

People of the Book: Balaam
Numbers 22:21-38
June 13, 2010

One of my favorite animated movies is Shrek. I think it's because of the character of the talking donkey. While the idea of a donkey that talks is funny (and Eddie Murphy surely does his part to make the character hilarious in the movie), the donkey has a much deeper purpose in the story than just offering comic relief. Donkey is the one who has to remind Shrek of the reality that is before him. The donkey challenges Shrek to not accept what he thinks he knows, but to look beyond it for the actual truth.

In a way, Shrek's talking donkey is modeled after Balaam's talking donkey. That's right, as you heard in the scripture reading this morning, there is a talking donkey in the Bible. I'll get back to him in a minute.

Over the next few weeks, we're going to be considering various biblical characters to see what we can learn from them as we strive to become better Christian disciples. Our first character is Balaam. Balaam was a pagan who was an internationally known diviner for hire. He was skilled in reading the entrails of animals, and observing natural phenomena in order to determine the will of various pagan gods.

The Hebrew people had come to the end of their time of wandering in the desert, and they were camping temporarily in the land of Moab. The king of Moab, Balak, saw the number of Hebrews and got scared. He wanted to hire Balaam to come and place a curse on the Hebrews. Balaam said that he had to consult with the God of the Hebrews, and God told Balaam that he would not be allowed to curse His chosen people. However, eventually, the Lord allowed Balaam to go with Balak's messengers. Almost immediately God became angry with Balaam. Why? God told him to go. So why get mad at him for going?!

God surely wasn't mad at Balaam for responding to Balak's call. Most likely the reason for God's anger was that He knew Balaam's resolve was weakening. He knew that Balaam was only supposed to do what the Lord told him he could do; however, his greedy spirit was taking over. Balaam's motives were no longer to communicate only what God said to him, but to receive the large payment Balak promised to him for cursing the Hebrews.

God told him not to curse those whom God has blessed, but Balaam tried to do it anyway. The result of Balaam trying to curse the Hebrews brings to mind a verse from last week: Proverbs 19:2 says, *You can make many plans, but the Lord's purpose will prevail.*

Balaam tried to curse the Hebrews, but was only able to bless them. From all outward appearance he was doing the will of God. However, if we were able to see inside his heart, we

would be able to see that his motives were in the gutter. He wasn't interested in doing God's will; he only wanted the wealth King Balak promised.

How many times do we, as disciples, act outwardly in ways that appear Christian...that appear to others as faithful, but our motives are not pure. Our actions should be manifestations of our faith and life in Christ. They should flow out of our hearts as our minds and hearts are transformed by the Holy Spirit. If our motives and actions aligned with one another then we would be authentic in our faith.

The hard truth is that many times our acts that appear Christian are the result of alternate motives. We want to be seen. We want to be thought of as pious. We are trying to cover secret sins. In other words, we have not died to ourselves and risen with Christ.

Paul encourages us in Colossians 3:1-3:

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits at the right hand in the place of honor and power. Let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth. For you died when Christ died, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.

When we allow the Father to govern our motives through Christ, then we are set free. Authenticity is of utmost importance in the life of a Christian disciple. The truth is that our motives always bubble to the surface – whether they are good or bad. Balaam is a great example of this. Based on what we find later in the story, Balaam's true self-centered motives finally overtook him and he found a way to curse at least some of the Israelites. His reward? In Numbers 31, we find Balaam dead at the hand of the Hebrews.

From the life of Balaam we can glean that while our outward actions are important, our inward motives are equally important.

Consider Romans 2:29:

... a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by God's Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people.

The same is true for those of us called by the name of Christ. You and I are called to leave behind the pressures we feel to conform to our neighbor's expectations or to bow at the altar of Madison Avenue.

All through the Scriptures we are encouraged to be honest with ourselves, spiritually. What will it take for you to be honest with yourself about your motives? God tried to get Balaam's attention through a talking donkey. The donkey could see an angel holding a sword blocking

their way on the road on which they were traveling. Balaam couldn't see the angel initially. It was only after the silliness of arguing with his donkey that he was able to have his eyes opened to the spiritual reality in front of him.

The Lord wants your heart and your motives to be centered on Him? It is my prayer that He won't have to use a talking donkey to get through to you.