

Keep the Sword Sharp

***Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered:
and many such like things do ye.***

Mark 7:13

In describing the Christian soldier's spiritual armament in Ephesians 6, the Apostle Paul compares the Word of God with a sword. A sword is both an offensive and defensive weapon in a soldier's arsenal. It can deflect thrusts from enemy weapons while also attacking to achieve victory. Hebrews 4 also compares the Word of God to a sharp two-edged sword that is so sharp that it can not only penetrate the flesh but can also pierce the soul and spirit and discern the thoughts and intents of the heart. This Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, is the foundation upon which Christians build their spiritual lives. It is food for the soul, that brings conviction, comfort, hope, and inspiration for believers. It is meant to be heard and then incorporated into sincere application.

The context of today's verse is an occasion when our Lord is rebuking the Pharisees for their strict adherence to traditions rather than simple faith in God's Word. The Word loses its effectiveness when tradition replaces the truth. People can learn and routinely perform ceremonies and lose sight of the spiritual significance of The Word. Traditions had become so ingrained in the religious fabric of Judaism that the religious leaders lost sight of God's true purpose for them. Keeping the Sabbath was more important to them than helping someone in need. Outwardly demonstrating their religion was more important to them than humbly and sincerely obeying the Lord. Pharisees fastidiously kept the minute details of the law and traditions and omitted the weightier matters of judgment, mercy, and faith.

As sharp and powerful as the Word of God is, believers can dull its effectiveness by living out their faith to be seen by others and satisfy their prideful flesh. This manifests in a variety of ways. Do we carry our Bible to church yet rarely read it through the week? Do we attend prayer meetings and neglect the private prayer closet? Do we tithe our income and yet overlook needs that cross our path? Does our speech reflect a sincere faith when we are not around other believers?

May God help us to be aware of any habitual tradition we have developed to satisfy our pride but has caused the sword of His Word to become dull in our lives. With confidence and full trust in its commands let us shine for Him while hiding in His shadow.

J. Ekis

Diligent thoughts

*The thoughts of the diligent tend only to plenteousness; but of every one that is hasty only to want.
Proverbs 21:5*

The contrast in this proverb makes an interesting connection between thoughts and actions, as they relate to diligence and haste. While haste is not always a bad thing, and can be seen in negative, positive, or sometimes neutral contexts in scripture and in life, diligence is always found in a positive light. In most cases, especially in the Proverbs, haste generally has a negative connotation. Yet diligence is commended with respect to guarding one's heart, seeking good and God, tending to provision and to business, and especially keeping the precepts of God. We can imagine Mr. Aesop perhaps contemplating these contrasts as he composed the fable of the diligent tortoise and the hasty hare.

The contrast in this verse compels us to consider the thoughts of the diligent versus those of the hasty. We can start with the possibility that the thoughts of the diligent are more than of the hasty. Noah Webster told us that diligence is "steady application in business of any kind; constant effort to accomplish what is undertaken; exertion of body or mind without unnecessary delay or sloth; due attention; industry; assiduity." To constantly think through the best steps to a goal will require more thoughts than will reactionary haste between corrections to poorly devised plans, yet in the end will produce better results. Also, the thoughts of the diligent would tend to be deeper, and thus more consistent, whereas hasty thoughts have not enough time to develop.

While this concept has many life applications, let us apply it to one spiritual example, as Hebrews 11:6 tells us that God is a rewarder of the faithful that diligently seek Him. The hasty thinker in this case would come up wanting, as often men refuse to believe in God because they will not seek to understand Him. They instead require instant revelation. Since His ways and thoughts are far above ours, we cannot expect to hastily grasp even what is possible to understand of His ways. Yet, the careful and constant consideration of all that He has revealed to us in His word can yield sufficient understanding to build plenteous faith, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at those things which are not seen. By diligently learning what we can of Him, we solidify our reasons to trust Him who is past finding out. Thus, the apostle exhorts us to study (literally, be diligent) to show ourselves approved unto God (II Timothy 2:15), and we will certainly not be ashamed.

Looking for a City

*For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.
– Hebrews 11:10 –*

I often feel as though I have spent my entire life navigating between extremes. It seems I am always in situations where I am in the middle of things and often have to broker a balance. This is true of where I have resided as well. I am neither a country boy nor a city dweller, but rather a suburbanite, through and through. If I HAD to choose a residence in one of the extremities here on earth, however, I would have to say it would be the quiet of the fields as opposed to the bustle of the metropolis. I like to visit the urban areas, no doubt – but would take the serenity (and population sparsity) of the woods for the day-in-and-day-out environs of life and living.

That said, there is a City I am looking forward to not only exploring but dwelling in for eternity. And I know I'm not alone. All believers, like Abraham, are looking for that City with foundations, whose builder and maker is God Himself. Let us take a few moments to reflect upon the aspects of what a city is, and what that implies with regard to our eternal home...

Cities are places of population density. While that may be something some of us shun here on earth, we will all enjoy the crowd in heaven! Indeed, it is described as a place where an innumerable company of the angels of God and the redeemed saints from all ages will eternally bump elbows. Imagine walking down those streets of gold and running into Moses, or David, or Paul. Or think about what it will be like to converse with Gabriel or Michael or the angels that were at the tomb on Easter morning or the members of the Heavenly host that were in the skies over Bethlehem. Even with my propensities as a suburbanite, I'll take this crowd!

Cities are places of incessant activity. There will be so much to DO in Heaven, and all of it will be filled with meaning and purpose. And we won't ever tire in doing any of it!

Cities are places of festivity. In the City of God, there will never be a sour second, a mournful minute, or a dull day. It will be a place of constant joy and rejoicing – our hearts full to the brim enjoying our Christ and His glory!

Cities are places of abundance. Earthside, this equates to an abundance of places to shop, to eat, and to play. What fulness of opportunity must await us in the New Jerusalem!

Cities are places of beauty. Can we even begin to imagine how those streets of gold, those pearly gates, those gem-strewn foundations will reflect the glory of the Lamb Who lights the place?

And this City's builder and maker is God. That translates to no crime, no sin, no sorrow. Only eternal safety, security, purity, and joy will fill those streets.

Praise be unto Him Who is preparing our place in the City of God! --- *D. Murcek*

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Shut In

2Corinthians 11: 23 in prisons more frequent,

The preaching of the gospel brought its accompanying persecutions. Paul was no stranger to the dungeon. The deprivations of Roman incarceration were unimaginably severe though Paul had frequented varied accommodations depending on the city of his detention. He was chained in a common holding cell in Philippi (Acts 16:23– 30), imprisoned in probably better conditions in the praetorium at Caesarea (Acts 23:35), and held in relative comfort while in house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16). In Rome, Paul was responsible for maintaining himself during his imprisonment, including his meals and clothes (Acts 28:30). Conditions of imprisonment were closely linked to the status of the prisoner. Non-Roman citizens, even those of high status, were often harshly treated. In contrast, house arrest was typically more comfortable for the prisoner, who was usually physically chained to a guard but could still host visitors.

Paul was probably placed in an underground cell somewhere in Rome before his execution. It is possible that he was then imprisoned in the Roman Mamertine Prison in the Roman Forum. The ancient historian Sallust said it was twelve feet underground and described its appearance as: "disgusting and vile by reason of the filth, the darkness, and the stench." This was where major convicted enemies of the state were strangled or kept before being thrown off the Tarpeian Rock on the Capitoline Hill.

To Timothy, Paul writes his last will and testament from this cell where he not only exhorts him to "preach the word" but also includes his request for items of necessity. A cloke, his treasured books, but "especially the parchments". *II Timothy 4:13* In this desperate season of want the apostle would find his comfort in a tattered coat, his primitive commentaries, and especially the scrolls of Old Testament scripture.

In some ways, our recent COVID quarantine has afforded us some perspective in this mandated house arrest in which we found ourselves. It is a far cry from the severity of Paul's sufferings but it can give us all some awareness of what had been so suddenly taken away from us. Within the breast of the courageous apostle was an unquenchable passion that a Roman chain could never extinguish. Rather than languishing in self-pity, he chose to redeem the time by the study of the Word, incessant prayer, and witnessing, as he eludes to in *Philippians 1:13: So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace and in all other places*; Paul was intent on finishing the course and receiving the crown of righteousness. That course is often fraught with disappointments and hardships that are seemingly inexplicable to us. Paul would have much preferred pursuing his peripatetic ministry all the way to Spain if given liberty, but the steps (and the stops) of "a good man are ordered by the Lord".

In the immutable, inscrutable counsels of the Almighty God, Paul would be shut in but not shut up. He received inquirers, instructed the guards and penned the fourteen epistles that would edify believers for the proceeding centuries of Christian thought.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing; and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Amazing and Abounding

Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

Romans 5:20

The hymn *Amazing Grace* is considered to be the most popular hymn of the Christian faith. The poetic words were written in 1772 by English clergyman, John Newton. It tells the story of Newton's amazing conversion from being the captain of a slave ship to becoming a minister of the Gospel. Another English Puritan preacher, John Bunyan, in 1666, had his autobiography published entitled *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, which also attests to God's grace concerning his conversion and walk in the Christian life. Both John Newton and John Bunyan testify to being the recipients of this amazing and abundant grace.

One of the differences between the Old and New Testaments is distinguished by Law and Grace. John 1:17 *For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ* highlights this difference. In Romans five, the Apostle Paul shows the extensiveness of sin, and when the Law entered the awareness of sin abounded. The historical events in the Bible provide a glaring record of the far-reaching effects of sin. So many of the accounts are permeated with pride, jealousy, selfishness, anger, hatred, idolatry, and rebellion. But for a small minority, even God's Chosen People the nation Israel, had forsaken the one and only true God to follow the false deities of the surrounding heathen. It was apparent that the totality of the Law could only show men their failures and sinfulness. But praise God that the only One who could fulfill every jot and tittle of the law, Jesus Christ the righteous, came and brought grace with him. We see the amazing and abundant effects of this grace as our Lord interacts with every strata of society. A religious leader who sought Jesus one night was told that God loved him so much, that the Son of God came to die for his sins, and all he had to do was to truly believe. An outcast Samaritan woman, who had multiple failed relationships, was offered the Living Water that would finally satisfy her inner thirst. An adulterous woman at the point of being executed finds a pardon from the Savior and is told to go and sin no more. A tormented maniac, filled with a legion of demons finally finds peace at the feet of Jesus. Hopeless lepers receive restoration by the touch of the Master's hand. Even a dying thief who asked only to be remembered was told that he would be with Jesus in paradise that same day. No matter what range of sin existed in these people's lives, the abundant grace of God came to pardon and drastically changed them.

That saving grace continues as we journey through this life. In one of his verses, John Newton says that grace has brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home. Today let us live in gratitude for that grace and may we always show it to others.

J. Ekis

Strength

*A wise man is strong; yea, a man of knowledge increaseth strength.
For by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war: and in multitude of counsellors there is
safety.
Proverbs 24:5-6*

What attracts people to strength? And to what kinds of strength are they attracted? The innumerable ads that call men and women to strength prey upon this intrinsic desire. Pictures of strength are used to sell many products and services. Some may be legitimate. Others are nothing but idle claims – especially those that promise strength without effort or commitment. But, generally speaking, strength is a good thing to desire and to obtain. The text before us assumes that. We know from references throughout scripture that the LORD is strong, and also gives strength (e.g., Psalm 105:4; Isaiah 26:4).

Yet, while people are often attracted to physical strength, the emphasis here is on a multi-faceted strength. The first is a strength that comes from wisdom. This may not be seen in rippling muscles in someone's body, but can be observed in actions, words, and in the discrete control of either. The second is the result of knowledge. Knowledge without wisdom may be used improperly or even for evil. Yet this passage tells us that the one who is wise and knowledgeable gains more strength. In the example given, the one who must determine a strategy for either potential or ensuing war wisely enlists the wisdom and knowledge of others.

The majority of us are probably not attempting feats of physical strength or preparing strategies for an army. However, we daily must prepare for spiritual warfare and encounters that require strength of mind, soul, and spirit. Thus, we must tap the source of wisdom within the word of God for strength in decision-making, especially when the right decision goes against the flow of popular opinion. We also need knowledge from the Spirit of God to understand unselfishly and from all perspectives the whole of a situation. In many cases, we need increased knowledge from a number of wise and experienced counsellors to be strengthened in a best decision. Let us therefore apply these principles, to be strong in the LORD and in the power of His might.

Diversity

And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles.

– Luke 6:13 –

Diversity! I first started noticing the traction this term was gaining during the junior year of my undergraduate studies at the University of Pittsburgh – around 1994 or so. It was beginning to become a sacred mantra of the academic Postmodern thinkers, who, in turn, provide the philosophical foundation for our information peddlers, entertainers, and cultural architects. The stated intent of encouraging this secular mechanism of “diversity” is to be “inclusive” of all races, creeds, etc. But anyone with half a cluster of functioning neurons can perceive that in reality, “diversity” as it’s used in its increasingly powerful DEI context is more so a tool of division rather than unification; an ill-defined, virtue-signaling concept that infuses snake-oil selling politicians and ambitious professionals with a smoke-and-mirrors, utilitarian “morality” for the purpose of dividing and conquering the masses, while securely ensconcing themselves in positions of power.

If only modern man would look to the Son of God and His church for the true meaning of diversity! It all started with our Lord’s choosing of the apostles. Could there have been twelve individuals so different – in background, in ideology, in temperament. You had Peter, the bitter-tongued, rough-and-tumble Galilean fisherman – as impetuous as he was insecure, and as crusty as he was tender-hearted. (We must wonder if some secular psychiatrist would have “diagnosed” Peter as “bipolar” had he lived in our label-mad generation.) Then there was John, pensive and introspective, yet simultaneously subject to thunderous indignation, like his brother James. What about Matthew, the publican? What kind of sordid history he must have known prior to Jesus’ transforming grace. And Thomas – also known as Didymus (the Twin) – fickle as they come, ready to die with Jesus one moment, and doubting His resurrection but a short time later. And let’s not forget about Simon Zealotes, who, at least at some point near his tenure as one of the Twelve, had embraced the insurrectional philosophy (and perhaps tactics?) of the Zealots. And these are but a few of the earliest members of Christ’s church...

But the diversity didn’t stop with the Twelve. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, members of the Sanhedrin, found themselves rubbing elbows with the former demoniac, Mary Magdalene. Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, would have been a breaker of bread with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Time fails us to explore the remarkable differences between the likes of so many other early believers – the searching Ethiopian Eunuch, the wealthy Roman Cornelius, the outcast and immoral Samaritan woman at the well, ad infinitum.

And it continues even today. The Name of Jesus is the greatest unifier of the most diverse expanse of humanity – drawing every tribe and nation and kindred and tongue into one giant, unified family of God. There is neither Greek nor Jew; circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free (we might append, black nor white; Hispanic nor Asian; etc.); but Christ is all, and in all. Let us rejoice that we are each and all part of this amazing organism that is comprised of more diversity than any man-made scheme could ever generate – the Church of Jesus Christ. --- *D. Murcek*

A Growing Worship

Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship ...

John 4:22

In John 4 our Lord began a conversation with a Samaritan woman about the water she was drawing at a well then steered that conversation to speaking about the Living Water that He could offer. Eventually, He led her to the topic of proper worship. Jesus pointed out that the Samaritans did not know what they worshipped, but the Jews knew what they worshipped. Though the Jews acknowledged and worshipped the true God, most of their religious leaders had declined into a state of outward formalism. Jesus revealed to the woman that true worshippers must worship in spirit and truth.

Do you know who you worship, and do you exercise your worship in spirit and truth? A seventeenth-century Puritan writer Stephen Charnock said *“Now it is impossible to worship God as we ought, unless we know God as He is”*. Charnock indicates that the quality of our worship is linked to the knowledge that we possess of our God. At the time of our conversion, we understood that Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, had paid the price for our sins. Our love and gratitude for who He is and what He has done created a spirit of worship in us. But that level of worship should grow as we mature as followers of Christ. The Apostle Peter concludes his second epistle with the admonition *“Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”* Spiritual growth is activated by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, understanding of God’s Word, fellowshiping with other believers, and learning to pray through the many circumstances the Lord brings to our lives. We learn from His Word about the many attributes of God, each of which gives a deeper insight into His character and personality. God’s many names in the scriptures also reveal the many facets of His nature. His holiness, which is declared from Genesis to Revelation, certainly causes our spirit to bow in His presence. Though God in his essence is beyond our understanding, and His ways are past finding out, we can continue gaining knowledge of Him when we persist in seeking Him. Expanding our knowledge of the Lord should produce a deeper desire to worship Him.

The worship that began when we fell at the feet of the Savior for our salvation will continue throughout eternity. On the other side of this life, we will be free from all hindrances to worship and we will cast our crowns at His feet and sing *“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.*

J. Ekis

Extremes

Two things have I required of thee; deny me them not before I die: Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me:

Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.

Proverbs 30:7-9

These requests of Agur reflect the common desire of mankind for convenience. From our modern vantage point, we can readily understand such desire. A man of Agur's time, evidently in or near the days of Solomon's reign, could hardly begin to imagine a fraction of the convenience that we enjoy in our times. Yet with all of the technological developments over these few thousand years, the extremes from which he requests deliverance continue to exist today. Fallen man is still prone to live in vanity and lies, and poverty and riches are still available for attaining. In verse nine, Agur expresses his reasons at least for avoiding the second set of extremes. His fear is that they might tempt him to sin by blaspheming the LORD God in his condition. He recognized that riches were as much, if not more, of a temptation to sin as poverty, but he also obviously knew the strength of temptation for the poor and hungry to regard the eighth commandment as vanity. Thus, he would rather live in the convenient state of the middle class, thinking it more conducive to uprightness.

Concerning his initial request to be far removed from vanity and lies, does he refer to those of others, or his own? If the former, does he also think that avoidance will guarantee escape from his own? While it is true that evil communications corrupt good manners, an axiom expounded with much variety in the balance of this book, we must also be aware that such avoidance doesn't exempt us from the bondage of our own corruption. Much more is needed.

Although in these seemingly reasonable requests we might agree to follow him, we must also be aware that simply the avoidance of the extremes of life is no guarantee of spiritual success. In fact, it is sometimes that such extremes are used of God to build the strength of faith needed for this life (e.g., Hebrews 11). It is difficult for a majority of us who enjoy the convenience of living far from extreme circumstances to understand the steadfast faith of our brethren throughout the world whose norm is to live in the extremes. They have learned that faith in the grace of God is far superior to Agur's scheme. May their example provoke us to walk and desire to learn the same.

Loving Christ

*Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.
– Ephesians 6:24 –*

There are many appellations we hold as believers – descriptors that delineate us from who and what we once were. Indeed, the Word of God clearly, repeatedly, and unequivocally divides mankind into two great classes – the saved and the lost, the righteous and the unrighteous, the justified and the condemned, Christians and the unbelieving. Our allegiance to God, however, is not something that can be incontrovertibly verified outwardly. Because it can be (and often is) feigned by professors of all kinds, its genuineness is something that is known in the most absolute sense by God alone. Perhaps the strongest self-ward validation of our redemptive status lies not in a title but rather within the breast of every child of God, answering to the question, “Do you love Christ?” An individual’s response to this inquiry cuts through all hypocrisy and pretense. No Judas can readily, unostentatiously, or convincingly confess a deep love for the Lord Jesus. Only the sincere disciple possesses the supernatural disposition to erupt excitedly from a volcanic heart with a zealous, “Yes! I love the Lord!”

Our love for Jesus is the definition of who we are as His followers. It is the hallmark of a bona fide salvation. A resident love for Christ has multiple accompanying witnesses, both promised and proclaimed by the Master Himself.

If we love Him, we will keep His commandments (John 14:15, 24). A true believer does not spend time trying to justify sin. We strive to live in a way that pleases our Lord Who spilled His blood as a propitiation for our iniquities. Sin is a reproach to the redeemed soul. We hate it because He hates it. When we stumble, we run to confess our sin to Him, to find grace, to be restored, and to advance in His power.

We can do this because our love for Him has secured His indwelling presence in us (John 14:23). We love Him because He first loved us. But having loved Him, He has made His abode in us. The God of the universe is inside. While inexplicable, everyone that loves Christ knows this to be true.

Because we love Christ, we rejoice in God’s will, even when we might not understand what is happening (John 14:28). It is His will, not ours, that matters. In our flesh, we believe that we know better. But our love for Christ constrains us to rest in His plan and await His revealed purpose.

Lovers of Jesus enjoy Christ’s presence. He promised to manifest Himself to those who love Him (John 14:21). A true believer knows His Lord is with him. We are confident of His companionship. Like the old hymn says, “He walks with us and talks with us along life’s narrow way.”

Because we love Christ, we are loved by the Father (John 16:27). Perhaps we are too accustomed to this truth. But meditate upon these words – God is our Father. There is a familial relationship every believer enjoys with the Almighty. This can be neither explained nor gainsaid – it is just simply and gloriously true.

Dear reader – do you love Jesus? Let us learn to love Him even more. — *D. Murcek*

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Spring Cleaning

Exodus 12:15: Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread; even the first day ye shall put away leaven out of your houses: for whosoever eateth leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel.

Preparing for Passover was the ultimate in spring cleaning! In obedience to the eternal commandment that God gave to the children of Israel to remove leaven (yeast) from their houses, every nook and cranny must be emptied, sorted and wiped in order to make sure that each dwelling place is free of **chametz (leavened products)** before Passover begins. Rabbinical Judaism has taken this single commandment and transformed it into a system that would weary the hardiest of women. All dishes, cutlery, pots and pans, and even dishrags used during the feast must be "Kosher for Passover."

The spiritual significance of this is readily detectable. Leaven is a type of sin that must be thoroughly purged from the believer's life since "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" Galatians 5:9. Yeast is a single-celled fungus that causes dough to rise by consuming the sugars and excreting carbon dioxide as a byproduct. And it doesn't take much yeast to start the process. Yeast is so pervasive that if dough is left on the counter, yeast will attach to the surface of the dough and then make its way throughout the whole loaf. And so it was of paramount importance that the house should be scoured for any traces of this insidious element.

At Passover, the Jewish People practice a beautiful custom called bedikat chametz (search for leaven). On the eve before Passover, the leader of the household, usually the father, holds a candle and guides his family around the house. With the lights extinguished, they search for any remnant of chametz (leavened products) by the light of this single candle. The children search every nook and cranny for crumbs of bread that the mother has carefully wrapped and hidden ahead of time. Each crumb of bread is found with exclamations of delight, "Oh! There it is! I found one!" This meaningful search continues until the very last crumb of leaven is removed. The next morning the crumbs along with all of the leaven found in the house are take out and burned.

Sin must not be allowed to thrive in the believer's life. With the help of the light of God's Word, we must search out every hiding place where sin may be lurking and bring every "crumb" of it to the fire, lest it find any room for advancement. May the Lord give us all the discernment to identify the devilish encroachments of sin!

Have a blessed day,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing; and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Voice Recognition

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

John 10:27

Seeing, tasting, touching, smelling, and hearing are the five senses God has given us to experience our physical existence in this world. When one of our senses is exposed to an area of its intended purpose, an imprint is deeply embedded in our brain. The experience will cause us to naturally remember how something sounds, smells, feels, tastes, or looks. If someone suddenly lost their eyesight, they would still be able to recognize the voices of those familiar to them. Today's verse speaks of believers being able to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd.

The tenth chapter of John pictures the intimate relationship between a shepherd and his sheep with the spiritual application being the believer's relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. From this teaching, we learn that not only does the Good Shepherd know His sheep by name but He guides, feeds, and protects each of them. The sheep recognize the shepherd's voice and follow him.

As believers, do we recognize the voice of our Good Shepherd? How does He speak to us? Does He still call our name? Before our conversion, God's voice was speaking to us to turn from our way and come to Him. At first, we may not have recognized that beckoning voice; but eventually, when we heard and yielded to His calling we entered into His sheepfold. Today the Lord's voice is heard through His word, His creation, prayer, our spirit, and the many teaching circumstances ordained by Him. Sadly, believers often have their spiritual hearing diminished by the interruptions and distractions of this life. In Matthew 11:15 Jesus offers the admonition "*He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.*" Because the Lord calls us by name, we share an intimacy with Him, and as we grow in that closeness we sense when He is speaking specifically to us. God's word rises to a new level of impact when we sense He is speaking directly to us. At times His voice will be convicting, or with a tone of warning, while at other times it will be comforting and consoling. Whatever the circumstance, the Shepherd's voice is calling us to follow Him. When we do, we will find ourselves in greener pastures and beside still waters. There will be times when strangers will call out for us to follow them, but because we are familiar with the Good Shepherd's voice, we can follow His lead.

As you travel through this day, keep your ears turned heavenward to hear the Shepherd's voice saying "Follow me."

J. Ekis

Time to judge

Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.

1 Corinthians 4:5

Here is an opportunity for us to understand contextual meaning and application. We have plenty of admonitions in scripture to make judgments and to discern rightly. Yet here the apostle Paul says to judge nothing before the time of the Lord's coming, when He will bring all things into judgment. However, in the next two chapters he exhorts the Corinthians to judge issues among church members, first those who profess to know Christ yet live publicly against Him and His revealed will, and then in cases of disputes among themselves. John in his epistles calls on believers to judge if teachers be true or false, and to judge their own consistency of profession and practice. Of course, many in our modern culture have adopted a convenient view of Jesus' warning to "judge not," while missing the ensuing context in Matthew chapter seven, which goes on to explain that judgment ought to be equitable and reciprocal. So which is it, are we to judge or not?

We can learn from these different passages that, in fact, there are times to judge and times to reserve judgment. In the context of today's verse, Paul has been discussing the Corinthians' unhealthy practice of comparing teacher against teacher, particularly Apollos and himself, and apparently attempting to divide the temple of God, which is the church body (3:16-17), over whom they followed. At this point it seems from the context that even motives were being judged, which he describes as hidden things and the counsels of the hearts. He therefore makes it clear that he doesn't even trust himself to rightly judge all of his own motives, as he probably honestly assessed the intricacies of the human heart. Yet even in things difficult to discern, he proclaims here that the Lord will come and shine the light of His truth into the hearts of all mankind, at which point no man shall be praised, but all will only praise God.

Let us therefore take heed as to how, when, and with what spirit we judge. Jesus said to judge righteous judgment. We may judge actions, behaviors, words, and teachings against standards provided by God's word, that we may hold fast that which is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21). But we most often cannot judge motives, thoughts, nor intentions, as well as other hidden things. However, we can rest assured that the Lord knows and discerns the thoughts and intents of every heart, and will bring every work and secret thing into judgment.

Meek and Lowly

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. – Matthew 11:29

One of the paradoxes of the Christian life is the more we strive to be like Christ, the more we realize how much unlike Him we are in our flesh. For me personally, I find these two characteristics of heart to be simultaneously the most desirable and the least attainable. Meek and lowly. How sweetly our Lord exhibits these attributes of spirit. Let us meditate upon the Savior's mastery of the inner man, and how we can and should emulate Him in these things...

Meekness is often confused with weakness. It is anything but! Meekness is birthed from a humble confidence – not in self, but in the Creator. From a God-ward standpoint, one who is meek is submissive to the Father's will, patient in tribulation, and earnest to please Heaven. In relation to dealing with our fellow man, it means being gentle, patient, easily imposed upon, and even graciously responding when offended. Think about that – how frequently during our Lord's earthly ministry He dealt so kindly and tenderly with those who came in contact with Him. With His disciples, He endured their faults and failings, and loved them to the end. He tolerantly answered their at-times foolish and obtuse questions, gently rebuked their frequent self-will, and lovingly brokered peace during their selfish disputes. With His enemies, His patience was not forced, but genuine. With the Pharisees and scribes, as He was wont, He taught them yet again. And again. And again. Even from His cross, this meekest of men even implored His Father to forgive the very people who were crucifying Him.

And He is lowly – humble. Could there be a more foreign concept to the fleshly self that resides within the human breast. But not with Jesus! He Who thought it not robbery to be equal with God made Himself of no reputation to be made in the likeness of sinful men. And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself. In every interaction, public and private, we see in our Master the essence and definition of humility – self being of no consequence and “me” esteemed to be nothing at all. Instead, a preoccupation with God and men consumed Him to His core. Even in His glorious resurrection, His appearances to His disciples were utterly unostentatious and unassuming, designed not to flaunt His preeminence, but to build their faith. What a Savior!

How unlike Him I am! How quick my frustration, how self-absorbed my perspective, how proud my actions, how abrasive my interactions! In meekness and lowliness, Christ's heart was so large, and mine is so very small. Lord, enlarge our hearts to be like yours. Help us to learn of You. --- *D. Murcek*

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Loosed

Acts 2:23-24: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.

Sin brings with it an accompanying bondage and with this bondage an accompanying pain of death. The Master, being the creator of life, had to come to our rescue and loose us from its inextricable captivity. The titanic struggle of the cross found our Savior in direct conflict with the contradiction of our sinful nature. He willingly adopts that nature in becoming "sin for us who knew no sin", earning him the right to the keys of death and hell with which he could liberate all those bound by sin.

The miserable internees of Hitler's hideous concentration camps could not restrain their emotions when they witnessed the American liberators storming the death camps and scattering their conscienceless captors. Like walking skeletons, the emaciated captives embraced their emancipators falling into their arms with irrepressible gratitude. These who were but days from the inevitable fires of the hellacious ovens, were now saved from, what seemed to them to be, an inevitable fait accompli.

Believers in Christ likewise embrace their Great Savior, seeing that He alone can lose us from our iniquity and save us from our inexorable damnation. The process whereby this is accomplished remains shrouded in spiritual mystery. No human mind can plumb the depths of this divine transaction that accepts the death of the "just for the unjust". I Peter 3:18: For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:

Death could not deny our glorious champion His victory. In a sublime and almost simplistic explanation, the text explains that the demons of hell and their perverted prince of darkness had no authority to thwart the overcoming power of His resurrection over death. It simply "was not possible that he should be holden of it."

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing; and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Our Purpose

Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

Revelation 4:11

At the outset of the creation, all things were made for God's honor, glory, and pleasure. Our creator did not just arbitrarily create, but from the smallest living creature to the largest celestial body there is evidence of an infinite design that shouts "Glory to God". Of course, the capstone of His creation was mankind. It was man that was made in God's image and endowed with certain God-like characteristics. Upon completing His creation, ***God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good.*** Adam's choice to sin, which plunged the world into the curse, did not take God by surprise; for it was already ordained that the Savior Jesus Christ the Son of God would one day come at the appointed time to give His life a sacrifice for sins. This event would enable fallen mankind to be restored to their true purpose and glorify the Heavenly Father.

Likewise, at the time of conversion, God begins a good work in every believer, which He intends to perform until the day of Jesus Christ. With the indwelling of the Holy Spirit supplying the necessary spiritual gifts, every believer has what is needed to fulfill the purpose for which they were created. The Heavenly Father has designed a specific plan for His children to be unified in the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God (Eph. 4:13). Though the Spirit's gifts differ for each Christian the outcome is always to be for the glory of God. This is not only accomplished in what some might consider "doing big things for God," but it is also achieved in the little things that are done in the Lord's name. ***And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men (Colossians 3:23).*** Knowing in every area of our life that it is the Lord whom we are serving can offset the discouragement that arises when men and women do not respond to our efforts. When we do our best with what the Lord has given us and trust Him for the results, we can be confident in Him to fulfill His purpose through us to His glory.

When out of touch with God, people will still strive to find purpose in their lives, but life is out of sync because they are not living as the Lord intended. They are like a man trying to dig a hole with a rake instead of a shovel. All efforts will be difficult and accomplish little because they are not properly equipped.

Today, by God's grace, choose to live as God intended so that you might fulfill God's purpose and bring glory to Him.

J. Ekis

Flee

*Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry.
I Corinthians 10:14*

This simple command from the apostle contains a very active verb. He previously in this epistle to the Corinthians employed this same verb, when he told them to flee fornication (6:18). While there are many other verbs that are used in exhortations against sin, such as avoid, abstain, turn away, refuse, etc., to flee seems to be one of the most active. To flee is to waste no time in running away from imminent danger; or in other words, to run, fast, and now. When we view the context of this epistle and understand the first century culture of their city within the Greek and Roman world influences, Paul's use of the term is understandable. It is notable that his other uses of the word occur in each of his epistles to the young preacher Timothy. In I Timothy 6:11, he tells him to flee all the things associated with covetousness and the desire to be rich. In II Timothy 2:22, the exhortation to flee youthful lusts could easily be associated with the same issues addressed above. In the culture of the day, the sin of fornication was directly connected to the idolatrous "worship" of the Gentile world. And this was the same issue that the Old Testament Israelite nation was continually plagued with, drawing them away from the worship of Jehovah, the only true God, which is the subject at the beginning of chapter 10 of this text. The connection is therefore clear. It is not safe to play with temptation, especially with those that are commonly more difficult to resist. So, although the often-quoted verse preceding our text is the promise that God will make a way of escape in the case of temptation, the whole message here is to run through that escape hatch as fast as possible.

The parallels to our present day's culture are obvious. The sins that so easily can beset mankind have not changed; they only morph their manifestations. We still have idolatry today. The ancient idols of wood and stone have in our culture been replaced by the true idol that they always represented – self. As we see more and more the temptation to worship ourselves, by satisfying our fleshly desires with practices and related philosophies contrary to the will of our loving and righteous Creator, let us remember to put aside our pride and recognize when it's time to flee.