

X Marks The Spot

*³Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.
(Jude 1:3. ESV)*

¹⁷I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. (Romans 16:17. ESV)

¹But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. (Titus 2:1. ESV)

Apostasy And Perseverance

February 10th, 2013

Mark 4:1-20

John 10:27-29

Romans 8:30

1 John 2:19

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Introduction:

Good morning! We are at week 6 of a 14 week series called “X-Marks The Spot” in which we are exploring some of the real and seeming tensions we discovered in our Walk Through The Bible journey in 2012. As you read through the Bible you will meet concepts and teachings which seem to say one thing and then you will read a little further and you will read of other concepts and other teachings that seem to say something very different and you have a few different options when that happens. You can dismiss the Bible as being full of contradictions and nonsense, and many do just that; you can stick your head in the sand and pretend that these contradictions aren’t there – you can simply stick to the passages that tell you what you want to hear – and many people do just that. Or you can wrestle with these passages, believing in your heart that the Word of God cannot contradict itself but accepting that God is BIG and MAJESTIC and that it is not at all unreasonable to expect that his self disclosure will also be BIG and MAJESTIC and will quite literally “blow your mind” at certain points along the way but that is no excuse to tap out, that is a call to press on and to seek to understand; to tremble before the Word of God and to ask the Holy Spirit to be our teacher. It is that third approach that we have adopted over these last 6 weeks and we will need that humility and we will need the Holy Spirit’s help today as we look at the tension between the Bible’s teaching on apostasy and its teaching on perseverance. How do these things go together?

In truth this topic illustrates in my life the importance of this sort of effort. I grew up in a church context that was heavy on system. I grew up in an aggressively Dispensational church and I was fed the system – we had coloured charts to tell us when the rapture was coming, we had complex divisions telling us what parts of the Bible we could ignore because they belonged only to certain “dispensations” and then I went to Bible School and began reading the Bible for myself and I began to learn Greek and then later a little Hebrew and I discovered to my horror that none of these things were actually IN THE BIBLE. That soured me on systems. I didn’t want to be part of any system. When at Bible School or later in seminary students would argue over whether we ought to be Calvinists or Arminians I would walk away. When they argued about whether we should be classically reformed or dispensationally reformed I RAN AWAY. I wanted to be BIBLICAL, I wanted to read the Bible and make up my own theology. I realize now that this was arrogant and foolish. All systems should be tested and submitted to Scripture but it is actually dangerous to simply make up your theology as you read through the Bible without listening to the wisdom of those who have gone before and have written down their understanding of the Bible having wrestled their way through the entirety of it. This issue in my life illustrates the dangers of trying to be simply “Biblical”.

Early on in my ministry life I became alarmed at what is often called “easy believism”; the idea that many people seem to have that if they ever raised their hand at a meeting or had warm thoughts of Jesus at a Billy Graham crusade then they were surely and eternally saved. The fact that they had neither persevered in their faith nor manifested any proving works did not bother them because they believed in something called “eternal security” by which they meant “once saved always saved” and so they sort of figured that they had God over a barrel. They had said the prayer, they had walked the aisle, they had signed the pledge card and therefore God was now eternally obligated to them despite the fact that there was no evidence of salvation and despite that they had long ago wandered back into their own filth and sin. And so I spent a lot of my time preaching on the reality of apostasy. I even wrote an open letter on apostasy in this church perhaps 4 years ago because I was so concerned with the false security that I saw everywhere around me. However, in doing so I’m not sure I gave adequate attention to the other side of this equation until about 2 years ago. I realized I had pushed some people too far and now I had legitimately saved people doubting their own salvation. I wish now that I had been a better systematic theologian and presented these truths in tension from the start. I trust you will be

gracious to me as I try and rectify that to some measure this morning. Open your Bibles to Mark 4:14 and we will look at one of the many passages in the Bible which teach the reality of apostasy.

Apostasy

Jesus has just given his famous parable of the sower. He's talked about how the Word of God is sown like seed into the field. Some seed falls on the path and the birds come and eat it up. Some seed falls on rocky ground and it springs up quickly but because it has no depth of soil, the sun comes out and scorches it and it dies. Other seed falls among the thorns and thistles and is choked out and dies. But some seed falls on good soil and it grows and sprouts and produces fruit, thirty, sixty and one hundred fold. Later his disciples ask Jesus to interpret the parable and this is what he says:

¹⁴The sower sows the word. ¹⁵And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, ¹⁹but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²⁰But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." (Mark 4:14-20. ESV)

Without attempting a detailed exegesis of everything Jesus is teaching in this parable, we can clearly see that Jesus is saying that there are some people who hear the Word of God and embrace it with great enthusiasm. They run down the aisle with tears in their eyes, they say the sinner's prayer loudly and sincerely, they fill in the pledge card and perhaps even take baptism, but then because they have NO DEPTH IN THEMSELVES, when the sun comes up – when hard times come, when the choir is no longer providing a soundtrack for their Christian journey and they face some troubles and tribulations – THEY FALL AWAY. The Greek word that Jesus uses in verse 17 is *skan-dal-idzo* in the passive which literally means "become enticed into apostasy". The devil, using the occasion of difficulty and trial literally drags them away into apostasy. That is a teaching of Jesus Christ.

When the Apostles of Jesus wrote their letters to their various churches it was very common for them to warn their people about this danger. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews spoke about

it in chapter 6 talking about how far along the Christian path some people can go – tasting of the heavenly gift; savouring it in their mouth like fine wine, before ultimately spitting it out and turning back. There is only judgment and a fury of fire for them he says. Peter too warned about this:

²¹For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, **to turn back** from the holy commandment that was passed on to them. ²²It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘The dog turns back to its own vomit’, and, ‘The sow is washed only to wallow in the mud.’ (2 Peter 2:20-22. NRSV)

The word Peter uses in both verses 21 and 22 is the Greek *ep-ee-stref-o* which means “to turn back again” or “to re-convert”. All theologically orthodox Christians have believed in the reality of apostasy from the very beginning and we stand with them in that here. John Bunyan perhaps the most famous Baptist Pastor other than Charles Spurgeon, wrote the book *Pilgrim’s Progress* to illustrate the Christian journey. I was pleased that so many of you picked up a copy in Guest Central – we actually had to order more this week and they will be here shortly – but Bunyan in his allegory speaks of a time when Christian was leaving the City of Destruction on his way to the Wicket Gate. He was accompanied for a time by a man named “Pliable”. Pliable was very eager to get to the Celestial City along with Christian and he was an enthusiastic convert to this narrow way. But before arriving at the Narrow Gate Christian and Pliable fell into the Slough of Despair which in Bunyan’s allegory represents a time of testing and doubt, and Pliable became very angry. He says to Christian: “Is this the happiness and pleasure you told me about? If the journey starts out this way, what will the rest be like? If I get out of here alive, you can take your journey without me.” And he struggled up the bank of the swamp nearest his old city and he went home. He turned back. He started out with great hope and enthusiasm but when things got tough, when he did not receive his BEST LIFE NOW he turned back, like a dog returning to his vomit. Apostasy is real. People turn back. Woe unto them. The Bible says of such people:

²⁹How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” ³¹It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:26-31. ESV)

It is a fearful thing to identify with the people of God; to call yourself a Christian; to profess that Christ is your Lord and then to turn back. The Lord takes no pleasure in those who shrink back.

Apostasy is real, apostasy is a consistent and frequent teaching of Scripture and yet that is not all that the Bible has to say on this matter.

Perseverance

Turn in your Bibles now to John 10:27-29. Here Jesus at first glance seems to be saying something different.

²⁷My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. (John 10:27-29. ESV)

Jesus seems to be saying something very different here, let's see if we can make sense of it. The first thing he says that we need to understand is "hearing" and "following" are definitional to "sheep". Jesus says in verse 27: "My **sheep hear my voice**, and I know them, and **they follow me**". Jesus says that his sheep have certain identifying characteristics. The first is that they "hear" his voice. Think of all the times that Jesus ends his teaching by saying something like this:

⁹And he said, "**He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**" (Mark 4:9. ESV)

Jesus is saying that his sheep hear his teaching differently than those who are not his sheep. He actually says in that passage, which by the way is the telling of the parable of the sower that we read earlier, that some people hear the Word of Jesus and it pushes them further away. They get angry, it doesn't sound right and it makes them believe LESS in God. Others – those who have EARS TO HEAR – they hear the teaching of Jesus and it draws them in, it draws them onward, deeper into the Christian life. It all comes down to who has ears to hear. So how do we get ears to hear, you might ask. The Bible says:

"Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but **you have given me an open ear.**" (Psalm 40:6. ESV)

The Hebrew literally says "ears you have dug for me"; God gives his sheep their ears to hear. A true believer has the Holy Spirit in his or her heart saying "Here is the path, walk ye in it". The Holy Spirit opens our minds to the truth of God's Word and functions like a GPS leading us further down the narrow way. Real sheep HEAR and real sheep FOLLOW.

Following is DEFINITIONAL to being a SHEEP. Jesus had no time for people who talked like they were following but didn't actually follow. He said:

⁴⁶“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? (Luke 6:46. ESV)

There have always been people who talk a good Christian game but who are not themselves truly saved. Sheep follow. Sheep obey. Jesus said:

¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. (John 15:14. ESV)

Sheep hear, sheep obey, sheep follow. So what does that mean about our friend Pliable? What does that mean about those who start out so strong, who are so sincere and yet who do not persevere? They must not be sheep. They must not have been given ears to hear and they must not have been given the Holy Spirit as interpreter and guide. That is certainly how the Apostle John understood it. He wrote to a church once that was struggling with the fact that some of their members – people who had made a profession of faith, people who had been baptized, people – some of whom had even been leaders and elders in the church – some of these people left the faith. They left the church and returned to the City of Destruction. What are we to think about that? John says this:

¹⁹They went out from us, but they were not of us; for **if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.** But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:19. ESV)

The fact that they left, the fact that they fell away, the fact that they turn around and went back to the City of Destruction proves that they were never truly of us, because if they had been they would have continued with us. Why? Because Jesus' sheep by definition hear, obey and follow and we remember from John 10 that real sheep never perish; they remain in the Father's hand.

they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. (John 10:27-29. ESV)

The Apostle Paul believed this and he taught this to his churches, he said:

⁶And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6. ESV)

That which God starts he finishes, truly saved Christians do not perish from the way. If God starts a work of grace in your life HE WILL FINISH IT. Paul said this beautifully to the believers in Rome. He said:

³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:30. ESV)

Theologians call this verse “The Golden Chain” – Paul is saying that if we were saved by a Sovereign work of God then we can trust that work to have its full intended effect in our lives. Nothing started by God ever fails. If God predestined you – if he elected you in love from before the foundation of the world then you can count on certain things happening. He will call you. At some point in your life he will open your ears and his word will enter your heart like a lightning bolt. Out of the blue you may be sleeping through a sermon and then WHAM! He starts your heart and digs ears into the side of your head and you are called. Theologians call that EFFECTUAL CALLING which is just a fancy way of saying that God strikes you with lightning. Its effectual all right, it sets your hair on fire. Then if that happens to you then you are justified. You put faith in Jesus Christ and the exchange of the cross is applied to your account. Your sins are hung on Christ, his righteousness is hung on you and you are now INNOCENT before the God of the Universe. If that happens then you will surely be glorified which means at your death or at his Return you will be caught up fully and entirely and eternally into the immensity of the Divine Fellowship and it will be GLORIOUS! That is the Golden Chain! Every step of it is guaranteed which is why they are all “past tenses” in English. They are aorists in Greek meaning that they are completed – none of them are “in process” or “in doubt”. They are done. God finishes what he starts. If he saved you , you will stay saved, you will finish the race. The saints persevere.

Guarding The Tension Between Apostasy and Perseverance

Obviously then the Christian life has to have its eye on each of these important teachings. We mustn't forget the reality of apostasy but neither must we neglect the certainty of perseverance for those who are truly saved. How do we do that? I've already confessed that I have not done this perfectly in my ministry, I have at times neglected perseverance in order to reintroduce the

reality of apostasy and there may have been sermons or teachings when I strayed too far from this post in order to re-anchor my flock to this post. These are tricky tensions to maintain, so let's pay some attention to how we might do better with that in this church. Let me suggest a few markers that we might hammer in the ground around this important tension. First of all:

1. Let's remember that not all professors of faith are truly possessors of faith

Jesus said that, he said:

²²On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' (Matthew 7:22-23. ESV)

Just because someone says they are a Christian doesn't mean that they are. Just because someone goes to church for 20 years in a row, just because they participate in some of the ministries and they do some good things doesn't mean that they are actually a Christian. Such a person may still fall away. Such a person may not actually be saved. Not all professors of faith are possessors of faith.

2. Let's be cautious about offering assurance of salvation

This is where the church gets into trouble – this is where lots of parents get into trouble. We are so excited when Johnny prays a little prayer that we tell Johnny that he is now for sure a Christian. We tell Johnny that when he dies he will for sure go to heaven. We do all of that on the basis of the fact that Johnny prayed a three sentence prayer, repeating words after you, which may or may not have mentioned sin, the Holy Spirit or Jesus' death on a cross or repentance or the need of following and on the basis of that three sentence prayer we are certain Johnny is well and truly saved. Really?

You know our grandparents were a lot smarter than us. If you believe in evolution – the idea that humans are gradually getting smarter and more sophisticated – and you want to be cured of that just read what people wrote 300 years ago and that'll set you straight. Our grandparents were pretty smart cookies. In the Old Baptist Confession of faith chapter 18 is called "Of The Assurance Of Grace And Salvation". Its a chapter about when assurance should be pressed upon

folks and how and when we should come to expect to experience it. Do you know what TWO CHAPTERS they put right before that? Chapter 17 is “Of The Perseverance of the Saints” and chapter 16 is called “Of Good Works”. Our grandparents taught that you had no business offering someone assurance of faith until you had seen their faith manifested in good works and until they had shown themselves to be persevering in the way. Now we give Johnny assurance of salvation before he’s taken his next breath after saying the sinner’s prayer; now we admit into the church and to the table anyone who waves their hand at Jesus.

I mentioned last week that in Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress before Christian was admitted to the Palace Beautiful he was examined by the Gate Keeper and by three young ladies; Prudence, Piety and Charity. What I didn’t mention was that just before he came to the door of the palace he had to pass through a narrow passage which was guarded by two roaring lions. Many others had turned back at this point and Christian was passed by two others running and screaming in the other direction and yet he pressed forward. As he passed by the lions he saw that they were in fact chained and as long as he kept to the middle of the path they could not touch him. What is Bunyan saying? He is saying that a true Christian is revealed by his perseverance through dangers and trials and that these dangers and trials are in fact under the Sovereign control of God and are meant to separate professors from possessors. A good gate keeper notes such things before admitting people to the palace beautiful. As a church we mustn’t call as Christian everyone who claims the name, let us be cautious in our giving of assurances.

3. Let’s examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith

People today take their own faith far too much for granted. It never occurs to them that they might be self deceived even though the Bible says:

⁹ “The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*,
And desperately wicked;
Who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9. NKJV)

The Bible says: “Your heart lies to you!” which is why the Apostle Paul said to his people:

⁵Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. (2 Corinthians 13:5. ESV)

Do you understand what he is saying? He is saying that if I were to ask you to raise your hands if you were a Christian and let's say 300 of you did so, Paul is saying that many of you would be wrong. Many of you would be self deceived. Therefore ALL OF US should examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith. We should test ourselves. We should hold ourselves up to the faith equation we talked about last Sunday. James in James 2:14-26 was very concerned to show that there is a certain faith that people have which is useless and unsaving. It is the faith that does not manifest in good works. So test yourself. See if there has been an increase in good works since you became a Christian. Yes or no. Test yourself on perseverance. Are you always getting knocked down and knocked out of the Christian journey by every wind and difficulty? You may need to do some soul searching on that. When Job lost his business, his wealth and all of his children in one horrific day he fell to his knees and WORSHIPPED saying: "The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord!" Could you say that? Could you persevere through that? Test yourself to see if you are in the faith. And if we see that we are and if the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God then:

4. Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us

The author of Hebrews says:

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2. ESV)

Run with endurance. Persevere unto the end. Fix your eye upon Jesus. Leave off the things of the world and follow his voice until the end. And you too will be given thrones to sit upon. You too will be glorified. For whomever he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. God always finishes what he starts. He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it. And all God's people said, amen.