

Devotionals

Senior Edition Week 2

DAY # 1 - To obey is better than sacrifice

Making a decision for college has arguably been one of the most difficult decisions I have ever made in my life. I agree that, initially, it didn't sound to me like a daunting choice either. After college admissions destroys your self-esteem and narrows your choices down to only a handful of schools, you would think that visiting each college and factoring in your personal preferences will help you to quickly crank out a college choice in no time. However, if you got into your dream college that has just about everything you could ever hope for, but God called you to another college that you may not have wanted to go to as much instead, would you obey Him?

Read 1 Samuel 15

Saul was Israel's first king and the Lord's anointed one. God chose Saul out of all the other men of Israel to be king over His people. However, God also wanted Saul to love and obey Him. When He called Saul to go to war with the Amalekites, He gave Saul specific orders to put to death all men, women, children, infants, and all of their livestock. God was with Saul when the Israelites battled with and annihilated the Amalekites. However, instead of following God's orders completely, he only half-heartedly obeyed them. He took the enemy king as hostage and kept all of the best livestock for his army.

Saul's actions displeased the Lord, who conveyed His message of grievance to His prophet Samuel. Samuel then rebuked Saul and told him that the Lord has rejected him as king over Israel. Saul was not expecting this. He thought he had done the right thing. He didn't even take the enemy's livestock for himself, but wanted to sacrifice all of the good things he reaped to the Lord. Saul thought he knew how to do things better than God did and, through his pride and selfishness, disobeyed the Lord's commands.

After senior year started for me, I knew I wanted to be an economics major and made a plan of all of the colleges I intended to apply to. Out of these schools, I put the University of Chicago as my number one choice for a number of reasons. Not only was it the closest to home, but it was also in Chicago, one of the country's most exciting and fun-filled cities. I also had a handful of close friends who were already in the city who I met through Teen Camp, WCAC, or school. On top of that, it was also tied first in the nation at economics with Harvard, Princeton, and MIT. Yeah... small wonder I had that school as my first choice.

(Continue Day # 1) I thought I had everything in the bag last fall after I applied to UChicago as early action. My essay for that school was arguably my best yet, my interview with the admissions officer went by very smoothly, my grades in school were decent, and the admissions rate for UChicago was extremely high for its prestige – sitting at almost 30% a year, and even higher for early applicants. When decision day came in early December, I was crushed when I received a skinny envelope in the mail with a short letter inside confirming that I had been deferred. Things seemed pretty hopeless to me at that point. I thought I knew exactly where God wanted me to go to school next fall, but obviously He thought otherwise. Why

else would He have deferred me? I knew what I had to do though – trust in God to provide me with the right college that He wants me to go to.

When colleges started releasing their regular decision admissions results, one of the first ones that came out was UChicago. And what do you know? I was arguably one of the happiest people alive at that moment when I found out that I had been accepted. However, a good education seems to always come at a high price as well – a price that cost me nearly \$57,000 per year (holy moly)! However, overall, I had already considered myself a UChicago student. Maybe that’s exactly how Saul felt when he went off to do things his own way. He saw the “good” that the enemy’s livestock had to offer and became enveloped in pride and greed.

Likewise, my happiness about being accepted into UChicago didn’t leave any room for God to work in my life and to direct me to the college He wanted me to go to. He intervened and, through my mom, forced me to go on a college visit to Washington University in St. Louis (another school I got into). I was extremely reluctant to go, thinking that it would just be a waste of my time, but I went anyways because of free travel expenses. In the end, my college decision was down to – you guessed it – my dream college that has just about everything I could ever hope for, or a less prestigious school where I’d still be happy and where I thought God might be calling me to go to.

I prayed to God, asking Him to give me some sort of sign that would assure me as to where He would like to go. I ended up visiting UChicago as well, but found that it actually didn’t quite appeal to me the way WashU did. I came home reasonably sure that WashU was where God wanted me to go. I prayed to God again, asking Him if WashU was indeed the college of HIS choice for me. He answered my prayer and solidified my decision by granting me a scholarship from WashU that made it one of my cheapest colleges.

Now, looking back, I can see why God did the things He did and how He works in such amazing ways in our lives. While I was really hurt that I was initially deferred from my top choice, things would have been completely different had I been accepted right off the bat. I don’t think I would have even bothered applying to WashU if I had been accepted early. With the mentality I carried about wanting to go to UChicago for sure, I wasn’t making any room for God in my life. I was following my own plan instead of His, and was obeying the things my mind was telling me rather than what God was telling me. Even when I thought I could crank out more success to honor God with in the future by going off on my own, God would rather just have me obey Him.

Obedience to the Lord shows that we love, trust, and fear Him. How could we say we love our God if we don’t do the things He tells us to do? 1 Samuel 15:22 says, “To obey is better than sacrifice.” Saul thought he could make things better for God rather than simply doing what He was told to do. However, God remains the rightful king and sought obedience from his chosen leader Saul. As a result, God rejected Saul and, instead, made David his new Israelite king. I know my story about how I decided on a college isn’t exactly the best parallel for this passage, but obeying God take shapes in a variety of other ways in our lives. We can obey our parents, our teachers, our church leaders, our elders, being respectful to strangers, and always praying to God and reading His word so He can speak to us.

One of the dangers we face is greed. We want to gain recognition for ourselves and, as a result, we overcomplicate things when it comes to obedience. We don’t just want to obey, we want to impress and gain glory for ourselves. As soon as we lose sight of why we are obeying God’s commands, or even what things we are obeying, we have lost ourselves to sin. Thus, I really encourage you to spend more time with God each day. I know I forget about it too some days, but how else can we obey our Father if we don’t know how to obey him? Luke 11:28 says, “[Jesus] replied, Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” High school will always come with struggles and pressures, but if we trust in Him, He will deliver us from all of the Amalekites in our lives. Nothing makes our Father happier than showing Him that we love him – and to do that, we have to obey!

Looking toward God for Help

My cousin blessed me with this passage just after a time in my life that left me exhausted and drained, looking toward God for help, but unsure how to approach Him.

This passage is the inspiration for the first song I ever wrote, the same song that God used to bless people in New York City during a mission trip in the summer of 2006. And I hope that this passage will bless you as much as God has used it to bless me.

Read Matthew 14: 22-36.

When I read this passage, I see an intimate moment between Jesus and the disciples. In verse 22, Jesus dismisses the crowd that was following Him (He had just fed the 5,000) and sends the disciples ahead of Him in a boat.

Jesus deliberately wanted to be alone with the disciples, but it seems like He didn't think things through. He sent the disciples away in the boat earlier and by nightfall, the boat was already far away from land...but since Jesus wasn't with them then, He was still on shore. Not to mention, a storm had started to brew. Clearly, it was bad planning on Jesus' part... right?

But then, Jesus heads out onto the lake.

Matthew makes it sound so inconspicuous. "Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake." Almost like we would say "Ben came to youth group, driving in his silver Nissan." And I think many people like to stop and just focus on the fact that Jesus is doing something supernatural. But that's not the point; Jesus is 100% God, so it shouldn't be surprising that He is doing something like that.

What I glean the most from this passage is the interaction between Jesus and the disciples because it parallels the relationship we have with God.

When Peter asks if he can go out onto the water with Jesus, he is welcomed without hesitation. "Come," Jesus says. And Peter is able to walk on water through God's power as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus. However, when Peter focused on the waves and the storm that were around him, he started to sink. And of course, Peter cries out for his life and Jesus reaches out and saves him.

Read Matthew 14:22-36 again.

Does the connection seem clearer?

I can name many times in my life when I felt like I was struggling by myself in a storm. But God always reminds me to keep my eyes on Him and is always faithful in making everything work out for His glory.

That is the amazing thing about our God. He doesn't just show off his power and strength for the sake of it to make us drop our jaws in awe. Instead, He invites us to join Him and lends us His strength and His power as we work with Him so that others can also see how great and wonderful our God is.

Devotion from a Super Busy Person

I'm a super busy person. So busy that a good chunk of my day is spent trying to figure out how to fit all the "busy-ness" together in my planner, and then when I'm not doing that I'm constantly going over my schedule in my head. While all this may appear OCD-ish, an affliction of only a select few, I assure you that everyone has at one point or another felt like this before.

It's a weird sensation being ridiculously busy- trying to finish one task just so you can get to the next. In fact often times you become so focused on completing your to-do list that you neglect the help others offer you because you feel that it's easier to work alone, that there isn't any time to explain what is going on to others. You feed off of that check or that scratch-out line as you complete a task. And while you feel like you're missing out on the nuances of life, you justify it in getting pity from those you complain to. In fact you somehow find ways to complain despite how busy you are, "Ugh, I can't (insert name of person your complaining to), I'm super busy".

Everything is fine and dandy, albeit busy, until you crack under the load of all that you have to do. And then you really start to complain, "This sucks so much! Why do I have to do everything and work so hard while everyone is out there having fun?!"

Read Luke 10: 38-42

When we become bitter and angry at all the work we have to do we lose focus on what is truly important. Because we are so wrapped up in the busy-ness of life we are distracted from our number one priority- Jesus and our relationship with him. Like Martha we may end up simply complaining/whining to Jesus, "God don't you care that everyone is having fun but me? Won't you tell them to help me?" or even, "Look at how hard I'm working, I'm much more diligent than those people."

This is not what God wants to hear from you, not only are you not depending on him for strength through the busy-ness, but you also look down on others who do not "have it as bad" as you.

God knows when we are busy. And we should know that nothing is impossible through Him; that when we look to him as our number one priority everything else will fall in place. However this does not mean that the rest of your life is smooth sailing, in fact it most likely will become even more busy and hectic. So keep your planners, schedules, and to-do list, but most importantly remember to keep your focus on God - for He is the rock that you should cling to when you feel in over your head.

EASTER PARTY

So this year, I was baptized on Easter! This event meant a lot to me because it gave me a chance to physically show the change within me spiritually that I had experienced the past three years. Three years ago, the day before Easter, I made the decision to accept Christ into my life. This decision not only changed my lifestyle but it changed who I am. I changed from the girl finding this life purposeless and a waste because we all die and leave nothing but a gravestone behind to a girl who has found a purpose for everything that she does. In high school, this is not always the easiest path to take. There were many things that my close friends would do from drinking to something like casually dating that with this new identity; I must abstain from making me sometimes unintentionally excluded and un-relatable. I would feel a heavier responsibility and weight on my actions. However, I think of my favorite Bible verse and remember that we are to live as lights in this world, set apart from everyone else.

As Romans 12:1-2 states: “So then, my friends, because of God’s great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer. Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this old, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God—what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.”

As many of you know, I was a member of the Service Ministry on Doulos, so that meant a lot of service project planning and attending, so I thought the topic of service/deeds would be appropriate for me to write about. So there's my little introduction, here we go.

James 2:14-17 says "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him "Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

This topic is brought up quite often within the Church. Therefore, it seems as though a lot of pressure is put upon Christians to do good works. Christians know that "good deeds" are the "right" thing to do, so they either choose to perform these things because it's what is expected of them, or they choose to not because they think that their own agenda is more important, and they're already "right" in their mindset, so they don't need to perform acts of service. As for me— a leader in service— I, at times, felt that it was my duty to attend service projects, so that was an extra push for me to get up on that Saturday morning and go do something for the community. Well there's nothing wrong with a little external motivation to keep you doing the things you should be doing. But the act of performing good deeds is about the mindset you have when doing them. Some may feel as though they *must* get crackin' on the community service in order to "save" their faith because of this verse (James 2:14-17), but that's not the right approach. You shouldn't sign up for service projects because you think it's your obligation to do so or because you feel like others may question the sincerity of your faith if you don't. You should see every opportunity to show love onto others as just that— an opportunity. "Deeds" aren't just official events that Pastor Ben announces on Sundays. Deeds— small or big— are little pieces of God's love that you give to others, despite what may be most desirable for you. For instance, I don't really like writing, and I'm pretty mentally checked out after just ending high school, but Josh asked me to write a devotional, so this is something that I'm doing for him— alleviating the stress of writing/ finding people to write devotionals every day— and for you— the reader who might get something positive from my thoughts. As another example, I joined a club called the Flock my sophomore year because all of my friends were doing it. It was a newly-formed group to help special education kids at our school feel more socially accepted with others. In all honesty, I joined because I didn't want to seem like a jerk for not joining. I went to the meetings so I wouldn't get kicked out of the group. But as I got to actually know the students, I discovered that they were so, so precious. I became an officer of the club not to improve my college application, but because I wanted to do anything and all that I could to make the group better for the kids. I joined their gym class and helped them change clothes, which was something I was reluctant to experience at first, because it was the best way to show love to them. When they have someone who will stop and help them tie their shoes, who walks at their pace and listens to how their day was, and who tells them that they're such a great friend, their self-worth shoots up tremendously, and that is something incredibly valuable. Showing love to each and every one of the special needs students went beyond just one occasion or method, but took a lot of patience and intentional prayer. But it went beyond the students feeling good about themselves— they built lasting relationships and social skills, and the student body around us saw how much love we gave to the kids and how much love we got in return. The Flock grew from about 15 to 115 students (excluding the special education ones) over 2 years, and students (and even teachers and administrators) outside of the group have seen a bridge built, and it is no longer "uncool" to approach the kids. That's not to say that you'll always get recognition for the good things you do; there has been no formal recognition of the club or administrative acknowledgement of the group's growth whatsoever. Anyways, to sum up, I encourage all of you to reflect upon the ways that you can perform "deeds" in your life. Remember that this doesn't come from the logic that deeds *must* be present if you have faith, but the logic of *wanting* to do good *because* of your faith. Your faith isn't something that you concocted on your own but rather was a gift from God, and so it goes with deeds. You must ask God for the humility, patience, and intentionality that it requires to spread love. Remember that Jesus gave *everything* for you, so serving the other people he sacrificed for is the best way to give a glimpse of what He did, and serve Him.