

CHOOSING A LIFE THAT MATTERS - "SEEK GOD, NOT SIN"

Joshua 24:14-24, Matthew 4:18-22, Philippians 3:7-12

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In his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer makes a very important statement. He says, "**What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.**" How we understand and conceptualize God influences the way that we think, the way that we live and the way that we have our being. The way that we think about God is the way that our lives will be fashioned and lived, so it is vital for us to have a healthy concept of God in order to be able to live abundant, successful and fruitful lives.

Let me give you a situation and see what you think. A group of youth are divided into three groups. For each of those groups, a 1000 piece puzzle is given to them to try to put together as much as they can in a seven minute period of time. HOWEVER, the first group gets the puzzle in the correct box that has the corresponding picture with that puzzle. The second group gets the puzzle in a box, but the cover of the box is different than the picture of the puzzle. The third group gets that 1000 piece puzzle in a paper bag.

Typically, when time is started, the first group gets the puzzle out, turns the box up so that they can begin to follow the color patterns and designs to put the puzzle together. The second group gets the puzzle out and sets up the box, but quickly finds that the box cover does not come close to guide them to put the puzzle together. They cry out that it wasn't fair. And then the third group pours the puzzle out, and with no picture to go by at all, quickly becomes frustrated and starts throwing the puzzle pieces at each other Frisbee style.

You see, in order to get the puzzle together in any reasonable time, it is vital that we have a guide to order our process. The correct picture of the puzzle is absolutely vital to make any positive progress in completing the puzzle. Without any guide, we quickly become discouraged, even hopelessly so, and resort to abandoning any work on the puzzle.

Now, as we correlate this illustration with life, we can begin to see that a proper perspective of

who God is determines how successful we will be at living in our world today. So God has given us a way to discover Him and help us to guide our lives in order to make ourselves something for Him and to the rest of the world. “The Bible is God’s box top that explains Him and life as He designed it to be lived...Since creation, humankind has been ignoring God’s box top and has been trying on its own to piece life together. But it never turns out as God intends...The Bible not only explains who God is, His attributes and character, but it also clearly explains who we are and how God expects us to relate to Him.”¹ So I want to lead us through a number of important characteristics that we need to observe in order to live a life that matters.

The first one is our topic for today, “**Seek God, Not Sin.**” Almost a decade ago, while we were living in Marinette, my wife, Linda, was working hard on finishing her Master’s Degree as a licensed clinical social worker. She was also working nights at Family Services in Green Bay helping out folks who were in crisis conditions. During this time, I would spend many of my evenings walking throughout the city of Marinette, putting in steps to stay in shape.

On one particular walk, I was passing through the “down-town” area when I had an interesting encounter. I was on one side of the street passing by a small apartment complex, when a woman sitting on the steps of that apartment, called out to me. “Hey handsome! Interested in having some fun tonight?” I kept walking without responding. Her invitation continued, “Come on, I won’t bite. Won’t you just come over and talk?” I still kept walking, not giving any indication that I had heard her whatsoever. “What’s the matter? You shy? We can have some fun!” My pace quickened a bit more, and as I moved further down the block, her invitations soon became angry retorts and accusations. It was a situation straight out of Proverbs 7, but I wasn’t going to stick around long enough to become lured by this would-be adulteress. I didn’t even want to give her the satisfaction of a reply, because I knew what her objective was. She didn’t know me, and I didn’t **want** to know her. I am in love with my wife, I have a terrific family, and I was not about to let anyone change that. I have to tell you that it

¹ (Dennis Rainey, *Choosing a Life That Matters,* [Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2017] pg. 14)

was the last time that I took **that particular** route on my walks.

It was very obvious that I was “being stalked, and not just by a [prostitute]. Sin itself was stalking me; it always is. Sin stays in attack mode, ready to pounce without warning...Sin is as nearby as our hands, eyes, ears, feet, or heart – any of the temptation gateways Satan likes to use to divert us from knowing God.”²

Sin takes many forms and it usually attacks us at our weakest points. Sin has no restrictions, no boundaries, and no guidelines. Sin is anything that will disrupt our minds into thinking that anything BUT the box top of God’s Word is ok. And the more we seek to know the Lord our God, the greater the temptations will be put before us to keep us from finding God’s plan for our life and living the way that God desires. None of us is immune to sin, and we are all guilty of falling to the temptations that Satan puts before us. The only way that we can protect ourselves is by following THE BOOK, God’s word in the Bible, and using His TRUTH to keep us from falling away and following the world.

You see, “our hearts were made to hunger, which is one reason temptation can pull us so easily along. We come with a factory setting of dissatisfaction...that drives us beyond the status quo. We don’t want life to always be as it has always been. We want to grow, learn, add, change, and conquer. And while it is true that this drive can take us down paths of selfishness, arrogance, and sin, it doesn’t have to go that way. We can – and should – “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matthew 5:6). Our dissatisfaction can be sanctified and it can lead us down paths of holiness and seeking God. As Christian men and women, we were made to want to know and experience more of God, to seek Him.”³

And that’s where our Old Testament lesson of Joshua 24 (14-24) invites us to go – to choose God’s way for our lives. As the people of Israel have taken possession of the Promised Land that God had given to them, Joshua challenges them to remain faithful in following the Lord God. He says, “...*honor the Lord and serve Him sincerely and faithfully. Get rid of the gods which your ancestors used to worship...and serve only the Lord*” (24:14). Joshua knew how easily the people were in

² (Ibid., pg. 19)

³ (pg. 20)

wandering away from faith in God. They were quick to embrace the gods of the surrounding peoples, and so he challenged them to make their commitment before God, right there at Shechem, to always follow the God who saved them from slavery in Egypt and delivered the land into their hands as an inheritance forever.

But despite their commitment, it was not long before they were designing their own puzzle top to make life like they wanted it to be, even to their own destruction. Joshua stated it very clearly to them, “...*the Lord...is a holy God and will not forgive your sins. He will tolerate no rivals, and if you leave Him to serve foreign gods, He will turn against you and punish you. He will destroy you, even though He was good to you before*” (19-20).

God has made us to seek Him, and **HIM ONLY**, but Satan convinces us that we know best and that God really won't destroy us. After all, we are made in His image! How could God destroy His own creation? Right? **WRONG!!!** Our God is a jealous God and He alone has given us the way to eternal life. Nothing else can provide satisfaction for our souls the way that He does. But Satan is always ready to convince us differently and draw us away from God, even into eternal death.

So we hear from the all of the prophets, challenges to stay faithful to the Lord our God so that we will not be destroyed because of our sin. We hear it in Isaiah 55:6, “*Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.*” We hear it in Jeremiah 29:13, “*You will seek Me and find Me, when you seek Me with all your heart.*” We hear it in Amos 5:6, “*Seek the Lord and LIVE.*” And we hear it in James 4:8-10, “*Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you...Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you.*”

In these verses, and so many others, we hear two messages: 1) **God desires us to seek Him**, and 2) **Our hearts were made to seek Him**. God is not playing a game of hide and seek with us. He really wants us to know Him, so He has established a definite way for us to find Him – and it's found in the Bible. “God doesn't invite us to seek Him so He can hide [from us]. God invites us to seek Him so we

will FIND HIM!”⁴ And when we find Him, He promises to let us know Him so that we might understand Him and be willing to follow Him throughout our lives. But we have to do the seeking. We have to find His box-top (the Bible) and study His image so that we might piece together a life that matters. As we seek Him, He promises to help us through the guidance of His Holy Spirit.

But then, our hearts were made to seek HIM. God has given everyone the invitation to come to Him, but not everyone responds. Jesus gave the invitation to His disciples, “*Come with me and I will teach you to catch men*” (Matt. 4:19). The invitation is out there, but we must be the ones to go after Him. “When we don’t seek God...we are being untrue to our Christian identity. We are drifting. Atrophying. Weakening. Seeking God demands that we use our spiritual muscles in the life-long quest of finding Him. Failing to seek God is a setup for sin to seek us and rob us of our identity (with Christ). Sin distracts us from our spiritual mission and purpose. Neglecting to seek God marks the onset of spiritual anemia. Soul fatigue generally comes from doing too little rather than too much. The remedy is – SEEK GOD!”⁵

Now you may think that this is a “no-brainer,” obvious to anyone. But all we need to do is to look around us to see the folks who are aimless, just going through the motions of survival, maintaining a superficial level of existence. “Seeking God requires a determination, a commitment, a wholehearted pursuit. We won’t wish our way into it; there’s no such thing as an ambivalent God seeker.”⁶ Faith in God doesn’t just happen. Finding God’s presence in our lives is never the result of doing your own thing. In order to discover who God is and come to know Him in your hearts, **YOU HAVE TO SEEK HIM!**

So let’s look at how the apostle Paul did that. The Epistle lesson today is Philippians 3:7-12. Listen to how Paul began his pursuit of God, and then daily sought after Him. (READ Philippians 3:7-12) Here we see three (3) things that Paul did to find God.

⁴ (Pg. 23)

⁵ (pg. 24)

⁶ (pg. 25)

The **first thing** Paul did in order to seek after God is a very hard thing for us to do, but it is essential if we are to begin our journey. He says, “...*I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere garbage so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with Him*” (3:8-9a).

Paul deals with the stuff of this world that entices us, calls out to us, and often controls us – the material possessions that we hold so dearly. They are distractions that keep us from having a good relationship with Jesus. Once we allow the power of the possessions to leave us, our minds can have a single focus – to gain Christ Jesus as our Lord. The craving for more and more stuff just leads us away from a dependence on God and keeps our eyes focused away from Him.

Secondly, Paul gives up making himself look better than he is. He abandons self-righteousness by following strictly to the adherence of the Law, and seeks to follow Jesus whereby his obedience to His teachings brings God’s righteousness. He says, “...*I no longer have a righteousness of my own, the kind that is gained by obeying the Law. I now have the righteousness that is given through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is based on faith*” (3:9b). It’s no longer works-righteousness, but by faith that he becomes right in God’s eyes; not by working hard to obey every letter of the Mosaic Law, but by living a life of faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and we come to the Father through Him.

So we give up working on a fancy reputation, or striving to be better than others by obeying the Law better than others. The Pharisees spent their whole day making themselves look better than others, and they missed the opportunity to touch the lives of others around them to help build their faith. Self-righteousness makes us think we can earn heaven on our own without the need for a Savior. Humility is essential for us to find faith in the work of Salvation that Jesus accomplished.

Thirdly, Paul turned his attention strictly on coming closer to Jesus Christ. Nothing else was more important than knowing Jesus. He says, “*All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of His resurrection, to share in His sufferings and become like Him in His death, in the hope that I*

myself will be raised from death to life...I keep striving to win the prize for which Christ Jesus has already won me to Himself' (3:10-12). Everything in Paul's life now centered on following Jesus Christ. He gave up everything else - power, position, possessions, pleasure, esteem, self-righteousness, and ambition – in order that he might focus on becoming Christ-like in every way. Jesus was his all-in-all, and Paul desperately wanted to become like Him so that he could be with Him.

To have a life that really matters, we have to purposefully choose to seek after Jesus, and to give Him all that we have and all that we are so that it does not distract us from our pursuit of knowing God. We need to set our minds on God, and do our very best in living according to His standards so that we, too, may become like Jesus in all our ways. As a runner focuses on the finish line in the race, we are to strive with all our hearts to finish well in becoming like Jesus.

In her song, *More Than Anything*, Natalie Grant has some terrific lyrics that help direct our attention as we seek God, not sin. The chorus goes like this:

*Help me want the Healer more than the healing; Help me want the Savior more than the saving;
Help me want the Giver more than the giving; Oh help me want You Jesus more than anything.*

Jesus calls us to look at this world, see all that is around us, and then actively pursue making sense of it all **from a heavenly perspective**. We need to ponder who we are, what our purpose in life is, how our relationship with God is, what our commitments are, and what our convictions are. We need to look at all the resources that we have at our disposal - talents, gifts, abilities and interests – and see how we can use them for the glory of God. We need to consider the expectations that God has for us so that we might begin to plot a course of success in working for Him.

Today there is a ½ sheet of yellow paper in your bulletin titled, *A Beginner's Guide to Pondering* by Dennis Rainey that I hope you'll look at and begin to consider. It is a call for each of us to seek after God, not seek after our own way, and to find where we are in relation to God and His plan for us. Work through these areas. Seek after God with your whole heart so that He might guide you to finding Him. Pursue the Lord and your life will begin to unfold before you so that you might discover the Lord and follow Him all the days of your life, to His glory in Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.