

Rescuing Wayward Affections

Michael Spielman - February 9, 2003

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It's been a few months and more since Phil first asked me to be one of the Sunday School substitutes during tax season, but as recently as last Sunday, I was still trying to come up with my first message. For the past three weeks, I've had a fairly clear idea of the questions I wanted to address but very little idea what the answers would actually be. Well, here, I am. My exploration is over, for the time being, and now it's time to share what I've learned. As best I can tell, this morning will be the introduction for the two lessons to follow, and starting next Sunday, I move into uncharted territory. My teaching resume is about two-lines long and this is the first time I've attempted anything like a series, so lets see what happens.

Before I get into the heart of our lesson, I want to begin by trying to recount my own thought process as I wrestled with choosing a topic for our time together. It has been such an evolving process that I think the destination will make more sense if you can see the steps that led me here. As I mentioned at the outset, I've known of this opportunity to teach for a while now, but I've had a difficult time coming up with a clear outline for what I wanted to present. The more thought I gave to it, the more varied my ideas became. It wasn't until receiving the passing counsel of a friend that I gained anything like a clear direction (though that clarity didn't last for long). Knowing me well, he counseled that teaching a series of lessons provides an opportunity to explore a subject on a deeper level than if I were teaching a single message. Therefore, I should choose a line of study that I've already wanted to pursue and use the teaching opportunity as a front of sorts for the necessary study.

That advise appealed to me immediately, in large part because I have a very long "to do" list, so to speak, and very short amounts of free time. Those who know me best know that I am a project man. Whether it's a blessing or a curse, it's sometimes hard to say, but I am perennially churning through new ideas...book ideas, movie ideas, design ideas, website ideas, outreach ideas. My computer has so many bits and pieces of stories and concepts that it's hard to keep track of them all (if only I was as adept at their completion as I was at their conception).

So how does all this relate to this morning? Like this. The project that has been nearest my heart of late is one that has been on my mind for almost three years now. It is a website I've named SoulSatisfied.com. Don't bother looking for it, it's not up yet. After three years of sporadic R&D, I still don't have anything to share with the public. Maybe this will be the year. So, what is SoulSatisfied? What's the concept?

Here it is in a nutshell. I want to build a professional grade, full-featured, interactive and animated website that presents the gospel as clearly and accurately as humanly possible...solid design and solid theology. Nothing like that exists on the web today, and to me, that is a major missed opportunity. Sure, there are a handful of gospel tracts that have been converted into web pages, but I haven't found anything that begins to utilize all that web distribution has to offer for the proclamation of the massive and glorious salvation call. It is true that the gospel is a simple message, but it is deep and so prone to confusion and abuse. If you just make it a four-point sales pitch, which some tracts seem to do, you will likely do more harm than good. I want SoulSatisfied to combat that sort of shallow presentation without compromising the simple beauty of the gospel message. By one man sin entered into the world, and by one man there is forgiveness of sins (Romans 5:18,19).

As the name suggests (and I'm slowly bringing us back around to this morning) I want SoulSatisfied to present union with Christ as reward and not as sacrifice. I want SoulSatisfied to break through all the lies and misconceptions concerning the relationship between God's glory and man's desire. I want to point out that all of us, you and me, black and white, men and women, young and old, educated and ignorant, Christian and pagan, we all want the same thing because we were all created by the same being. We all want to be happy, even though we employ so many different means in pursuit of that one end. I want to tell the unbelieving world that it isn't that their desire for pleasure is too strong. Rather, as C.S. Lewis profoundly points out, they're desire is too weak. They sell out for useless and fraudulent and damning pleasures which are snatched from their hands before they're ever realized. I want SoulSatisfied to be an Ecclesiastes for the hungry soul, to proclaim with King Solomon, that every single worldly pursuit is vanity and chasing after the wind. We were made for one thing...the glory of God, and we will find satisfaction no where else. Were that the world knew that. Were that I knew that.

For those who heard me teach this class last year, this line of thinking should sound familiar. In some ways SoulSatisfied is to be the evangelistic version of those lessons. My April message argued that the Christian life is not primarily a life of sacrifice but a life of reward. Yes, we are called to give up all the junk in the world which would destroy us anyway, but what do we gain? An eternity of perfect peace and rest, fellowship with the living God. That is not a sacrifice! My June message dealt with the fact that God's love towards us is not such that He makes much of us, or exalts our worth, but rather it is the stripping away of all the things in our life which keep us from seeing and beholding His glory. God loves us best, when He glorifies Himself the most.

So, all that to say, that, thanks to my friend's advice, I finally knew, or so I thought, what I would present to you in our weeks together: an exposition on the glory of God and the satisfied soul, how it relates to evangelism and how it relates to our own growth in sanctification. Well, my plan didn't last for long.

Sitting down to begin my study for the first time, I was almost immediately struck by one of those miserable moments of self-realization where I suddenly felt like a complete and utter hypocrite. My intention, you see, was to articulate this beautiful theology of reward and delight, about loving God for the sake of God, about finding your soul's greatest fulfillment in the only thing that can fulfill your soul. But sitting there at that moment, at 6:15 in the morning, tired and weary, those seemed like very foreign concepts. For all my talk of "Desiring God", all I wanted to do was to get back in bed.

I didn't get back in bed, I kept reading, but I felt the heavy weight of competing desires, desires that I would have much rather pursued. As I sat there, I thought of the nature of my own affections. What are the things that I most desire to do... spend time with my family, watch a movie, read a book, work on the computer, go out to eat, see my friends, go to sleep...or spend time with my Savior? If I'm honest with myself, my time with the Lord rarely thrills my heart so much as so many lesser pleasures do.

So what is wrong with me?! Is the notion of the fulfilled soul just a theoretical hoax that has no bearing in the real world of sickness and alarm clocks? For all my talk, is prayer and study and obedience still motivated by duty rather than delight, and if it is how can I change that? I need to change that (by the grace of God)!

This morning I have the unique opportunity to preach the exact message that I most need to hear. This morning I'm preaching to myself, and here is the question I must answer. When it comes to communing with my God, my Savior and my Creator, why is it that my heart strays, and why do my affections wander?

After much painful consideration, here is what I've seen (in the form of three main points which stack on top of each other). I don't delight in God as I should or give Him the attention He deserves because I don't recognize what's at stake. I don't recognize what's at stake because I spend too much time on the sidelines. I spend too much time on the sidelines because I often confuse my present life in the world with my future life in heaven. Now, let's explore these one at a time.

I. I don't recognize what's at stake, or put another way, I don't realize the peril that faces me.

The apostle Paul tells us often that the Christian life is a battle. In Ephesians 6 he says that if we don't daily put on the full armor of God, we won't be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. And if we don't habitually stand against the wiles of the devil, then our faith is useless. And if our faith is useless, then we won't attain to eternal life. Therefore, when I am tempted *not* to read the Word and *not* to come to God in prayer, I am being tempted to throw aside the full armor of God. That's big. The stakes couldn't be any higher.

For example, let's consider Christ and the apostles in their last moments together before Christ was crucified. It was late at night, they had taken their meal and they were tired. After calling Peter and James and John to Himself, Jesus tells them in Matthew 26:38, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me." Well, they didn't watch for long. While Christ was on His face pleading, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me, nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will," his disciples were fast asleep, heedless to the growing evil and unaware of the approaching enemy. Christ asked them three times to watch and pray, and all three times, while He prayed (to the point of sweating blood), they slept. "Could you not watch one hour?" Jesus asks them in Mark 14:38. No they couldn't, but Jesus could. Why? Wasn't He just as tired as they were? He was, but Jesus knew what was at stake. His disciples had forgotten. Jesus was equipping for a night of battle. His disciples were equipping for a night of rest.

Likewise, if I was more aware of what's at stake when it's time for me to meet with the Lord, my desires would fall quickly into place. If my options are, meet with the Lord and live, or, do not meet with Him and perish, I know what my desire would be. My failures in this matter do not stem from ignorance, but rather neglect. I fail to remind myself, just like the disciples before me. They knew something was afoot when Christ took them to the garden. He had just told them, "I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom" (v. 29). In verse 31, He warned them that they would all fall away, and that He would be stricken. After Peter's ill-founded claim of allegiance, Christ predicted that he would deny him that very night. The disciples were warned of the risk, but they forgot or overlooked it. They were waylaid by the appearance of peace and safety, and so am I. Peter's compromise cost him his allegiance to Christ. Why should I expect my own compromises to yield anything less? Let he who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (I Corinthians 10:12).

With that said, let me emphasize that my personal failures, while placing my own soul in jeopardy, do not jeopardize God's ultimate victory. God's purposes will come to pass with or without me. To

illustrate, let's consider briefly the story of Esther and Mordecai. Esther was a young Jewish woman who was also the wife of a powerful foreign king. The king had taken her as a wife for her stunning beauty, knowing nothing of her ethnic identity. Esther's uncle, Mordecai, also a Jew, was a devout man of God who staunchly refused to bow and pay homage to the king's steward, a wicked man named Haman. Haman hated Mordecai for his resolve and so convinced the king to issue a decree to destroy all the Jews in his kingdom. Mordecai quickly sent word to Esther, urging that she plead with the king to relent from his planned genocide. Esther replied that no one, not even her, could approach the king unbidden without forfeiting their life (unless he raised his scepter and bid them approach). Mordecai's response to Esther is what I'm focusing on here, so let's read it now in Esther 4:14:

For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Mordecai's theology was exactly right. God is not hamstrung by the failures of His people. His purposes will come to pass one way or another. Therefore, when we falter, we do not harm God, we harm ourselves, forfeiting blessing and incurring God's chastening (or worse). What did Mordecai warn Esther? Deliverance will come either way, but if you will not intervene, then you and your house will perish. Esther saw his wisdom and replied boldly, "I will go to the king," and "if I perish, I perish." And notice that once Esther knew what was at stake, she immediately went into prayer and fasting. The heart that truly knows what's at stake is a heart whose focus and affections will be rightly placed.

II. I'm spending too much time on the sidelines.

I believe that one of the main reasons I forget what's at stake each morning is because I'm spending too much time on the sidelines, not in the game.

For example, when I was in high school, I was the only guy on the football team who got to play offense and defense. I never came out of the game, and you know what, focus wasn't a problem for me, and neither was preparation. The nature of athletic competition requires total concentration. It was literally beyond my ability, in those game time moments, to think about anything else, because the task at hand required my full and undivided attention. On the basketball court, however, I was not so well off, at least as a sophomore. I spent a lot of time on the bench, and my mind wandered far and wide. Whenever I did get into the game, how often I had to ask the guy I was subbing for who he was guarding. I was supposed to know that. Wasn't I watching the game? Wasn't I paying attention? Not always. Too often I was thinking, "I'd rather be doing something else." Does that sound familiar? The mind in the game is engaged by default, but the mind on the sidelines is often distracted.

When Christ prayed in Gethsemane, He was warring against the spirits of darkness, wrestling to drink the painful cup appointed Him. I don't get the impression that He was having to slap himself in the face to stay awake, and I don't think He was struggling to stay focused in prayer. Does anyone really think that Jesus' mind could have been wandering at that moment, like mine is so prone to do when I commune with God? Is there any chance Jesus was thinking, "I think I'll go fishing tomorrow," or, "maybe it's time I bought some new sandals" or, whatever! Is there any

chance Jesus' heart was straying? None. Christ was in the game. All His energies were required of Him.

Let's shift now from the question of focus to the question of desire by going to I Corinthians 9:24. Paul, who seems as fond of athletic imagery as he is of war imagery here centers on running and boxing.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, Lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Now, let me see if I can flesh out this example of the runner. Paul tells us that whoever competes for a prize must be temperate in all things, just as he tells us in II Timothy 2:3,4 that the good soldier of Jesus Christ does not, "[entangle] himself with the affairs of this life." Being a soldier and being an athlete both require significant levels of self-denial, in the present, to achieve great reward in the future. As such, when I feel exhausted and have little desire to get up and spend time in the Word, the Bible must then compete with the bed in the same way that the 21st mile of a marathon must compete with the desire to quit. Though I have never run a marathon, I can imagine that there are plenty of times along the way, where quitting the race seems a lot more appealing than finishing it. What is it, then, in that moment, that pushes the marathoner on? Is it delight or duty? I would argue that it is determination to *get* the delight, the greater delight, which pushes him at that moment past the lesser delight of quitting. They sacrifice the small, though immediate, pleasure of quitting for the greater, and lasting, pleasure of finishing. So too, there are many times when fighting the good fight of faith can only compete with the promise of immediate rest in the long run of expected reward. Let us not forget, after all, that we are competing for a crown, and crown's go to those who finish the race!

Before I move to the final point of my analysis, I must here pause and try to give some practical direction to this charge of "Get in the game!" Such commendation has a nice ring to it, but what does it mean in the context of the Christian life? 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 a "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 (—), 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.

III. I confuse my present life in the world with my future life in heaven.

Finally, it occurred to me that one of the reasons I'm not always in the game is because I don't want

to suffer the price that such involvement requires. I want to enjoy the fruits of heaven while I'm still living on earth, but that, of course, is not what I'm here for.

The reward, or the satisfaction of salvation, is not primarily immediate. It is a long-term dividend that may never pay out until the life to come. That is precisely why Paul speaks of the Christian life as wrestling and running and making war. Such endeavors are painful and exhausting while they last. If there were no finish line, no rest, no relief, such pursuits would be futile and foolish. My problem is that despite all my talk, I am forever looking to the immediate yield, and the satisfaction offered in pursuing the Lord (as we saw above) can rarely compete with the satisfaction offered by the things of the world, *if you look only to their immediate yield.*

When my alarm goes off in the morning, and my heart longs to stay in bed, sleep is more appealing to me at that moment than the Lord. Therefore, I am in danger of either not getting out of bed at all, or getting out of bed for all the wrong reasons (for duty rather than delight). However, if I would just consider the long-term return rather than the immediate yield, my desires would be right every time. The question comes back to this, am I trying to be satisfied now for a little while or satisfied later for all eternity? If we want an easy life *now*, we shouldn't be Christians. Eat, drink, be normal, get lots of rest, don't take any risks. Don't worry about prayer or study or making war. Rest now and perish later. But, if we'd rather sacrifice leisure in the here and now for an eternity of perfect peace and rest, we must learn to look long.

It struck me a couple of years ago that heaven is described in the Bible as a place of rest. "Enter into my rest," we hear in Hebrews chapter four. By implication, then, we should be wearing ourselves out in this life, in preparation for the rest that is promised. Our rest is to come in eternity, not now. And if I waste my life in perennial rest, then what do I have to look forward to in heaven? Rest is not much appeal to a rested man, is it? But oh how appealing is rest to one who is spent and worn out! Do we sleep better at night after a day of lounging in front of the TV or after a day of activity and work and toil? The rest is coming, but not now, so let's not begrudge God if we have to wait for it.

So long as we're talking about rest, let me tell you a story about Jon Gruden. Jon Gruden is the football coach of the Super Bowl Champion Tampa Bay Buccaneers, the youngest coach in the NFL, and ever since he took his first coaching job as a graduate assistant at the University of Tennessee, he has made it a practice to be in his office before five o'clock every morning. He gets up, in fact, at 3:17 each day, and works often till nine, ten or eleven o'clock at night. Is that not amazing? I read an interview with Coach Gruden in an American Airlines magazine article last year that blew me away. I tried to find the original quote so I could get it just right, but I couldn't track it down. Here it is in paraphrase:

Too many people are living life without purpose or passion. I live every day to the fullest, knowing it could be my last. Life is too short to not pursue your passion with everything you've got.

Were that I had the passion for the kingdom that Jon Gruden has for football. And you know the saddest thing for Jon? He's already won the Super Bowl, thirty-nine years old and he's already attained to the highest calling of his life. And it's vanity. Now what? He's poured out everything in pursuit of this one thing, and now he has it, and it won't satisfy. It's utterly and completely meaningless, and he'll know it soon enough, if not already. And yet he's pouring his life out at 3:17 in the

morning for nothing, while I'm still in bed, too tired to pursue the only thing in life which isn't vanity. How's that for a wake-up call? Each time I fight to get out of bed, I can think of Jon Gruden, sitting in his office, watching his tapes, diagraming his plays, disciplined and devoted, willing to sacrifice to achieve his goals. He may stand on the sideline, but his head is in the game. I pray that Jon Gruden will one day get his head in the real game. In the meantime, he competes for a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown, so let's get in the game!

In closing, I want to remind each of us, that there will come a day, for we who are united to Christ, when the alarm clock will sound no more, when the battles will all be over, and when competing desires will cease forever! But do not expect such things now. We are not home yet, so let's not try and live like we are. If we don't prepare to meet the enemy, then we're not going to make it. I mean, what did Jesus warn Peter? "Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation," he says in Mark 14:38. Peter failed and fell. Christ restored him, but there was another disciple who failed and fell, and his torment continues to this day. The stakes are high.

At the end of the day, we should be motivated both by love and desperation, and that in large measure, will be our focus for the next two Sundays...love that God has rescued us from warring against him to warring with him (rescuing us from death to life), and desperation at the knowledge that there is a world, a flesh and a devil trying to destroy us. Therefore, let us resolve to forsake excess amounts of leisure in the present, so we can spend more time in the game, so we'll better realize that the stakes are high. If those three things are true in our lives, how can we not delight to spend time with the Lord in prayer and how could we not afford to give him all our attention?

Let's pray.