



2021 Weekly Devotions

Week of: August 30th - Sept 5th

Sermon: August 29th



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH
building community ◊ equipping believers ◊ serving Jesus

August 30

John 3:36

One of my favorite pastors and theologians, John Piper, once said, “Saving faith is sanctifying faith.” In other words, if a person has “real” faith in Christ through which the grace of God flows from heaven to save them, then that same grace is going to be consistently transforming them into the likeness of Christ. The Bible says that grace *teaches* us (Titus 2:15) so we are to believe that God’s grace is an active force (I don’t mean impersonal energy) that works in you from salvation all the way to glorification. You see, the Holy Spirit does not show up in a person’s life to redeem them, and then disappear from their lives leaving them to flounder through life in their own strength. If there is no evidence of the active work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life, we are left with no choice but to believe they are not saved.

Our text for Sunday’s message began in verse 32 stating that all who believed were of one heart and soul. Friends, I want you to ponder today the clear teaching of God’s Word that truly saved people are changed people. Truly saved people live reflecting the image of God in ever growing measures. Yes of course I know that there are periods of time in which we may walk in a dry season and fruit is scarce. This should be the exception not the rule of our lives. All who believed were transformed as they were born again with a new heart that was filled with the Spirit and thus reflecting His heart more than their old hearts of stone. Remember what I said in the message on Sunday – they were able to break free of the things of this world while they were bound to the church and the people of God in a loving and sacrificial manner. It showed up in generosity and sacrifice. Can you imagine people selling property and giving the proceeds to the church? These people did just that because they were captured by Christ and His Kingdom and took to heart the charge to store up treasures in heaven while loving their neighbors as themselves.

The text I chose for today’s devotion of from John 3:36. John writes that if a person believes in Jesus then he is saved BUT in the same sentence he says that if that person does not obey Jesus then he remains lost and the wrath of God remains on him. Isn’t it interesting that John uses the words believe and obey interchangeably here? He assumes that the reader would make the connection that to truly believe in the work and person of Christ will automatically result in an increased measure of obedience to Him as Lord. It was then, and should still be today, ludicrous to think that a person could say they believe in Jesus but not obey Him. Saving belief demands that we obey the One who died for us. Following Christ requires something of us and to think that we can say we believe to get our “ticket to heaven punched” is a lie from hell. Unfortunately, many people have bought that lie hook, line, and sinker.

Please consider today how foolish it would be to say that you believe in Jesus without obeying Him. If all that He said and taught is true, then you must see that it truly is of the utmost importance. If what He taught was true, then heaven and hell are real and the day is coming when we will all be judged for the lives we’ve lived. If what He said was true, then I must repent of my sin and pursue the things of God. I must learn to deny myself and take up a cross or I can’t get to heaven. These things are true so I for one have decided to believe strong enough to obey.

August 31

Matthew 6:19-21

Every time I read the passage chosen for today's point to ponder, I think of how telling it is. For those who want to know if they are saved or where they stand with Christ, you need look no further than this passage. In verse 21 of Matthew 6, Matthew writes, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." In this case, your heart refers to your passions, interests, priorities, and ultimately love. In other words, your choices are the indicators of what really matters to you and the use of your resources is the evidence of your true affections. So, the statement that Jesus makes in this chapter is meant to lay open your heart to reveal whether you love Him and His kingdom or the things of this world.

Dear ones, I hate to be hard-nosed or cruel, that is sincerely not my intention, but you must not let yourself off the hook in light of this passage. I cannot allow you to dance around the very words of Jesus Christ our Lord and King. In my sermon this past Sunday, what we saw in Acts 4 was what happens in the lives of those who are captured by the love of Christ. It is much like the parable of the pearl of great price in Matthew 13:45-46. The pearl is valued so highly that the one who finds it is willing to sell everything he owns to obtain it. It becomes his highest priority and everything else pales in comparison to it. What I don't want you to skirt around is the need to look at your own heart and see who is actually on the throne. Where do you spend your resources? Are you far more concerned with saving your money and building your savings account above advancing God's kingdom.

I have had times in my ministry when I was so saddened by statements that people make. Too many times questions about giving have been asked that indicate a person wants to know the bare minimum by which they can get by. Rather than asking if you need to give based on your gross income or your net income is the wrong question. The right question is, "How much can I give and still take care of my responsibilities?" We should want to give all we can and even sacrifice at times so that we can give more. This is only strange to those who simply do not understand the value, beauty, joy, and satisfaction that comes in serving King Jesus. I must honestly say that I cannot fathom how some people with lots of money can keep their huge money accounts while the church could use help in extending ministries farther than we ever have. I dream of what we could do if our mortgage were paid off...and it could be if people had a love for Jesus like those in Acts 4.

What you deal with is the fact that the verse for today clearly says you put your money where your heart is. The scary truth about that is, for many, your heart is not even close to Jesus. Is your heart captured by Christ or money? It cannot be both ways. The sad truth is that our passage to ponder is clear that all the treasures stored up for personal gain and a sense of security will rust, be lost, and prove to be useless when it is time to take your last breath. Oh beloved, why not invest your resources in heaven where time and evil can never take it away. I pray that God would capture your heart so completely that your genuine love of the Lord would be clear as you pour your heart and your treasures into His kingdom and not the temporary kingdoms of this world.

September 1

Luke 12:13-21

I want to continue yesterday's point just a bit more today. The text to ponder today from Luke 12 begins with a man asking for an equal share of the family inheritance. You may say that sounds fair. The cultural practice was that the oldest son received a double portion and this brother was complaining. Jesus responds by telling him, first of all, that he was not going to deal with that issue and then warns him, and the crowd, about every form of greed. The biblical truth is that a person's life does not consist of his possessions. In other words, you can have all the money in the world and gadgets and toys of all sorts and it still not make you happy, fulfilled, or content. Jesus tells a parable to illustrate this truth that applies today as much as ever.

The parable is about a man who had done extremely well for himself. His farm was producing an abundance and he was literally running out of space for his harvest. There is nothing inherently wrong with working hard and being good at what you do. There is nothing wrong with being rewarded for hard labor. Of course, we might remember that as a farmer, it was the Lord who had obviously provided proper sunshine, rain, and temperatures. It was the Lord who had given the man good health and a sharp mind. It was God who had provided good laborers for the harvest, etc. Now the point of the parable is not that we should not save or store up goods for future need. You see, money can be both helpful and hazardous. The real lesson of the parable is that we must also take the time to be "rich toward God" (v.21). What does that mean?

What we want to do is to minimize the hazards of money and maximize the helpfulness of the same. Money in itself is just pieces of metal and paper. What they represent as currency in our culture is value. What I am saying is that we exchange it for what we value. What you do with your money shows what you value with your heart. If we value food, we will pay for it and the same thing is true for every other object in this world. Whether it be entertainment, vehicles, education, furniture, etc., we will pay for what we value.

The man in the parable valued food, comfort, security, and wealth among other things. What the parable teaches us is that he did not value God. If we value the ministries of the church, for example, or the spread of the gospel, we will give money to those ministries to make it happen. The man in the parable clearly valued things more than God. My job as one of your pastors is to teach you and point you to the ultimate value of God. To be rich toward God is the opposite of laying up earthly treasures for yourself. To be rich toward God is to know that life consists in the abundance of knowing God not in having possessions. To be rich toward God is to be drawn to Him, and so to be about advancing His causes because we value them higher than ourselves and our stuff. Would it not have been wonderful for him to say, "Soul, you have many goods because you have been blessed so I will show my love for God by being generous, advancing the gospel, and providing for others in various ways." That is what we saw in Acts 4 among the people of the early church. My prayer is that it will be true of us in our day.

September 2

Galatians 5:6

This passage for today is vitally important to the book of Galatians and quite frankly to the whole Bible. We only have a page so let me get right to it. The human heart produces all sorts of desires and longings. Solomon wrote in Proverbs 4:23 that the issues of life spring from the heart. It truly is the wellspring of our behaviors and choices because it holds our desires and longings. A heart that is set on worldly things will produce in you longings and desires for worldly gain and goods. The heart that is set on faith is not like that. It will be driven by desires to please and to know God and to see God glorified and known. What I want to focus on today is what Paul wrote in Galatians 5:6 which says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love." He is saying that real faith produces love like a tomato plant produces tomatoes. You cannot be saved and not be a loving person. Saving faith produces love.

Love must be defined biblically for us to get this right. Love is not a mushy feeling that is motivated by personal benefit. 1 Corinthians 13 says that love does not seek its own. It is not the absence of discipline or what we might call tough love. Love says "no" sometimes and gives what is needed and not what is wanted at appropriate times. Love trains and moves others toward godliness and maturity. So how does faith produce love in a person's heart? First of all, thinking about what I have written the last two days, faith removes some things from the heart and gives other things to the heart. Faith can take away fear and replace it with courage based on trust in the promises of God. Faith takes away our guilt because we believe that we are forgiven in Christ. Faith takes away greed and selfishness because we grow to value Christ more than these things and can then let them go more easily. These things that faith pushes out of our hearts are the very things that keep us from being kind, generous, and loving people.

Faith gives us a desire to experience walking on water with God. It gives us the bravery to go into deep waters where we are completely dependent on Him and where we experience the amazing wonders of His power and grace. What will propel you to make sacrifices for people, even your family, to help a person in need even if he/she is an enemy? What will give you the courage to speak to others about Jesus? What will give you the confidence to give your money away to help with ministries of the church? These things never just happen. They happen because the love of God has captured your heart. Faith pushed us into places where we are positioned to experience the amazing move of God in our lives which becomes the impetus to love others. We can love others and meet their needs when we realize all of ours are met in Christ. When a person by faith has Jesus, he becomes freed from the lesser allurements of this world.

What I have been saying in this point to ponder today is that real, genuine, saving faith will demonstrate itself in acts of selfless love. Where there is no love for others and the things of God, there is not faith. Beloved, you don't have to "pump this up" in your own strength or fake it. The Spirit of God will produce love in you. It too becomes evidence of your salvation.

September 3

John 8:32,36

I believe we would all agree that the followers of Christ in Acts 4 were people who had been set free. We read of an internal liberty that allowed them to love others intimately and to give when needs arose. They were men and women who were willing to sell property so that they could have money to meet other people's needs. They were free from the love of money and material possessions. That may appear to be an insignificant sentence and you may gloss right over it as you read. I hope not. You see, they were freed from things and were freed to invest more time, resources, and love into people. They were free because they no longer needed to worry about their lives or daily bread. They could enjoy seeking God first and His kingdom. They were joined to Christ by faith and to each other by love. John Piper said, "Faith in Christ creates a bond of love for people and cuts the bond of love to things."

I wonder how many people might respond like the people who spoke out in verse 33. They said, "We are already free." They did not understand that Jesus was speaking about their bondage to sin which could only be broken by Christ Himself. Brothers and sisters, I want to take my thoughts over the last few days a step further today. For the person who is still set on storing up treasures here on earth instead of storing up treasures in heaven, and for the person who spends all their time building their own worldly kingdom and no time building God's, you must know that is sin. The Bible teaches in this passage of Scripture that it is slavery to sin that causes a person to behave in such a way, and the only hope for change is to be saved. If your name has been on the church roll for decades and you can remember when you were baptized but do not have love in your heart for God and people then ma'am or sir, you are not saved. If you are sitting on boat loads of resources and are not investing more than meager offerings to the ministries of the church, I cannot believe you know the Lord. I cannot believe the Holy Spirit is indwelling your heart.

As a recap, remember that over the past few days we have looked at passages that taught us that saving faith produces love. We now understand that love is demonstrated by acts of selflessness, sacrifice, and generosity. We have learned that it is the foolish person who keeps on storing up more and more for self, while investing little in the kingdom, who ends up going to hell. We have learned that belief that saves is belief that obeys. And today, we have looked at the fact that Jesus Christ alone is the one who sets a person free from the bondage of sin. So, if you were to say to me, "Pastor, I don't know what you are talking about. I am free." My question would be, "How much of a hold do your possessions have over you? How many decisions do you make because you are worried about what someone is going to think of you? How much pressure do you feel to measure up and to keep up? Truth be told, you are more captive to the things of this world than you realize. What can you give up and still be content and satisfied in Jesus?"

When Jesus sets you free you are free indeed. He can set you free so that your possessions no longer have a hold on you. He sets you free to love God with your whole heart and to lay your life at His feet. He can make it so that your greatest desire is to please Him and your greatest fear is His disappointment not the worlds. Beloved, ask God to free you from slavery to the things of this world. My prayer is that you would be free to live your life wide open knowing that He is worth it and ultimately you can't lose anyway.

September 4

Jeremiah 31:20

I may have been a little hard on some of you this week so today I want you to ponder an amazing truth about the way God loves you if you are one of His own. At times in the past, I have been one who throws off a bit on that phrase that is often used to soften our sin and eliminate God's wrath against it. That phrase is, "God hates the sin but loves the sinner." I normally don't like that because it allows the sinner too much comfort in his/her sin. It might be thrown into a conversation like this, "Hey don't worry about it. God knows everybody sins and He still loves you anyway so no big issue." Surely you can see how dangerous that can be. For the unregenerate, the wrath of God is still pointed at them and will definitely be poured out against them if they do not repent and come to Jesus. There is nowhere in the Bible that says, God winks at our sin because He loves us so much.

But allow me to address where that phrase is absolutely true and amazing. For those who are children of God by faith in Jesus Christ, our sin does not stop God's incredible love for us. In the book of Jeremiah, chapters 30-33 are known as the "Book of Consolation" because it is here that God reveals to His people His final response towards their sinfulness. They deserved judgment and likely expected it based on the previous 29 chapters of Jeremiah's book. How can this be? If you read Jeremiah 31:3 you will find that it says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." He had them deeply rooted in His own heart. If you look at Jeremiah 1:16, 2:13, 3:2, 4:14, 5:23, you will see that the people, God's people, had consistently sinned and rebelled against Him. Yet, He genuinely loved the sinner and hated the sin. Don't miss that this can only be applied to God's children! Read 31:20 now and stand in awe of that kind of love the Father has for His children and be encouraged. God deals with their sin but still He "remembers them, yearns for them, and will extend unmerited mercy to them. Amazing love, how can it be?

Dear ones, this statement will tie this point to ponder into the previous devotions this week: "Compassion is drawn out in corresponding intensity to the degree to which we love the one in view." God's compassion for His children is "drawn out" because of His deep love for us. Likewise, what we see in Acts 4 among the early church, is a compassion towards others and a desire to be involved in Kingdom work because of the great love they have for each other and for God. When you love someone, you cannot help but extend compassion, grace, mercy, patience, etc. You see, once again the problem is that the absence of compassion is an indication that there is the absence of love which reveals that there is no faith (Gal. 5:6).

Brothers and sisters, this is yet another passage that teaches the doctrine of eternal security or perseverance of the saints. Our Father in heaven will not let go of His own. He may have to discipline us (Heb. 12:5) but He will never stop loving His children (Rom. 8:32ff). Part of the challenge that we face in dealing with a beautiful truth like this is that we too often see God as we are. From His heart flows mercy; from ours a reluctance to receive it. We wonder how He could still love us, but the Bible teaches in this wonderful passage that He does. Be encouraged friends, if you belong to Him, He hates your sin but loves you still.

September 5

John 17:21-23

Pastor Aaron wrote a devotion last week from John 13:35 that has often been called the badge of discipleship. That badge is unity and love for one another. Jesus said in that passage, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples." Today for this closing point to ponder for this week's sermon, I want to utilize a similar passage to emphasize Christ's desire and prayer for our unity and love for one another because of how utterly important it is in evangelism and proving that Jesus actually came from God the Father in heaven. Jesus said in His high priestly prayer in John 17, "Make them one Father so that the world will know that You sent Me" (v.21,23). Brothers and sisters, have you ever stopped to consider that when there is disunity in the church and a lack of love for one another, that we are saying to the world that Jesus did not come from heaven and should be disregarded? That sure does make it more real in my opinion.

The testimony of unity and love among a people who are diverse, and who hold differences of opinion and preferences is an obvious draw to Christ. When a watching world sees unity and love amongst Jews and Gentiles, different races and ethnic backgrounds they cannot help but be drawn to the beauty of it. The young church, as she is described through Acts 4, was empowered by the Spirit, convinced of the work and person of Christ including the resurrection and ascension, and was preoccupied with each other. They were so involved in ministry that they did not have the time to be busy bodies and whiners. As they served together, their love for one another naturally grew (Phil. 1:7). How do we get back to that?

Surely many directions could be taken here, but I want to highlight the need to see yourself correctly before Christ. Beloved, when you spend more of your time in the presence of King Jesus, it is easy to be humble. When His perfect light exposes our wretched sin, we are left with nothing to say. Paul wrote in the book of Romans that we should not think too highly of ourselves. I want to draw your attention to the fact that in order for a person to be saved, he/she must recognize their own need for a Savior. We must understand that we cannot save ourselves, that we do not deserve to be saved, that our salvation is God's doing and by His grace, and that we are hopelessly lost without Christ's shed blood on the cross and resurrection from the grave. My point is simple, a right understanding of salvation leads to humility. Humility then leads to love more freely. When self gets out of the way because you know you are a loathsome soul apart from Christ, it becomes much easier to think more of others than self. To be in a place where we could honestly say, "I deserve nothing and am just grateful to be a part of the family of God regardless of how insignificant I may feel. My value is found in Christ and then I am free to love others and think more of their needs than my own because for my needs I learn to fall at the feet of Jesus AND rely on the beautiful body of Christ (the church) to come alongside me in love and unity as I come alongside them.

Brothers and sisters, unity and love are not to be ignored in the life of the church and we should do all we can to promote it. Christ prayed for it, and it proves so much of who He is as the transformer of souls in the eyes of a lost world. BTW, the world did not drop the ball and cause our current culture to spiral out of control. The church did and it is time to start again – in the house of the Lord.