

A Deceived Third Class

So these nations feared the Lord, and served their graven images, ...

2Kings 17:41

It is humorously said that there are two kinds of people in the world, those that are (you fill in the blank), and those who wish they were (again, fill in the blank). But from a Biblical perspective, there are just two main classifications of people: believers and non-believers. In the Old Testament, it was Hebrew or heathen; in the New Testament, it was Jew or Gentile. From the viewpoint of trusting God for His salvation, there are just two classifications: the saved and the lost.

The seventeenth chapter of 2Kings records the fall of the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom. After being deported to Assyria, the king of Assyria then repopulates Samaria with the people of the surrounding nations. Bringing with them the idols of their false religions, they assimilate into the northern land of Israel. While there, these heathens develop a favorable attitude to Jehovah, the true God of Israel. Combining a belief in Jehovah with their traditional idols, they formed a hybrid religion which was sort of a third classification. This religion would only have the power to confuse its adherents, reinforcing their superstitions.

When Jesus entered this world, He was Truth incarnate. His teachings drew a line of distinction between truth and error. Jesus stated if we are not for Him, we are against Him, we are either on the Lord's right or His left and as the parables teach, we are either wheat or tares. Jesus encouraged people to enter the strait gate and walk on the narrow way so that they might avoid the broad road that leads to destruction. Jesus' invitation is inclusive for all, but because He *is* the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no man comes unto the Father, but by Him and the power of His crucifixion.

Today, there is a growing number of people who have combined Christian beliefs with the self-styled philosophies of this world. Because many folks are casually skimming the scriptures, they are ignorant of what the Bible teaches concerning repentance of sinful behavior and their false beliefs. Not being aware of the conflict embedded in their personal belief system, they develop a false sense of security, thinking they have obtained a good standing with God. The invitation to follow Christ is a call to forsake our ways and conform to the likeness of Christ. Our false beliefs and detrimental lifestyle are to be surrendered at the foot of the Cross.

True Christians are not to merely add Biblical truths to their lives, but rather allow the scriptures to be their life's basis and true guide. Today, let us allow the scriptures to govern our thoughts, words, and deeds so that we might demonstrate true Christianity to those around us.

~J. Ekis

Reflecting Holiness

*Thy testimonies are very sure: holiness becometh thine house, O LORD, for ever.
Psalm 93:5*

Holiness in its basic sense refers to being set apart, or literally “other than.” God defines holiness because there is none other like Him. Therefore, its meaning is expanded in the Bible by other attributes of God, such as righteousness. Holiness becomes, or is appropriate and suitable for, the house of the Lord, because the house of the Lord is where His presence abides. The house of the Lord has been at once a literal and symbolic expression. The Old Testament people of God referred to the house of the Lord, first in the tabernacle, and then in the temple. They witnessed the awesome display of the shekinah of His presence in both places. Scripture refers to these as the places where God chose to put His name. All of the artifacts associated with those houses were deemed to be holy, not because of the quality within them, but because of their association with Him.

In our New Testament times, the house of the Lord has been misunderstood by many to be a building. But scripture is abundantly clear that the place where God chooses to put His name under this new economy is the body of His people. The house, or building, of God’s presence is the spiritual household of those whose faith and eternal life is in Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22; I Peter 2:5). And the truth of our text remains very sure, that holiness is fitting and appropriate for His house. It also remains that the holiness comes from His presence in the house, not from the house or its elements of their own accord. As we are admonished to pursue holiness (Hebrews 12:14), we should not think that we do so by performing holy acts. God is not holy because He does holy things. He does holy things because He is holy. So we, as the household of God through His Holy Spirit, ought to pursue the power of His abiding presence in our lives both individually and corporately, so that river of living water may flow out of us in life that behaves in ways that reflect and are becoming of His holy presence.

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Honorable Discharge

*Numbers 24:10-11: And Balak's anger was kindled against Balaam...
I thought to promote thee unto great honour; but, lo, the LORD hath kept
thee back from honour.*

The pagan king had treasure, esteem, and honor to bestow upon the backslidden prophet if only he would comply to the terms of compromise. He had an obtuse victim in Balaam who was all too willing to defile the mantle of his office and cast his lot in with the wicked. The donkey and the angel of the Lord thwarted the errant man of God on his broad path that led to destruction. The devil tested our Lord with similar propositions but could not find any way to engage the incorruptible Savior.

King Saul began well but ended tragically. At the first, his humility served him well. He was reluctant to receive the honor befitting to his position and went and "hid himself among the stuff" but as he grew accustomed to the accolades and eminence his position afforded, he became haughty and avaricious, clinging to his power until his ignominious end came by the edge of his own sword.

So often we are tempted to muse on what might have been. There are agents of Satan that whisper in our ears that the success that others, with lesser abilities, enjoy ought to be ours. But the Lord reminds us that "that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God." It is best for all of us that we be "content in whatever state we are in" and to remember :

Psalms 75:6: For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south.

Psalms 75:7: But God is the judge: he putteth down one and setteth up another.

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

People of the Future

By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.

– Hebrews 11:22 –

There were so many outstanding events in the life of Joseph, the son of Jacob. He was sold into slavery by his brothers. He was promoted to position just to find himself falsely accused and cast back into prison. He was catapulted into the presence of Pharaoh and boldly interpreted the king's dream. This led to him being crowned vice-regent of Egypt and one of the most powerful men on the face of the earth at that time. He was miraculously re-united with his family and became the protector of the infant nation of Israel. The list could go on.

So, of all of these amazing events, why does the Holy Spirit isolate this seemingly obscure occurrence at the end of his life as the most characteristic illustration of the faith of this man of God? "By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones."

Though he was a son of Jacob, almost everything about Joseph was thoroughly Egyptian. God had planted him there, and it was there in that pagan land that he assimilated, blossomed, and prospered. It would have been natural for Joseph to accept a permanent and honored burial place amongst the tombs of the Pharaohs, ensconcing his legacy in the annals of that nation's history. But the man's faith was anything but natural. Despite the many decades of Egyptian influence, Joseph was an astute student of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was keenly aware that there was specific promise associated with the land God had for His people, and he knew that Egypt was not that land. When Joseph's time finally came to go the way of all the earth, he must have done some mental calculus. God had promised Canaan to him and his people. They were not in that land currently, but God would take them there one day. And on the coming great day of God, Joseph must have wanted his first resurrected steps to be in that Promised Land. On his very deathbed, he was not looking back over his long years in Egypt and his legacy there, but toward the future to a time when God's promise would be fully realized amongst His people. He therefore gave commandment concerning his bones, to be carried out of Egypt into the land God had promised to his fathers. What a pristine example of vibrant, unencumbered and whole-hearted faith!

We are God's New Covenant people, brothers and sisters. This world is nothing more than our Egypt. It must not define us. Like Joseph, we are people from tomorrow – here for the moment, but our proper place is over yonder. God's promise of our everlasting home in heaven is where our focus should be fixed. Let us faithfully live today for that world to come! --

D. Murcek

The Lines of Pleasant Places

The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot. The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.

Psalm 16:5,6

The benefits of being a child of God are both present and future. Our present blessings are temporary due to the curse and all of its ramifications. God's promises provide relief and hope amid life's pressures, which is why we need to find a place to escape our daily demands and enjoy a more intimate time with our Lord. It could be a private room or a quiet and peaceful place outdoors; just someplace where we can reflect, relax, and absorb the goodness of the Lord. The temporary nature of these present solaces makes us yearn for the future ones God has promised.

The sixteenth Psalm has multiple applications. Penned by David, it records the contrast between His hope and trust in living God with the emptiness of the false gods of those who surrounded him. David reveals that the Lord was the portion of his inheritance and his fulfillment in his present circumstances. The Psalm is also messianic in that it points to the Lord Jesus. It shows that the Messiah's strength to endure all the trials He experienced was a powerful benefit resulting from His relationship with the Heavenly Father. Always being about His Father's business, Jesus found it a pleasant place to be surrounded by the boundaries of God's inheritance.

For believers today the Psalm is a reminder of our greatest present possession, which is also our future eternal hope. As believers, we have inherited the Lord Himself. Everything we need we can find in Him. He is the Source of our peace, our sustenance, our protection, our guidance, our purpose, and our fellowship. If all the world forsakes us, we have His guarantee that He will *never* leave us, *nor* forsake us. Because of our Good Shepherd, we shall never want for anything as He leads us through green pastures and beside still waters. And best of all, our relationship with Him will continue throughout eternity. His sacrificial death and resurrection have opened Heaven's gates with a "welcome home" for those who believe. The boundary lines of heaven are laid, providing a pleasant place forever.

Today, take comfort knowing that the Lord is the portion of our inheritance and one day in the not-too-distant future, we will be welcomed within the lines of a pleasant place.

J. Ekis

Marveling

When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.

Matthew 8:10

As we observe this first instance of Matthew's use of the word "marvel," we ought to contemplate the meaning of the term in its context. The word means to wonder or admire. We find this from the Greek scholars of the original word, as well as from Webster of the English translation. It is used later in the chapter of the disciples marveling at Jesus calming the tempest, as they rhetorically question what manner of man He was. We can know that it does not mean that Jesus was surprised by the centurion's response of faith in Jesus' authority to heal his servant. John's gospel tells us plainly that Jesus knew all men and knew what was in man (John 2:24-25). His statement to those that followed provides more evidence of that at which He marveled. The comparison of the faith of this Gentile outsider to that of the Israelites He had met was something to contemplate and consider, especially as the disciples present were Israelites. We can note the corollary when Jesus returned to minister in Nazareth, "and he marvelled because of their unbelief" (Mark 6:6), as He did relatively few miracles there.

Thus, Jesus takes note of and emphasizes the lack of faith in those that ought to have more reason to believe, based on the knowledge that they have been given. The apostle Paul emphasized this to the Roman church in the early chapters of his epistle to them, as he contrasted the advantage of the Jews (Romans 2:14-3:2). We then, unto whom the word of God has been abundantly provided, should heed and apply this lesson and exhortation. Let Him not find in us a heart of unbelief that would cause Him to marvel at the contrasting faith of others, while we wrestle with intricacies of things known only to God. Instead, let us recognize and surrender to His authority attested by His word, leaving the secret things to belong to the Lord our God, and believing and doing the things revealed to us and to our children (Deuteronomy 29:29).

A Productive Prisoner

And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.

– Acts 28:30-31 –

I don't know about you, but I hate being unproductive. Life in some ways is about the work we do – not about our jobs or careers, but about leaving the path behind us better off for having come through. God has a purpose for our being here – something for us to produce. This is true for all mankind universally, but redemption in Christ gives it a turbo charge. Once converted, our lives are to be kinetic epicenters for the Kingdom of God. Every day presents countless opportunities to live for Christ and accomplish something for His glory. We have no greater example of the boundlessness of this paradigm than the Apostle Paul.

After his Damascus experience with the risen Lord, Paul never yielded any ground to circumstance or situation to sway him from his newfound focus. The Lord Jesus and His Kingdom were everything to the Apostle. Whether in poverty or prosperity, in the marketplace or the synagogue, on shore or at sea, free or bound – Paul was all about glorifying God by producing steadfast followers of Jesus Christ. His mission and purpose could not be deterred or derailed by anything Hell threw at him. Take away his freedom and he would sing (loudly). Silence his voice and we would write (voluminously). Stop his pen and he would pray (incessantly). The Apostle understood something – that a risen Lord was at the end of this journey called life. He therefore wanted to ensure that he fought a good fight, that he finished his course, that he kept the faith. This drove him continuously and caused him to know how to be productive toward that coming Day no matter the environs of the moment. Even when shackled, Paul was producing epistles, prayers, and converts.

Are you in prison today, dear reader – bound perhaps not by bars and chains but by some situation or circumstance that seems insurmountable? Shift your focus. You are not here by accident. God is still on his throne, and the risen Lord at His right hand. He has something for you to produce today. Rest assured that if you commit your bonds to His purposes, Hell itself cannot withstand your ability, even here, to magnify God and produce something of eternal value that will glorify your Lord. To Him be all the honor and praise.

-- D. Murcek

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Requirements for the Good Life

Deuteronomy 10:12-13: And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, To keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?

What sublime simplicity greets us in this text. Believers have been given this unique formula for sanctified, felicitous living by diligently applying themselves to this divine dictum. We are plainly told what God requires of His people and how our assiduous obedience to these directives will redound for our good. This instruction is too valuable to be shrouded in arcane tropes. It is expressed in straightforward language so that even a child might readily discern the meaning. God's most important truths are always easily detected.

The modern self-help gurus have become millionaires by publishing their best-selling 10 Rules for Successful Living books, as they peddle nugatory suggestions for promoting self-esteem. Of course, their advice misses the mark because the emphasis on success is self-oriented rather than Christ-centered. Notice the repetition of the glorious name of the "LORD thy God" in our promise. Pleasing Him is what brings "good" to our lives. Self-exaltation inevitably leads to an empty and unfulfilled existence because it strives to bring glory to ourselves while ignoring the benevolent Maker who provided all the creative energies of life.

One must never think that God's commandments are in some way an impediment to happiness. God has only put His prohibition on that which is deleterious to the well-being of his children. Holy living guarantees access to the best life in the immediate and eternal life in the world to come. I Timothy 4:8: ... but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.

Joshua 1:8: This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. Walk in the truth,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Anger Management

The discretion of man deferreth his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.
Proverbs 19:11

Anger is an emotion that we all have in common. Channeled in the right direction it could be beneficial to us. Being angry at a repeated personal sin could be the impetus for finally claiming victory over it. Unfortunately, anger is something that more often than not troubles a life and can mar a testimony. A Biblical study of the many times when unrighteous anger is demonstrated and addressed can be enlightening and spiritually profitable. We can observe Biblical characters who were led by anger to detrimental and regretful circumstances.

Cain was the first to demonstrate great anger when the Lord respected his brother Abel's offering over his. His anger and jealousy were the catalysts that led to the killing of his brother. This first murder led to Cain's alienation from God and his fellow man. When the vain and evil Haman did not receive honor from Mordecai, he became filled with wrath. Driven by his anger, Haman orders gallows to be built to execute Mordecai, but instead, Haman himself is executed through divine intervention. When King Ahab pouts in anger, because he is unable to buy Naboth's vineyard, Jezebel intervenes with a wicked plot to kill Naboth to obtain his vineyard. In New Testament times, Herod's self-centeredness produced a fit of anger that led to the killing of the little innocents in Bethlehem. These few examples illustrate the extremes to which unchecked anger can take a person.

For believers, anger often presents more subtle traps to disrupt their lives than these glaring accounts noted. Both the Old and New Testaments teach that anger is something to put away from our lives. Whether we are angry about some situation in our lives, or at a person who has stirred our anger, the results are not usually positive. The strength of the emotion suppresses self-control and the resulting words or actions are usually regretted. Unfortunately, regret does not always mend the damage that is done. Unrestrained anger in believers interrupts a close relationship with the Lord while causing a rift in the fellowship with other believers. Repeatedly wrestling with anger can consume Christians thereby hindering their spiritual growth. Today's verse reminds us to restrain our anger and teaches that it is commendable to overlook a transgression. With the reminder of the scriptures and the restraining power of the Holy Spirit may God grant us the grace to gain victory over anger.

J. Ekis

Power of meekness

Behold my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put my spirit upon him, and he shall shew judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory. And in his name shall the Gentiles trust.

Matthew 12:18-21

Matthew quotes Isaiah in this passage following the account of Jesus' charge to the multitudes that he healed to not make Him known. In the immediate context, Jesus had departed and withdrawn Himself from the council of Pharisees who were plotting to destroy Him, after He had once again put them to shame with the truth concerning the sabbath that they had corrupted. In light of this, it would make sense for Jesus to be making this charge so that the enemies wouldn't find Him. Yet this is not the only time that we see Jesus making such a charge to those that He healed. Then with Matthew's connection to these words of Isaiah as being fulfilled by this charge, we understand that He continued to do marvelous works of compassion on the multitudes without desiring fame.

This true humility demonstrates again the character of the Son of God compared to the typical tendencies of normal men. A normal man performing such miracles would be looking for notoriety and benefit, like Simon the sorcerer when he wanted the power of the apostles in Samaria to bring him gain. In contrast, as described in detail in Isaiah's prophecy, Jesus the Messiah would demonstrate the power of the Spirit of God in quietness and gentleness without pretense. Yet, that power would prevail beyond ministry to the lost sheep of Israel unto the Gentiles, so that the Gentiles would also and more so put their trust in the meek and powerful savior of the world. Although Matthew begins his gospel clearly demonstrating to the Jews that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promised Messiah, he is well in tune with the overarching purpose of Christ to call into one body both Jew and Gentile unto salvation through trust in Him. May we share Matthew's understanding and purpose to make Jesus known as the conqueror of hearts.

Hath God Said?

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?

– Genesis 3:1 –

It was in the incipient days of our first parents that Satan began his long war on words. He knew better than Adam and Eve that faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. If he could corrupt the conduit of communication between God and man, he could redirect mankind toward warring with God rather than communing with him. His strategy was very successful. Even after Eden, he so polluted man's language that it was a driving force enabling them to unite in aggregate rebellion and build a tower toward heaven. God intervened to confound their language and scatter them abroad. But the devil has continued through the ages to poison the waters of human communication in order to author confusion amongst men and inhibit their ability to find the pathway back to their Creator.

It was a former disgraced US President who infamously said, "Words have meanings." Many of us laughed at the seemingly foolish statement. It was, however, a window into how devilishly inspired people, particularly those in the media and political realms, look at language. Whether wittingly or not, these puppets of Hell adhere to their master's philosophy, parsing and redefining words such that all absolute meaning is lost, confusion reigns, and morality thereby becomes relative. It is this Machiavellian principle that rules our modern discourse in America. Words are constantly being redefined or replaced so that the culture can be re-engineered. Consider the following sampling of biblical words that had veritable force and explicit meaning in Western Civilization for generations, but are no longer "politically correct" to utter in the public arena of ideas...

We no longer speak of adultery. It was first softened to infidelity, and now is simply referred to as an "affair". Wickedness is considered an indiscretion. Fornication is called love-making. Sodomy is now referred to as a sexual orientation. Drunkards are alcoholics. Theft is a misappropriation of funds. Perversion is a lifestyle. Even "man" and "woman" are being re-cast as undefinable.

Can you not smell the brimstone? What God clearly delineated and defined in His eternal Word for mankind is being blunted and diluted to the point that these critical words have little to no meaning at all. This creates a cultural malaise that can be refashioned into a neo-Babel. Moreover, much of the modern church is complicit in all of this due to the fact that so many pulpits paint in pale pastels rather than drawing bold lines around the sin that God has categorically and eternally condemned.

Hath God said? Yes, He has! And as our Master commanded, Get thee hence, Satan! May our God grant us boldness to assert what He has said, whether in season or out, and may He hasten Lucifer's soon-coming and final destruction. -- D. Murcek

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Presumption

Judges 16:20: And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the LORD was departed from him.

Samson took for granted that the Lord's power would always fall upon him when an exigency arose. He had every reason to think this as his experience had borne this patent fact out on numerous adventures. He did not take into account that the Holy Spirit can be grieved. Unlike the advantage that New Testament saints enjoy, believers in his day had no such promise of an ever-present, indwelling presence of the Spirit of God. The Spirit could come upon God's servants but could also, just as suddenly, depart from those who offended the Almighty.

In Samson's case, we must marvel at the patience that the Lord showed towards him after his multiple indiscretions with the harlot and heathen women that held a demonic sway over this Champion of Israel. A reminder to us all, that the devil knows our vulnerabilities and how to exploit them to his own diabolical end and to our inevitable disgrace.

"I will go out as at other times before". He wrongly presumed that the Lord would be at the ready as had always been the case. He did not reason that at some point his disobedience would be visited with the forfeiture of God's power. Sadly, he is only one of a disgraced group of men who were bereft of the Holy presence. "The Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul" because he presumptively assumed the role of priest and directly defied the orders of God. At the first it was said: "the spirit of God came upon him", but his ignominious end at the hand of his own people testified to his reprobation. Eli must have begun well but he and his godless sons became self-serving and led the people into such a backslidden state that Ichabod was written over the nation as the spirit of the Lord departed from their midst. The apostate nation became so recalcitrant that the Lord had to deliver them into the hands of the Babylonians. Ezekiel prophesied before their destruction, "Then the glory of the LORD departed from off the threshold of the house." These all presumed that the Lord would abide with them despite their moral failure and idolatry, but they endured four centuries of the Spirit's departure until, at the river Jordan, "the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased."

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Return of Paradise

And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him

Revelation 22:3

The last verse of the Bible's very first chapter summarizes the completion of God's act of creation.

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day. Genesis 1:31

The focal point of creation was man and the paradise that God provided. Mankind could live in perfect harmony with God and all that He created with no fears or worries, and free from all pain, sorrow, and death. Everything man needed was already abundantly provided by God. But it was all interrupted by a selfish choice when sin with the ensuing curse entered the world.

Today, everything in life is affected by the curse. Its evidence can be seen in every corner of the globe - every country, every culture, every level of society, and every age group. A quick summary of history glaringly reveals the effects of the curse. In today's world, wars, crime, pandemics, and governmental corruption dominate the headlines further reinforcing that all of creation is out of sync. Every individual, every day in different forms and fashions and varying degrees feels the effects of the curse.

When Christ came into the world, God's planned remedy for the curse was set in motion. With Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the curse of sins wage - eternal hell and separation from God - was eliminated for all who would believe. Being born again, Christians find a new life of purpose and a personal relationship with God in a world that is still impacted by the curse. With the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the scriptures to guide us, believers navigate through the wreckage of this world keeping their sights fixed on a new heaven and a new earth.

As children of God, we are far from being immune to the curse. We feel it in our bodies, we see it in everyone around us. We've been to hospitals; we've been to funeral homes. Jails, prisons, detention centers, and rehabilitation centers are in our towns. Fearmongering newscasts only reinforce what we already know; our world is troubled. As we long for a better day, we must keep pressing on as ambassadors of a heavenly country. When we are tempted to feel overwhelmed, we can flee to the Rock that is higher than us. Resting in our Lord, we long for that eternal rest when there will be no more curse.

J. Ekis

Supreme commandments

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.
Matthew 22:37-40

In this well-known passage where Jesus defines the great commandment in the law, it is interesting that this is His response to a question from a lawyer, who Matthew says was tempting Jesus with the question. How could such a question be considered as a temptation? This is an opportunity for us to understand such a general word in its context. The most general meaning of the word translated “tempt” is “to test.” So the lawyer was testing Jesus’ knowledge of the law, perhaps hoping to draw Him into a difficulty that would allow exploitation before the crowd, just as the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees had tried just before this. However, as usual, the Lord answered perfectly, such that there was no room for rebuttal. In fact, although Matthew completes this particular account at this point, Mark’s gospel goes on to provide the response of the impressed lawyer/scribe to such a profoundly simple answer. As many were in these encounters, the antagonist was overwhelmed with the wisdom of the Son of God.

In addition, Jesus gave him a bonus answer in providing the second greatest commandment, and explaining that all the law and prophetic utterances could be grouped under one of these. Yet the second is also a sub-category of the first. In John’s first epistle, he applies this principle when he exposes the contradiction of one who says he loves God but hates his brother. Thus, to keep the great commandment without fault must result in the keeping of the second. In one sense, the keeping or breaking of the second is more readily observed in our daily experience, and in some ways is harder to cover. Thus, in providing this excellent and complete response, Jesus again gave opportunity for all in the crowd, including the self-righteous Pharisees and their scribal disciples, to understand their inability to fulfill these greatest summary laws. There was sufficient truth and conviction there for all to acknowledge their need for repentance, forgiveness, and cleansing from normal failure to keep the law as so described. Then the need for grace and mercy is magnified, and is met in the person of Christ alone.

It appears in the account that these groups went away with mouths shut, yet still unconverted. Let us not follow their path, but understand our need for the Savior to bridge the chasm and bring us into righteous standing with Him, as well as to a consistent state with our neighbor.

Life Under the Sun

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

– Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 –

The book of Ecclesiastes is perhaps one of the most enigmatic treatises in the Word of God. I recall being a freshman in college and sitting in a student Bible study, listening to all the various interpretations of the first few chapters. Confusion was the currency. The group eventually decided, against my protests, to abandon the book and move on to something else. But I knew that something very important was being communicated in these pages of Scripture. Nearly three decades have passed since then, and while there are still many areas of the book that make me scratch my head, I do believe the overall meaning of the book is clear.

Understanding the Holy Spirit's words coming from "the Preacher" (Solomon) in Ecclesiastes hinges on a few key things. First, this book was written late in Solomon's life, after his many years of foolish compromise that led him astray. Second, that sin and compromise lead to a very bitter and caustic outlook. Lastly, that this is the Word of God, and like any other book, understanding the doctrine of inspiration and all its ramifications is critical to interpreting the book's meaning.

In short, Ecclesiastes is about life under the sun – i.e., human life in a curse world. Further, it is God's inspired record of man's imperfect interpretation of the circumstances and events that comprise human experience. This requires us to be careful about the doctrines we draw from the book. In some sense, it is the inspired ramblings of a very bitter man – a man who has wandered far from the God of his youth. Like in the book of Job, God has here recorded man's misunderstanding about Himself in order to contrast it with the truth about Him also communicated within its contents.

The point? Human wisdom, while laudable, when exercised in and of itself, is wholly unsatisfying. In fact, looking solely through its lens, we find over the course of twelve chapters that nothing in this cursed world is permanent, secure, or meaningful. Solomon goes to great lengths to illustrate that there is nothing just, satisfying, or fulfilling about life under the sun. He has some pithy and refreshing oases on occasion, but nothing that negates his bewailing mantra, "All is vanity." Unless or until, of course, we bring God into the equation. God and His commandments are the anchor that secures the ship, the lighthouse that calls us from the stormy sea of ego-centric living to the safe haven of His keeping. When we finally put on that pair of glasses, everything changes.

Let us be careful not to interpret our lot and place in this cursed world from our own limited and fallen perspective. Fear God and keep His commandments, and all will be well, both under as well as beyond the sun. -- D. Murcek

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Music Therapy

1 Samuel 16:23: ... David took an harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him.

David makes his first appearance at the royal court as a troubadour to soothe the savage spirit of the choleric king. (Those who forsake the Lord become victims to fits of distemper and depression.) Music, if properly employed and divinely composed, has a quieting and salubrious effect on the spirit. Like Saul, people of the world spend much of their lives in a state of agitation. The devil's music with its driving rhythms, tedious repetition, and annoying cacophony only serve to exacerbate that anxiety. David's poetic psalmody was skillfully blended with the calming melodies that he composed from an ingenuous ardency for the Lord. Music that is Spirit-inspired can tame the most obstreperous spirits. Even the madness of Saul was quelled by the heavenly canticles that issued forth from the shepherd's lyre and from his anointed lips.

Church worship must always include the singing of the hymns. What delight is found in the believer who enters "his courts with praise" and comes "before his presence with singing". This praise delights the Heavenly Father and redounds to the soul of the offerer. No matter how heavy the burden borne by the true saint, heavenly music can prove to be an elixir for the soul. Life on earth would be a miserable drudgery were it not for the songs of Zion to cheer the pilgrim's journey. Pity the saturnine soul that spends his poor existence with no exuberant song to cheer his burdened heart.

When David ascended to the throne he brought with him his treasure trove of hymnody and filled the royal court with the joyful sound of music. As believers, we also expect to ascend to the hallowed halls of heaven with songs of praise to the Savior who made the journey possible. No longer can the tempter depress us with an evil spirit for sorrow and sighing will be forever banished. Isaiah 35:10: And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Rejoice evermore,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

O Lord, Send It Out

*O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill,
and to thy tabernacles.*

Psalm 43:3

God's written word is profitable for instruction for everyone, so we should be able to identify with its broad scope of accounts. The Psalms record the varying situations that confronted God's people and the importance of their faith to persevere and overcome. Reading and applying these truths are necessary for Christians to successfully navigate this life.

The Psalmist in today's text was experiencing the pressure of being surrounded by ungodly men. Questioning that God was still with him, he descends into the darkness of depression. His plea was for God to send him light and truth which would bring him to God's tabernacle where he would find joy by an outpouring of praise in Jehovah's presence.

Light and truth continue to be components that help believers to enjoy a greater and more intimate relationship with God today. In the scriptures, light is often used as a metaphor that demonstrates the enlightening qualities of God's word, and also is a description of Jesus as the Light of the world who penetrates the spiritual darkness of this world. Psalm 119: 130 states that *the entrance of God's words giveth light and understanding unto the simple*, and in verse 105 it says that His word is a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path. With Jesus as the Light, those who follow Him shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life. When the darkness of sin enveloped us, God commanded the light to shine out of darkness and shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. After conversion, God's light continues to guide our steps to experience edifying lessons He has designed for us. The Psalmist also requested truth that could lead him to the tabernacle that was on God's hill. The word *truth* here has the connotation of stability and trustworthiness. This truth that endures forever is the bedrock of our faith. It reveals Jesus as the only way that people can come to the Heavenly Father, and that truth continues to be the foundation on which to build our life. With so much uncertainty in our troubled world, the stability of the truth of the Lord is the one thing upon which we can rely.

Take time today to plead for God to send out His light and truth, so that we may be led closer into His presence.

J. Ekis

Delightful comforts

In the multitude of my thoughts within me thy comforts delight my soul.

Psalm 94:19

How many thoughts race through our minds in a day? If the psalmist in his day could describe them as a multitude, how much more would we who live in the “information age?” Yet, no matter how many thoughts, the balance of the psalm reflects the common issue of their variableness. As he at one point is impatiently fretting over the triumphing of the wicked, at another he reminds himself of the righteous judgments of the LORD. In the midst of all his internal conversations with himself, with others, and with the LORD, in our text the psalmist lands on the solution. Amidst the cacophony of thoughts, many of which may be trying to instill restlessness and consternation, God’s comforting thoughts are the balmy delight of the soul.

So how do we tap into those delightful comforts, as the multitude of thoughts of our days attempt to scramble our minds? Let us go to the well of the word of God. As we fill our memories with the thoughts of His word, the multitude of thoughts will be more and more dominated by His comforts. Isaiah reminds us, “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee. Trust ye in the LORD for ever: for in the LORD JEHOVAH is everlasting strength” (Isaiah 26:3-4). There are also those times when uninvited and unwelcome thoughts drop in from seemingly nowhere. Yet we have the admonition from the apostle, “whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Philippians 4:8). As we obey these and hide the word of God in our heart (Psalm 119:11), we continue to supply the well that can delight our soul from the God of all comfort (II Corinthians 1:3).