

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, October 1, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JOHN 10:41

“John performed no miracle; but everything
he said about this Man (Jesus) was true.”

JOHN PERFORMED NO MIRACLE, BUT...

John performed no miracle, but...! BUT! That small three-lettered conjunction is one of the most significant and decisive words in all of human language. It has power to raise us to the heights of joy; it has power also to plunge us to the depths of despair.

Imagine the emotional response of a wife who receives this phone call from an airline office: “The plane on which your husband was travelling has crashed in its approach to the Los Angeles airport, but we are happy to inform you that he is amongst the survivors and has not been seriously injured.”

Or think of the pathos, the tragedy involved in these memorable sentences from the Old Testament, “Now, Naaman was commander of the army of the King of Syria. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was a valiant soldier, BUT he had leprosy.” (2 Kings 5:1).

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, that giant of the 19th century English pulpit, in his delightful volume on preaching entitled Lectures to Students, tells of a young seminary graduate who once preached a most ingenious trial sermon before a country congregation upon this verse about Naaman being a valiant soldier, BUT he had leprosy. He took the one word “BUT” as the basis for his remarks. Apparently, he attempted to dazzle the good country folk by his brilliance in being able to enlarge so marvelously upon a mere conjunction! However, at the close of the service the wise old elders came up to him and said, “Well, young man, you have given us a singular sermon this morning, BUT -- you are not the man for this congregation; that we can see very clearly!” BUT!

Upon graduation from seminary I served for a year as Assistant Minister of a congregation in the town of Ballymoney in Northern Ireland. There were three large Presbyterian congregations in the town, and the minister of one of these churches, the Reverend J. B. Armour, maintained the commendable custom of paying a brief tribute, from the pulpit, to every member of the congregation who passed away. He always had something good to say about each one. And then the town “drunk” died. His name still remained on the roll of members, and everyone waited expectantly to hear what Mr. Armour would say about him.

“John wasn’t often in his pew on the Sabbath Day,” reflected the pastor. “His interest in the things of the Lord was meager, and perhaps he was a bit fonder of the bottle than he ought to have been; but he was a kindly gentle soul, and all the dogs in Ballymoney loved him!”

“John performed no miracle; BUT everything he said about this Man was true.” In those simple words there is, I venture to say, a world of encouragement for all of us as we meet our Lord this morning at His Table.

If you’re like me, there come moments when you say to yourself, “Is my life really counting for Christ? How I would love to see more fruit for my labor, if only I could perform a miracle we might have a congregation of 1,000 by the end of the year!”

Some of you may think, “There seems to be so little that I can do for the Lord. I have no musical talent, I don’t think I would be an effective Sunday School teacher or youth leader. I’m somewhat shy and withdrawn, and I just don’t feel that I’m making much of an impact on others for the Kingdom of God. Most of my waking hours are spent in managing an office, or operating a computer, doing secretarial work, working in a store, studying at school, or washing clothes and keeping the house tidy and preparing meals for the family. There never seem to be enough hours in the day, and too often even my devotional life, my Bible study and prayer time, gets shortchanged.”

Remember, fellow believer, Satan loves to tempt us into believing that unless we are outstanding in our achievements for the Lord, unless we have notable gifts of leadership and a charismatic personality, we can’t bring honor to the name of Jesus, and further the work of the Gospel. But that is Satan’s attempt to delude and discourage us, and nothing could be farther from the truth.

In Old Testament times the Jewish people believed that a person was a chosen messenger of God, a prophet of the Almighty, if he had power to perform miracles. We read this morning (Exodus 7:6-13) of how Moses commanded his brother Aaron to throw down his staff before Pharaoh, whereupon immediately it became a snake. When Pharaoh’s sorcerers did the same thing, and had their staffs changed into snakes, Aaron’s snake swallowed all their snakes! Elijah called down fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice upon the altar at Mount Cannel, even though the altar and the trench around it had been drenched with water (1 Kings 18:16-46). Elisha restored to life a little boy who had died of sunstroke (2 Kings 4:8-37). These and other great prophets whose names are emblazoned upon the pages of the Old Testament performed miracles, and for that reason their claim to be God’s ambassadors was accepted without question.

But John! Never once did he perform a miracle; and in Judea there must have been many among the religious elite who would be only too glad of the opportunity to say, “This John -- he’s only a voice crying in the wilderness; he can be no prophet; he performs no miracles!”

And yet our Lord emphatically declared that John was greater than any of his Old Testament predecessors, “Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). And now in our text comes this sublime compliment bestowed upon John by his contemporaries who had witnessed his life of faith: “John performed no miracle, but everything he said about this Man (Jesus) was true.”

My friend, perhaps you can perform no miracle in the service of Jesus. Your name and

mine may never go down in Church history as an outstanding spiritual personality; but thank the Lord, we can have great honor with God, and lay up for ourselves vast treasure in heaven because -

You can speak for Jesus with your life as well as with your lips -- although we should use our lips too, as opportunity presents itself.

Perhaps the most enduring work for Christ is accomplished by those humble, consecrated, transparently sincere disciples of Jesus who, in their own quiet way, witness, even silently in the street, the marketplace, the school, the office and the home. Much of our work for the Lord must necessarily be of this silent and unconscious character. And in the final analysis, the eternal value of our Christian service depends, in every case, not upon what we say or do, but upon what we are. Your influence upon others is the most powerful weapon you possess in the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged. If you live your life in constant fellowship with Jesus, that life will have a purifying and uplifting influence in the home, the school, the place of business, and wherever you are.

When that great Christian and Scottish novelist, Sir Walter Scott, was building his beautiful and famous home, which he called "Abbotsford," he placed the bowling green in a peculiar place; and at one corner of it he built a little summerhouse where he might sit in the evenings after dinner. And he built it there, not because the view was outstanding, but in order that he might sit and listen to the evening worship of his coachman whose cottage was just on the other side of the hedge. Old Peter was the epitome of what a good employee should be -- faithful, scrupulous in all that he did, a man of sterling integrity. He lived his faith in a very winsome way. But every evening of the year, after the evening meal was finished, with the family still around the table, Peter took his Bible and read a portion aloud, then offered prayer, and finally led the family in the singing of a psalm; and travelling heavenward, Sir Walter heard it and was comforted even as his last fatal illness ravaged his body. Old Peter was preaching far more effectively than ever he imagined.

That is what all of us are doing constantly if we are wholeheartedly committed to Christ. Our unconscious influence will leave its mark upon many a life, and perhaps we will not even realize that it is happening!

The renowned old Puritan commentator of the 18th century, Matthew Henry, has this pungent remark to make upon our text: "John not only did no miracle to divert people from Christ, but he said a great deal to direct them toward Christ."

1. "He did no miracle to divert people from Christ." No doubt Jim Bakker believed that the creation of Heritage Village, USA, was a miracle; but how many millions of people have been diverted from Christ because of the moral turpitude of this TV evangelist!

Dear friends, we must be constantly on guard lest, in serving Christ, we may, by personal moral failure, be a stumbling block in the path of others, even members of our own family. I remember a man in Belfast, an elder and a pillar of his church. He made a very ostentatious profession of his faith. He was also very successful in business, but he was patently dishonest in

many of his business dealings, and his son knew it; and that son despised his father and never darkened a church door until his dying day. Parents, pray constantly that you may never, by word or deed or attitude, divert your children from Christ.

2. “He said a great deal to direct them toward Christ.” We can say a great deal about Jesus by our actions as well as by our words, and nothing will direct people to our Lord so effectively as a life that is genuinely Christ-like in every way.

“John performed no miracle; but everything he said about Jesus was true.”

You say that Jesus “breaks the power of cancelled sin and sets the prisoner free.” Then let a cynical world see that Jesus has transformed your life and made you kind and sensitive to the feelings and needs of others.

You say that “God is love.” But the people around you will not believe it until they see reflected in your personality the love and winsomeness of your Lord.

Dr. J. Stuart Holden was a great evangelical preacher, and Rector of All Souls Parish Church in London in the early part of this century. During World War I he was invited to visit the allied troops in Egypt where, one day, he met a husky sergeant in a Scottish Highland regiment. The man was on fire for Christ, and Dr. Holden asked him how he had been brought to the Savior. The sergeant replied in these words: “There is a private in our company who was converted in Malta. We gave that fellow an awful time of it. One terribly wet night he came in very tired and very wet, and before getting into bed, he got down to pray. My boots were heavy with wet mud, and I let him have a boot on each side of the head. Next morning, I found those boots beautifully polished by the side of my bed. That was his reply to me, and it just broke my heart, and I was converted that very day.”

“John performed no miracle; BUT...

When we come to the end of the journey and face Jesus, and hear Him address us, remember -- He will never say, “Well done, good and accomplished servant.” Nor will He say, “Well done, clever and brilliant servant”; but rather, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

May it be ours to hear those gracious words of commendation, and in some measure, to be worthy of them.

AMEN.