

For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee.(Psa 128:2)

I had a different sermon almost ready to go for today but one of our friends asked a question that I thought might be helpful if we explored together, so I decided to regroup. The issue that was raised is around service (and I'm paraphrasing here):

"...not every single moment of our days is picketing or some other facet of our public ministry. The public ministry is something that the LORD has given us to do, and we are to do it... but it seems that a huge part of our lives is just the daily grind. The labor of just living in this day of small things. Mowing. Construction projects. Watching kids. Washing dishes. Satan comes at me, leveraging this impossible standard that working these tasks is somehow sin, because I'm not "directly" serving God (whatever that means)...if I'm not holding a sign 24/7, then I'm not doing right by God. And it's like I'm not allowed to do anything that results in my own happiness, improves my own quality of life, or allows for enjoyment and rejoicing in my labors. I'm not talking about making idols of things. ... it's idolatry to use an hour to consider and prepare nutritious food. If a work doesn't fall under the category of absolute need, or directly serving God, then I'm not allowed to do it. This feels so satanic. It probably sounds really silly. But I can't think of the exact set of verses to shield myself. I just know it's wrong thinking..."

I had to consider this for some time because there is a lot to unpack in these words. I don't mean that in a bad way, it just made me think for a long while. I asked a few people if these thoughts resonated with them in some way, and got quite a few affirmative answers, which is also why I diverted from my original discussion. I'm thankful that this person chose to express this rather than just stew on it. It takes a certain amount of humility and courage to admit feeling things like this, and it's good that we can do that.

Now, there are a few things to say here, and some may be hard to hear or take in but realize I'm not out to poke anyone in the eye. My goal is to help, and sometimes that means challenging a thought or two. I'm going to challenge some ideas today.

What I'm **not** going to do is give you a list of verses to make you feel good about and potentially help you justify yourself. If you "*just know it's wrong thinking...*" – I wonder why you'd be so convinced that this is definitively wrong thinking? I'm not saying dispositively that it is or isn't, but if you're going to start from a position that what you're thinking is wrong when you are considering whether your service to God is adequate, when you are legitimately asking whether you need to be less focused on yourself and more focused on serving God, I'm going to challenge the conclusion and encourage you to dig into it further.

I delivered a sermon last July that sort of touches on this topic, and I'm going to encourage anyone who heavily relates to these ideas to go back and read it, because I

think it applies now to us just as much as it did last year, and some of the exhortations I deliver in that sermon answer at least a few of these points. I'm not going to repeat everything that I said then, though.

I suggest that starting from the premise of "*I know this is wrong thinking*" may in and of itself be part of why you feel so unsettled. I am challenging whether you're really feeling attacked in your conscience for that hour you spent figuring out whether to have broccoli or Snickers for dinner or whether it was the hour you spent playing video games when there was a public preaching event scheduled? Or that hour you sat with your feet up relaxing while others were engaged in some labor that you knew about? I'm also challenging your standard of "absolute need". What is that?

I'm not saying that I have any right to judge you for how you may have spent your time by what I determined were **valuable uses of my time**. We have no business looking at one another and declaring in our hearts, and for certain putting words into the air about how unrighteous someone else is by comparing what we think they are doing to our actions or even worse someone else's who we "respect" and think to be the "example to follow".

If I never caught a whiff of that mindset and those kinds of words flowing around this body it would give me much reason to rejoice. I'm not suggesting this is a constant state of being, but it happens, it's a weakness of the flesh. We cannot do enough to guard against that behavior.

What you choose to do with your resources (including time) is your business ultimately; if you combine some obviously sinful behavior with poor use of resources that can certainly compound sinfulness and can absolutely be a matter for the body to consider. Poor use of resources out of spite, malice or a complete lack of faithful stewardship I think can be called sinful in its own right. But as a general task of my own, I'm not spending my energy evaluating how you spend your time caring for the basic tasks of life.

I am, however, challenging everyone in this house to challenge themselves; to be brutally honest with themselves about what is pricking their conscience if this is an internal conversation you frequently have. Sometimes the hardest person there is to be honest about ourselves with is ourselves. When we're working through our issues, new man doing battle with the old, there is nowhere to hide. It's all there and has to be addressed, you have to look these things in the face and see the truth for what it is – that we are all depraved and worthless people. Sometimes it's just hard to address it honestly. Seeing a thing for what it is can make it easier to go back to the source of help and find answers. That may be why you "*can't think of the exact set of verses to shield*" yourself, because you aren't working to shield against the real issue.

I'm also encouraging everyone not to make every accusation of your conscience out to be a whisper of Satan. I of course have many times delivered warnings about Satan's devices and his desire to influence us, pointing out the great power he has to do so. That doesn't mean every guilty flutter of your heart is Satan working you over. There's an out that you can be giving yourself by thinking in those terms. You are potentially blocking yourself from being honest about your behavior.

So the question you have to ask yourself is "why is my conscience pricking me?"

I can't answer that question for you. I can't know your conscience or your heart. I can know your deeds. I can know the words you speak. But only you and God know your conscience and what is driving these inner conversations that make you feel like figuring out a nutritious chicken recipe for dinner is somehow contrary to serving Christ.

Please understand that I am not making light of this. I understand all too well the struggle being described and what it can do to your mindset. Sometimes, when we look at a struggle in the broad light of day and strip away all the trappings we put on it in our own minds, it can help to see just how much of a mountain we can be making out of the mole hill that is our inner thoughts. It can be helpful to minimize the self-importance we all have in our inner conversations; the sureness of how right we are and how important this or that thing is can be stripped away by saying it out loud.

I think you have to look seriously at what is it that you are actually questioning.

Consider why Paul and Peter express so many times the idea of a "good conscience".

"Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned:" (1Ti 1:5)

"The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:" (1Pe 3:21)

How is it possible that anyone could have a good conscience if it is also true that we are vile, worthless sinners by nature? This just seems so contradictory that it couldn't be possible, it must be a thing that the Apostles uniquely experienced. We are surrounded and buffeted by our faults daily. There is no way to have a good conscience when I just sinned and feel the weight of that sin, is there?

I think the important thing to understand when considering a good conscience, and what I believe the Holy Spirit is providing for us in these passages is a practical answer to the question of "what does it mean to have unity with Christ"?

When assaulted by Satan, our conscience, or both, there is only one remedy. There is only one to whom we may turn in order to defend against that buffeting and to find that “good conscience” – Christ. This good conscience is one that isn’t convicting you of your sin, not because it isn’t there, but because it is paid for in full by our Christ and the good conscience sees this and applies no new guilt over it.

“But”, you say, “I am a sinner of the worst kind. I sin and return to that sin again and again so that my conscience is constantly berating me for my sinfulness. I feel lost and separated from Christ because of it”.

And?

Consider that thinking for a second. **You feel** separated from Christ, but in so saying that you are denying His infinite care and love for you! Has He changed? Of course not!

“Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.” (Heb 13:8)

So how could an immutable God who has infinite capacity to love and you have made a profession of faith toward be separated from you? Did His love suddenly turn off? How would that work in regard to His immutability? It’s impossible for Him to lie, so if you are one of His and you have been called, this separation you feel is from your end, not His. He is still just as present as ever.

There is no Scriptural mandate that puts dealing with the tasks of life at odds with serving Christ. It is a part of the curse we are under that we have to do these things

“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Gen 3:19)

While God provides for us, we are not in a situation where all we have to do is gather manna every morning. We cannot literally sit every waking hour reading or be gathered together to worship all day. Where has He laid that burden on us? We must eat, and that requires time and work to generate the sweat of our face to obtain the bread. That doesn’t mean we aren’t serving by how we conduct ourselves while performing these mundane life tasks. Think about the analogy of live-in servants. Are they not serving their master by being ready to conduct his business, even while they tend to their own daily lives under his roof?

Consider these verses regarding our conversation, or how we live our lives:

“The wicked have drawn out the sword, and have bent their bow, to cast down the poor and needy, and to slay such as be of upright conversation.” (Psa 37:14)

“Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God.” (Psa 50:23)

“For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward.” (2Co 1:12)

“That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;” (Eph 4:22)

There are only two conversations men have in this life – that of the old man by nature or that of the new man by faith.

Which conversation drives you? That’s what you have to decide. If you claim to have been called, to believe in Christ and His word, to be His follower, then you have to walk in the profession of faith you have made to properly glorify Him. And that includes all the elements of this life.

Having this good conscience Paul speaks about doesn’t mean you go about sinning willfully and ignore what that does to you, claiming “your conscience is clear because you took Jesus as your own personal Lord and savior and you don’t really sin anymore” like these cardboard Christians claim. Paul also tells us

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” (Rom 6:1-2)

Being dead to sin here doesn’t mean you don’t sin, it means you have a full understanding that you are not under the law and the condemnation of sin. As you mature spiritually you embrace that isn’t a license to behave sinfully, rather it allows your conscience to be made clear in Christ’s righteousness!

When you sin and you mourn for that sin you just committed fleeing to Him for repentance, acknowledging your dependence on Him to have paid the price for it already, a result of that faithful dependence on Him is peace with Him in your conscience. Listening to your conscience should drive you back to Christ to find that peace in the face of every error.

I do believe that the conscience is an element of the flesh and therefore can be used by Satan to accuse. When you stop thinking in terms of your dependence upon Christ with those thoughts driving you back to Him when you sin, and instead you start listening to these whispers in your conscience convicting you under the law, seeking another remedy, you have started a spiral of death, quite literally.

If you start expressing things that sound like you believe your works and your strength will deliver you – “how will I get out of this mess?” instead of “dear Lord, help me out of this mess, deliver me from myself and the fiery darts of the adversary” you’re in that spiral. While your conscience can be useful like any muscle can be useful, it can also be a source of despair when you start listening to yourself and not drawing near to the throne of grace. When you do this, you make Christ a liar.

Now, you may be sitting there saying “whoa, that’s a bit harsh, I never said Christ lied”. But didn’t you? When you asked yourself “self, how am I going to fix this sinful mess I created”, didn’t you deny the steadfastness of this promise?

“And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.” (Psa 50:15)

The reality is that every single time we turn to ourselves and dwell in our consciences searching for how we’re going to undo some sin, or fix it in any way by our hands, we are denying the power of Christ, the love of Christ and all the promises He has made rather than glorifying Him by taking what He has freely given. That’s not harsh, that’s just simple facts.

We either believe every word in the book is His, it is true, and it is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness (2Ti 3:16) or we don’t really believe any of it, because this is either one living, breathing collective work or it’s not. We either steadfastly hold to the truth that these words are here, preserved against all fleshly odds to provide us hope (Rom 15:4), or we believe it’s just a book. There’s no middle ground here. There’s no gray area.

SO unless your conscience is telling you “fly, you fool, fly to the throne of grace”, tell it to stop bothering you so you can get to Christ, to close that gap you’ve created in your unity with Him, and tell it to remind you of that next time instead of beating you up. That return to Christ will bring you to a good conscience, focused not on what you can do, but what Christ has **promised many times** to do for you; it brings to the forefront of our minds and hearts that we are indeed righteous in Christ (Rom 10:4).

But what if it actually is Satan chirping directly in your ear? What if it is a Satanic motivation that is making you feel somehow separated from Christ by your “daily grind”? I think there are a few things to consider on this front.

First, the fundamental remedy is the same. Get to the word. The Word is the only place you’re finding any answers. You don’t think you know the “*exact verses to shield*” yourself? How about just starting with some? Who said you had to know the exact verses to shield yourself at all times? What standard are you applying to yourself in that statement?

Especially my younger friends, the idea that you must know all the verses all the time is a standard you impose upon yourself when you (potentially) mis-apply verses like

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2Ti 2:15)

Paul doesn't instruct Timothy to know everything. No, indeed, he encourages him to study. Studying is a lifelong practice – he doesn't tell Timothy to “study until you know everything I know”. He is exhorting him to a life of discipline, resulting in an outcome that if you are disciplined in your study and it is blessed by the Holy Spirit you will be able to rightly divide the word of truth. There is an acknowledgement embedded in this that we don't and can't know everything, including all the verses to apply in every situation. Anyone who thinks they do, denies this truth:

“But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.” (Joh 14:26)

We need help here. So knowing how to put the armor on and how to properly use it is again, not of you. It is dependent upon the Spirit working in you to know. The Spirit isn't going to work in you if you don't ask or if you fill your prayers with the demand to give you this specific knowledge right now, let me know all the verses I should know to answer this accusation, immediately. That is not a humble and contrite approach.

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” (Psa 51:17)

The second thing to consider if you think it is a temptation from the enemy to try and draw you from Christ is what James tells us

“Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” (Jas 4:5-7)

If it is Satan causing you to think your daily life is not truly serving Christ, resist him and he will flee. But to determine how to properly resist him, I think you have to consider another question.

Are you really doing all that you can to serve?

We must constantly be asking ourselves this question. Is it possible to serve the God whose grace is infinite and express enough gratitude for that grace by our service? Can we ever fully return the love that God has showered on us?

No, but a thing to think deeply upon when answering this question is whether we have taken something mundane, some part of the “daily grind” and turned that into its own form of an idol? Have we created so many excuses for dealing with the “practical realities” of our lives that we are not giving Him his proper due? Are we elevating the vanity of life into some importance it doesn’t really have juxtaposed to serving God actively? It’s very possible to do.

There is a stark truth that when properly considered will put many of these things into perspective for us

“Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better? For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?” (Ecc 6:11-12)

It may be hard to wrap our minds around the idea that all these things God has set in motion in our lives and that pull our energy away from Christ truly are vanity. That word vanity means nothingness. Less than air. All the considerations you give to your health, your lawn, repairs to your house, your job, school, the children – literally anything that is focused solely on this life is as valuable as an empty paper bag. Less, because the bag has at least some value.

In the routine of our lives there is only one thing that isn’t vanity

“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.” (1Co 15:58)

The labor we engage in to support one another, to spread the Gospel, to serve our masters as unto the Lord, to keep a Godly conversation among the gentiles, etc., are all what Paul describes here as “the work of the Lord”. I challenge you to find a verse that says anything about a public ministry being the only important thing Christ’s followers should engage in and the only thing you can do that matters. I challenge the thinking that elevates 24/7 sign holding to a station of righteousness to the exclusion of other elements of service.

The public ministry is important – don’t misunderstand – but it doesn’t singularly define all that is important in our lives. Did Paul not say

“For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.” (2Th 3:10)

To eat, which is required for life, demands the “daily grind” and you do not see here a standard of “absolute need”. I don’t find that anywhere in Scripture. What would that even look like? I’m going to suggest you are trying to apply a standard that doesn’t exist in Scripture instead of looking at the overall picture.

Everything must be balanced in our lives, friends. Your balance is different than my balance or another person’s balance; strive to find it. What we are working to balance is **not** old man vs new man. We must strive against the old man in the flesh always, not compromising with him. It isn’t our goal to minimize the influence of the old man but to overcome him. Our goal is to walk as the new creature we are in Christ

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.” (Gal 6:15-16)

When we walk as that new creature, the balance we seek is what I think the question is ultimately about. We know this is a pilgrim life we live. Until we have passed out of this mortal coil we cannot spend even a preponderance of our time in the worship of God. We aren’t called to isolate ourselves in some tower somewhere like Catholic monks claiming some holiness by repeatedly copying the Bible, or to do what the Jews do in their Yeshivas as though God called us to just sit in a room all day reading His word and never making it known to others! If I’m missing some standard that calls us to this idea, I’m open to hearing it, but even when the Apostles turned away from serving tables, they didn’t always turn away from doing work to support themselves – as we see with Paul.

Consider what it would take in this life to actually hold a sign 24/7. What burden would you put on so many other people to provide your physical necessities? How is it even possible? Do you believe God places unreasonable and unattainable standards upon His people? Upon His children? Remember we are heirs through Christ!

We are called to serve. We are called to minister to the world. We are called to sacrifice. We are called to separate ourselves from the world. We are called to study. We are called to care for one another and to be so strong in that love that it is the identifying characteristic by which the world sees us. All these things (and likely more) are absolutely true and backed up by Scripture. Not one is called to be done to the **exclusion** of the others, but as a balanced mixture – that is our conversation, our walk.

When we focus on ourselves and try to build a balance of simple wants and feelings, instead of a focused balance of all the things God calls us to do, that is when we lose the peace that He has promised and we find ourselves at conflict with one or more of the things we are called to do, even putting them at odds against one another. That is a thing of the flesh.

Remember, simply enjoying the result of our labors is not in itself a sin.

“Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.” (Ecc 9:7)

God doesn't accept the works of sin we commit, or those of evil men. It is the works we commit in support of our service to Him that He accepts and produce this joy. A key result of effectual faith is peace with God, which is truly required to enjoy anything in this life in a real, genuine way. The enjoyments of the flesh derived through sin are venal, not real. They are the result of our failing to overcome and reject the bribery of our enemy. Those pleasures do not last because there is no permanence in what the enemy offers. Look back again to the garden, and what he offered our parents. He didn't offer eternal life because he couldn't. He could only offer a false hope – “ye shall be **as** gods”.

My encouragement to everyone is to seek these proper balance points. I remind that my balance isn't yours. We each have different gifts, different lots, different degrees of faith, so the fruits of our labors will not be the same. Though it is one Spirit that provides these things to us, we are never told the fruits will be identical.

*“But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, **dividing to every man severally as he will.**” (1Co 12:11)*

Our remedy for these difficult internal conversations is to not keep continuing it as an internal conversation, but to turn to the Spirit, return always to the Word and seek that peace that comes either by accepting we have done all that we can, or putting our hand to doing more. It isn't any more difficult than that, and it is a constant thing even in those who are mature in the faith. Until we have crossed over beyond the veil, we won't have any rest from this reality and the seeking of this balance.

In other words, our rest from these labors is not in this life. Keep doing the work. Don't despise the elements of the work we have to do. Keep driving closer to Christ and seeking greater unity with Him through our conversation in anticipation of that day where our unity will be made manifest in His very presence.

My hope is this has somehow been helpful.

“There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.” (Heb 4:9-11)