

Disputing and Persuading

And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God.

– Acts 19:8 –

We are rapidly losing something very precious here in America, something enshrined in our Constitution that is being voluntarily ceded to political powers. Freedom of speech has been curtailed in our country by diabolical means to devilish ends, and we are not far from its extinction. Political correctness has birthed control of thought. If we stop and think for a moment about how we manage our tongues in public venues, we will likely realize how much we have voluntarily positioned ourselves under the authority of the godless, secular virtue masters of our time. Don't talk about politics or religion, right? Why? Could it be because one is critical to the life that now is, and the other is vital to the life to come? Hell benefits greatly from this culture of shush, because the devil's ultimate end-game with speech control is the extinction of the gospel.

The gospel of Jesus Christ advanced in apostolic days because it was proclaimed unabashedly. Our text gives us rich insight into what every believer can expect and model in sharing the gospel...

Paul went into the synagogue. He knew there would be opposition. He actually was looking for engagement, and the best means of obtaining that is to meet people on their ideological turf. When we do this, the wrestling thought-match is much more likely to begin.

He spake boldly. We need never be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We know its life-transforming power, so we can expect hell to resist. But God is with us. We can be confident in the message, and speak it with the authority of heaven behind us.

For the space of three months. Conversion often takes time. The devil does not issue exit visas. He intends to keep his subjects, but he's powerless to do so if we can get them to listen with their hearts. This takes a patient, continued effort. We must not give up, but be consistent in our gospel sharing.

Disputing and persuading. Both are necessary in our evangelistic efforts. We will be opposed. Remember, the mind is blinded by the god of this world before the light of the gospel shines in the heart. We must be ready to dispute. It need not be ugly, but we cannot give the devil any ground, either. Sin is sin. Christ is God. God will judge. Hell awaits. There is a devil. Jesus is the only way to Heaven. We must be steadfast in these truths. Only by debate against the prince of the power of the air will we begin to persuade his subjects to turn from darkness to light.

Today is another opportunity. Let us eschew the silly Thought Police, and purpose to boldly advance the things concerning God's Kingdom in our sphere of influence. --- D. Murcek

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Willingly Received

Then they willingly received him into the ship: and immediately the ship was at the land whither they went. John 6:21

The night grew eerily dark and the winds and waves swirled about their frail bark, threatening imminent submersion. Trepidation gripped the hearts of the twelve as they frantically rowed trying, in vain, to arrest the course of their jeopardized craft. The superstitions of the ancient mariners gripped their hearts as “they mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble” (Psalms 107:26). To add to their dread the frightful sight of a shadowy specter appeared, hovering upon the unrelenting waves. Was it the unwelcome omen of impending doom? Was this tempestuous sea, from whence they had, for so long, plied their trade and fed their families, now about to exact the ultimate payment for its many years of benefits? But then the calming word resounded above the howling wind: “It is I; be not afraid”.

Let us permit Mark to insert this important element into the narrative: “And he saw them toiling in rowing...and would have passed by them” Mark 6:48. Jesus is a gentleman and does not intrude where He is not first invited. He saw the twelve hopelessly floundering in their self-effort to save themselves, but He would not violate their free choice to do for themselves despite the futility of their toil. He is never far from those who are about to sink, but His help must be solicited. It is here that our text finds its place. “Then they willingly received him into the ship”. If nothing more, it would have been a comfort to have their Lord with them as they sunk beneath the unrelenting waves, but prior to this moment, and not far removed from it, they had seen Jesus stand before the obstreperous storm and command it to cease. Surely, He could repeat that miracle for their present distress. This made them more than willing to secure Jesus’ passage on board their failing vessel. What relief He brought to that fearful crew, when He, the commander of the wind and the waves, took the helm.

The Captain of our Salvation comes to all who are sinking, despite their futile efforts to save themselves. He awaits our invitation to come aboard and take command of our foundering sloop. We shall find that our misguided ship shall find a straight cause to the safe haven of rest.

Give Him full command of your ship,

Pastor

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

Keep Everything in Its Proper Place

*Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.
(Ecclesiastes 5:5)*

During the developmental years of our youth, there were times when we gained the confidence to assert ourselves. However, we may have physically or verbally crossed a respectful boundary line and needed to be put in our place. A loving or stern rebuke was often a reminder that we were not experienced adults yet and that it was best to remember our place. There is a vast difference between adulthood and childhood, but concerning God and man the difference is vast beyond comprehension.

The reformation as well as spiritual awakenings through the past centuries have helped God's people to realize the importance of having a personal relationship with God. Having an assurance of salvation and knowing that we are heirs of God can give us confidence as we sojourn this world. Unfortunately, there have been many who have taken this magnanimous blessing to an extreme and have dethroned God in the realm of their own lives as they seek to have their selfish expectations fulfilled in their own time. It is certainly true, that the Lord invites us to call unto Him daily and to cast all our cares upon Him; but it is man that is to be in submission to God, and not He to man. He will provide for us and protect us. He is our Good Shepherd who knows us by name, and we can walk with Him in the light as He is in the light. We also see from the scripture that we can not flee from His presence and that He is never far from any one of us. We are reminded in Psalm 139 *Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.* Though God is presented as filling heaven and earth, we also take comfort in knowing that He is sitting on His throne in heaven. From heaven's throne the Lord reigns, and the earth is to tremble. Regrettably, man often does what the great Tempter Lucifer did, that being, we attempt to exalt our throne above that of the Most High. Instead of conforming to His image, we seem to strive to make God conform to our image. Dwelling on the love of God is a beneficial exercise, but it is never to be done at the expense of losing the fear and awe of God. We should be eternally grateful that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, but we must never forget that the Word who delivered to us our great salvation is also the Creator who brought the world into existence. God is still the High and Lofty One that inhabits eternity. He is the One who cannot behold iniquity and the One to whom we must give an account of our life.

Today , let us ask God to enable us to focus on how to balance experiencing His closeness while simultaneously standing in awe of Him. By abdicating the throne of our hearts to Him and allowing Him to be the sovereign ruler of all, we will get to know Him more deeply as we keep things in their rightful and proper place. - J. Ekis

Baggage

But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.
Acts 15:5-6

This pivotal chapter of New Testament history provides a glimpse of a potential issue that must be given attention in every age of church history. As Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch after the first missionary journey and had announced God's marvelous work of faith among the Gentiles, after some time came men from the church in Judaea to Antioch, teaching the brethren there that they could not be saved without being "circumcised after the manner of Moses." The disputation that arose over that matter led to a trip to Jerusalem and a meeting of the apostles and elders of the church there, along with Paul and Barnabas, and others from Antioch. Our text reveals that among the group that met were some converted Pharisees that were perhaps associated with those that had gone to Antioch teaching such doctrine.

As Luke summarizes the beginning of the meeting as comprised of "much disputing," he describes the exhortation given by Peter, reminding them all how God had worked at the house of Cornelius to demonstrate to him and other Jews that the Gentiles would also be saved by faith as well as they, without the yoke of the law. The presiding elder of the Jerusalem church was James, commonly acknowledged as the brother of the Lord, who concluded the verdict in agreement with Peter's experience, and scripture, and drafted a letter to the church at Antioch. The letter emphatically stated that the teaching promoting circumcision had not been commanded by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, and simply exhorted them to abstain from the elements of idolatry, from which they had turned.

So where did the teaching of circumcising the Gentile converts originate? It is obvious that it came out of the baggage that the converted Pharisees were still carrying along their spiritual journey. Luke does not provide any information about the reaction of those men to the conclusion of the meeting. We do know, however, that some of that persuasion would evidently go as far as Galatia, promoting perhaps an even stronger version of the same doctrine that was rejected by the church leaders in Jerusalem and Antioch (Galatians 1:7).

Thus, let us take heed that we allow not similar error, interpreting or even applying scripture through our own baggage of past traditions. We must examine those traditions in light of the word of God, even as we interpret scripture by comparing with other scripture. If they be consistent with His word, then by all means apply them with vigor. But if not, let us leave the baggage behind and grasp the truth of Christ, which makes us free indeed.

Matthew's Call

And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him.

– Matthew 9:9 –

All of those who know the Master were called by Him. Many are called, but few are chosen, however. Our Lord is calling all men and women to repentance and discipleship, but it is only those who hear and obey His invitation that will populate the eternal streets of the City of God. Matthew's inspired recording of the moment that changed his eternity is filled with Spirit-infused wisdom that will help each of us reflect upon the similar moment(s) the Lord so graciously called us out from our sinful past and made us His disciples....

He saw a man, named Matthew. Some called him Levi. It didn't much matter. Jesus knew exactly who He was, and turned His attention specifically and pointedly in his direction. And did He not do the same with each of us? Out of the multitudes and the crowds, He fixed His salvific gaze upon – me? How sweet to recount the Lord of glory's personal attention to so obscure a sinner.

Sitting – the position of relaxation and comfort. Matthew was comfortable in his shady business. It was perhaps all he knew, this vile life of a publican. That is, until Jesus passed by. We can undoubtedly identify.

At the receipt of custom. Greedy, avaricious, and uncaring. Despised by his brethren, and a willing, useful idiot to Rome. But that was alright, as long as the wages were good. Filthy lucre is the only reason anyone became a publican, or remained one, for that matter. Well, there was the company that misery begat as well. Riotous living often accompanied this occupation. Publicans, harlots, sinners. It was the preferred avenue to drown the sorrows and quiet the conscience, or at least to try to do so. No doubt Matthew saw in that gaze of Christ the same thing we beheld when He found each of us – the way out from the cesspool we had grown so accustomed to thinking was our eternal lot.

Follow me. That is all it took – two inviting words, uttered from the lips of the Son of God – to forever change Matthew's trajectory. Why me? No time to wonder. Arise and follow, Matthew. The depths of grace will never be comprehended, but now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation. Follow Him. Oh, dear friend, do you not remember that like moment in your own life? The heart pounding, the risk apparent – and yet, there was nowhere else to go. Standing before you was Him who had the words of eternal life. You arose, and followed, and never looked back.

Who would have thought that such a sinner as Matthew the publican would provide the world with the first gospel of the New Testament? Jesus did, that's Who! He had something for Matthew to do, just as He has something for each of us to do to advance His kingdom. Let us be about it today. --- D. Murcek

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Abundant Blessings

The LORD shall increase you more and more, you and your children.

Ye are blessed of the LORD which made heaven and earth.

Psalms 115:14-15

The Maker of heaven and earth has an inexhaustible repository of blessings from which to endow his people. The redeemed are the beneficiaries of this endless supply. It is not enough to say that the Lord gives us "abundantly" but "exceeding abundantly above"-not just more but "more and more". Who among us has not found the case to be true, that the Lord has given to us "good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over".

Some many years ago I recall reading a fanciful account of Joseph's granaries during the seven years of plenty in Egypt. The silos burgeoning with substance provided a paradisaal lodging for a field mouse and his family who luxuriated in the wholesome and endless food supply. Never would he again have to forage to provide for his family, scurrying hither and yon to gather a crumb here or a crust there, ever leery of traps and poisons laid for his demise. Now he nestled securely in unlimited allowance.

And such is the felicitous case for those whose names are recorded in heaven. The promise is for the immediate and for the future. Proverbs 4:18: But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. For when can it ever be seen "the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread".

Note as well that the promise is for us and for our children! What a gracious addendum this is -a generational promise. Happy should be the child born to faithful Christian parents. There is in our promise the perpetuation of God's goodness. And lest we limit the increase to the mere temporal, please consider that the Lord has every intention to shower our heritage with spiritual gifts. Philippians 1:9: And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment;

How truly marvelous are His ways toward His own:

"Ye are blessed of the LORD which made heaven and earth."

Pastor

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

Life and Death

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:20

Life and death are the two things that all people have in common no matter when or where they have lived. The latter is contingent upon the first. No one has a say about when or where they enter this life and under normal circumstances no one has a say about when they exit this life. Life is what most people tenaciously defend and try to extend, and death is what most people try to avoid. Most people not only desire life but also desire to live a better quality of life. Our own Declaration of Independence states that: that all men are equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. Unfortunately, the pursuit of happiness in just the physical realm will be an endless pursuit that ultimately ends in disappointment. The spirit and soul within us yearn for inner and lasting fulfillment which can only be found in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul said that he was crucified with Christ, yet he lived. Crucifixion meant death. Physical life ceased when the cruelties of the cross brought death to our Lord. But here the apostle is not speaking of a physical crucifixion to which he had been sentenced but one of choosing to surrender his own will which enables a person to find the spiritual life that is unattainable while being focused on the entrapments of physical life. Figuratively speaking, many people have life but they have not truly lived. Some try to immerse themselves in whatever catches their interest and vainly hope it will provide some lasting satisfaction. Jesus said that he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. The person who is imprisoned by their sin, fears, worries, pride, greed, life goals and plans, and a host of other crippling things has not experienced the liberating feeling of real life in Christ. Even the thirst for a sense of satisfaction can only end when we drink of the Spirit of Christ, the fountain of living water. Being crucified with Christ is not a one-time occurrence, but rather a daily moment-by-moment choice. Often situations arise that necessitate us choosing to put to death our selfish will in order to do God's will. When we make the right choice, we find a sense of God's enabling power and the peace of doing God's will. Living by the faith of the Son of God will uncover simple joys that were undiscovered while living in the flesh. Remembering that Christ lived and died for us is a motivator to crucify our flesh and keep fresh in our hearts that He is ever-present with us to open the pathway as we desire to follow God's plan.

Today is a day to not only rest in our faith in Christ, but it is also a day to exercise our faith in Him as we live out His will. As Jesus said: *For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake will find it.* May we be crucified with Christ today and find true life that is found in the crucified and risen Savior.

J. Ekis

Noble searching

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.

Acts 17:11-12

There are key words and phrases in this description of the Jews of Berea that are worthy of consideration and emulation. Paul and Silas had fled Thessalonica because of the Jews in the synagogue there who had organized persecution of those who had believed the gospel message and were seeking to also harm the missionaries. When they arrived at the next city of Berea and also continued their custom of preaching the gospel in the synagogue, they found a completely different reception from these Macedonian Jews, and also Greeks. The first key description of these Berean Jews was that they were more *noble* than the Thessalonian Jews. Being noble implies “well-born,” or in a more general sense, “generous.” They were generous with their time and willingness, or “*readiness of mind*,” to investigate the matters being presented. This eagerness towards the message they received caused them to *search* the scriptures. The original word (*anakrino*) implies to investigate, examine, interrogate, or judge. Robertson says it “means to sift up and down, make careful and exact research as in legal processes.” The text also tells us that they did this *daily*, not just on sabbath days.

It is no wonder then that the connecting word, *therefore*, introduces the result that many of them believed. As Paul’s epistle to the Romans proclaims that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17), we then understand that this means active hearing, which is eager to examine and judge the words given against the truth of scripture. When the message passes the test against scripture, then it should be eagerly received and performed. An honest and willing mind with the gold standard of scripture and the witness of the Holy Spirit must believe the truth of the gospel, as demonstrated by these Bereans.

Robertson commented on this passage, “In Scotland people have the Bible open on the preacher as he expounds the passage, a fine habit worth imitating.” Are we following this noble example? Or have we been deadened by the modern practice of “viewing,” where presentations of any kind, particularly those delivered on screens, are simply taken in, with little to no thought of challenging their validity? May God deliver us from such mental and spiritual lethargy. Let us instead follow these Bereans in how we listen, and therefore believe. First, in teaching or preaching situations, let us have open Bibles to compare against scripture, and confirm or correct, all that is said. Also, let us cultivate our daily personal Bible reading and study times, which should hone our ability to examine all that we hear and see, to discern truth from error or absurdity, and then practice the truth so confirmed.

A Bountiful Eye

*He that hat a bountiful eye shall be blessed; for he giveth of his bread to the poor.
– Proverbs 22:9 –*

It is quite easy to get caught up in the day-to-day obligations of this life. Living requires a certain amount of effort. Because of this, a good measure of our focus is on the material world. Even as believers, this is requisite to our existence. While we long for the eternal, we nonetheless have to make a living, maintain our dwellings, ensure our finances, etc. We can do all of these things with God's help and superintendence, no doubt, but the reality is that we are still very much terrestrial until the day He calls us to our celestial habitation. As frustrating as this can seem at times, it is part of the Master's grand design, so it is good and right. It helps us meet out His purpose – to touch others living under the same general conditions, and to point them to our King.

God's children possess many things throughout the course of our earthly lives. Some of these gifts are eternal in nature – our salvation, His Spirit, His peace, His Word, His wisdom. Others are immaterial yet temporal – the spiritual gifts He bestows in varied measure upon His people. And still others are more general and corporeal – our homes, our food, our raiment, our funds. The fact is, while we may refer to these things as ours, they are all from the hand of the Almighty. We possess them as stewards and we are expected to use them in accordance with His will. Nothing is ours to hold, but everything is ours to share. Freely we have received. Freely we must give.

Generosity does not require a large bank account. A little child sharing his or her lunch with a friend who doesn't have one is an apt reminder that the heart is the determining factor to living generously. God's people should have bountiful eyes – looking for every opportunity to share whatever we have with whomever might need it. It may be material, or it just as well need not be. Do we have an encouraging word? Then we must speak it to him that is weary. Do we have heavenly knowledge and a gift to teach it? Then we will find a forum to do so for needy souls. Do we have a sensitive heart that can weep with them that weep? Then we look to connect with such as we can minister to in this fashion. Do we have moneys that could be used to advance the Kingdom? Then we give them sacrificially for that great eternal cause. Do we know someone in need? What are we going to do about it?

God's people ought to be characterized by a gracious, generous spirit. We each have abundant treasures from heaven to share with our brethren as well as with a lost and dying world. Let us resolve to live with large hearts and open hands. It is the way our Lord Jesus showed us to live. Who can we be generous toward today? --- *D. Murcek*

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

A BA degree from HSU
(A Born Again Degree from Holy Spirit University)

*That in every thing ye are enriched by him,
in all utterance, and in all knowledge; 1 Corinthians 1:5*

June is a month often associated with graduation caps, gowns, and diplomas. The hallowed halls of "higher education" continually churn out their secularized scholars who have been duly propagandized to regurgitate the party line of agnostic twaddle. Armed with academic certification, they boast of a pretentious legitimacy that they believe commands automatic respect from and superiority over those who have come short of their scholastic achievements. But "hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?"

By outward observation, one would have expected that Jesus, having been raised in the obscure village of Nazareth where little or no educational opportunity would have been afforded him, could ever aspire to any intellectual eminence. But even at the tender age of twelve "all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers". And in later years, while being mocked as a mere "carpenter's son", the Jewish Intelligentsia were nonetheless compelled to admit that no man ever "spake like this man" "And the Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?"

It should be of no surprise that they that followed the Master would, themselves, be similarly endowed. "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus". Stephen spoke with such force that they that heard him "were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake". Paul had the academic credentials of which to boast having been tutored at the feet of Gamaliel, the eminent rabbinical scholar of the first century. Yet he counted that "but dung" in comparison to "the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus". "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power."

And so in these last days, believers can likewise depend on that same endowment when it is time to arise in the defense of the glorious gospel of Christ. "But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost."

Blessings to all who read,

Pastor

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

Crippling Fear

I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.

Psalm 37:4

During World War II, the German war machine's brilliant but evil minds sought ways to efficiently conquer their enemies. Science, technology, propaganda, and psychological warfare would contribute to making the German army one of the best in the world. The Luftwaffe, or air force, had a dive bomber that effectively neutralized allied targets with astounding accuracy. A siren was added to the bomber that was activated when diving toward its target. The siren posed no physical threat to people on the ground but was installed on the planes to strike fear and confusion in the people below. When hearing the siren, the people knew that death and destruction were descending from above. Some people would run to the bomb shelters, while others would aimlessly wander about, and oftentimes people would just freeze in place. In reality, the siren was harmless in and of itself but caused a crippling fear in the people below.

Fear is something each of us experiences in our lives. It can come in a wide variety of venues causing different levels of anxiety. Some fears may seem silly, while others are warranted because of the dire consequences of their cause. Superstition is the root of some fears while reality is the cause of others. Whether justified or not, fear can be debilitating to the person who lives with it. Because of fear, some people may never be able to participate in certain activities of life. Imagine some of the negative consequences of the following phobias. *Agoraphobia*- the fear of being in public places. *Claustrophobia*- fear of being in confined places. *Aquaphobia*- fear of water. *Acrophobia*- fear of heights. *Nyctophobia*- fear of the dark. *Atychiphobia*- fear of failure. *Thanatophobia*- fear of death. These are but a few of the diagnosed fears from which people suffer in varying degrees. Extreme fears can hinder a person from developing to the full potential for which God has made them. The book of Hebrews reminds us that people are kept in a lifetime of bondage because of the fear of death. One might say they become frozen with fear and fail to move forward with life. The devil delights to torment us with fear. When the mind is preoccupied with it, prayer and communion with God are interrupted, and meditating upon the Word is cloudy at best. Remaining in this state will stunt our spiritual growth and minimize our fruitfulness. Instead of the spirit of fear, God gives us the spirit of power, and of love, and a sound mind. The Apostle John in his first epistle says that “ *there is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment.* Fear comes to us when we lose our focus on God’s love and His promises and instead focus on our circumstances.

None of us are immune to fear, but when it comes our way may we do as Peter did when he was sinking in the tumultuous sea and quickly call out to the Lord for help remembering that He is with us and will never forsake us in any situation. Since His *perfect love casteth out fear*, may we always be *persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

J. Ekis

First Things First

*Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.
– Revelation 2:4 –*

Conjugal relationships can wither, fade, and die in many ways, but always for the same reason. One or both parties begins to focus on themselves more than the other. Love is much more than a feeling. The emotional aspect should ignite the will, and commitment perpetuates desire and adoration. If this is not understood or enacted, what should be a selfless journey becomes a selfish preoccupation. There is no such thing as “falling out of love”, but there is a very real and ever-present danger of deprioritizing one’s partner, thereby choking the relationship into oblivion.

Our salvation is relational. We are united with Jesus. Emotion likely played some role in our conversion, when we first realized the justness of our damnation, and grasped what depth of love Christ exhibited toward us on the cross. But when we believed, we were also making a commitment. We love Him because He first loved us. He became our reason, our purpose, our all in all. Life, which previously was centered around us – our wants, our needs, our desires – now revolves around Him.

Yet because this is a relationship, it needs fostered, cultivated, and maintained. The stark reality is that we can and often do neglect our Christ. The devil knows this weakness and continually seeks to exploit it to our demise. If he can turn our attention toward other things (Jesus called them “cares, and riches, and pleasures of this life” (Lk. 8:14)), these distractions possess an intrinsic power to remove our focus from our Beloved.

But the danger does not stop there. Our text indicates that even our very service and fidelity to our Lord can become a self-serving thing. Like Martha, we can become encumbered about with many good and right things, forgetting that one thing is needful. He knows our hearts, and if it is not Him and Him alone upon its throne, we are guilty of leaving our first love.

How do we keep ourselves from this awful error of neglecting our Savior? We must continuously consume His Word to know Him more. We must respect the assembly of the saints, gathering frequently with fellow-believers and anticipating His presence in the midst of us. We must examine our service, positioning our hearts to render it as an act of worship rather than a thing of rote. We must remember our propensity to sin and consistently approach the throne of grace to obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. He must be our first thought in the morning, our last conversation at night, and we must consult and include Him through all the in-between.

Let us continuously check ourselves by asking, Do I love my Lord? And then let us resolve to love Him more. --- *D. Murcek*

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Revival Comes to the Capitol of Idolatry

*And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth,
Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus:Acts 19:1*

Ephesus was the leading city in Asia Minor under Roman rule. It was a wealthy commercial center and home to a bizarre assembly of pagan magicians, priests, exorcists, and temple prostitutes – a steaming pot of multiculturalism and moral relativism. The great marble temple of Artemis was the pride of the Ephesians in that day, and a whole industry of money changers, authors, craftsmen, prostitution, and other businesses grew up around the worship of Artemis, or "Diana" as the Romans called her, the ancient fertility goddess of Asia Minor. The temple of Artemis was one of the legendary Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Ephesus attracted people from all over the Roman world during its annual pagan festival. It was into this grand fortress of pagan idolatry that Paul ventured in his third missionary journey.

The power and eminence with which Paul spoke convinced a large number of these noble Asians to turn from their ineffective fantasies to the living God. Those who were once held captive to superstitions, pagan mysticism, occult practices, and abominable idolatry were now liberated by the power of the Holy Spirit. "And fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men:"Acts 19:17-19. One can only imagine the uproar that this caused amongst the benighted artificers that watched their nefarious businesses suffer financial collapse. To them, only one remedy would revive the former superstitions and restore their ill-gotten wealth: Paul must be apprehended and thrust out of the city. Not dissimilarly, the Gadarenes expelled Jesus from their borders, preferring to ply their illicit swine trading than to honoring the visitation of the Son of God.

Now consider the effect that a genuine revival would have upon one of the major cities in the United States. We could only hope for a day when bars, casinos, brothels, dope dens, porn shops, and state stores would be shuttered for lack of consumers. Let us try to imagine the internet, the movies, and the television programs being cleaned up of violence, blasphemies, and lewd productions. What an amazing moment it would be if the people brought their violent video games, their filthy rock music, their liquor bottles, their drug paraphernalia, and their occult books and set them ablaze. One could expect a concerted uproar from the business community as profit losses would be tallied in the billions of dollars. Instead of thousands cramming into stadiums for sports events and rock concerts, people would be rushing to churches thirsting for the words of God.

But sadly, I fear, the people of our generation would most likely replicate the actions of the craftsmen of Ephesus and the swine herders of Gadara and thrust out the evangelist that would dare upset the evil norms of the day.

Live in the power of His resurrection,z

Pastor

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

Quality and Quantity

... He which soweth sparingly shall reap sparingly; but he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully

II Corinthians 9:6

The law of sowing and reaping, or planting and harvesting, is a principle found in the Bible and everyday life. In the book of Galatians, the Bible addresses that if a person sows to their fleshly desire, they will also reap the corruption that it produces; and conversely, if one sows to the Spirit, they will reap life everlasting. The context in today's verse has to do with sacrificial giving and the amount of blessing that is returned. Both are illustrated through accounts that are recorded in the Scriptures. Adam, Esau, and Solomon are just a few that demonstrate the repercussions of sowing to the flesh and reaping corruption, while the widow of Zarephath, the boy who gave his bread and fish to Jesus, and Mary of Bethany are examples of the blessing of sacrificial giving.

Today, we will consider another aspect of sowing and reaping, that being how much we sow in areas of our lives. Quality is indeed better than quantity, but there are benefits from the amount we put into something. We should keep in mind that inaction is also a level of sowing, which quite often produces a deficient harvest. Usually, in the physical realm, if we plant more, a greater return can be expected. Two people with equal musical abilities will show different results if their amount of practice time drastically differs. Students' grades often reflect the amount of time put into studying. This law is certainly applicable to our spiritual disciplines. Concerning our Bible reading, merely reading a lot of verses will not alone produce results unless we focus on and apply what we have read. If we focus and digest more of the Scriptures, our depth of Biblical knowledge will increase. Granted, not everyone will have the same results because of how God has equipped each of us, but everyone should be able to see some level of increase. The same holds true for prayer. Quality and quantity of time spent in prayer is a fruitful exercise. The sowing that is considered bountiful is assessed not only by the answers we receive from God but also by that invisible transaction that occurs from being in the Lord's presence. Though we will never radiate as Moses did when he returned from his meeting on the mount with Jehovah, we will greatly benefit from spending time in God's presence. When our prayer life is interrupted, our spiritual strength is weakened. The same can be said of church attendance or the varying ways we may look for opportunities to do charitable acts. Even the words we speak have a much better return when they are sown from a full supply of love and grace flowing from time spent with the Lord.

Today is another day to be aware of the biblical principle of sowing and reaping in our lives. With God's help, if we can find ways to increase both the quality and quantity of what we sow, we may then expect a fruitful harvest. May God give us increase!

J. Ekis

Liberty

Then said Agrippa unto Festus, This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar.

Acts 26:32

This is one of those places in the historical account where we might ask ourselves why such a situation had to be sustained. The apostle Paul had been left in the Roman jail in Caesarea for over two years by governor Felix. As recorded in the previous chapter, when Festus replaced Felix, he forced Paul into the situation requiring him to appeal to Caesar as a Roman citizen, to escape the Jews who were plotting to kill him, should he be transported back to Jerusalem for trial. But now king Agrippa, who was more knowledgeable of the events described by Paul in his testimony recorded in this chapter, had pronounced him innocent. Both Agrippa and Festus represented the authority of Rome. Why could they not reverse the situation and just set Paul free? Then he could have preached to more Jews, and Gentiles, and perhaps had many more years to spread the gospel.

Yet we must remember another detail shared earlier by Luke, after Paul had been rescued from the Jewish mob by the Roman captain, who then attempted a hearing to determine the reason for the dissension, without success. “And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome” (Acts 23:11). While no further details were given, we can be sure that Paul did not forget this encouragement and promise from the Lord. So, as he had initially recounted his conversion experience to the mob, and now again to Agrippa, Paul was perhaps beginning to see that plan develop. In fact, he may have already contemplated such when he initially appealed to Caesar. As this plot transpires, we see that, as a prisoner, Paul realized more liberty than one might think, being under the protection of the Roman jail guards from the Jews who plotted to kill him. Then in the ensuing account, the government would also provide pre-paid transportation, again with guarded escort, to Rome. And much of the story points to generally favorable treatment of Paul by those transporting him. The overall picture indicates considerable liberty for him to preach the gospel to many that he would encounter.

Thus, Paul’s experience reminds us not to second-guess the circumstances that may, at times, cause us consternation. If we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, we can trust that He is working all things together for the good that He intends, even when we might feel somewhat constrained without knowing the details in advance. While Paul’s path was not without hardship, it was clearly God’s plan. Let us also recognize the liberty in being able to trust and wait on the Lord to accomplish His purpose in our ways, wherever they may lead.

Scripture

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

– 2 Timothy 3:16 –

Every generation of God's people contends with its antichrists and false brethren. The surest way to spot tares among the wheat is to identify one's stance on the Scriptures. All true believers are Bible believers, assiduous adherents to God's revealed Word. It is good to meditate on what a treasure we hold in this Book of books...

All scripture. Old Testament as well as New. Yes, some of it is laborious to read through, while other passages are difficult to put down. But it is all important and vital to our spiritual well-being. The devil's pillow prophets will put forth their arguments – that there are other books that should have been included in this compendium, that there are contradictions within these sixty-six books, *ad nauseam*. But the true believer knows that what God has chosen to reveal can be found solely, uniquely, and faithfully in the pages between Genesis and Revelation.

Inspiration of God – literally, breathed by God. Whether we are reading Moses, David, John, or Paul, while the human agency is noted, the words are those of a single Author. Every word is pure and good and right, and wholly those of Jehovah Himself. There are those that will contend that it is just the thoughts or the narrative that are mystically from God. But the lover of God countenances nothing but the plenary, verbal perspective regarding the inspired nature of the Word of his Master.

Profitable. The Bible is profitable. We never lose anything in poring through its pages, over and over again. Just the opposite. The more time spent plumbing its holy contents, the richer the inward man becomes.

For doctrine. Yes – doctrine. Teaching. We need taught. And then taught again. And then again. Knowing God is foundationally didactic, lest we be led astray with every wind of doctrine and the increasingly fashionable doctrines of devils. Those who scorn biblical doctrine are fools at best. Thank God for the sound doctrine found in the Scriptures!

For reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. We are sheep gone astray, all of us. The believer knows he is prone to wander. We can be so easily beset by sin. Mining the Scriptures and putting ourselves under the preaching of the Word is critical to our sanctification, because it slaps us and resets our course. Without reproof, correction, and instruction, we would be left defenseless to hell's advances. Let us rejoice in the great plainness of speech found in the scriptures that keeps us on the straight and narrow path.

What a treasure we have in this Book! Let us both faithfully hold, and uncompromisingly hold forth, this Word of life. --- D. Murcek