

"SOLI DEO GLORIA"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 13, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

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Ten times a variation of the verse Jesus quoted appears in the Old Testament. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength". When something is important, we repeat it. Right? So, too, does God. Four more times this same command is repeated in the New Testament. Fourteen times God's Word says, "Love the Lord your God..." Yes, this is the first and the great commandment.

DEVELOPMENT

The question for this morning is, do we keep this commandment first in our lives? What if I asked you,

"What is your number one priority in life? What is your personal mission statement? What are you living for?"

Would you answer, "To love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind and strength?" "Soli Deo Gloria - to God alone be the glory?" How do we make such a commitment to God in our society today?

Commitment is certainly not the strong suit of our generation. Adlai Stevenson once told of a pastor who so moved one of his congregation that the man jumped to his feet and cried,

"Oh Lord, use me...in an advisory capacity!"

That's how most people would prefer to be used...in an advisory capacity. How do we buck the trend and live for God alone?

WHAT IS COMMITMENT

What is commitment? In its simplest form I think it is doing what we say we will do even when we don't feel like it.

This is what marriage vows are all about. Traditional vows include the phrasing "For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, 'til death do us part". If there was only "for better", or "for

richer", or "in health", and only one person in all the world that we ever found attractive, we wouldn't need marriage vows. But we make the commitment for those days when things are "for worse", "for poorer", "in sickness" and when we might find someone else attractive and appealing. The commitment says that the circumstances may change, but the marriage stands.

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In other words, commitments are made to rule our feelings. Commitments keep us on the right track when our feelings would cause us to veer...to weaken. Commitment means,

"If I say I will do a job, I do it. If I say I will show up, I show up. If I say I'll pay, I pay."

Commitment involves unselfishness and sacrifice. It involves making painful choices. A minister took his sons, ages 12 and 9, on a canoe trip in northern Michigan. The younger boy learned too late that once you embark on a canoe trip down a swiftly flowing river, it's too late to turn back. As soon as you push off you are stuck. There's no way out. You have to go to the end, like it or not. About half way on their journey this young man decided he didn't want to go the rest of the way. At the start of the trip, however, he and his father and brother made a commitment. They didn't have to get in the canoe, but once committed, there was no alternative to finishing.

That's the way certain commitments are. Our commitment to God is different from a canoe ride in this respect, however. We do have the freedom to turn back. There are other options every step along the way. Thus, we are constantly confronted with difficult choices.

This is why Paul said in I Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 31, "I die daily". You will never meet a fully devoted follower of Christ who doesn't die daily to a host of things that would like to have a grip on his or her life - personal ambition, the approval of others, greed, drugs, sex. Our culture ferociously maintains, "You can have it all." But that slogan is a lie. Commitment means dying to, walking away from, or giving up many things that might appeal to us. Commitment means consistently using our time, talent, and our treasure for God. What is commitment? To live "soli Deo gloria" - to God alone be the glory! We need on occasion to ask ourselves: How committed am I?

HOW DO WE KEEP OUR COMMITMENT TO GOD?

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Let me take up a second question that is worth considering. How do we keep

I saw a poll recently that disturbed me. According to this poll most people go to Church because they want to feel good. Now, there's nothing wrong with feeling good. Is there anyone in this room who does not enjoy feeling good? Feeling good is nice. However, we might ask the question whether this is sufficient motivation for the committed Christian.

Many contemporary church-goers want what Jim Packer calls a "hot tub religion". They go for peace of mind, or to meet people, or because it's good business. Commitment to Jesus Christ is far down the list of their priorities. Some churches are catering to this comfort-oriented religion. They offer not only padded pews, but padded crosses as well.

THEN HOW DO WE LIVE FOR GOD ALONE?

How do we live for God alone? First of all, we do it by subjecting all of our other concerns to that one grand concern expressed by Jesus in this way,

"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God".

Now, some of us have a real problem at this point. I think the drive for material possessions has almost taken over our lives. There's even a popular song stating our obsession with accumulating wealth. "I wanna be rich" says the song, "have love, peace and happiness".

And we can understand that. Some of us were poor as children. And we are committed to not being poor again. Anyone who went through the Great Depression understands this psychology. You don't have to be around a person who grew up in the Depression years very long to hear what real poverty is. One fellow said his family was so poor they used to go to Kentucky Fried Chicken and lick the fingers of other people. Another said the garbage man would back up to his house and ask, "Pick up or delivery?" And another once said that "His sister got married just to get the rice."

Some of you know what poverty is like...that it brings pain and therefore you are committed to having money which brings pleasure.

That was Howard Hughes' obsession. There was only one thing he wanted in life - more. More money, more fame, more sensual pleasures, more thrills, more power. All he ever wanted was more and yet this man concluded his life emaciated; colorless; with a sunken chest; with fingernails which resembled grotesque, inches-long corkscrews; with rotting black teeth and needle marks from his drug addiction. He walked around nearly naked most of the time with his beard and hair to his waist. He kept his own human waste in quart jars which he stashed around his 15 by 17 foot apartment.

He lived in darkness, wore rubber gloves, sterilized everything in his junk-filled room. He spent most of his time watching old movies and drinking soup. He talked on the phone for 10 to 15 hours a day, he was so lonely. He died weighing 95 pounds still believing in the myth of more. A billionaire junkie, if you will. Is this "living". Of course not! We know that.

Donald Trump admitted recently on 20/20 in an interview with Barbara Walters that "nothing is what it's cracked up to be". Jesus said long ago,

"You cannot serve both God and money".

That truth forces some difficult choices on those of us caught up in a material world. However, if we are to live "soli Deo Gloria", we must subject every concern in life to this one great commandment of "loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength."

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOSE WHO HAVE GIVEN ALL FOR GOD

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to think about. I think that keeping our commitment also means consciously and consistently following in the footsteps of those who have given their all for God.

I don't have to tell you their stories. Abraham, Joshua, Miriam, Jonah, Elijah, Jeremiah and a host of others. They were not perfect people...we know that...but they were "committed" people. And Jesus, of course, went beyond all others in demonstrating once and for all the nature of commitment. As He was confronting the most painful death ever devised by man - crucifixion - He knelt and prayed in Gethsemane's Garden,

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet, not as I will, but as You will...."

His example, His spirit permeated those who came after Him. The Apostles, though terrified by His crucifixion, were electrified by His resurrection and would not keep quiet. Though they paid for their powerful testimonies with their very lives, they were also committed.

First century Christians knew what it is to be committed. Caesar demanded that his subjects bow to him and call him Lord. But conscientious Christians could never do that even though such a stand sometimes meant their death. Our generation wonders ...hey...why couldn't they cross their fingers under their togas and mouth words of renunciation, but these men and women had made a commitment. They had made Jesus the Lord of their lives. They would not betray Him regardless of the cost. They died with this truth on their lips. "Soli Deo Gloria".

Across twenty centuries faithful children of God in every generation have lived and died with that same single-minded commitment. Now, it is our turn to take center stage in this drama of life. How will we perform? Will we do what we say we will do even when we don't feel like doing it? Will we live for money, popularity and power by playing to the masses? Or will we perform for the ultimate spectator - God?

I pray that God will give you and me the grace and the power to perform for Him alone! Of course, people in this "no-commitment" society will find it hard to understand. They'll tell you that living for God is a kind of fanaticism this world of ours can do without. They wonder...who would be foolish enough to voluntarily suffer loss...or refrain from pleasure...or lower their comfort level in life for an idea that can't even be proved. To some that will seem like squandering the precious few days we have on earth. But as a martyred missionary said some time back,

"He is no fool who gives up that which he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose...."

To such a standard of life each of us who bear His name is ultimately called. Commitment. Many are not comfortable with that word. Think about it. Do something about it.

CLOSING

They say that Verdi, the composer, stood in the shadows of the Concert Hall in Florence during the performance of his first opera. Though he would later go on and garner the acclaim of the music world, at this point in his career he was an unknown. Throughout the performance Verdi waited in the darkness with his eye on only one person in the audience: the master composer Rossini. Verdi did not care whether the crowd would cheer him or jeer him. It made no difference. All he wanted was the smile of approval from the master...from Rossini.

So it is with each of us if we would follow in the footsteps of Jesus and the saints of every age. Only the Master's approval truly matters.

"Soli Deo Gloria" - To God alone be
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PRAYER

Now strengthen us in our commitment to Him in whom we have come to see life's highest hope as well as its deepest meaning. Wrestle with each of us in the deep places of our lives. In the name and spirit of Him who calls our name in this burning hour and asks for daring hearts and spirits free. Amen.

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