

Monday Memo 291: Fear Fear.

American President Franklin Roosevelt uttered the now-famous line, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." That was true when America entered World War II, and it's still true today. There is a good chance that fear is your greatest adversary, but it may be caused by a deeper spiritual problem. To understand what that problem is, you must read on.

ROW, ROW, ROW YOUR BOAT.

I just sent out my ninth study of Mark's gospel for my weekly Bible studies. This week's study included the story of Jesus walking on the water, coming to the disciples late at night:

When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid" (Mark 6:47-50).

The disciples had been rowing for a long time, battling the wind and waves. They were worn out, and they weren't making much progress. They were probably wondering why Jesus had sent them on ahead of Him in such conditions. You may be in the same life situation, facing some difficult things, and wondering where God is. You are rowing hard, but your boat is making progress.

I'm not sure how I would have reacted when I saw Jesus coming to me on the water. I don't think I would have concluded that He was a ghost, but you never know. There is a good chance, however, that I would have been afraid. Yet somehow I don't think that response would have been so unusual. After all, seeing someone walk on the water isn't something that happens every day.

Yet they were terrified not because this sight was so unusual. They were terrified because of their spiritual condition.

HARD HEARTS

Mark reported the reason why Jesus came to them the way He did:

Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened (Mark 6:51-52).

These men had already seen Jesus do amazing miracles, and so have you. These disciples had witnessed God's ability to provide when Jesus took five loaves and two fish and fed five thousand. You have also seen God's faithful provision, and so have I. Yet I still have to battle fear, because my heart is hard. These men already had a history of seeing Jesus do remarkable things, yet when He did this remarkable thing (walk on water), they freaked out. I can't judge them too harshly, for I am often in the same boat as they were.

Next week, we will all gather at our local churches to celebrate the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead. If God can raise the dead, He can do anything! Yet many will go home from church on Easter, having paid tribute to Jesus' resurrection, and not have the resurrection impact their daily lives. Will you be among them?

Will you go home from Easter service fearful for the future, or confident? Will you go home and do something that relies on God's power, or will you be afraid of doing the wrong thing and do no thing? President Roosevelt was correct; we must learn to fear fear, for fear paralyzes us and skews our spiritual perspective. Yet fear is often rooted in a hard heart and that is what we must remedy if we are to take bold action.

As you confront your fears this week, I urge you to go a little deeper and examine the heart condition which allows those fears to foster. Then do something to soften up your heart, like taking action on some long abandoned faith project. There is no greater testimony you can give to the fact that Jesus is alive than to act every day like He is and like that same resurrection power is available to you as you do God's will. Have a great week!

Monday Memo 292: God is Not a Tease.

Did you ever have someone tell you that you should enjoy something that you do, even though you don't--enjoy it, that it? Did you ever have someone tell you that you should not enjoy something that you absolutely love? No one can legislate your heart or tell you how you should or should not feel. Yet it happens, and more often than we should, we listen to them and try to change. The problem is that it seldom works. For the reasons why, read on.

GOD IS NOT A TEASE.

I have never understood why some people think God would give them the joy to do something and then not allow them to do what they love or enjoy. God is not a tease, dangling something in front of you to do that is attractive to you, only to jerk it away, saying, "Uh-uh. To serve me, you must do something else, something you enjoy less."

I have found that God makes it simple for me. He has put a love in me to do what I was created to do, which is to create order out of chaos. I don't enjoy every aspect of what God has given me to do, but I enjoy most of it. When I love something, I give myself to it without much thought or effort. I would imagine that you are the same.

Doesn't it make sense that God would give you joy to do something so that the joy would direct and draw you to that activity or role?

"I LOVE TO ADD UP NUMBERS."

I was back in Mobile, Alabama last week and it reminded me of my friend Evelyn, who lives and works there. More than 20 years ago, Evelyn came to me, saying that God had sent her to tell me something. I thought she had some great revelation or prophetic word to deliver. In our appointment, however, Evelyn said, "I came to tell you that I love to add up columns of numbers. I used to work for an accountant and I was the fastest person to use the adding machine," Evelyn explained. "That's all I have to say."

I was bewildered. Why was this woman telling me this seemingly trivial piece of information? Yet a short time later when we were expanding our accounting department, I called Evelyn and we hired her. When we computerized, Evelyn excelled at applying the software. Today, Evelyn is the administrative leader for the ministry where she works. She took her love and joy for adding up numbers (correctly, I might add) and turned it into a leadership role.

I want to leave you with a verse to remember this week: "Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one can share its joy" (Proverbs 14:10). No one can tell you what your heart is feeling, what gives you joy and what does not. Only you know. The question is: do you have the courage to acknowledge it? Can you stand up and, like Evelyn, say, "This is what I love. When I do this, I feel joy"? Can you then ask, "How can I do that more often than I am now?"

Why not spend this week getting in touch with your heart and what gives you joy? Then, I have a simple assignment. I want you to tell someone

what it is, no matter how simple or bizarre it may sound. I want you to do what Evelyn did many years ago and see where it leads you. I can't promise you a leadership position like hers, but I can promise that you will find happiness as you do what you were created to do more often than you are today. Have a great week!

Monday Memo 293: Joy Inventory

Have you ever kept track of the money you spend so you can do a budget? Have you ever kept a record of how much time you were spending in a certain area so you could use your time more effectively? If you have, then you know that those simple steps can help you budget your time and money. Have you ever considered a similar inventory to help clarify your purpose? If not, then maybe this is the week for you to do so.

PAY ATTENTION.

Joy is an indicator of what you should be doing, where you should be investing your time and energy. When I ask people what they enjoy doing, I get two responses. The first is, "I don't know." The second is, "I enjoy doing so many things that I'm not sure what the thing is that identifies my purpose." So what I am suggesting this week is to keep a record of what you enjoy doing. It's what I'm calling a joy inventory.

For you to do that, you must pay attention to your heart. You must not talk yourself out of how you feel or tell yourself that you should enjoy this or that. For example, here would be my joy inventory from this past Saturday:

1. I didn't enjoy packing for my latest trip.
2. I enjoyed visiting my mother before I left town.
3. I really enjoyed flying on the plane heading to Providence, RI.
4. I did not enjoy attending the church service on Saturday night. There was nothing wrong with the service. I just didn't sense any joy being there.
5. I enjoyed going out to eat with friends after the service.
6. I really enjoyed playing the video games on my new handheld organizer.

Here is my joy indicator for Sunday.

1. I enjoyed getting ready to speak in church.
2. I really enjoyed speaking.
3. I really, really enjoyed signing my books that I sold after service.

4. I enjoyed going out with a wonderful couple after church.
5. I am blissful writing the Monday Memo to send to you.

So what does this inventory tell me?

THE RESULTS ARE IN.

My inventory tells me that I love to travel, speak and write. I enjoy small groups, but I don't enjoy larger settings where I cannot connect with the people. I like to connect in some small way with people who buy my books and could sign autographs all day! I like to eat out in restaurants. I am competitive and like games I can play against myself, but not against other people (I am not a good loser and never have been). When I read over this inventory, I am doing something unusual as I do. I am giving myself permission to be who I am, to enjoy what I enjoy and to not force trying to feel something that I don't. (By the way, I asked my wife to help me and she packed my suitcase. When my wife packs, it's a work of art.)

I think my inventory tells me a lot about myself in just two days, don't you agree? Having said that, I propose that you do one for every day this week. Keep a notebook nearby and write down what you do that gives you joy and what you do that doesn't all week. Then next Sunday, sit down to study the list. Are there any patterns that emerge? How can you do more of what you enjoy and less of what you don't? Is there enough of a pattern to clarify your purpose?

If there isn't, don't worry about it. The patterns you can identify will help you. If the activities that give you joy are after work hours, then why is your work so joy-less? If you aren't doing anything all week that gives you joy, then what are you doing with your life? Why is there no joy? What can you do about that?

The objective of this exercise is to get you to pay attention to your heart, for your heart matters where purpose is concerned. Your purpose doesn't have to make sense to you at first; you simply have to recognize it by the joy it generates. After you identify your purpose, God will show you ways to gain meaning from engaging in purposeful activities more often than you are now.

So that's your assignment this week. I would love to hear your results and conclusions next week, so I invited you to enter them on the site where this is posted. Have a great week!

Monday Memo 294: Get More Done

Would you like to write, study, learn a new language or earn another degree? Don't you wish you could find a way to squeeze more activities into a day? Well, I am here to tell you that it's not possible! Yet it is possible to do more things that you would like and need to do? How is that possible? To find out, you will have to read on.

ADDICTED TO EMAIL

I am in London, staying at a flat that belongs to Celebration Church London. it's a great flat, conveniently located and cozy. There's only one drawback, and that is the lack of wireless Internet connection. I arrived on Sunday and went through withdrawal until I could get to a Starbuck's today and get online. But do you know what? I've been more productive the last two days without the Internet. Why? Because I spend so much time on the computer. It's hard for me not to respond as soon as an email arrives. The last two days, however, have been wonderful. I've read more, written more and stayed more focused without constant access to my email.

The lesson is that for you to do more of what you want, you have to say "no" to something you are already doing. I've never had anyone come to me and say, "John, I have six hours a week on my hands and I need help in what to do with them." People come to me because they are busy and would like me to help them shoe-horn more things into their already hectic lives. As much as I would like to do so (for myself as well), it isn't possible. The only way to do more of what you like is to stop doing some of what you don't like. It sounds pretty simple, but it's not, as you well know.

A FEW TIPS

The first thing you need to decide is what is most important to you, which are your values. I am attaching a copy of my latest values to this Memo for your review. If you haven't spelled yours out like I have, then you need to do so. If you have them written down, then perhaps it's time to check and see if you are living those values out on a daily basis.

If you aren't living out your values, then what can you do? The second recommendation would be to do a time inventory. I know that seem a bit awkward to do, but it really isn't. Keep a small notebook with you for the next week and keep track of where your time goes. I did that one two-week period and discovered I had watched 14 hours of television. I was able to reclaim some of those hours and put them to better use, but it all

started with knowing that is where my time was going. How much time do you spend on the phone? Commuting? Cooking? Sleeping? Once you know, how can you activate one of your values during those times you are using for other activities? I listen to books while I travel and that enables me to live out my value of learning and growing.

Time management is really a misnomer. You can't manage time, you can only manage yourself and the events that fit into the time you have. While the clock is always ticking, you can take steps to put those fleeting hours to good use. Why not borrow some time from another activity this week to write out your values. Then spend the rest of the week determining where your time goes and where you want it to go. By next week, you can be well on your way to living a more fulfilled, productive life by using the time you have for the things that are right for you. Have a great week!

Monday Memo 295: Timing is Bunk!

I hear many people say they are concerned about timing. They don't want to miss or get ahead of the Lord, so they watch and wait for God's timing. When I am asked about timing, I usually give the same response; "Timing is bunk!" (Which means it's not that important, if you don't understand American slang!) To understand why I say that, you must read on.

TIMING IS BUNK.

Perhaps I should say that timing as a planning tool is bunk. I maintain that it is impossible to know what time or season you are in, until you are in it. So why waste any time, or allow the thought of timing to slow down what you are going to do? Let me explain it another way.

How do you know for sure that you have a good idea? Is it before or after you implement the idea? It is after you take steps to carry out the idea. So if you are waiting for the right time to apply this good idea, you may never take action. That is why I say timing is bunk and is overrated as a worthy consideration.

Perhaps two passages will help make my case. The first is found in Ecclesiastes 11:4-5:

Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed [a] in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things. Sow your seed in the morning, and at

evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.

The second is from the story of the four lepers in 2 Kings 7:

Now there were four leprous men at the entrance of the gate; and they said to one another, "Why do we sit here until we die? "If we say, 'We will enter the city,' then the famine is in the city and we will die there; and if we sit here, we die also. Now therefore come, and let us go over to the camp of the Arameans. If they spare us, we will live; and if they kill us, we will but die" (2 Kings 7:3-4).

WHAT'S TIMING TO A LEPER?

The four lepers saw their condition as critical. They were less concerned about looking bad or "missing God" than survival! It is not faith to want to know the timing and steps you will need to take to succeed. It is presumptuous! God does not owe you a full explanation before you take the first steps in obedience. To think that He does is to expect more than God gave Abraham. God told Abraham to set out. When Abraham wanted to know where he was going, the Lord basically responded, "I'll tell you when you get there."

If you don't identify with the lepers, you will say that you can "wait on the Lord." If you do identify with their situation and see yourself in need, then you will act today on your purpose, ideas, goals and dreams. Have you had enough of being where you are? Then step out and be less concerned about timing and more concerned about finding success.

Let me close with one more thought. I hear people say, "I don't want to get ahead of the Lord." I say, go ahead and try! If Ephesians 3:20-21 is true (and it is), there is no way you can get ahead of Him:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

So dream big and then step out to see what happens. Be free to move out and about, knowing that you can't get ahead of God and you won't fully please Him until you act in faith, faith that your time is now to do the will of God. Have a great week!