



28 DAYS OF DEVOTION

WEEK 4 (November 7-13) Sealed By Faith

Day 22: Who Is in Possession?

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. (Mark 10:17-22 NIV)

He came to the correct person, Jesus, and he asked about the correct subject, eternal life. But when Jesus responds, “Why do you call me good? ... No one is good—except God alone” (v. 18), it seems strange. Most of us probably think Jesus is good, so what is Jesus attempting to teach that young man? The lesson Jesus is teaching is that in order to get eternal life, doing good or being good is not enough.

Jesus goes on to remind the young man of the commandments that the young man had already accomplished. At first the young man is elated. He thinks he is in! “Teacher, ... all these I have kept since I was a boy” (v. 20). You can just imagine him pumping his fist and exclaiming “I made it!”

Peering into him and loving him, Jesus says, “One thing you lack. ... Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (v. 21).

The young man finds himself at a crossroads and has to answer the question we all face. Do we believe our future will be good because God is with us? Or do we believe our future is secure because our portfolio is diversified enough and our assets are allocated sufficiently? Simply put, is our faith placed in God or in our stuff?

In the end, the young man allowed his possessions to own him, and he missed life. God asked to be loved more than the young man's stuff, and the young man was not able to do it.

~Dale McConnell

Reflection

What is at the center of your life—God or your possessions?

Challenge

Take a personal inventory of all your possessions. In your journal, reflect on the question, "Is there anything I would be unable to give up if God asked me to?"

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Day 23: When Lunch Becomes a Banquet

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" (John 6:8-9 NRSV)

It is likely the little boy who gave up his five loaves and two fish never forgot the encounter with Jesus! He had heard the men asking if anyone had any food. He had the lunch his mother had prepared. What should he do? With a child's open and generous heart, he opened his bag and shared his lunch with them. Imagine his surprise. He thought he was giving away his lunch, but discovered he was being invited to a feast that would feed thousands! In Jesus' hands, that lunch became a banquet.

Donna and Gary, a childless couple in their early forties, consented to be chairpersons of their church's capital campaign. As requested, each day they prayed the campaign prayer: "Lord, what do you want to do through us?" Nobody knew, but they had been saving for a thirty-five-foot camping trailer for several years. The time had come to make the purchase, and as they were driving to the dealer, they looked at each other and asked, "What are we doing?" They discovered God's answer to their campaign prayer was to postpone the purchase of a trailer and contribute their savings to the campaign.

God's leading to Donna and Gary was sealed by faith when they chose to sacrifice for their church's campaign. Not only did their response impact them, but it had a huge impact on their church. It was not just about the money. When they told their story, the impact of their faithful response to God's answer to their prayers inspired heart-searching prayers from other members of their church family.

Sealing God's answer to our prayer with faith is a critical step in the journey of generosity. A year later in a follow-up conversation with the leaders of the campaign at their church, I learned that Donna and Gary had been blessed with a "miracle child." I called and visited with them on the phone. Joyfully, they told me of the birth of their daughter. They had all but given up hope they could ever have a family! What an amazing God we serve.

~Gregory McGarvey

Reflection

How did the boy's experience that day impact his faith and living in years to come? Have you ever given a gift and discovered it opened a door to new relationships or experiences you could not have imagined?

Challenge

Pray with intention: "Lord, what do you want to do through me?"

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Day 24: Relying on God

Then Jesus said to them, "Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one's life isn't determined by one's possessions, even when someone is very wealthy." Then he told them a parable: "A certain rich man's land produced a bountiful crop. He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! Then he thought, Here's what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That's where I'll store all my grain and goods. I'll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself." (Luke 12:15-19 CEB)

Most of us have experienced that feeling of relief when, after a time of hard work, we can finally take a breath. Our work is done, and now it is time to enjoy the fruits of our labor. We look forward to taking a drive in our new car, treating ourselves to a fancy dinner, and being able to eat, drink, and be merry, much like the Rich Fool of the parable found in Luke 12.

This idea sounds great, right? But Jesus tells the crowd, with harsh criticism, God's thoughts on greed:

"But God said to him, 'Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?' This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren't rich toward God." (Luke 12:20-21 CEB)

The Rich Fool will die, and the stuff he has accumulated will be worthless to him. Ouch! Seems that although the Rich Fool had amassed substantial wealth, he forgot to acknowledge God's role in his success. Instead of expressing gratitude to God for his abundance, he became complacent. He had become self-reliant rather than relying on God.

The journey of generosity begins with a fundamental understanding that God is the source of everything. Our relationships, skills, and even our wealth are blessings from our Creator. Being sealed by faith means we understand we are not self-made, but God-made. Finding our way home involves giving the glory and thanks to God for his eternal generosity.

~Kristine Miller

Reflection

Can you recall a time when you became complacent and self-reliant? What happened to remind you of God's provision in your life? How do you acknowledge your dependence on God and give thanks?

Challenge

Try spending an entire day being attentive to all the ways in which God has provided for you. Keep a list in your journal and reflect on each one. Did you notice that while you're listing your blessings, they keep coming? How can you express your gratitude to God?

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Day 25: Whom Do You Worship?

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." (Genesis 22:15-18 NIV)

After giving Abraham and Sarah the gift of a long-awaited son, God instructed Abraham to "take a journey" with his beloved son, build an altar, place the child on this altar, and ... sacrifice his life to God? (Read the story in Genesis 21 and 22.) In reading this story, it is difficult to imagine what God may be doing!

As a father of six, I cannot imagine the depth of faith and trust Abraham demonstrated to have even left on that journey! Forty-four years ago, I went through an experience that would change my life forever. Our first child, who had lived a healthy three years of life, was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia. Only fourteen days after her diagnosis, that precious girl died in my arms, and I came face to face with the question, "Who is it that you worship, Larry, the Gift or the Giver?"

In Genesis, God asked Abraham the same question. God asked Abraham to decide who it was that he would worship, the Gift (Isaac) or the Giver (God). At various points in our lives, we will all answer this question, and the answer will determine how we live life. Worshiping the Gift will only make us bitter, angry, cold, and unhappy. Worshiping the Giver will make us loving, caring, generous, and compassionate. Worshiping God, the Giver, enables us to live in the presence of a loving and giving God whose abundant generosity is always available to us.

~Larry Sykora

Reflection

So far in your life, especially during times of loss or crisis, how have you answered the question, "Whom do you worship?" When have you trusted God and when have you chosen something else?

Challenge

Think of someone you know who has gone through tragedy and still has clearly trusted God and has remained positive and hopeful. Talk with the person and ask him or her these questions: How were you able to get through this? What role did faith play?

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Day 26: What's in Your Cup?

*“But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.”
(Luke 11:41 NIV)*

Jesus had already had a busy day. He'd performed an exorcism and spent time teaching. While he'd been speaking, a Pharisee had invited him to eat dinner. But Jesus ignited a controversy when he didn't wash up before taking his seat at the table.

Being “pure” was a big deal to the Pharisees, so they would wash both themselves and their eating utensils in ritual baths. Some taught that it was important to keep the outside of the cup clean, while others focused on the inside.

Jesus sidesteps their debate altogether by shifting the focus to the contents of our cup. It's not just about being clean, inside or out, but it's about the quality of what's inside. In the comparison, he leaves open the question whether he is talking about what's within our cup or within our heart. One is tied to the other. You can't have good wine and a sour heart.

Jesus then says, what matters isn't the condition of your cup but your willingness to share what's inside. What defines our cleanliness isn't the state of our cups, inside or out, but the abundance of our generosity. Instead of focusing on keeping yourself clean, what matters is giving away your good wine, just as he demonstrated earlier at the wedding at Cana. This is the best antidote to the greed that leads to death. What is within our cup reflects what is within our heart. An empty cup equals a full heart. Surprisingly, when the cup is empty, we arrive home and find our best self: the very person God created us to be.

~Len Wilson

Reflection

In what ways do we allow our faith to become focused on keeping ourselves clean? How might you change your focus to the contents of the cup instead of the cup itself?

Challenge

Look for a way this week to share the contents of your cup with a stranger or someone outside of your daily circle.

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Day 27: The Voice

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27 NIV)

Sometimes the voices overwhelm us, voices calling for us to buy this or do this; voices calling for us to be fearful or angry; voices reminding us of our failings and sins; voices telling us we are not worthwhile or lovable. One pastor I know refers to these voices as the committee meeting in our minds.

There is, my friends, another voice. A Voice quiet but persistent, a Voice whispering in our ears, “You are mine ... you are loved ... you are forgiven ... you are of eternal worth.” In the midst of the committee meeting going on in your head, can you hear that Voice? In the midst of other voices, can you dare to believe in the other Voice? Can you dare to believe you are both known and loved?

Parents called their rabbi and asked him to please come to their home and straighten out their willful and disobedient child. When the rabbi came to the house, much to the parents’ chagrin, he simply held the boy close to him and never said a word. The boy grew up and became a famous rabbi, known for wisdom and compassion. When asked how he came to be so wise and compassionate, he said, “As a boy, I put my ear close to the chief rabbi’s heart, and in that moment, I heard the heartbeat of God.” Hear the heartbeat of God, whispering “I love you.” And when we hear the heartbeat of God, when we believe in the voice of God whispering “I love you,” then we are home; then we are whole.

~Scott McKenzie

Reflection

When do you most hear God’s whisper?

Challenge

At the end of the day, sit down for a few minutes and ask, “What voices did I listen to today?” In your journal, make a list of the committee voices you hear throughout the day. Now in the quiet, can you hear the whisper of God, can you hear the heartbeat of God? Welcome home!

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Day 28: The Joyful Ouch

For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. (2 Corinthians 8:3-5 NIV)

The background of this scripture lesson is a great Palestinian famine. Suffering and hunger were rampant. Paul enlisted the aid of the Gentile churches for relief of Jewish Christians.

The Macedonians responded in a remarkable way, with no excuses. One might say they had every right to find an excuse as they were severely persecuted and impoverished themselves. And yet, as

God's own people, their hearts were moved by God's grace and the expressed need. Excuses for not giving were abandoned and they ultimately gave beyond their means and pleaded to do so.

Some years ago, our family was starting the stewardship journey of a capital campaign in our church. Believing we should encourage our children to take part in the experience, we sat our two boys down, explained the campaign and its purpose, and suggested we find a way to give of ourselves to support our church through the campaign.

My "bright" idea was to suggest our two boys come up with their own definition of the word *sacrifice*—in a one-word definition. (The one-word definition is where I went wrong.)

Our older son, a mature twelve-year-old at the time, shouted with fervor, "That's easy, it's the word *ouch!*"

Hurriedly his eight-year-old brother, not to be outdone, responded with a hearty, "That's easy, it's the word *joyful!*" "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard!" his big brother stated.

Trying to save the day, my wife jumped in and asked our younger son to explain what he meant. He answered her in these questions:

"Well, aren't we doing this for our church?" Yes, my wife replied. "Then, aren't we doing this for God?" Again, a yes in reply.

"Well then, why would God want this if it is not joyful?"

Our sons' wisdom has morphed into a new definition for giving at our house. The combination of these two words is a definition for giving back to God out of God's goodness and grace—it's a "joyful ouch." And in the joyful ouch, we discover our best self, the self created in the image of a loving, generous God.

~Terry Goolsby

Reflection

In response to God's goodness, bounty, and grace, what is your "joyful ouch"? Can you remember the times when you've offered excuses instead of giving?

Challenge

In your journal, list other times you've felt joy in sacrifice.