

SERMON TITLE- "Life In The Real World"

TEXT- 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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In the weeks ahead we are going to go on a journey.

VIDEO- Google Earth to Athens

I hope you understood what was supposed to take place there. We left Nanaimo and traveled to Athens, Greece [it should have been Corinth]. Then we traveled back in time 2000 years to the time of the NT.

That is supposed to set us up for a study in 2 Corinthians. The first thing that I hope you begin with is this statement- life in the real world, 2000 years ago, had virtually all the same joys and distresses that we have today.

There were of course, no electronic games. But the real problems of trying to get along with family, friends, co-workers and community haven't changed.

What this means for us is that when we read Paul's letter to this church we can observe a working out of the challenges of living as followers of Jesus by reading this and other NT letters.

The letter begins like this-

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2
Corinthians 1:1-2**

The stress that we want to put on the table today is one that captured the minds of the people of Jesus' day. It is the question- "Why do people do bad things?" In fact I think that the same question is just as relevant today as it ever was. As we go through 2 Corinthians I want us to keep that question firmly in our heads.

There is no argument with the fact that people do bad things- everyone agrees with that statement even if they may not all agree on what a list of bad things looks like. In fact I suspect that while we can spend a lot of time disagreeing about certain controversial things that are or are not on the list- the vast portion of any list is agreed to by everyone around the world- and through all history.

To introduce this topic I thought I would ask some of the Youth Group a question- "Can you tell me of a time when you did something you knew was bad?" To make it easier I asked them to think of a time when they did something bad to a sibling.

These are their answers-

VIDEO

While not everyone had a sibling this question limited the answers a bit- but for those who did- there was no question that they had examples of having done things that they knew were clearly- and without a doubt- wrong/bad/evil. On that we could all agree.

So if we are all agreed, then the question is, "Why do we still do those things if we know that they are wrong?"

Once I had enough confessions- that was my next set of questions to them. Here

are these answers-

VIDEO

It was also virtually unanimous- we do bad/evil things because we enjoy doing them. It is worth it to us.

As a matter of fact 300 years before Jesus was on earth a famous philosopher called Aristotle said exactly what the kids told me- without any introduction-

Aristotle- “We do bad things because it is worth it to us.”

Now you may wonder what Aristotle has to the NT.

Actually he has a lot to do with it. In NT times, Aristotle was among the most well known people for any educated person. In fact I believe that Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son has all the marks of being patterned after an essay on prodigals that Aristotle wrote. Jesus uses Aristotle’s exact definition of prodigal.

But if we agree with the statement that we do bad things because they are worth it to us it creates the ultimate moral puzzle- if we know bad is bad- and that doing bad things leads to more, bad things- this is a terrible problem. Things can only go from bad to worse.

In some way every serious thinker and philosopher wrestles with this problem. It certainly was on the top of everyone’s mind in NT times.

So then how do we solve the problem?

The Greek philosophers came up with 3 answers which are still being used today- and in fact each of the answers has something to them.

#1. Aristotle: We Need Training To Like Good Things

This was Aristotle’s answer and so he set up schools to train people to love to do the right things instead of the wrong things.

Aristotle was one of the world’s best teachers and set to work. The problem showed up quickly. It seemed that in the end of the day the people with the most education and training weren’t any better than regular people. People with a lot of education can learn to say the right thing better than other people but it is pretty hard to demonstrate that they are better people.

Aristotle, as the world’s greatest teacher was hired by Philip, King of Macedonia to train his son. His son’s name was Alexander the Great and he was certainly extremely successful but not many people can make the case that he was a good person. In fact he was a standard conqueror- plundering the whole world with his powerful armies.

And long before Aristotle people knew that simple training wasn’t good enough.

Two groups of philosophers challenged Aristotle. They were talked about in the NT very specifically.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Acts 17:16-18

But the time of the NT it seems that these 2 groups of philosophers had become quite dominant. They argued with each other because they came to opposite solutions.

#2. The Epicureans: If It Feels Good- Do It

The Epicureans came to the conclusion that Aristotle was just trying to impose his values on everyone else. Aristotle loved nothing more than philosophy and so the highest good- was people doing philosophy.

I don't know how many philosophers you know- but actually most people find them to be as dull as mud. They argue about the tiniest points when everyone else knows that these arguments don't make any difference.

The Epicureans decided that making everyone into a philosopher would turn the world into a living hell for the rest of mankind.

What about those people who would rather go fishing?

What about those people who would rather play sports?

What about those people who would rather play music?

You can't tell me, the Epicureans said, that that's all bad and only philosophy is good. The argument seems pretty airtight.

As long as what we do doesn't hurt anyone else- why should anyone care?

What is the problem with that argument? Two things-

1. Some bad behavior just looks evil even if it doesn't hurt anyone else. The big problem for that culture- just like today was alcohol. Getting really drunk is the most fun anyone can have. But anyone looking at a drunk knows that it is pathetic- even if the drunk is the happiest person on earth.

2. Bad behavior doesn't stay in a nice little box. It does hurt other people. When you see a drunk at a party- you can just walk away and look down on them- but that drunk is someone's father/mother, brother/sister, husband/wife, son/daughter. Do you think that they aren't in pain when they see the person they love?

The Epicureans didn't care- they were the party philosophers. They were known by their love of alcohol.

That of course didn't look any better 2000 years ago than it does today and it was the Stoics who answered back with a different response.

Their answer was-

-we agree that training doesn't solve the problem

-but the Epicurean idea- "if it feels good- do it" is even worse

-we know that there is right behavior so-

#3. The Stoics: Just Do It

They disagreed and claimed that how you feel didn't matter- you just have to decide to be good. If something was right you should do it- if it was wrong you shouldn't do it.

It is pretty hard to argue with a Stoic. You could argue about what might be a good thing or not- but once everyone agreed, for example, that tormenting your sibling is bad- then it simply shouldn't be done. This led to a very obvious conclusion-

If you didn't do a good thing that you were supposed to do- or conversely if you did a bad thing- you were simply a failure.

Stoicism was the perfect religion for gladiators. Everyone agreed that a gladiator should be valiant in combat and when it was time to die- they should die with dignity. In fact the highest goal of the Stoic was to die with dignity.

The problem was- it is a very hard religion to live by. It is easy to say the right things but doing them is not the same as saying them.

It was in a world where these arguments were going on that the NT church lived and it is in response to this that Paul writes to the church in Corinth.

So what is Paul's answer to the problem?

Listen to what he tells them-

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 2 Corinthians 1:8

#1. It Is Tough- We Can't Do It Alone

Don't try to pretend you are better than you are.

Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. 2 Corinthians 1:9-10

#2. We Can't Do It Alone But God Promises To Help Us

Like today, the average person in the NT times did not think God really cared for average people. Paul came with an amazing message- God does care and He will help us. He doesn't promise an easy ride- but God cares. That's a very big difference between how the Greek philosophers understood how things work and how the NT describes how things work.

But there is another very big difference. Paul carries on-

On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

#3. We Are To Work As A Team

The Christian journey is a team journey. We are to support and pray for each other as we press on to live doing the right thing.

That's a huge bonus. Rather than simply living and dying as a lonely hero- we encourage each other to do right.

Doing the right thing is never easy- but at least with God behind us and His people around us- we really can live by the standards of the Kingdom of God.