

TAKEAWAY

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January 31, 2010

Part 5 – Distractions

The Devil's Advocate

I think I can honestly say that I did not learn a thing in my theology class. Certainly the fact that it was an 8 a.m. class had something to do with it. But the primary reason for my lack of retention was the two gentlemen who sat on opposite corners of the classroom. One introduced himself as the son of a pastor. The other was a self-professed “lifelong devil’s advocate.” Every class was an open, full-on debate. It didn’t matter what the topic was. The professor would begin with a verse or a theological premise, and off they would go on their intellectual race to win the argument that ensued. From time to time, others in the class tried to chime in, but they were quickly curtailed by one of these gentlemen. Many of us begged the professor to call it off because the more they debated, the more confused we were.

So often it seems like churches can be like that. We get to splitting hairs, arguing over semantics, or throwing all our energies behind intellectual and religious glories. We forget the point—we serve the same awesome God! Certainly, learning and reflecting on a working knowledge of God and who He is proves crucial to the Christian walk. According to Proverbs 10:13-14 (NIV), “*Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks judgment. Wise men store up knowledge, but the mouth of a fool invites ruin.*” We are to have knowledge, but a wise person learns when and how to use that knowledge. Many debates end with at least one person being offended or hurt, which is not what God is about. God wants positive relationships—not someone who uses their wisdom to judge others or verbally bludgeon them. Christ continually used His wisdom about His person and principles to teach and demonstrate His love, not to show His superiority.

If you find yourself getting involved in a discussion that starts becoming divisive, ask yourself if you are waging a battle against the wrong enemy. We can learn a lesson from an account of the naval Battle of Trafalgar. As the battle was about to begin, Admiral Nelson came across two officers of his own flagship who were arguing hotly and about to take sword to each other. Nelson stepped between them and said, “*Stop.*” Then, pointing to the French fleet, he said, “*There is the enemy.*” Let us remember that the enemy is always Satan who comes to divide, conquer, and destroy.

Majoring In the Minors

How do you know if you’re “majoring in the minors”? Look at the impact you have on the people around you. Read 1 Timothy 6:4-5. What is the outcome of unhealthy interests? If strife, suspicion, and constant friction are the fruit of your discussions, it may be time to drop the issue and get back to grace. Ask yourself, *Where is the grace in this issue?* Read 2 Timothy 2:8-14. What is the reminder in verse 14? Why do we need that reminder? How can you use that as a check when you feel things heating up during a discussion? How can you learn to agree to disagree? Read 2 Timothy 2:23-26. Is it ever okay with God for us to be so upset with a fellow believer over an issue that we stop talking to them? And even if we happen to be right about something, what does verse 25 say?

A number of years ago, before I came to Blue Ridge, I got caught up in a “majoring in the minors” situation. I became ensnared in someone’s teaching on a couple of verses in the Bible about women covering their heads. You can read about it in 1 Corinthians 11:6. The teaching was that those who don’t follow this daily practice cannot be hearing from Christ and are not true believers. Coming from a legalistic background, this was hard for me to ignore. I was all too easily pulled into the rest of the teaching that included the idea that all imagery (fictional stories, pictures of Jesus, etc.) was evil. This was among many other teachings that stirred up strife and turmoil inside of me, not to mention my family! Looking back at that time in my life, it’s easy to see how the *minors* became the *majors* and my faith began to turn on performance, rather than grace. Not long after leaving that environment, I found myself in a conversation with a wonderful woman who chose to wear a head covering. She told me that, while she felt led to wear one, she didn’t think it was faith altering if I didn’t, and she would never presume to tell anyone they had to. This served as a great example for me of not majoring in the minors at a time when I really needed it. There was

freedom for her and for me, because in the end we were both covered by grace. Read Galatians 5:4-8 and 5:13-15. These verses are specifically talking about Jewish law, but how can they also help those who may be caught up in following divisive teachings? How do these verses tie in grace to the overall picture of our faith?

Is it Love?

I've been thinking this week about knowledge and truth. I recall being at college and reaching a moment when all I wanted was to leave and go and "do" something, because it seemed like I was just acquiring knowledge for the sake of knowing. I was the first in my family to attend college, and I really wasn't sure what I wanted to become through the experience. But someone had advised me that I should go anyway simply to pursue intellectual growth. My family has always been big on work ethic. So, even though I went to college and gained a lot of knowledge, there came a point when that just wasn't enough. I wanted application. My personal experience bears out the theory that if you don't use it, you lose it.

Paul was a very learned man. We know that he had been formally schooled. But see what he has to say about knowledge in 1 Corinthians 13:1-2. It can be fun to get caught up in knowing more, to discuss and debate possibilities, or to speculate on what things really mean or will mean in the future. But if we don't have love—if as we discuss God's Word, love is not the motivation—then it is fruitless. When you get into these discussions, ask yourself, *Am I motivated to share my knowledge so that I look knowledgeable or am I motivated by faith, hope, and love?*

That Tickles

In 2 Timothy 4:1-4 (NASB), Paul states, *"I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."*

This was not the first time the Apostle Paul had given Timothy a "solemn charge." But I think it's interesting that all three times it happened in his two letters to Timothy, those solemn charges had to do with seriously communicating truth to the people Timothy was leading. Why did Paul do that? I believe it was because he wanted Timothy (and us) to be very intentional about focusing on sound doctrine and not just what people wanted to hear. My own tendencies help me relate to why Paul said that for a couple of different reasons. The first is that I tend to get bored easily. I know some people who buy a lot of movies because they watch them over and over. That doesn't work for me. I want something new. I like being surprised. (You've heard it said that familiarity breeds contempt.) Sometimes when we think we know the story, we check out without really listening to what is being said. We want to hear something new. The same thing can happen when we read or hear Scripture that we think we "know." Have you ever considered that maybe God isn't telling you something new because you haven't done what He already told you to do? Or perhaps He is trying to emphasize certain things by showing them to you in new ways.

The second reason I think we want our ears tickled is because we really don't like some of the things God tells us. We want to pick and choose the parts of the Bible we like and skip over those that are uncomfortable. Kind of like a spiritual buffet line: I'll take the *God loves me* part and maybe some of *God has a plan for me*, but I'll just pass over the parts about forgiving others and submission. Are we guilty of the prediction in 2 Timothy 4:3 that says *"...they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires"*? Do we look for godly advice from people who just affirm our actions or those who challenge us with God's truth? Do we cringe when we tell others the truth that heaven and hell are real and God will judge all of us? Or do we just say God is love and all He wants is to make us rich and prosperous and He would never let something like hell exist? Jesus said a lot of things that might make us uncomfortable, and the Bible is full of stories that we might like to edit. But unless we embrace the whole of God's truth, we are in effect doing just what Paul warned against. So what's the remedy? I think it has to do with us embracing all of the Truth and asking the Holy Spirit to teach us. And it includes inviting godly people into our lives who will challenge our actions with what all of Scripture has to say—especially when we don't want to hear it.

Q: How can I make sure I get the Takeaway every week?

A: (1) Sign up on our website to receive the Takeaway by e-mail, (2) download the Takeaway from our website, or (3) pick up a copy as you leave the auditorium on Sunday.