

St. Paul: On The Same page

Devotions on the upcoming lessons, 03.22.15 Lent 5b

Day One: Jeremiah 31:31-34

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers... because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them...”

I’m constantly getting notices that some “privacy policy has changed” or some other contract in very tiny print has been revised. Frankly, I don’t usually pay much attention. The new deal seems about like the old deal.

In our lesson, God says that his new covenant will be different from the old one. Should this be something we care about? Should we maybe read the fine print of God’s new covenant?

How would it be changed? Under the old covenant (the Old Testament), God was like a husband to Israel. He loved them. He rescued them from slavery and led them to a land of their own. He said he would be their God and they would be his people.

That sounds like a pretty good deal. But then, when they were unfaithful to him, what would the old covenant require? It would mean divorce. It would mean that God should reject his bride and abandon her.

Under this new covenant what would you expect God to do differently? We might say he needs a covenant with some “teeth in it.” We’d suggest some consequences for straying in order to make it stick.

Instead, God says he will write his law on the hearts of his people. He will love them even more, and bring them even closer to himself. Best of all, he will forgive them for their unfaithfulness, and he will be faithful in spite of them.

This new deal sounds like it’s worth reading about. The next time you get a notice of a new contract, open your New Testament. Your heavenly Father has a better deal.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, we know that we owe you our obedience. Lord, we pray, stir up our hearts so that we may add love as well, and cherish you as dearly as you cherish us. Amen.*

Day Two: Hebrews 5:1-10

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God... No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God...

There was an old saying in politics (before women's suffrage and before the modern advertising age): "The man does not seek the office. The office seeks the man." In other words, we should not try to exalt ourselves by grasping and plotting to obtain a high office or to be honored.

A century ago we still tried to practice this in American politics. A candidate who hoped to be nominated to run for president would sit at home during the party convention, waiting to hear if he had been chosen.

In the church we still believe this. No one should campaign to be called as our next pastor. Instead, it is God acting through the church that should call people into positions of responsibility.

In our gospel lesson we're a bit offended that James and John would presume to ask for positions of honor. You just don't do that. You don't

ask to be considered more important than everyone else.

The writer to the Hebrews says that even Jesus did not make himself the high priest. "So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "You are my Son..."

If even Jesus waited for the Father's call, why should you think that you are entitled to whatever position of honor or authority that you desire? Of course, no one schemes to become a leader in the church because these places don't come with power or money. They come with service, with responsibility, with lots of problems to solve.

Nevertheless, God calls them a high honor. One who serves in God's kingdom is exalted. And whoever serves in the lowest place is the most important. Where are you today? You are where God called you to be, and we wait for him to honor us by calling us even lower.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I am your servant. Help me to be content to serve where and when you send me. Amen.*

Day Three: Mark 10:32-45

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to [Jesus].

“Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

Would you even think of praying such a thing as James and John do here?!? Of course not! They are asking Jesus to give them whatever they want! And when Jesus asks what they want, they request the two highest places.

I’m confident you would never ask for that. On the other hand, I’m betting that you do ask for some very special consideration from God.

When a group of soldiers has been pinned down by the enemy, the commander might ask for volunteers to help rescue them. We would hope that we’d have the courage to do so, even though it is likely that we could be wounded, or even killed. Certainly it would be hard and frightening and exhausting.

So when we look out at the battlefield of our world and we see God’s children trapped by the enemy, suffering sickness and crime and accident, all the results of a sinful broken world, do we

expect that someone else should go into that battle, but not us?

“Lord, I want to comfort the sick, but spare me bad smells or uncomfortable situations.” “Lord, I want to be there for people who have cancer, but please exempt me from ever experiencing cancer myself.” “I want my children to grow up and enjoy all the things of the world, but please don’t challenge them with the troubles that sinful people have.”

When we put it like that we would never pray such a prayer. But we do seem to ask God to let us go through life as if we would suffer no stain, no fear, no heavy exertion, no loss, as if the consequences of sin should not apply to us.

That is not God’s plan. Jesus’ plan for James and John was much better than giving them places of honor. He gave them the chance to do what he did – to empty themselves for others. He called them to give their lives, and to receive so much more.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, wherever you call me, to whatever challenge or trouble, I want to be willing to go. Give me the faith I need. Amen.*

Day Four: Mark 10:42-45

“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

How do you feel when you see other people get an award? Sometimes we feel envious. We wonder why a person should make so much money and be given so much praise just for being able to throw a ball or play a part. We might even think, “I could do that.”

We don't like people who seek fame and fortune for themselves – people who thrust themselves forward. It bothers us that James and John presumed to ask for positions of honor. We would rather that people receive their awards with humility. Like this...

“I don't deserve this award, but I have arthritis and I don't deserve that either.”

Jack Benny

“My mother used to tell me man gives the award, God

gives the reward. I don't need another plaque.” *Denzel Washington*

And then there are those who consider fame essential: “In the book of Gaga, fame is in your heart; fame is there to comfort you, to bring you self-confidence and worth whenever you need it.” *Lady Gaga*

Why do we all want to be popular? Why do we want others to remember our name? It is because we want to be loved. But, of course, fame is not the same as being loved. Many famous people even take their own lives because they fear that no one really loves them.

But there IS one who really loves us. Your name may not be known at all among the many people on earth, but there is one who knows your name. He came to serve you. He came to give you life. And he calls you to serve with him.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, who am I? I am no one in this world, but I know that I am important in your kingdom. I am not the greatest, but I am yours. Amen.*