

Secret Disciples of Jesus

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Date: 21 March 2010

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[0 : 00] Well, now, in keeping with the reading, I want to turn back to John 19 and focus our thoughts around verses 38 to 42.

After Jesus had died, we read at verse 38, After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission.

So he came and took the body of Jesus. Particularly the reference there in verse 38 to Joseph of Arimathea being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews.

I want us actually to think, with the communion season in mind, of course, about two secret disciples of Jesus.

And the emphasis here is on being secret disciples, of keeping it hidden. The word in the original has to do with keeping it hidden. Now, it's true, generally, that there are many things which go on in secret that are best left that way.

[1 : 41] There are many other things that are said and done, eventually come out, though they have been said and done in secret. And they come out into the open, and often to the embarrassment of those who have sought to hide them, because they've been simply evil.

But there are some things that ought never to be hidden at all. And such is here in our text today. That is personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Jesus told his disciples, Let your light so shine that men may see.

Don't hide it under a jug, an upturned jug, but set it on a hill that it can be seen. And yet we find in this passage two men who were secret disciples, who were hiding the fact that they were Jesus' disciples.

They were following him. And just as it was then for these two fellows, so it is for ourselves today that there are those who keep secret their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[3 : 13] They have an uneasiness about hiding that fact, that they know him, that they believe in him. And they have the uneasiness because they're afraid in a way that folk will find out, and they're just not ready to come out into the open.

But it seems to me that we ought to regard what Jesus himself has to say, that we should openly confess him before men. And it's my prayer that for those of us who have professed him, that we will be more bold to make him known.

That we'll not be afraid. I'm speaking here for myself too, don't forget. Some 35 years or so down the line of being a follower of Jesus.

And we're always, if we're honest with ourselves, we're always confronted with situations that make us afraid and would keep us stoom. We wouldn't say anything.

So, the searchlight is on, not just literally the secret disciples who may be among us, but on the tendency we all have as believers to weigh a situation and to say, oh, better keep quiet.

[4 : 31] Whereas we ought to speak. You remember that very vivid story told in 2 Kings 6 about the four lepers.

And there was a siege in the city of Samaria. And the people were in a bad state.

And they came across. They weren't getting any food. There was no food. There was starvation rations in the city.

And they went away. And they found the camp of the Syrians empty. And everyone was gone. And all the booty and all the food and the animals were left there.

And they had a good gorging session. And they took gold and silver and clothing. And they stashed it away. Then they went back for round two.

[5 : 30] And they were sitting there stuffing their faces. And all of a sudden they said, we're not doing what's right. This is a day of good news.

And we are silent. And my dear friends, the principle that is brought out in that passage is the same for us. This is a day of good news.

And we ought not to be silent. If it was true for these four lepers, and it was, they went, you see, then with haste. And they told the starving inhabitants of the city, come and see this.

May the Spirit guide us then. And help us to go on in Judy's past the way we ought. The first thing I want to think about here is their identity.

The secret disciples, the two of them, their identity. And it's very clearly put here. First of all, there's Joseph of Arimathea. Now, Joseph of Arimathea is only mentioned.

[6 : 38] He's not just mentioned here. But he's only mentioned in connection with this situation. All the other bits of information we get from Matthew and Mark, we get in relation to this incident.

They're quite illuminating, and we'll look at them. But he's not mentioned anywhere apart from this incident. And the things we learn about him, they're almost like aside bits of information.

They're helpful. But it's in connection with this incident we're looking at here. After the death of Jesus. Arimathea itself is a place that is unknown precisely.

I think the balance of study would tend to suggest that it's on the same latitude as the city of Joppa, and about 15 miles east of it.

That's about as near as anybody gets to suggesting where it is. And we're told, actually, John Calvin in his commentary calls him a senator, but by that he meant he was a member of the Jewish council, the superior council, the Sanhedrin.

[8 : 04] And in fact, we're told that very thing about him in Luke 23 and verse 50. And then we're told, interestingly, in Matthew 27, 57, he was rich.

So he was rich and famous and popular. And we're told also he was a godly man.

He was waiting for the revelation of the kingdom of God. He understood through the scriptures that there was a time coming when God's kingdom would be seen in a new way, in a different way.

We're told about him he was an upright man. He was in a right standing with God by God's grace. In fact, we get a rather interesting insight back in that passage in Luke.

Luke tells us Joseph did not consent within the body of the Sanhedrin to going after Jesus to make sure that he would die.

[9 : 15] He refused to take part in that decision. And yet, despite all that is said on the positive concerning Joseph of Arimathea, we're told he was a secret disciple because he feared the Jewish authorities.

Verse 38. Being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews. Very often, that expression, for fear of the Jews, actually means the Jewish authorities.

Oh, my dear friends, take notice for fear of the Jews. Effectively, the fear of man.

And the book of Proverbs tells us the fear of man brings a snare. That means it snares us and it cripples our minds so that we can't function as we would and come to reasonable, rational decisions.

The fear of man. It snares us. It certainly cripples faith so that it doesn't operate as it should. And he hid the truth about his faith because he feared man.

[10 : 28] That's very briefly then Joseph of Arimathea. He's first. Second is, of course, Nicodemus. And Nicodemus was also a ruler of the Jews.

He was also a Sanhedrin member. You find in chapter 3 of John's Gospel that he was a Sanhedrin member.

He was also rich. We learn that he brought a huge heap of spices of myrrh and aloes so that they could embalm the body of Jesus.

And that cost a lot of money. He was a rich man. Back in that reference I gave you in John 3, it's full of most interesting insights to Nicodemus because we're told that when Jesus told him that if he was to see, spiritually apprehend, the kingdom of God, he had to be born from above.

He'd be born of God's spirit. He had to be regenerated. And that there was no way that he could, himself and by his own efforts, apprehend in a spiritual way the reality of a kingdom or know its power in his life.

[11 : 56] He was ignorant of the doctrine of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. And it's interesting, Jesus says to him, what you are, our English version says, you are a teacher in Israel and you don't

know these things.

But the original puts it far more revealingly. What? You are the teacher. You're a teacher of renown. You're one of the top flight of teachers of the Bible in Israel and you don't know these things. So another thing we can say about him is he was both erudite and eminent as a teacher of the Hebrew Bible.

And yet he didn't know the things about regeneration. Now, John tells us, you see, in this passage, verse 39, Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, that's the John 3 reference, he first came to Jesus at night.

He came at night so as not to be seen by his fellow Sanhedrinists. He was afraid that they would immediately think he's one of them.

[13:17] He's a follower of the Nazarene. And it's interesting that in John's Gospel again, you'll find it there in chapter 7, verses 50 and 51, when they were deciding to go after Jesus and to have him officially put to death, he too resisted that.

It wasn't just Joseph, but he himself also resisted that. And we're shown that he made a feeble attempt to defend Jesus by saying, well, the law tells us, we ought not to condemn a man before he gets a fair hearing.

And what happened was they rounded on Nicodemus and they said, are you perhaps from Galilee also? Search and see if any prophet has arisen from Galilee.

In other words, they put him down. They put down his opinion with the threat, the implicit threat, that we have a good idea, you're one of his, you're a Galilean, you're a follower of him.

So for fear he held his peace. So here we have two men, two rich and famous and popular and able men who followed Jesus, who believed in their hearts he was the Savior and Messiah.

[14:51] And yet their fear of man prevented them coming out into the open. Now what I want to do here in the second place is consider in more detail why they were secret disciples.

We've already sought to show some of that. But we want now to look a little closer at it and see how this has a bearing on ourselves.

We've already said that the fear of man brings us near. It catches us and cripples us as to proper action so very often.

In their case, it crippled them from making an open profession of faith in Jesus. It crippled them from making an earnest attempt to follow him.

And the Savior himself warned against this policy. He told his disciples that this was a dangerous way to behave.

[16:03] because in effect they were denying him, publicly denying him their allegiance. And it's interesting that in the Gospels we find, particularly after the raising of Lazarus, who had been dead for four days, you remember, after the raising of Lazarus of Bethany, the whole of the land was just in a ferment of activity, of thought and reflection on this.

It was undeniable. It was so undeniable that Jesus had done this that many were believing in him. And yet, we're told this, they did not confess him openly for fear of the Jews.

That means the Jewish authorities. They were afraid they would be excommunicated, they would be shoved out from the synagogue life, and as such they would become social outcasts from the local community.

Life would be lonely and difficult, and they would not confess the Lord Jesus they had come to believe in.

And you see, that brings us closer to Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. They had a lot to lose. They had a lot to lose.

[17:50] They acquired the riches by legitimate means, but they acquired it within the community. I remember years ago, some of you will remember the book Betrayed by Stan Telson, became a very eminent preacher and teacher of the good news in Jesus.

And he's an old man now, but still going on and contending for the only true way in Jesus to his Jewish people.

And he was a high flyer in insurance in America. And he had built up a great business and he was a wealthy man. He was in, because of his standing in the community, he was in all the right clubs and he attended all the right conferences and all that sort of thing.

and the moment it spread that he had become a follower of Jesus, you remember the story, he tried to get his daughter, she was converted to Christ when she was on campus, on university campus.

And he, first of all, he was going to do the very thing they all do, disown them. You're not mine anymore, you don't belong to us anymore, you're out, finished, forgotten.

[19 : 17] And he thought, no, I'm not doing this, I love my daughter. I'm going to study their Bible. And he studied it.

Never told his wife, and he studied it, and the more he studied it, the more he realized, I don't know that I believe that the Hebrew Bible is the word of God at all.

So he began then to think about what the word of God is. Why can we call the Bible Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the word of God? And he came to see that the Bible is in fact, through men, yes, but men moved by the Spirit, the very word of God.

Well, soon he came to faith, and soon that filtered out, I suppose it went out pretty quickly, and the successful, rich, businessman, influential and popular in the community, was that way no more.

My dear friends, I'm not saying anything here that isn't true to that situation, then and now. And therefore, we remind ourselves that these two eminent men in public life, in the community as it was there in Jerusalem, they had a lot to lose.

[20 : 44] Their position, their eminence, both in public life, and their role as teachers of the law, in the University of Jerusalem, if you like.

Their situation would become really difficult. if we take the apostle Paul before he came to faith in Jesus, he's a good illustration of the very point.

He was Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee, he was top flight. He was the envy of his fellows, his contemporaries, being more zealous for the law than any of them, erudite in his study of the word, and so on.

And when he became a follower of Jesus, they didn't want to know him anymore. He became an enemy of the cause.

So what we're doing here is we're seeing that for very practical reasons, Nicodemus and Joseph were secret disciples. We could multiply stories about rabbis and other Jewish people who became believers and who were disowned not only by the community but by their families.

[22 : 08] People who read their own obituary in the newspaper. So-and-so has died. What actually that meant was so-and-so is no longer alive to this family.

Remember Bruch Moore is telling us that that's what happened to him. he read his own obituary. It's a common thing.

It's a costly thing is what we're saying. There were practical reasons why they were secret disciples. They had a lot to lose. some of you will remember Moshe Radcliffe.

He was Austrian originally. He went to Australia with his family. They were top flight in baking and made their money that way.

And when Moshe, his real name was Henry, he took on the name Moshe after he became a follower of Jesus. But when Moshe Radcliffe became a follower, his family disowned him.

[23 : 22] And he told that story. But of course, some of you will also remember Ernest Lloyd, who was 70 just the other week. Did I say 70, 97?

Still going strong. And he tells the story of his visit. He knew Moshe's family in Australia and used to visit them. And he was asking Moshe's mother how Henry, her son, was getting on.

This was in the early days of his following Jesus. I do not have a son called Henry. They had a lot to lose.

But you see, they were bidden by Jesus whatever the cost to come out into the open and on his side.

We sing it in our Psalms, I sought the Lord and he delivered me from all my fears. Thirdly, what they eventually became.

[24 : 38] Well, in a word, bold inner God. Soon after, the Saviour's side was pieced by the soldier just to make sure, up into the ribs and into the heart, and out flowed blood and water.

along went Joseph to Pilate to ask for the body.

And you find in Mark 15 verses 43 to 45, Pilate would not release the body until he got word from the centurion who was responsible for ensuring the prisoners were crucified and dead.

When he reported to Pilate, he's dead. Joseph was given the body. But we're told in Mark's Gospel, in that reference I've given you there in chapter 15, he went boldly to Pilate.

Joseph of Arimathea, bold. something had happened. Something went on in his heart.

[25 : 54] It was time to come out into the open. The Spirit of God moved him to come out into the open and he went boldly to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus.

Perhaps conscience at last had had enough of that unease and that pressure. You ought to, you missed.

And so he does more for his blessed Savior after his death on the cross than he had done for him when he was alive and among them. Pilate, once he had the official word from the centurion, let him have the body.

And Nicodemus were told joined him, verse 39, and Nicodemus came bringing a mixture of myr and alice, and then verse 40, they took the body of Jesus and bound it in strips of linen, the embalming sheet strips.

Suddenly, the secret disciples are the secret disciples no more. They're out into the open. They're shining for Jesus. And surely this says to us here today, let the fearful be strong.

[27 : 26] Let the doubting doubt no more. They took the precious body, prepared it hurriedly for the burial, and laid in the folds of the linen cloth, large amounts of myrrh and aloes mix.

And we see then how they cast aside their cringing fear, and they boldly declared themselves for Jesus.

And that's speaking to us today, speaking to us all. I hope it is. I want us to finish, time has gone on, I want us to finish with one last point, what their witness tells us.

Well, it tells us in a word, the timid became brave, the fearful became strong, they cast out their fear, and went forward for Jesus' sake.

Now, I want to finish in this point, and what I want to do is I want to use John Calvin, who, of course, we all know as one of the great preachers and scholars of the Reformation.

[28 : 48] And far from the caricature, the popular caricature of him, he was a great and godly and compassionate man, a man who had the heart for the people.

And John Calvin's comments on this passage tells us that the testimony of these two men, the testimony of their bold faith as they carried Christ's body from the grave, says to us, our slothfulness will be base and shameful if now that he reigns in the heavenly glory, makes us withhold from him the profession of our faith.

He doesn't stop there. He says their witness also says it is, I wouldn't say this, I have to confess, but this is what Calvin says, it is inexcusable wickedness to use Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus as examples which we plead on our behalf to justify not making known our faith in Christ.

And the third thing he says is the witness further says, and I like this, if we really trust God with our lives, body and soul, for eternity, that he will deliver us from eternal ruin, will we not also trust that he will deliver us from all our fears and enable us to profess the name of Christ and not persist in denying him.

These are profoundly solemn words and challenging words. Friends, the bottom line as we leave it is we mustn't say it as well when we conceal in our hearts our faith in Christ, when we conceal in our hearts that we do live in.

[31 : 30] We must not be ashamed of him in this way. We mustn't be afraid of what anyone else will say. we must do what is right in his sight and make known our interest in him and his in us.

Time and again one is brought back to the words of the paraphrase. And I say that personally. I'm not afraid to own my Lord or to defend his cause, maintain the glory of his cross, and honour all his laws.

Jesus my Lord, I know his name. His name is all my boast. Nor will he put my soul to shame, nor let my hope be lost.

And if that's true of us here today, let's out and say it. And fear no more. May he bless his word to us. Amen.