

Life and Death

Today In Your Reading...

We continued to follow Paul's letter-writing campaign, by reading his short message to Philemon and the beginning of his letter to the Philippians. His message to Philemon was simple — "show kindness to Onesimus" (v.10). Evidently, Onesimus was Philemon's slave, who had run away to find Paul in Rome. While in Rome, he became a follower of Christ and was encouraged by Paul and others to return to his master. Paul's letter was written to soften the blow of his return, as he would face the anger and possible resentment of Philemon.

Paul's letter to the Philippians was meant to encourage them regarding his situation in prison. He explained that his circumstances "had happened to spread the Good News" (v.12). In that, Paul said, he rejoiced (v.18). Next, Paul described the two options that he saw for his future — discharge or death — both of which he believed would turn out for his deliverance (v.19). He recognized that he would be "free" one way or the other. Either the Romans would find him innocent and he would be freed from his chains, or the Romans would find him guilty, though he was innocent, and execute him, thus setting him free from his earthly chains to go to heaven.

Notice that Paul wrestled with life and death, not knowing which one to choose. In his mind, both were preferable, for "to me," he wrote, "living is for Christ and dying is even better" (v.21).

Paul's view of life and death is instructive here.

For most people, to live is gain and to die is loss. In other words, life is good and death is bad; but, for Paul, it was quite different. While life was good, death was much better (v.23). **He did not fear death but welcomed it.**

In Paul's mind, to remain on earth was to live *for* Christ, to honor Him by his words and deeds, to make Him known and to share Him with eve-

ryone; but to die or to depart from this world was to live *with* Christ, in His presence, by His side, with a host of believers in the halls of heaven. Today, **we tend to hold onto this earthly life in such a way that reveals our misunderstanding of what is to come.** We act as if we were leaving behind something better for something worse, when, in reality, we are leaving behind something "good" for something much better.

Daily Reflection

This life, as "good" as it might be, pales in comparison to the life that is to come. How so?

With so much to look forward to, do you have to fear death? If you have put your trust in God, then "death has no sting" (*1 Corinthians 15:55*), rather **it is the door through which you must pass to enter into the second, more desirable life** that awaits you.

Notice that while Paul knew that he was to remain a little while longer, he was comforted by the fact that it meant more "fruitful service" for him (v.22). He knew that his time on earth was limited and that while he was here, he was not to waste it; he was supposed to labor or work.

You work all the time but for what, a paycheck, groceries, gas? Is that fruitful labor? No, Paul is referring to labor that bears *eternal* fruit not *temporary* reward. Do you recognize that your time is limited? Do you understand that you are not to be *wasting* your time? Does your work produce fruit that is eternal? Are you just making a living or are you making a difference?

Personal Perfection

Today In Your Reading...

We completed Paul's letter to the Philippians, which was an expression of gratitude for their support of his ministry (4:15). However, as he wrote this letter of thanksgiving, Paul challenged the Philippians to live a Christ-centered life. Paul's challenges fell into two categories, that of *salvation* and *sanctification*.

First, in regards to salvation, "We put no confidence in human effort," he said. "Instead, we boast about what Christ has done for us" (3:3). Sinners cannot save themselves from sin with sin-ridden activity, no matter how sincere it is. Thus, Paul wrote that all of the trophies that he could boast should be thrown in the trash. He considered them worthless (v.8). If we count anything in our lives, other than Christ, as a gain towards our right standing before God, **we are clinging to meaningless trophies.**

Second, Paul addressed the topic of *personal perfection* (3:1-4:1). Becoming perfect does not mean that we somehow become sinless or never make mistakes. The word is better defined as "complete or mature." Sanctification is God's work of conforming us to the image of His Son, that we may be on the outside what we are on the inside, a work that will not be finished until we are in heaven (1:6; 4:21). Thus, Paul wrote, "I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things... No, I am not all that I should be" (v.12, 13). "I look forward to what lies ahead and "strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize..." (v.13, 14). **Paul was not passive about his sanctification; he was active;** he pursued it and pressed for it.

Daily Reflection

Sanctification is a work of God in you (1:6), but, **it is also a process in which you join Him in the work.** You play an active role. Sanctification can be described like a seed that Christ has

planted in your heart; though you must water it, give it sunlight, and tend to the soil, it is God who ultimately causes the growth. Likewise, though the seed is in you, if you do nothing to encourage its progress, the seed will lay dormant and never grow as it should. That is why every believer is at a different stage of personal growth or sanctification.

What are some ways that you can encourage your "seed" of sanctification to grow?

Paul wrote, "Forget the past" (v.13). Satan will constantly attempt to shame you with your past, your life before Christ, the mistakes or failures after Christ, or the weaknesses and sin traps you readily fall into. Do not pay attention to him. He is simply trying to distract you from the work that God is doing in your life. Also, forgetting the past includes looking beyond your successes, your achievements, your trophies. Satan will use them to cater to your ego and puff you up with pride or self-confidence. You must follow Paul's example and consider them worthless compared to Christ.

Paul also wrote to "look forward to what lies ahead... "Strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize..." **You must never be complacent with where you are in your walk with God.** Never stop pressing the accelerator and just coast. You are like a car on an incline; you are either progressing up the hill or rolling backwards. In your spiritual life, **there is no such thing as neutral.** Strain to reach the end and receive the prize!

Faith and Works

Today In Your Reading...

We began the book of *James*, which is a lot like drinking from a fire hydrant. Every sentence of his letter is loaded with wise counsel, like the *Proverbs*. We could spend several months unpacking it all; and, yet, I have the task of summarizing it in a day. Therefore, I am going to focus on what I believe is the heart of the book, that **faith without works is dead** (2:14-26).

Now, I realize that stating that principle may cause confusion. Does James mean to say that we are saved by our works? Is he insinuating somehow that without works we can lose our salvation? Paul wrote that we are saved by faith alone. Is James now saying that we must have faith plus works? As you can see, we must be careful here not to wander off into error.

The key to understanding the entire passage is in the first verse. "Dear brothers and sisters, what's the use of *saying* you have faith if you don't *prove* it by your actions? That *kind* of faith can't save anyone" (v.14). James does not say that these people have genuine saving faith, but, rather, he says that they *claim* to have faith. Anyone can simply claim to have faith but that does not mean that they truly have faith. So then, how are we supposed to be able to tell if someone has saving faith? Their actions.

James is not suggesting that works are a means to earn salvation; rather, he is saying that **works are a means of evidence for one's salvation**. For one to say that he has faith (or that he is a Christian) and, yet, to have no evidence in his life of his salvation, is a sign that his "faith" is not saving faith. To claim justification (right standing with God) apart from sanctification (conforming to the image of Christ) is a nullification of the claim. **Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, but that faith will not remain alone; it will produce good works.**

Daily Reflection

What Christ has done in your life internally (making you a new creature) **should be evident in your life externally**. To say that you love people and yet demonstrate no compassion for those in need is to live in a way that contradicts your claim (v.15, 16). Do you know anyone who claims to be a Christian but whose life gives no evidence of his claim? Could others say the same about you?

Now, take what you know in the plain teaching of Scripture and make sense of James' examples of Abraham and Rahab (v.21-26). "So you see, we are made right with God by what we do, not by faith alone. Just as the body is dead without a spirit, so faith is dead without good deeds" (v.24, 26). What is James saying here?

Could a person be in Christ, having right-standing with God and eternal life secured in Him, and still not exhibit visible evidence in his life of this transformation? Explain your answer.

"Don't hide your light under a basket! Put it on a stand and **let your good deeds shine out for all to see...**" (Matt. 5:15, 16).

War of the World

Today In Your Reading...

We finished the book of *James* and opened a letter to Timothy. Timothy was Paul's protégé, a young man very much like him, who had a deep love for the Church and its success. Thus, Paul sent Timothy as his representative to bring stability and order to various churches. Paul wrote this first letter from Macedonia. He had stationed Timothy in Ephesus (1:3). However, before we move on to read the instructions that Paul had for his mentoree, let's consider the second half of the book of *James*.

Once again, every line of James' letter is full of godly wisdom, giving counsel on topics ranging from the cause of quarreling and passing judgment on others to wealth and self-confidence to suffering and prayer. The stand-out verse to me was this one, "Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again, that **if your aim is to enjoy the world, you can't be a friend of God**" (4:4).

James sets the love that we have for God and the love that we have for this world in opposition to each other; and, he reminds us that we cannot love both. By the "world," James is not referring to creation or to people; he is referring to the religious system behind the world order, which is under Satan's influence. Therefore, to love the world, or the things of the world, is to love the Devil's religious system.

However, one might say, "I don't love the Devil or worship the Devil, so how can you say that I love the Devil's religious system?" Satan is deceiving and smart. While many think that the Devil's religious system is called Satanism, or the Occult, it is not. He is much more cunning than that. In the big scheme of things, very few people directly worship the Devil; however, **the vast majority of the world worships the Devil indirectly by worshipping themselves.**

Simply put, **Satan's religion is humanism**, the worship of man or self.

Daily Reflection

Every person, including you, is caught between these two loves – the love of God and the love of the world – and every day, you make decisions that move you one step in either direction. Have you sensed this friction between love of God and love of the world or self? Explain.

You must be intentional to deepen your love for God or you will fall more in love with yourself and the things of this world. There is no such thing as neutral; for if you do nothing to deepen your love for God, your fleshly tendencies will move you in the opposite direction.

James contends that those who have surrendered to worldliness demonstrate a resistance to God (no evidence of salvation). **The one who has been redeemed by Christ will show signs of resistance to the world.** Since these two loves are in opposition to each other, the Christian, who is indwelt with the Holy Spirit, will desire the things of God; and, in time, the temptations of this world will slowly lose their effectiveness to distract his attention. Which direction are you moving, towards God or away from Him?

No doubt, **this world has everything humans would want, but for followers of Christ, it has nothing that we need.** Why would we cling to a system that will one day fail and fall, when we have a true, everlasting treasure in Jesus Christ?

Spiritual Fitness

Today In Your Reading...

We read more of Paul's letter to Timothy, his young protégé. His purpose in writing to him was so that he would "know how people must conduct themselves in the household of God..." (3:14, 15). Thus, he addressed such topics as installing Elders and Deacons, providing for widows, and protecting against false teachers and the temptation of worldly riches.

Instructing the church at such a young age might have rubbed some people wrong, but Paul encouraged Timothy not to "let anyone think less" of him because of his age. "Be an example to all believers," he wrote, "in what you teach, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity" (4:12). To achieve these things, Paul challenged him to "**spend time and energy in training yourself for spiritual fitness**. Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is more important..." (4:7, 8).

When I was in seventh grade, I was introduced to weight lifting. While I had very little training, by the end of the year, I noticed something that surprised me — *muscles*. I remember being so impressed by my physical improvements that I asked my parents for a dumbbell set, so that I could lift at home. I became aware that **the more time and effort I invested, the stronger and more physically fit I became**.

Daily Reflection

As Christians, we transition through similar stages in our spiritual lives. After our "rebirth" at salvation, we are immediately thrust into **spiritual infancy** (no matter our physical age), that place in which we are immature, dependent, and have much to learn. While every newborn Christian starts there, **it is vital that you do not get stuck there**. It is God's desire that you progress and grow into maturity.

Spiritual maturity does not happen overnight; it occurs gradually. While salvation is a one-time occurrence and solely a work of God, spiritual growth is an ongoing event in which you cooperate with God. He has already done His part, by giving you everything that you need to progress spiritually. However, *He has left the rate at which you grow to you*. Thus, spiritual growth is a joint effort. **God supplies the tools, while you supply the labor.**

You can decide to make use of these tools and get into "shape," or you can refuse to put in the time and effort and never progress at all. It is your choice; and, if you choose to work hard, God has promised to make you adequate for every good work (2 Timothy 3:17). Thus, you must decide to discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness, to roll up your sleeves and get to work. The Lord will do the rest.

Have you ever noticed that every believer is at a different stage in his or her spiritual maturity? Why do you think this happens?

Unfortunately, **many Christians are satisfied with or are forever stuck in the rut of spiritual infancy**, never knowing or caring that God expects more. I believe one of the reasons this occurs is because we are never taught to feed ourselves. Thus, *many believers never contribute to their own spiritual growth*. How much time and effort are you willing to invest in order to progress and grow?

Practice What You Preach

December 15 — 1 Timothy 6:11-21; Titus 1-3; 2 Timothy 1:1-18

Day 349 — 16 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

We read parts of three letters of Paul, two to Timothy and one to Titus. Both of these young men were protégés of Paul, to whom he was preparing to pass the baton as future leaders of the early Church. His letters to both were similar in nature, charging each of them to preach the Gospel accurately, to be good examples of godly living and to encourage it in others, and to set in order each church by appointing officers.

At the heart of Paul's letter to Titus was this challenge, "As for you, **promote the kind of living that reflects right teaching**" (2:1). Here Paul laid out a principle that is still true today — *orthodoxy leads to orthopraxy*. **Right doctrine leads to right practice**. Our words and actions stem from decisions that we've made, based on what our mind has been convinced is right or wrong. Our convictions of right and wrong are built on what we've been taught by others, including our parents, our teachers, our pastors, or what we've read in God's Word or other resources.

Paul continued telling Titus, "You yourself must be an example to them (young men) by doing good deeds of every kind. Let everything you do reflect the integrity and seriousness of your teaching" (2:7). If I could summarize Paul's words here, it would be to "**practice what you preach**." Again, Paul wrote, "Jesus Christ gave His life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us His very own people, **totally committed to doing what is right**. You must teach these things and encourage your people to do them..." (2:14, 15).

However, there are those who do not practice what they preach. "Such people claim to know God, but they deny Him by the way they live. They are despicable and disobedient, worthless for doing anything good" (1:16). These are peo-

ple who have not become convinced that what they've learned is true. They are "corrupt and unbelieving, because their minds and consciences are defiled" (1:15).

Daily Reflection

Do you know anyone who does not practice what they preach, who says one thing but does another? What message does that send?

Could others say the same of you? Do you practice what you preach? Have you ever said one thing and done another? Explain.

If right practice stems from right doctrine, how do you ensure that you are being taught right doctrine?

At the end of Paul's letter to Titus, he wrote, "These things I have told you are all true. I want you to insist on them so that everyone who trusts in God will be careful to do good deeds all the time" (3:8). Evaluate what you have been taught in light of God's Word. Evaluate your deeds in the same way.

A Good Soldier

December 16 — 2 Timothy 2:1-4:18

Today In Your Reading...

With the exception of a few verses in tomorrow's reading, we completed Paul's last written words. "As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of death is near. I fought the good fight. I have finished the race and I have remained faithful. Now, the prize awaits me..." (4:6-8). The circumstances he described were grim — still in prison, alone (only Luke was with him), many had deserted him, and some had "done him much harm"; but he remained confident in God and in his faith.

Paul pleaded with Timothy to come to him as soon as he could. "Hurry so you can get here before winter" (4:9, 21). It was as if Paul sensed that he had come to the end of the line and he was recalling his life and ministry. He had given so much, suffered so much, and experienced so much, but he had no regrets. He was thankful to God for all that He had done in and through him.

While Paul used several illustrations to describe the life he had lived and to challenge Timothy in his ministry — an athlete in a race (2:5), a diligent farmer (2:6), a good worker (2:15), a pure utensil (2:20, 21) — perhaps the most descriptive was that of a good soldier. He wrote to his young protégé, "Endure suffering along with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus; and, **as Christ's soldier, do not let yourself become tied up in the affairs of this life**, for then you cannot satisfy the One who enlisted you in His army" (2:3, 4).

What are the characteristics of a good soldier? He is **ready at all times** to be called upon to do his duty. He has **eliminated distractions** in his life so that he can focus on the tasks at hand. He is **obedient to the commands** of those in authority over him. He is **loyal to the end**; and, he is **willing to give his life** for the cause.

Daily Reflection

"To be ready at all times" insinuates that a good soldier is not entangled but free to act when called upon. What does that mean practically?

What does a good soldier do to eliminate distractions and remain single-minded? What distracts you from fulfilling your "duties"?

Why are obedience and loyalty essential traits for good soldiers? Would you say that these qualities are present in your life? Explain.

What is missing in Paul's life that we are so entangled with today?

Are you a good soldier for Christ? Are you pursuing active duty or avoiding and hindering it?