

Simon the Zealot

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[0 : 00] A previous generation used to say that there are two things a decent person should never speak about in public.

Politics and religion. It's bad enough that you have hotheads arguing about politics, never mind introducing religion into the equation. Well, what happens when you have a religious politician or a political religionist?

Well, such a man was Simon the Zealot, or as he's sometimes known in Scripture, Simon the Canaan. We might have welcomed the famous Christian Dutch Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper into our homes, fair-minded Calvinist libertarian that he was.

But we probably would not have invited Simon the Zealot into our homes, close-minded nationalist legalist. After-dinner conversation would really have been so dull.

The Romans this, the Gentiles that, the Jews the next thing, fire and revolution. Yawn, Simon, would you like another drink before you go home?

[1 : 16] It's amazing the kind of people that Jesus calls to follow him in the beginning. Roman collaborators like Matthew.

Jewish nationalists like Simon the Zealot. It's amazing the kind of people Jesus is still calling to follow him now. Socialists and capitalists.

Unionists and nationalists. Royalists and even Republicans. Whoever they are, they all come to realize one thing.

Jesus Christ transcends all political boundaries and brings together those who are divided by human politics into one common pursuit.

The glory of the gospel. What unites us in Christ Jesus is far more than what disunites us in politics.

[2 : 18] Now, if before you had, if before he had met with Jesus, you would ask Simon the Canaanian to describe himself, he probably would have used political words like Jewish, nationalist, zealot, words which distinguished him from others.

But after he met with Jesus, he would not have used words which distinguished him from others. He would have used words which identified him from others.

Christian, disciple, follower of Jesus. I know what Simon I would prefer to invite to dinner, and I'm sure you do too. Because the thing is, knowing Jesus makes all the difference in the world to us.

Whether we're fishermen, whether we're tax collectors, or whether we're nationalists. Other things than fish and money and politics become more important to us.

The glory of the gospel. Let me suggest to you that the nationalist extremist Simon learned five things from his discipleship in Jesus.

[3 : 28] First, love is more powerful than hate. Second, life is more powerful than death. Third, church is more powerful than nation.

Fourth, gospel is more powerful than law. And last, word is more powerful than sword. Now, I would hope you wouldn't take anything I say today as a criticism of Christians who are involved in the political process.

We must pray for them. We must respect them. Simply, that knowing Jesus changes everything about us, whoever we are.

It must, or it isn't Jesus we really know. First of all then, love is more powerful than hate.

Love is more powerful than hate. Although I personally am not a Scottish nationalist, when we talk about Scottish nationalists, we don't think of a violent movement committed to pursuing its political ends using military means.

[4 : 37] We think of politicians debating in Hollywood and arguments in the media. Although there may be some on the fringes of Scottish nationalism who are anti-English, it is most certainly not a mainstream policy among them.

But when it came to Jewish nationalism, especially of the zealot variety, we're in very different territory. The zealots were xenophobes to the extreme, man-haters.

Now, the Israel of Jesus' day was very cosmopolitan, containing many ethnic groups living under the government of Rome. Galilee, where Jesus was from, is called in other places Galilee of the Gentiles.

Capernaum, where Jesus lived, was a majority Jewish town, but there were other towns very nearby which were almost totally Gentile in their makeup. Whereas many Scottish nationalists celebrate the diversity of cosmopolitan Scotland today, Jewish nationalists hated anyone who was not a purebred Jew and couldn't prove it by showing his ancestral line.

And so among them, there was a politics of hate, where every moment of every day was spent trying to work out how to rid Israel of non-Jews. You know, I guess the closest equivalent in today's world would be ISIS, who tried to establish a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, killing anyone who would not hold to their twisted extremism.

[6 : 18] So every Jewish zealot prayed prayers which contained words like, Lord, I thank you that I was not born a Gentile. They were extreme nationalists.

They were devoted to hating anyone who was not Jewish. They were Jewish, racists, and xenophobes, everything we rightly argue against in today's world.

They were the Nazis of the day, striving for ethnic and national purity at all costs. Never mind us inviting Simon the Zealot to come to our house for dinner.

He wouldn't have accepted anyway, because for him, all of us are unclean Gentiles, and he hated us. But into the experience of this man came Jesus.

Jesus who treated both Jew and Gentile with the same degree of respect, and dignified both as human beings made in the image of God. The only thing Jesus ever taught his disciples to hate was their own inner sinfulness and propensity toward disobedience to God.

[7 : 37] This Jesus chooses examples of outstanding faith from among the Gentiles, from Naaman the Syrian, from the Syrophenician woman who came to Jesus pleading with him to help her daughter, from the city of Nineveh, who repented under the preaching of Jonah.

This Jesus heals Gentile demoniacs. He loves all men equally. This Jesus commands his disciples, saying, love your enemies, and then commissions them, saying, go into all the nations of the world.

You see, the thought world of Jesus is very far removed from the hate-filled xenophobia of the zealots. Well, did I say very far removed there?

What I meant, actually, was diametrically opposed. Hatred has no place in the life of the follower of Christ who loved the Christ, who loved all men equally, and treated all with the dignity they deserve as made in the image of God.

And so as Simon grew in his discipleship, no doubt he would have learned that love is more powerful than hate, that xenophilia, the love of strangers, is more powerful than xenophobia, the fear of strangers.

[9 : 02] Take any hate-filled politics you see in the world today, politics which may be conceived to be born out of a zeal for the honor of God, and bring them to the bar of the judgment of Christ.

The Holy Spirit will not accept them. Surely he will work in our hearts to change us so that finally we shall realize, along with Simon the Zealot, that love is always more powerful than hate.

Second, Simon the Zealot learned that life is more powerful than death. Life is more powerful than death. The Zealots were men who believed in the pursuit of political goals through military means.

We've had plenty of men like that since we have them today. We will always have them. It is the natural default position of men of hate that they will always prefer killing to living.

So the Zealots of the day had an ultra-radical sect among them called the Sicarii. Literally, that word means men of the dagger. So these men were assassins.

[10 : 27] They were sent by the Zealots to assassinate prominent collaborators or Gentiles in positions of authority in Israel. The Zealots largely took their inspiration from a historical Jewish figure called Judas Maccabeus, who lived 200 years before Jesus was born.

This man first led a guerrilla campaign and then a full-scale, successful military campaign against Israel's enemies. The name Maccabeus means hammer.

And these Zealots thought that they could repeat his actions and hammer the Gentiles and the Romans into submission through a series of assassinations, guerrilla campaigns, and military revolutions.

I guess that in our own history of Scotland, the closest association perhaps would be to a William Wallace-type figure, maybe. And so the Zealots, Simon included, believed that death was more powerful than life.

That since a dead man could no longer speak, they should cut out his tongue, put a dagger in his heart to make sure his voice is no longer heard. During the recent Syrian war, ISIS were called a death cult, and rightly so.

[11 : 55] These Zealots were cut of exactly the same cloth. They favored a diplomacy of death as opposed to a dialogue of life. How strange it must have been for Simon the Zealot when he first began to hear Jesus speaking of the value of every human life, even those with whom we disagree and consider to be our enemies.

It must have been so strange for Simon when he heard all that transpired on the cross to have heard that Jesus did not condemn those who put him to death.

He prayed for them and for their forgiveness. He did not call for fire from heaven to fall and strike down his enemies.

He prayed for God to show them mercy. And as the early church grew and Gentiles began to flood into its ranks, each accepted not according to their ethnicity or ancestry, they were accepted according to their faith in Jesus.

It must have been life transforming for Simon to learn to enrich the lives of Gentile Christians and not to end them.

[13 : 12] you see, that's the Christian ethic at work in a man's life. The transformation of the gospel, the Holy Spirit's power to transform.

It transforms a man altogether to saving lives, not to taking lives, to enriching the lives of other people and not ending the lives of other people.

people. On account of Jesus and his gospel, the Christian church must be known as the place of life on this planet where men and women fulfill their potential, fulfill the potential of their God-given humanity and enjoy life to the full and more beside.

The gospel gives life, the resurrection life of Jesus, which no man may take from us. Third, Simon the Zealot was changed in that he learned that church is more powerful than nation.

That church is more powerful than nation. So zealots were committed to one purpose, one only, the freedom and greatness of the nation of Israel.

[14 : 36] They looked back to the days of Judas Maccabeus, even further back to the days of David and Solomon, and they dreamed of a new splendid empire, the empire of Israel, spreading more powerfully and more extensively than ancient Egypt and even Rome itself.

They dreamed big dreams about the nation of Israel and they were both willing to kill and to die for their dreams. For them, there was nothing more powerful or important than nation.

The reunification and expansion of Israel under the headship of an earthly figure, a military figure, a kingly figure, they called the Messiah.

Now, that was what Simon the Zealot would have believed. You often find that in the list of the disciples, Simon the Zealot is paired alongside Judas Iscariot.

Now, I have often thought there was more to Judas' betrayal of Jesus than 30 pieces of silver. But by handing Jesus over to the Jewish authorities, Judas thought that Israel might rise again under the headship of Jesus as Messiah and thereby Israel would become great again.

[16 : 00] Now, if that is so and many commentators would agree with me, then where did Judas Iscariot get this crazy idea from? I speculate that it was from the time he spent with Simon the Zealot, the two of them talking over a fire together of the greatness of a future Israel under the government of the kingship of Jesus as Messiah.

Judas was sucked by Simon into some kind of quasi-Jewish nationalism. Well, be that as it may, Judas and Simon were not alone in their misunderstanding of why Jesus came and the pan-national nature of his kingdom.

So, in Acts 1, verse 6, even after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples ask him, Lord, are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel? All of them, Peter, James, and John and the rest, they still thought in terms of Jesus as the head of the nation of Israel.

But things were very shortly going to change for all the disciples, but especially for Simon the Zealot. Because on the day of Pentecost, we may say very loosely, the church was born and the church became made more important to them than any nation.

Their primary loyalty ceased to be toward an earthly kingdom. Rather, it was focused on a heavenly king. Their people were no longer ethnic Israel, but all who professed to trust in Jesus Christ as Lord.

[17 : 47] The church of God and the spiritual descendants of Abraham by faith in Christ became more important to them than the nation of Israel and the physical descendants of Abraham by blood.

God these men would not have recognized our obsession with ethnically homogeneous and national churches. Chinese churches in Glasgow, African churches in Glasgow, Gaelic churches in Glasgow, because for them all were one in Christ and they all belonged to the same church.

Church was more important than nation. Ethnicity ceased to be a barrier and our union in Christ Jesus became evidence of our changed hearts.

After all, in what other institution in the world do Chinese, Africans, Koreans, Iranians, Arabs, and Europeans embrace each other as brothers and equals?

except in the church of Jesus Christ. Fourth, Simon the zealot learned that gospel is more powerful than law.

[19 : 13] Gospel is more powerful than law. Well, most of the zealots were committed not just to the nation of Israel, but also to its laws.

they were extremists in every way. They were the religious thought police of the day, who were at the head of demanding Israel's tight compliance with the rabbinic laws and the Torah.

Sabbath laws, food laws, ceremonial laws, dress code, everything connected with the distinctive identity of the Jews was at stake.

So you might imagine, actually, that Simon the zealot probably wasn't much fun to be around. He probably wasn't. If he wasn't speaking about Israel, he was busily shaking his head at everyone around him for their moral and ceremonial slackness, and please don't let anyone eat anything other than kosher food in his presence.

He genuinely thought he could win his way into God's favor by his rigid adherence to the man-made laws of Judaism.

[20 : 29] Well, he wasn't alone then. He's not alone now. A hundred percent of human beings, according to our natural default position, think the same way.

That what we do or does or do not do is paramount to our acceptance with God. So back then, whether you were a Greek or a Jew, whether you were a Roman or Egyptian, you sacrificed to your gods, you kept whatever code these religions imposed upon you.

The power of religious law kept a people moralized and uncivilized. even though Simon may have wanted to use generic Jewish words like words that I use, this is what he believed.

But then he encountered a Jesus who said to him, listen, Simon, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

And then later he heard Jesus say, I have come not to be served, but to serve and give my life as a ransom for many.

[21 : 47] And then he heard Jesus saying, God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever should believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

He learned over and over and over again that a man is justified not by his obedience to the works of the law, but by simple faith in Jesus Christ.

That it's faith in Christ, not obedience to the laws of the rabbis, which guarantee salvation and the favor of God. For Simon and for all sins, that is life-changing.

It means that the most powerful force in civilizing and cultivating true humanity isn't obedience to a set of man-made regulations, nor is it forced observance of religious ceremonies.

It is the gospel of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The good news of Jesus' cross and resurrection and how faith in him is all that God requires is the most powerful force in the universe.

[23 : 05] It is enough to turn a world upside down, then right side up, it changed Simon's heart, transforming him from being a creature of hate into a Christian of love, an extremist nationalist and xenophobe into a man who loved nothing more than to hear that Gentiles were being brought into the church and were in fact beginning to outnumber ethnic Jews.

I wonder today whether any of us appreciate just how powerful grace is, how much more powerful the gospel is than our tradition.

It changes a man from the inside out. It takes the sword out of his hand by first taking it from his heart. We live in a world filled with conflict and suspicion, where nations fight proxy wars against other nations and people fight on the streets.

Yes, we know that our laws must be upheld, that's why we pray for our police forces, but ultimately the solution is the gospel. That national politics and identity politics would be thoroughly replaced by the proclamation of gospel, where joy, not suspicion, characterizes our world, where love, not hate, where peace, not war.

Is this achievable, you may ask? Well, I thought it never would be in the case of an extremist nationalist like Simon the Zealot, but it was.

[24 : 53] And it can be in your life also. Lastly, Simon learned word is more powerful than the sword.

Word is more powerful than sword. Zealots had one aim, the greatness of Israel. people. They hated everyone who didn't share their views, Greeks, Romans, even slightly more liberal Jews, shall we say.

They were the original death cult who were willing to kill and murder to advance their cause. Earlier on, we talked about the men of the dagger, the sicarii, the assassins.

In 8070, the last outpost of Jewish resistance was on a hilltop called Masada, where several hundred zealots, men, women, and children, committed suicide rather than surrendering themselves to the Romans.

These were men and women who mistakenly thought that the power of the sword was ultimate, that ten times out of ten, violence will win.

[26 : 11] We still live in a world where in general the sword is the ultimate weapon of influence. Who has the biggest army? Who has the best intelligence services?

Who has the most advanced weaponry? It was once said that war is the continuation of politics by another means. Simon the Zealot would have bought readily into that definition and was willing to put it to the test in a battle of swords with the Romans.

For the pre-Christian Simon, ultimate power rested in the sword. But things changed for him when he met with Jesus.

Because during these three years he witnessed and experienced a greater power than any sword at work. Can a sword or a gun heal a leper?

can he make a paralyzed man walk? Can a sword or a gun cast out demons or still the wind and the waves?

[27 : 20] Can a sword bring a man back from the dead? Can a sword or gun so change a man on the inside that his hate is replaced by love and his guilt is replaced by forgiveness?

What Simon came to understand is that the words of Jesus are more powerful than the swords of armies. It's not so much a lesson in the pen is mightier than the sword but a lesson in the greatness of the word of Jesus Christ and how when that word is proclaimed the sword is taken out of men's hands because first and foremost it's taken from their hearts.

Do you know? Do you know that the word of Jesus you carry with you in your Bible and in your heart is more powerful than all the armies of the world put together?

Do you know that it has the ability to create a new world of order where once there was only chaos? Beauty where once there was only ugliness?

And love where once there was only hate? by the power of the word of God God said let there be light and there was light by the word of his power Jesus said to the woman troubled by her issue of blood be freed from your suffering and at that very moment in time she was healed.

[28 : 49] The word of God is more powerful than the swords of armies. As the early church grew it grew by the proclamation of the word of God.

There were no swords involved unless they were the swords belonging to those who were murdering Christians. There was no military conquest.

There was no blood shed by the early Christians to further the kingdom of God. The early church depended wholly upon the word of the gospel as the power of salvation.

It was right to do so then it is right to do so now. You know I'm pretty certain that the pre-Christian Simon the zealot wasn't the kind of man you'd have enjoyed having round to a dinner party at your house.

I'm also certain that having met with Jesus and having himself been changed Simon would have been a whole new kind of person. A whole new kind of zealot.

[29 : 55] zealot now not for the blood of Romans but for the salvation of Romans. Zealot now not for the politics of Israel but for the redemption of the world.

Zealot now not for the glory of a nation but for the glory of God. when I was a boy we used to sing an old-fashioned hymn.

What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought since Jesus came into my heart. If Simon the disciple is evidence of anything he is evidence of the change which happens in our lives when Jesus comes into our hearts when he becomes our savior.

when he becomes our Lord. So I guess my question in closing is this. What kind of dinner party companion would you be? The pre or post Christian Simon?

For what are you zealous? What is the most important thing to you in life? Have you believed in Jesus? Have you begun that path of change we call Christian discipleship?

[31 : 18] Let us pray. We thank you for your word O Lord. We thank you that even in this most minor of disciples Simon the zealot we have an example of how the gospel changes everything about us.

We pray for those Christians who are involved in politics in our own nation. We ask Lord that you would bless them and give them wisdom in their work. We pray Lord that you would keep them from the temptation to define themselves by their politics and not by their faith in Jesus.

You would keep us O Lord we pray from defining one another in terms of who we are ethnically culturally politically socially help us to be one in Christ Jesus.

We ask these things in his name. Amen. God .