



Sermon

2nd September 2012

Dead Wrong

1 Sam 28:3-20 ; Acts 16:16-18; Luke 16:19-31

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Saul is terrified. The Philistines have invaded again; the battle lines are drawn up. When he sees the opposing army, "terror fills his heart."¹

Things are not going too well for Saul. Some years before, he had twice rebelled against God's instructions because he would not wait but took matters into his own hands. That cost him God's favour. God told him "rebellion is like the sin of divination..."² That seems a surprising comparison doesn't it?

Saul had been rejected by God and become subject to paranoid rages. In hounding David around the country he killed 80 priests who were his spiritual support and would have provided a prophetic service to him as king. Samuel had withdrawn from him and had no further contact. Saul became isolated from good spiritual supports. So with the Philistine army ready to fall on him, he has nowhere to go for advice.

He tries to contact God, "He enquired of the LORD, but the LORD did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets."³ These were ways he had received guidance before. Dreams and prophets you can understand, but Urim? The high priest had "the Urim and the Thurim" to allow God to communicate decisions. We don't know what these were but they might have been used like lots to indicate yes/no answers.

Saul had tried the means he knew to hear from God. Once again he does not wait on God but plunges ahead on a disobedient course. Why was he not hearing from God? Because he had turned away, rebelled and failed to repent. He has pursued God's man unjustly and murdered those who displease him. When we turn from God, we also find communication is shut down.

I heard a story about a couple who had just moved to town, and he was coming home from his first day at work. As he drove along the motorway, his cell phone rang – it was his wife. "Darling, I'm just calling you to warn you to be careful. I just heard on the radio that some nut is driving north on the motorway on the wrong side!"

"It's worse than that!" he said, "I'm on the motorway now and it's not just one car. It's hundreds of them!"

If everyone else is wrong – perhaps it's me - not them? It's worth checking when it's like that.

¹ 1 Sam 28:5

² 1 Sam 15:23

³ 1 Sam 28:6

Saul heads the wrong way when he goes to a medium. He, himself, had banished from the land all mediums and spiritists. Mediums are literally “necromancers” (who call up the dead to gain knowledge) and spiritists are literally those with “a [familiar] spirit.”

He banished them because the Law of Moses said of the spiritualist practitioners:

“Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD...”⁴

And of those who went to consult them it says:

“I will set my face against the person who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute himself by following them, and I will cut him off from his people.”⁵

What follows surprises everyone. She calls up Samuel and is shocked when she sees a figure appearing. She is surprised – and we are surprised too! There is no hint from the writer that this is other than the spirit of Samuel appearing to her. However, it does not appear to be what she was expecting – so either she was normally fraudulent or this was different in some other way from the usual interaction.

Samuel rebukes Saul and merely repeats what he had already told Saul when alive that the kingdom will be torn from him but adds that Saul will die the next day.

“Rebellion is like the sin of divination.” Both rebellion and divination are rejections of God’s authority in our lives. What we see in Saul’s life is a progression from refusal to obey God (which is rebellion) to divination – which is the attempt to find information from spiritual sources other than God.

The account in 1 Chronicles tells us:

“Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD, and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not enquire of the LORD. So the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.”⁶

Now you may say that was the Old Testament. A real question is how do we know which things in the Old Testament still apply to us and which can be laid aside as peculiar to the Jews? Gordon Fee, a Biblical Scholar, looks to see whether the New Testament confirms the Old Testament. In this case we find in Revelation that the prohibition remains,

“...those who practice magic arts ...their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur... the second death”⁷

And we find in the preaching of the early church, they called pagans to turn from occult practices:

“A number who had practised sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.”⁸

In the reading from Acts about the slave girl, Luke is clear that her power of divination came from a controlling evil spirit. When Paul commanded it to leave – it had to go and she lost the power of fortune telling. That provides us with a strong clue that the power behind real, effective fortune telling and other forms of divination may very well be demonic. Do you want a demon feeding

⁴ Deuteronomy 18:10-12

⁵ Leviticus 20:6

⁶ 1 Chronicles 10:13-14

⁷ Revelation 21:8

⁸ Acts 19:18-19

information to you? Jesus said that the devil is the father of lies⁹. The best lies have some truth in them to convince us. When some of what you hear is true, it encourages you to believe the rest.

The gospel reading relates to two men dying and their state in the afterlife. I heard a story about three men on a fishing trip talking about what they wished people would say about them at their funerals. The first said he wanted them to say how he had served people all his life. The second said he hoped they would say he had encouraged children to excel. The last man listened to the others and then said, "At my funeral I hope they say about me, 'Look! He's still breathing.' "

In the parable we peek into the initial afterlife. Some people argue that it is just a story to make a point about indifference to the poor. But the story does describe an important future state of being. For the one who says, "I am the Truth," to misrepresent the facts for the sake of a story would be both unnecessary and irresponsible.

In Jesus' account, there is a separation of the righteous from the unrighteous. They are not to mingle – indeed they cannot. It seems that the unrighteous are not able to have contact with the living either since the rich man asks if someone else can warn his brothers. I used to think that was merely lazy of him – but surely he would rather go himself if he could to get out of the unpleasant circumstances in which he finds himself! The righteous may or may not be able to return but it seems from the parable they are not normally allowed to contact us.

Jesus describes a fixed position in the afterlife. The rich man cannot then repent - he has had his opportunities. The time to make our choices eternally is in this present life - it is too late in the afterlife. That is why we don't pray for the dead. We commend them to God and trust him to deal with them in his truth and love.

The conclusion about mediums and divination in general is that there are strong warnings and commands against being involved either actively as a practitioner or a user.

Is it valid then to consult the dead? We are told not to and we have seen there is the possibility of spiritual deception. People will say that the medium told them details only the deceased would have known. But if a demonic power is involved why would you think it could not know those details?

We know that God is good and he warns us off activities which will be harmful to us. The common report of Christian ministers is that people who get involved in the occult come to embrace false ideas about God and salvation. They tend to show a hardness of heart towards God. One of the reasons God warns us away from the occult is that those who accept it come to reject Him.

A second reason is because of the damage Satan can do in our lives through it. This area of occult related activities is broad. Spiritualism and mediums is one area but there are less dramatic ways of seeking guiding knowledge apart from God: Horoscopes, reading palms or tealeaves, Ouija boards, tarot cards, dealing with psychics. There many variants – I strongly advise that you have nothing to do with them.

Obviously, in some cases, there is no reality and in some there will be spiritual influence. Even in the fooling around, the enemy can introduce fear or doubts which are unhelpful. I have never followed horoscopes but one day my father decided to read them aloud from "The Herald." I said I did not want to hear it but he thought it was funny and pressed on. At that time, I was writing up the thesis for my M.E. (Electrical). The horoscope predicted a major problem with something electrical. I am not a superstitious man, but when I heard those words, I felt a stab of fear. I fought hard against it. I rejected those words and declared them a lie. I prayed for God's truth to reign over me not the enemy's lie. But it unsettled me for some weeks. Nothing did go wrong but those idle words were used by the enemy to try to pull me down and it took a major effort to resist them.

⁹ John 8:44

Why open yourself to that risk? Why invite either random ideas to direct your thoughts or worse evil forces to speak to you?

We can learn from Saul's experience:

1. Deal with any barrier between you and God. For Saul it was unconfessed sin. His sin blocked God's ability to communicate with him.
2. Refuse to allow demonic powers to influence your life. The Bible says in Ephesians 4:27 "...do not give the devil a foothold." It is foolish to open a door into your life to dangerous forces. If you are feeling uncomfortable about something you have been involved with I suggest you come for prayer after the service. You need to turn away from it and maybe have any unclean influence sent away from you.
3. Seek a deeper relationship with God and you will find what you've been looking for. God will speak to us. Bear in mind, he sometimes waits to find out if we are seriously wanting his will. God will speak to us perhaps through a small inner voice, the Bible, through other people whether they are aware of that or not. He speaks through circumstances and common sense.

He promises, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."¹⁰

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¹⁰ Jeremiah 29:13