

# ***Nurturing Desperation***

**Michael Spielman - February 16, 2003**  
**Loxafamosity.com**

It's good to be back with you this morning after what has been a frenzied week for me. It was another reminder that it is hard to be a teacher of God's Word in your spare time, so I am very thankful to God that he has given us pastors who are willing and able to forsake other competing pursuits so they can pour their full energies into this one great vocation, the proclamation of the Word of God. As I told you last week, this is the first time I've taught a series of messages, and I can see already, even on this limited scale, that it is a real discipline to pour your heart out on Sunday, only to dive right back into the word come Monday and start the preparation process all over again.

I brought with me this morning a few copies of last week's message for those who were not here or for those who want to take another look. You can also find a copy of it online at [Loxafamosity.com](http://Loxafamosity.com). I told you I was a project man, and [Loxafamosity](http://Loxafamosity.com) is one of those projects, an online magazine that launched on January 1, 2000. It's still awaiting it's big break, but has slowly grown to include 41 articles, including a couple by our own Victor Longstreth.

What I have on paper, here, is close to, but not exactly, what you heard me teach last Sunday. This is a message, you will recall, that I preached primarily to myself, in response to my own wandering affections, and as I considered it further, I saw some loose ends that needed tightening. The primary revision deals with a weakness in the application of my second point, "Get in the game". I was never satisfied with my explanation of what that means exactly, to get in the game spiritually. Here is what I finally concluded. I'll just read it from last week's revised manuscript.

Here is my council, to me first and also to you: Overextend yourself for the kingdom of God. Bite off way more than you can chew. Until we come to the end of our own abilities, we will never experience the desperation necessary to drive us to our knees in any meaningful way. If we live "small" and manageable Christian lives, avoiding all the extremes, we will likely be able to survive in our own strength and won't have to trouble with anything like getting up in the morning to wrestle in prayer with the King. However, if we place ourselves in situations which put us in over our heads, we will, by necessity, be driven into constant and focused fellowship with the only One who can satisfy our souls. If we don't delight in prayer, if our mind cannot focus on He who is an ever-present help in time of despair (Psalm 46:1), then we are obviously risking way too little for the kingdom of God. If we want to get into the game, we need to get in over our heads.

I am calling last week's previously untitled message, "Rescuing Wayward Affections," for that is what it entails. As way of review, I identified three culprits that contribute to my lack of focus and my failure to delight in God over and above all other competing desires. Number one: I do not remind myself each morning what is at stake in this fight of faith. For example, when I forget that I'm in a war, and I forget that the strength of the Spirit is my only hope for triumph, I become cavalier about my time with the Lord, viewing it as option rather than necessity (as if I could get by in my own strength) Number two: One of the reasons I fail to realize what's at stake each morning is because I'm spending too much time on the sidelines and not in the game. If I was in over my head, I would know what's at stake. Number three: One of the reasons I'm not in the game is because I'm trying to enjoy the promises of heaven while I'm still here on earth. In other words, I want a life of comfort and rest, not turmoil and risk. Therefore, I avoid those types of endeavors which put me on the front line of the battle.

While last week identified that which steals my focus and affection, this week and next will continue in the way of solution. And the solution, of course, lies in scripture so let's go there, starting in Matthew 7, reading verses 21-23:

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord" shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name? And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness!"

For as long as I have been a Christian, I don't think there has been a portion of Scripture that has scared me more than this one. By God's own divine declaration, there will be *many* people who will come to the end of their earthly lives, and will stand before the judgment seat, expecting to enter the kingdom of heaven only to be ushered into the terror of hell. That, in itself, may not be all that remarkable, since most people seem to have a vague and ill-founded

notion that they're a good person deserving of heaven. What is notable (and tragic!) about this passage is that those who are being denied admission are religious people who have lived their lives with a false assurance of salvation. These are not desperate delusionals trying to enter heaven after a life of wanton immorality. These are people who, at least externally, did all the right things. They taught the Word of God, they cast out demons, they even performed miracles, and yet salvation eluded them. They expected eternal life, they were given eternal damnation. That is a scary thought, for all of us who think ourselves religious.

This morning, my intention is to make each of us feel very desperate, by examining some of the severe warnings that face us in Scripture. My hope is that in fostering our own sense of desperation, it will drive us closer to Christ for fear that we should run this race in vain, just as those described in Matthew seven. It is the desperate soul that will fight back fatigue, that will forsake the TV or the newspaper or whatever would keep them from renewing the mind and donning the full armor of God. It is the confident soul that sees no need to war or wrestle and run, and the soul which doesn't war or wrestle or run is the soul that will not survive. It is important that we feel desperate. As way of clarification, when I say the "confident soul" I refer to the soul which finds confidence in it's own strength, not the soul that finds confidence in the Lord. We *should* be confident in the Lord, but not in ourselves. "But he who glories, let him glory in the Lord" (II Cor. 10:17).

OK, back to desperation, this time in Hebrews 12:14. Catholics, I think, know this verse well, Protestants not so much. We need to know this verse. It reads, "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord."

Now there are basically two ways we could respond to this verse. We could say, "if I can just be 'holy' enough, then I can make it into heaven!", or we could say, "Oh, God, if you don't give me the grace to obey, then I am undone!" The first response seems to be the default mind set of fallen man and, on a more sophisticated level, is a pillar of Catholic doctrine (where you cooperate with God to actually become holy enough to merit entrance into the kingdom). The other response, the correct response, is a response of desperation, recognizing that we're disqualified from ever meriting entrance to heaven long before we utter our first word or take our first step. We are united to Adam, united to his sin and thus united to his death (Romans 5:18,19). If we ever gain entrance to heaven it will be on the imputed righteousness of another, not the actual righteousness of ourselves (Romans 4:5). Our own righteousness is as filthy rags, so far as it's ability to earn heaven. My intention this morning is not to examine the doctrine of justification at any significant level. It is a worthy study, but that isn't my purpose today. What I do want to examine is the implication of Hebrews 12:14, without holiness, no one will see God. Too often Protestants don't let the full weight of verses like this land on them. It is true we are saved through grace alone, by faith alone, but it is also true that holiness, or sanctification, is absolutely necessary to our final salvation. The path of holiness is the only path that leads to heaven.

I John 1:6-7 is a helpful passage in this regard, showing us that while growth in holiness is necessary for salvation, it is by no means the foundation of our salvation. Here's what it says:

If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Notice two things. First, those who "walk in the light" are not living perfect, sinless lives. Verse seven tells us that Christ's blood is still the only thing that can cleanse them from all their sin. Secondly, since sin remains in the lives of those who "walk in the light", then a person's own realized holiness cannot be the basis for their admittance to heaven. Holiness is the necessary evidence of salvation (since those who walk in darkness are without the truth), but it is clearly not the foundation of salvation.

Let's move on. The passage I opened with in Matthew comes from the tail end of Christ's Sermon on the Mount. This next portion of Scripture comes nearer the Sermon's beginning but is no less forceful. Ask yourself as we read, "Is Christ actually teaching that without holiness we will be cast into hell?" This comes from Matthew 5:27-30.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you, for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it

from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

Christ *is* teaching that without holiness we will be cast into hell, and He prescribes a mentality that is willing to do whatever it takes to keep sin from reigning in your body.

Last Friday I was coming home from work and I grabbed one of the many tapes from the floor of my car and popped it in. By God's sovereign design, the tape I grabbed was profound and convicting and dealt entirely with this subject of holiness, or sanctification. The text was Romans 6:22 & 23, the preacher was John Piper, and the tape has been playing continuously in my car for the last week. I've heard the message five times now, once a day during my trips back and forth between home and work. There is a part of me that was tempted this morning to just pop that tape in, hit play, and sit down, but I trust that God's strength will be magnified in my many weaknesses. Nevertheless, I was happy to glean from it what I could, and I am again thankful to God for faithful and gifted teachers of his Word. Let's read together the end of Romans 6 (vv. 22,23), and this time I'm in the New American Standard.

But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, *and the outcome, eternal life*. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The first thing to point out is that eternal life is the outcome of sanctification, which we could simply define as progressively becoming like Jesus. This, then, corroborates with Hebrews 12:14 affirming that sanctification, or holiness, is necessary for the attainment of eternal life. But what else does this portion of Romans tell us? It also says that eternal life is a free gift. Therefore we must deduce that if eternal life is a free gift, then sanctification, which results in eternal life, must also be a free gift. If eternal life is a free gift, but the sanctification necessary to get there isn't, then eternal life would not be a free gift.

But what does this mean that sanctification is a free gift, for we all know by experience and by the testimony of Scripture that holiness results from our own obedience, from our own choices, and from our own preferences? We will be held accountable for the decisions we make. In this same chapter of Romans we are commanded to consider ourselves dead to sin, to not let sin reign in our mortal bodies, to not obey its lusts, and to present ourselves as slaves of obedience. These are all things that we must do, and yet sanctification is a gift. We see this tension again in verse 17, "*But thanks be to God* that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed." Paul thanks God for our obedience, not us. If we were responsible for it, we'd get the thanks, but we don't. What we are left with is the biblical reality that sanctification is both dependent upon our choices, and built upon God's gift. The mistake that we could make here, and the mistake many people do make when considering these mind-bending biblical concepts, is to think that since sanctification is God's gift, then we don't have to do anything. That would be like saying, "Since obeying God is a gift, then I don't have to obey God." Or to place it in the framework of last week, "since the ability to get out of bed and read my Bible is a gift, then I don't have to get out of bed and read my Bible." Such thinking is nonsense. The gift of God is not in place of our effort, it is our effort! Whenever we deny ourselves some sinful pleasure, it's a gift! Whenever we say some bold word of testimony, it's a gift! Whenever we present the members of our bodies to righteousness, it's a gift! So let's be desperate for that gift, realizing that the gift is not in place of us, it is us. Our affections have been enslaved to another and our old self has passed away.

Before leaving the confines of Romans 6, I want to consider briefly this notion of slavery. The Bible is clear, both here and elsewhere, that all of humanity is enslaved to one of two masters. I said last week that we are all unified in the desire to be happy. Today we see that we also unified in bondage, either to God or to sin. There are no in between. Everyone you meet, everyone you see on the street, everyone you pass in the mall is either enslaved to God or enslaved to sin. The natural mind thinks itself free. The redeemed mind knows better.

This slavery which the Bible speaks of is unusual in that it is the slavery of the will. Unlike a person enslaved to a cruel master, forced to work *against* their will, this is a slavery which rules the will. Those whom God calls to salvation do not begrudge the rescue. We thank God, we do not cry out, "Help me, I'm enslaved!". Likewise, those outside God's kingdom are not beating at heaven's door, lamenting their inability to get in. Rather, they are perfectly content to serve their slave master sin. The only way we can move from one slave master to the other (and it is a transaction which only works one way!) is for God to break in and free us from the slave master sin, the slave master we were born serving. In the process, our old self passes away and we are given new affections. We are still fallen,

weighed down by our corrupt flesh, but no longer enslaved to sin. And once we are freed from sin and enslaved to God, all the forces of sin and hell are incapable of getting us back (John 10:29).

In a practical sense, this notion of slavery is not hard to illustrate in the real world. Even the most ardent atheist must admit that they are not free in any ultimate sense. We are all subject to something just beyond our control, namely our affections. For example, let's consider food. If you despise mushrooms or brussel sprouts or liver, are you truly free to enjoy them? You are certainly free to eat them, but are you free to delight in them? Or how about sports, if you don't like boxing, are you really free to have fun watching it, no matter how hard you try? While these first two examples center on fairly inconsequential preferences, matters of massive moral significance often fall in much the same way. Consider the gospel call. How many times does the exact same sermon prompt the exact opposite reactions in people, so that one person falls to their knees in repentance and the other jeers in derision. The same message was preached, the same evidence was presented, the same call was issued. These two people may be the same age, the same gender, the same race, and the same intelligence, and yet one accepts and one rejects. When it comes right down to it, our affections are rarely, if ever, determined by mere objective evidence. What could the deciding factor then be, if not something completely beyond our own control? The Bible tells us what that something is. For the believer, it is the Spirit divinely enabling us to prefer righteousness. For the unbeliever, it is the slave master sin forcing their affections away from righteousness. I tell you this not to discourage you, that you're will is enslaved, but to encourage you that as believers, we are in a relationship with He who can change our affections and bend them towards Him, so plead with Him to do it at ever increasing levels. "Lord, satisfy me in the morning. May my desire be for you and for your Word and not for my bed!" The world has no mechanism for changing their affections. This is why all their efforts at moral reformation fail. But we, through prayer, can somehow influence Him who influences our affections. I don't pretend to fully understand it, but I am thankful for it.

Last week I read from I Corinthians 9, where it tells us to run the race and to fight the fight, not as one beating the air. Why is Paul so relentless in his strivings? So that after preaching to others, he himself should not be disqualified (like the preachers mentioned in Matthew 7). If we continue from chapter 9 into chapter 10 we will see further illustration of this concept of slavery and affection, and we will be given another stern warning which we would do well to heed for the good of our soul.

I Corinthians 10:1-5

Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

This is an account of Israel's exodus from Egypt. We are told that all of Israel lived through the same miracles, they all followed the same cloud and the same flame. They all passed through the same Red Sea, and they all ate the same manna from above and drank water from the same rock. All of Israel witnessed God's power in stunning ways, and yet they all perished in the wilderness for their rebellion and unbelief, all of them except for Joshua and Caleb. Did Joshua and Caleb have inside information? Were they smarter than the rest of Israel? Was their decision to stay the course better informed than everyone else's decision to flee? No. They all saw the same things, they all received the same promises and commandments. The final deciding impulse must have come from outside of them. Joshua and Caleb had their blinders lifted, while the rest of Israel continued in darkness. The lesson, here, is that those of us in the church also have front row seats to God's glory, but if we see only with our natural eyes, we will live in spiritual apathy and rebellion just as Israel did. In our natural condition, we are incapable of beholding and loving God's glory so let us be desperate that he open our ever-closing eyes. If we do not, the consequences are serious. Let's continue the passage.

I Corinthians 10:6-12

Now *these things became our examples*, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now all these things happened to them *as examples*, and *they were written for our admonition*, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.*

These things were written for our example. This passage, then, could be the summation of my primary intent this morning. God promises and delivers terrible things to those who will not be satisfied in Him. These historic examples of tragedy and death are given us to place a healthy fear of God in our wandering souls. Be careful, the Bible tells us. Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

I have listed in front of me this morning eight other passages which I wanted to introduce, passages that contain significant warnings to we who attain to heaven, but clearly our time together is coming to a close. As such, I will hold off on these verses and conclude by examining a warning of a slightly different nature. Beyond the Bible's many threats to our soul, there is another threat that is just as real, if not so far reaching. God tells us that those who are His children will be chastened for their disobedience. Let's read Hebrews 12:3-11:

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES." It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

As children of God, we would do well to take some lessons from the parent-child relationships here on earth. What does a child risk in disobedience? Certainly not their status as children. They sacrifice, rather, their own well-being, both for the punishment they will receive and for the ramifications of whatever destructive choice they have made. Punishment is not designed to harm, though it is painful in the present, but rather to spare, to spare the child from destructive behaviors. Such is the case with God. His chastening produces holiness in His children, without which no one can see God. If we are Christians, then we will be chastened for disobedience so let us not have the attitude, which often exists subtly in the back of my mind, that sin has no ramifications for me, as a justified sinner. I will be chastened, it will complicate my relationships here on earth, it will compromise my testimony to those around me, and it will hurt. Like the rebellious child, I sacrifice my immediate well-being when I sin, even though my Father's punishment is keeping me from sacrificing my eternal soul.

In closing I want to share a brief quotation from J.C. Ryle's book *Holiness*, a book that is extremely helpful on these topics of warring and

If the Bible be true, it is certain that unless we are 'sanctified', we shall not be saved. There are three things which, according to the Bible, are absolutely necessary to the salvation of every man and woman in Christendom. These three are justification, regeneration and sanctification. All three meet in every child of God: he is both born again and justified and sanctified. He that lacks any one of these three things is not a true Christian in the sight of God and, dying in that condition, will not be found in heaven and glorified in the last day.

If we think of justification as what God does and sanctification as what we do, we make a glaring omission. Justification is a free gift from God and so is sanctification. And what is the gift of sanctification? It is us, a changed us, so that our desire is no longer for wickedness, but for righteousness. We are all bound to our affections so fight to align your affections to Scripture. Don't complain that the gift is too complicated or hard to understand. Be thankful for the gift and continue the fight, knowing that God's gift to us, as it applies to sanctification, is the effort to stay in the fight, so heed the warnings and stay in the fight.

Let's pray.