



2023 Weekly Devotions

Week of: May 8th - 14th

Sermon: May 7th



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH
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May 8

Proverbs 29:5

The words of Tertullus in Acts 24 drip with deceit. As the platformed spokesmen for the enemies of God stands to address Felix, he begins with platitudes that everyone knew were false. Felix is lauded for his role in bringing peace to the Jews all the while history, and the popular conviction of that particular moment, tell us that Felix was anything but an instrument of peace! The truth is that Felix was terrible at his job, but the more important truth is that the Jews weren't interested in the truth. Their intent was not to proclaim what was real or verifiable, their aim was to carry out a truly heinous plot against God and his chosen instrument, Paul.

I've learned over the years that men naturally crave praise, even when we don't deserve it! Mankind is far more interested in hearing compliments than criticisms. This is true in my life, if not checked, I naturally run to those who simply tell me what I want to hear. The impulse is natural, but it is incredibly destructive and today I want to try to illustrate why.

Some people wonder what can be so wrong with building up another person. Why is it such a terrible offense to give compliments, even if they are embellished? The answer is that flattery has at least two consequences. First, flattery denies biblical teaching. When a person aims to tell another how wonderful they are, they are speaking a message that contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture. The Bible describes mankind in universally pessimistic terms. There is "no one good" (Romans 3:10), no one living is righteous (Psalm 143:2), "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23), all of us have gone astray (Isaiah 53:6) and our hearts are full of evil (Ecclesiastes 9:3).

Second, flattery takes our eyes off of the One who is good. What Felix needed to hear had nothing to do with his relative success, or lack thereof, what he needed was to see the goodness of Another. The Gospel message has never been fixated on "finding the good in yourself" or "becoming a better you" or walking in your victory. The Gospel is fundamentally and solely about finding good outside of yourself and walking in the victory of another.

These truths help us understand the assertion of Proverbs 29:5. How is it that the flattering tongue spreads a net for our feet? The answer is that it traps us in thinking that leads us away from salvation in Christ! Flattery does not lead us to seek mercy and the imputed righteousness of another, flattery leads us to the erroneous conviction that we are somehow plenty good enough in our natural state. This is dangerous and it is also why flattery is a primary weapon of the enemy.

The Jews were not seeking the good of Felix, they were seeking the harm of Paul. Likewise, those in your life who only tell you what you want to hear might seem like friends, but they are really enemies in allied garb.

May 9

Jude 1:16

If you've lived in this world for anytime (and if you're reading or hearing this, I'm going to assume you have!), you know that things are often not as they appear. How many of us have received emails promising to wire millions of dollars if we just provide our personal information? How many "get rich quick schemes" or "shady salesman" have you run across? Our world is full of things that are not as they appear, and this is why we have so many lasting, if trite, phrases to communicate this truth. Think about it, haven't you grown up hearing things like "some things are too good to be true", or "not everything that glitters is gold" or, more personally, be aware of those who are "wolves in sheep's clothing".

In each of those statements, the same sentiment exists. We realize that there are many things in life that are really just attractive traps. The Bible contains many warnings about these kinds of situations and the individuals that perpetuate them. Today's verse describes a group of people who were outwardly religious, in fact they had crept into the church unnoticed, but inwardly they were ravenous wolves who were bent on destruction.

The playbook of the false converts in Jude is eerily similar to the strategy employed by the Jews in Acts 24. In fact, Jude warns us that these enemies of the cross will be guilty of showing favoritism in order to gain an advantage. To be clear, their goal is to represent an affinity and a love for their fellow man but in their hearts their actions are just a means to their selfish ends.

As the Jews stood before Felix, they were not interested in a long-term relationship, they were attempting to leverage his authority for their selfish and sinful desires. He meant nothing to them, but they knew that if they could convince him otherwise, he would be a willing pawn in their hands. Folks, the way that we discern a person's love for us is not found in their words of flattery. Those who tell you exclusively what you want to hear are almost certainly lying to you! Their goal is not to build you up but to gain an advantage and this means that they are not for you or concerned with you in the slightest.

It seems to me that, pastorally speaking, we have an epidemic of such religious leaders today. There are many who preach what sounds nice or therapeutic, but their end is not as it appears. They line their pockets with your money and stand on platforms that you build all the while claiming to have your best interest at heart. Oh, dear brothers and sisters, be leery of such people. God has given us a clear revelation in the Bible and much of it is hard to hear but it is better for the truth of the Word of God to momentarily pierce our hearts leading to repentance and unending life than for the falsehoods of selfish preachers to momentarily build our egos all the while leading us to eternal ruin.

May 10

Romans 2:5

Paul and Felix's relationship lasted much longer than many realize. Towards the end of Acts 24, we read that their dialogues took place over the course of more than 2 years. Evidently, Felix was interested in what Paul had to say but his interest never turned into anything more. In describing the result of some of their initial interactions, Luke says that Felix was "alarmed". The word is intentionally expressive, and it indicates that Felix was more than a little bothered by what Paul had to say.

Thankfully, we don't have to wonder why Felix was "alarmed" because Luke tells us! Specifically, we are told that Felix's alarm came about, in part, because of Paul's discussion of righteousness. A few days ago, we spoke about the biblical teaching regarding man's righteousness, or lack thereof. The Bible is clear that no mortal is righteous but that doesn't mean that righteousness doesn't exist! While man is not righteous, God is exceedingly and totally righteous.

At first glance, this might sound reasonable and not all that "alarming" but when we consider the necessary results of righteousness, we are led to a more "alarming" conclusion. You see, righteousness is not solely theoretical. To be righteous is not just to have the right convictions, it is to do the right thing. One cannot be considered righteous if his actions do not match his words and this is true of the Lord as well. This means that God's righteousness demands not just a clear Word delineating truth from error, His righteousness demands clear and strong responses to unrighteousness.

If God were to look the other way or choose not to punish sin, He would cease to be righteous. Furthermore, once man realizes the fact that he has violated God's law and, therefore, deserves to be judged according to God's righteousness, then alarming conclusions are reached! Felix left alarmed because he knew that the words of flattery weren't true about him. Paul was able to easily, and convincingly, show the Roman official that he was in violation of God's standard, and this was alarming to Felix.

Our text for today tells us that the result of our unrighteousness and God's righteousness is a day of coming judgment. On that day, all of the wrath that was stored up for us as a product of our sinful rebellion against God will be unleashed against the unrighteous. This is a promise, but it is not a guarantee. You see, the message that Paul was really preaching to Felix did not terminate Felix's unrighteousness. Instead, the good news that marked Paul's ministry is that One came into the world to take the wrath of God that was previously stored up for men like Felix (and us).

We believe that God, in His righteousness, must punish sin but we further confess that God, in His mercy, sent someone to be punished in our place. The righteousness of God demanded that sin be atoned for. He simply could not look the other way, but the mercy of God deemed it good to send a substitute. There was a day in history where the wrath of God was already poured out. Jesus stood in the place of lost men like Felix, and you, and He did so for the purpose of redeeming you from the sure wrath to follow. This is the way to salvation, and it is the means that God has established to be both righteous and merciful. The tragedy of this narrative is not that Felix was alarmed; the real bummer is that his alarm never led him to embrace the sacrifice of Christ on his behalf. Judgment is coming but it can be averted if you will simply look to Jesus.

May 11

Isaiah 55:6

Paul tells us that his message was fundamentally and exclusively centered on the Gospel of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:2), therefore we can know quite definitively what Felix heard in his discussions with the Apostle. Paul was most assuredly talking to the Roman official about Jesus while imploring Felix to repent and believe. The point is that Paul's message demanded a response, but Felix never seemed to provide one.

It may seem that Felix's sin was one of omission. Some readers would claim that his transgression was simply neglecting to do anything with Paul's message. After all, the text doesn't seem to indicate that Felix ever rejected the Gospel, on the contrary, it seems as if Felix was ready and willing to hear the verities of the redemption of Christ repeatedly. Nevertheless, the biblical reality is that Felix's indecision was, in itself, a decision and it was a grave mistake.

Some people are guilty of following in the Roman official's footsteps in this manner. Many hear the truth of the Gospel and put off a response. They think that they can deal with the issue or matter "tomorrow" or "next week" and, in so doing, kick the proverbial can down the road a bit. The problem, of course, is that we are not guaranteed more time. At some point, Felix had a final conversation with Paul but there is no indication that he knew when that was coming. On some day, Felix walked out of Paul's presence for the last time and, because he had neglected to respond to the Gospel, his chance to repent and believe and be saved passed. In this way, Felix stands as a stark warning to all of us. We have a responsibility and an obligation to seek the Lord, as we respond to His Gospel invitation, when we hear truth.

As I close today, I want to conclude with two, broad pieces of application. I realize that this is a diverse audience and, therefore, you dear reader may be in a very different position both temporally and in relationship to the Lord than others. For some of you, the admonition is clear, repent and believe. Many of you have heard the truth about Christ for years but you've never taken the necessary step of believing. You are guilty of Felix's foolish sin and it's time to learn from his example. There are no guarantees of another hearing, seek the Lord today! For others, you are a believer, but you have been guilty of hearing the clear teaching of God's Word on some subject without acting in obedience. Christians are in constant danger of becoming callous and apathetic to truth for this precise reason. It is quite natural for people to get into the habit of hearing and not acting. Some of you have heard and read biblical commands for years without responding. Perhaps you know that God has commanded you to share the Gospel with that difficult family member or maybe you have been made aware again of your need to return to active involvement in the body of Christ or your issue might possibly be summarized by a refusal to turn from some besetting sin and pursue Christ.

Whatever the case may be, you are not guaranteed more time and the choice to not decide is, in fact, a decision! May we press into the Lord by acting obediently today trusting that He has given us this moment in which to be faithful.

May 12

James 4:14

You may consider this devotion a “part 2”, continuing yesterday’s theme. As I reflect on the urgency of Isaiah’s command, I am struck by how relevant the admonition to seek the Lord “while there is still time” is in our mortal existence. Life passes... quickly. The older I get, the more obvious that truth becomes. Last week, we celebrated my oldest daughter’s 11th birthday. I remember, like it was yesterday, the first moment I saw her precious face. I can recall holding her in my hands and thinking about the blessing and possibilities her life would bring. It seems like yesterday that she was learning to walk and talk. I recall dropping her off for kindergarten and even watching her learn to read and write.

Those days are long gone but they seem like they shouldn’t be. I find myself looking at Analeigh (and the other two for that matter) and wondering where the time has gone. Life passes quickly and this is exactly the point that James makes in our text today. Life is but a mist. James’ inspired choice is a prescient and vivid example to be sure. There may be nothing in life that disappears as quickly as mist (except perhaps a pizza at a youth gathering). We’ve all had the experience of looking out over a field or down a road early in the morning to a thick fog or mist only to look back a short time later and see no indication of its having been present. James wants us to know that our life is that way.

It disappears quickly, often without any indication. This truth, that life is fleeting, should prompt us to want to act with urgent conviction in our relationship with Christ. We are not guaranteed tomorrow and even if we are given another day, we only have a relative few on this planet. Furthermore, while it is true that this life is fleeting, it is equally valid to say that the next life is permanent. Folks, we believe that all of us will live eternally, somewhere. That final and eternal destination will be determined based on our response here.

What we do with our time and how we steward and heed to resources God has provided will be the determinant factor on our eternal state. Do you live with that kind of mentality? Are you aware that your reading, studying and contemplating the Scriptures and, specifically, the Gospel of Christ is the kind of thing that has eternal ramifications? Do you attend worship on Sundays with the understanding that what is being preached are the very Words that lead to the Person who has given us eternal life? Are you earnestly devoting yourself to the things of God in your day-to-day life understanding that you won’t be here for long but your faith and obedience in this life will either bring blessing or curses in the next?

I suppose the goal of today’s devotion is simple, my hope is to either remind you not to be apathetic or to awaken you from your spiritual malaise. Eternity is fast approaching, the mist is going to dissipate, your life will be taken from you at some point and when it goes, all that will matter is your relationship to the One who has died to give you eternal life with Him. May we prioritize our lives with that meeting in mind.

May 13

Acts 24:25

As we close this week's devotions, I want to deal with two possible objections to the call we have made to repent and believe. The first objection has to do with the trustworthiness of the Gospel. Is it really justifiable to believe in such a message? Today's text demonstrates that Paul thought so!

The ESV translation of our verse for the day says that Paul "reasoned" with Felix. I prefer that rendering of the original language because I believe it gets to the relative heart of the matter. Paul's speaking and admonishing Felix was.... Reasonable. It is reasonable to believe in the Gospel and I want to give you two reasons why.

First, it is reasonable to believe that salvation must come from outside of ourselves. Stated in the inverse, it is unreasonable to think we can save ourselves. I once heard a theologian talk about the depravity (or sinfulness) of man saying, "no one has lied to you more than you have!" His point was that we know ourselves, and the depth of our delusion and failures, most. When thinking about how often we mess up what we claim to embrace and believe, it is striking that no one would want to trust in their own abilities. How many times have you failed? How often have you not lived up to your own standards? How many times have you made a mess of your life? Why would anyone look at the mountain of evidence to the contrary and think they can somehow preserve their soul? It seems to me that what is inside of man has been demonstrated to be substandard, and even sinful, over and over again in our collective and individual history.

Second, it is reasonable to trust in Christ for salvation. The simple truth is that the Gospel message is not rooted in the theoretical. We believe in Christ, in large part, because He died on Friday and rose again on Sunday. Jesus physically died at a specific moment in world history, and He physically rose a short time later in Jerusalem. We do not worship and believe in Christ because of His spiritual pontifications or hypothetical teachings alone; we worship Him because He is the only One in history who has died and gotten back up of His own accord. Wouldn't it be reasonable to trust such a man with your soul? Who else has the credentials to substantiate faith like this?

When Paul spoke to Felix, I have no doubt that their conversation went in various directions but I'm equally sure that it was fixated and founded upon the finished work of Christ. Like Felix, we too have need to see our own impotence to save and embrace the One who overcame death, hell and the grave for us. Seeing Jesus' power over the grave and trusting in Him alone in our hope of triumphing over death is the most reasonable action in the universe.

May 14

Romans 10:13

Today's objection is common but, thankfully, easily answered. When pressed with the Gospel invitation to repent and believe, many have responded that God could not possibly save such a wretched sinner like them. There are many reasons behind this objection, but the recognition of our sin is realistic and valid. Is it possible that God is not willing to save some? Are there people on earth who have gone too far? Where is God's mercy offered and who is a candidate?

The answer is found in Romans 10:13 and, thankfully, it is a universal promise. Paul's statement is unqualified, "All" who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. There is no hierarchy or moral standard that a sinner must meet in order to be saved. Fortunately for us, any person who is living and willing to repent and believe will be welcomed. As we close, I want us to drill down on this thought for just a moment.

First, we must recognize the credibility of the one who wrote this statement. We believe that the Bible is inspired by God. This means that, ultimately, the Bible is a product of the Spirit of God. Nevertheless, real human authors were used and guided by God to write various books and this book, the Epistle to the Romans, was written by the Apostle Paul. This is an important fact because Paul was a wretched individual prior to his salvation. The Apostle was characterized by hatred for Jesus and His followers, as demonstrated by his desire to persecute members of the church before his conversion. He was also a self-righteous Pharisee and Pharisees were Jesus' chief human opponent while our Lord was physically on this planet. The point is that if Paul could be saved, surely anyone else can be as well.

Second, notice the universal commitment from God. "All" who call on the name of the Lord. I realize we don't have many Greek scholars in our midst, but thankfully you don't need to be one to grasp the scope of this word. The term "all" means, "everyone". Everyone who would believe on Christ, calling out for Him by name, will be saved. There is no prerequisite and no further action needed, the simple turning to Jesus (and therefore turning from sin) and calling to Him in faith that He will hear and save is enough.

In my experience, Satan uses two, opposite, strategies to attempt to dissuade people from salvation. The first is self-righteousness. There are those who simply don't believe they need help in salvation. The other is shame. Many people are discouraged from crying out to God because they believe they're beyond help. If this is you, know that Jesus has a history of saving sinners and His desire and mission to seek and to save the lost includes even the dregs of society. If you are reading or hearing this today, know that Jesus' offer of salvation is available to you. He knew you before the world began and He chose to come to die to redeem you anyway. Nothing you can say or do can disqualify you from His grace if you would just call on His name.