

“Fighting the Right Battles”
Mark 9:38-41
March 2, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to the Gospel of Mark as Jesus instructs his disciples on who he is and what it means to follow him as we turn now to Mark 9:38-41.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{9:38} John said to him [that is, to Jesus], “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, your hands have made and fashioned us;
give us understanding that we may learn your commandments,
that we your people might rejoice together,
as we see the work that you are doing in each of us.
Work now in our hearts, to conform us to your word,
that we may not be put to shame,
but might delight in you.
Teach us from your word now, we ask,
in Jesus’s name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:73, 74, 76, 80]

The Problem

The Apostle John observed a man who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus. But John says that he tried to stop that man because the man wasn’t following John and his companions. He brings this to Jesus expecting, it would seem, to be commended.

But instead, Jesus corrects him.

We're going to dig into the details of this text, but the big picture of the problem we see here, for the Apostle John and for us, is that when we forget that there's a cosmic war at hand, we become zealous for our tribe over our King, and so we fight our true allies and aid our true enemy.

When we forget that there's a cosmic war at hand, we become zealous for our tribe over our King, and so we fight our true allies and aid our true enemy.

That's the problem at work here. And it's a problem we often have as well.

So, let's break it down a bit further.

When We Forget That There's a Cosmic War at Hand

The first problem our text reveals is that we have a tendency to forget that there's a cosmic war at hand.

The Bible tells us that God made the world good. He made the angels good. He made humanity good.

But then some of the angels rebelled against God, starting a cosmic war.

And then, through temptation, the leader of that rebellion – the Devil – brought humanity into that war against God, as we too rebelled against God through our sin and disobedience.

The world thus fell into enemy hands – to dark spiritual forces, and to fallen humanity.

But God decided to reclaim this world. And so, he began a reinvasion. He called Abraham, and he formed Israel, and in them he sought to form a resistance. And in the fullness of time, God himself came to earth, in the person of Jesus Christ, as our King, to lead the battle against evil and the forces of darkness.

His death paid the penalty for our rebellion so that we could be forgiven and could return to him as full citizens of his Kingdom once again. And his resurrection ensured his ultimate victory against sin, and death, and the Devil, and all who would rebel against him.

This is the story the Bible tells us we are living in. There is a cosmic war at hand between the good forces of God and the dark forces of the Devil. The outcome is sure, but the battle right now is still real – the fighting is real – and we need to be engaged with and committed to the war effort. [Wright, 125-127]

But sometimes ... we forget.

Now, forgetting you're at war is not a minor thing. A soldier on the front lines who forgets he's at war and starts acting like it's peace time has made a major mistake and possibly put many at risk.

And in our case, that temptation to forget is itself a part of the war. Our spiritual enemy would like us to forget. He'd like us to ignore the war. He'd like us to stop paying attention. Our spiritual forgetfulness is less the product of absentmindedness and more the result of an intentional disinformation campaign in our world, our hearts, and our minds by the spiritual forces of darkness.

And far too often, we fall for it.

And John has here.

John says in verse 38 that he saw someone casting out demons ... and that he – that John – tried to stop the man. And he seems to expect Jesus to approve of his actions.

The Apostle John goes to Jesus – the King of the forces of light – and he tells him that he saw someone fighting against the forces of darkness, and he tried to stop him.

Imagine an Allied soldier on the frontlines of World War II, running to his superior officer and saying to him, “Sir, I saw some people fighting Nazi soldiers, and I tried to stop them,” and then looking up at his superior officer expecting some kind of reward for this. That's basically what John's doing here.

And the only way that John or that Allied soldier could do something like that is if, on some level, they forgot that a war is on.

It's a huge mistake.

But the Bible tells us that it's one that we make every day.

We too forget that we live on a spiritual battlefield. In fact, if we're honest ... a lot of days it doesn't even cross our minds.

And that sets us up for the very same mistake we see John make here.

Because we often start in the same place: Both we and John have a tendency to forget that there's a cosmic war at hand.

That's the first thing we see here.

We Become Zealous for Our Tribe Over Our King

The next thing we see in this particular text is that when we forget that there's a cosmic war at hand, we become zealous for our tribe over our King.

We become zealous for our tribe over our King. [Horne, 139]

Think again of why John stopped this man.

This man, who we're told in verse 38 – was calling on the name of Jesus. Now, neither John nor Jesus makes any statement questioning the sincerity of this man's faith in Jesus. No one seems to

doubt that this man was a sincere follower of Jesus – John doesn't even imply that that was the problem. He doesn't say "Jesus, we tried to stop the man because he wasn't really following you."

No, he says "We tried to stop him because he was not following us." Meaning that the man wasn't following John and his companions. That's why John tried to stop him. [Edwards, 289]

At this point, Jesus's earthly ministry had been successful enough that, as he traveled around, he was leaving believers behind in communities like Capernaum. And as Jesus moved on to another town, those believers would seek to continue to live out their faith.

In this context, "not following" John and his companions does not seem to be some statement of unorthodoxy or schism, but simply that they are not part of John's inner circle. They're not one of "his people."

This man would seem to be a believer in Jesus who was not a part of John's smaller spiritual tribe. And in that moment, John felt that membership in his own smaller tribe was more important than believing in Jesus – or, at least, that believing in Jesus wasn't enough in itself – because he tries to order this man to stop serving Jesus in spiritual battle, because he's not part of John's little tribe.

Where Jesus, in verse 39, is more interested in the man's relationship to him – to Jesus – John in verse 38 seems more interested in the man's relationship to himself – to John.

John places membership in his own tribe over allegiance to Jesus Christ the King. And so, the second thing we see here is that when we forget that there's a cosmic war at hand, we become zealous for our tribe over our King.

And we do this as well. When we forget about the cosmic battlefield we live in, we turn our attention away from the real battle that truly matters, and we start to suspect, and then to doubt, and then to dispute with our brothers and sisters – our allies.

And some of us are more prone to this specific outcome than others.

John and his brother, Sinclair Ferguson reminds us, were given the nickname "Boanerges" – meaning "sons of thunder" by Jesus himself! [Mark 3:17] John, in other words, was perhaps prone to fiery zeal. [Ferguson, 150-151]

But what we see here is that the problem was not zeal itself – or having a fiery personality. The problem was misplaced zeal. The problem was fire for the wrong things: for our little religious subgroup more than for Jesus, our Lord.

When we misplace our zeal like that, as Christians, it can lead to serious problems.

And that's the next thing we see here.

And So, We Fight Our True Allies and Aid Our True Enemy

Because the next thing we see is that when we forget that there's a cosmic war at hand, we become zealous for our tribe over our King, and so we fight our true allies and aid our true enemy.

And that's exactly what John does here.

Two individuals here are locked in battle. One is a man who is calling on Jesus to help him fight against the powers of darkness. The other is a demon who is oppressing a person and opposed to the Kingdom of Jesus.

This man who was calling on Jesus should have been John's spiritual and cosmic ally. The demon should have been John's cosmic and spiritual enemy. But instead of aiding his ally and fighting his enemy, John told his ally to stop fighting, which would, in turn, provide relief to his enemy, the demon.

When we become overly zealous for our smaller tribe, than for Jesus himself, we end up fighting against those who should be our allies, and in the process, aiding the dark forces of evil – who should be our true enemies.

And this has been a problem throughout the history of God's people. It comes up in the Old Testament. It comes up in the New Testament. It comes up throughout Church history.

This morning in adult Sunday school, I'm teaching on a controversy which had the result that, in 1054, when the Eastern Church and the Western Church had their great schism ... one of the unresolved disputes they cited in the official documents giving their reason for fighting against one another and dividing from one another was the question of whether pastors should have beards. [Siecinski]

I'm serious. Serious theologians wrote passionately on the evils of either pastoral shaving or, in some cases, pastoral beards.

And such disputes and infighting and mis-prioritization in spiritual battle are not limited to the ancient or medieval Church.

In his essay titled "Machen's Warrior Children," John Frame documents how members of our religious tribe – conservative evangelical Reformed Christians – have done just this sort of thing, again and again, over the last 100 years.

Now, Frame notes, sometimes serious disputes and even battles with others in the church are necessary. As an example, Frame points to J. Gresham Machen himself, who, in the 1920s, battled with others in Church authority not over secondary or tertiary matters ... but over issues central to who Jesus is, and what it even means to call on his name.

Machen battled those who would claim that Christ was merely a moral example rather than God incarnate and the Savior of his people. He was opposing those who claimed that salvation is to be found in following Jesus's example, rather than by faith in Christ and his saving work on the cross. He was contending with those who claimed that the Bible was a book of mere human testimonies, rather than the Word of God. [Frame]

These battles were necessary. And conflict ensued. And the result was a sad but necessary division.

But the problem, Frame notes, was that after those necessary battles were over ... many of Machen's spiritual descendants didn't stop fighting. Only now they began fighting with one another.

Frame writes: "Machen died of pneumonia in 1937, disappointed that his new denomination was already showing signs of division." Machen's spiritual children had turned on one another – fighting their true allies, who were not just fellow Christians but even fellow conservative evangelical Reformed Christians.

And Frame chronicles the disputes.

The first was over eschatology – over the order of events that will lead up to Jesus's return. First, one group attacked two others, claiming that their end-times views were to blame for declining Christian influence in society. Those two groups then responded by accusing the first group of having unorthodox biblical interpretations within their view. In the end, it led to a denominational split and a seminary split.

Next, in 1937, there was a heated battle over whether Christians could drink alcohol.

After that, in the 1940s, a battle ensued not over whether God's thoughts are different from our thoughts ... but over just how different God's thoughts are from our thoughts. This fight got so heated that one faction, the followers of Cornelius Van Til, tried to complain against the ordination of the leader of the other faction, Gordon Clark. Just to be clear: They all were Christians. They all were conservative, evangelical, and Reformed. They all affirmed the Westminster Standards. But one group became convinced that a slightly different answer on this technical question made a man unfit for Christian ministry. In the end Clark's ordination was not revoked, but he and many of his followers soon left the denomination over issues related to the controversy. As Frame puts it: "Another battle, another split."

Next it was a battle over apologetics – not over whether Christians should defend their faith, but over how they should do it. And again, a disagreement led to a battle in which conservative evangelical Reformed Christians, who were remarkably similar to one another, started accusing one another of not being Reformed enough.

Those are just the first four examples of such battles within the conservative evangelical Reformed world. Frame goes on to chronicle 21 battles in all ... all within the conservative evangelical Reformed churches; all Christians battling with, tearing down, and trying to hinder the ministry of other Christians; all cases where at least some conservative evangelical Reformed Christians seemed to become more zealous for their own little sub-tribe than for Christ their King. And so, they spent their time and energy fighting against their true allies ... and in the process, they aided their true enemies, as the Church spent more time on infighting and less on battling the world, the flesh, and the devil.

And it hasn't really gotten better.

Even in recent years, I've seen Christians in our denomination who agree about what the Christian sexual ethic is, who agree about what it calls Christians to, and who agree that Christians need to stand for God's commandments over the pressure of our secular culture. They agree about all these things ... and I've seen one group attack the other group because they don't like the terminology the other group uses.

And so rather than both groups battling against sin and coming alongside others and helping them fight sin, they've spent an incredible amount of time either attacking the other group or having to defend themselves on the internet, in denominational courts, and on the floor of our General Assembly.

And as one group attacks and the other tries to defend, the actual work of ministry – of combatting the temptations to sin, and the lies of the devil – that work is hindered.

Often, the devil doesn't even need to attack our ministries head-on; he can just get us to fight one another.

When we forget that there's a cosmic war at hand, we become zealous for our tribe over our King, and so we fight our true allies and aid our true enemy.

That's what we see again and again. The question is: where do you see it in your heart and life?

Maybe for you it's not beards or eschatology or the exact nature of God's thoughts. But I bet it's something.

Maybe for you it's our Reformed theology, and you doubt the trustworthiness or the maturity or even the faith of anyone who isn't theologically Reformed.

Maybe for you it's our music, and you scoff at and want little to do with churches with music different from ours.

Maybe for you it's our value of Christian education, and you don't just disagree with other Christians who take a different approach to educating their children – you don't trust them, and you secretly question the authenticity of their faith.

Maybe for you it's the Presbyterian tradition, and you so value that tradition that you're suspicious of other Presbyterians who don't seem Presbyterian enough to you.

Maybe for you it's politics, and you look down on or mistrust or even doubt the depth of Christian commitment of those Christians who voted for someone different than you did in the last election.

Or maybe it's education level, or socio-economic class, or how they engage with the unbelieving culture, or even philosophy of ministry within our own church ... or maybe it's something else.

But I bet there are other sincere Christians out there whose fellowship you resist and whose faith you may even doubt ... because though they call on Jesus, they're not following your people.

And that doubt and that distrust sows discord. Maybe you attack them openly. But often it's more subtle. Maybe you whisper words of mistrust or critique to others. Or you just avoid working with

them when you can. Or you make a condescending comment to them, so that they'll know what you really think of them. Maybe you subtly back away from them or push them away from you. And then, divided from one another, mistrusting one another, we fail to help and support one another ... and become all the easier for the world, the flesh, and the devil to pick each of us off.

As once commentator notes, this is especially easy “for people who have always worshipped and prayed within one particular tradition or style.” It’s not just that they, with good reason perhaps, might think that their way is better. It’s that they then look down on, and despise, and divide from those Christians who may be different ... those they decide are beneath them. [Wright, 127]

Brothers and sisters ... is that us sometimes?

When we forget that there’s a cosmic war at hand, we become zealous for our tribe over our King, and so we fight our true allies and thus aid our true enemy.

That’s the problem our text identifies for us.

The Solution

Thankfully, our text doesn’t stop with identifying the problem. It goes on to point us to a solution.

And the solution our text holds out is that true zeal for Christ unites us with our cosmic allies to fight the cosmic war before us.

True zeal for Christ unites us with our cosmic allies to fight the cosmic war before us.

True Zeal for Christ

First, at the heart of it all is true zeal for Christ.

The solution, in other words, is not less zeal. It’s more zeal for the right thing.

If Jesus is our Maker, the One to whom we owe our very existence ... if Jesus is our Savior, the one who saved us from sin, and death, and even hell ... if Jesus is our King, the One leading us in battle against the forces of darkness in this world ... if Jesus is all those things to us, then nothing – no allegiance, no loyalty, no tribe, no denomination, no religious subgroup, no custom, no tradition – nothing should be more important, more precious to us, than Jesus.

He should have our greatest zeal above all other things.

After all, as Jesus points out in verse 41, we belong to him.

And if we belong to Jesus – if we are his – then the first thing we are called to here is to have true zeal for Christ that places our loyalty to him above all other loyalties.

Unites Us with Our Cosmic Allies

And then second, that true zeal for Christ should unite us with our cosmic allies.

When we see that our shared unity in Christ far outstrips our earthly differences, our shared zeal for Jesus should unite us with Christians who are different from us.

With that, we're called, of course, to refrain from hindering or attacking fellow believers who are different from us – who are not following “our people.”

But Jesus also reminds us here that our unity with them should go far beyond mere tolerance.

In verse 41, Jesus says “For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.” In context, this verse seems aimed at Christians aiding one another across tribal lines. If the man John saw aids the twelve in any way because the twelve belong to Jesus, then that man will be rewarded. But then the reverse must also be true – if the twelve aid the man in Capernaum in any way, because that man belongs to Jesus, then they – the twelve – would be rewarded too.

And so it is for us. We're not just to refrain from hurling attacks or throwing roadblocks at other Christians outside our smaller denominational subgroups or tribes; we're not just supposed to passively tolerate Christians who are different from us. We're supposed to actively aid them.

Just a few verses before our text this morning, Jesus said, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” That includes serving the kind of Christians that you tend to throw barbs at.

Do you want to be rewarded in the Kingdom of Jesus? Serve Christians who differ from you, rather than critiquing, scorning, or impeding them.

True zeal for Jesus Christ our King should drive us to aid other Christians as our true cosmic allies, even when they look different and sound different and don't follow the sort of people we follow.

Because true zeal for Christ unites us with our cosmic allies.

To Fight the Cosmic War Before Us

And that unity will help us in the most important battles.

In this life, true zeal for Christ unites us with our cosmic allies to fight the cosmic war before us.

This war is not a war amongst ourselves over who is the smartest, or who is the best, or who is the purest.

It's the war of Christ's Kingdom against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

We are fighting the forces of spiritual darkness run by the devil himself, who seeks to deceive others from what is true and to destroy what is good and beautiful in this world.

We are fighting against the forces of the world that so often promote the devil's lies and that use their power to oppress and mistreat the weak and vulnerable.

And we are fighting against the forces of our own sin, repenting of our self-centered ways, and seeking to live as the Lord has called us to – battling the sin that is so often present in our own hearts.

This is what fighting the true cosmic battle before us often looks like.

It looks like proclaiming the truth with our mouths and living the truth in our lives.

It looks like bearing witness to Jesus Christ and his gospel in word and in deed.

It looks like repenting of our sin, trusting in Christ, and seeking to love God and love our neighbor.

It looks like seeking to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.

And as we see emphasized in this text, it looks like helping others who are fighting the same battle – helping those among our friends, those in our small group, those in our churches, those in other churches, and those who are very different from us but who call on the name of Jesus – helping them in the very same spiritual struggles: offering them a cup of water – a provision of aid – as they fight these battles because they, too, belong to Christ.

True zeal for Christ unites us with our cosmic allies to fight the cosmic war before us together.

Conclusion

A couple of weeks ago I talked a lot about *The Lord of the Rings*. I hope you'll forgive me if I mention something about it here too.

One of the interesting dimensions of *The Lord of the Rings* is how Tolkien creates a world in which very different beings – humans, elves, dwarves, hobbits, wizards, ents, and more – very different beings must overcome their differences and work together in order to fight for the good and against the evil Dark Lord.

And that proves to be a challenge throughout the novel.

At one point, a group that includes elves, men, hobbits, and a dwarf is disputing amongst themselves, and distrust is rising higher and higher ... and then Haldir, one of the elves, says this to them – he says: “In nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who still oppose him.” [Tolkien, 348]

Hear that again: “In nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who still oppose him.”

It's true that sometimes we Christians struggle to understand one another. Sometimes we just seem strange to each other ... kind of like how an elf would seem strange to a dwarf, or a hobbit would seem strange to a man. And we might look at each other funny, and some other Christians might

baffle us – the way a hobbit might baffle an elf. But if their allegiance is to the true King ... if they, like us, are also opposed to the Dark Lord ... then they are our truest allies, no matter our differences. And true zeal for our King will lead us to fight alongside them, as brothers in arms – not to turn on them and battle with them.

Because when we turn on one another, the power of the Dark Lord is revealed to be present, both within us and among us.

And so, let us not forget that we live in the midst of a cosmic war.

Let us look to our King and have our greatest zeal for him.

Let us seek to help and to aid and to fight alongside all our true allies – all who call on Jesus in faith.

And then let us fight the true battle before us together, for the glory of Christ our King.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
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- Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.