

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Hebrews #34
January 25, 2015

Sermon Summary #34

Living by Faith in the Greater Wealth of Christ Hebrews 11:23-28

I want to portray for you two similar scenarios, one that is applicable to men and the other to women.

Men, envision yourself in a small accountability group with three others, one of whom is struggling with what can only be called a sexual addiction. He has acknowledged the problem, appears to be broken and repentant, and wants to change. But he has a long history with pornography, sexual promiscuity, and time and money spent at so-called “Gentlemen’s Clubs” (a pathetically inaccurate name given to strip clubs; “gentlemen” do not go to “Gentlemen’s Clubs”).

Ladies, you likewise meet regularly with a small group of Christian women, one of whom is especially enslaved to issues relating to body image. She is borderline anorexic, spends excessive amounts of money on the most fashionable and expensive clothing, and admits that her self-image is largely dependent on how men respond to her. She obsessively fears their rejection and has on several occasions given in to their requests for sexual intimacy.

What would you say to each of these individuals? Of course, problems such as this are complex and I don’t want to sound as if I’m reducing their struggles to just one or even two factors. There are often physiological as well as psychological and spiritual components that contribute to their sinful behavior. That being said, what strategy would you employ when they come to you for help? What would you say to encourage and empower them to find victory over the temptations that they regularly face?

Needless to say, I could have chosen any number of sinful struggles and moral issues to illustrate my point. For some it might be a habit of lying to impress others and to win their approval. Others hide behind a façade of shyness because they fear rejection and falling short of people’s expectations. Still more live in a paralyzing fear of poverty and have developed a lifestyle of stinginess and the almost complete absence of generosity. Many are simply selfish. Everything in life must be principally about them and they take great offense when the focus of conversation or the efforts of other people are directed elsewhere. The list of sinful struggles could go on endlessly with any number of behavioral and mental attitudes involved.

My concern is actually quite simple. ***How do you motivate others as well as yourself to forsake sin and pursue holiness?*** How do you empower a person to say “No” to the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and “Yes” to the commandments of God in Scripture? What works best and most effectively to help a person overcome fleshly addictions and give themselves wholeheartedly to a life that honors Christ?

You know as well as I do what the standard answers have been. They can typically be reduced to a handful of strategies.

“Don’t engage in that sort of behavior or you’ll get caught one of these days and your reputation will be ruined forever.”

“Don’t go to places like that or people will see you and you’ll lose all opportunity for promotion at work.”

“Stop engaging in sexual immorality or you’ll eventually catch a disease that might end up taking your life.”

“Have you taken a long, hard look at what you’re doing? It’s so ugly and repulsive.”

“If you don’t change your ways your spouse may divorce you. Is that what you want? Are you sure it’s worth it to risk losing your family and alienating your children?”

“I know someone who walked down the same pathway as you’re on and they ended up losing every friend they had. Last I heard they died all alone, with no one around to care for them or comfort them.”

You know as well as I do that each of these warnings is true. They don’t always come about the way you might think. In fact, some people appear to succeed quite well in their sinful lifestyle. But the question for us today is this: For those who know better and long to live a life that pleases God and enables them to flourish and grow spiritually, what is the most effective way to motivate them to obey God and his Word?

Jason and Ulysses

Let me illustrate my point. I’ve told this story dozens of times at churches and conferences around the world and I’ve included it in several of my books, so if you’ve heard it before just bear with me today for the sake of those who haven’t. You and I need to hear it again as it summarizes the essence of what we see in the life of Moses in our passage. Don’t be put off by the fact that it comes from Greek mythology. The point it makes is thoroughly biblical.

The story concerns two men. The first is Odysseus, also known as **Ulysses**. Ulysses was a devoted husband to his wife, **Penelope**, adored his son, and agonized at leaving his home of **Ithaca**. But he was also a Greek, and duty called.

Paris, the prince of Troy, had stolen away **Helen**, the woman “whose face launched a thousand ships.” She was the wife of **Menelaus**, the King of Greece. He, together with his brother **Agamemnon**, Ulysses, and a mighty Greek army undertook the daunting task of recapturing her and restoring dignity to their beloved land.

To make a long story short, hidden in the belly of a huge Trojan horse, Ulysses and his men gained access to the city, slaughtered its inhabitants, and rescued the captive Helen. But the return voyage to Ithaca, which lasted nearly a decade, would prove to be far more challenging.

People are intrigued by Ulysses’ encounter with the witch Circe and his careful navigation between the treacherous Scylla and Charybdis. And who can forget his blinding of the Cyclops Polyphemus, son of Poseidon, god of the seas?

My fascination, however, has always been with the infamous **Sirens**. The Sirens were, for lack of a better way of describing them, **demonic cannibals** who disguised themselves as beautiful women. Countless were the unwitting sailors who, on passing by their island, succumbed to the outward beauty of the Sirens and their seductively irresistible songs. Once lured close to shore, their boats crashed on the hidden rocks lurking beneath the surface of the sea. The Sirens wasted little time in savagely consuming their flesh.

Ulysses had been repeatedly warned about the Sirens and their lethal hypocrisy. Upon reaching their island, he ordered his crew to put wax in their ears lest they be lured to their ultimate demise. He commanded them to look neither to the left nor right but to row for their very lives. Ulysses had other plans for himself. He instructed his men to strap him to the mast of the ship, leaving his ears unplugged. “I want to hear their song. No matter what I say or do, don’t untie me until we are safely at a distance from the island.”

The songs of the Sirens were more than Ulysses’ otherwise strong will could resist. He was utterly seduced by their sound and mesmerized by the promise of immediate gratification. One Siren even took on the form of Penelope, Ulysses’ wife, seeking to lure him closer on the delusion that he had finally arrived home. ***Were it not for the ropes that held him tightly to the mast, Ulysses would have succumbed to their invitation.*** Although his hands were restrained, his heart was captivated by their beauty. Although his soul said “Yes”, the ropes prevented his indulgence. ***His “No” was not the fruit of a spontaneous revulsion but the product of an external shackle.***

Ulysses’ encounter with the Sirens, together with his strategy for resisting their appeal, is all too similar to the way many Christians try to live as followers of Jesus Christ. Like him, their hearts pant for what Hebrews 11:25 refers to as “the fleeting pleasures of sin.” Their wills are no match for the magnetic power of sensual indulgence.

Although they understand what is at stake, they struggle through life saying No to sin, not because their souls are ill-disposed to evil but because their hands have been shackled by the laws and rules imposed by an oppressive religious atmosphere. It is the extra-biblical taboo that comes thundering from a legalistic pulpit or a long-standing denominational prohibition that accounts for their external complicity. ***Their obedience is not the glad product of a transformed nature but a reluctant conformity born of fear and shame.***

I have no desire to live that way. Neither do you, I suspect. So, is your "obedience" the expression of your deepest heart-felt joy? Is it the product of a passion that spontaneously and urgently springs from the depths of your being? Or are you firmly bound to the mast of religious expectations, all the while yearning for the opposite of what you actually do? ***What is the most effective scheme for confronting the sinful sounds of Sirens?***

Jason, like Ulysses, was himself a character of ancient mythology, perhaps best known for his pursuit of the famous Golden Fleece. Again, like Ulysses, he faced the temptation posed by the seductive sounds of the Sirens. But his solution was of a different sort. Jason brought with him on the treacherous journey a man named **Orpheus**, the son of Oeager. Orpheus was a musician of incomparable talent, especially on the lyre and flute. When his music filled the air it had an enchanting effect on all who heard. There was not a lovelier or more melodious sound in all the ancient world.

When it came time, Jason declined to plug the ears of his crew. Neither did he strap himself to the mast to restrain his otherwise lustful yearning for whatever pleasures the Sirens might offer. But this was not the reckless decision of an arrogant heart. Jason had no illusions about the strength of his will or his capacity to be deceived. He was no less determined than Ulysses to resist the temptations of the Sirens. But he chose a different strategy.

He ordered Orpheus to play his most beautiful and alluring songs. The Sirens didn't stand a chance! Notwithstanding their collective allure, Jason and his men paid no heed to the Sirens. They were not in the least inclined to succumb. Why? Was it that the Sirens had ceased to sing? Was it that they had lost their capacity to entice the human heart? Not at all.

Jason and his men said No because they were captivated by a transcendent sound. The music of Orpheus was of an altogether different and exalted nature. Jason and his men said No to the sounds of the Sirens because they had heard something far more sublime. They had tasted something far sweeter. They had encountered something far more noble.

Here's my point. Ulysses may have survived the sounds of Sirens. But only Jason triumphed over them. Yes, both men "obeyed" (in a manner of speaking). Neither succumbed. Neither indulged his desires. Both men escaped the danger at hand. But only one was changed.

The vice-grip the pleasure of sin exerts on the human soul will be broken only by trusting God's promise of superior pleasure in knowing Jesus. The only way to conquer one pleasure is with another, greater and more pleasing pleasure. Whether it's the sound of Sirens in ancient mythology or the all-too-real appeal of contemporary society, the principle is the same. ***Our only hope is in maximizing our pleasure in God.***

These are the options. Like Ulysses, you can continue to fight against the restrictive influence of religious ropes and the binding power of fear, reprisal, and guilt, while your heart persists in yearning for what your hand is denied, or, like Jason, you can shout a spontaneous and heartfelt "No!" to the sounds of Sirens because you've heard a sweeter sound! Either you devote your time and energy to demonstrate the ugliness and futility of sin and the world, hoping that such will enable your heart to say No to it as unworthy of your affection, or you demonstrate the beauty and splendor of all that God is for you in Jesus and become happily and joyfully enticed by a rival affection.

There are, I believe, only **two kinds of Christians**: those **driven** by fear and uncertainty, on the one hand, and those **drawn** by fascination and joy on the other. The former motivate themselves to "obey" with the constant reminder of the dreadful consequences of failure or the shameful humiliation of "getting caught". It is more the terrifying prospect of public exposure than the allure of heavenly joy that accounts for how they live.

The others aren't immune to the promptings of the flesh. They know how appealing the world can be. But their hearts are energized by the incomparable attraction of divine beauty. Their wills are empowered not by the

expectations of ecclesiastical authorities but by the enjoyment that flows from having encountered the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

To put it simply, *the only way to liberate the heart from servitude to the passing pleasure of sin is by cultivating a passion for the joy and delight of beholding the beauty of Jesus*. We must solidify in our souls the unshakeable confidence that we were fashioned by God for nothing less. What elevates the human soul and empowers it to live in the fullness of its created purpose is not religious intimidation or new rules or an anxiety induced by spiritual scoldings. It is faith in the promise that the enjoyment sin brings is fleeting and futile but at God's right hand, and in the presence of his radiant glory, are pleasures evermore (Ps. 16:11).

The Example of Moses

Now let's turn our attention back to Hebrews 11 and the experience of Moses and take note of how he confronted temptation in much the same way that Jason did.

There are *four* references to "faith" in this account of Moses. These four expressions or displays of faith cover a period of approximately eighty years from the time of Moses' birth to the time of the Exodus when he led the people out of Egypt. Today we will focus on only one of the four. But let me briefly mention the other three.

The first is in v. 23 and concerns his parents, Amram and Jochebed, and their courageous decision to defy the edict or decree of Pharaoh. You may recall from Exodus 1:22 that he ordered that every son "born to the Hebrews" should be "cast into the Nile" river, but they were to let the female infants live.

The clear implication that Moses' parents obviously understood was that if they were to disobey the king and preserve their infant son's life they were putting their own lives at risk. If discovered, they would undoubtedly have been killed. In other words, the mother and father of Moses could make one of two choices: kill their son as the king had ordered and in doing so save themselves, or save their son and put their own lives at risk. They chose the latter and they did it "by faith" (v. 23a).

The second of the four expressions of faith is found in vv. 24-26 and is our main concern today. I'll return to it shortly.

The third instance of faith is mentioned in v. 27 and pertains to what Moses did in leading the people out of Egypt in the Exodus. The fourth and final example of faith is in v. 28 and concerns the keeping of the Passover. You will recall that Moses was instructed by God to kill an unblemished lamb and to sprinkle its blood on the doorposts of each Israelite home. When the "Destroyer" or what some refer to as the "angel of death" came through the streets of Egypt, only the firstborn of the Egyptians would die. When God saw the blood of the lamb on the doorpost of the Israelite homes he promised to "pass over" them.

Today I want us to focus on what we read in vv. 24-26. There is, in my opinion, no better example of the approach to Christian living that I've been describing than what we read in these three verses.

Living by Faith in the Greater Wealth of Christ

It was by faith that Moses made a critical decision: he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter (Heb. 11:24). Let me say just a brief word about who this woman may have been, because it sheds considerable light on the nature of Moses' choice.

Many argue that this woman was probably just one of the many daughters of Pharaoh whom he fathered through one of his several concubines. But there is good reason to believe that the Pharaoh or "king" mentioned here was Thutmose I. If so, his "daughter" may well have been the famous Hatshepsut who herself ruled as Pharaoh at a later time. If this is the case, Moses would have been a direct heir to the throne of Egypt! Needless to say, ***his decision to renounce his relationship to Pharaoh's daughter was the turning of his back on immeasurable and unspeakable power and glory.***

Consider what was involved in remaining the son of Pharaoh's daughter and perhaps even ascending to the throne of Egypt itself. In v. 26 he is described as having turned his back on **"the treasures of Egypt."** We can only vaguely imagine what this entailed: money without limit, authority over tens of thousands of men and women, fame, military power, access to the best of food and drink, sexual pleasures beyond anything we can envision, everyone bowing in his presence and quick to obey his every word and wish. Egypt was the most powerful and wealthy nation in the world at that time and it was all in Moses' hand for the taking. And he turned it down. He threw it away.

Notice how the author of Hebrews describes what happened. Moses looked at "the fleeting (passing, temporary) pleasures of sin" and chose instead "to be mistreated with the people of God (v. 25). ***This incredible decision didn't occur in a vacuum.*** Moses didn't just wake up one morning and say to himself: "Egypt stinks. Money is worthless. Sex is boring. Power is dumb. Fame is overblown." No, something happened that recast Moses' vision and altered his evaluation of worldly pleasures and treasures.

The key is stated in Hebrews 11:26 where we read that he considered 'the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.'

What exactly happened to Moses? It would appear that Moses took a long, hard, honest look at all that life in Egypt as Pharaoh's daughter offered him. He was neither naïve nor ignorant. He knew exactly what lay ahead for him, were he to want it. Again, we can only guess at what this involved. Try to imagine the life that is available to Bill Gates and Rupert Murdoch and Mark Zuckerberg and President Obama and Vladimir Putin and put them all in a bundle. Collectively, cumulatively, that is something along the lines of what Moses had within his reach. As noted, it is called, in v. 26, the "treasures" of Egypt. Yet Moses said "No!" Wow! He chose the path of pain and sacrifice and endurance and reproach instead. How did he do it? How can *we* do it?

Before I answer that question, we need to determine what is meant by the phrase, ***"the reproach of Christ"*** (v. 26). There are three possible ways of interpreting this.

(1) The word here translated "Christ" (which means "anointed one") was also applied in the OT to the people of God collectively or corporately (see Ps. 89:50-51; 105:15; Hab. 3:13). Thus the reproach of "Christ" may mean the "suffering endured by ***God's people, Israel.***"

(2) Others would translate this phrase, "a Christ-like reproach." In other words, it refers to reproach of like nature to that which Jesus would himself endure when he came to this earth. Thus we might render it: "he considered 'Christ-like' reproach" greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt.

(3) But it may also be that Moses knew of the coming Messiah, at least in some measure. He knew that God would send a deliverer who would take away the sins of the people. He knew that the sacrificial lamb of the Passover was a foreshadowing of the true sacrificial Lamb of God who by his shedding of blood would finally and forever take away sin. How much he knew, we can't be sure. How clearly he saw it, we don't know. We do know that years later when he wrote of this coming one, he said in Deuteronomy 18:15 – "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers – it is to him you shall listen."

We return now to the question of how Moses was able to make this kind of momentous decision. Quite simply, Moses didn't simply look at the "treasures" of Egypt and suddenly find them repelling and repulsive. There was no magical alteration in their appeal. Indeed, according to v. 25 there was great "pleasure" to be found in all they offered. ***So how did the pleasures and treasures of Egypt lose their grip on Moses' heart?*** I could as readily ask: "How will the pleasures and treasures of sinful self-indulgence in Oklahoma City lose their grip on *your* heart?" It's really simpler than you might think.

Moses looked at the reproach, i.e., the suffering and stigma, that comes with identifying with God's people and considered it ***"greater wealth"*** than anything Egypt could produce. He looked at the glitter, the grandeur, the thrill of all that Egypt had to offer (and it was a lot!) and ***in view of what he saw in the promised reward*** (and that's the key), he said: "Are you kidding me? Is *that* the best you can do? You're going to have to make a better offer than that. What do you think I am: stupid or something?" ***It was from his desire for a greater pleasure that he said No to a lesser pleasure.***

He didn't disregard his desires or repent of them or deny they existed. He made a careful, spiritually informed evaluation of what Egypt offered versus what God offered and came to the conclusion that the latter would prove eminently and eternally more satisfying to his soul. "Why would I want pleasures that are *fleeting*," he must have said, "when I can have *pleasures* that last *forever*" (Ps. 16:11)! He set his sight and his faith on the promised **reward** of God's future blessing and grace and found the power to say "No" to the allure of Egypt and its treasures.

Conclusion

Be certain that you understand what this means for you today. Moses felt the magnetic appeal of the pleasures of sin that Egypt offered to him. He was keenly aware of the pull, the tug, the draw that exerted itself on his soul. He could feel himself being drawn into the web of Egyptian life and its sinful pleasures. It felt good. It made promises to him of fleshly and sensual satisfaction. In his own way Moses had heard the sounds of Sirens. In his own way he experienced the same pressures and power of temptation that Jason faced, the same pressures and power of temptation that you and I face today. And he looked it all squarely in the face and said, "No, I'm going with God. I prefer the riches of the spiritual reward that awaits all who walk in the path of holiness."

Let me tell you something about your soul, your heart, your spirit, yes and even your body. ***You weren't created for the passing pleasures of this world. You were created and designed by God to enjoy to the max a happiness and joy and deep soul satisfaction that is more enduring and more delightful and more exciting than anything this world's passing pleasures can give you.*** If you don't believe that, you've been deceived. The world is lying to you, just as it lied to Moses. But he fought back against that destructive deception by putting his faith in the promises of all that God would be for him in Jesus.

This world, as you know, has one distinct advantage. It promises to provide you with pleasure and satisfaction ***right now*** and it has seemingly limitless goods and services and gadgets and commodities ready and available for you to seize at any moment. Whether it's pornography at the click of a mouse or that promotion at work that can only come at the expense of truth and purity or a quick and secretive affair or the buzz of drugs and alcohol, it's all there for the taking. But know this: ***the passing pleasures of this world will not satisfy you; they will steal from you. They will not thrill you; they will kill you.***

But don't misunderstand the alternative that Christianity offers to you. When you read in Psalm 16:11 that there is "fullness of joy" in God's presence and "pleasures forevermore" at his right hand, don't think that what is being offered is merely a spiritual counterpart to the material goods the world offers. When you read in Hebrews 11 about the "greater wealth" in Christ and the promised "reward", don't think that this is simply about changing your bad habits or making you appear socially acceptable. ***This is all about experiencing now and forevermore the most glorious, most beautiful and most thrilling satisfaction that the human soul can ever hope to find.***

If you sincerely desire to find the power to say No to the passing pleasures of sin in your world, immerse your heart and soul and mind and spirit in the surpassing, eternal, always satisfying pleasures of knowing Christ and loving Christ and following Christ. ***The power to resist the allure of a lesser pleasure comes from the joy of having tasted a greater one.*** Set your sights on the reward of "fullness of joy" and "pleasures evermore" that are found only in his presence and you will be empowered and energized to resist the allure of the "treasures of Egypt" and to say No to the "sounds of Sirens"!