

HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING?

By

CHARLES COLSON

Text: Matthew 10:24-39	Date: 6/22/08	#0828
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We have just heard some of the harshest teachings of Jesus. “I’ve not come to bring peace but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother... Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” If we had started at the very beginning of this chapter we would have heard Jesus say, “I’m sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

Jesus was speaking to his disciples. A question the disciples just may have asked themselves was: are these words telling us more about our master, Jesus, or are these words more about what we are suppose to be doing? You and I, who do not have the benefit of seeing Jesus face to face, nonetheless must keep the balance, no easy task. This is not just about Jesus alone; this is not just about his teaching alone. If we let go of one or the other, which we’re always tempted to do, we receive either a hollow Jesus or a legalistic church.

The tough verse I would have us meditate on today is verse 26: “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” Jesus was

saying: no secrets. There were in Jesus' day and still are today, groups that claim that they have the secrets of the world, they have the secret knowledge that will unlock paradise. However, the secrets are only for the initiated, only for the select few.

But Jesus said: no secrets. The good news is for everyone who wants to listen. I give it to you freely. What's more, if you think I just whispered it to you, your job then is to repeat it loudly, shout it so everyone can hear it plainly. Don't keep it to yourself. Don't hoard it. Don't give the impression that you're better than everybody else because you have the message. You don't have it unless you share it. You don't have it unless you live it. You don't have it unless you give it away just as I have.

This saying is as harsh as any of them, because it makes us look at Jesus the man as much as it makes us evaluate our ethics. We often try to visualize Jesus in our day, and we ask what Jesus would do. What kind of car would Jesus drive? What kind of songs would Jesus sing? The answers might not be as comforting as we might wish. For instance, would Jesus not be sitting with folks in the unemployment office? Would Jesus not be distributing food to the homeless? Would Jesus not be putting sandbags on the levees of the Mississippi River? Would Jesus not be talking with Palestinian leaders; with Iraqi leaders; with Shia Muslims and Sunni Muslims; with the Taliban? Who would be the ones putting Jesus to death today? The people we regard as our political and religious enemies or the people who can not abide anyone crossing any boundaries?

Now when it comes to our ethics, do we prefer to stick to the rules, or does Jesus offer us another way, call it the open way? Here's where the title of this sermon comes into play, "How can I keep from singing?" We sang this title a few minutes ago as well as a month ago. By my informal poll I learned that despite this song not being in our hymnal, it was not entirely unfamiliar to this congregation. I didn't grow up with this song; I heard it for the first time in the last year at some conference or meeting I attended.

Between then and now because of the words it occurred to me, whatever rules we follow, whatever activities we think are the right ones to do, whatever hard decisions we simply must make, whatever people we are forced into sitting beside or working beside, whatever job the pastor or nominating committee requests of us, whatever feelings are evoked in us when we are ignored or slighted or maligned, we can respond in a grumpy manner, with a frown on our face, with a snippy retort, with an attitude of displeasure or we can sing. What benefit is it if your feet carry you to a righteous destination and your hands do their ethical duty, but your heart is far, far removed? What are you really proclaiming from the housetop in such a case? Do you think the people around you won't notice that your heart's "not in it" as we say? Jesus said shout it (that is, what I'm all about) from the housetop: do you really think he meant just in words?

Singing has been part of the church's life from day one. We know that the psalms all 150 of them were sung. Paul told the Corinthians: I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise

with the mind also.” If you search our own hymnal you will find hymns dating back to the earliest centuries. Furthermore it is recorded that some of the martyrs of the church who were burned at the stake for their beliefs were heard singing the hymns of the church in the midst of the flames.

Singing is no wimpy substitute for right action. Rather, right action and singing are twins. How can I keep from singing when I know that Jesus has my best interests at heart? How can I keep from singing, when Jesus has provided me with purpose and direction for my life and I want to serve him? How can I keep from singing regardless of the drudgery and tragedy and disappointment and reversals in my life, when Jesus loves me?

I remember during my college years being in a civil rights rally and singing along with a huge crowd, "We shall overcome. Deep in my heart I do believe, we shall overcome some day." My friend next to me said: these words are just idealistic claptrap. However, for the first time I had a different opinion from my friend whose views I thought were always the right ones. Today I would express it like this: it's in singing together that starts us crossing boundaries, which otherwise is so hard to do. Singing cements our common humanity. By singing we access the thruway to our heart. We access the spirit of the man Jesus.

We sing in worship because we are asked to praise God from our heart. We're also asked to proclaim the good news in every way we can, not in whispers, but with passion. "The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing! All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?