

Alpha and Omega: Lord of the Present

Grace to you from the One who is. God is... This is a timeless truth. And we know it is true because of He has revealed Himself to us in Jesus through and Scripture. Those revelations show us that God loves His creation, loves us, and is with us for all time and in all times. He is Lord of the present. In the midst of our toil and suffering we are not alone. God is, and God is with us.

In this series of messages, I'm talking about our timeless God who holds all time in His hands. **"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty," Revelation 1:8.** This last book of the Bible (the Book of Revelation) is often read as either a book about the past, given as a sign of hope to Christians under persecution, or a book about the future, with hints and clues about the end of the world. But hear these words: **Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, Rev. 1:4.** Last week I spoke to you about how God, the timeless One, covers our past, and redeems all our sins of the past. **God is also Lord of the present ... this very day is the day the Lord has made.**

I. Walking With The Timeless One

What does it mean to walk with the timeless One in this very thin slice of time we call "the present?" That has been the question and challenge for believers since Jesus walked this earth. St. Paul's letters give instruction on living as a Christian. Classic Christian writings speak to this... Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, Brother Lawrence's *Practicing the Presence of God*, come to mind. More recently, Kathleen Norris has written, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy, and "Women's Work."* All are helpful guides for Christians seeking to follow Jesus daily. Theirs are reflections on the very things most serious Christians think about: how can I truly follow God in the midst of all the tasks, responsibilities, challenges, and temptations that make up my life each day? How can I cope with all the disappointments, delusions, and distractions that assail me, and still believe that God is there and cares about me and all the other people?

American Christians, and perhaps to a lesser extent Americans in general, still ask these kinds of questions, but they are not very clear on where to find answers. Too many in our day and age, if indeed they are asking such questions, are looking to politics and policy, or pop culture, for answers.

Let's step back a moment to that day when the disciples discovered Jesus' empty tomb. While they were wondering what had happened to Jesus' body two angels appeared to the women and asked, **Why do you look for the living among the dead? Luke 24:5.** "Looking for the living among the dead," is like thinking that if I had just a bit more money, life would work out fine. It's like thinking we can bring about salvation through legislation or believing that policy will bring perfection. ... It's not that legislation is bad, or that making more money is evil. And it's not that Jesus' resurrection somehow frees us from earthly concerns. The point is this: **Christ was resurrected in the midst of all**

earthly concerns. When Jesus said, *Don't worry about what you will eat*, Matt. 6:25, He didn't mean, "Don't eat anything because, you know, I am the Bread of Life." Christ is the light that shines in the darkness. The darkness is still there (hunger, thirst, despair, loneliness, lack of purpose, evil desires and deeds), but it is no longer the only thing we can see.¹

Methodism began as a movement to help people live with God in the present.

Methodists were the ones who read the Bible every day, prayed throughout the day, were in church every Sunday, and met weekly in their small group – all so they could and would attend to the matters of God in this thin slice of time we call the present. It's a shame so much of this has been lost in recent times, as we've been distracted or sidetracked by the siren call of culture. Maybe the Christian life appears unexciting to those taken in by instant results, and sparkling events and activities. The disciplines of seeking God each day seem mundane and restrictive of personal desire. Yet, as we grasp for the immediate, God has an eternal perspective. Most of us need a lifetime of training the soul to see things more nearly from God's perspective.

II. Directions From Jesus

Jesus gave his disciples some clear directions on how we are to be about godly living in the present. There are two key practices:

A. Great Commandment: Love God.

Jesus was once asked what was the greatest commandment from God on how we should live. The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: *'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength,'* Mark 12:29-30. Jesus was simply reiterating what Moses had long before communicated to the Israelites. **God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God ... you shall have no other gods before Me,'** Exodus 20:1, 3.

When Jesus said to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, He meant **do not allow anyone or anything to edge God out of the picture.** Do we often push God to the margins of our living as our careers, pursuit of wealth, political party, or even our family take over? The heart represents our affection and also the seat of our will. We love God by an act of the will. It's more than an emotion or feeling. It's making a commitment to love Him. I tell couples preparing for marriage that love is really a choice – a choice you make about your spouse even on days when you don't feel like it. Here it means trusting God in all circumstances – not just when things are going good or you really need help in a pinch, but each and every day.

Jesus said to the crowds that followed Him: ***Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,*** Mark 8:34. Sounds rather demanding, doesn't it? I don't think He meant for us to seek martyrdom. It's more like He's saying, **"Don't respond to God's whole-hearted love in a half-hearted manner."**

God is calling us into relationship in which He becomes our soul-mate. Maybe that sounds too mushy – but think of David, the warrior king of Israel. He could say, *The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?* Psalm 27:1. The key is seeking to be near God in the present. ***One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life...*** Psalm 27:4. It is true

that our actions speak louder than words. How many of us, regularly, pray like this, and really mean it: Lord, show me where and how I can be with You or serve You today?

Following after God in the present moment doesn't mean we neglect our duties and responsibilities to family and work. We wouldn't want to be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good. It's simply a matter of allowing God to actively participate in your daily life. When all the distractions and concerns are gone, where does your mind come to rest? ***Restore to me the joy of your salvation, And grant to me a willing spirit, to sustain me, Psalm 51:12.***

Now, God gave us minds, as well as hearts. Feelings and faith must be governed by God's Word using our reason. Emotionalism occurs when our personal experience takes priority over the Word of God. Here's another prayer: ***Test me, LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind, Psalm 26:2.***

B. Great Compassion: Love Your Neighbor As Yourself.

When responding to the question as to what is the greatest commandment, Jesus said love God with all you got and then he added, ***The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these, Mark 12:31.***

Jesus' reply really simplified things. Quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 (love God) and Leviticus 19:18 (love your neighbor), He boiled down the Ten Commandments and the 613 rules and regulations known as the Law, to just two verses. ***We are to love God and love people.*** This isn't complicated. Who doesn't get that? Think about it: if you truly love God, you will have no other gods before Him. You will remember the Sabbath day. You will not misuse His Name. If you truly love your neighbor, you won't murder him, you won't steal from him, you won't take his wife, you won't gossip against him. I think Jesus is also telling us that ***until you love God as you should, you will never love your neighbor as you could.*** What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself? Let's keep it simple. ***Treat others as you want them to treat you. This is what the Law and the Prophets are all about, Matthew 7:12.***

- When you have a need, you attempt to meet it.
- When you have a hurt, you attempt to heal it.
- When you have a responsibility, you attempt to fulfill it. Do the same for your neighbor.

Maxie Dunnam tells that down in Mississippi where he grew up, they had a quaint way of describing a beginning courtship. "John is paying attention to Mary." Pretty descriptive. A friend told Maxie that for about three years he had intentionally sought the meaning of love. He talked about it with preachers, philosophers, with the educated and uneducated.

The most helpful definition came from a workman in a furniture factory. "Love is awareness," the fellow said. Maxie says that became a key for exciting living for his friend and has turned him into one of the most sensitive, and affirming people you'd ever meet. That's not everything love is, but love is that – awareness.

A recent study indicated that some of the loneliest persons are married couples. They have nice homes, good jobs, money, family – everything, but they are out of touch with each other. Love means relationship. Relationship requires awareness. So the answer to our deepest need for love begins in awareness, in paying attention.ⁱⁱ

Even when we earnestly desire to truly love God and love people it's really hard. It's no easy thing to sacrifice our own preferences for God or the needs of others. What are your top priorities today? He still asks, "Do you love me more than these?" We must do our best to love our Savior knowing that His grace is sufficient. What we lack He can make up as we ask Him. That's really what it means to walk with the timeless One during this thin slice of time called the "present." **We don't have to be perfect ... only turn to Him.**

III. Today Is Taken Care Of

So when does all this happen? How about today? Are you ready (and willing) for God to be in your life today? Don't put Him off for another day ... it could be too late. Here's what the Apostle John said: **Dear friends now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known, 1 John 3:2. We are God's children today, so let's live like it!** Though we have not yet fully grown into the person God intends us to be, His loving attention can grow us into the likeness of the new man, Jesus Christ.

Knowing that God will take care of today, we can truthfully say, "This is the day that the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it!" Today is a special day, because it is a day of opportunities. You can't do anything about your past, and you have to wait for tomorrow to arrive, but you can do something with today. Here's a bit of advice: don't let something slip into your tomorrow that you can take care of in your today. On this day we can clearly see the Giver of Life.

Don't ever let your life get stuck in a regret over a yesterday or a fear about tomorrow. Give God your best in every breath today. I may pay attention to all the stuff in the news, I might even get concerned about those things. But I don't fret over it. Jesus said, **I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world, John 16:33.** On this day Jesus has overcome the world. God has given us a Savior for the very times we live in - Immanuel, God with us. So, make today count for God. Pray, Praise and Worship, share Jesus with everyone you meet.

The present is such a thin slice of time, a razor's edge between the past and the future. As soon as the moment has passed it is no longer the present. All the more reason to hold fast to these maxims: God has yesterday covered; He is clearing a path for tomorrow. Do your best for God today.

One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life... Psalm 27:4.

ⁱMatt Rowle, *The Redemption of Scrooge*, 115-116.

ⁱⁱMaxie Dunnam, "Love Is Awareness," *Perceptions* (Bristol Books, Wilmore, KY), 29.