

"HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?"

INTRODUCTION

How much is enough? I suppose it all depends on what you're talking about. I know if I'm enjoying some ice cream from the Dairy Queen on a warm summer's night up in Maine, it's not easy to say how much is enough! Or, if one is talking about one's bank account, he or she may conclude, longingly, that there's never quiet enough. On the other hand, in some things we know how much is enough. If it's a bad headache, a migraine, then one minute is far too much. And for the child, or the spouse, who is abused, one time is too much. And sometimes those who face intolerable circumstances in jobs or marriages, or in certain human relationships, may say, "I've had enough...that's it!" If you want to know "how much is enough?" - some of those people can tell you.

We preachers, as we prepare, write, and then deliver, the sermon, often stand guilty of not knowing how much is enough. You in the congregation could quickly tell us - and often do - in one way or another. A friend here in the Church who loved baseball use to get after me whenever I preached over 22 minutes. He likened it to a baseball game and use to say that a long sermon was like a 15 inning ball game. The short ones - like 15 minutes - were like a nine inning game and the seats got harder and harder in extra innings.

DEVELOPMENT

The two scripture lessons that John read for us - one from Micah, and the other from Galatians, - have to do with commitment, with devotion to God. One of these (Micah) speaks of justice, kindness and walking humbly with God. The other (Galatians) is a testimony of one who has spiritually "died" so that Christ lives in his place. It is against the backdrop of these two passages that we consider this thought, "How much devotion is enough?" What guidelines do the scriptures give us.

In the book of Micah, the prophet poses the hypothetical question of what should be brought as a sign of devotion to God. "Shall I come with burnt offerings?" (Is that enough?) "How about bringing calves a year old?" (Is that enough?) Or, "A thousand rams" or maybe "ten thousand rivers of oil?" (Would that be enough?) Perhaps God desires the sacrifice of "my first born" (When is enough?) The answer the prophet gives to these questions is that "God has shown you what is good". What does God require? That you "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God".

This means that the surrender of external things - the tokens or the verbalizations of a ritual are not enough. We know, for example, that it is not enough for a scout to learn the Scout Law or the Scout oath. The scout must work and learn and put into practice the precepts of the scouting principles. So, likewise in marriage - however exquisite the ring, and however lavish and lovely the wedding, or however solemn the vows, all of these together are not enough for a good marriage. The marriage requires the fulfillment of the vows, the living out of a life of respect, understanding, honor and love.

Moreover, a college degree may be awarded after years of laborious study, but is not enough in itself to produce a life that is a beneficiary of a sound education. The degree finds its ultimate integrity validated in how the graduate utilizes the degree in life.

THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

So, likewise the life of commitment within the "community of faith" may involve baptism, vows, ritual and various initiatory procedures. But these things are never enough. Remember, there are always plenty who will cry, "Lord; Lord" as Jesus Himself pointed out, who do not "do the will of the Father who is in heaven". "Lord, Lord" is not enough. There are others who will occupy a pew, maybe frequently, but that is not enough. Still others will offer their tithes and their offerings. Yet, as important as these are, they are not enough. At the very moment we may think we are qualified for having done enough in terms of our commitment, remember that none of us will ever qualify. We'll never measure up.

But the walk toward total commitment is one - in Micah's words - in which our lives are marked by doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God. And there we begin to get a glimpse of an answer to the question, "How much is enough?" But let's take it another step, over into the New Testament.

PAUL'S WORDS IN GALATIANS

Look at this in another way as suggested to us in Paul's Letter to the Galatians. In answer to the question, "How much is enough commitment?" Paul's answer might be found in his own testimony, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

You see, for Paul it was not enough simply to have experienced a vision on the road to Damascus. It was not enough to have been imprisoned, nor was it enough to have written letters to Christian people, even though they were well thought-out documents discussing complex theological dogma and faith.

It was not even enough to maintain a witness in spite of threats of bodily harm. How much was enough? Everything he could do would never be enough, for "all fall short of the glory of God". But Christian witness to Paul was more than transmitting the Gospel and it was more than transporting the Gospel, too. It was to be so transformed by Christ that the result would be the demise of the old self and the birth of a new person in Christ.

The new person in Christ bears the image of Christ and is therefore a beautiful and radiant life. Don't ever let that image within you be distorted and warped. It's been a hot summer...one of the hottest I've known here in the city...

STEAMED UP

People have surely gotten steamed up this Summer over a movie that they feel has distorted Christ and is unfaithful to the Scriptures and I'm not speaking of Bull Durham which I have seen, but of The Last Temptation of Christ which I have not seen. I, too, like so many of you ~~am~~ opposed to degrading and defaming Christ.

But come now, we really can't expect too much from an industry which has, in spite of many good things, fostered violence, and glorified sex, and promoted pornography at various levels, and accepted infidelity as the norm.

There is not one thing a movie or a book can do that will diminish one whit the truth of who Christ was and is and what He stands for and what He promises, and what He does in your life and mine. I wonder...all this hysteria may be a useful smokescreen in diverting attention from how terribly Christians degrade Christ by concentrating on how terribly Hollywood defames Christ.

- AND RIGHTLY SO -

After all, dear brothers and sisters, Jesus warned us (and this is scriptural) to not worry too much about the mite we see in another's eye, and fail to see the log in your own eye.

Often we may observe in the hearts of Christians a meanness which distorts the image of Christ; or a lack of compassion or tolerance, which makes a mockery of Christ; or a spirit of racism which twists the love of Christ into something that Christ would not recognize; or a stinginess on numerous levels which is poles apart from the sacrificial spirit of giving that is "in" Christ; or a pride that tends to dethrone Christ and places the "self" in His name.

It may be a refusal to hear the call of Christ, or of scrambling the call and tuning in instead to the voices of the world, and idolizing them as if they were God's call and God's word. Don't ever expect the world to treat Christ with respect. But the world has to expect that Christians will treat Him with respect.

This is a time for renewed witness to our Christ, to exalt Him in our own lives and to allow His spirit to live within us. Let us always keep our eyes on Him and say to each other, we belong to Him and not that He belongs to us. I think it was H. L. Mencken who once defined a courtroom as a place where Jesus Christ and Judas Iscariot would be equals, with the betting odds in favor of Judas.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH

"How much is enough commitment?" There's never enough. But we fall far short unless we can come to know personally what Paul meant when he said,

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me."

I read somewhere recently that Dr. Robert Emory Blackwell was for many years the beloved president of Randolph-Macon College. I'm told that Blackwell auditorium is named for him. There's a beautiful anecdote told that when he was a small boy he met the great Robert E. Lee. The Virginia general asked him what he wanted to do when he grew up. He replied, "I want to be like you".

Those who have seen Dr. Blackwell's portrait know well the remarkable resemblance he bears to Robert L. Lee. Whether this is a coincidence, who knows? But one thing is true. When we set our eyes on Jesus and share in his crucifixion, his image will so live within us that others may see some resemblance of Christ there - by the way we talk, the way we treat others, the way we spend our money, the way we make Christ's love known.

To ask a question as the basis of a sermon and then not to answer it, is really not fair and not the best way to end a sermon. But in speaking of commitment and to ask, "How much is enough?" is like asking "How deep is the ocean?" and "how high is the sky?" or "How great is God?" All we can do is point to certain signs which perhaps suggest an answer. "How much is enough?"

I think one will never love God enough, or serve Him fully, or have a faith that leaves no room for greater faith. But, dear friend, we move in the right direction when we observe the clue of Micah "To do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with God".

And especially when we come to know and understand something of Paul's transforming experience,

"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"

How much is enough? I don't know. But I know I've said enough for now about this and pray that God will take my words and give them flight into your heart and that in these coming days of a new season He will help us to do His will and His work in even greater and more complete ways than in the past.

PRAYER Teach us, good Lord, to serve Thee more faithfully. To give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labor and not ~~to~~ ask for any reward save that of knowing that we do Thy will. In the spirit of Christ we pray. Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER: September 11, 1988

ETERNAL GOD IN CHRIST, grant us grace to worship Thee in spirit and in truth.

We believe that in these moments of worship the deepest things within us are being stirred up...and that down below the surface of our lives, Your spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and the best that we are meant to be.

Wrestle with us, O God, until we are conquered by Your love.

And grant us such spiritual wealth that we will be made aware of ETERNAL REALITIES...that captured by a vision of the Christ-like life, we will be lifted out of our littleness by our dedication to abiding values and to Your everlasting purpose for us.

2 CLEANSE US, O GOD...from our evil ways, our ugly egotism, our indifferent apathy, our sinful lusts...that we may be ready for this transforming experience.

1 GRANT US HONESTY in confronting and confessing our sins.

We do not mean to live...oblivious...to the perplexities and turmoil that surrounds us or the hunger and the tragedies that fill our world.

Forgive us, Lord, for having shunned costly involvement.

We like our relaxation, our comfortable living style, our full stomachs. With our preoccupation with things, we haven't really sensed any great need of You.

We confess that we have been slow to pray...until the odds mounted against us. We have been neglectful of justice and couldn't care less about human rights for others until the oppressed have made a scene and embarrassed us. We have been short on charity until it was legislated for us.

Our hypocrisy is self-evident, Lord. We have accepted the Gospel's high demand with our lips but not with our lives.

BUT IN SPITE OF OUR HUMANNESSESS, our weaknesses, our self-indulgence, our neglect, YOU dared to entrust Your Kingdom to us. Admittedly, the paradise we have built is organizational and institutional. And we have succeeded in perfecting the market place, but not your Kingdom of Kindness. We have instant communication worldwide, but not the reconciling word for our neighbor.

HEAR, O GOD, our confession of confusion. And by Your Holy Spirit, touch us, and renew within us, each one of us, the heart of grace.

MINISTER TO OUR PERSONAL NEEDS, DEAR FATHER, IN THIS TIME OF WORSHIP.

Walk through this community of great faith now and be the help and comfort, the inspiration and sustenance of our souls.

Comfort us in our bereavement. Steady our spirits in sickness. Keep our hearts steadfast in practical distress.

In temptation, in illness, in disappointment and depression, in defeat when we are tempted to give up...in success when we are tempted to be proud and haughty - O God, restore our souls.

May we hear YOUR voice speaking to each of us, reassuring us, challenging us, summoning us to great things in days ahead, to dedicated and victorious living.

ALL THIS WE NOW PRAY in the name of the Good Shepherd who gently brings us HOME to Himself.