

Galatians 5:17-26

17For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. 18But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. 19Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. 26Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Making God's Vision OUR Vision

Jesus says, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

I don't know if that's always such a great thing. Aren't there times you wish Jesus wasn't with you, times you wish he'd just turn his head or cover his ears? I've noticed a tendency among people to try to put a distance between themselves and God, with pastors serving as intermediaries. The way I've seen this played out is when I so cleverly go out to meet people without a clerical collar. I don't just come out and tell people I'm a pastor; instead I like to get into *honest* conversation with them. And during that conversation the person I'm conversing with may get a little colorful with their language. And when they get around to asking me what I do and I tell them, they are embarrassed and apologetic. "You should have told me." And my assumption is that if they are so careful the way they speak and act when they know they are around a pastor, they would be EXTREMELY CAUTIOUS in the presence of God. But they don't imagine themselves as really being in God's presence: God is in churches and cathedrals, but not in pubs or at New Year's Parties.

People really wish that God was NOT around most of the time. And you know what? There are times when I wish that God was not around. When I think or act pretentiously because I'm a pastor. I remember once...bingo..."someone who reads the Bible daily" I signed his bingo card because I *wanted him and other teens to think that I actually did read the Bible daily*. SO NOT ONLY DID I LIE: I ALSO BEHAVED PROUDLY. I TRIED TO PERPETUATE THE IMAGE THAT I WAS SO PIOUS AND RIGHTEOUS AND DEVOUT. I FORGOT THAT GOD WAS AROUND AND PARADED AROUND AS SOME HOLIER-THAN-THOU YOUTH LEADER WHEN WASN'T. I DIDN'T WANT GOD AROUND TO BLOW MY COVER, BUT JESUS REMINDS US THAT HE IS WITH US, TO THE END OF THE AGE.

We are at the end of our worship series, “Living into God’s future” and the question we need to ask ourselves today is “Are we really interested in pursuing the future that GOD desires? Or are we really pursuing a future that WE as individuals or clans or cliques or tribes or nations truly desire? And if we’re uncomfortable with the reality that JESUS IS WITH US NOW AND TILL THE END OF THE AGE, might our discomfort stem from the fact that we are not really doing what he instructed us to do... Which is, as our Gospel lesson reminds us, “TO GO, AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS”? And I emphasize the word “disciple” because there are too many people who claim Jesus as their Lord but fail to even *try* to follow his commandments and even go so far as to justify their disobedience. Are those people really interested in making Jesus their Lord or are they more interested in belonging to a group that pursues their own common interests in the name of Jesus?

NOW I’LL BE HONEST, MAKING DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS IS QUITE A TALL ORDER. Not only must our own hearts be committed to serving Jesus Christ, but we have to keep up our morale. When we look at the world as a whole we may think that we’ve been losing ground, that Jesus is actually losing the battle and that the Kingdom of God is not attainable. Fewer people are going to church. Other religions are growing faster than Christianity. There is so much violence and hatred along with all those things Paul mentions in our Epistle reading - fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and there’s basic human pride that makes us want others to think that we are better than we truly are. BUT ALL THESE ISSUES DON’T CHANGE JESUS’ WORDS, HIS GREAT COMMISSION THAT **WE** GO OUT AND MAKE DISCIPLES.

So how do we do this when it seems that the world is moving in another direction, and we even battle our own hearts in order to follow Jesus’ commandments and truly make him our Lord? The answer is GRACE. We must always embrace the fact that Jesus is not only our LORD, but our SAVIOR as well. This is the essence of what I understand to be the GOSPEL, that God loves us and wants us despite our failures, past, present and future. We live in grace knowing that even when we run away from God that he runs after us to save us from self-destruction. We neglect and disobey him, and he remains faithful and forgiving. We don’t cheapen that fact by considering it some kind of loophole for getting to heaven; we receive it with joy and thanksgiving, and that in turn sparks a desire in us to do better in obeying and serving and loving. It’s that Gospel reality that gives a Christian a peace that Paul describes as “beyond understanding.” It’s that Gospel reality that makes our lives abundant and our joy complete.

It’s also that Gospel reality that enables a Christian to be REAL. We don’t need to be pretentious, trying to disguise our failures and our flaws; we can accept who we are because God accepts who we are. We can acknowledge that we need encouragement as much as anyone else. The gospel empowers us to see ourselves clearly, the beauty as well as the ugliness, but know that God loves us regardless.

And when we can see ourselves clearly, and be ourselves clearly, we are better able to see how self-deceived others can be, how flawed their reasoning is when they try to justify greed or bigotry. We can see how their own fear lures them into sin, and while we ourselves are not without sin we have a better grasp of the God’s plan, and we can see how the kingdom of Man so often opposes the Kingdom of God. And thus it’s important that we preach it, that we live it to the best of our ability, that we avoid the lures that would draw us into compromising God’s will, and we would encourage one another to pursue justice and peace with great vigor.

The take-home: First and foremost recognize and embrace the love and grace of God in which you dwell. Second, within that sphere of love and grace grasp the vision of God. Finally, give and receive encouragement in your pursuit of God’s kingdom in this world. Avoid the guilt that results from a lack of

faith in God's amazing grace, and avoid the indifference that results from the cheapening of that very costly grace, a grace that is demonstrated most poignantly by Jesus on the cross. Let that love and grace propel you to joyfully pursue God's kingdom with all your strength.