



Minutes With Messiah

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TWO OR THREE

You and a friend are passing a coffee shop in the Balkan nations, particularly Greece or Bulgaria. You ask if your companion wants coffee. He shakes his head from side to side, so you keep walking. After a few steps you notice that he has stopped. You took his gesture to mean the negative. In context of location, though, he was answering in the affirmative. A head shake means yes, and raising the head in the start of a nod means no.

A particular word now has an opposite meaning in different contexts. If you see that a movie is “featuring” Tom Hanks, you can assume he has a major role. If you see a song is “featuring” James Taylor, he may sing one or two lines. In recent years in the music industry, “featuring” has taken the opposite of its traditional meaning.

Many times we take scriptures out of context, and face the same problems. One that is popularly taken out of context is Matthew 18:20, which says, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

More commonly, this is even misquoted as saying “where two or more are gathered.” As we shall see, there was a reason Jesus specified “two or three” rather than more. It is probably that those who misquote the passage this way do so exactly because it is taken out of context and used to mean something Jesus did not intend

Even worse than the misquote, though, is an implication. The preceding verse says, “If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.” The logical, and erroneous, conclusion of these two verses would be that God would not answer the prayers of individuals. For God to answer a prayer, it would appear, two Christians have to agree on the request, because where two or more are gathered, Jesus is there. Does this mean Jesus is not with us when we pray alone, but only in an assembly? That would make him a liar when he says to pray in secret and God will reward you openly. (Matt 6:6) No, he is not saying we have to agree in prayer for it to be answered. Then what is he saying.

One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established. (Deut 19:15)

This is the established reason Jesus spoke of “two or three” rather than more. He is speaking in a legal context. The paragraph, which begins in Matthew 18:15, concerns legal torts. “If thy brother shall trespass against thee....” The first recourse in such a case should always be a private attempt at reconciliation or restitution. If that doesn’t work, take witnesses (two or three) who can establish the matter at hand. Today we tend to think of witnesses only in terms of testifying to the facts, without any other direct involvement in the judicial decision. This is a relatively recent modification to the justice system. At other times, a jury consisted of the witnesses. These are not witnesses to the actual injustice, however; they are witnesses to the proceedings. They witness the discussion between the two litigants, and then make a decision on the rights of the case. That way, if the case must go to the whole assembly (the church, in the King James Version), these people can testify that the one has previously refused to take blame or make restitution. Then, when the assembly makes a decision it is based on the testimony of the required two or three witnesses that a reasonable attempt at reconciliation was first made. They are first testifying as to what was said between the parties, but also that it is not a frivolous use of the assembly’s time.

In context, then, Jesus is saying that where two or three are gathered for a judicial procedure, he is there. If two or three gather by his authority to pass judgement on a brother, he acknowledges the righteousness of the process. He would be party to a proper proceeding, but not to a kangaroo court.

Certainly Jesus is with us when two or more are gathered in his name, just as he is with us when we are by ourselves. We just have to take care not to ignore the context of this particular statement about his authority.

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WOE, WOE, WOE (+5)

Onomatopoeia. It's a strange sounding word with a simple definition. It is a word formed from a sound associated with the thing named. Boom is the sound of an explosion. A cuckoo is a bird whose call sounds like cuckoo. A zipper makes a sound that may be expressed as zip. (Velcro makes a similar sound, but the zipper was invented first.) In Matthew 23, Jesus uses an onomatopoeic word eight times, but most people don't realize it. The word is "woe," which comes from a Greek word pronounced ohh-aye. It is an expression of sorrow, and comes from the sound of a person wailing. Seven times he is telling the "scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" to mourn for their errors. Once it is used in reference to blind guides, but one can presume, because of its placement, that he is still referring to the scribes and Pharisees.

If Jesus pronounces a woe (mourning) on these people for certain things, then perhaps we should learn from him. We need not follow in their footsteps because we have been warned.

Proselyte, or not

But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. (Mat 23:13)

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. (Mat 23:15)

This is a major woe for Christians today. More and more there seem to be two types of Christians; those who accept anything, and those who hate everything. Jesus seems to be talking about both. The Pharisees were eager to proselytize, as long as those they converted agreed with them. They were the *parush*, the Separated Ones. Either you were with them, or you were nobody. If they had truly followed the Law, that would have been good; but they insisted that the hedge around the Law was more important than the Law itself. Especially in the current political climate in the United States, with the "doctrine of hate" gaining support, this woe seems especially significant. Extremism is usually wrong.

So is going to the other extreme. When you are so eager to get converts that anyone who walks in the door is accepted without change, then perhaps you are guilty of making people "twofold more the child of hell." God has established standards. He expects people to make their best effort to follow those standards. It is easy to believe

in universal acceptance, but that doesn't make it right. We should not drive people away with hatred, but we must also let them know that a change (sometimes called repentance) is necessary. Otherwise, we are as subject to woe as they will ultimately find themselves to be.

Keeping up appearances

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation. (Mat 23:14)

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel. (Mat 23:23-24)

Doing the right thing for the right reason is commendable. Doing the right thing because you know it is right, but you don't feel like doing it is also commendable on a certain level. Doing the right thing just for appearances, while secretly harming others, is woeful.

The funny thing is, most people can ultimately see through the façade. In the words of President Lincoln, "You can fool all of the people some of the time. You can fool some of the people all of the time. But you can't fool all of the people all of the time." We have seen it countless times. In fact, those who are most concerned with appearances are the most likely to take a fall, because people are looking for something against them. Scandals abound in the political world, and in the religious.

On the other hand, those who pray because they want to communicate with God, and those who show mercy because they are truly merciful, will stand. Daniel did not pray just for pretence, and when his enemies came looking for something to catch him on, they couldn't find anything. They had to create a law that would make doing the right thing illegal, in order to try to bring him down. (It didn't work.)

Peter probably remembered these words when he wrote his letters. He gave Christians advice about doing the right thing for the right reasons.

If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. (1 Pet 4:14-16)

Suffering will happen. If it is because of hypocrisy, there is nothing to look forward to. If it is for being right, and righteous, God will be glorified and the believer will be rewarded.

A matter of degree

Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. (Mat 23:16-22)

This is the woe that breaks the pattern, although it is probably also directed at the Pharisees and scribes. The blind guides are those who would categorize right and wrong, and make it a matter of degree.

Sin is sin. Sin, unrepented and unforgiven, will separate one from God. It doesn't matter if it is a "mortal" sin or a "venial" sin. Ultimately, without God's forgiveness, all sin is "mortal" because "the wages of sin is death." (Rom 6:23) Even those who claim not to believe in the distinction between mortal and venial may practice categorization. Speeding on the highway is not so bad, even justifiable if everyone is doing it. Murder may even be justified in some circumstances. But a mass murderer is beyond forgiveness. Adultery, while unfortunate, is socially acceptable, but homosexual acts are unforgivable.

These blind guides were even categorizing something that was somewhat good. Making vows was a part of the Law of Moses. Generally, vows involved doing something, or abstaining from something, for a limited time for religious purposes. The woe was pronounced because they found ways of getting out of a vow based on what they swore by. They wanted a way to break a contract with God.

That is the problem. People tend to categorize vows in order to find ways out of them. People tend to categorize sin to make their pet sins less despicable. If your sin is worse than mine, then I must be a pretty good guy, even if my sin will ultimately lead me to the same fate. The problem with degrees is, we tend to think ours is the better degree. It is a way to justify ourselves so that we don't require justification from God. It is an attempt to be saved without Christ.

Inside out

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. (Mat 23:25-26)

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (Mat 23:27-28)

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. (Mat 23:29-35)

Under the Law, anyone who touched a dead body was unclean for a week, and had to purify himself on the third and seventh day. Unclean meant no social contact, and especially no sexual contact. Cleanliness was important. Therefore, they painted graves white, so nobody would accidentally touch one. But they were still graves full of bones, no matter how pretty you made them. Ceremonial washing was important, but what good is washing your hands and your feet if you are going to eat something unclean? Purity is not just an outward thing. As with other woes, Jesus is saying that we need to commit to him fully. Otherwise, we might as well not commit at all.

Eight woes, but maybe they are all just one. Woe to anyone who pretends to righteousness as a cover for sin. After all, whether they were scribes or Pharisees, they were all described as hypocrites.

HADASSAH'S AUTHOR

Who wrote the book of Esther? Scholars disagree. Actually, scholars disagree about who wrote most of the books of the Bible. A few identify the writer, and even some of those have been questioned. Like the book of Mark. Most scholars might even agree that it was probably written by the John Mark that sometimes accompanied Paul. Many, though, suspect that he was just the scribe or ghost writer for Peter. Of course, the most famous unnamed author is the writer of the book of Hebrews. Sometimes Paul is proposed, but mostly the author is now simply called "the writer of Hebrews." (Some add, "whoever he *or she* was.")

With Purim coming up (March 24, 2016), it might be interesting to look at who wrote the book that is read around the world on that date. As with Genesis and Hebrews, there is much disagreement on the authorship. Generally, there are two candidates most often proposed. Would it be anachronistic to propose a third?

Possibly the leading candidate for the authorship is Nehemiah. The events of the book of Esther took place in the reign of Ahasuerus, who is now commonly assumed to be Xerxes I; this in spite of the Septuagint translation and Josephus using the name Artaxerxes for the king in the book. Nehemiah served Artaxerxes, the son of Xerxes I. The author's familiarity with the royal city of Susa (Shushan) argues that the author was from that city, as was Nehemiah. He was a significant servant in the palace, and so could describe the palace and the palace customs in intimate detail. The author was also clearly Jewish, with a concern for Jewish nationalism, which also fits Nehemiah.

A second candidate, proposed by Josephus and some early rabbis, is the main male character of the story,

Mordechai. Since the book is about him and his ward, Hadassah (Esther), he would know the facts. One could argue that, as an outsider, he would not have known the details of the palace; however, at the end of the book he is elevated to a position that would give him that detail. A couple of factors militate against Mordechai, however. One is that he would have had to have written the book shortly after the events recorded. The problem is that the holiday had been well established by the time of the writing. It is only barely possible Mordechai lived long enough to be the author. The other factor is the descriptions of Mordechai himself. It would not be unheard of for a man who rose from obscurity to power to blow his own horn. That, though, does not accord with Mordechai's description in the book.

A possibility that has not been mentioned in most of the literature is that Esther wrote the book. Her age would have allowed her to live longer than Mordechai. She was intimately involved, and had an interest in showing the promotion of Mordechai. The one thing that most goes in her favor, however, is chapter 1. To the modern American mind, that chapter sounds more like it was written for a women's magazine than for *GQ*. Nor is it beyond reason to believe that women have always taken more of an interest in the palace decorations. This is perhaps more of a 21st Century, chauvinist viewpoint. On the other hand, chauvinists of an earlier age would have dismissed her as the author just because she was a woman.

Ultimately, the only thing we can say with reasonable certainty is that someone wrote the book. Even though it doesn't mention God directly, it is pretty well accepted that He is the ultimate author. Beyond that, it doesn't really matter who wrote it.

Timothy J. O'Hearn
737 Monell Dr NE
Albuquerque NM 87123