

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)

Fight And Rest

March 17th, 2013

Nehemiah 4:9

1 Corinthians 15:10

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Introduction:

Good morning! This week we are finishing our series called “X-Marks The Spot” in which we have been exploring some of the real and seeming tensions we discovered in our Walk Through The Bible journey in 2012. Last week’s tension was controversial – this week’s tension is far more practical and subtle, though if neglected or mishandled, it is equally dangerous and destructive. I want to talk to you this morning about the tension between the FIGHT of faith and the REST of faith. Put another way, I want to talk to you about the balance in our thinking between EFFORT and TRUST. There are all kinds of “actives” in the Bible – all kinds of commands and many stories about battles and glorious achievements – and simultaneously there are all kinds of “passives” in the Bible – things that can only be done TO US and never BY US, things that have to be received as a gift and that can never be grasped by ambition or human striving. How do we hold these things together? Obviously it is the height of foolishness to “let go and let God” and equally obvious is the fact that we walk by faith and not by sight. So how does this work? What is the balance between fighting and resting in the kingdom of God?

Displaying The Tension

Happily in the Bible these concerns are often presented simultaneously. Unlike the tension between equal and different from last week where we have to figure out how Galatians 3 and 1

Timothy 2 go together in the New Testament and Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 fit together in the Old Testament, with this issue the two concerns are generally presented side by side in the same passage and that dictates a slightly different approach. Open your Bibles this morning to Nehemiah 4:7 and we'll read through to verse 14.

But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. ⁸And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. ⁹**And we prayed to our God and set a guard** as a protection against them day and night....

¹⁴And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. **Remember the Lord**, who is great and awesome, **and fight** for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes." (Nehemiah 4:7-14. ESV)

Right here in the same passage we meet this very Biblical balance: we prayed and set a guard. Remember the Lord – AND FIGHT! The battle is the Lord's! Now let's go sharpen our swords and shine up our shields! You see this tension again and again and again in the Bible. The fact that the battle is the Lord's doesn't mean that you don't have to fight. It doesn't even mean that you won't die. It just means that God is Sovereign over the outcome and he has already decided in your favour. God gave the Israelites the promised land but they still had to strap on their armour and fight battle after battle after battle. Without God they didn't have a chance, but without fighting they didn't receive that which was promised. So they prayed and fought – this pattern continues in the New Testament; open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 15:10. The Apostle Paul says:

¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (1 Corinthians 15:10. ESV)

We see lots of grace in that verse and we see lots of hard work – side by side without apology or false humility. The Apostle sees no contradiction between resting in grace and working your fingers to the bone for the glory of God. He sounds a lot like Nehemiah. We prayed and we set a guard. We remembered the Lord. And we fought.

That's the tension, Old Testament and New. It is the logical outworking in the human realm of the very first tension we looked at within the inner nature of God himself. God is Sovereign. Whatsoever comes to pass comes to pass because God decrees it! And yet. Human beings are made by God responsible creatures. We make real choices, freely chosen with no violence done

to our will and want. We are not puppets and God does not beat us to our actions. The Old Baptist Creed says it this way:

God hath decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein; **nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established**; in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree. (The Baptist Confession, 1689. Section 3, paragraph 1)

God uses the freely willed action and work of secondary agents – that’s you and me – to accomplish his Sovereign purposes. That is the consistent teaching of the Bible and that has been the testimony of the church throughout these many centuries. The problem isn’t really explaining this tension, the problem is in knowing how to live in light of it. If I might make an analogy here, the problem isn’t lighting the road – the road is well lit by the Bible and by church history – the problem is keeping your car out of the ditch. When I was young and poor and just starting out as a youth pastor I had a 1983 VW Rabbit that had all kinds of problems. One of the problems was that it changed lanes on its own whenever I took my hands off the steering wheel. The alignment was way out of whack and I didn’t have the money to fix it so my car naturally veered to the left and if I didn’t keep a firm hand on the wheel I would end up in the ditch – or worse, driving into on-coming traffic. Most human beings are like that too. We have a natural drift away from this tension into one of two ditches on either side. Some of us are inclined to charge off into action as though it all depends on us. We are inclined to pragmatism and faithlessness. Others of us are inclined towards an unthinking sentimentality in our faith that causes us to pray and never do. Both of those ditches are equally destructive to Biblical faith and so what I want to do this morning is lay down some rumble strips. You know those rumble strips on the side of the road that wake you up if you’ve been sleeping and drifting toward the ditch? That’s what I want to lay down this morning. I want to help you realize when you are coming too close to a deadly ditch.

First of all I want to help you ask:

When does “effort” become self reliance and legalism?

This is the rumble strip that the action people need to know about. This is going to be helpful for you if you are a type A personality or to speak in Myers Briggs terminology – if you are an ENTJ

type of person. These are the signs that you are may be losing this tension and falling into a very dangerous ditch.

i. When you spend more time planning than praying

Back in 1993 I remember George Barna released a book he had written after surveying an enormous number of North American pastors and Christian workers. In it he stated that the average Christian pastor spent approximately 25 minutes a day in prayer. 25 minutes! That was back in the 1993 and more recently I have seen two different studies but neither heading in the right direction; I have read 12 minutes and 8 minutes – so clearly we are heading further and faster in a very troubling direction. Over the last 30 years pastoral ministry has become increasingly pragmatic. Pastors are spending less time reading God’s Word, less time seeking the face of God on their knees and more time “casting vision” and studying culture. How did we get here? Martin Luther who wrote more books than you can shake a stick at, and who launched the Protestant Reformation and trained up a generation of pastors was certainly one of the busiest men of his generation and yet he was also known far and wide as a man of prayer. He was once heard to remark: “I have so much work to do today that I must spend the first 2 hours in prayer”. 2 hours! Now our pastors spend 8 minutes, or maybe if they’re one of the good ones – 12 minutes! Is it any wonder that we are losing power in the church and influence in the culture?

I’ve never met a pastor who would say out loud that he did not believe that God was strong enough to save sinners and to build the church – not once have I ever heard a pastor say that. But if you are only spending 10 minutes a day in prayer, isn’t that exactly what you are saying? If you prefer to read books by corporate CEO’s to the Bible and if you know more about Steve Jobs then you do about Ezra or Jeremiah – isn’t that exactly what you are saying? That’s not how the first generation of church leaders seemed to talk. Do you remember Acts 6? In Acts 6 the church was growing, things were getting busier and busier and there was a huge temptation for the disciples to get more involved in “PRACTICAL THINGS” – but they didn’t bite. They said:

“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴**But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.**” (Acts 6:2-4. ESV)

They didn't say that the work being done wasn't important, they didn't say that it should stop – they just said that we are going to have to find a way to organize this such that we are not distracted from our primary duty which is to study God's Word and to seek God's face and to lead from that place. Pastoral ministry in the 21st century Evangelical church is drowning in the ditch of pragmatism and many Christians are likewise in danger. When you have a problem or face a challenge is your first instinct to take it to the Lord in prayer? When the storms of life begin buffeting your little boat and it seems that you will be surely overwhelmed – what do you do first? Do you row for shore? Do you check the stars or do you go get Jesus? He is with you in the boat and only he has power over wind and wave. He is God of the storm and if he is not your first call then you too are in danger of the ditch.

Secondly, effort becomes self reliance and legalism:

ii. **When you begin to focus more on outcomes than on obedience**

This second rumble strip is obviously connected to the first. If you focus more on planning and practical strategies and methods than you do on prayer and seeking the Lord than obviously and quickly you will become focused on outcomes rather than simple obedience. You will start thinking and talking as though what we do can and should secure certain positive outcomes. Let me illustrate that. People who lose this tension in this direction start saying things like: If we present the Gospel in culturally accessible ways – our church will grow. If we dim the lights just so, play that certain song just so and if the gifted leader gives the Gospel just so – then surely people will get saved. And of course even “spiritual” people can talk this way. A more spiritual version of this error would be to say: If we pray for 2 hours before every service, and if we fast once a week and if we speak in tongues during the worship then surely the Holy Spirit will fall and we will have a powerful encounter with the Lord. Anytime you are connecting human actions with certain outcomes you have fallen into this ditch. That is not how people talk in the Bible. Listen to how these people talk and tell me if you can spot the difference:

⁶Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, “Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. **It may be that the LORD will work for us,** for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few.” (1 Samuel 14:6. ESV)

In the New Testament, listen to how they talk:

⁴⁸And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and **as many as were appointed to eternal life believed**. (Acts 13:48. ESV)

The Apostle Paul preached a sermon – I would imagine that it was a pretty good one – and the text doesn't say, "because the sermon was so awesome and because it was rooted in a careful exegesis of culture many people came to put faith in Jesus for salvation". It doesn't say that, it says "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed." People in the Bible understood that **OUTCOMES BELONG TO THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD!** You can do it really well – and see no results. You can do it quite poorly – and see incredible results! Now normally there is some slight correlation between those two things but it is **NEVER PERMITTED** to be direct and it is often entirely inscrutable. We are never permitted to think that because some missionary labours in Japan for 20 years and sees only 3 converts that he is doing it wrong while a missionary who labours in Latin America for 3 months and sees 2000 converts is doing it right! We can't draw lines like that and when we do we give evidence only that we are face down in this ditch.

Parents, do you understand what this means? It means that you can do it right and your kids can turn out wrong. It means conversely that some kids will turn out fabulously right – they will be wonderfully and gloriously converted out of really terrible and dysfunctional homes and they will serve the Lord and bring him glory! So don't ever give up on that kid that comes from the dysfunctional home and don't ever believe that you doing this or that with your kid will force God's hand and determine the outcome. Do it right moms and dads but then fall on your face and beg God to show mercy to your child. Outcomes belong to a Sovereign God.

Third, you are in danger of falling into the ditch:

iii. When you rely more on external vs. internal motivations to manage yourself and others

Now notice the word "rely". External motivations are in the Bible and they have their place. Romans 13 says that the king does not bear the sword in vain – fear of punishment has a role to play in maintaining an ordered life and an ordered society but if you are a Christian you know that external motivations are not stronger than our inward bent towards sin. To live victoriously

you need the internal motivations of love for God and hatred of sin. Those things are the gift of God – they are the work of the Holy Spirit in us. John 16 tells us that the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and Romans 5 tells us:

the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. (Romans 5:4. KJV)

Love of God is a gift and hatred of sin is a gift – they are things we receive in faith not things we achieve through striving and so one of the signs that you may be sliding into the ditch on this issue is when you begin to RELY on external motivations to manage yourself and others. You begin to put more faith in your accountability partner or your internet filter than you put in the Holy Spirit for example. Or you begin to think that you can grow and sanctify your kids more by strict rules and stringent sanctions than by helping them to be ever being filled with the Holy Spirit. If you find yourself in this place, turn back and repent.

Now, obviously there is another side to this issue – there is a ditch that is not a real danger to type A, pull yourself up by your bootstrap sorts of people. We need to lay some rumble strips on the other side of this tension as well. Here I want to help you answer the question:

When does “faith” become foolishness and negligence?

This is the rumble strip that the “spiritual” people need to know about. This is going to be helpful for people who self identify as “prayer warriors” – its fine to be a prayer warrior as long as you are also an actual warrior. It’s good to pray for it, it’s good to trust God for it - as long as you are also willing to work for it and seek diligently after it. These are the signs that you may be losing this tension in the other direction and falling into a different and yet equally dangerous ditch.

i. When prayer becomes a substitute for obedience

I have frequently had people tell me over the course of almost 20 years in ministry that they need to pray about something that in fact they do not need to pray about. Several times the issue has been whether or not it is God’s will for them to date or to marry a non-believer. I go to them and reason from Scripture and they say: “Well pastor I’m going to need to pray about that.” Why do

you need to pray about that? What do you think God is going to say? He's already told us in his word:

¹⁴Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? (2 Corinthians 6:14. ESV)

If that's not clear enough for us we also have 1 Corinthians 7:

³⁹A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, **only in the Lord**. (1 Corinthians 7:39. ESV)

That's pretty clear: you can get married – only in the Lord, only to other believers. Do not be unequally yoked - period. And yet I can't tell you how many times I've had people tell me that they need to pray about that. No you don't. When you pray about something God has already spoken to you are telling God that you don't think His Word is authoritative over your life. When God has spoken definitively he does not like to be asked if he would wish to reconsider. Moses found that out near the Red Sea. God had said to go, the fact that there was a sizeable body of water in the way was not interesting to God and he got agitated when Moses asked him if he would like to reconsider his instructions:

¹⁵The LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. ¹⁶Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. (Exodus 14:15-16. ESV)

The fact that the way forward looks difficult to you is no excuse to allow prayer to become a substitute for obedience. It isn't just Christian singles that need to understand this, it's every Christian. How many times have you prayed about something that you should have just done? I love the story told about C.H. Spurgeon. He hosted a prayer meeting for his elders and deacons and one night the group was made aware of a need. A man in the church had passed away suddenly leaving behind a widow who was now in desperate straits with rent to pay and children to feed. The deacon who brought the concern asked for prayer but before the group could pray Spurgeon cleared his throat and said: "We will not ask God to do what he has told us to do." And then he took off his hat and passed it to the deacon on his left. "When we have two months rent and expenses in this hat we will go to the Lord for help and aid." That's a man who understands the balance between the FIGHT of faith and the REST of faith. That's a man who

understands that prayer is never to become a shield from our duty. We are called to care for our widows and orphans so we can just do that without asking whether it is God's will. We will not ask God to do our duty for us. Rather we will ask him to do our duty THROUGH US.

Secondly, you may be veering into the ditch on this side:

ii. When you begin to denigrate and despise normal means and agency

When I was an old youth pastor I was asked by our denomination to mentor some young youth pastors. One of the young men I used to meet with drove me half way to distraction. He was young and hip and a great athlete and SUPER SPIRITUAL. He really was a charismatic character in every sense of that word. But I could never get through to him on the importance of study. I would ask him, "Bob, (not his real name), why is that you haven't completed your undergraduate degree?" He would answer with some over the top spiritual sounding thing like: "I am striving to be approved by God and not by men." Oh. Well I see. Then I would look at this shelves and say: "Bob, I can't help but notice that you don't seem to own any books. How are you preparing your messages?" And he reached into his back pocket and he pulled out this tiny little New Testament and he held it up before my face and he said: "This is the only book I need". I wanted to punch him but thankfully the Lord blessed me with supernatural restraint. That is just about the stupidest thing I have ever heard! It really is. Now of course, the Bible is the only authoritative source for all life and doctrine and of course the Bible is the final arbiter for every dispute of theology and ministry – I 100% believe that and yet the Bible itself says:

¹⁵Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15. KJV)

¹⁶Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:16. ESV)

Study. Keep a close watch on your teaching. How can you do that except by getting into the literature and the commentaries to know whether or not you are teaching something different than Hodge or Calvin or Augustine or JESUS? If the New Testament in your back pocket was all you needed then we wouldn't have Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses for crying out loud! It is a sure sign that you are way deep into the foolishness ditch on this issue when you begin despising

ordinary means. The ordinary means of making dumb people smart is study. Now, God has ordained the ends – of course! I'm not saying that God can't use people that haven't been to seminary, that's not at all what I'm saying, but neither does God bless people who are too lazy to do the work which is well within their ability to do. Paul understood that he was massively grace gifted by God. And yet nevertheless he worked harder than anyone else. So ought we. Do not despise ordinary means.

Thirdly and last, you may be in danger of falling into this ditch:

iii. When failure and suffering become incomprehensible and unbearable

Foolishly spiritual people are often completely undone by failure and suffering. If you've been "trusting God" for that miracle and "naming it and claiming it" and "calling into being things that are not" and then those things never come into being, that healing doesn't come, that breakthrough never happens, what can it mean to you but that God is not large and in charge? It creates a faith challenge. It creates a world view fracture. I worry about all the people who've bought into the North American heresy that we are rich because God loves us and because we've had faith – what will happen to those people when in the Providence of God we are given suffering, poverty and hardship? Will 40,000 people show up for church in Houston when they're NOT enjoying their best life now? You see, just as its wrong to assume that you "doing it right" will secure a positive outcome – that's the mistake made on the other side of this issue – in the same way you assuming that if you just have enough faith will make everything work out – that is just as dangerous and deadly! "Just have faith" can be devastating counsel because what if the cancer doesn't go away? What if your baby doesn't get better? Now you have no grid for understanding that. But we have to remember over here the same thing we had to remember over there: outcomes belong to a Sovereign God. You can work over there and you can pray over here and neither of those approaches GUARENTEES an outcome because outcomes belong to the Sovereignty of God. Things don't always come up roses in this life either for those who "do it right" or for those who "trust in the Lord". That's why Job, a man who did it right and believed it right had to say in his suffering:

²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth (Job 19:25. ESV)

One day God will come in all his fullness and he will sort out all the outcomes according to his justice and goodness and I can wait for that day Job says. Can you wait for that day? Can you work, obey, do right, pray and believe and yet suffer loss and difficulty and trial and still trust that God is just and good and in control? Because if you lose this tension that will be very hard for you to do. When suffering and hardship become incomprehensible and unbearable you have likely lost this tension and you need to go back and find it again.

Conclusion:

This is a hard road to hold. Like that nasty shopping cart at Zehr's – we all have a strong wobble towards one way or the other don't we? That's why the Christian journey is a constant process of repentance. We hit a rumble strip and we fall to our knees and repent. We ask for help. We seek counsel in the Word. We submit to the grace of Christian oversight in the church. We delight in correction. And we get up and walk again. We pray and set a guard. We remember the Lord and we fight. We thank God for the grace that has made us who we are. And yet we work harder than all the rest. Yet not I – not you, not us. But the grace of God in us. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.