

BRANDED

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Mark 9:38-48

William Shakespeare posed one of the great questions of all time when he wrote, “What's in a name?” Our name is everything. I’m talking about more than the words that appear on our driver’s license. I’m talking about our identity and reputation. As the book of Proverbs tells us, *A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches*. All of us strive to earn a good name. When we do something that is wrong, we can expect that name to suffer.

Companies and businesses do the same thing. Their existence depends on people having a favorable impression of them. Given a choice, I’m going to take my business to the company that I believe is the most honest and reliable, that stands behind their product, that has a good reputation. I would rather not go to the one that was the subject of last week’s exposé on 60 Minutes.

When a company has developed a strong name they will do all they can to protect that name—what they refer to as their brand. A strong brand makes a business more recognizable. We only have to glimpse the logo of certain companies and immediately we make a whole host of associations with that company—Nike’s swoosh, McDonalds arches, Apple’s apple, and more. A brand has value and other businesses may utilize that brand for their own profit, if possible. Most obviously, we see this in a knock-off good—the fake Louis Vuitton bag or imitation Rayban sunglasses you can buy at a flea market.

But then there are infringements on the brand that are not so clear cut, such as a company that creates a product that kinda resembles an existing product, or a company that creates a name that kinda resembles an existing company name. There have been many famous trademark cases over such infringements. For example, a couple of years ago, the US company 3M brought suit against the 3N company of China for trademark infringement. 3N was accused of copying the 3M logo and color palette and selling the same type of goods as sold by 3M. The Chinese court hearing the case found in favor of 3M and forced 3N to pay half-million dollars in damages.

Starbucks sent a cease and desist letter to a brewery in St. Louis for selling Frappuccino beer. The brewery complied.

Companies take actions like this to protect their brand, their reputation. They don’t want someone doing something negative that might be associated with them. For example, you know the giant delivery company United Parcel Service (UPS). They have those big brown trucks they use to bring Amazon packages to your home. Did you know that those trucks are never sold to the public? They are destroyed.

UPS does not want their very recognizable trucks on the street unless they are driven by their drivers. Imagine the terrible publicity if a second-hand UPS truck crashed into a school bus. Since their trucks are central to their brand, UPS made the decision that in the long-run it is just better that no one get the old trucks.

Our reading for today opens with a statement about brands. One of the disciples points out to Jesus that he and the others had witnessed someone *casting out demons* and they were doing it in Jesus' name. The disciples were not at all pleased about this because apparently this man had not secured the rights to use Jesus' name in this manner. He was violating the disciples' trademark. By performing this exorcism in the name of Jesus he was encroaching into the business space that the disciples assumed was limited to them alone. They alone, they assumed, represented Jesus. The disciples inform Jesus that they tried to stop the man for the simple reason that he *was not following us*.

Jesus tells them that they should not have done that. After all, he was doing God's work. Jesus tells them, *no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me*. In other words, there is a residual effect to doing good works in Jesus' name. Then he says, *Whoever is not against us is for us*. If you go out and spend the afternoon working on a house for Habitat for Humanity and you are doing this as a Christian disciple, then there will be some period of time in which your spiritual battery will be fully charged and you will be fully committed to Christ. Doing a deed of power in Jesus' name has a lasting, positive effect on us.

This conversation between Jesus and the disciples is the continuation of longer discussion. The group appears to be where we left them last week—inside a house in Capernaum. If you will recall, Jesus and the disciples had returned to Capernaum from a preaching tour. When they were together alone Jesus asked what they had been arguing about. They don't answer Jesus, but he knows that they had been arguing about which one of them was the greatest of the twelve. Jesus reminds them that in God's kingdom, greatness is measured differently than what they are used to. In God's kingdom, the first will be last and will be servants to all. And then Jesus takes a small child into his arms and tells the disciples that if they accept a child in his name then they can accept him.

But, back to the guy casting out demons. If you think about it, casting out demons is big deal. That is an impressive display of power. Whoever can control demons has claim to some serious credibility. And while the disciples are fixated on "greatness" Jesus points out that even the smallest act in his name is sufficient. He talks about a cup of water. And really, that is about the very least, the smallest act you can do for someone—giving them a cup of water. It costs nothing. There is no preparation or work involved—just hand a cup of water to someone who is thirsty. And yet, it is sufficient. That little act, performed in the name of Christ, is sufficient.

I think about how on this coming Saturday, we as a church, are going to gather to package meals—not gourmet meals, just simple meals. It will be sufficient.

Since our reading for today is the continuation of that passage then presumably Jesus is still holding the child. It's not clear when he sets the child down, but I like to imagine that he's still got it in his arms. That seems to be the case as he makes reference to *these little ones*. But now, *these little ones* seem to be not necessarily children but those who are new to the faith, who are immature in their beliefs, and vulnerable to being misled.

It is at this point that Jesus begins speaking in great hyperbole. He talks about stumbling blocks. A stumbling block is a term for anything which might cause someone to trip as they move along the road of faith. If anyone should do anything that would cause even a child to stumble in their faith, then the consequences would be dire. You would be better off, Jesus says, being thrown into the ocean with a huge rock tied around your neck than to cause even a little one to stumble.

Jesus offers more examples of hyperbole. If your hand, he says, causes you to stumble, you would be better off just cutting it off and going through life with one hand than you would going to hell with two hands. He says the same about the feet and the eyes. If your foot or your eye causes you to stumble, you would be better off losing one of these than experiencing the torment of hell.

This conversation began with the argument about greatness. Jesus teaches that greatness isn't a measurement of God's kingdom. Service is. And the disciples are threatened by someone casting out demons in Jesus' name—they believe that their greatness is threatened, that their brand is diluted. And again, Jesus tells them that it is not the grandiosity of the act, but the heart of the believer. A cup of water given in the name of Christ is as great as the most spectacular miracle. But heaven help you if you do anything that would cause someone who is new in their faith to lose their way.

The stumbling block for the disciples is their own sense of self-importance and elitism. It is their close proximity to Jesus that leads them to believe that they are greater than anyone else. They feel that they and they alone are the owners of the Jesus brand.

This reminds me of an old story. A New York City family bought a ranch out west where they intended to raise cattle. Friends visited and asked if the ranch had a name. "Well," said the would-be cattleman, "I wanted to name it Bar J. My wife favored Suzy Q, one son liked the Flying W, and the other wanted the Lazy Y. So, we compromised. We're calling it the Bar-J-Suzy-Q-Flying-W-Lazy-Y." The visitors then asked, "So...where are all your cattle?" The prospective rancher replied, "None survived the branding."

And that makes me wonder. If we were branded with the brand of Christ, would we survive the branding? The answer is no. We would not. We would die but die to our old selves and become a new creation. That new creation will then have a great responsibility to faithfully represent the brand of Christ to the world. As those branded in Christ's name we must conduct ourselves in a way that doesn't cause others to stumble or to lose faith, that doesn't seek greatness but instead seeks servanthood, that embraces the little ones instead of seeking out only the powerful.

It is my prayer, that each of us is willing to humbly and faithfully wear the brand of Jesus Christ our savior. Amen.