

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (15-10-1995 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Cleave to the Lord with all your heart
Acts 11:1-24

Introduction

The Gospel arrived at Antioch. Antioch was where the disciples were first called Christians. It was the third city of the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria. By ancient standards it was a very large city, with a population of half a million. It was a place where merchants, traders and travellers from East and West met. It was the centre of trade, and many caravans passed through. All races, all types, all occupations were found in this pleasure-loving city, with its theatres, arenas, racecourses, betting shops and nightclubs. It was beautiful, busy and frivolous.

Eventually a church was founded there. The number of people in it is unknown and they are unnamed, many of them fleeing from persecution in Jerusalem. How often the Christian church has thrived under persecution and gone to sleep when the world is indifferent. For example, Moscow Baptist church under communism – 5000 members, 6 services per week but still needed more, communion three times, each service packed out, and 3 or more sermons preached at a time, 14 daughter churches, full of spiritual life and zeal.

The Christians at Antioch were so zealous and were always talking about Christ. That is how they earned themselves the name “Christ’s Ones”. An important step in the process was the Christians taking the initiative in reaching out to the Gentiles. Previously they had received Gentiles (e.g. Cornelius), but now without invitation they went out and preached the Gospel, and so formed the first Gentile church. Later it became the centre from which further missionary work developed. Paul’s three great missionary journeys started from there. **The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord** (Acts 11:21).

The Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to investigate, and when he saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad. He saw tremendous proof that the Gospel was the power of God unto salvation. There were outstanding transformations of character. Idolatry and magic were widely practiced; morally it was a den of iniquity. But by the grace of God, false religion was forsaken, magical practices were abandoned, godless and immoral living was forsaken when people believed and turned to the Lord. There was a definite break with the old life, separation from the world, forsaking of sin, turning to the Lord. The Saviour had saved them from sin, old life, darkness, Satan and the world, and they were forgiven for their past sins.

No wonder Barnabas was glad. These people had once been without hope, and now they were in the family of God, faces heavenward, feet on the paths of righteousness, hearts and lives changed, peace with God. **He encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts** (Acts 11:23 NIV). **He exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord** (A.V). We are going to look at this phrase more carefully to examine what it means to cleave to the Lord, why it needs to be stressed, and how it can be carried out.

What does it mean to cleave to the Lord with all the heart?

It means to be thoroughly, personally and unreservedly committed to the Lord. Not 50%, or 90%, but 100% committed to the Lord. And if every Christian were that, what a different state the Christian church would be in today.

Continue closely with the Lord, stick fast to the Lord, and persevere in your relationship with the Lord. All Christian duties are summed up here. God first in every relationship, choice, decision, in conduct and whole tenor of life. All we do is to be done with purpose of heart – determination, from the centre of the personality, deliberately and purposefully and with resolution. Not something we drift into or casually arrive at.

Not God first when it is convenient, when it doesn't upset our programme or doesn't offend or upset someone else, or attract criticism or displeasure. We must be prepared to make sacrifices and put ourselves out.

This exhortation went out to everyone, with no exceptions: to those beginning their Christian lives who faced many perils ahead; to those in middle age who might have left their first love, and grown slack and easy going; to those in old age who, having survived the middle years, may yet fail to end well. "Few men end well" (Bonar). No age group is excepted. This exhortation is for everyone.

The Bible constantly underlines that people of God should cleave to the Lord with all their heart. This advice was constantly given to new churches, and when Paul Barnabas went back to visit churches, they did so to strengthen them and exhort them to continue in their faith (Acts 14:22). This was the motive behind the second missionary journey. **Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."** (Acts 15:36).

The epistles were written to urge church members to cleave to the Lord with all their hearts. **Stand firm** (Galatians 5:1). **Hold on** (Hebrews 3:6). **Hold firmly to the faith** (Hebrews 4:14). **Beware of being led astray** (2 Peter 3:17). **Hold unswervingly to the hope** (Hebrews 10:23). We find echoes of the Old Testament in these exhortations. **My feet have closely followed his steps; I have kept to his way without turning aside** (Job 23:11). **King Josiah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in all the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left** (2 Kings 22:2).

Needless to say, only those who have cleaved to the Lord have ever done anything for God and not been overcome by the world. Others may have done well for themselves and their families and their work, but precious little for the Kingdom. In the Christian life we never stand still for long. If we are not progressing, then we are regressing; waxing or waning; growing or decaying. Like riding a bike, if you are not moving forward, you are about to fall off. "Refuse to be average" (A.W.Tozer).

Why should this exhortation be heeded?

We need to heed this truth because of the teaching of Scripture, the state of the church, the state of the country, and the state of our own hearts. The Bible not only gives exhortations, but concrete examples of those who failed to cleave to the Lord with all their heart. King Uzziah of Judah did what was right in the sight of the Lord. He sought God, and he was marvellously helped until he was strong. Then his heart was lifted up with pride, and the result was disaster (2 Chronicles 26:16).

Have we not seen this in individuals known to us? The early years they showed such promise and progress. Then their hearts were lifted because of good job, money, position, pride, and self-importance. They may have remained connected to the church, but they were not the people they once were. Men in the ministry – at the start they were prepared to spend and be spent, prayerful, zealous, committed. Then there was a change, and in an attempt to please all, they become compromised, closed their mouths in guilty silence, or became puffed up with pride, neglectful of prayer, and preaching loses its potency, because the man is too concerned with the opinion of others.

The state of the church today, including evangelical churches, demonstrates a decline in doctrinal and spiritual standards. Fewer churches have faithful Gospel ministry, Bible teaching ministry, few are bursting with spiritual life, few have 100% commitment from members. There is an atmosphere around to which we all contribute, and it can have a harmful effect. We all need to cleave to the Lord as individuals, and this will spread into our church life.

The state of the world today is another reason why we need to cleave to the Lord with all our heart. We must not allow the godless, secular world to encroach on our lives with its standards and values and denials. Trying to maintain a Christian witness in many places and homes is extremely difficult, but vital.

Then think of your own heart. Why is it we fail so much – when the tongue is silent, when we do not attempt to witness and serve the Lord, when we are cowed by the world, and make up excuses and reasons? The real reason is that we do not take seriously this injunction to cleave to the Lord with the purpose of God. When we think of the preciousness of souls and the shortness of time, what are we doing for God, how much more could we be doing for God, if only we were cleaving to Him?

There are other reasons for remembering this injunction. The Devil himself is very subtle in ensuring we forget him. But we are in a battle against him, and so we very much need God's help and strength and presence. One day we will all go before the judgement seat of Christ for an assessment of our faithfulness and service. Life for all of us is ebbing away fast, and the quality of our faith will soon be tested. How often do we make decisions, conduct our lives, form opinions in the light of how they will appear when we see Him face to face?

There are very solid reasons why we should cleave to the Lord with all our heart. Beware of cooling down. Beware of thinking we can be too earnest for the Lord or do too much or be too committed. Never mind reproach and contempt of others – even of fellow Christians. The praise and approval of God is all that matters in the long run. How will our lives, decisions and standards look when we render up our accounts when we see Him face to face on the last day?

How do we cleave to the Lord with all our heart?

Can we, in this secular age when there are so few of us and we are swimming against the tide, avoid spiritual decline? Can we cleave to the Lord with purpose of heart? Remember that God is at work in our lives. His great purpose is that we should conform to the image of His Son. We were predestined for that. **For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son** (Romans 8:29). **For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do** (Ephesians 2:10).

But God works through means. **Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose** (Philippians 2:12,13). Work out what God works in. God's provision is adequate. Christ lives within. We can do all things in union with Him who keeps on pouring His strength into us.

Consider our ways and situation in lives. Where are we at spiritually? Are we going through the motions on the outside, but inwardly cold, lukewarm, distant? Or is our supreme concern to cleave to the Lord with purpose of heart? This should be our aim and determination and longing above all else. Unless we have this clear aim and direction, we are not going very far. Are we determined for this and prepared to make any sacrifice and deny self and put self out whatever the cost? There are no short cuts or instant secrets.

Make adequate time to be alone with God and to get to know Him. We can always find time for the things we want to do. A definite time needs to be fenced off and carefully kept. Ask Him to feed you with His Word through promises and warnings. Take time to pray over your life with the Lord in all aspects with Him. Seek His guidance about all decisions, strength for all duties. Daily consecrate your life to the Lord, saying, here is my life, talents, possessions, opportunities, heart, will mind etc.

Be aware of anything that is coming between you and the Lord and get it put right at once. A tender conscience makes for a closer walk. Prepare to make adjustments in life and routine and habits to avoid anything which spoils fellowship with the Lord or causes Him to be less important and precious to you.

Be very watchful to keep out of life anything that would take over the Lord's place as number one in the life, e.g. another person, a lesser loyalty, church, interest, opinions of others. Make the most of Christian fellowship. What company do we keep? Nothing affects us more. It is so easy to be taken over by the ways and outlook of the people we mix with. Make friends with God's children. And build one another up and encourage one another in spiritual things. Idle chatter, boasting, gossiping, intruding self is not our aim. Godly conversation is of immense value to enable us to cleave to the Lord. Archbishop Ussher used to say, "A word about Christ before we part."

Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honoured his name (Malachi 3:16). Keep your eyes open to God's chastening. When things go contrary to us, times of adversity, we may

get a sense that we are being dealt with, being pulled up, caused to think. Is God saying something to us? Intervening in our lives? There must be a reason. Ask God about it. He can revive. We are not beyond recovery. **Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon** (Isaiah 55:7).