

October 7, 2007

Today Part VI

Well it all began on the first Sunday in September and we draw it to a close on this the first Sunday in October. What is it? Our sermon series based on Hebrews 4:7 titled today. God has set aside a day and called it today; today if you hear His voice do not harden your heart. It's been a sermon series about preparing for heaven and living a righteous life; a series about putting our faith to work. Our journey has taken us to several destinations first we saw that Christians are to be in church its commanded in the Old Testament, the apostles admonished us to do this and Christ himself modeled it. In week two we saw that our faith should motivate us to wholesome talk and service to others. Week three called on us to pray continually while week four showed us the importance of Bible study and the need to follow what the Bible says. Last week we saw that we are to obey and submit to our spiritual leaders and that our spiritual leaders are to submit themselves to do and obey God's word as people or teachers who will give an account to God himself.

In our final week we take a journey that will look at devotion and the effect it will have on our lives. In week four we saw that to devote our selves or to devote means "to dedicate by a solemn act. To center the attention or activities of oneself. Suggests motives as solemn as a vow." We've seen the devotion of the early church already in our first week Paul encouraged Timothy in 1 Timothy 13 to devote himself to the public reading of scripture. In week three Colossians 4:2 told us to devote yourselves to prayer. We are supposed to make prayer a priority. In week four Christians devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching. In other words church, prayer and Bible study were the center of their attention and activities. They vowed to uphold these things. Is this the level of devotion that Christ calls us to also? Well, to answer that question consider what Jesus says in Matthew 5:11 & 12, "Blessed are you when people insult you persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

We are to be so devoted to our faith that we are willing to suffer unjustly for it. We are to take the insults, the false accusations even physical persecution, which could include death, and we're to rejoice and be glad. Why? Because we are then at the same level as the prophets. Now think about that why were the prophets persecuted and killed? Not because they could tell the future this was only a tiny aspect of their work. No, they were persecuted and killed because they proclaimed God's word with their voice and through their lives. This is what prophecy means to proclaim more particularly to proclaim God's word. Their words and their lives were a vivid reminder of how others should live. When others are confronted with this when they are in the presence of someone who is truly living as God's calls them to live well then others feel guilty and when they feel this guilt in such a person's presence they have two choices. One humble themselves, repent and change their life so the guilt is gone to remove the reminder of their guilt. Harass the prophet, belittle or slander the prophet, kill the prophet. So how was the dedication of the prophets and the apostles evident? How was it that they became like this litmus test? Well they were devoted. They devoted themselves to prayer, to Bible study, to church to wholesome talk, to spiritual authority and I believe three additional aspects. And one of those is stewardship.

The prophet Malachi makes this one very clear and I have a funny feeling the people really didn't like what he had to say too much. He says in Malachi 3, "I the Lord do not change so you, descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me and I will return to you says the Lord Almighty. But you ask how are we to return? Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me but you ask how do we rob you? In tithes and offerings you are under a curse the whole nation of you because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the store house that there may be food in my house test me in this says the Lord almighty and see if I will not thrown open the flood gates of heaven and pour out so much blessing you will not have enough room for it." The reality of scripture is very simply this beginning with Abraham and continuing through the prophets we see that those who are devoted to God give tithe, they practice good stewardship. The early Christians were encouraged to do the same in 2 Corinthians 9:7 Paul tells them to be "cheerful givers". Did they take this seriously? When we look back

there to Acts 2 right after Peter's Pentecost sermon we hear that the early Christians were selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need. They didn't just tithe they took what they owned, they sold it and they gave it to the ministry. Paul also tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 6: 18, "Be generous a devoted Christian is one who cheerfully gives generously".

The second areas that showed their devotion was their zeal for evangelism. Consider what Paul says about our evangelistic efforts I Thessalonians 2: 19, "For what is our hope are joy or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when He comes. Is it not you?" Now your first reaction to that verse may be what? But think of what Paul is saying. Paul is saying that when he is in the presence of Christ when he is in heaven his greatest joy will be those who he witnessed to and have been saved. You know I've heard a lot of people talk about their dreams. Dreams about what they would do if they won the lottery and many people talk about what they would give away they would use that money to make lives better for others. Earthly wealth is transitory its gone when you die as a Christian you have right now in you something that is worth more than any amount of money. You have the keys to salvation. Now if you're one of those people who though gosh if I won the power ball and I had \$300 million I would take like \$290 million and give it away to help others. Well you got more than \$290 million are you going to share it? Can you imagine the tremendous joy you would feel if you saw someone in heaven that you witnessed to and God took you aside and said he's here because of you, well-done good and faithful servant. Now imagine the opposite how sick would you feel if you saw that same person in hell and you knew you did nothing to prevent it. Why do you think Paul went on all those missionary trips? He wanted to get the good news to people so that they would be in heaven and his joy would be complete when he got to heaven and saw them. Why do you think all the apostles on the windows that are above you in this church were willing to suffer imprisonment and death? They were devoted to evangelism and I hate to say it but evangelism our church has not done real well and it is something we really must improve. We have a phenomenal thing to share its called salvation.

Finally the final aspect of devotion is our motive. When it comes to motive I honestly do not think you can find a better example than John the Baptist for a proper motive for why we do it. In our

Gospel this morning people came to him and they want to stir up trouble they tell him Jesus is baptizing people now on the Jordan River too and now everyone is going to him. This is bad for your business what are you going to do? John's response is flat out awesome he says, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourself can testify that I said I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him. The bride belongs to the bridegroom the friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine and it is now complete. He must become greater I must become less." John is saying that the church is the bride the church belongs to Jesus. John is saying that I'm the best man I rejoice when I see the church going to Jesus, he must become greater I've got to become less. Then he makes it very clear he says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life but whoever rejects the Son will not see light for God's wrath remains on him." John just makes it clear I don't have salvation Jesus has salvation go to him go now. This passage has had a profound impact on me for John it was all about doing God's will John was not looking for accolades he wanted more than anything to see God's kingdom grow and to see people give glory to God and when I consider John he is the one that I hope I can model my life after. I hope that when I die on my tombstone something would be written like Jesus became greater Matt became less.

Devotion, this is what its about. Is your faith the center of your life? Do you make church, bible study, prayer, stewardship, evangelism and service to God and others the top priorities in your life? Maybe the hardest question is this and it is a question I end the sermon with, can you honestly join John and say, "God must become greater I must become less?"

In our Savior's name, Amen.