

WHY DIDN'T MORE PEOPLE HELP?

“Why didn’t more people help?” This is not a weird or obscure question. It is the plaintive cry we hear from almost every person who is engaged in any task, business, or organization across the world. The more a person is convinced that what they are trying to accomplish is noble, beneficial, and important for the benefit of others, the greater the consternation and lament. Why didn’t more people help? Why aren’t more people helping?

If you have never asked this question, is it because you have never tried to accomplish anything important? Perhaps most of us have come to realize that it is a futile question. Those who want to help, will. Those who do not, will not. And some of those who are not helping are busy trying to accomplish their own purposes and goals, and it’s probable and possible that we don’t have much time or energy left over to help them very much with theirs either.

But the question takes on a different level of significance when we are talking about Jesus. It is a huge question, and it is connected to the very center of the story when we are talking about the Messiah/King who comes – who is sent – to pick up the destiny of the Jewish people and the Covenant promises that have been growing dimmer and dimmer for generations. Truly the Messiah comes in a surprising way and with many surprising perspectives, teachings, and approaches, but even in our own time, people who belong to one of His churches have concluded in one way or another that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah: the true and rightful King called and sent by God to pick up the story, to invite us into it, and to move it forward.

That does indeed make the question more poignant. Why weren’t more people helping? And why aren’t more people trying to help today? The best answer I know for Jesus’ own time is that many people did not recognize Him. If a person did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, they could hardly be expected to set aside their lives in any way in order to help Jesus with His mission; most of Jesus’ teachings would not be able to reach them. *“He who loses his life for my sake will find it.”* That cannot register very clearly or very deeply if we do not know that Jesus is God’s Messiah.

To be sure, the waters are muddy and the landscape is still fuzzy in our time because of all the turmoil around religious issues. But we still have a vast array of religious organizations filled with people who

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belong to and participate in them yet who seem to have no awareness, certainly no conviction, that Jesus is God's Messiah. If these people ever paid attention to what Jesus is saying and doing, they would be appalled. They have made up a comfortable idea of what they think Jesus *should* be like, and it has very little to do with the Gospel stories – the records we actually have about Jesus and His life and ministry. The made-up version feels comfortable and safe to them, but it does not call them to be true followers or to be among those who actually try to help with Jesus' mission and ministry.

Please stay alert. There are many genuine – not perfect, but genuine – followers of Jesus who come here. Those who deserve to be scolded will not hear me, so if this sermon makes any of you feel scolded, in all probability you do not deserve it. Listen for the meaning – not for the angst. Besides, Jesus is the Lord of grace and forgiveness.

We have this passage from the eleventh chapter of Luke, and it contains a saying from Jesus that has long intrigued me. I have breezed on by it for many years, promising myself that someday I would stop and pay more attention to it. But first we need to get oriented. Where are we, and who is Jesus talking to?

We are in the eleventh chapter of Luke, so we know that Jesus is already on the way to Jerusalem – heading for Palm Sunday. He only has a few weeks left before the Confrontation and the Crucifixion. We know that the conflict and the opposition are already severe. Jesus is healing people, but the opposition is claiming that the only reason Jesus is able to heal is because He is in league with the Devil – He commands the evil spirits because he is in cahoots with Satan, their leader. Obviously lots of people went home believing these false accusations. If they did not believe the lies, they would have to change sides. You cannot stay Pharisee, Sadducee, happy with the temple, content with the synagogue – unless Jesus is discredited.

Jesus deflects this ridiculous charge, making it clear to anyone who can think straight that the reason He is able to heal is because He is stronger than Satan. He commands the evil spirits against their will and despite anything Satan can do to stop Him. He is the strong man who has broken into the enemy's fortress. Then comes this amazing statement: HE WHO IS NOT WITH ME IS AGAINST ME, AND HE WHO DOES NOT GATHER WITH ME SCATTERS.

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I am convinced that Jesus says this to His friends, to His followers – to you and to me. Clearly His enemies will not hear it or believe it. But if we want to follow Him, we *need* to hear it and believe it.

So I sit and stare at it. It is so stark and clear. It has a laser-like quality that I have come to associate with the way Jesus thinks. Many of my excuses wither and perish in its light. Lots of them I did not really want to keep; it just seemed like they were more comfortable and friendly in the atmosphere of the culture and society around me.

But before thinking about it on the personal level, I need to see it clearly in the context of Jesus' life and ministry. Some of you are still struggling your way through the claims and propositions that Jesus is indeed God's true Messiah. I had to also, but it has been quite a long time now since I doubted or wondered about that. As it becomes clear that Jesus is the true Messiah, it also becomes clear that Jesus knew this even more clearly than any of us do. Every generation has to figure this out all over again. Some come to believe it; some do not. And I am not trying to corrupt your search or your faith (your trust in His authority). But some things look very different depending on where our faith really is. Do we trust Jesus' authority? Have we actually concluded that Jesus *has* any authority?

So I do not imagine that Jesus is trying to instruct the world in general. I do assume that He is talking to His followers – not just the twelve, but *all* of His disciples – and He is telling them that if they really believe in Him, they cannot keep thinking in generalities. They cannot go on assuming that all life is gray or that everything is a compromise. The Golden Mean is at the core of much Greek philosophy, but it is not the deep truth of the Christian WAY. HE WHO IS NOT WITH ME IS AGAINST ME, AND HE WHO DOES NOT GATHER WITH ME SCATTERS.

“Get off the fence. Make up your mind. Come with me or go back to your former life. I did not come to bring peace on earth. Blessed are you when people persecute you because of your loyalty to me. You will not be able to please everyone or keep all your former friends if you are a true follower of mine. Woe to you when all the people around you speak well of you.”

But we never want to forget the context. Jesus does not cause trouble because He *likes* trouble. He has a task beyond all Mission Impossible tasks. He comes to a nation – and to a world – that has lost

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its way. Even those who want to love and serve God no longer know how. There is too much fear and guilt, too much loneliness and pain, and even people who greatly desire a relationship with God do not know how to trust the grace, the forgiveness, the mercy, the love – at least not enough to claim it and receive it for themselves.

The New WAY – the New Covenant – will be stark and uncompromising indeed. It will lead into community and acceptance and grace unbounded. But that will not come and cannot come until we turn away from all the lesser things we *think* should work, think should make it easy, think should produce the desired results without requiring any significant changes in us. “*You must be born anew.*” Okay, but that’s only theoretical, only poetic imagery, only a metaphor. Metaphors can be fun to play with, but metaphors do not save us.

Who helped Jesus with His mission and purpose on earth? We know that lots of people did not. For almost a thousand years prior to His coming, people longed and prayed and hoped and dreamed that a New King would come – a worthy successor to the great King David. A New King who would unite Israel and lead her forth again as the chosen messengers and agents of the Holy God. Many kings came and went. Some of them were pretty sincere. A few of them (Hezekiah, Josiah) were personally faithful and tried to return their nation (now split) back to obedience to Yahweh. But the reality was that things kept getting worse and worse.

Until finally, in the fullness of time (as we say), God sent a true Messiah, the Anointed One – the rightful KING. And His task was incredibly difficult but also essential. It was of utmost importance to return people to a right and true relationship with God. To do that, Jesus had to claim authority above and beyond that of all the rulers (kings, governors, priests, rabbis) of His time. To do that, Jesus had to revise all understandings of what it meant to trust God and to worship and serve God. In our language: the whole nation needed to be converted.

Many of us realize that Jesus did this in a way nobody had foreseen or even imagined. He set up a New Kingdom not of this world. He died and rose again, in a way that allowed all people to choose Him as their King if they wanted to, regardless of whether the world around them liked it, noticed it, approved of it, ridiculed it, ignored it, or persecuted it.

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But the question was and is: Why didn't more people help? Seeing how important this purpose was – how essential, how difficult, how fraught with turmoil and enemies and misunderstandings and opposition – why didn't more people help? A whole world was at stake – a whole nation in growing despair, growing disillusionment, growing panic that would and did lead to utter destruction (in 70 A.D.).

Why didn't more people help? God's true Messiah finally comes – and we get a handful of fishermen; a few tax-collectors; some women with questionable reputations; an occasional maverick among the Sanhedrin (among the Pharisees) who start to see beneath the surface. Some of them begin to realize that there is more to what they are feeling and seeing than meets the eye. But none of them tumble to very much of it until after the Resurrection – until after Pentecost.

But Jesus is saying and claiming all along that this is urgent; that this requires total commitment; that this is the most important thing going on in all the world. The Kingdom of God is more important, has more authority, has a right to claim our lives more than anything else going on in this world. Of course, this confuses some people. It offends some people. It annoys some people. Otherwise the world would not have been able to crucify Him.

HE WHO IS NOT WITH ME IS AGAINST ME, AND HE WHO DOES NOT GATHER WITH ME SCATTERS. It is absolutely and totally true. Everybody has a right to their own opinions, but our opinions are often false, when matched against Jesus' opinions.

Inevitably and inescapably, I am led to my own prayers and meditations. I am a follower of Jesus. Some of you may have a lot of doubts about that, but I do not have any doubts about that. I probably know my blunders and shortcomings even better than you do, but that does not change my truth. I am a follower of Jesus. So sooner or later I must listen to what Jesus says – and not just hear it for others, but hear it for my own life.

HE WHO IS NOT WITH ME IS AGAINST ME. Am I with Him? I search my life. I search my choices. I search my motives. What am I trying to do with my life now, in 2017? Am I with Him? As is so often true with Jesus, He leaves me with no alternative. I am with Him or against Him. I may not like it that stark. That may not seem fair, at first blush. But He is not asking me – He is telling me: if I am not with Him, I am against Him. Am I with Him?

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HE WHO DOES NOT GATHER WITH ME SCATTERS. Do I scatter? I would love to gather with Him. I try to gather with Him. I consider it hugely important to gather with Him. But do I scatter? Yes, of course. I sometimes scatter, and you all know it. I come to a church and some people leave. Some even leave before I get through the door. Some wait for a while and then decide they want no part of it. Some people come to visit and we never see them again. Do I scatter? Yes, indeed I do.

Do I teach some things that offend people? Yes. Does that not scatter? Do I have a personality that everyone likes or approves of? Hardly. Does that not scatter?

This is a very hard meditation – until I remember that Jesus also scattered. To be sure, He was gathering many. But He was also scattering, and with far less apology than I have. So I have to be careful about being too rigid or literalistic. Do I scatter the already scattered? If I gather those whom Jesus Himself would scatter, am I still with Him?

It gets me off no hooks. It is why we pray every day. And I am not asking for you to step in and answer my questions or do my prayers for me. I am saying that if we are followers of Jesus, we each need to keep hearing what He is saying – hearing for ourselves and taking it to heart in our own lives.

Why aren't more people helping? That is an interesting but irrelevant question. Am **I** helping? Am **I** with Him? Do **I** gather with Him, or do I scatter?

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There is more than darkness in our realm. There is also light. And very soon more people *would* be helping. Crucifixion is the nadir – the lowest point in the story. But there was a mushroom cloud coming, and not the negative kind. More and more people began to awaken to the true and personal awareness of who Jesus really was, and to the awareness of His Holy Spirit present and alive in their lives. Then they wanted to help Him in every way they could.

I wish more of *us* wanted to be part of it. But the wind blows where it wills. Even so, we will not all stay as cautious and uncommitted as we are today. More of us are seeing light and heading into it than

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was true even two years ago. Some of you have to find a way to see past me. Some of you have to heal from hurts and wounds that still hold you back.

But Jesus is so much bigger – so much more – than we ever think at first. So we listen to Him more and more; we trust Him more and more. And He tells us many fascinating things, like “*Cultivate it, put manure around it, and give it one more year.*” (Luke 13:8-9)