

Sermon: Drifting from God – January 24, 2016 (Scripture is from the ESV)

Location: New Philadelphia Church, Sillim Campus – 1:15pm service

Introduction

Back when I was in college at Virginia Tech I heard many different sermons from attending church on Sundays and fellowship gatherings during the week. I can't remember most of the sermons from back then, but there was one sermon that stood out to me. One of the leaders at my church guest spoke one Sunday and he preached a message titled, "Drifting." (표류하다). His message was based off of Hebrews 2:1, which reads...

SLIDE 1

Hebrews 2:1 – Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

This leader happened to be a very melancholy person. I remember him asking the church, "Have you ever felt like you're drifting from God? Do you ever feel like you're not as close with Him as you were before?" These were great questions and a great subject to discuss, but sadly it became clear in the message that he himself was struggling with drifting from God and hadn't figured out a clear solution of getting back. After that message I remember a number of people saying in a very melancholy way, "I think I'm drifting too." It turned out his message was one that many of the college students could relate to. But because there wasn't a clear solution, many of the students ended up just consoling each other rather than finding their way back to a close relationship with God.

Today I'm going to preach on the same subject, because drifting is indeed something that many Christians struggle with at some point in their relationship with God. Few Christians ever intentionally distance themselves from God. Instead, just like a boat floating away at sea, after some time Christians wake up and realize they're not as close to God as they once were. Unknowingly, they've drifted away.

Today I'm going to explain the steps we need to take to get back close with God if we do end up drifting. The title of the message today is, "Drifting from God."

Pray

Satan's Scheme

Please open your Bibles to 2Corinthians 11:3. We're going to look at one of Satan's chief objectives in attacking God's people...

SLIDE 2

2Corinthians 11:3 – But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

Ever since Adam and Eve were created, Satan's chief objective has been to lead God's people away from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

Whenever someone gets a revelation of God and accepts Him into their heart, their gaze and the focus of their life becomes directed to Him. The more we are focused on Him, the closer we become to Him. The more our lives are directly connected to Him, the quicker we become like Him, in love, joy, and peace.

Satan's objective is to lead us astray from this straight path. Satan wants to dilute the love, joy, and peace we are receiving from God and mix it with things of this world and even with sin. Satan wants to lead us away from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. So how does he do this?

Picture of Person Fully Focused on God

For new Christians it can be easy to grow quickly with God. The revelation of Jesus Christ's love and sacrifice for us on the Cross is amazing. This revelation of grace release gratefulness, joy, and adoration. For new Christians they often see the world around them in a new light. Fellow believers are always so encouraging. And new believers have greater patience and compassion for those who do not believe in the Lord. These new believers have tasted and seen the Lord is good and all they want is more of Him.

But soon Satan begins to try and do his usual tricks to hinder the devotion of the new believer. Satan will try and push pride or religion on the new believer to hinder the believer's growth. Whereas at first the new believer had been directly connected to God with his face fully set on the Lord, now Satan is trying to get the new believer to also focus on the praise of man. Soon obedience is no longer done fully out of love for God, but also at of the love of the praise of man. At first the believer just wants God's praise and that is all. But soon that nice feeling of the praise of man starts to seep in. If the new believer isn't careful, soon the believer will only be wanting the praise of man, with his gaze fully turned away from God.

For other new believers they receive new identities in Christ like "Forgiven" and "New Creation," but they don't go beyond these identities. Instead they fall back to their own talents and giftings. A musically talented new believer may soon inherit the identity of "Praise team member." If this believer's identity gets more wrapped up in gifting than in their true identity in Christ, then soon the believer will become limited in his ability to worship God. If this believer is suddenly no longer able to serve on the praise team, then there is no way for the believer to worship God. The believer will feel worthless and distant from God.

Satan wants us to find our identity in the things here on earth: our jobs, our leadership positions, and our talents and giftings. **Rather than keeping our gaze fixed on God and receiving our identity and purpose through Him, instead we will begin looking to other places for identity and purpose.** Our gaze becomes less and less direct to Him. And for some they turn completely from Him.

For older believers, Satan will try to disconnect the older believer from the power of God. Satan will try and push routine upon the older believer. Rather than relying on grace and the power of God's Spirit, the older believer may begin just relying on methods. Satan will try and fill the older believer's schedule so full with different things that the older believer will gradually stop praying as often and instead keep just relying on experience. Soon the older believer will become powerless, no longer moving in the power of God's love. And soon discouragement, fatigue, and jadedness can seep in. For such older believers they may want to stop serving completely. They just want some time to rest and to be stationary. It's not that the Holy Spirit is telling them to rest, but rather it is the jadedness and fatigue that is crying out for them to pull back.

What we need to understand is that we are always becoming what we are focusing on. That means if you're focusing on God then you are drawing closer to Him and becoming more like Him. But if you are focusing on worldly things, then you are drawing closer to those things and becoming more like them. And even if you try and just remain stationary and not focus

on anything, the truth is you're focusing on yourself, and so even then you're drifting away from God. God must remain our focus, always!

I want to be clear about this: **Drifting is not meant to be a part of a Christian's growth with God.** It is not God's perfect will that His people drift away from Him from time to time. It is not God's perfect will that His people sin here and there. No loving father would ever want his son or daughter to become distant now and then or to dabble in sin. God does not empathize with drifters. God does not pad such melancholy believers on the back and say, "It must be hard feeling distant from me. Don't worry, you'll find me again later on in life." One of God's names is Immanuel, which means "God With Us." Hebrews 13:5 reads, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake." God never drifts from us. And even when we feel like we've drifted away, He is still near. We just have to wake up.

So how do we wake up? What is the solution for those who are drifting? It can be found in Revelation 2:4-5. Let's turn there together. This passage is a letter to the church of Ephesus. They are praised for their patient endurance in serving God. But then God has these words of warning against them...

SLIDE 3

Revelation 2:4-5 – But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

SLIDE 4

In this passage God is addressing a church that has been drifting. This is a church that has been faithful in terms of works, but has become hollow in terms of their heart. Their focus was once fully on God, but as time passed their focus turned to their works and their worldly identities. And so God is calling them back. God is calling out for them to wake up and return to Him. And in these two verses God gives three key steps for bring them back from drifting. **The three key steps are: Remember, repent, and act.**

Remember, repent, and act. If at any time in our life we feel ourselves drifting from God or even from a loved one here on earth, these are three things we must do: remember, repent, and act. And they must be done in that specific order.

Remembering

I want to first speak to you all about **remembering**. My last two messages here at Sillim I actually spoke on this exact subject. In the message "Carrying God's Promises" my last point was how we need to treasure the signs God gives us regarding His promises for us. Remember Hebrews 2:1 how it says...

Hebrews 2:1 – Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

If we can treasure the signs God has given us, then we won't drift away from His promises for us. We will remain focused and hopeful.

In the message, "Remembering God's Goodness" I shared about how we must be intentional in remembering the good things God has done in our lives, we must be intentional about not just being thankful but remembering the things we are thankful for. The more we focus on

remembering God's goodness, the more we become filled with light, hope, and joy. How we remember is critical for our wellbeing.

One well known marital counselor wrote in his book that by one simple activity he can easily tell which struggling marriages are likely to end in divorce and which struggling marriages can be healed. That simple activity is remembering. When he asks a struggling couple about their wedding day, if a spouse responds, "Oh, it was a beautiful day. I felt so much joy and excitement for the future. Our first dance was special," then there is great hope for this struggling couple. But if a spouse responds, "Our wedding day? He forgot something important just like he always does. And the cake was dry and disappointing," then this couple is likely headed for divorce.

The objective of the marital counselor is to get the couple to remember good memories of each other. Bad memories only turn them away from each other. But good memories draw them together.

For Sky and I when we have a bad fight, it's amazing how much we will turn from each other. Usually we are very loving to each other and encourage each other a lot. But sometimes there are miscommunications and differences that can lead to offense, especially when we are tired. Rather than standing together emotionally, we instead turn from each other and stand upon what we think is right in the conflict. And then we argue and try and convince the other that where we are standing is correct and the other is wrong. We're no longer turned to each other but now turned to what we think is right. And our minds can become flooded with anger and frustration towards the other, suddenly seeing the other person as offensive and unattractive. So how do we defuse the situation?

Some couples will just eventually give up and try and move on later like nothing happened. The conflict was never resolved, so the offense can still remain inside. For others they will just want it resolved so they will insincerely apologize with, "Fine, I'm sorry! Fine, you're right! Okay, let's just move on." But while they may move on from the conflict, they don't turn back to each other. And soon these conflicts create bitterness inside and begin to poison their memories of each other. And soon they may get to the point where during marital counseling they can only remember the negative parts of their memories of each other.

So what do Sky and I do? We do AA: affirmation and appreciation. At some point in our conflict we will pause and step back from each other. Then one of us, whoever is feeling stronger in the moment, will just begin affirming the other. "I appreciate and affirm how you cooked for me this morning. I appreciate and affirm how you warmly greeted me when I came home from the children's home. I appreciate and affirm..." and so on. Bringing up specific shared memories and remembering what we're appreciative of helps turn us back to each other. Rather than continuing to stand apart from each other because of the conflict, we instead turn back to each other through remembering good things together. And soon the conflict isn't as intense anymore and we're able to solve it together, rather than separately.

Healthy remembering leads to healthy turning. The word repent actually means just that, "To turn." If we can remember God's goodness and what He has done in our life and our sweet memories with Him, then a desire will rise up within us to turn back to Him. We will want to repent, not out of guilt or sorrow but out of fresh love for God.

The prodigal son was an example of someone that had drifted. His focus had gone from his loving father to the greed of his inheritance and the desires for sin. So the son left his father

and wasted all his inheritance money on evil things. Later when the son was poor and struggling, the son began remembering what it was like living with his father. He remembered how good it was living there. And so he got up and returned to his father, ready to confess his wrong.

The first thing we need to do if we have drifted from God is remember. We need to remember who God is. We need to remember how God saved us. We need to remember the good memories we have with God. Just as healthy remembering turns struggling couples back to each other, it also can turn us back to God. This leads to the next step: Repentance.

Repentance

Let me read Revelation 2:4-5 to you again...

Revelation 2:4-5 – But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

After remembering, we must repent.

Repentance seems to be treated like a bad word among Christians. It often correlates with “Bad!” Just as a dog owner will yell at a disobedient dog, “Bad! Bad! Bad!” many preachers will often yell at their congregation, “Repent! Repent! Repent!” And so for many Christians the word has become more attached to guilt rather than to restoration. But it’s not supposed to be that way. Repentance is meant to be beautiful!

When a couple has had a fight but then is able to spend some time doing healthy AA, they will often reconcile with love and say things like, “What was I thinking? I love you so much! I don’t ever want to lose you!” And so through this healthy remembering they actually turn to each other even closer. Their repentance, or turning, has led to an even stronger love.

But imagine that if after doing healthy AA and reconciling, they instead say things like, “Oh, what was I thinking? I’m such a fool for ever turning from you. I’m such a fool. I should have never done that. Oh, I can’t believe I did that. Oh, I feel so much shame.” That would just be painful and unhealthy. Repentance isn’t meant to be a focus on guilt from a sin. It’s meant to be a full turning from that sin. While it’s good for there to be an admission of doing wrong, what’s more important than the admission is the turning.

When the prodigal’s father saw him returning the father ran to the son before the son could even say anything. God’s heart is so strong for us. The moment we begin to turn to Him His heart soars with love and joy.

Revelation 2:4 says the church had “abandoned their first love.” That word “Abandon” can also mean: “departed from.” It does not mean “lost.” This means that love was waiting right where the church left it. They didn’t lose the powerful love, they abandoned it, just like the prodigal son left his father.

God’s love does not change. His love endures forever. His love is strong and is unfailing. It never dies. It never ends. Just as the prodigal’s father’s love was so strong and powerful for his son, so is God’s love so strong and powerful for us, even when we abandon Him. So when we repent we need to open our hearts fully to His love and let Him fill us back up. We can’t turn toward our guilt or our poor condition. We have to fully turn to Him like we did

before. And the more we are fully directed to the light of His presence, the more we will become filled by His light again.

This leads to the last step: Acting

Acting

After remembering and then repenting, God calls us to “do the works we did at first.” God doesn’t want us to be stationary any longer. God wants us to be fluid with His heart. God wants us to move with Him. God wants us to live our lives in worship for Him.

In our church if a leader is in sin or not in the best place, we will then put this leader on restoration. The purpose of restoration is to restore the person to a place of health and wholeness, so that they will not be as susceptible to that sin again and will also have a healthier view of God. While a leader is on restoration we do not allow the leader to lead a CG, a ministry team, or to serve on stage. The reason for this is because we want the leader to be back in a place of wholeness before leading others. But while we don’t want this person leading while on restoration, the last thing we want is for a person on restoration to isolate himself or feel unable to do anything for God. We want the person to remain plugged in with God’s heart. And one of the greatest ways to be plugged into God’s heart is to serve and love God’s people.

Turn with me to Isaiah 58. Isaiah 58 is one of my favorite chapters in the Bible. The chapter is about how God’s people have drifted from God. While they are still going through the motions of prayer and fasting, they had completely lost God’s heart and calling for them. They fast, but their prayers aren’t heard because their focus isn’t on God when they fast. And so God gives them clear instructions in verses 6 – 11. Let me read those verses to you...

SLIDES 5, 6, and 7

Isaiah 58:6-11 – Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, **like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.**

What happens when God’s people act out of God’s love? We become filled with light and healing. We become closer to God and hear His voice more clearly. We find clear guidance for our life. And we become like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. In other words, we become undriftable. We become so close to God that it is impossible for us to drift away. We are one with Him, fluid with Him, moving in the middle of the river of His Spirit.

If we act before remembering and repenting, then our actions will be hollow and empty, like the beginning of Isaiah 58. If we repent and act without remembering, then we will still feel a distance from God. But if we remember first and our hearts soften, and then if we repent and turn back into His loving embrace, then we’re able to act from a place of love, joy, and

gratefulness. And as we love others, we feel His same love for us. As we're patient with the broken, we're reminded of how patient God is with us. And so our love grows stronger. And our relationship with God grows closer.

Conclusion

Remember, repent, and act. These steps will keep us from drifting away from God. The more quickly we can respond with these things, the closer we will become with God. And I want to encourage you all to find people you can walk with who can also help you remember what God has done in your life. Journal these things. Never forget them. And remember whenever you repent that you aren't meant to dwell on guilt or shame, but rather by repenting you're turning to the open arms of our great, big, loving Father. Turn to His sweet love and grace. Be refreshed by His kindness and grace. And then act upon His love, living a life of worship to Him.

Altar Call

Before I close this message in prayer, I want to allow a moment for response. If you feel like you have been drifting from God, I want to pray for you. Please stand up where you are...

Lead them in remembering

Have altar ministers come forward

Lead the people standing in repenting by turning forward to the altar ministers

Let the altar ministers pray for those who have been drifting, affirming them

Hugs!

Close in prayer and praise