

WHY DESPISE WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND?

Today's Text: Matt. 12: 1- 37

Extracts:

Then one was brought to Him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute, and He healed him, so that the blind and mute both spoke and saw. And all the multitudes were amazed and said, "Could this be the Son of David?" Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, "This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons" [Matt. 12: 22-24]

It was a Sierra Leonean friend of mine during our graduate study days in New York in the 1970's who told me this story. American foundations that offered scholarships to foreign students attached recipients to American host families for the purpose of cultural exchange. My friend had been invited to a dinner by his host family. Also invited was an American diplomat who had just returned from a duty tour in an African country. Many of the guests were impressed with the Sierra Leonean's level of articulation and knowledge of contemporary issues. Then from no where, the diplomat pontificated, "In Africa, people live on trees." Perhaps to ease the tension that suddenly descended, the host turned to the African and said, "Tell him that's not true!" The Sierra Leonean replied, "It is true. Actually, the American ambassador in my country lives on the tallest tree!"

The diplomat might have lived in a tiny part of a huge continent called Africa and might as well have seen some people that lived on trees. But what was the purpose of rubbing it in at a New York function where a young articulate African student in one of America's top universities was a guest? Was he telling a poor joke or trying to put down the "African from the jungle"? Whatever might have been his motive, what came out was an unsuccessful attempt to put down or despise a more cultured person.

A moment ago, you might have said something derogatory about somebody you perceive to be competing for limelight with you. S (he) may be in your family, church, school, place of work or business, or professional association. What you have said may not be true but you do not care to know the truth. What is your motive and what do you hope to achieve? Do you even understand what you are despising in others? Do you know the dangers that you could be facing? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in this week's study, based on the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees.

1. Why do people despise others?

People may have their reasons for trying to put others down, especially those that they know little or nothing about. Some of those reasons can be classified as follows:

a) *Superiority complex*

Some people suffer from superiority complex that may derive from the colour of their skin or the blood that flows through their veins. It could be due to their gender or beauty or creed, wealth or education. Such people tend to praise or overrate their own strengths while underrating or undermining those of their opponents.

In the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, Jesus spoke of some people “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” A Pharisee and a tax collector went to the temple to pray. The self-righteous Pharisee stood up and prayed thus, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess” [Lk 18: 9-12]. He was playing up his own strengths while putting down the tax collector that he knew little or nothing about. In the end, the despised man went home justified and exalted in the sight of God [vv. 13-14].

The Pharisees looked down on Jesus as He taught in the temple because He did not attend their ‘academies’ for “how does this Man know letters having never studied?” [Jn 7: 14]. The Jewish leaders that arrested the apostles, Peter and John, underrated them because they “perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men” [Acts 4: 13]. Goliath the Philistine giant underrated David the teenager who only had a sling and some pebbles as his weapons. When he “looked and saw David, he disdained him, *for he was only a youth, ruddy and good looking*” [1 Sam. 17: 41-45]. He only saw his own strengths while putting David down. Superiority complex is thus a possible explanation why we despise those we want to make inferior to us.

b) *Inferiority complex*

At the other end, there are people who suffer from inferiority complex and try to mask it by trying to dominate others. Such people use the power of position or privilege to damage or destroy those they perceive are a threat to them. For example, when people with inferiority complex are bosses, they do everything possible to undermine their highly competent subordinates. They will never comment favourably on their work or contributions even when it is obvious that such subordinates are the best.

When they are in the position to punish, they are ruthless with those they perceive superior to them so as to eliminate competition.

A good example of inferiority complex was exhibited by Haman, a top officer of King Ahasuerus whose queen (Esther) was a Jew by birth. He was descended from the Amalekites, a nation whose king, Agag, was killed by Samuel during the reign of King Saul [**1 Sam. 15: 1-33**]. In exile in Persia, Haman the Agagite found himself in a superior political position to the Jewish exiles. Esther's uncle, Mordecai, was a servant at the king's gate who refused to bow or pay homage to Haman. He, therefore, desired to lay hands on Mordecai, "for they had told him of the people of Mordecai (and) Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus" [**Esth. 3: 1-6**]. On the surface, it smells like vengeance but it looks driven by inferiority complex. As long as the Jews were prominent in Ahasuerus' kingdom, Haman could not be comfortable, no matter whatever position he was given. At one stage, he told his wife that his high status availed him nothing "so long as (he saw) Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate" [**Esth. 5: 13**]. In the end, Haman was hanged in the gallows that he had built for Mordecai, the man that he despised [**Esth. 7: 10**].

c) *Pure envy*

Envy is wishing we had what others have even when what we have is superior! That is why the word of God calls envy "rotteness to the bones" [**Prov. 14: 30**]. Envy wells up in us when we suddenly find others that we used to consider inferior to us now in a position to compete for the same privileges or positions with us. From that point on, we no longer have good things to say about them. Instead, we use confidential information on them to damage their upward mobility.

The Pharisees and other Jewish leaders became envious of Jesus as soon as they saw the multitudes drifting away from them to follow Him. Even the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, noticed it during the trial of Jesus "for he knew that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy" [**Mk 15: 10**]. In another example, Saul loved David after he had killed the giant Goliath. In fact, he set him over the men of war. However, as they were coming home from the battlefield, the women sang and danced, saying, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." That displeased Saul and he asked, "Now what more can he have but the kingdom?" From that point on, "Saul eyed David" [**1 Sam. 18: 2-9**]. He pursued the young man for over ten years until the king was killed in a battle with the Philistines [**1 Sam. 31: 5-6**]. In the end, the throne passed to David.

From the forgoing, we see that it may not be easy to determine the specific reasons why people despise others. However, the result is the same: those we try to despise may actually be innocent of what we are alleging. Secondly, we may know little or nothing about the people we despise or their motives, strengths or weaknesses. In the end, we may hurt ourselves more than we can hurt them. Let us use the encounter of Jesus with the Pharisees to illustrate the point.

2. The Pharisees despise Jesus

The Pharisees were an influential Jewish sect who believed that religious rituals and separation from common sinners was the way to please God and to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.¹ As a result, they were sticklers for Mosaic Law [**Phil. 3: 5**] and were quite zealous for Judaism [**Matt. 23: 15**]. They particularly despised Jesus whom they sought to destroy because they did not accept Him as the Messiah [**Matt. 12: 14**]. So, they relentlessly pursued Him everywhere He went so as to find evidence with which to nail Him.

When you plot to hurt others, you had better have solid proof of their guilt. What allegations did the Pharisees have against Jesus? Here are some of them:

a) *That Jesus and His disciples did what was unlawful on the Sabbath*

On the Sabbath, Jesus and His disciples were hungry. As they passed through the grainfields, they plucked heads of grains and ate. When the Pharisees saw them doing so, they accused Him and His disciples of “doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath” [**vv. 1-2**]. Was Jesus guilty as charged?

On the matter of eating products from other people’s farms, the Law of Moses states [**Deut. 23: 24-25**]:

When you come into your neighbour’s vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes at your pleasure, but you shall not put any in your container. When you come into your neighbour’s standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbour’s standing grain.

Clearly, the action of Jesus and His disciples in plucking grains from another person’s farm was lawful. That was why He did not bother to defend their action. However, on doing so on the Sabbath, the day that God had ordained as the day of rest from work [**Ex. 20: 8-11**], Jesus answered His critics by referring to precedents that the Pharisees themselves had not questioned, namely:

¹ Karen Dockrey, Johnnie Dodwin and Phyllis Godwin, *The Student Bible Dictionary*, Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, Inc; 2000; p. 183

- When David was running away from King Saul's persecution, he and his men came to Ahimelech the priest. David and his men were hungry and they asked the priest for bread. The priest told David, "There is no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread (provided) the young men have at least kept themselves from women." On David's assurances that he and his men carried holy vessels, Ahimelech "gave him holy bread; for there was no bread there but the showbread which had been taken from before the Lord" [1 Sam. 21: 1-5]. The showbread was meant only for the priests but David and his men ate it and it was not regarded as unlawful [Matt. 12: 3-4].
- Jesus also reminded the Pharisees that when on the Sabbath day the priests prepared the offerings (grain offering, burnt offering and drink offering), they were working but nobody ever blamed them for profaning the Sabbath [Num. 28: 9-10; Matt. 12: 5].

Having dismissed their allegations as baseless and an unsuccessful attempt to condemn the guiltless, Jesus reiterated the truth about Himself to the Pharisees, namely, Jesus is greater than the temple and He is Lord even of the Sabbath [vv. 6, 8]. Moreover, God desires mercy more than sacrifice [v. 7; Hos. 6: 6]

b) *That Jesus healed on the Sabbath*

Jesus came to the synagogue where His accusers worshipped and there He saw a man with a withered hand. Without waiting for their cheap accusation, He proactively asked the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" [Matt. 12: 9-10]. Before doing anything for the sick man, Jesus established another truth. Would any of the Pharisees themselves who had just one sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath day not go after it to rescue it? Was a man not more valuable than a sheep? Of course, the Pharisees themselves would answer both questions in the affirmative. So Jesus concluded by saying, "Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then, he went ahead and healed the sick man [vv. 11-13].

Having failed on the point of law, the Pharisees 'went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.' Jesus knew that and He wisely withdrew from there [v. 14]. The Pharisees despised Jesus but they could not base it on facts or truth!

c) *That Jesus was using demonic powers to heal*

A demon-possessed man was brought to Jesus. The man was blind and mute. Jesus healed him and he saw and began to speak. The multitudes marveled and asked, "Could this be the Son of David?" [vv. 22-23].

[By coincidence, today, 5 April 2009, is Palm Sunday when we commemorate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passion Week. What did the multitudes cry out as they followed Jesus? “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna to the highest!” **[Matt. 21: 9]**. So, the Son of David is the Messiah that the Jews had been waiting for **[Lk 1: 31-33]!**]

That was too much for the Pharisees to bear. So, they poured more scorn on Jesus by saying, “*This fellow* does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons” **[Matt. 12: 24]**. This fellow? That was a low blow in deed. Could they prove that allegation? Were they not talking about matters they knew little or nothing about?

It was at that point that Jesus gave serious warning to all *those who despise what they do not understand*. They could be sinning against the Holy Spirit and “*whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit ... will not be forgiven... either in this age or in the age to come*” **[v. 32]**. Moreover, “for every word that we may speak, we shall give account of it in the day of judgment” **[v. 36]**. Those are the important lessons that we must learn from this week’s study.

3. Conclusion: Your salvation is at stake when you despise others!

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and ruler in Israel. Instead of despising Jesus like his colleagues, he came to Him by night to know the truth about God **[Jn 3: 1-2]**. There is evidence that he was convinced about Christ’s earthly mission because, when even the disciples of Jesus abandoned Him during His trial, it was Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathaea that boldly came forward to Pilate to obtain permission to take Jesus from the cross and bury Him **[Jn 19: 38-39]**. Paul of Tarsus was another Pharisee who did exploits for Christ after he had come to know the truth. You can be sure that Paul and Nicodemus are today two Pharisees in heaven with Jesus.

It is dangerous to despise others, especially on matters we know little or nothing about. First, you cannot attain what you despise for death and life are in the power of the tongue **[Prov. 18: 21]**. Second, whatever you speak God will use to judge you **[Matt. 12: 36]**. Finally, you risk eternal damnation in hell because you could be blaspheming the Holy Spirit **[v. 32]**. Therefore, your salvation is at stake when you despise others.

Can you afford that risk?