

Bad Ideas

Human history is littered with some really bad ideas. You might have thought, for example, that Napoleon proved for all generations to come that invading Russia in a campaign that would last into winter was a really bad idea. But no, Hitler decided to attempt a similar campaign against the Soviets and launched the offensive in June of 1941. After a defeat at Stalingrad in 1943, the whole course of the Second World War changed and the Allies gained the momentum and began the pushback that resulted in their victory.

People have all kinds of solutions to the problems they face - like this group of guys that are trying to help a buddy move his furniture. And then there's this crocodile trainer - the caption underneath says, "Things were going well, right up to the point where the crocodile realized that the larger piece of meat wasn't up in the air." And then there are the times when we have an idea that just doesn't work out too well, perhaps through a lack of foresight on our part . . . Of course cats have bad ideas. Now here's something that looks like a lot of fun as long as you can stay up on your bike - I don't think it's going to be too long, unfortunately. And my favorite one is two guys who decide it might be fun to dress up like a zebra -- the caption under "Bad Ideas" is "This is one of them".

From the time of Jesus, there are some people who have had some really bad ideas. I think of James and John asking Jesus if he wanted them to call down fire from heaven to punish some folks in Samaria who didn't want to show them hospitality. That was just a bad idea, but it wasn't the only one these guys had. They also got their mother to go to Jesus and ask Him for the places of honor for her two sons when Jesus would come in His Kingdom. That idea didn't go over too well with Jesus, but He used it to teach about servanthood.

In the passage we're looking at today, we're going to come across some bad ideas that certain people had about Jesus and about how He ought to conduct His life, so let's dig in:

When Jesus returned to the house where He was staying, the crowds began to gather again, and soon He and His disciples couldn't even find time to eat.

When His family heard what was happening, they tried to take Him home with them. "He's out of his mind!" they said.

But the teachers of religious law who had arrived from Jerusalem said, "He's possessed by Satan, the prince of demons. That's where he gets the power to cast out demons." (3:20-22)

There are two really bad ideas in this section. The first is that anyone who goes without food in order to minister to the needs of others is mentally unhinged and needs to be put in the psych ward for his own protection. And that was from Mary and James and Jude and the rest of the family. Joseph does not appear in this story, nor does he appear anywhere else during Jesus' adult life, so we must assume that he was no longer living at this point. But Mary is an anxious mom - she doesn't understand what's going on and she panics when she sees Jesus being pressed so hard by the many needs that He

is trying to meet. And Jesus' brothers are intense and eager to do something about their older sibling. Remember that James was a Pharisee, or at least shared their views, so he would be anxious to reel Jesus in and make him more acceptable to the teachers of the law. At least that's how I imagine their motivations for coming to collect Jesus. We will see how He responded to His family a few verses later on.

The second bad idea comes from the teachers of religious law who have come up from Jerusalem to investigate Jesus. When they hear that the family is concerned about Jesus' mental health, they come up with an alternate diagnosis. They decide that it's Jesus' spiritual health that is at risk, that he is firmly in the clutches of Satan and that he gets the power to drive out demons from none other than Satan himself.

Now, notice where all this started. Jesus has gone back to the house, probably Peter's house in Capernaum, and crowds have gathered looking for Him. Jesus gets so busy in ministering to these people, which most likely means teaching them, healing them and delivering them from evil spirits, that He and His disciples can't find time to sit down to a proper meal. There were no fast food places in Capernaum at the time and so meals would take some time away from the massive needs that are constantly gathering at the door of the house. And so Jesus went hungry in order to help the people -- that's how these bad ideas got started. Jesus' family was afraid *for* Him, and wanted to get Him out of there; the religious leaders were afraid *of* Him and wanted to remove or reduce His influence.

From that starting point, these really bad ideas make their way from troubled hearts to people's lips and into actions. Jesus responds to the religious teachers first:

Jesus called them over and said to them by way of illustration, "How can Satan cast out Satan? A kingdom divided against itself is doomed. And if Satan is fighting against himself, how can he stand? He would never survive. Let me illustrate this. You can't enter a strong man's house and rob him without first tying him up. Only then can his house be robbed. I assure you that any sin can be forgiven, including blasphemy; but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. It is an eternal sin." He told them this because they were saying He had an evil spirit. (3:23-30)

One of my favorite musicals is the Cotton Patch Gospel, based on a folksy translation called "The Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John" written in the 1960's by Clarence Jordan. Tom Key and Russell Treyz wrote a play based on this translation and Harry Chapin wrote the musical score, completing it just before his death in a traffic accident in 1981. Chapin never saw Cotton Patch performed, but thought it was the most important thing he had written.

The setting for this story is in the state of Georgia, with Atlanta being the equivalent of Jerusalem and Mary and Joe being from the town of Valdosta and John the baptizer dipping people in the Chattahoochee River. At one point in Cotton Patch the religious leaders confront Jesus and accuse Him of operating under the influence of a negative spiritual power, when He healed or delivered people ... and then they offer irrefutable

proof: “otherwise, why would he do it for free!” I did mention that it was set in the deep south of the U.S. didn’t I?

But what we see Jesus doing in this passage is simply exposing a really bad idea. “How can Satan cast out Satan? A kingdom divided against itself is doomed!” Isn’t it obvious that Satan’s work has nothing to do with casting out evil spirits from people - no, his purpose is to get those demons into people, not out of them. What kind of reason is there behind this accusation - there’s obviously nothing to it. Satan is not going to set about to free people from spiritual bondage. If he did, all his works would have been undone long before Jesus came on the scene - evil on earth would have been defeated by the prince of darkness. Jesus makes their accusation look preposterous - which it was!

But then He adds a statement that has often been misunderstood in the church, and I want to be very clear about what it means here. First, who was He talking to? He was responding to the religious teachers who had come up from Jerusalem. What were they saying or doing that Jesus was responding to? The last verse tells us that Jesus spoke to them because they were saying that He had an evil spirit. What Spirit did Jesus actually have? The Holy Spirit, who had come upon Him at the time of His baptism and who had led Him throughout His ministry. So, what did their statements about Jesus’ ministry imply about the Holy Spirit? They were saying that the spirit that was in Jesus was evil. They were saying that Jesus was operating under the inspiration and power of Satan and therefore was evil.

Now, bigger picture. What had Jesus been doing up until this point in time? He had been healing people, He had been casting out demons from people and He had been teaching them. These supposed experts in the law of God were saying that all of this was evil, was from the devil, and that Jesus should be rejected and ignored by all the people. Their message was, “If you want to be safe, if you want to be right with God, then you surely shouldn’t be on Jesus’ side, because He’s in league with Satan.”

Why can’t that be forgiven? Because it is calling good evil and evil good - it is a distortion of God’s character and it is done for personal gain at God’s expense. This is gross sin, the worst kind, and it labels the Holy Spirit as an evil spirit, a lying spirit and a servant of Satan. If you’re going to make that statement and take that stance, aren’t you saying that you are fully committed to evil yourself? Aren’t you saying that you will do or say anything to distort the truth in order to protect your position of privilege, your status, or your reputation?

The unforgivable sin is not a slip of the tongue, not a bad habit, not even an act of selfishness or rebellion - it’s a denial of God’s very nature and a rejection of who He reveals Himself to be. It’s a defiant “NO” to the Spirit of God who is at work in the person of Jesus Messiah.

Now, on to the final paragraph for today:

Jesus mother and brothers arrived at the house where He was teaching. They stood outside and sent word for Him to come out and talk with them. There was a crowd around Jesus and someone said, "Your mother and your brothers and your sisters are outside, asking for You."

Jesus replied, "Who is My mother? Who are My brothers?" Then He looked at those around Him and said, "These are My mother and brothers. Anyone who does God's will is My brother and sister and mother." (3:31-35)

The family comes with the idea of getting Jesus out of there. How would they do it? There were so many people gathered around Jesus that they couldn't even get close to Him - so we're told in Luke's account of this attempted rescue. So they sent word through the crowd that they would like Jesus to come out to talk with them. Jesus doesn't budge. I wonder if He suspected that they would try to remove Him by force, that they hadn't come all this way to just let Him talk them out of their plans. They were a motivated group and they had come with some sort of plan to remove Jesus and give Him some time to recover from His ordeal. They had no chance of removing Him through the crowds, but maybe if they could get Him to come out to them? Who knows?

Jesus doesn't confront their scheme or get into a big argument with them. He just looks around at the people He is with and calls them His family. "Anyone who does God's will is My brother and sister and mother." We should take that as Jesus' way of describing the person who is part of the family of God - their new bent, their heart's desire, is to do the things that are honoring to God. That's a family trait, to please Dad, because this Father really does know what's best.

We aren't told anything about the journey of Jesus' family back to their homes. We can imagine that there was some resentment and we can hope that there was some self-reflection, but we don't know. What we do know is that we can engage in the self-reflection that these two bad ideas require.

First, let's look at what constitutes a "bad idea". What did Jesus' family members think about and talk about that set them up for this failure? What did the Pharisees and teachers of the law conclude about Jesus' ministry that set them up for their really bad idea? There are a lot of candidates here, so I'm going to look at these as broadly as I can, as kind of foundations of bad ideas.

1. The conviction that you know better than others do about what's best for them. We all have opinions and we all think that our opinions are right, or at least as close to the truth as anyone else's. What creates the potential for bad ideas is being unwilling to consider that someone else has an important insight, has a different perspective, has some wisdom to offer that we could benefit from. If we're so married to our opinions that we can't let them be reshaped by new information or by another person's insights, we are setting ourselves up for an epic fail. Jesus' mother and brothers were convinced, convinced! that Jesus was mentally unstable because He wasn't getting His meals on time - I think the brothers had some other reasons - but they were so sure they were right. They had to do something. The teachers of the law

were also convinced that Jesus was on the wrong side of their religious faith - simply because He didn't see things or act according to their ideas, their traditions. It was their blind spots, in both cases, that got them into trouble.

2. The second foundation of bad ideas is the certainty that you have to change the situation, that you have a God-given responsibility to fix somebody or some situation which you were never involved in in the first place. Jesus' family was certain that they had to get Him away from the crowds and allow Him to regain something they called sanity. The religious teachers thought they had a responsibility to confront the kind of ministry Jesus was involved with and bring it into line with the traditions of the Jewish elders. There is very little you are responsible for outside of your own actions, your responsibility to raise your pre-adult children and becoming aware of an injustice that requires correction - and you're in a position to correct it or to begin a corrective process. Too often we give advice when it's not wanted, continue to give that same advice when it's been rejected, and then get angry with the person who doesn't do what we want them to do. Let it go - give counsel if you feel it's important to do so and then give the individual the freedom to act on your counsel or to reject it.
3. The third foundation for bad ideas is jealousy or some other expression of self-interest. Jesus' family were likely smarting a bit from reports of His activities. They were embarrassed by the way their neighbors talked about Him and criticized His teachings or His practices. Something must have been really stinging their thoughts to make them all travel to Capernaum to confront Him and possibly to attempt a rescue. On the other hand, it is abundantly clear that the teachers of religious law were jealous of Jesus. They resented the approval and admiration that He was receiving from the crowds that followed Him throughout Galilee. They resented the fact that He rejected their traditions, the things that set them apart from ordinary people, that made them holy in the sight of the common folk, that made people respect and admire them. Jesus didn't value those things at all, didn't agree that these traditions were true reflections of the laws of Moses and didn't ask His disciples to abide by them.
4. A fourth source of bad ideas is being in the position of power, the position to make your bad ideas become reality. In the stories we've just looked at, Jesus' family had no power and obviously left disappointed and frustrated. But the teachers of religious law did have power and they could make accusations about Jesus and make people, at least some people, believe them. They could stir up crowds to oppose the things Jesus said and did - and that's what they did in the end. Power is a dangerous thing, but that doesn't make people turn from it; it seems to make people want it all the more. And there always seems to be someone in power who has the worst ideas, but is able to make those ideas the law of the land, or of the city, even of the church.
5. Four foundations so far: the arrogance to assume you are right without giving time to consider other sources of information, the certainty that knowledge requires action on your part, the power of self-interest combined with jealousy of others, and being in a position of power where you can impose your will on others, or at least exert influence. The final foundation of bad ideas is the desire to please other people who may not be wise or well-informed or have enough information themselves. You may be intimidated by them or you really like them or you need a favor from them. This personal need can be seen in the response of the delegation from Judea. They had

made up their minds before they got to Capernaum. They represented vested interests in the priesthood of Jerusalem and they were not going to be bound by logic or reason in their criticisms of Jesus' ministry. They had no intention of pleasing Jesus, or the ordinary Galileans - their only interest was in pleasing the people who had sent them.

Applications:

1. Be humble about your opinions, and especially about your judgments of other people. I think it's also very helpful to be humble in how you give advice - don't be so sure that you know what the other person ought to do that your "advice" comes across as a "command".
2. Don't act in ways that could be hurtful, could cause division, could accuse someone falsely. In fact, we say often that we need to be led by the Spirit, as Jesus was. This is a good place to put that into practice - be led by the Spirit in how you act on your opinions of issues or of people.
3. Guard your heart - be aware of your motivations. Are you acting out of jealousy or anger or disappointment or to please people who may not be objective or motivated by love themselves? Watch out for this because all kinds of damage is done when we act out of impure motives.
4. Be careful not to use a position of power in a hurtful way. Don't just bring the hammer down on someone because you can. If you have to enforce discipline or take strong actions, wait until you can do so in love, with a care for how your actions affect the person.

Jesus had a lot of really good ideas and people with bad ideas kept coming along to throw Him off track. That He persisted with the good ideas has brought all of us great blessing -- let's bring great blessing to the world around us by following Jesus in the ways He taught us.