

St. Paul: Weekly Devotions

*Devotions on week's readings
for 09.06.15 (Pentecost 15b)*

Day One: Isaiah 35:4-7a

Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."

"Vengeance"!?! Ouch! We don't like that word. We were taught as children not to hold a grudge or want revenge. Vengeance sounds mean to us. One dictionary says that it means "to do something bad to someone because they did something bad to you." And of course, nobody should "do something bad." But is there a place for vengeance?

The word vengeance comes from a Latin word that means "to lay a claim to." If it is used to refer to paying back some evil act, it's not just because we are angry, but because we are insisting on equal justice. Someone was wronged, something was taken, and something must be repaid.

Perhaps this is why God says in Deuteronomy, "Vengeance is mine." We run

into trouble when we focus our lives on revenge, on getting even, because we consider ourselves the victims. But God says he is the ultimate owner. He is laying a claim upon us. We are his.

When we seek revenge, we only create a greater mess because our rights and wrongs are so terribly entangled. Our world is a mess of sins and counter-sins. And we make it worse as we seek what we think we deserve.

But God commands Isaiah to say to those with fearful hearts, "your God will come... with vengeance." He is saying, "You belong to God, and he will take care of you."

Justice is in God's hands. Making things right is in God's hands, because you belong to God and he has a fierce love for you. He will not allow you to be harmed forever by your enemies. His rescue is on its way.

Prayer: *Almighty God, you are not only my loving Father, you are a Mighty King and Perfect Judge. Give me confidence in your judgments, that you will correct all the wrongs of this world and life I give all my fears and concerns for these things over to you. Amen.*

Day Two: James 2:1-10, 14-18

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

Are we saved by faith – or by the things we do? A lot of people have argued over what sort of balance is needed between faith and works. How much faith do we need? Or how many good works?

Try this: come up with other ways to say what James says. If a man says that he is a millionaire but he has no money, do his words make him rich? If a woman says she loves you, but all her actions are hateful, is she really in love?

The problem with those situations is not that there are not enough actions to back up the words. The problem is that the words themselves are empty – they are a charade. You might as well ask, is a dead love really love? Is a bankrupt millionaire really a millionaire? Is a dead faith really faith?

James was concerned that some Christians, knowing that Jesus died for them and that they were saved only by God's

gift, simply took God's love for granted. They didn't have actual faith, a relationship of love and trust in God. They didn't turn to God in gratitude and relief because he had rescued them from sin and death.

Instead, they were like people walking through the vendor displays at a fair, picking up all the free samples. "I'll take one of these, and two of these..." They'll probably throw many of these gifts away, but if it's free, why not take some?

Jesus' love is free – but having faith does not mean saying, "Sure, I'll have one of those." It means saying, "Lord, I am dead without your love. Take my life."

Real love changes us. Living faith bears fruit. Knowing Jesus' love causes us to love, and to live our faith.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, sometimes my faith is so small it is like a flickering heartbeat. Someone might think I was dead, it is so weak. But you have given me life and breath and warmth. Let that life grow strong enough to stand up and embrace others. Amen.*

Day Three: Mark 7:31-37

After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephatha!" (which means, "Be opened!")

I know that God can and does do miracles, even today. But I have quite a bit of skepticism for many of those who claim to have the gift of healing.

Have you ever watched a "faith healer" on television? Many of them do their "miracles" with a lot of showmanship and extravagance. They draw attention to themselves with elaborate gestures and words. And of course they wish to perform miracles for the largest possible audience.

Even people who are not considered healers, and who don't work on television or in a stadium, often seem to want a lot attention.

What does Jesus do? He takes the man away from the crowd. It says that Jesus speaks with him "privately." Literally, he spoke with him "on his own," just the two of them.

Jesus speaks to him in signs and gestures, touching his ears and his tongue, and looking up to heaven. And he heals him not with a shout, but with a sigh. He looks up to heaven and he sighs.

Why do you suppose Jesus sighed? It might have been with sadness, knowing all the evil things this man would now be able to hear. But then it might have been a sigh of deep satisfaction, knowing that he was restoring a broken part of God's precious creation.

This is not the only instance in which Jesus seems to avoid publicity and attention. That's because his healing was not about himself. It was about those that he loved, those who needed him.

If Jesus touched you and sighed, why do think it would be? I think it would be an expression of his pleasure at being close to you, and bringing you close to him.

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, you have touched me. You touched me, chose me, washed me, and made me your own. I sigh to think of the love you have for me, which I can never begin to comprehend. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.*

Day Four: “Lord, Whose Love through Humble Service” (LSB #848)

*Lord, whose love through humble service
Bore the weight of human need,
Who upon the cross, forsaken,
Offered mercy's perfect deed,
We, Your servants, bring the worship
Not of voice alone, but heart,
Consecrating to Your purpose
Every gift that You impart.*

The first verse of this hymn expresses the faith that James longs to see in us – faith in Jesus whose love was seen in his acts of mercy, and especially in his great act of sacrifice. Jesus died for us because he loved us.

*Still Your children wander homeless;
Still the hungry cry for bread;
Still the captives long for freedom;
Still in grief we mourn our dead.
As, O Lord, Your deep compassion
Healed the sick and freed the soul,
Use the love Your Spirit kindles
Still to save and make us whole.*

The second verse expresses our great need for Jesus' mercy. In just a few words it summarizes much of the misery of our world. Just think of all that is behind those words: the “homeless... the hungry... the captives... in grief.”

The third verse describes the completeness that James urges us to find in joining faith and works together.

*As we worship, grant us vision,
Till Your love's revealing light
In its height and depth and greatness,
Dawns upon our quickened sight,
Making known the needs and burdens
Your compassion bids us bear,
Stirring us to tireless striving,
Your abundant life to share.*

Notice that it is Jesus' love that “quickens” our sight. The light of Jesus' love brings our eyesight to life and allows us to see the needy around us.

It is Jesus' compassion, not his law, that leads us to tirelessly strive to serve those in need. And we serve them not just by answering physical need, but by sharing the abundant life we have received.

Jesus is the source of mercy, love, and grace.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, there is terrible sadness in our world. It is because of our sin. It is because of my own sin too. Lord, let me bring your compassion and forgiveness to my world today, by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.*

These devotions help us to think ahead about the Bible verses we will read in worship next week. They are written weekly by Pastor Don Neuendorf. You can learn more about our worship or our church at stpaulannarbor.org