



2021 Weekly Devotions

Week of: May 10th - May 16th

Sermon: May 9th



May 10

Matthew 28:16-20

Acts 1 records Jesus' monumental instructions to all of His disciples (including us) regarding His expectations of believers moving forward. We are to be Jesus' "witnesses" meaning we are to be busy testifying of who Jesus is and what He has done. This is a wonderful and important task but before we unpack the different implications of His instruction, it's important to dwell for a moment on the necessity of obedience.

Over the years, I have heard people describe their spiritual journey this way "Jesus became my Savior at (insert age) but He didn't become my Lord until (insert a later age)". To be honest, I am really not sure how that kind of thinking became so prevalent, but there is absolutely no biblical reason to make such an absurd statement. Folks, Jesus cannot be your Savior unless He is your Lord. It is only as we come to recognize His defeat of death, the exclusivity of His offer of salvation and His position of sole authority in the universe that we truly understand the beauty of the Gospel.

The ascension of Christ is another example of His rightful claim to authority and obedience as Jesus demonstrates His supernatural power even as He ascends to a place of unmatched authority. Nevertheless, even before His ascension, Jesus prefaces His command to share the Gospel with a statement regarding His authority.

Our text for today is a familiar one. The Great Commission is well-known by many believers and yet there is one little phrase that probably does not receive the attention it deserves. The phrase is found in verse 18 as Jesus says, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." You will note that this statement precedes His commands to make disciples. Jesus is basing the obedience to His command of disciple making on the recognition of Christ's authority to require such an action in the lives of His people.

This authority is unveiled by His resurrection. Jesus is speaking on the other side of the grave and, therefore, has demonstrated His authority over our greatest enemies. In Acts 1, the command is further buttressed by His ascension to the throne of heaven.

In both instances, we must understand that what Christ has displayed has a bearing upon what we do. Brother and sister, you do not have the autonomy to decide whether or not you will be a witness. The resurrected and ascended One has the authority, and He calls the shots! We do not contain the ability to edit His commands or replace them with what we believe to be more beneficial. His privilege is to give the orders and our responsibility is to honor them!

This means that the only question to be answered after reading a text like Acts 1 is whether or not we will choose to submit to His authority now. Make no mistake, in the future, the entire planet will bow but believers exercise the privilege of being able to serve in the midst of an otherwise crooked and perverse people. Those who have been given sight to behold the beauty and majesty of Christ must, by virtue of what they see, submit to the Glorious One which means that being a witness is not an option but a mandate. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon once said, "every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter". To that we, as followers of Christ, exclaim a hearty "Amen!"

May 11

2 Timothy 1:10

Today's passage serves to further illuminate the truth of what we studied yesterday about the authority of Christ. The truth is that Jesus is our Lord for many reasons but for our purposes today, let us highlight one of the most glorious proofs of Christ's Lordship. Jesus is Lord because He overcame an enemy that no one else could conquer.

The Apostle Paul begins his second epistle to Timothy with an admonition to Timothy to guard the Gospel of Christ which has been entrusted to Jesus' followers to proclaim. It is interesting to see the symmetry between Acts 1 and 2 Timothy 1 as we reflect upon the reality that what Jesus commanded of His immediate disciples is continuing to be practiced decades later. Paul is still concerned that Jesus' followers (in this case particularly Timothy) boldly and faithfully witness of the glories of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, in our verse for today we read of one of the primary reasons why Jesus commands our allegiance as well as a primary motivation behind the proclamation of Jesus' finished work on the Cross. Notice that Paul says Jesus "abolished death". The Greek term is translated in multiple ways in the New Testament. Sometimes it means to "utterly or totally destroy", in other passages it means to "nullify". Both of these give us a fuller meaning of the term as Paul is teaching Timothy, and us, that Jesus alone eradicated the power of death!

As Jesus stood before the disciples in His resurrected bodies and as He ascended on high to the place of worship and rule that awaited Him, He proclaimed His glorious might and displayed His credentials that demand our obedience. Why should we honor Jesus and not our own desires? Because Jesus overcame our greatest enemy, death, and without Him we have no hope of prevailing!

His victory is good news, but it comes with implications. If Jesus holds the keys to victory and if He alone is the means whereby death is defeated then we certainly must obey Him but, just as importantly, our faith in His victory demands we speak about Him! Folks, death is sure for every person who lives on this planet. No one has, or will, avoid death. Even more pressing is the reality that death ushers those who do not know Christ into an eternal state of torment and the ONLY means of altering that destination is a knowledge of and faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

What could be more important than this? Who would believe such a thing and not dedicate their lives to being witnesses of the One who abolished what we cannot hope to defeat in our own might? If we struggle to share our faith, we must ask whether we struggle to either understand the authority of Christ or understand the beauty of the message He has entrusted to us. It is only through Jesus that we gain immortality, and it is only through living for His message that we gain true purpose and meaning in life.

May 12

2 Timothy 2:23 & Titus 3:9

So, the resurrected and ascended Christ possesses all authority! I hope by now you are convinced of this truth but understanding His supernatural clout alone is not sufficient. We must understand both His rightful place of preeminence AND His expectations of us as we endeavor to obey His commands.

The good news is that Jesus gave explicit instructions regarding how we are to obey and honor Him in this life. The instructions in Acts 1 can really be broken down into three categories. Two things we are to embrace or pursue and one ditch to avoid. Before we get into the components of faithful witnessing, it is important to spend a day meditating on the warning of Christ prior to His command.

If you remember, the disciples ask Jesus a question in verse 6 of Acts 1. The question relates to the end of human history when the Messiah returns to set up His rule and reign on earth. They wanted to know if that moment of earthly triumph had arrived, and Jesus' answer is incredibly insightful. Instead of replying with an answer to their question, Jesus reminds His followers that they are not supposed to know the answer to those things. God, in His providence, has hidden some portions of His plan from His followers for reasons known only to Him. Jesus' admonition is that His followers do not attempt to discover what God has not revealed, an activity that ends in foolishness and futility, instead they are to be busy doing what God has instructed them to accomplish!

The underlying truth in this portion of the passage is that there are things that we simply are not supposed to know or understand. Deuteronomy 29:29 refers to "secret things" that belong only to the Lord our God. These secret things include many of our questions about the end times (what day will Jesus' return? When will the Antichrist arise? What are the details of the Mark of the Beast?). These questions can consume so much of our time! In fact, they often do.

The problem with these pursuits is not curiosity, the issue is the lack of clarity on the conclusion. The simple truth is that when we attempt to speculate in areas in which God has not spoken, we never arrive at a clear answer and we divert attention away from those things which we are commanded by God to accomplish. This informs Paul's warnings to Timothy and Titus who are his two pastoral proteges.

It's always interested me that Paul includes this warning to both men. Evidently, he understood that there would be great temptation to enter into foolish and speculative conversations about things that could not be proven and, frankly, had no bearing on the mission God has given believers. He knew that there would be those who wanted to draw these men away from their task with frivolous and unanswerable questions and so he warns them not to be sidetracked!

The warning is applicable for us as well. Instead of fixating on the obscure and unrevealed, our job is to know and apply all that God has given us even as we exercise faith in Him to tie up all of the loose ends. When we are busy about His work, we have little time for the things that He alone knows but in our diligence we are fulfilling the part of His plan He has entrusted to us and in our faith, we know that He will deliver in a marvelous and wise way.

May 13

1 Corinthians 1:23

If we are to avoid speculations, we must be diligent in pursuing proclamation! Jesus' instructions to His disciples do not end with what they are to avoid, instead He tells them that they are to be His "witnesses". The term is a familiar one in our world today. We are still called "witnesses" in the court of law. These are men and women who have some firsthand experience with the issue at hand. They have seen or heard something that provides them a certain level of credibility in a court of law.

In the same way, Jesus instructs His believers to be His witnesses as they testify of His identity and His accomplished work on the cross. Evidently, Christ does not expect this to be a secondary pursuit in His disciples' lives, instead the work of testifying of Him is central to their very existence. The rest of the Bible bears out this truth. As we follow these disciples along, we will notice that they consistently bear witness to Jesus.

Our passage for today is another example of this playing out, this time in the Apostle Paul's life. If you remember on Sunday, we saw many different passages in Acts whereby the disciples witnessed (3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 26:14-20) but the work of witnessing is not isolated to this one book. Instead, we read in many other places of the Apostles taking the work of witnessing seriously, even building their entire ministry around this one message.

In 1 Corinthians 1, we read Paul summarizing his ministry to the Jews and Gentiles. In this portion of Scripture, Paul says "we preach Christ crucified..." The entirety of His earthly life and ministry was dedicated to witnessing, specifically to proclaiming the truth of Jesus' death and victorious resurrection!

Unfortunately, many pulpits today do not herald the message of Christ crucified. We have decided that it is better and more effective to give people more practical and palatable instructions than such an old, archaic and, frankly, offensive message! Unlike Paul, we are concerned that the Gospel is a stumbling block to those who do not believe and so we have decided not to proclaim it often. In fact, many ministries are characterized by a strategy whereby the Gospel is supposed to be "snuck in" well after we lure people to our churches with other more "applicable" teachings.

This might seem wise to the world, but it flies in the face of Christ's commands and our apostolic example. Folks, Jesus does not need you to "tame" Him to the masses. We are not making the Gospel more effective by hiding it or only giving it limited exposure. Instead, Jesus' authority and clear instruction demands that we take this precious message and preach it as often and clearly as we possibly can! May it be said of you that you preach Christ. May the community know that Smyrna Baptist preaches Christ crucified! That we do believe in the reality of sin, the necessity of Christ's substitutionary atonement, the reality of His victory over death and the responsibility of every believer to bear witness to His marvelous deeds to a lost and often antagonistic world. We are to be Jesus' "witnesses", not His public relations team. He doesn't need us to clean Him up but He has called us to get His message out!

May 14

Philippians 4:13 & 2 Timothy 4:17

One of the truths I hope I mentioned (I am writing this four days before the sermon!) is that the term “witness” as utilized in verse 8 of our passage is elsewhere translated as “martyr” in Revelation 17. The point is relatively clear, to be a witness for Christ in a fallen and antagonistic world is to undertake a task that requires great sacrifice, even the possibility of losing our life!

That last sentence might seem a bit exaggerated, but the testimony of the rest of the Scriptures and church history bears the truth out. Of the 12 apostles who were present to hear Jesus’ Words, history teaches us that 11 were killed for their message and the one who was “spared” was exiled. Christian history is littered with men and women who lost their lives because of their message. These things teach us that what Christ has called us to in Acts 1 is incredibly difficult. So difficult, in fact, that there must be supernatural power involved.

Jesus told His disciples to “wait here” until power from on high arrived. We know, based on Acts 2, that the power Jesus was referring to constitutes the very presence of the Spirit of God in their lives. The Spirit was necessary for many reasons but certainly the necessity of His supernatural strength must not be ignored.

The reality of the strength of the Spirit is present in many New Testament writings. I have selected two such passages today. The first is often taken out of context. Paul is not telling the Philippians that he could dunk a basketball or sing like a rock star because of the presence of the Spirit! Instead, it is Christ (through the Holy Spirit) who strengthens Paul to fulfill the ministry that God has entrusted to Paul to fulfill. The “all things” in the text relates to “all things” that God would call Paul to faithfully accomplish in accordance with His will that Paul be a “witness” of Jesus Christ.

The second text is looking back to Paul’s ministry and the faithfulness that he enjoyed. You will note that the power of God is what Paul credits for strengthening him as he remained faithful to be a witness of Christ amongst the Gentiles.

What is the point? Sometimes when we read a book like Acts, we fixate on the obviously supernatural and bizarre. It is certainly true that the Holy Spirit descended on the first disciples in a tongue of fire but that is not normative! Instead, His supernatural descent marked a turning point in history whereby God’s people were symbolically and literally indwelt by the power of God for the task Christ had given. Nevertheless, the true work of the Spirit manifested itself for decades, as the Third Member of the Trinity was busy strengthening and encouraging and providing discernment for the task at hand.

Brother and sister, all of us need this power. We need strength, resolve and stamina that is not intrinsic to our fallen condition. We need the Helper who will bring the Word of God to our remembrance, intercede for us when we do not know what to say and provide peace that transcends all understanding. This power might not be as obvious to the world, but it is absolutely crucial to the believer and cherished by those who are busy fulfilling Christ’s commands.

May 15

Matthew 12:35-37

Today's text is a powerful statement about how all men manifest the condition of their own heart. The simple truth is that what we say reflects who we are as it constitutes the very overflow of the heart that resides within. Nevertheless, I want to make a specific point in utilizing this passage for our devotion.

We stated that the ascension, and subsequent reminder by the angels of Jesus' return in like manner, serves as accountability for the days ahead. Why are we faithful to Jesus' commands? We have mentioned His authority, but it is imperative that we note the guarantee that we will encounter this authoritative Lord when our time has been completed. This assurance of a meeting and the description of our reunion as being one in which we are judged by virtue of the words we speak (to include our words of witness or lack thereof) serve as great motivators for faithfulness.

The truth of the matter is that our days are spent underneath the supervision of a Sovereign King who will one day require us to answer for how we leveraged our time. Those who think they are somehow getting away unscathed by choosing to be disobedient to the Lord's clear commands have not meditated clearly upon His Words in texts such as Matthew 12. Our God will not be mocked, and He will not allow our disobedience to go unnoticed.

As we noted in the sermon on Sunday, there is a greater motivation than just accountability, but this does not negate the foundational nature of our conviction that we will meet Christ in glory. The Bible says "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" which implies that wisdom far exceeds mere fear, but it is not less than reverential fear of God. Sometimes, when we do not see a pathway to joy, we must obey simply because we fear God's displeasure. In life, we do not always feel motivated but the unchanging nature of the judgment of Christ upon our lives as His followers is an ever-ready source of inspiration. When you do not feel like it, allow the fear of God to propel you forward in spite of your hindrances!

Now, some may ask, how does this square with a text like Romans 8:1? The answer is that while we will give an account for our faithfulness (or disobedience), Christ's blood assures that those who truly believe will not be cast out of the Father's presence. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which we will have to give an account for how we used our time, and the very disappointment or displeasure of God should serve as a powerful motivator for our obedience. Who wants to stand before the Lord one day with nothing to show for the lives He gave us? Who wants to just merely "get in?" Wouldn't it be far greater if we are able to stand in His presence, as imperfect as we were, with wonderful fruit from the dedication we exhibited to His plan? We live in light of seeing Him again and this reunion is a wonderful tool to keep us moving forward in paths of righteousness.

May 16

Matthew 6:19-21

Sometimes the subject of obedience to Christ's command to witness is framed in an unfortunate manner. There are those who claim that we do what we do solely out of duty. Certainly, as we studied yesterday, there are times in which duty might serve as our primary motivator, but the pinnacle of our Christian experience should be delight! Why are we faithful to Christ? Why are we so willing to give up so much in this life? Why are we motivated to be ridiculed, endangered and even killed? Because we believe there is great reward in heaven!

The Christian life is not about ETERNAL self-denial. It is about TEMPORAL self-denial for eternal privileges and blessings. There are those who claim that we deny self just to do it but the biblical testimony is that we deny self, obey Christ and submit to Him out of conviction that He is a far greater reward than anything in life and that He possesses pleasure that the world cannot touch.

Listen to how David describes his joyous expectations in relationship to God in Psalm 16:11 "You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." Why does David follow God in the path of life? Well, partly because he looks forward to the day of reaping His reward which is the commendation and fellowship with the Almighty and all that being in His presence entails.

Folks, if you do not believe that there is real treasure in heaven. If you are trying to live faithfully in the moment without a conviction that your sacrifices pale in comparison to the joy of eternity, you will be miserable and unsuccessful in many respects. Christ did not teach us that the desire for pleasure and treasure is evil, He teaches us that true pleasure and treasure does not come from this fallen world, it only comes as we know and enjoy Him.

As we witness and obey the Lord's commands, we do so believing that there is coming a day when all of those acts of faith-filled obedience pay off in a glorious way. The great missionary, and martyr, Jim Elliot was once asked why he would sacrifice his lifestyle to take the message of the Gospel to unreached people at great personal cost. His response was this "he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep (life on earth) to gain that which he cannot lose (eternal joy in the presence of the Lord)". Do you hear in that statement the mentality we are speaking about today? Elliot, and every faithful Christian, understands that obedience leads to joy and the pinnacle of joy is realized when we see our Savior again!

The angels reminded the disciples that Jesus would return. His coming again served as a bedrock conviction that bred faithfulness. It was their reunion with Him that allowed Paul to say to "die is gain" and Peter to faithful Gospel proclamation even at great personal risk. They were looking forward to the city whose maker and builder was God, and we ought to do the same! May we live for joy, may we store up treasures in heaven and may we do so understanding that what we currently sacrifice is miniscule in comparison to what we eternally gain!