

Soul Care (Deut. 30:11-20)

As the pastor of this church, I am sometimes called to step off script and address things of a more topical and timely nature. We will continue to study the book of Deuteronomy, and, in fact, I hope to apply part of the message of this fifth book of the Bible today. Nonetheless, I feel compelled to address an issue that has been weighing on my heart for the last few months. The Bible teaches us that **we do not live in a spiritually neutral zone**. We live in a time of conflict, praying that the fruits of the work of Jesus would be applied against all the schemes of the principalities and powers. Make no mistake, Satan has already received his death blow at the cross, but nonetheless he still “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

And what has our enemy been plotting against us in this season of pandemic and social upheaval? Let me be clear. You cannot flip open the Bible and find an exact account of the enemy’s game plan for 2020. But that does not leave us without discernment and strategy. We are biblically permitted to observe types of Satan’s work in Scripture, and then carefully watch for those patterns at work in the world around us. **One of Satan’s greatest strategies is set forth in 2 Corinthians 4:4** – “In their case [the case of those who are perishing] the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” This is Satan’s MO – to do whatever he can **to blind people from seeing the glory of Christ**. I would submit to you this morning that Satan is seeking to blind us in a very particular way. Satan wants to deceive people into thinking that they are nothing but material bodies living in a world with nothing but material existence at stake. He wants to blind people to the inescapably spiritual dimensions of reality and the crying need to care for our souls. Allow me to share three kinds of evidence with you concerning this conspiracy of the enemy.

1. **Data**. In a recent article published by The Gospel Coalition, Joe Carter summarizes recent findings of the American Bible Society and the Barna Group. The research suggests that what these organizations term

“Scripture engagement” for adults has fallen from 27.8% in January to 22.6% by the first week of June. This means that, according to this research, **13.1 million fewer Americans were regularly reading the Bible in a personally impactful way in June than had been in January.** The culprit in this decline is clearly the pandemic and the move of many churches to online activities. Additional Barna research cited in an article posted by Fox News finds that in the month of May nearly half of all churched adults did not engage with online worship options, though there was an initial surge of interest at the beginning of the shutdown. Obviously, attendance has been down because of closures and the risk of transmission. But what is troubling is that this has clearly led to a decline in key spiritual disciplines. And we could add to these numbers many other pieces of data, such as increases in social media use, streaming services, and messaging through dating apps, all behaviors indicative of extended periods of time at home. Now some of these activities are not necessarily problematic, but it is interesting to note their widespread use happening at the same time as church engagement declines. These activities also reflect sins of isolation and sloth.

2. **The language of “essential” v. “nonessential.”** To this information, we add the now ubiquitous language of essential and nonessential activities. In speaking on this subject, I am not questioning the motives of those using the words. I am simply noting the way in which this language has filtered down into our everyday vocabulary and even our mental landscapes. Essential activities are understood as those things which are necessary for life – the things which keep roofs over our heads, food in our bellies, and breath in our lungs. I suppose that we may want to talk about the popular perception of Maslow at this point. But I’m not so sure that Maslow got things right. Were you and I made to eat, sleep, and breath, focusing solely on our physical health? Why label activities concerning work, worship, relationships, and community involvement as nonessential? If anything, it seems to me that these are often fundamental human activities which demonstrate that we are different than the animal world, that we are made in the image of God. Is it appropriate for governing bodies to classify religious worship as nonessential when religion is clearly a

fundamental part of the human experience? Is freedom of religious worship a right bequeathed upon a people by a state which has declared it safe? Or is it a right given to us by God and simply recognized by the state? If it is the latter, then why deem it nonessential? Again, I am neither suggesting that people use this language only for bad motives or that it is never appropriate to cease doing some things for the sake of public health. It clearly can be an act of love for neighbor. I am only suggesting that our enemy can co-opt and manipulate this language for his own nefarious ends.

3. **Personal experience.** Lastly, I think about myself over the last few months. I think about the ways in which I have been lost in a Netflix-infused haze. Or the way in which I have made a habit of eating a full meal late at night. Or the way in which I have looked at my own Bible and chosen to read something else. I remember the insane amount of time that went into finding food and paper products in April. I think of the way in which I have battled days of despondency and despair. And I see these things in many of your faces as well. I know that people I care for are experiencing the same. And I discern that our enemy is behind many of these experiences. Slothfulness and spiritual inattention are clearly fruits of his work.

In all these things, I see a theme. **The enemy wants you to be blind.** He wants you to think of yourself as an eating, drinking, breathing machine. He wants you cut off from meaningful relationships. He wants you to not only disengage from church but look at the Bible on your desk or the prayer you speak at night as nonessential. He wants people to focus on little else than gratifying their physical desires, and then numbing their emotions online. He wants us to live in a haze in which we make all our decisions based on one narrow set of factors, relegating all other concerns to the margins. I am not questioning the wisdom of being careful or closing some things down for a time. I am not saying that you should refuse to wear a mask. **My goal is to remind you that you are not just material stuff.** Being made in the image of God means that you were made to walk in communion with God, in connection with his creation, in fellowship with fellow Christians, and in engagement with meaningful activities. You were made to take dominion over the earth, to be fruitful and multiply. You were made to know yourself

not just as body but as soul. If right now at this moment you are saving your body yet impoverishing your soul, then you are not in the place that the Lord wants for you. If you have kept yourself free of a virus yet lost communion with the God of the universe, then you have gained nothing worthwhile.

What is the answer to the devil's blinding work? It is the lesson that we learned in **Deuteronomy 8:3** – “And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” We saw a few weeks back that Israel was to conceive of the wilderness time as a kind of training ground for life in Canaan. They were to seek God and allow God to provide for them. During the temptation in the wilderness, Satan tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread. He tempted Jesus to focus on his physical hunger and to exclude his connection to his Father as a nonessential. And in the face of Satan's lies, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3.

This message may seem out of place in our study this summer. Maybe it is. It is certainly a departure from our path through Deuteronomy. But the end of this pandemic is not here yet. The pressures that many feel are not declining but heightening. My plea for you and for myself is, before the fall comes with new challenges, **make the care of your soul your great priority**. “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” Jesus asks in Mark 8:36. Now is the time to be resolved to nurture your connection with God. Now is the time to be more of the image-bearer that God has called you to be. Now is the time to engage deeper in a whole-hearted seeking after Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the words of Moses in Deut. 30:19, “**Choose life** that you and your offspring may live.” Keep seeking real life from the God who is the fountain of all light and life.

There will undoubtedly be more bumps in the road for our life as a body. But I want to ask you this morning to be specifically in **prayer for revival**. Revival is a work of God's Spirit in which he visits people with deep conviction of sin and deep reliance on Christ. During revival, the church grows both numerically greater and spiritually deeper. We must believe that such a movement of God is possible in this time and place, that no work of God can be thwarted by circumstances, be they public health crises or public

safety dangers. Let us also be attentive for opportunities for evangelism. Right now, there are words that you and I can speak about life, death, and Jesus which are exactly what those around us need to hear. There is a God who made the world. **This God loves you and wants you to know a great inheritance through him.** Sin has intruded upon this relationship, severing that connection between us and God's love and plan. But God has sent Jesus to make a way to reconnect people with God's purposes that they might know the meaning of inheritance. Jesus lived a life of obedience to God, died a death to pay the price for our sin, and rose from the dead in victory. The way is now open. Jesus rules and reigns. If anyone submits themselves to King Jesus, then they will know God's love and God's plan for their lives. Let us believe this essential good news right now and share it with those who need to hear.