

2023 Theme - Focus On What Matters
Sermon Series - The Book of Acts/God's Plan for His Church
Sermon Title - Serving Self or Serving God?
Sermon Text - Acts 12:19-24
Sermon Presenter - Pastor Larry

Introduction

“Look at the wounds that give me life, Grace flowing from His side, No greater sacrifice” How can we just live for ourselves and not live for the One who died for us? How could we let “self” become number one if we’ve seen the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf? And yet somehow in this world today, self has become the god of the age and so many live to serve the god of self. But we should be serving the God of the Ages, the God who tells us to put Himself and others above ourselves! Each of us in this room has a decision to make: will we live our lives serving self or serving God? Let’s pray and ask God to teach us some very practical and critical truths today. Pray.

When I say practical, I mean practical! Today’s message has applications for each of our lives. Let me begin with this truth:

Biblical principles, even when followed by non-believers, work because they are true!!

For example, we find this in Acts 20:35...

Acts 20:35 In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ ”

This is true for believers and nonbelievers alike! And here’s another very practical truth that applies to both...

Consequences for not following Biblical principles become a reality for both believers and non-believers!

For example, we find this in Proverbs 16:18...

Proverbs 16:18 Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

Today we’re going to learn from our text in the book of Acts the difference between serving self and serving God. We’ll begin by looking at the story of King Herod where we get a clear example of...

I. Serving Self

Acts 12:19 And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

Acts 12:20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food.

Acts 12:21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them.

Acts 12:22 And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!"

Acts 12:23 Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

Acts 12:24 But the word of God continued to increase and spread.

Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, confirms this Biblical account. He mentions Herod's speech and states that after giving it he became ill and 5 days later died of an intestinal illness. Probably a parasitic illness, worms. Herod had the wrong kind of pride in many ways! His pride was all about self! Self promotion, self absorbed, selfish! There's a long list of negatives about the wrong kind of pride! But is there a good kind of pride? Yes.

Pride in your Lord, Pride in your church community, Pride in your country, Pride in your work, Pride in your family, which certainly includes pride in your grandchildren!

Debbie and I have a new granddaughter in Japan! Our Son Derek and his wife Nanako, had their second just a couple of weeks ago. Her name is Kotoko! So there's certainly a good kind of pride! However, Herod's pride was blatantly the wrong kind. Herod's attitude was arrogant and destructive. He thought to himself...

I've Got the Power! I Call the Plays! I'm the Provider! I'm the Priority!

The wrong kind of pride is destructive to you and to others! While I'm not here today to tell you that if you have the wrong kind of pride, you will be struck down by an angel of the Lord and eaten by worms, like King Herod, I am here to tell you that the wrong kind of pride can destroy your life and eat away at the relationships in life that God intended to be most precious for you. When Andrew and I were discussing this week's sermon he made this powerful observation: "Pride leads to destruction and bondage. It's an easy path to take but your heart gets hard!" So true! Folks, the wrong kind of pride is destructive in every way!! Let's look at the wrong kind of pride, which is motivated by a desire to serve self and self only! It is a pride generated by what I call the unholy trinity. Me, myself and I! Let's learn from Herod's bad example. In his pride he had this attitude...

A. I've Got the Power

Here's an example from a Scripture we read two weeks ago...

Acts 12:1 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.

Acts 12:2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

Acts 12:3 When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Herod's attitude was, "I'm the king, and as such I've got the power to do anything I want to!"

He acted on this and took the lives of innocent people for no other reason than to advance his political power. Herod believed that he was in control of everything. Sadly, Herod is not alone in this kind of pride. Sometimes we think we have the power over everything in our lives.

While we certainly make choices that affect our destiny, there are many things we have no power over. It is a foolish man or woman who thinks they control everything. This individual has not learned to control his or her own pride! Someday you may have a rude awakening-an unexpected event that will either open your eyes and turn you towards God or it will cause you to become more stubborn in your denial of your inability to control everything.

Think about this, you don't have total power over...

Health

You certainly have some power in this area. Eating right, exercise, plenty of rest, however, we all have known people who made all the right choices in this area and still became ill. It's not that we shouldn't make good choices, but we must admit that we don't have total power over our health. We also do not have total power over our...

Position in life

You certainly have some power in this area. You can study hard in school. You can work hard to advance your position at work. You can manage your money wisely. However, you did not choose the circumstances in which you would be born or the opportunities that would be afforded to you. You could have been born in a place like Haiti. And we sure need to be praying for our brothers and sisters there! I have dear friends there. We also do not have total power over our...

Talent – Certainly you have some power in this area. You can take the talent you've been given and develop it and grow it to be great. You can practice hard. But the truth is, sometimes no matter how hard you practice certain things, if you don't have a certain amount of God-given talent to develop, you have to admit it and move on to something else. We also do not have total power over...

Sin – Certainly we have some power in this area. We make choices. However, I think we would all be willing to admit that there have been times in our lives where sin got the best of us. Maybe it was anger, greed, lust, or whatever. We must come to the place where we admit our need for God's power in every area of our lives if we are to overcome the power of sin. Listen to Scripture...

Psa 18:27 You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.
Psa 18:28 You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.
Psa 18:29 With your help I can advance against a troop ; with my God I can scale a wall.
Psa 18:30 As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him.
Psa 18:31 For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God?
Psa 18:32 It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.
Psa 18:33 He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to stand on the heights.
Psa 18:34 He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze.
Psa 18:35 You give me your shield of victory, and your right hand sustains me; you stoop down to make me great.

So we know we depend on God's power for victory in this life. However, in Herod's self absorbed world, he not only believed he had the power, he believed this...

B. I Call the Plays

Acts 12:4 After arresting him(Peter), he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

Key word "Intended." As we learned a couple of weeks ago, God had another plan. Peter was rescued from prison by an angel and evaded Herod's grip. Herod was angry and had the guards executed. Sadly, Herod is not alone in this kind of selfish pride. We want to call the plays. We think we know what is best. We want what we want and we want it now. We make our plans many times with total disregard to the will of God. You might say, why should I consult with God? It's my life. I should be able to do as I please. Listen carefully: If you have not asked Jesus to be your Lord, then you certainly have the right to do your own thing. God has given you that right. However, you must understand, you're on your own if you choose this path. You alone bear the responsibility for your choices and you alone will deal with the consequences. And if, as in the case of Herod, your choices affect God's will for the lives of others, He has the right to overrule your will. On the other hand, if you are a Christian, then disregarding the will of God is pure sin. James put it this way...

James 4:13 Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money."

James 4:14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

James 4:15 Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

James 4:16 As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.

And speaking of boasting...Herod became prideful in his position and used it as a way to control others. His attitude was...

C. I'm the provider

Acts 12:20 He (Herod) had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

While Herod had control over some of the food supplies, the truth is this: God is ultimately our provider! Herod had no control over weather patterns and we don't either. We've gotten pretty good at predicting weather, but we still can't control it! If we were to have another "dust-bowl" like drought in this country, we would be in trouble. And if the 18 wheelers ever stopped running, what would we do? How many of you have a garden? I've had a couple of gardens and I told Debbie, "You know if we depended on our garden for this year's food, it wouldn't be a pretty situation! If there were a worldwide depression, did you know that people in developing nations would do better than us? They don't have Walmart's, or Dollar Generals. But they are survivors. They've learned to live on very little. I've met so many who believe they got where they are by themselves. "I worked for this, I made my way. I didn't depend on anyone's help. I did it myself. I don't need anyone's help." To that I would say..."Really? Who gave you your health? Who allowed you to be born in the land of opportunity? Your ability to provide could be gone in an instant." Paul talks about this to young Timothy...

1 Tim 6:17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

1 Tim 6:18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.

1 Tim 6:19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Paul also told Timothy...

1 Tim 6:6 But godliness with contentment is great gain.

1 Tim 6:7 For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.

1 Tim 6:8 But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

1 Tim 6:9 People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.

1 Tim 6:10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

1 Tim 6:11 But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

Herod had another pride problem, he liked being the priority. Herod's attitude was this...

D. I'm the priority

Acts 12:21 On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people.

Acts 12:22 They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man.

Acts 12:23 ...Herod did not give praise to God, ...

Herod was all too proud to take on the title of God. He liked having the power, calling the shots, and being seen as the great provider. He wanted to be number one. He liked being the priority. However, because he was a king and greatly affected God's will for the lives of others, God took action to remove him from his position. Again I have to ask the tough questions: are we so different from Herod? Don't we like to be the priority? Don't we like to be number one? Do we not many times make decisions based solely on, "what's in it for me," or "what's best for me?" Here's another few questions for us...

Is this kind of self-exaltation not the issue in most relationships that go bad?

Is this kind of self-prioritizing not what causes many of the problems our world faces today.

People have lost the desire to put others' needs above their own. This kind of pride destroys marriages, friendships, business partnerships, yes and even churches. How can we defeat this destructive pride? We find the answer in Peter's words to the church leaders which he would later write in his first epistle...

1 Pet 5:1 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed:

1 Pet 5:2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;

1 Pet 5:3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

1 Pet 5:4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

1 Pet 5:5 Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

1 Pet 5:6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

And with those amazing words of instruction we come to the part of our text that juxtaposes Herod's attitude of serving self, to the example of the early church leaders who were...

II. Serving God

Acts 12:24 But the word of God continued to increase and spread.

Acts 12:25 When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

Acts 13:1 In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

Acts 13:2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Acts 13:3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

In these verses we see some things that are critical to the ability to serve God and not self. First of all we learn that serving God is a...

Calling!

Acts 13:2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Remember that Barnabas had been sent by the church in Jerusalem to Antioch to assess the situation with the gentiles coming to know Jesus. After seeing God's work among the people there, Barnabas was excited! He encouraged them and even went and found Paul so that he could teach and disciple the people. He and Paul stayed for an entire year. Paul and Barnabas made a strong team and God put a call on their lives. What does it mean to be called by God? When a person is called by God, it means that God has some divine purpose for that individual. All believers have been called to serve God in some form or fashion! It's not just the clergy, the so-called professionals or paid staff! All followers of Jesus have been called by Jesus in the great commission to be on mission!

Matthew 28:18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Matthew 28:19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

Matthew 28:20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

In order to make disciples we must understand that it involves a lifestyle of right living that will honor God and be a good example for others to follow. But in our text Barnabas and Saul were being called to a specific mission! You might ask, "How would I know if I'm being called to a specific mission?"

We must put ourselves in a position to hear from God.

Acts 13:2 says...

Acts 13:2 "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said..."

In other words, we must be listening and sensitive to the Holy Spirit. Some would say, "I understand the need for worship, but why fasting?" Fasting indicates a desperation to know the will of God. Fasting indicates the priority to which you've assigned this need to know the will of God! It's an attitude that says: "I can eat later, right now I need a word from God!" Listen to the Psalmist...

Psa 119:57 You are my portion, O LORD; I have promised to obey your words.

Psa 119:58 I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise.

Psa 119:59 I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes.

Psa 119:60 I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands.

The Psalmist had a spirit of humility! Here's what he said...

You are my portion (my provision, my life.) I promise to obey Your Word

I have sought Your Face. I have considered my ways.

I have turned my steps toward Your statutes. I will obey.

A person with this kind of thinking is not focused on self, but on God and will recognize the call from God to serve! And we must remember this truth I mentioned earlier...

It is more blessed to give than to receive!

Those who serve have purpose, meaning, and motivation, for life beyond accumulating wealth and things and gaining self recognition. They trust that they will be taken care of by God and so they have the freedom to give and to serve! They've seen God keep His promises so they continue to walk by faith and live by serving God and others.

Listen to this description of the call from God in Isaiah...

Isa 42:5 This is what God the LORD says-- he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:

Isa 42:6 "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,

Isa 42:7 to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Jesus quoted this passage as the call on His life in Luke 4:16ff.

Luke 4:16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read.

Luke 4:17 The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

Luke 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed,

Luke 4:19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Luke 4:20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him,

Luke 4:21 and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus passed this calling on to us!

Acts 1:6 So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Acts 1:7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 1:9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

The disciples were worried about when their nation would once again have world power and status. Many religions have this as a goal. Not real Christianity! What is the goal of the true follower of Christ? It is not world domination, it is world salvation. We do not want to control people, quite the contrary, we want to set them free. We want them to understand the love of God in Christ Jesus and the freedom that will bring to their lives. Freedom from anger, hate, depression, substance abuse, materialism and the list goes on and on! Paul preached about that call.

2 Cor 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

2 Cor 5:18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:

2 Cor 5:19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

2 Cor 5:20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

And if we are going to be Christ's ambassadors we need to be...

Anointed!

Acts 13:2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Acts 13:3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Did you notice this? In verse 2 they were worshiping and fasting. In verse 3, they were praying and fasting! They had received the call and now they wanted the anointing of God to be upon them so they prayed and fasted. What is anointing? To anoint was to rub an oil like olive oil on something or someone. This act was usually done to set something apart for a holy purpose. Sometimes anointing with oil was done to symbolize the power of God to bring healing to someone's life. And the laying on of hands was also symbolic of the anointing of God. As it relates to the Call of God, the anointing means...

The person has been set apart for a God given purpose

The person has been granted the power and presence of God in order to achieve that God given purpose

Again we turn to the Psalmist

Psa 28:6 Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy.

Psa 28:7 The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.

Psa 28:8 The LORD is the strength of his people, a fortress of salvation for his anointed one.

Psa 28:9 Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever.

Paul wrote...

2 Cor 1:21 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us,

2 Cor 1:22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

When God calls, He anoints! We need to pray for God's anointing on our lives as individuals and on our church as a whole. This anointing brings the presence and power of God to help us overcome self and to become true servants of God! This anointing brings the power of God on every circumstance of life. The good ones and the bad ones. How often should we seek the anointing of God?

Luke 9:23 Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

And the last thing we see in our text about serving God is the follow through! Barnabas and Saul were...

Sent!

Acts 13:3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

It's not enough to be called, anointed, prepared, excited, and pumped up about serving our Lord! The time comes when you must act on the call to abandon self and serve The Living God! You must trust that He will anoint you with everything you will need by His Holy Spirit! You must understand that you were called and anointed so that you could be sent out! Where is He sending you? Is it to Baja Mexico? Is it to China? Is it to India? Is it to Africa? Could be. But He may not be sending you across the world but across the street! He may be sending you to a neighbor, an estranged family member, a lonely student who thinks no one cares, a fellow worker who needs a friend! Your willingness to put self aside and allow God to love others through you could prevent the next tragic school shooting or someone giving up on life. God may be calling you to do something which may seem simple, but in fact is quite profound! Your kind greeting to someone who has come today with great hurts and needs may cause them to have restored hope! You are a part of meeting their need to know God cares and loves them! The child you take care of in the nursery or teach back in ShoreKids, may have allowed a parent with great spiritual needs to concentrate on the message because they knew their child was receiving quality care from a kind and caring person. The warm smile that you gave when you greeted someone at the door or in the parking lot may have communicated the love of Christ more effectively than 10 sermons. I will close by reading a portion of Jesus' prayer before His crucifixion

John 17:15 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

John 17:16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.

John 17:17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

John 17:18 As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

Let's pray!