible, more even than its chief subject. He is the only reason God gave His word to man. The Old Testament's purpose was to prepare mankind for His coming into the world as Savior. The New Testament has no purpose but to proclaim that in Him salvation has come, just as God promised.

II

Which brings us back to what so astonished those in Capernaum's synagogue that day. What did Jesus teach them? What did He say? Clearly, He did not teach what the Pharisees or Sadducees taught. That would have astonished no one! It would only have caused them to tune Him out, much as we tune out television commercials, much as many in our day, who sit in churches, carefully listen to the Scriptures as they are read, heartily sing the hymns, sincerely participate in the liturgy, just tune out the preacher whose words simply do not align with the Scriptures, hymns, and liturgy. This is what attracted people to Jesus in the first place, as we read of those who first heard Him in the Sermon on the Mount, "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at His teaching, for He was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes." (Matt. 7:28)

Jesus preached to them as One who believed the Old Testament Scriptures with all His heart. He preached as One who knew the desperate situation of every man and woman He

met. He preached as One who knew the fearful power of sin and evil in the lives of people. He preached as One who knew well every promise concerning the Messiah and His saving work. He preached with utter certainty that every promise would be fulfilled in its every detail. He spoke with God's own finality: Believe in the Savior who God's word proclaims and live. Disbelieve and be lost forever. He preached the Scriptures clearly, plainly, letting their authority sound forth unhindered with all the beauty of God's grace and mercy.

As He spoke a certain man in the congregation cried out with a loud voice, "Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know You, who you are – the Holy One of God." (v. 34) The demon within that wretched man knew something before anyone else in the congregation that day. He knew that the One of whom the prophets spoke was right there in the room among them. He knew the promises were being fulfilled even as Jesus was speaking. For He was the Holy One, the Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of the Father. He had come for this very purpose: to destroy sin, death, hell, and all the demons of hell, so mankind could be set free from the power of darkness.

With a word Jesus silenced the demon. And the people exclaimed, "What is this word? For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits and they come out." (v. 36) What a word is this! Dear friends, I say is and not was, because Christ Jesus our Lord, commanded this same word to be preached throughout the world, and promised that whoever heard it proclaimed would be hearing Him. His word still casts out sin and death within us. It still brings light where there is only darkness. It still puts the devil to flight. It is, as Martin Luther's great hymn says, the "one little word" that fells Satan. It retains all the authority and power it had that day in Capernaum when it came from the lips of Jesus Himself. It still astonishes people.

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It astonishes people to hear Christ's word proclaimed not as just another explanation of the Scriptures, another point of view. It astonishes the hearer when he or she grasps that this is the very word of God, the word by which each of us will live eternally or perish forever. It declares that Jesus Christ came into the world to give His life for us so we, by His death, might be freed from sins and, by His resurrection, declared righteous before God. In Him is eternal life. It astonishes people on Good Friday when they grasp that Christ, God in the flesh, actually suffered the penalty of our sins in His own body and soul on the cross, and so conquered sin. It astonishes people on Easter when they realize that we do not speak symbolically or theoretically: Jesus rose from death physically on Easter morning, and all who believe that He did so for them, will also rise on the last day to life everlasting.

Dear friends, the Bible is certainly not the rulebook of the Pharisee, ancient or modern. Just as certainly, it is not the moralistic storybook of the Sadducee, ancient or modern. It is the true and enduring witness of the promises of salvation God once gave, and then of the fulfillment of them in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came into the world to seek and to save that which was lost. It is the astonishing, uncompromising declaration to you who hear it that Jesus Christ saves sinners, and so, brings joy and peace to you, as it terrifies demons. Believe that and you will live forever. The very authority and power of God Himself guarantee it. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria