

Empire of the Risen Son

A Treatise on the Kingdom of God—What it is and Why it Matters

Book Two: All the King's Men

By Steve Gregg

Second Edition

All citations from scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New King James Version

Other books by the author:

Empire of the Risen Son—Book One
There is Another King
(Xulon Press, 2020)

Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary
(Thomas Nelson, 1997, 2013)

Why Hell? Three Christian Views
(Thomas Nelson, 2013; Zondervan, 2024)

Why Not Full-Preterism? A Partial Preterist Response
(Xulon Press, 2022)

Dedication:

To Franklin DeRemer

A disciple of Jesus, now rejoicing in the presence of his King.

Many thanks to my wife Dayna for her helpful editorial suggestions
and for finding many (perhaps not all) of my typos.

Empire of the Risen Son

A Treatise on the Kingdom of God—What it is and Why it Matters

Book Two: All the King's Men

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Preface

I have abandoned my search for truth, and am now looking for a good fantasy.

—Ashleigh Brilliant¹

The most consequential decision every person will ever make is whether to live in reality or in a delusion. In the world of reality, there is a God who has elevated His Son to the position of universal rulership. Those who live in the real world are those who take this into consideration and live continually in that awareness. There is a King, named Jesus, and those who have not embraced a fantasy, whether a good one or a bad one, embrace this as the foundational fact of life. It is the source of all righteousness and peace and joy, as Paul said, and it is called the Kingdom of God.²

Those who have not incorporated this reality into their thinking still live in a misapprehension of all that is around them. They are in no position to make coherent sense of anything that happens, and must grope in the dark for ultimate meaning. The Bible says that the god of this world (Satan) has blinded the minds of those who do not recognize the truth.³ The Hindus have a concept called *maya*—*the supernatural power of gods or demons to create illusions*. They affirm that “everything is *maya*.” Followers of Christ can affirm that these dear souls have discovered something true about the world in which *they* live. Lacking the awareness of the Kingdom of God, every worldview is merely an illusion. Those who do not know the difference between reality and illusion are delusional.

Deceptive illusions can be enjoyable in the short term—like that of pretending you are in an exotic sub-Saharan rainforest, far from civilization and surrounded by interesting African fauna. It is delightful right up to the moment your little skiff emerges into the thoroughly un-jungle-like reality at the end of Disneyland’s brief Jungle Cruise Ride. This was my favorite ride, as a child. I well remember the intense sense of disappointment whenever the boat turned that last bend in the faux river and emerged from the dense verdure, revealing that the jungle cruise illusion had once again ended.

Fantasies are really only good when you know they are not real. If we mistake a fantasy for reality, and begin making life-decisions as if it were true, we set ourselves up for tragedy and disillusionment. Even the most pleasing delusion amounts only to a constant banging of one’s head against the unyielding wall of truth. The illusion that one’s philandering husband is really very devoted and loyal, or that the person inviting the teen to post nude pictures of herself to his phone is really a Hollywood talent scout, or that a Nigerian widow has decided to share her deceased husband’s millions with a

¹ Ashleigh Brilliant, *I Have Abandoned My Search for Truth, and Am Now Looking for a Good Fantasy* (Santa Barbara, CA: Woodbridge Press Publishing Co., 1980), 10

² Romans 14:17

³ 2 Corinthians 4:4

total stranger, if believed, can lead to enormous tragedy and disillusionment. Deception can be terribly costly.

Possessing and embracing reality, however, allows one to navigate through life without fear of it leading to existential regret at the end of the road. To live in the light of the reality of the Kingdom of God—that is, under Christ’s lordship—is to become a disciple of the King. The human race was created for this very thing. Any course of life less than this amounts to the waste of the one shot given to every person to decide between living in reality and pursuing a pleasant fantasy.

This book is the second on the subject of the *Empire of the Risen Son*, written with those in mind who read the first volume, *There Is Another King*. In that book, I sought to demonstrate that nothing in the world makes sense other than embracing this truth and ordering all of one’s personal life according to that reality. The Kingdom of God is an objective reality. It becomes a personal reality to each individual when one becomes a committed disciple of the King Himself. To those thirsting for such reality, this book seeks to provide some guidance to the springs of living water found only in Christ by those who wholly follow Him. Such people are called *disciples*. As Book One dealt with the Kingdom of God conceptually, this book deals with the Kingdom in practical terms. What does it mean, or require, to be a part of this Kingdom? How does this phenomenon affect and change every aspect of one’s life on earth, and make one a world-changer?

The author is one who chose this path as a youth and who has now lived, though imperfectly, according to these truths without the slightest regret for fifty years, at the time of writing. This way has been trod by true disciples for two-thousand years and it is a well-proven path.

What I am talking about must not be mistaken for whatever you may have heard called *Christianity*. That word has been used to describe many things, not all of which deserve the label. Even a casual study of Church history—both ancient and modern—will demonstrate that a great number of those calling themselves “Christians” throughout history have never so much as endeavored to live as disciples of Jesus on His terms.⁴ When the way of Christ is presented without compromise many of the most vocal opponents to the truth turn out to be those within the Church. Like Israel of old, the Church has seldom lacked for critics of the way of the King, even within her ranks. Many today, like the imposters in the Church whom Jude described, “*speaking evil of whatever they do not know.*”⁵ The sources consulted in developing the thoughts in this book have been Jesus, His first disciples, and others throughout history who took the path here recommended. The

⁴ I do not mean to suggest that they were all hypocrites, though there has never been a shortage of those. A very large percentage of people in churches, at any time in history, have been biblically illiterate and have never learned of the true path of the disciple of Jesus, which is not concealed to anyone seeking guidance from the words of Jesus Himself. It would seem that even many of the clergy have also known little of the matter.

⁵ Jude 1:10

speculations of those who have never taken the path need not be consulted by travelers seeking guidance.

Chapter One

Discipleship as Citizenship

*And He said to His disciples...“Do not fear, little flock,
for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”*

(Luke 12:22, 32)

And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

(Acts 11:26)

According to the above scriptures, those to whom the Father chooses to give His Kingdom are the ones that Jesus calls His “disciples.” There are times when the term is used in the New Testament in referring to the twelve apostles, but the word *apostle* and the word *disciple* are not synonyms. While all the apostles were disciples, not all disciples were apostles. The latter term refers to the twelve specially selected leaders whom Jesus determined to leave in charge of His movement after His departure and to whom He gave special training. They were chosen out of the larger group of Christ’s followers for this special leadership assignment:

And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself; and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles.¹

We see that the larger group from which the apostles were selected were all called *His disciples*. The company of His disciples consisted of all who were committed to following and learning from Him. Many of these had interrupted or abandoned their normal lives in order to follow Him from place to place and to remain under His instruction. At one time, there were at least seventy in this category.² Later still, Luke could speak of “the whole multitude of the disciples.”³ At one point, the comments that Jesus made to the crowds actually offended and drove off many of His own disciples.⁴

In the historical narrative of the New Testament, “disciples” served as a cover term for all of Christ’s followers, and “apostles” referred to the special group of leadership trainees to whom Jesus gave unique authority. After Jesus returned to heaven, the twelve became the undisputed governing body of the movement. In recording the coming of the Spirit upon Christ’s followers, the whole

¹ Luke 6:13

² Luke 10:1

³ Luke 19:37

⁴ John 6:66

company of 120 believers including the apostolic leaders were referred to as “the disciples”⁵—or as the *ekklesia* (that is, the “Church”).⁶

Those originally known as *disciples* were later given the label *Christians*—“*the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.*”⁷ This tells us something of great value, namely that, in scripture, a *Christian* is just another name for a *disciple* of Jesus. It is to such that God gives His *Kingdom*: “*He said to His disciples...it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*”⁸ We can summarize these truths in the following equation:

A Christian = A Disciple = One who has been given the Kingdom

There is a danger of taking such an equation the wrong way. Since we think we know what it means to be a “Christian,” in the modern usage of that term, we may wrongfully apply this default definition to the word “disciple,” whose actual meaning may be more obscure to us. The problem here is that we are taking our assumed understanding of the more familiar term *Christian* to control our definitions of the word *disciple* and of Kingdom *citizenship*. What if our controlling term is being misunderstood? Are we sure that we have understood the word *Christian* as the early believers (and God) understood it? The term *Christian*, after all, is found only three times in the Bible, none of which (other than the passage cited above) provides any information that would assist us in defining the term.

It would seem the most sensible approach to first arrive at a biblical understanding of the term *disciple*, since that is the original and more common terminology of scripture. The New Testament provides abundant witness to the definition and character of a disciple. Once we have this knowledge in hand, we must then allow it to control our understanding of what it means to be a *Christian*. What if we have been calling ourselves, and others, *Christians* only because we have misunderstood the meaning of the word?

A cursory study of biblical discipleship will reveal that Christ’s description of a true *disciple* does not correspond to most modern definitions of the word *Christian*. What should we do with that information?

Who are you calling a Christian?

⁵ Acts 1:15; 6:1, 2, 7; 9:1, 10, 19, 25, 26,36; 38; 11:26, 29; 13:52; 14:20, 21, 22, 28; 15:10; 16:1; 18:23, 27; 19:9,30; 20:1, 7, 30; 21:4, 16.

⁶ Acts 5:11, 12; 8:1, 3; 9:31; 11:22, 26; 12:1, 5; 13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3, 4, 22, 41; 16:5; 18:22; 20:17, 28

⁷ Acts 11:26

⁸ Luke 12:22, 32

In popular usage over the last twenty centuries the label *Christian* has come to mean a great many different things. This renders it difficult to know what anyone in particular is actually telling us in referring to oneself as a “Christian.”

Confusion over the meaning of this term has come about largely as a result of the rise of a major *world religion* called *Christianity*. This term is never found in scripture, and there is serious reason to question whether Jesus ever intended to start a religion at all. If He did, He never mentioned it. According to His words, and those of the apostles, He came to establish a *Kingdom*—which is a very different thing.

A religion is normally viewed as a means of formally appeasing some deity by performing certain ritual practices at holy gatherings, on holy days, and adopting a system of correct theological propositions. A kingdom, by contrast, is a political term, referring to an entity in which one participates by loyalty to a supreme ruler who is obeyed in all areas of personal and civil life. Christ’s Kingdom, like that of Israel in the Old Testament, is indeed a *worshipping* community, but it is, first and foremost, an *obeying* community. In fact, Jesus made it clear (as did the prophets) that without obedience worship is unacceptable to Him.⁹ Loving obedience to God in all things is the true worship.¹⁰

Thus, discipleship is not so much the adoption of a set of religious ideas as it is the obtaining of citizenship in a new *society*¹¹ To have a new King is to embrace the phenomenon of citizenship in a Kingdom. Citizenship has privileges and obligations which will be discussed presently, but it is first essential that we grasp that becoming a naturalized citizen in a country is quite different from merely joining a religious organization or belief system. To become and remain loyal—even unto death—to Jesus as Monarch is that to which biblical “faith” in Christ refers. It is primarily trust in, and fealty to, a King rather than the embracing of a set of religious doctrines.

Christianity is regarded, by most, as one possible alternative in a smorgasbord of available religious options alongside *Hinduism*, *Buddhism*, *Judaism* and *Islam*. A country whose dominant culture has been significantly influenced by this religious option is often called a *Christian country* and its citizens are frequently presumed by default to be *Christians*. Many years ago, I asked a stranger, “Are you a Christian?” To my amazement, he replied, “I’m an American, aren’t I? What do you think I am—a Hindu?”

Many people self-identify as Christians, due to having Christian parents and an upbringing that included some church attendance. These people may have been baptized as infants, or at a tender age—more at the parents’ choosing than their own—and have assumed, on that basis, that this defines them as Christians in good standing with God. The fact that there is nothing about their daily

⁹ Matthew 5:23-24; 7:21-27; Luke 6:46-49 (cf., 1 Samuel 15:22; Proverbs 15:8; Isaiah 1:11-17)

¹⁰ Romans 12:1; cf., 1 Samuel 15:22

¹¹ Hebrews 11:14

thoughts or conduct that would distinguish them from most non-believers does not seem to factor into their self-identification.

Apart from those simply born into a culture with strong roots in the biblical worldview, there are also those who have been “converted” to Christianity under some evangelistic appeal that bore no resemblance to Christ’s own preaching of the Kingdom. They were only told that God is very angry at non-Christians, and that they can come into His good graces by saying a “sinner’s prayer,” or by “accepting Jesus into their hearts” as their “personal Savior.”¹² Having been finally induced to take such a step, they have subsequently been encouraged to believe that they are now *saved*, or *born again*—even when no particular alteration of their course in life is in evidence.

If we are going to live under the assumption that we are Christians, we must make sure that God recognizes us as such. Jesus warned that there will be many who are deluded into thinking they have a place in His Kingdom, only to experience the rudest of all awakenings:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!”¹³

These verses might just qualify as the most terrifying lines in the whole Bible. Yet, there they are! They have stood in the text for nearly two-thousand years. How many self-identified Christians have nonetheless lived with a complacency that these verses would render completely unwarranted? It is hard to ignore the unnerving fact that some of those whom Jesus describes as being rejected claimed to possess more impressive spiritual “credentials” of genuineness than do many of us who today have no doubts about our salvation. How long has it been since you, or I, exorcised a demon, prophesied, or worked a mighty wonder in Christ’s name? I confess that it has been some time for me! According to Jesus, even if we regularly performed such exploits it would apparently prove nothing about our being “saved” or true followers of Christ.

This passage may well serve as a corrective to that particular school of thought that identifies the Kingdom of God with the performing of miraculous demonstrations of power. Such things may occur in the course of a Christian’s ministry, but it is a great mistake to become enamored and impressed by such phenomena. When the seventy returned from their short-term mission, they were exulting in the wonders they had performed—especially the exorcisms. Jesus tried to tamp down their wild

¹² None of the expressions presented in quotation marks can be found in scripture.

¹³ Matthew 7:21-23

enthusiasm about such things. He said, *“Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.”*¹⁴

Paul also suggested that many imagined “qualifications” for inclusion in the Kingdom of God can leave one deluded about his or her status with God:

*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.*¹⁵

Like Jesus, Paul mentions prophesying and miracle-working, but adds speaking in tongues, theological sophistication, the divestment of all possessions to assist the poor, and even acceptance of martyrdom to the list of non-qualifiers! Can someone really have all of this going on and it still have it mean “nothing,” in terms of salvation? Together, Jesus and Paul have enumerated activities and gifts that many would regard as evidences of genuine discipleship, and they have stricken items off the list, one-by-one. What is left?

At the outset of His sobering warning, Jesus identified what it is that really proves one to be among the company that He acknowledges as His own: *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.”*¹⁶

The true Kingdom citizen is described as *“he who does the will of my Father in heaven.”*¹⁷ Given the weight of this statement, and what is at stake, we would do well to ponder what this means.

Since Jesus had said earlier in the same sermon that one will never enter the Kingdom without possessing a righteousness surpassing that of the Pharisees,¹⁸ it may safely be assumed, that doing *“the will of the Father”* has little to do with the performance of ritual religious practices. No one could do more of that kind of thing than did the Pharisees. This means that going to religious services, putting money in the bag, singing songs of praise, and listening to religious pep-talks (or even to sound biblical expositions, which are harder to find), are not among the things that qualify one as a disciple in the Kingdom.

Nor, when He speaks of *“your righteousness”* is it likely that Jesus is referring to what we evangelicals call *“imputed righteousness.”* The latter refers to enjoying the *status* of righteousness imputed to us in Christ, apart from our actually being particularly righteous people in our behavior.

¹⁴ Luke 10:20

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

¹⁶ Matthew 7:21

¹⁷ Matthew 7:21

¹⁸ Matthew 5:20

This doctrine has given comfort to a great number of unconverted professing “Christians.” Their lives prove them not to be followers of Jesus, but they have been assured by some preacher that this deficiency is unrelated to the question of their *salvation*, since they have received “imputed righteousness” due to their faith. So long as one has taken the step that is called “*accepting Jesus*,” one is said to be secure, because the righteousness of Christ has been deposited into his or her “account.” It is often thought that, from that moment on, nothing that is done by the alleged believer has any impact upon his or her secure status.

It is indeed Christ who is our righteousness. We cannot be good enough to earn status with God as His forgiven children. This much, the Bible clearly teaches.¹⁹ However, it is not the only thing the Bible teaches on the subject. Scripture indicates that such a righteous status is never conferred *invisibly* upon the believer, producing no noticeable result in his or her life. John clearly tells us that the righteous person will be recognized by righteous behavior—that is, by “practicing righteousness”:

*Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.*²⁰

Notice John warns about being deceived about this matter, just as Jesus does. It seems that a prevalent danger exists of a person mistakenly believing oneself to be among the *righteous*, or the *saved*, when the essential evidence of this is lacking. No doubt, it was in order to disabuse his readers of such a self-deception that John wrote:

*He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.*²¹

Well, we couldn’t ask for more clarity that *that!* Those who keep Christ’s commandments are those who are not lying when they say they “know” Him. Those who walk as Jesus walked are those who have reason to believe that they are “in Him” (where the *imputed* righteousness is received). Those who *practice* righteousness are those who are also *imputed* righteous. Righteousness is not imputed as a reward for righteous works, but that transaction does not occur apart from the regeneration that produces a life of righteous behavior. True salvation is by grace through faith²²—but it is always *accompanied* by a life that displays its presence.²³ Behavior is evidence of status.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:9; (cf., Isaiah 54:17; Jeremiah 23:6)

²⁰ 1 John 3:7

²¹ 1 John 2:4-6

²² Ephesians 2:8-9

²³ Hebrews 6:9

The righteousness that characterizes those whom Christ recognizes as His true disciples is that which He identifies as “[doing] *the will of my Father in heaven.*” Notice that He speaks of “doing” rather than of “believing.” Doing God’s will does not refer to a few occasional instances of doing the right thing to please God or to avoid trouble. Jesus is describing a changed course of life defined by cheerful submission and habitual obedience to the will of God.

Judged by our works?

It is striking that we are saved by faith, but the scripture teaches that we will be judged by our works. How can both statements be true? That the final judgment is based upon each one’s works cannot safely be ignored since this is mentioned by Jesus and by every writer of scripture who addresses the subject. The fact that all (believers and unbelievers alike) are to be judged by the standard of their works is affirmed by Paul, Peter, James, and John.²⁴ In fact, there is nowhere in scripture where one finds mention of any alternative basis of evaluation at the Final Judgment, other than the works of the individual.

How, then, do we escape the conclusion that we are saved by works, rather than by grace through faith? It is really quite simple. The disciple is saved because of faith in God through Jesus. However, any faith that makes a difference to God also makes a difference to the believer. Genuine salvation is transformative.²⁵ A counterfeit salvation is not. When one has experienced rebirth, one behaves like a child of God, not a child of the devil. It is entirely safe for God to judge a person based upon his or her behavior since this is the infallible test of having been regenerated by faith in Christ.

What is spoken of here is not what some call *sinless perfection* but rather the *habit of obedience* to Christ, which is the only legitimate response to a genuine recognition of Him as King and Lord. If this habitual obedience is absent, then one has not embraced the lordship of Christ and is not what the Bible calls a Christian. If this causes some readers to be alarmed, then perhaps it should. There is cause for alarm in the modern Church. Jesus did not speak the “*I never knew you*” warning for no reason! Instead of being angry or despondent, any who may feel alarmed can remedy the situation by repenting and becoming a true disciple of Jesus.

“Nobody’s perfect!”

The fact that disciples actually do live obedient lives does not mean that they never sin. To say that a miser does not squander his money does not mean that no miser ever made a bad deal by being

²⁴ Matthew 16:28; 25:31-46; Romans 2:5-10; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 1:17; James 2:12-13; Revelation 20:13

²⁵ See Acts 5:32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 5:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Titus 2:11-14; Hebrews 5:9; James 2:14-26; 1 Peter 4:1-4; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 2:3-5, 29; 3:6-10; 4:7-8; 5:1-3, 18

deceived or careless. A miser *habitually* avoids waste of his resources, because he hates to lose money foolishly. It is his nature to jealously guard his assets. While this does not rule out any missteps on his part, it does mean that squandering money is completely contrary to his temperament and disposition. Any failure in maintaining this practice is vigilantly guarded against, and greatly regretted whenever it may occur. “Miser” describes a disposition and character that militates against waste. “Christian” describes a disposition and character that militates against sinning.

A disciple is one who “does not sin”²⁶—in the sense that a miser does not squander. It is against his or her nature to do so. A disciple of Christ has a settled determination to follow and obey Christ as a way of living day-by-day. Temptation is habitually resisted and when sin is committed it is never excused or rationalized. It is hated. When a disciple commits a sin, it leads to repentance and greater determination not to stumble again.

When Jesus speaks of the one “*who does the will of [the] Father,*” He is not describing the perfect person who never sins, but the one who loves God and wants nothing more than to please Him in all things. Such a one has a desire and determination habitually to obey, and is empowered in that effort by the indwelling Spirit of Christ. Jesus is not referring to the occasional performance of certain good deeds, like those required to get a Boy Scout merit badge. It should be clear that the disciple is one who, by repentance, has exchanged the former intention of living a life in pursuit of one’s own agenda for one determined to consistently fulfill the will of God.

It may be true that nobody is perfect, but a true disciple of Jesus *desires* and *intends* to be as perfect as the grace of God, the Spirit of God, and one’s own choices may permit. Jesus said, “*I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.*”²⁷ Jesus, obviously, had “doing the will of the Father” down to an art, and it was, no doubt, in terms of this habitual behavior that He promised, “*a disciple...who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher.*”²⁸

Obedience is something that one becomes better at over the years of walking with Christ as one becomes more adept and consistent at “*walking in the Spirit.*”²⁹ If following Jesus is felt to be too difficult and emotionally exhausting, then the Spirit is not empowering, and something is missing. Perhaps the true disciple in such a case is leaning on his or her own strength, and is neither filled with, nor walking in, the power of the Spirit. Alternatively, the person making the attempt may not yet be truly born again, and is not a genuine disciple.

Beware of false assurance

²⁶ 1 John 3:9-10; 5:18

²⁷ John 6:38

²⁸ Luke 6:40

²⁹ Romans 8:4; Galatians 5:16

No doubt, this is why so many people (especially those reared in Christian homes) have felt that they legitimately “tried” to be Christians, but “God didn’t show up.” Christian parents are only too eager to encourage their children to “accept Jesus into their hearts,” so that they can have the assurance that their children will join them in heaven. Upon persuading them to say “the sinner’s prayer,” the parent sometimes rejoices that the desired transition has been made from death to life, from being a child of the devil to being a child of God. The same is true of zealous Christians witnessing to their friends about Christ. If only we can get them to say the prayer, we feel we will have snatched a soul from the jaws of hell.

This is unfortunately misleading for many who were evangelized in that manner because the Bible never speaks of “asking Jesus into your heart” or “saying the sinner’s prayer” as a normative means of becoming a Christian. These are terms that have become part of modern evangelical parlance but were unknown to Jesus and the apostles.

Jesus’ commission was not that we should get people to jump through such a hoop to be converted, but that we are to “*make disciples...baptizing them...and teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.*”³⁰ Too many of our so-called “converts” have never actually heard nor personally answered the call to *discipleship*.

If one should desire an authoritative test of true discipleship, Jesus provided this when addressing a crowd of people, of whom it is said that they “*believed in Him.*” That descriptor alone would be enough to identify one as a Christian in most evangelical circles today. However, though they believed in Him, Jesus was not so sure that He believed in all of them. He turned to these alleged *believers* and said: “*If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine.*”³¹ By including the word “*truly,*” Jesus implied that there might be some who were not genuinely His disciples. One who is truly a disciple, as opposed to one *in name only*, is one who continues to live in the sphere of Christ’s instruction.

A disciple is a student under instruction—a trainee, or a *protégé*, being groomed by a mentor for privilege and responsibility. Jesus was not the only person in Israel who had personal disciples. John the Baptist had some,³² and so did certain rabbis.³³ In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah had disciples.³⁴ We can reasonably see the relationship between Elijah and Elisha (and probably the *sons of the prophets*³⁵) as a relationship between a master and his disciples, as well.

³⁰ Matthew 28:19-20

³¹ John 8:31 NASB

³² Matthew 9:14; John 3:25

³³ Mark 2:18; Acts 22:3

³⁴ Isaiah 8:16

³⁵ 2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7, 15, etc.

On one occasion, Jesus urged those who wished to follow Him: “*take My yoke upon you and learn from Me.*”³⁶ A yoke is a bar placed across the necks of beasts of burden—usually oxen or donkeys—allowing them to be steered by their master. A rabbi’s disciples were said to have taken the rabbi’s “yoke” upon themselves, so as to be trained in the special expertise of that mentor. This is the relationship into which Jesus called any would-be disciples to join Him.

Those who have come to Christ on His terms as disciples receive His private inward instruction and direction. He illuminates the otherwise obscure scriptures to them.³⁷ It was only to His disciples that Jesus explained the mysteries enshrouded in His parables.³⁸ They were given this privilege because of their commitment to learn and follow His ways. The assumption is that a disciple under instruction is thinking in agreement with, and living in obedience to, his master. Otherwise, the rebuke is warranted, “*why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?*”³⁹

Disciples are born...and made

The so-called *Great Commission* imposes this task upon the Church:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you...⁴⁰

The commission is to *make disciples* of all nations. According to Jesus, the making of disciples involves two aspects:

- 1) *Baptizing them*, which speaks of converting them and bringing them into the fellowship of the Kingdom. True conversion must be on Christ’s terms of repentance and full surrender. Those who have found Christ and His Kingdom, like a treasure or a pearl of great value, will joyfully forsake all to be His followers. In scripture, baptism is the acknowledgment that such a surrender to the King has occurred. Biblically, it is the inauguration into the company of the true disciples.
- 2) *Teaching them*. After one has entered the Kingdom community through repentance, faith and baptism, the actual *discipling* begins. This is a protracted process, beyond merely securing one’s initial decision to come to Christ. Coming on Christ’s terms means a willingness and a desire to know His will and to do it. A person comes to Christ to be His disciple, or trainee. The prescribed curriculum for the disciple is being taught “*to observe all things that I have commanded you.*”

³⁶ Matthew 11:29

³⁷ Luke 24:27, 44-45; 2 Corinthians 3:15-16; 1 John 2:27

³⁸ Matthew 13:10-11; Mark 4:34

³⁹ Luke 6:46

⁴⁰ Matthew 28:19-20

It seems that many sincere Christians involved in evangelism and missions have been satisfied to see unbelievers converted and baptized. It is regarded as an added bonus if they end up attending a church and seriously resolve to actually follow Christ. But where is the commitment in our churches or missions to teach the curriculum prescribed by the King? If a genuine disciple is one who continues in the words of Christ⁴¹ would it not be helpful if the would-be disciples were actually trained in the manner that Jesus dictated they should be—by being taught to observe everything Jesus commanded? How many churches even make it their aim to teach such a practical obedience to everything Jesus taught? Some may, but it tends to be a very uncommon practice among evangelical congregations. We seem contented to redeem *their souls* when Christ's purpose is to redeem *their whole lives*—including their finances, their work ethics, their family behavior, their friendships, their speech, their entertainment choices—everything! As believers are trained in everything Jesus commanded it transforms every area of their earthly lives.

The will of God, as expounded practically in the teachings of Christ, is ultimately that we should love God and love each other "*in deed and in truth.*"⁴² Such love impacts our behavior in all of our relationships. By Jesus' own declaration, the surest proof that one is a disciple of Jesus is his or her visibly demonstrated love for one's fellow man:

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*⁴³

This is why Paul, as we observed earlier, wrote that every spiritual credential—whether spiritual gifts, religious knowledge, sacrificial giving, or even dutiful martyrdom—is meaningless if love is absent. If I should have all of these things without love, Paul insists, "*I am nothing*" and "*it profits me nothing.*"⁴⁴ If even martyrdom and sacrificial giving are not automatically identified with *love*, it is because Paul assumes that true *agape*, while expressed in this kind of action, must be a habitual state of the heart produced by the Holy Spirit—not an occasional good deed.⁴⁵

The Holy Spirit resides in genuine disciples through the supernatural experience of regeneration and produces the fruit of *agape* love.⁴⁶ The love experienced and expressed in the disciple of Jesus is not a self-willed or humanistic altruism, like that practiced by any secular philanthropist. The

⁴¹ John 8:31

⁴² 1 John 3:18

⁴³ John 13:34-35

⁴⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

⁴⁵ Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22

⁴⁶ Titus 3:5; 1 John 3:14, 24; 4:7-8, 13; Romans 8:9

disciple's disposition of love must be a result of spiritual rebirth motivated first by a love for God that inspires a commitment to keeping His commandments and makes obedience a "light yoke"⁴⁷:

*For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.*⁴⁸

It is not the mere decision to become a more loving person, but a full surrender to the lordship of Christ, that permits the Spirit of God to regenerate us, and to birth within us the requisite love for God and for others—providing the surest proof of true discipleship status.

*...love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*⁴⁹

We will discuss this requirement further in the chapter, *The Law of the Kingdom*, and will not dwell further on that subject here. We must now turn to an exploration of the essential teachings of Christ on the nature and benefits of discipleship...and its cost.

⁴⁷ Matthew 11:29-30

⁴⁸ 1 John 5:2-3

⁴⁹ 1 John 4:7-8

Chapter Two

Following Jesus

*Then He said to them all,
“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself,
and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.*

(Luke 9:23)

These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

(Revelation 14:14)

The nature of being a disciple is to *follow* a master. When Jesus called people to become His disciples, He gave the simple command: “*Follow Me.*”¹ He described His disciples as His “sheep.” It is the nature of a sheep to follow its shepherd, and this is the specific characteristic that Jesus had in mind when using this metaphor: “*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.*”² The vocation of *following* Jesus, in His day, involved a person’s leaving home and traveling with Him on His geographical itinerary—something that is obviously not possible in the same sense today.

Yet, even after Jesus’ departure from earth, it was still assumed that disciples were to be His *followers*. John described post-ascension Christians as those who “follow” Christ: “*These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes.*”³ Walking around with Jesus on earth, as the first disciples did, was not essential, but incidental, to what it means to follow Jesus. There were people who followed Jesus around and listened to Him, but who were not disciples. There always seemed to be unbelieving scribes and Pharisees in the crowds to harass Him wherever He went. The essence of what it means to “follow” is not the aspect of moving about, *per se*, but is something that true disciples do today as much as they did when He was here on earth.

In a sense, of course, He is still living among us walking around on earth—in our shoes. His Spirit in us has incorporated us into His Body. We are His flesh and bones, His hands and feet, following, as did His earliest disciples, the dictates of Christ as Head. The Head still directs His body from heaven, just as He did from earth when He was with the first disciples. Therefore, following Jesus today is, in principle, not that different from what it was at the beginning of His movement.

To follow Christ involves for us, as it did for the original disciples, at least four things:

1. To follow means to accompany someone.

¹ E.g., Matthew 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 19:21.

² John 10:27

³ Revelation 14:4

This was what the would-be disciple meant who said, “*Lord, I will follow [accompany] you wherever you go.*”⁴ It was Peter’s meaning also, when he insisted that He would pay any price to be with Jesus: “*Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake.*”⁵

Since Jesus has promised, “*I am with you always...*”⁶ it is the case that we are accompanying Him—or He is accompanying us—throughout our Christian lives.

It is essential to understand, however, that it is not a matter of Him tagging along with us as we go about our own way, pursuing our own personal agendas. He is the Lord and King. If we are in motion with Him, He is the one leading. We are His followers, just as were the four-hundred men who accompanied David as he fled from Saul. They recognized Him as their “captain.”⁷ They were following him wherever he went, experiencing hardship and danger with him at the hands of his enemies.

The disciple’s life is a journey with Jesus. This sometimes actually requires physical movement and geographical relocation if He so leads. Even when this is not the case the follower is on a journey of the heart—a quest for spiritual maturity and transformation of character—which cannot fail to occur when one is being “led by the Spirit of God.”⁸ This quest is the following of the Spirit of Christ guiding within.

2. To follow means to imitate or mimic a mentor.

After washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus said, “*If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.*”⁹

Paul said, “*Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.*”¹⁰ The word he used was that of mimicry, or imitation. Paul had just been describing his own policies of regularly laying down his rights for the sake of others and for the gospel. He said that this was behavior originally modeled by Christ. Paul was following, or mimicking, Christ. All disciples would do well to do the same, imitating Paul’s example.

Since Jesus is not *visibly* present with us, it helps if we have examples of Jesus “with skin on” that can model His behavior for us until we can get to know Him well enough to become ourselves such mentors to younger disciples. Frankly, such good examples are not as easy to find as we might wish,

⁴ Luke 9:57

⁵ John 13:37

⁶ Matthew 28:20

⁷ 1 Samuel 22:2

⁸ Romans 8:14

⁹ John 13:14-15

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:1 KJV

but in their absence, we have the graphic accounts of Christ's behavior portrayed in the four gospels that tell His story. If we meditate on Him as He is seen in scripture, we are not without knowledge of how Jesus lived and related with God and people.

When Peter urged fortitude in the face of receiving persecution and unjust treatment, he reminded his readers of Christ's demeanor in suffering—how He did not threaten or retaliate when He suffered wrong. Peter writes that, in doing this, Jesus provided an example for us to imitate, or “follow”: *“Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps...”*¹¹

3. To follow means to embrace the teaching of a master.

The followers of any religion or philosophy are those who have voluntarily allowed their minds to be molded by the teachings of its authoritative leader(s). Followers have adopted the worldview, the values, the outlook, and the tenets of that leader's perspective.

Since Christ's true disciples are those who *“continue in [His] words,”*¹² it is their goal to see all things as He sees them. What does He value or devalue? What is His perspective on such subjects as theology, history, eternity, worship, ethics, rights, relationships, money, possessions, love, hate, personal goals, etc.? When we come to Christ our default opinions need to be reexamined and revamped according to Christ's teachings. Many of them have been adopted, consciously or unconsciously, from friends, family, entertainers, books, teachers, and our own pre-Christian musings. Paul exhorted the Roman believers to be *“transformed by the renewing of your minds.”*¹³ The “mind,” of course, is not the organic brain, but its patterns of thought, opinions, values, tastes, attitudes, habits, etc. These comprise the “mind.” It is the entire way of thinking that needs to be renewed through the *“washing of water by the word.”*¹⁴

When we first become followers of Christ we have no idea how much we have to unlearn. Since our ways of thinking about life, people, the world, etc., have been shaped by influences contrary to Christ, we would do well to think that our opinions about most things are probably wrong and in need of renewing. We must count it our duty to reshape our worldview from scratch, if necessary—strictly on the basis of His teachings. Any category of our thinking that remains unchanged by His word is one in which we should tentatively assume we may be ignorant, misinformed, or deceived.

Christ's thoughts are contrary to the world's. The renewing of our minds will bring our thoughts in line with His and place us at odds with many people who demand that we agree with them. They

¹¹ 1 Peter 2:21

¹² John. 8:31

¹³ Romans 12:2

¹⁴ Ephesians 5:26

will resent our refusal to do so. It is at this point that our loyalty to Christ will be greatly tested. Remember Paul's statement, *"If I still pleased men, I would not be a servant of Christ."*¹⁵

4) *To follow means to obey orders and conform to instruction.*

One who is on a mission under the High Command of the King must learn to "follow" orders. This obviously means obeying commands. In this sense, the Pharisees regarded themselves as disciples of Moses. They rebuked the formerly blind man whom Jesus had healed, because he cooperated with and defended Christ's actions violating the Sabbath Day. He had done this in obedience to Christ's command, but contrary to Moses' law which proscribed the bearing of a burden on the Sabbath. When the healed man invited the Pharisees to become disciples of Jesus, their response was, *"you are His disciple, but we are Moses' disciples."*¹⁶ The man followed Jesus' orders; they (or so they claimed) obeyed those of Moses. This was, in their mind, being a "disciple" of Moses.

Obedience to Christ is mandatory, but this should not be confused with either legalism or works-righteousness. These terms refer to the confused mindset that mistakes salvation as a reward for personal good conduct. Our salvation is indeed a reward for good conduct—but not our own. It is Christ's righteous act that justifies those who are His.¹⁷ We have been correctly informed that salvation is ours *"by grace...through faith."* In the same context, however, Paul tells us that God's purpose in saving us is *"for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."*¹⁸ Those belonging to the Christian community are described, by Peter and by the author of Hebrews, as *"those who obey Him"*:

*And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.*¹⁹

*And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.*²⁰

We would be more inclined to describe Christians as "those who believe..." Yet, those who believe that Jesus is the King are those whose lives exhibit a pattern of obedience to Him. "Those who obey Him" was the natural way to describe the disciple community. Those who are not determined to obey whatever commands Jesus may give are still apparently denying that He is King and Lord. Such are not His disciples. Nor are they *Christians*, by any biblical definition. No one is forced to enter the

¹⁵ Galatians 1:10

¹⁶ John 9:28

¹⁷ Romans 5:18

¹⁸ Ephesians 2:8-10

¹⁹ Acts 5:32

²⁰ Hebrews 5:9

Kingdom of God or to become a Christian, but once one has done so it is not acceptable to revise or redefine the terms of what that means. If we are not committed to teach believers that they must “*observe all things that [Jesus] commanded,*”²¹ then we are not making disciples and we are thus, apparently, not involved in the Great Commission.

The obvious place to discover the commands of Christ is in the record of His life and teachings found in the four biblical gospels. The Sermon on the Mount²² is a treasure trove of Christ’s teachings and commands. Likewise, the teachings of the apostles, found in Acts and the epistles, must also be regarded as “*the commandments of the Lord.*”²³ This is because Jesus conferred unique authority upon His apostles to speak as His agents. Jesus delegated His authority to them when He said, “*As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.*”²⁴ The word *apostle* means “one who is sent.” Of such sent-ones, Jesus said, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.*”²⁵ Following the apostolic teachings is following Christ as surely as is the following of the words He uttered when on earth. True disciples have always recognized this, since one cannot reject those whom Christ authorized without thereby rejecting His authority.

Prerequisites to following Jesus

Having discussed what it means to follow Jesus, it is necessary to consider why so many people who regard themselves to be Christians do not actually follow Him as the Bible mandates. For many, it is simply because they never intended to do so. They were never told that this is what being a Christian means.

Surrender to Christ brings inward peace and security, but it also involves making difficult decisions and sacrifices. Jesus said, “*If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.*”²⁶ Following Jesus, then, requires two prior actions: 1) denial of self, and 2) the taking up of a cross. What do these expressions mean?

1. What does it mean to “deny yourself”?

Those who inquire into Jesus do so for various reasons—some of which are not conducive to becoming His followers. There are those who see Jesus simply as someone to exploit for their own advantage. It is most natural (and sinful) for human beings to cling to their own rights and to press for their own plans and agendas. If they are interested in Christ at all, it is for the same reasons that

²¹ Matthew 28:20

²² Matthew, chapters 5 through 7

²³ 1 Corinthians 14:37

²⁴ John 20:21

²⁵ John 13:20

²⁶ Luke 9:23

they embrace any relationship or any course of action—namely, to benefit themselves. Many never hear of Christ’s demands from the modern pulpit, and many of those who do are repulsed or nonplussed—*Why should I follow Jesus if it can cost me everything, including my life?*

Such a question reveals that the inquirer is not really interested in Christ upon His own terms, or in order to glorify or please God. Such a one might be interested in obtaining a good standing that will get him or her past the security detail at the gates of heaven, so long as he or she can have this without considerably displacing self-interest as a primary arbiter of life decisions. Such an attitude will not allow anyone to genuinely come to or follow Christ.

Some preachers have filled their churches with bodies by preaching a distorted “gospel,” which invites a person to become a *Christian* for their own good, rather than for the glory of God. They promise the sinner that coming to Christ will provide forgiveness, meaning, inner peace, answers to prayer, an eternal mansion in glory, etc. What a sales-pitch! Who could say “no” to that—especially when the price tag has been altered—or hidden altogether?

The “altered” price tag has replaced the true cost of discipleship with such simple actions as the raising of a hand while every head is bowed, the walking down of a church aisle, and/or the repetition of a brief and painless prayer. This doesn’t cost much—perhaps a little pride—but it is only for a moment. After the quick transaction, assurance is often hastily given to the respondent that he or she is now secure for eternity, and will not need to have any fear at the moment of death. Such fine benefits at such minimal expense!

No wonder those who are evangelized on this basis seldom have any interest in studying or obeying scripture, surrendering their possessions, sacrificially serving people, or regularly and vulnerably meeting with other Christians. There has been no denial of self, no conversion, no reorientation, and no rebirth. These things occur only when self-will is permanently surrendered in a decisive act called repentance. We have sold Jesus to people as marketers advertise products. The focus is on personal benefit to the consumer and a significant discounting of the cost. In other words, we have appealed to the self-interest of a “client” as one does in any business transaction. No wonder such converts so seldom show signs of true discipleship. They aren’t disciples of Jesus at all, but merely speculating investors. Tragically, in most cases they have heard of no other kind of “Christianity.”

From birth, we are self-interested. Babies care nothing about inconveniencing others for their own gratification. This is the very nature of sin—*“Me first.”* This is precisely what Jesus came to save us from—our self-centeredness (our *sin*).²⁷ As children growing up without Christ, we quickly learn how to manipulate other people—parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, the opposite sex, bosses, co-workers, customers, etc.—to our own advantage. Sin is placing “self” at the center of one’s own

²⁷ Matthew 1:21

concerns—the place where only God rightfully belongs. We become adept at this. Preachers, knowing well this sinful human orientation, often exploit it. There is a kind of preaching that gives the sinner the impression that Jesus and God are available, like everything and everybody else, to be exploited for one’s self-interest. Instead of calling people to renounce their self-orientation, we too-often affirm and encourage this very characteristic in them by offering them heaven as a commodity at a bargain-basement price: “*Do yourself a favor—get saved!*” By encouraging sinners to take advantage of God in this way, we end up affirming and enforcing the very aspect of human nature that Christ came to save them from!

Those won with such preaching all too often have not really been won to Christ at all. In fact, nothing has changed in their nature or fundamental orientation, because they now expect to have “all this and heaven too!” They do not love Jesus or God, but they love themselves and are happy to allow God to serve their interests without regard for His proper claim upon them. This is not being a disciple, nor is it being *saved*.

The true gospel is about the rightful claims of the King and of His Kingdom. Its emphasis is upon the prerogatives of the King, rather than the desires, preferences, or even *needs* of the sinner. In the Kingdom of God, one’s sinful self-interest must be sacrificed to God’s choices for one’s life. Those who regard this as too great a sacrifice should not be lied to, coddled, or bargained with. They are simply not ready for Jesus. He will not change His terms to salvage their egos.

A Christian woman once told me that she had attempted to talk to another woman about Christ, but the response she received was, “Your Christianity is not for me! In Christianity the highest positions of leadership would be withheld from me as a woman. If I were to become a Christian, I would be held down from reaching my highest potential.” The Christian lady asked me what she could have said to the woman. I replied that I would have told the woman that she was correct: Christianity is not *for her*. It is *for God*—and for those who are ready to stop making demands concerning their own positions or privileges. Christ is nothing less than the High King, and He calls only those who will deny themselves, surrender their own agendas, and come willing to take the lowest place as humble servants. There is no room in God’s Kingdom for any man or woman who insists on having his or her own way.

On this point, I here take the liberty of lifting a paragraph from an earlier book of mine:

Jesus has never been desperate for friends. He is not compelled to ‘settle’ for shallow and insincere companions, or an apathetic bride who will only agree to marry Him for advantage, rather than for love. Those who come to the table intending to negotiate the best deal for themselves with God have simply not yet come to terms with who it is they are dealing with—

and neither He nor His apostles ever offered inclusion in His kingdom on any terms other than unqualified surrender to His lordship.²⁸

Several years ago, the magazine, *Christianity Today*, had a cover story about the propriety of women in church leadership. Four women were interviewed, all of whom were the heads of Christian organizations. Not surprisingly, the opinions expressed were all favorable with reference to the question of women in Christian leadership. In the next month's issue, there was a letter to the editor from a woman complaining about the lopsidedness of the previous issue's treatment of the subject. She said, "Why didn't you interview someone with an opposing opinion, like Elisabeth Elliot?"

Elisabeth Elliot Gren was the widow of the famous missionary and martyr, Jim Elliott, who alongside four of his fellow missionaries, died very young by the spears of Ecuadorian natives. She was well-known to hold a more conservative approach to the question of women in pastoral ministry. Though she herself had planted a church among the very natives who killed her husband, had written many Christian books, and was herself a Bible college professor, she did not believe women should be pastors of congregations. The woman who wrote the complaint to the editors knew that Mrs. Elliot-Gren would have given a different slant on the issue from that of those interviewed for the previous month's article. Interestingly, the very next printed letter to the editors was from the great lady herself. I will never forget the brevity and power of her letter. She wrote:

Leadership, for the Christian, means servanthood. Fulfillment, for the Christian, is not an achievement, but a by-product of self-denial (Matt.16:25). True liberation for the Christian woman is not a right but a reward of humble obedience. Wouldn't the utterly boring 'women's issue' dissolve into nothingness if all of us, men and women alike, would forsake the power struggle and follow Him who did not count equality a thing to be grasped at, but stripped himself of all privilege and humbled himself even to the point of dying? ²⁹

The question of women in leadership, a controversial subject, as raised in the above anecdotes, need not distract us from the point we are presently considering—which has nothing to do with the legitimacy of respective gender roles. Becoming a disciple of Christ requires first, the denial of self—not only when the special occasion requires it, but as a fundamental, permanent reorientation of one's whole life and priorities. Self's interests can no longer be regarded as the arbiter of behavior or outcomes, nor of personal rights that must be defended. To the disciple, the settled attitude must be, as it was for Christ, "*not as I will, but as You will.*"³⁰—or, as Paul put it, "*No longer I...but Christ.*"³¹ Those

²⁸ Steve Gregg, *Why Hell? Three Christian Views* (Thomas Nelson, 2013; Zondervan, 2024), 62

²⁹ Letter to the Editor, *Christianity Today*, 12/12/86

³⁰ Matthew 26:39

³¹ Galatians 2:20

who are not prepared to make that transition need not apply. Again, God is not the one who is desperate—we are!

2. What does it mean to “take up your cross”?

The second precondition for following Christ (that is, being a *disciple*, or a *Christian*) is the taking up of a cross for oneself. This is not intended literally, and most of Christ’s disciples, then and now, have neither experienced crucifixion nor borne a literal cross on their shoulders. A cross, when Jesus was speaking, was not viewed as a religious symbol or a piece of jewelry. Though a cross was a very familiar object to all who heard Christ speak, it was not associated with religion, atonement, spirituality, salvation, nor anything like that. These are later associations that Christians came to adopt after Christ’s crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. To Jesus’ hearers, the cross was an instrument of execution—the worst imaginable kind—used by the Romans to make an example of anyone guilty of capital crimes, but who did not have the special exemption of Roman citizenship. No one other than Jesus, at that time, made any connection between a cross and the means of His own demise. When Jesus spoke of the need for His disciples to take up their crosses, they did not yet know that He would be crucified, and had no “theology of the cross” in place to allow them to spiritualize His reference to them taking up their crosses.

Carrying a cross to the place of crucifixion was something the Romans often required the condemned man to do. A truly obstinate prisoner might simply refuse to do so, of course, and accept the consequent beating he would receive for his insubordination. If this was his choice no one could force him to do otherwise. Though his crucifixion would still occur whether he agreed to it or not, if he was carrying a cross to the place of his own execution, he was doing so by his own decision. He was resigned to his fate.

Jesus did not say, “If you will follow me, you must be literally crucified, as I will be.” His comment makes no specific reference to their *dying* for Him but, rather, to their *living* under the weight and stigma of a cross. While many Christians have been called upon to die for Jesus (some, literally, on crosses), it is often every bit as demanding, or more so, to *live* a lifetime under the cross. Dying for Jesus requires only one heroic decision, and the consequences may be over in minutes or hours. By contrast, *living* for Jesus lasts a lifetime, and involves many painful and heroic sacrificial decisions being willingly made over the course of years.

In biblical times the man who was seen willingly bearing a cross on his shoulder had a different attitude about his life than the onlookers had about theirs. He had accepted the fact that his life was no longer his. He was humble, accepting the scorn of the crowds, who loved to torment men on their way to crucifixion. Such a condemned man was no longer mindful of his “rights” or “social status.” In

his mind, he was already dead—dead to the world, dead to pleasure, to wealth, to his ambitions and dreams. His old, self-interested life was over.

The “cross” borne for Christ may be perceived as the sufferings and the reproach that the disciple must welcome on behalf of his or her loyalty to Christ, or it may simply refer to the willing surrender of one’s own will to the costly will of God. Such a life of resignation to the will of God is applicable to all decisions:

- Shall I remain unmarried, celibate and lonely?
- Shall I remain unhappily married, faithful and lonely?
- Shall I work at an honest, menial job at low pay or one that has more prestige and pays better, but requires certain compromises?
- Shall I increase my standard of living to the maximum that my income will allow, or shall I, rather, simplify my own personal lifestyle in order to increase my “standard of giving”?
- Shall I seek my own safety and comfort, or take risks for others and the Kingdom of God?
- Shall I literally lay down my life for a brother—or even for an enemy?

These questions will be answered differently by one who is willingly bearing a cross than by one who has never seriously considered doing so. The plainest meaning of one’s accepting a cross to be borne is that the disciple is not at his or her own liberty, but has come into captivity to fulfill the will of another. Jesus does not tell His disciples whether their cross will be laid upon them by God or by the devil. It actually didn’t matter. It was only their concern to bear it faithfully. Even the literal cross that claimed the life of Jesus Himself, though ostensibly instigated by Satan, was accepted by Jesus as *“the cup which My Father has given Me.”*³²

To be a follower of Christ for your whole life will be impossible if you shrink from following Him in this matter of denying your self-interest and accepting a cross. Jesus wore a crown of thorns. Do we expect to wear a crown of roses?³³ So long as we believe that being a Christian means recruiting Jesus to our project of having our best life now, we delay beginning on the journey of following Christ and being His disciples.

If we thought that Jesus suffered for us so as to exempt us from suffering, we have been misinformed. He suffered as He did in order to lead the way for those who follow Him in the path of resistance and difficulty:

³² John 18:11

³³ Paraphrasing Thomas Watson *The Divine Cordial*, p.19: “Was his head crowned with thorns, and do we think to be crowned with roses?”

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps...³⁴

There is a place of inward peace associated with such a full surrender of our agendas. One receives the comfort of the Holy Spirit, known only by true disciples of Jesus. However, that does not alter the fact that one's own will must constantly be surrendered to that of another, which is where most of the battles in the disciple's warfare will be waged. Is following Jesus worth the sacrifice? There is obviously a cost. One must make the decision for oneself—but not before contemplating such matters as those we will now consider.

³⁴ 1 Peter 2:21

Chapter Three

It Comes at a Cost

*Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them,
“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children,
brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.
And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple...
So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.*

(Luke 14:26, 27, 33)

A caller to my radio program once asked, “If Christianity is so great, why aren’t more people Christians?” The answer seemed a simple one. It is like asking, “If Lear Jets are so great, why doesn’t everyone have one?” There is no question of value here. It is a question of cost. A Lear Jet may be worth every penny of its price, but most people will never prioritize their budgets so as to sell everything they have to obtain one.

Perhaps a better parallel would be to ask, “If John Deere makes such a good earthmover, why doesn’t everyone buy one?” In this case, the expense would still be a factor, with the additional consideration that most people do not really believe that they have need for one. Those who choose not to follow Jesus when they hear who He is and what He requires are probably reacting to both factors—following Him costs too much, and they can’t see the need for Him in their lives.

Passages like those in Luke, cited above, are often called the “hard sayings” of Jesus. Here was a man who was not yet a world-class celebrity, viewed only as an itinerant peasant philosopher and rabbi, and yet He had the *chutzpah* to tell total strangers to leave their jobs, their families, their possessions, to bear a cross—all just to follow Him around and listen to Him? Two questions naturally come to our minds. First, *Who, exactly, did He think He was to make such demands?* And second, *Why did so many people actually do it?* What induced them to think it was worth the price to be with Him?

As audacious as it might seem for Jesus to require so much from people, at least no one can say that He made the proposition alluring. He wanted people to know what they were leaving behind to accompany Him. Those who followed did so voluntarily. Unlike a Roman soldier, Jesus had no civil authority to force anyone to come with Him. Having embarked on such an adventure, they were ostensibly free to leave Him at any time—which some did.¹ Also, before anyone totally burned their bridges, He warned them of exactly how much it would cost them to continue as His followers—

¹ John 6:66

namely, *everything*. Jewish men and women were as good as anyone at recognizing a bargain, and that seems to be the way those who followed Him viewed the receiving of such a call.

Jesus made it plain that He did not want anyone along who had not counted the cost in advance to determine whether the vocation was worth the sacrifice. He likened the prospective disciple to a contractor planning to build a tower:

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’?²

Jesus sympathetically anticipated the regrets and shame one might feel who initially responded to the call but who fizzled out when the going got tough. What impression will it give to unbelieving friends concerning one’s former zeal for Christ? Defection from following Him will make Jesus look bad, as if He really wasn’t “*all that*” after all! Won’t they say with a smirk, “We knew you’d be back!”? It is better not starting this project unless one is prepared to go the distance. We don’t know how many potential candidates were peeled off from the group by these considerations, but some stayed—to the deadly end.

The cost is indeed great, and some today, as then, will be put-off by the sacrifice required. However, sacrifices are routinely made in order to obtain things of value. Consider, for example, the price many will pay for a university education, a family home, a car, or to make a very promising investment. Things of value—like a spouse or children—come at considerable expense, and require a lifelong series of sacrifices. Nonetheless, we resolutely pay the price for those things which we think will ultimately make us glad that we did. It is not uncommon for a family’s provider to lay out every last dollar on hand to purchase the long-term residence for the family, or for an entrepreneur to invest all that he or she has in a promising start-up business. We are not unfamiliar with making sacrifices. The question is simply one of what we perceive to be of value.

Of treasures and pearls

Since access to God’s kingdom actually costs more than any other earthly investment (namely, our whole life!) it is reasonable to ask whether the price tag is excessive or whether what is gained is worth more than what is surrendered in its acquisition. I might add that God, being who He is, has every right to require sacrifices of us, whether we receive back any reward or not. However, those who follow Jesus do know that they have found a treasure.

² Luke 14:28-30

Matthew's 13th chapter contains a collection of seven parables (or eight, depending on how one counts them) about the Kingdom of God.³ In this chapter, we find two short parables, revealing the surpassing value of the Kingdom of God to the one who finds and obtains it.

Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.⁴

Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.⁵

At first blush, there appears to be a redundancy in these two parables. Both compare the Kingdom with something of surpassing value, and both represent a buyer who gladly divests himself of all his possessions to obtain the item. In both cases, the item is the Kingdom of Heaven (a.k.a., the Kingdom of God).

At the least, both parables speak of supreme sacrifice, and both also suggest that the transaction represents a great opportunity to gain something of greater value than that of the sacrifice made. I believe the inclusion of two parables on this point is not a redundancy. Earlier in Matthew 13, there are two short parables grouped together that predict the growth of the Kingdom.⁶ Those two parables—that of the mustard seed, and that of the leaven—are not redundant. They present different aspects of the Kingdom's growth. The first describes its expansive growth in the world, and the second predicts its intensive, spreading impact within and upon its environment. The parables have one thing in common (the expansion of the Kingdom), but they present two facets of the point.

I am convinced that this is also the case with the twin parables about the surpassing value of the Kingdom. Some interpreters take them to be describing the sacrifice Christ made to obtain the church, which is viewed as His treasure and His pearl. Others see the parables as presenting the cost to the would-be disciple, who must forsake everything to obtain a piece of that action. I would propose that both are right. However, the first parable describes Christ's purchase of the Kingdom, and the second presents the equivalent sacrifice made by the disciple in order to participate in it. This conclusion is not an arbitrary compromise between the two opinions of different interpreters. It is, in my mind, suggested by the details of the parables themselves.

³ Matthew favors the term "Kingdom of Heaven," which is interchangeable with the more common phrase "Kingdom of God." This difference in terminology is discussed more thoroughly in *Empire of the Risen Son—Book One: There is Another King*, chapter two.

⁴ Matthew 13:44

⁵ *Ibid.*, vv.45-46

⁶ *Ibid.*, vv.31-33

In the parable of the buried treasure a straightforward purchase of a commodity for sale is not depicted. The treasure is “*hidden in a field*” and that field must be purchased somewhat by stealth to obtain ownership of the treasure, the existence of which only the purchaser is aware.

The scenario Jesus described was not altogether unfamiliar to Jesus’ hearers. Throughout Israel’s history, the land had been overrun by invaders—either those seeking to conquer Israel, or who simply passed through on their way to invade another country and who decided to rob and pillage among the vulnerable Jews, *en route*. Since one never knew when such invaders might come and take everything an Israelite owned, some would bury their valuables on their property where strangers passing through would not find them. Of course, there was always the possibility that the only person who knew of this cache would be killed by future invaders, or would otherwise die before passing along the information about the buried treasure. Such treasures might never be discovered, or they might be found accidentally, perhaps generations later, by someone digging or ploughing in the field long after the death of the former owner.

That is the scenario behind the parable. A typical servant is pictured as accidentally discovering a treasure while working in another’s field. Having reason to believe that he is the only one who knows of its existence, the servant buries it again and is now the only man aware of a hidden value in that piece of real estate. After liquidating his own meager assets to get up the necessary capital, he purchases the land at the price of an ordinary field. Having thus legally obtained the mineral rights to the land, he exhumes the treasure and is a very happy man.

The purchase of a field to obtain a hidden treasure introduces an additional step, not found in the parable of the pearl-buyer (who simply makes a direct, public purchase of the thing he desires). This corresponds to Christ’s own case. The parable reveals the great value of the Kingdom *to Christ Himself*. He values and seeks a people of His own—a bride for Himself. This bride happens to be hidden within the larger population of the world.⁷ Jesus, in order to extract His own people from among the devil’s people in the world, had to purchase the whole world, just to recover His bride out of it.⁸ That Jesus’ death was the purchase price for the whole world is frequently affirmed in scripture:

*Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*⁹

*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.*¹⁰

*And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.*¹¹

⁷ In an earlier parable, Jesus had said “*The field is the world*” (Matthew 13:38)

⁸ John 15:19

⁹ John 1:29

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:19

¹¹ 1 John 2:2

Christ left the glory He originally shared with the Father,¹² took on the weaknesses of mortal flesh,¹³ endured the tests and trials common to mankind,¹⁴ and sacrificed His life on the cross.¹⁵ Thus, it is no exaggeration to describe Him as having sold “*all that He had*” in order to purchase the field of the world, in order to obtain His Kingdom.

The scenario of this particular parable does not correspond as admirably to the sacrifice made by the disciple in order to obtain the Kingdom because the Christian has not purchased one thing in order to obtain another as Christ did. Therefore, it seems certain that the purchase of the treasure in the field represents the price paid by Jesus to obtain the Kingdom of God—His people, and His bride.

On the other hand, I am persuaded that the second parable representing the Kingdom as a costly pearl is presenting the other side of the transaction. That Christ calls disciples to “*forsake all*” has been noted in the scriptures cited at the head of this chapter. Therefore, the action of the pearl-buyer reasonably corresponds to the disciple’s actions, which mirror those of Christ Himself in treating the Kingdom of God as of highest value.

From time-to-time, I receive advertisements in the mail, wishing to sell me silver bullion as an investment. Frequently, the sellers will say, “Warren Buffet is buying up enormous amounts of silver” or “The Chinese government is amassing and stockpiling silver,” or some similar line. Since I am neither a disciple of Warren Buffet nor of China, I might say, “Why should I care what they are buying?” However, the obvious subtext of the information is: “They know the value of an investment. If they are buying up silver, maybe you should do the same”—and, I can’t deny, they make a valid point. However, there are things more valuable than silver and gold (and I do not mean platinum!). Gold is of no eternal value. Revelation 21:21 depicts it as having no eternal use better than as pavement for the streets! When Peter said to the beggar, “*Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you...*”, he was not complaining or seeking pity for himself as an indigent. Rather, he was saying, “You hope I will give you some coin. I can do better than that for you!” The disciple of Jesus in His Kingdom definitely has that which is worth more than money.

That Christ, who certainly knows the value of a thing, would sacrifice everything to obtain the Kingdom, should tell us something about its worth. Knowing this value, it is a small matter for us to make the equivalent sacrifice to that which Christ made in order to gain the same Kingdom. The things He had to surrender were worth infinitely more than the things we are asked to abandon in the same pursuit. If the Kingdom is perceived by Christ as being worth the forfeiture of all things, how can we place less value upon it in our desire to acquire it? That the price paid by Jesus is to be mirrored in our own sacrifice is plainly declared by Paul:

¹² John 17:5

¹³ Romans 8:3; Philippians 2:7

¹⁴ Hebrews 4:15

¹⁵ John 10:18; Philippians 2:8

...we judge thus: that if One died for all, then...those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.¹⁶

Jesus paid the price that made His Kingdom a reality—quite apart from any response you or I may choose to make to it. The Kingdom exists as an objective phenomenon. My participation in it remains only in the realm of potentialities until I meet the conditions for entrance. Some may think that, since Jesus made the full payment, the thing He purchased comes to us free as a gift without conditions. This is a critical misunderstanding.

If I buy my grandson an expensive car, and offer it to him for free, it is a gift. However, I may place the condition upon it that he has to obtain a driver's license and agree to obey all traffic laws. If he will not agree to such conditions the gift cannot be his. The presence of such conditions does not change the "free gift" status of the vehicle into a purchase on his part. By getting a license and following the pertinent laws he is simply meeting conditions to receive a conditional gift, but his doing so in no way earns or purchases the car.

Many gifts may have conditions attached. My grandmother told me that, if I would attend a particular college of her choosing, she would cover the full tuition. This was a generous gift offer, but I never received it because I did not choose to attend the college she suggested. When my first daughter was born, I received cards in the mail from stores that sell baby things, promising that, if I would present the card in the store, I would receive some free merchandise for the baby. It is not uncommon for gifts to have strings attached. This fact does not compromise their status as "gifts." Parents who lavish valuable gifts on their children without ever requiring responsible behavior on their part are not generous givers; they are simply cowardly *enablers*.

The Kingdom of God was fully purchased by Christ, and inclusion in it is offered as a free gift to any individual. It is a good thing that it *is* a gift since none of us could ever afford to pay such a price as Jesus had to pay to obtain it. However, there are conditions for entry. Jesus was explicit about this:

"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple...So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple."¹⁷

Three times Jesus speaks of conditions under which one "*cannot be My disciple*." Notice, it is not a question of "may not," but of "cannot." Jesus *is not* saying, "If you do not do all these things, I will

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

¹⁷ Luke 14:26, 27, 33

not have you.” He *is* saying, “If you can’t willingly surrender these things, you don’t want Me enough to carry out your mission! It can’t work. This is what full participation will demand of you. Without your complete renunciation of all distractions and rival loves, there is no way that following Me can work out for you.”

By nature, discipleship makes demands upon a person’s comforts, peer approval, possessions, and even one’s mortal life. Those who cannot sacrifice such things cannot hope to succeed. It is best to get that information on the table from the beginning.

There are really only two options in life: you will either live and die for *something* or you will live and die for *nothing*. If you don’t have something in your life worth *dying* for, you actually have not yet found anything really worth *living* for.

This is similar to the demands for being in the military. One can’t simply come and play at war on weekends and hope to be a participant in the battle. A soldier has signed away the freedom of living as a civilian. One does this in the hopes of promoting a better future world for oneself, one’s loved ones, and all people. Without that total commitment, one simply isn’t involved in the enterprise. This is why Paul exhorted Timothy:

*You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.*¹⁸

It is the same with the Kingdom of God. Some religious people may want to wade in the shallows of involvement in Churchianity, but what is required is a flying leap into the deep end—into the thick of the battle. Christ isn’t a beggar seeking a contribution, but a King requiring a full surrender. Consider the relative roles played by the chicken and the steer in providing for their master a breakfast of steak and eggs. The chicken simply makes a contribution, but for the steer it requires a full commitment.

The Kingdom is presently locked in conflict against the resistant vestiges of the retreating kingdom of darkness. The world is not a playground; it is a battleground. Those who live their lives oblivious to this fact are like children unknowingly playing soccer in a minefield. In this event you are either all-in or all-out—or all over the place. Jesus set the example for the rest of us by being *all-in*, “*even [to] the death of the cross.*”¹⁹ How can the foot soldier be less committed to the Kingdom, and sacrifice less for it, than does the King he or she serves?

So, having demonstrated in the first parable the surpassing value that Jesus sees in His Kingdom, a second parable presents the reasonable response of those who wish to get a piece of that prize. The analogy of purchasing something very valuable is again employed in the parable of the pearl of great

¹⁸ 2 Timothy 2:3-4

¹⁹ Philippians 2:8

price. As the King has sacrificed all, so is it only appropriate and necessary for those who would follow Him to do the same.

What does it mean to “forsake all that you have”?

My favorite exposition on the parable of the pearl is the rather whimsical dialogue presented by Juan Carlos Ortiz, in his book, *Disciple*, where writes:

...when we find Jesus, it costs us everything. He has happiness, joy, peace, healing, security, eternity, everything. So we say, “I want this pearl. How much is it?”

“Well,” the seller says, “it’s very expensive.”

“But how much?” we ask.

“Well, a very large amount.”

“Do you think I could buy it?”

“Oh, of course. Everyone can buy it.”

“But didn’t you say it was very expensive?”

“Yes.”

“Well, how much is it?”

“Everything you have,” says the seller.

We make up our minds. “All right, I’ll buy it,” we say.

“Well, what do you have?” he wants to know. “Let’s write it down.”

“Well, I have ten thousand dollars in the bank.”

“Good—ten thousand dollars. What else.”

“That’s all. That’s all I have.”

“Nothing more?”

“Well, I have a few dollars here in my pocket.”

“How much?”

We start digging. “Well, let’s see—thirty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred, a hundred twenty dollars.”

“That’s fine. What else do you have?”

“Well, nothing. That’s all.”

“Where do you live?” He’s still probing.

“In my house. Yes, I have a house.”

“The house too, then.” He writes that down.

“You mean I have to live in my camper?”

“You have a camper? That, too. What else?”

“I’ll have to sleep in my car!”

“You have a car?”

“Two of them.”

“Both become mine, both cars. What else?”

“Well, you already have my money, my house, my camper, my cars. What else do you want?”

“Are you alone in this world?”

“No, I have a wife and two children....”

“Oh, yes, your wife and children, too. What else?”

“I have nothing left! I am left alone now.”

Suddenly the seller exclaims, “Oh, I almost forgot! *You* yourself, too! Everything becomes mine—wife, children, house, money, cars—and you too.”

Then he goes on. “Now listen—I will allow you to use all these things for the time being. But don’t forget that they are mine, just as you are. And whenever I need any of them, you must give them up, because now I am the owner.”²⁰

This is what it means to “forsake all.” One might think that it leaves the disciple a destitute pauper, but it actually involves, initially, only the *transfer of title* of everything one *is* and *has* to the King. It is thereafter His decision, differing from case to case, what shall be done with His things that remain in your possession. What was once yours—even your life—is now owned by Him, and must be regarded as being entirely at His disposal. Otherwise you have no King, and do not belong to the Kingdom.

Peter and the apostles are said to have “left all” to follow Jesus.²¹ If anyone had met the terms of genuine discipleship, these were the guys. Yet, even after becoming a follower of Christ, Peter still lived in his former home, cared for a family, including his mother-in-law, possessed a fishing boat, tackle, etc. In what sense, then, can it be said that he had “forsaken” everything to follow Jesus? Simply this: all that had once been strictly at his own disposal was now surrendered to Jesus for His purposes. Peter’s house became the lodging and ministry center for Jesus and His team, when they were in Capernaum;²² the boat became Jesus’ transport, and sometimes even His pulpit.²³ Even the fishing tackle came in handy to meet certain purposes of the kingdom.²⁴

As far as we know Peter did not physically have to part with anything except his job and settled lifestyle when he took up Christ’s commission. Twenty-something years later, Peter and the other

²⁰ From Juan Carlos Ortiz, *Disciple: A Handbook for New Believers*, (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 1975, 1995), 34-35

²¹ Matthew 19:27

²² Mark 1:29ff

²³ Luke 5:3; Mark 4:35-36

²⁴ Matthew 17:27; John 21:6

apostles traveled around, taking their wives with them (their children, presumably, being now grown).²⁵

Things might have been otherwise. Had Jesus wished for Peter to give things away, the disciple would have done so, because he had forsaken everything in his heart to be available at Jesus' bidding.

Christ's will for the possessions of the rich, young ruler was different. In Christ's judgment, that man needed to actually divest himself of his possessions lest they hold him back from following after Jesus undistracted. The man's refusal to do so at the command of Christ proves that Jesus was not mistaken in seeing the man's riches as a liability. When we surrender all to Christ we do not have any stake in whatever He may do with His own things (which we had once regarded as ours before surrendering to His lordship)—just as we have no stake in how our neighbor may dispose of his own things. They are not our concern.

Another, more cheerful, aspect of this transaction is that not only our possessions but also our *problems* become His. We are told that we may cast all our cares (worries) upon Christ,²⁶ to whom they now belong. When a master owns a servant, the servant's problems are the master's concerns, not the servant's. There have been many times when, under burdensome trials, I found complete peace by praying out loud, "Because I am Yours, this problem is yours, not mine. I will leave it to you as a matter of your own business." This was more as a reminder to me, of course, than to Him. However, it is what it means to "*cast your burden on the Lord.*"²⁷

The desire for self-ownership has been the downfall of many who have had some passing interest in following Christ. Luke tells us of three men who were interested, up to a point, in becoming disciples:

Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God."

And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."²⁸

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:5

²⁶ 1 Peter 5:7

²⁷ Psalm 55:22

²⁸ Luke 9:57-62

In each case, the candidate for the Kingdom showed initial interest, but appears to have been put-off and disqualified by his insistence upon retaining certain rights to himself. The first man was a volunteer, but Jesus told Him that discipleship would not be a comfortable life. We may assume (though we are not told) that this news caused him to change his mind.

The second and third candidates had something in common—family connections that they wished to put first. In fact, both of them, in their answer to Christ, requested that they be granted a delay in their obedience. Perhaps the core problem for them both is expressed in their words, “*me first.*” They both said, “*Let me first...*” There is no room for “*me first*” in the life of a disciple in Christ’s Kingdom. However, there is great satisfaction and abundance of liberty and joy in following Jesus as can be had nowhere else. The kingdom, after all, “*is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*”²⁹ But these benefits can only be had at the price set by Christ Himself—total self-abandon to His will.

²⁹ Romans 14:17

Chapter Four

Cost and Benefit

*If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross,
and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it,
but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.
For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?
(Matthew 16:24-26)*

*For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost,
whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation,
and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him,
saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish'?
(Luke 14:28-30)*

We come now to the other side of the cost/benefit analysis. If God has so arranged things that following Jesus is not possible without the full surrender of everything we have, what is it about the Kingdom life that renders it worth such a sacrifice? God is not cruel to His children (so He would never make things harder than necessary), nor is He a bad economist (as if He would ask them to make a bad investment). No one has a greater interest in the happiness and well-being of a child than does a loving parent. A father sees further ahead and understands the true road to happiness and satisfaction, far better than does the near-sighted child, who often disdains nothing so much as delayed gratification. If the Kingdom did not hold the greatest prospects of well-being, happiness, and satisfaction for His children, God would never have urged us to make the sacrifices necessary to have a place in it. We are asked to trust His wisdom and goodness in this matter.

So, what is it about Kingdom citizenship, or discipleship, that has held such appeal to the millions of clear-sighted individuals who, throughout history, have chosen to meet the price?

The value of the Kingdom of God to the disciple

The benefits of discipleship are many. However, they are not such things as can be appreciated by someone still mesmerized by the shiny baubles that the world displays to distract or lure its foolish captives away from that which the world simply cannot offer at any price. Let's see what Jesus

Himself said would be the rewards of complete surrender to Him as Lord and King. I have an idea what I have to give up. What does Christ offer in their place?

1. *To be with Him*

There is a major assumption, throughout the Bible, that may not always be prominent in the thinking of religious people—many of whom have merely seen in religion primarily a means to some self-serving end. The biblical assumption is that God is eminently capable of being valued and loved for who He is, quite apart from any prospect of our receiving anything from Him. That is one of the primary lessons of the Book of Job. Satan was betting that this assumption is not true. Job was the Guinea pig. Satan lost the bet.

Many who identify as Christians seem not to have really processed this fact. The question, “What shall I have in exchange for serving God?” is answered very simply: “You will have God!” If this cannot be seen as the one reward above all others worth having, then one’s readiness to become a disciple of the King should not be assumed. A true lover gladly sacrifices all—and will even die—for the beloved. Those who truly love God, require nothing more than the knowledge that He is blessed by our actions. Such a one desires nothing so much as to enjoy Him. This is what love is.

Many believers are frustrated that they seem to love God so little, but do not know what can be done to redress this deficiency. I have two suggestions for such people:

a) In most cases of such a malady, whole-hearted love for God is being crowded out of the heart by the presence of love for His rivals—things, pleasures, people, popularity, ambition, etc. Insofar as a woman loves multiple men or even one man besides her husband, she will have a diminished capacity for loving her husband supremely, and will entirely fail to love him exclusively. There may be some affection or appreciation toward him, but if he is not the sole object of her devotion, she can never love him as she ought. One cannot have two supreme loves.

This is why God was so intolerant of idolatry. None of the pagan gods required the love of their sycophants. For a worshiper of any pagan deity to spread his or her devotion among multiple idols was no problem. None of the demonic images objected because they had no love for, nor expected any love from, their adherents. This is one consequence, I suppose, of their non-existence.

Yahweh is not like them. He is the only God who desires the love of His followers, because He is love. All other things were created by Him for our enjoyment, but not for our devotion. Everything that is not God Himself must be enjoyed only as gifts from the one who gives them. Giving God His proper place is a choice that can be made, but it will be at the cost of all things that rival Him as objects of devotion.

Those persons, places, and things that we love have something about them that makes them attractive to us. Every one of these attractive features, however, is a gift from God who possesses all of these elements in infinitude. Do you admire others for their beauty, their wit, their creativity, their intelligence, their strength, their musical ability, their generosity, their humility, their attentive care, their problem-solving ability, or any other virtue? Imagine people with whom you would enjoy spending a lot of time and try to identify whatever it is that they possess that captivates you. That thing that you identify in them is possessed by God to an infinite degree. He is the source of it in them: *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights...”*¹ God is the infinite possessor and fountainhead of all desirable traits. Are you impressed by great works of art, by musical compositions, by wonderful stories, by delectable foods, by delightful climates and vistas? These are but a pinch of God’s store of wonders that proceed from His glory and magnificence. He is the Artist, and these are but a token of what He has in store for those who love Him. Those who settle for anything less than God, are settling for crumbs from His table. As Saint Theresa of Avila wrote: *“Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices.”*

One who was probably the wealthiest king of his time, who lacked nothing that the ancient world could provide to the rich and powerful, found one thing only that could permanently fascinate and enthrall him:

*One thing have I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord
and to inquire in his temple.*²

This mirrors Mary of Bethany’s obsession with Jesus Himself, sitting at His feet and hearing His voice. Jesus said that Mary had chosen the *“one thing...needed.”*³ Notice, this was a choice Mary had made over other possible options. She had discovered the one thing that is needed by every human soul.

b) Another way in which greater love can be cultivated is by increasing one’s gratitude factor. Few things interfere with feelings of love so much as does a sense of *entitlement*. This is an especially ugly aspect of pride, or arrogance. In truth, few people owe us anything at all, and we have made enough mistakes and done enough harm to others, for which we have not suffered as we deserved to have,

¹ James 1:17

² Psalm 27:4 ESV

³ Luke 10:42

to put us in the negative side of the ledger of indebtedness. Despite any injustices we have suffered from others, on balance, we have all received much better than we can honestly claim to deserve. When we humble ourselves to realize that we are not uniquely important people, and that the world does not owe us any favors, we can become grateful people. Spoiled children are incapable of feeling gratitude, since every favor they have enjoyed as a result of the generosity of others is perceived as something *owed* to them. However, when we bring our self-image into sync with reality, we must realize that every kindness, every mercy, every gift we have received has been undeserved, and has been provided by persons who made sacrifices for us when they actually owed us nothing. This is the basis of being grateful people—and is one of the greatest secrets of happiness.

What do we imagine that God owes us? Certainly nothing other than condemnation for our rebellion against Him! Yet, He withholds His hand of discipline unaccountably long and still brings into our lives, along with correction, pure mercy and generosity. The kindness of others is a gift from Him. Any modicum of health and pleasure that any of us enjoys comes from His hand. Even the offer of forgiveness, and of ultimately living and reigning with Him, is outrageously unwarranted in terms of anything we have earned. Ingratitude to God is a sin, but gratitude makes the heart appreciative. If cultivated, gratitude is a seedbed from which love for Him will grow. Before we allow a complaint to take root in our minds, we should instruct our hearts, “Think of all the undeserved benefits I have received—many of which have been withheld from people much better than myself!” It is almost miraculous how such a habit will improve one’s life and please God. David said, “*Bless the Lord, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits!*”⁴ Then he proceeded to enumerate a dozen or more blessings he had received. Very few habits of mind are calculated to increase one’s appreciation and love for God more than this. “*We love Him because He first loved us.*”⁵ It is hard for emotional love to be absent where there is adequate gratitude.

It is in the nature of *agape* love (and even of romantic love, which is not the same thing but bears some resemblance to it), that the lover takes great pleasure in the very presence of the beloved. This is true whether one is thinking of a spouse, one’s own child, a personal hero, or Jesus. To know that that person wants to be with you and is pleased in you rivals all other pleasures. To know that one has pleased God, and that Jesus is delighted, is greater than any worldly satisfaction available.

To those who love God, His presence and His pleasure become the ultimate reward. It is like the child whose father takes time out of his day to go and watch his track meet, or her musical recital, or even just to sit on the shore fishing with the child. To hear one’s father say, “You did excellently!” does more to build the child’s character and confidence than could a cabinet full of shiny trophies.

⁴ Psalm 103:2

⁵ 1 John 4:19

What pleasure could be desired above that of having God say, “I want to hang out with you, and watch how you run in the race,” or “Let’s go fishing together—*for men*”? Nothing this world can offer can reasonably bring so much delight as to hear God say, “*Well done, good and faithful servant.*”⁶ Though this statement will be followed by the bestowing of other rewards, the words themselves count more than any additional trophies that may follow. God is most pleased with those who value His presence above all else. Those who do not desire Him need to double check and see if they know exactly who it is we are talking about here.

The greatest benefit to the disciples of Jesus—the great reward of their sacrifices—is His presence with them. Those who actually know Him are aware of this. Though Jesus often needed a respite from the crowds, the disciples were always permitted to accompany Him. “*But Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the sea.*”⁷ It is to them that He promised, “*I am with you always...*”⁸ He said: “... *follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also.*”⁹

Having Jesus is the greatest reward for following Jesus. As Francis Chan put it:

“Either people will be awed by the sacred or they will not. If the sacred is not enough, then it is clear that the Spirit has not done a work in their lives. If the sheep don’t hear His voice, let them walk away.”¹⁰

2. To be taught by Him

Jesus puts out a general welcome to all who wish to come to Him, urging, “*take My yoke upon you and learn from Me.*”¹¹ To be under the yoke is to be under servitude and under instruction. It is the privilege of disciples to be under servitude and the instruction of Christ. The disciple is a learner directly under Christ: “*And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.*”¹²

One who is taught by Christ may also learn from men and women who are His instruments but none but Christ must be regarded as the ultimate Teacher: “*for One is your Teacher, the Christ...*”¹³ It is the Spirit of Christ (“the Anointing”) who leads into all truth. “*But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing*

⁶ Matthew 25:21

⁷ Mark 3:7

⁸ Matthew 28:20

⁹ John 12:26

¹⁰ Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018) 52

¹¹ Matthew 11:28-30

¹² Mark 4:34

¹³ Matthew 23:8

teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him."¹⁴

Learning directly from the Spirit of Jesus is the disciple's privilege, but one must recognize that the Holy Spirit also gives gifts, including teachers,¹⁵ to the church. Human teachers, through whom the Spirit teaches, as well as personal inward guidance and instruction, are equally means by which Christ teaches His disciples. Not everyone who teaches is necessarily anointed as a vessel through whom the Spirit genuinely speaks. Every thought communicated to us by others is subject to review, criticism, and possible rejection, by Christ's Spirit within the true disciple.

3. To be set free

*Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."*¹⁶

The very definition of discipleship is remaining within the realm of His instruction, believing and following what He teaches. It may seem ironic that the servitude of Christ's yoke is actually the path of greatest liberty. How can this be?

The New Testament assumes that true disciples have been given a new heart inclined toward obedience, and possessing no greater desire than to please God in all things. Many religious people (like the Pharisees) had a desire to keep God's commandments, but they found (as Paul testifies autobiographically)¹⁷ that they could not live as they knew they should, because of the bondage of the flesh to sin.

When Jesus told the Jews that by becoming disciples they could become free, the hearers arrogantly objected. To whom were they in bondage that they should require Him to liberate them? This was a really strange question for them to ask, since their liberation from the Romans was precisely what they were waiting for the Messiah to accomplish. However, Jesus did not seem to them like a man with any aspirations of running-off the Romans—so *from whom* could He promise to free them?

Jesus told them that they were slaves of sin and needed to be set free. This liberation would occur in the course of their continuing in His words as His disciples. This is precisely how the angel had summarized Jesus' mission when addressing Joseph: "*you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*"¹⁸

¹⁴ 1 John 2:27

¹⁵ Ephesians 4:11; 1 Corinthians 12:28

¹⁶ John 8:31-32

¹⁷ Romans 7:14-23

¹⁸ Matthew 1:21

Those who are Christ's followers receive the assistance of His Word, which is "*alive and powerful*,"¹⁹ and of the Holy Spirit, to reshape the course of their lives through submission to the truth. Sin dominates, to a very large degree, through ignorance and deception. Whoever chooses to sin is succumbing, at that moment, to a delusion. He or she is thinking that sinning will satisfy and impart happiness, that there will be few or no adverse consequences for the action, or at least that the pleasure of sin will outweigh the damage that may result from it. Not one of these beliefs is true. Satan is the deceiver, and it is precisely by such deception that he keeps us involved like prisoners in sinful behaviors even when we want to shake them off.

Only the power of God liberates people from sinful bondage—and this power is a major benefit of following Christ. I have known hundreds of people who have testified to having obtained freedom from addictions and self-destructive habits to which they were in bondage. They were freed by surrendering to Christ and entering the Kingdom of God. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about their scandalous sinful bondages from which they were delivered. He said that those in such bondage "*will not inherit the kingdom of God*":

*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.*²⁰

However, in the next verse, he speaks of their having been delivered from such lifestyles, so that they now could participate in the Kingdom life:

And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

Being a slave of sin may provide momentary "fun" to those whose threshold for enjoyment is low, but the difference between *fun* and *happiness* is a wide chasm. No one who knows the "*righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*" (which is how Paul describes life in the Kingdom of God²¹) could ever be satisfied to be reduced to the highest "highs" experienced by those living in their sins. Once one has truly tasted the Kingdom, it spoils him or her for the tawdry pleasures of the world. Those who never find freedom from their sins and addictions eventually come to ruin and grief—both in this life and in the next. Deliverance is only found in following Christ.

4. The blessings of the beatitudes

¹⁹ Hebrews 4:12

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

²¹ Romans 14:17

Jesus' famous discourse to His disciples on the mountainside opened with a series of statements called "beatitudes." Jesus gave special promises that apply to the "poor," the "hungry," the "weeping," and the "persecuted." These were words He used to describe His followers.²² He began His message:

"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets."²³

To describe someone as "blessed" means that he or she is fortunate, enviable, and in truly happy circumstances. The phrase, "*Blessed are...!*" could be paraphrased, "*How blissful...!*" Jesus' list of the circumstances that render a person "blissful" or "enviable" seems counterintuitive to the natural hearer. Perhaps this is why Jesus had to state such things explicitly, since we would never have guessed them! Do we believe Him, or is this an area where we are content to live as if we know more than the Son of God knows about real life?

Jesus was aware that His words would cut across the grain of natural human thinking. That may be why He justified each statement by mentioning His rationale. Why are these poor men blessed? Because they possess the Kingdom of God! Why are these hungry, weeping, persecuted ones enviable? Because they have the guarantee (not given to others) that they will be satisfied and will have the last laugh.

The similar, but fuller, list of beatitudes found in Matthew 5:3-10 adds to this list blessings to the poor in spirit (humble), the meek, the pure in heart, those hungering for righteousness, and the peacemakers—all of which are intended to designate true disciples. He promised that they will be vindicated, will inherit the earth, will see God, and will be known as God's children. This is quite a catalogue of benefits promised to those who choose the way of the disciple. The world cannot promise half so much.

5. To accomplish things of eternal value

Anyone who becomes contemplative about the purpose of life must, at some point ask the questions, "What impact have I made upon the world and the well-being of my fellow man?" and

²² Twice as many beatitudes are found in Matthew 5:3-10.

²³ Luke 6:20-23

“When I am gone, will it make any difference at all that I was here?” “Will anything remain improved eternally, or even ten minutes, after my brief life has ended?”

It is such concerns as these that inspire many people to become philanthropists, social workers, soldiers, political activists, Peace Corps volunteers, etc. I am sure that all of these activities have the potential of making one feel better about having lived than would be the case if one merely pursued an empty course of selfish pleasure and luxury. However, those who change circumstances for the better in their world still have to come to grips with the fact that few of these things impact anything in the long run. The gains made in one generation can easily be lost in the succeeding generation, or even in one’s own lifetime, so that all of our efforts can easily come to nothing. There is great wisdom distilled in the old, well-worn adage:

*Only one life, twill soon be past;
Only what’s done for Christ will last.*²⁴

All accomplishments that do not promote the eternal reign of Christ in the world and in the hearts of people—even if their benefits linger for generations—can and will someday disappear and be gone forever. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s profound poem about Ozymandias (the Greek name for Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses II) cynically underscores the vain and temporary nature of even the greatest accomplishments of men. The poem describes the ruins of a monument discovered in the Egyptian desert. It had once been an intact statue of the great Ramesses II, erected in the height of his power and prestige. All that remained in modern times were two “trunkless legs” and near them lay “half sunk a shattered visage” with “wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command.” On the pedestal under the truncated legs there is an inscription: “*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!*” All around this wrecked monument are level sands as far as the eye can see.²⁵

Very well might the “mighty” despair who encounter this dilapidated monument—but not for reasons such as the tyrant had imagined. Viewing the inscription, one might indeed despair of the lasting impact of one’s own accomplishments in view of the precedent of Ozymandias (like hundreds of powerful rulers before and after him) whose works have entirely disappeared in the sands of time. The greatest rulers of ancient times come to nothing and are mostly or entirely forgotten. If their remarkable accomplishments disappear below the dunes, what might any of us expect concerning the long-term significance of our own meager contributions to the history of the world?

²⁴ This is the refrain in a classic poem by missionary C.T. Studd, entitled “*Only One Life*”

²⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias” in *Miscellaneous and Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: W. Benbow, 1826), 100

What can possibly give life transcendent purpose and give us the ability to impact eternity for the better? The answer—and the only one—is found in the Kingdom of God, as the prophet foretold (and history has vindicated):

*Of the increase of [the Messiah's] government and peace
There will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice
From that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.²⁶*

Only the disciples of Jesus Christ deployed in the building and expansion of this Kingdom of eternal justice can know with certainty that their *“labor is not in vain in the Lord.”*²⁷ The Kingdom moves forward by slow and steady progress, through the combined small contributions of every disciple with boots on the ground. The progress made and the souls impacted have eternal value and significance. All other human accomplishments of any kind come to nothing soon enough. This is the privilege of discipleship—the ability to be employed in the Messiah’s work and to impact the world eternally for the better.

6. To glorify God

Jesus said,

By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.²⁸

Though generally underappreciated, the glory of God is the greatest incentive for making whatever sacrifices may be necessary in living as a disciple. Obedient disciples bear the fruit of the Kingdom and this is what glorifies God. Only those who have been reborn by the inner working of God can really even care much about this matter of glorifying God—though to the true disciple this is all that matters.

There is a general complaint among the ignorant that God always seems to be concerned only about His own reputation. Why does God always want people to praise and glorify Him? Doesn’t this suggest that He has an enormous ego requiring continual “strokes” from His creatures? Even if God really is great, doesn’t it kind of spoil it if He is always saying, “appreciate me!” and “Glorify me!”?

²⁶ Isaiah 9:7

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:58

²⁸ John 15:8

Those who make this complaint cannot understand God’s motivations as those who know Him do. Nor, probably, do they know their own motives for objecting to this. Usually the complainers resent God’s requirement that we honor Him only because this competes with their own needy craving to be respected and honored by others. In fact, it is this very flaw in themselves that makes it necessary for God to remind us so often that He is the one to be glorified.

God is not arrogant. The Bible describes Him as one who “*humbles Himself*” even to observe us²⁹—we who would have zero significance if not for His choosing to take notice of us. David found it inconceivable that God would impute any value to such specks of dust as ourselves:

*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,
What is man that You are mindful of him,
And the son of man that You visit him?*³⁰

It should first be acknowledged that God has absolutely no need for our praise, nor for us to glorify Him. The angels do that much better than we do anyway, and there were already millions of them before God created humankind. Our praise of Him contributes nothing to His ego, any more than a three-year-old puffs up a grown man who has broken free a stubborn jar lid, by saying, “Wow! You are really strong.” The vast differential between the one praising and the one praised renders the child’s words inconsequential to the self-esteem of the man.

So why would God’s word so frequently prod us to give Him His due honor and glory? Let me attempt to clarify, in steps:

- God is infinitely superior to the sum total of all He created, especially such specks of dust as ourselves.
- He created humans to know Him, to be in a relationship with Him, and in some sense to be like Him.
- Humans have chosen to think they are better and wiser than God, and have thus not only failed to know Him accurately, but have put themselves completely out of sync with the order of the universe—which, itself, continually glorifies Him (Psalm 19:1).

²⁹ Psalm 113:6

³⁰ Psalm 8:3-4

- Unlike the animals, humans are worshipers by nature and will inevitably worship something. Those who do not worship God, inevitably put inferior objects of worship in His place—whether self, other humans, objects, money, habits that bring momentary pleasure, etc.
- Our tendency toward worship will lead us to honor and serve that which most impresses us. Yet, compared to God, nothing is really impressive at all. To fail to recognize and acknowledge God’s superiority will doom us to the mistaken notion that lesser things are worthy of our esteem and devotion. All things worshiped apart from God Himself are portals to the worship of demons, and bring us into slavery to demonic powers.
- Since the truth sets us free from delusions that trap and eventually kill us, our only hope of liberation is to acknowledge the truth, recognizing the magnificence and incomparable superiority of God above all things (especially ourselves).
- When we glorify God as we should, we are doing nothing to His advantage, but we are doing something that benefits us immensely. We are recalibrating our own instincts, righting our overall orientation, coming back into sync with the truth and universal reality—whereby we discover our true place of freedom and value as children of God. This cannot occur while we are misapprehending God and thinking lower thoughts of Him than comport with reality.

7. To become like Him

There is another, totally unselfish motive in God that causes Him to call us into His proper worship, and that is that, although He cannot make Himself inglorious in order to relate with us, He can make us more glorious, more like Himself, in order that we can relate with Him. What does it look like to share in His glory? It looks like Jesus. Our glorification is our transformation into His image, and comes about by our fixing our gaze on His glory. According to Paul:

“we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”³¹

Even such a good servant as Moses was told that he could not look upon God’s glory and survive the intensity of that radiance. By contrast, God *“has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”³²*

³¹ 2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV

³² 2 Corinthians 4:6

God has called the disciples of Jesus, not only to behold His glory, but to be sharers in it—that is, to be like Jesus, as it is written:

*...that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.*³³

*He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*³⁴

*...may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.*³⁵

This is the most astonishing of the benefits received by the faithful disciples of Jesus, namely, to be like Him. *“A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher.”*³⁶

There are those who are not attracted to Jesus. This was true in His own day as well. There’s no accounting for taste. However, those who have known and loved Him can imagine no greater reward than to share with Him eternally in His glorious nature and radiant purity.

The purpose of existence lies before us and the disciple of Jesus is one who recognizes and seizes it. Many find themselves upon their deathbeds wondering why they even lived—and what, if anything, they have accomplished of value. Too often, in one’s dying hours or days, there is little more than bitter regrets over wasted opportunities. The man or woman who has lived a life devoted to following and serving Christ will never have occasion to regret this choice. In my experience, the only regret I have heard expressed by true disciples at the end of life is that they had not made their commitment to Christ earlier and thereby made a greater eternal impact for Him and for His Kingdom during this brief lifetime.

³³ 1 Thessalonians 2:12

³⁴ 2 Thessalonians 2:14

³⁵ 1 Peter 5:10

³⁶ Luke 6:40

Chapter Five
Walking as Jesus Walked

He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

(1 John 2:6)

*... that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us
who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

(Romans 8:14)

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

(Galatians 5:16)

Some of my readers will remember a religious fad, a couple of decades ago, which features the initials WWJD on bracelets, baseball caps, tee shirts, and other “merch.” The letters represent to question, “*What Would Jesus Do?*” I have never really been drawn to religious fads, but when I began to hear people echoing this phrase it reminded me of the first time I had heard it. It was in 1968 or 69. I was fourteen or fifteen and very active in the evangelical church youth group where our family had attended for many years. At that time, a friend in the youth group told me of a fictional story he was currently reading, of which I was unfamiliar, entitled *In His Steps*.¹ He told me that the story was about a pastor who challenged his congregation to spend the following year doing and saying nothing without first asking themselves the simple question, *What would Jesus do?* According to the story, this practice revolutionized the church and the community.

Though to this day I have never read the book, simply hearing the concept mentioned by my friend made a profound impression upon me. I remember thinking, “Of course! That is what being a Christian is all about! I wonder why I never thought of it that way before!” I suspect that the reason it had never previously crossed my mind is that I had been raised all my life in a church in which everyone was presumed to be Bible-believers, but in which it was not common to encounter anyone who seemed to see it as particularly desirable to be just like Jesus. However, when I heard this question, it certainly seemed desirable to me. The concept captured my imagination, and has never subsequently released me. Is this something that can actually be done?

Nothing else has ever seemed quite so appealing as living like Jesus. While I could not at that moment think of specific verses in scripture that laid this out, in so many words, as the goal of the

¹ The book by Charles Monroe Sheldon was first published in 1896, and has sold over 50 million copies—making it one of the best-selling books in history.

Christian life, I suppose the Holy Spirit simply bore witness to my spirit that this was the norm for children of God.

It was one thing to catch such a vision, but quite another to implement it. I knew well enough in experience Paul's complaint:

I find, then, the law, that when I desire to do what is right, with me the evil is present for I delight in the law of God according to the inward man, and I behold another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of the sin that is in my members.²

It would be a couple more years before I would discover what Paul presents as the solution to his dilemma—walking in the Holy Spirit³—and would be able to enjoy the life that the New Testament describes as normative for the believer.

As has often been stated, the Christian life is not difficult to live—it is *impossible*. That is, it is impossible to live it in our own moral strength—what Paul refers to as “*the flesh*”—because it is by definition a supernatural, spiritual life. There are many who live and have lived the Christian life who have found it neither impossible nor particularly difficult to do so. This is not to say that there is such a thing as a Christian life without difficulties but that is largely because there is no such thing as any life without difficulties. Some of us have found such assistance from Christ in difficulties that we wonder how anyone manages to live life without Him. Does this sound like the testimony of a weak person who needs God as a crutch? Not at all! It is rather that of a complete invalid who needs God as some trauma patients require artificial life support! Should a weak person be embarrassed about being weak? How can one be ashamed of being human? The only shame is in being merely human but *pretending* to be spiritually strong—a trait which is not part of the human condition—and refusing the only life support available. Now *that* is shameful.

Paul used the term “the flesh” in reference to our natural human incapacity and limitations. To live in “the flesh”—is to live in constant failure and to never become what God created humans to be: “*strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.*”⁴ Without such divine empowerment, success at living the Christian life would indeed be beyond the reach of mortals. “*So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*”⁵

As seen in 1 John 2:6 cited above, our assignment is to live or “walk” *as Jesus walked*. This requires the disciple of Jesus to do what cannot humanly be done, such as loving others more than oneself, defeating the inward pull of sin, genuinely loving and forgiving one's betrayer or persecutor,

² Romans 7:21-23

³ *Ibid.*, 8:1-4

⁴ Ephesians 6:10

⁵ Romans 8:8

preferring the humble servant's role, retaining composure and confidence when no natural means of rescue from impending disaster exists, rejoicing in tribulations, and taking greater delight in pleasing God than in life itself.

Everything about the life that Jesus calls His disciples to live goes against fallen human nature, which possesses no resources within itself to assist in the endeavor. Living the Christian life is God's work—*“for it is God who works in you both to will and to do...His good pleasure.”*⁶ The sooner we get used to that idea, the sooner we will find success and be rid of constant frustration.

No one less powerful than God Himself can successfully perform God's tasks. The only successful Christian life is the one lived in the strength He provides. The fact that so many who are regarded as Christians do not seem to be successful in fulfilling this discipleship mandate suggests that there is something significant missing in their understanding of normative Christian experience. This ignorance is entirely unnecessary, but it is a sad fact, nonetheless.

The principal difference between the life of the early disciples and the lives of many who would follow Christ today is the respective presence or absence of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in their lives. This power was promised to the apostles by Jesus Himself,⁷ and repeated, by Peter and Paul as promised to Christians generally.⁸ How many followers of Christ have viewed this power as belonging only to the first generation of believers or as some optional “extra” which some Christians may seem to need and have, while others may live without it? Perhaps it is natural to assume that the low level of spiritual experience of our own lives is the norm and standard by which life in Christ is to be defined. How can we read the New Testament and not reach the conclusion that what many Christians have known in experience is not what was regarded as normative in biblical times?

There are indeed believers who are hungry for the spiritual dynamics seen in the lives of the apostles and who believe that the Holy Spirit should reproduce the same phenomena in every believer's life. They believe the Holy Spirit's power is available essentially to make all disciples effective evangelists, miracle-workers, tongues-speakers, healers, prophesiers, etc. To their minds, the power of the Spirit available to every believer should be manifest in supernatural signs and wonders such as those performed by Jesus, Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul in the New Testament. In other words, the main fascination with the Holy Spirit for some is the manifestation of some of the more attention-getting “gifts” mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12—like miracles and healings.

Then there are those who entirely rule-out the presence of such gifts in the modern age, and have reduced their expectations of spiritual power to a level common to the experience in their churches, but below any justified by scripture. The gifts are not the primary evidence of the power of God

⁶ Philippians 2:13

⁷ John 7:37-39; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8

⁸ Acts 2:38-39; Romans 15:13; Galatians 3:14; Ephesians 1:13; 5:18; 1 John 3:24; 4:13

working in the life of Christ's disciples, but they cannot be denied their proper role in Christian ministry.

In the verses cited at the head of this chapter, Paul speaks of the power of the Holy Spirit as that which enables believers not to sin. The principal concern of the Holy Spirit is not the manifestation of miraculous phenomena but the demonstration of simple obedience and personal *holiness*—which is another kind of miraculous phenomenon. To reshape human lives into replicas of Christ Himself, characterized by love and the other fruit of the Spirit, is seen in scripture as the Holy Spirit's principle function in the believer's life.

Growing up in the evangelical church, it was common to hear preachers say, "We all sin many times, in thought, word, and deed, every day." Not only did this make it sound as if sinning daily was inevitable for the believer, but the comment was often followed by the tagline, "and if you say you have not sinned today, you are guilty of the sin of pride." So, I guess, we're damned if we do, and damned if we don't, speak of ourselves as hopelessly habitual sinners.

Fortunately, this dreary idea is never stated anywhere in scripture, so that the disciple is not required to set his or her expectations in accordance with such a dismal assumption. Not only is such a statement never affirmed in scripture, everywhere in the New Testament it is assumed to be false. That Christians could believe such a statement to be true, contrary to scripture, must be attributed to a spiritual deficiency found in modern church attenders rather than the teaching of the New Testament.

When Paul says that those who walk in the Spirit do *not fulfill the lusts of the flesh*⁹ but actually *fulfill the righteous requirements of the law*,¹⁰ it is hard to see how any reader would conclude that he is telling his readers that they must necessarily succumb to the lusts of the flesh and violate the righteous requirements of the law on a daily basis! While the biblical writers never hinted that we *must sin*, they were unanimously agreed that we *must not sin*. How, if not by rejecting scriptural norms in favor of popular religious ones, could such a reversal of the truth have ever been accepted by Bible-believers?

When we find modern Christians regularly lacking the faith to trust God in the financial realm, doubting God in the midst of trials, caving-in at the first hint of temptation, betraying their wedding vows when their marriages become unpleasant, and fearing that they may not remain faithful under persecution, we are tempted to wonder if the apostles (or Jesus) would recognize our modern spiritual experience as belonging to the same species as theirs. When we are told—again without a line of scriptural justification—that the gifts of the Spirit are not supposed to be manifested among us today, we have to wonder whether the modern churches' assumptions about biblical norms are

⁹ Galatians 5:16

¹⁰ Romans 8:4

simply being adjusted to conform to the familiar level of spiritual deficiency actually characterizing our modern churches. Why would modern believers assume that they can get along without the primary resource that rendered the early Church successful, dynamic, and unstoppable? Are we to assume that the disappearance of the power promised by Jesus to His followers is an essential part of God's program?

Walking as Jesus walked

I fear that in our churches we do not have many of the same kind of Christians as those whom the Apostle John clearly defined as true disciples in His time:

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked."¹¹

If you skipped over the above passage lightly let me urge you to read it again line-by-line, and ask yourself, "If John and his contemporaries were to meet me today, would they regard me as a Christian brother or sister? More importantly, *would Jesus?*" Continuing in the words of Jesus, as we found in John 8:31, is the very definition of being a true disciple (that is, a true *Christian*). John reaffirms the same point here. However, he speaks of the true evidence of genuineness as not simply being *obedient to Jesus* but being *like Jesus* as well—walking "*as He walked.*"

Life in the Kingdom of God is a life that resembles the life of Jesus. In scripture, *living our lives* is often likened to *walking*. The life of the disciple is described in terms such as:

- walking "in the fear of the Lord,"¹²
- walking "in the steps of faith,"¹³
- walking "in newness of life,"¹⁴
- walking "in love,"¹⁵
- walking "in the light,"¹⁶
- walking "worthy of our calling,"¹⁷

¹¹ 1 John 2:3-6

¹² Acts 9:31

¹³ Romans 4:12

¹⁴ Romans 6:4

¹⁵ Romans 14:15; Ephesians 5:2

¹⁶ 1 John 1:7

¹⁷ Ephesians 4:1

- walking “by faith,”¹⁸
- walking “circumspectly,”¹⁹
- walking “humbly with God.”²⁰

All of these passages identify aspects of the single habit of “*walking in [or “according to”] the Spirit.*”²¹ The Bible also contrasts the disciples’ lifestyles with their former walking “*according to the course of this world,*”²² which was “*as the Gentiles walk.*” That lifestyle is called walking “*in the flesh*” or “*according to the flesh.*”²³

Many metaphors are used in the scripture to illustrate various aspects of the disciple’s calling. It is like constructing a building,²⁴ or running a race,²⁵ or engaging in battle.²⁶ Walking is possibly the most common metaphor of this type. There are good reasons to employ the imagery of walking to signify a person’s living day by day:

1. First, because the act of walking represents movement toward a destination. Though we sometimes take recreational walks merely for the physical exercise, in biblical times people got more exercise than they needed from their daily labor. In those times, if they were walking they were traveling from one place to a determined destination. Every day that we live, and every choice that we make and carry out, brings us another step closer to some end or other. Most people probably do not know what destination awaits them at the end of their particular life’s journey. By contrast, disciples of Jesus know their goal. It is not just heaven that is our destination. Our goal is to become like Christ. “*A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher.*”²⁷ This is the glory that is often identified in scripture as the Christian’s hope.²⁸

2. Walking is also analogous to living because both are comprised of taking individual steps. Unlike driving or being carried along by a current where the journey is an unbroken continuum of progress, walking requires each step to be individually and deliberately executed. This is why Christians are said to be walking in the “*steps of the faith*” of Abraham.²⁹ In speaking of the conduct of Titus among

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:7

¹⁹ Ephesians 5:15

²⁰ Micah 6:8; This one is actually from the Old Testament, but can anyone object that this is not also a New Testament obligation?

²¹ Galatians 5:16, 25; Romans 8:4

²² Ephesians 2:2; 4:17

²³ Romans 8:4; 2 Corinthians 10:2

²⁴ Luke 6:47-49; 14:28-30

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:24-25; 2 Timothy 2:5; 4:7; Hebrews 12:1-2

²⁶ Luke 14:31-32; Ephesians 6:10-12; 2 Timothy 2:3-4

²⁷ Luke 6:40

²⁸ Romans 5:2; Colossians 1:27; Titus 2:13 [in the Greek]; 1 John 3:2-3

²⁹ Romans 4:12

the Corinthians, Paul asked, “*Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same steps?*”³⁰ The act of walking is a continuous series of individual steps. If we take a series of steps in the power and guidance of the Spirit this is “walking in the Spirit.” But every step is its own accomplishment. Every successful step could be followed by a stumble if we are inattentive. Even for one who habitually walks in the Spirit the very next step could be “in the flesh”—though it needn’t be. When a toddler first begins to walk, each wobbly step is a deliberate accomplishment. Falling is frequent. Over time walking becomes more natural—and sometimes more careless. One who walks well, if inattentive to the path, will still occasionally trip and fall.

When we misstep we “*stumble*”³¹ which means we sin. Christians do not walk in sin, though we sometimes do stumble into it. James wrote, “*we all stumble in many things.*”³² We are not perfect in our walking, and may never be in this life, but as with ordinary stumbling we do not redefine our walking in terms of our missteps. If we trip and fall, we do not say, “Ah well, I am not perfect, so I will simply allow myself to trip and fall many times daily in thought, word, and deed! Better yet—I’ll just stay down here on my face!”

Walking is a deliberate activity. Stumbling is an unwelcome, accidental interruption in our normal, purposeful walking. When it occurs, it embarrasses us, causing us to renew our vigilance not to repeat the misstep in the future. If we tripped over a crack in the sidewalk or a tree root protruding above the ground, we determine to be more vigilant in the future when walking in the proximity of such “stumbling blocks.” If it were to happen several times in the same place, we might choose a different route to avoid the danger and embarrassment!

We are to become, progressively, more like Jesus—but how do we “*walk even as He walked*”? He was perfect; we are not. What does it even *mean* to walk as Jesus walked? Are we required to live exactly as He did—unmarried, homeless, bearded, traveling about in sandals as itinerant preachers? Obviously not, as we find that many of the early Christians, including apostles, did not see it as their duty to do so. Of course, we must walk in love and walk in the light as He did, but Jesus’ whole way of life can be subsumed under the single expression, “*walking in the Spirit.*” Jesus lived His life in the power of the Holy Spirit,³³ and was guided by the Holy Spirit.³⁴ According to scripture, this is how He lived the supernatural life that He lived.

Even though Jesus was God, in taking on human nature³⁵ He seems to have laid aside many of His divine privileges. Many believe this is what Paul was referring to when he said that Jesus “*emptied*

³⁰ 2 Corinthians 12:18

³¹ James 2:10

³² James 3:2

³³ Luke 4:14; Matthew 12:28; Acts 1:2

³⁴ Luke 4:1

³⁵ Romans 8:3; John 1:14

*himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*³⁶ Though He was God, He took upon Himself certain human handicaps. For example:

- God is invisible,³⁷ but Jesus was seen³⁸
- God is not tempted with evil,³⁹ but Jesus was tempted⁴⁰
- God does not become weary, nor sleep,⁴¹ but Jesus did both⁴²
- God knows everything,⁴³ but Jesus didn't⁴⁴
- God is immortal,⁴⁵ but Jesus died⁴⁶

Living under conditions of human frailty, Jesus lived as we are expected to do—through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ Jesus exhibited nothing miraculous in His life until the Holy Spirit descended upon Him and He was filled with the Spirit.⁴⁸ Jesus worked miracles, exhibited supernatural knowledge, gave prophecies and inspired teaching. These can be regarded as actions of the incarnate God voluntarily self-limited by His assuming of a human nature, but operating in the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit. Christ's ministry began only after He was anointed and filled with the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹ This power, which resided in the man Jesus, also has been given to the community of His disciples who comprise His Body on earth today.⁵⁰ When we are told to walk as Jesus walked, this refers to walking in the Spirit, as He did. What this expression means and how we are expected to pull it off will be the topics of the following two chapters.

³⁶ Philippians 2:7 ESV

³⁷ John 1:18; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17

³⁸ John 1:14, 18; 1 John 1:1-3; 1 Timothy 3:16

³⁹ James 1:13

⁴⁰ Matthew 4:1; Luke 4:2; Hebrews 4:15

⁴¹ Psalm 121:4; Isaiah 40:28

⁴² Matthew 8:24;

⁴³ 1 John 3:20

⁴⁴ Mark 13:32; Luke 2:52

⁴⁵ 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16

⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:3; Philippians 2:8

⁴⁷ Luke 4:14, 18; Matthew 12:28; Acts 1:2

⁴⁸ Luke 4:1

⁴⁹ Luke 4:1, 14, 18

⁵⁰ Acts 2:38-39

Chapter Six

Walking in the Power of the Spirit

...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power...

(Acts 10:38)

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

(Acts 1:8)

Being filled with the Spirit

“...be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God.”¹

On the Day of Pentecost, the 120 disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem “were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”² Although we are not told that speaking in tongues always accompanied the experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit, we do find that this fullness was the norm in the Church. It continued to characterize and empower the work accomplished through the community of the disciples. Only a few days earlier, Jesus had predicted this event when He said, “John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”³

The prophets had spoken of the Messiah’s kingdom as corresponding to an age of the Holy Spirit’s unprecedented activity. In the Old Testament times, the Holy Spirit was not yet given to all believers,⁴ and only came specially upon chosen individuals like certain judges, kings and prophets. Moses expressed a desire “that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them.”⁵ This wish was entirely in accordance with God’s ultimate plans. The prophet Joel predicted that this very thing would be a characteristic of the Messianic Age: “And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...”⁶

¹ Ephesians 5:18-21

² Acts 2:4

³ Acts 1:5

⁴ John 7:39

⁵ Numbers 11:29

⁶ Joel 2:28

Other prophets had spoken similarly about the Spirit being given in the Messianic Age,⁷ and the apostles recognized that these prophecies had been, and were being, fulfilled among them.⁸

Throughout His prophetic career, Isaiah had used the imagery of Israel prior to the coming of Messiah as being spiritually fruitless and barren—like an uncultivated wilderness. Judah was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and became a literal desert wasteland—which the prophets took as a real-life metaphor for the spiritual wasteland that the nation had become.⁹ Isaiah spoke of a time when rivers of water would flood the desert and cause it to become fruitful.¹⁰ This describes the time when the fruits of justice and righteousness, which God had long sought from His vineyard,¹¹ would actually be produced in the corporate life of the Messianic Community. Occasionally, he spoke of this “river” specifically as the outpouring of God’s Spirit upon the parched land, producing the fruit of justice and righteousness in the wilderness:

*The bustling city will be deserted.
The forts and towers will become lairs forever,
A joy of wild donkeys, a pasture of flocks—
Until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high,
And the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,
And the fruitful field is counted as a forest.
Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
And righteousness remain in the fruitful field.*

The psalmist had spoken of his spiritual dryness in these terms: “*My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land where there is no water*” and “*I spread out my hands to You; my soul longs for You like a thirsty land.*”¹² With the coming of the Spirit in the Messianic Kingdom, Jeremiah had predicted: “*Their souls shall be like a well-watered garden.*”¹³

Jesus addressed this spiritual thirst which He perceived to exist in the remnant of Israel, making this public declaration: “*If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.*”¹⁴ John then adds his commentary: “*this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*”¹⁵

⁷ Isaiah 11:1-2; 32:15; 42:1; 44:3; 59:21; 61:1-2; Ezekiel 36:26-27; 37:14; 39:29; Zechariah 12:10; 14:8.

⁸ Matthew 12:18-21; Luke 4:18-21; John 7:37-39; Acts 2:16ff.

⁹ Isaiah 1:30; 27:10; 32:12-14; 34:14; 40:3; 64:1 (cf., Jeremiah 4:26; 9:12; 12:10; 22:6; 23:10; Hosea 2:3)

¹⁰ Isaiah 32:15-16; 35:1, 6; 41:18-19; 43:19-20; 51:3; 58:11; 61:11.

¹¹ Isaiah 5:7

¹² Psalm 63:1; 143:6

¹³ Jeremiah 31:12

¹⁴ John 7:37-38

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, v.39

This is what happened on the Day of Pentecost. Jesus had described it as the “baptism” (meaning *immersion* or *overwhelming*) in the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ It was the beginning of a New Order in which the Spirit of God would be given to produce the fruit in God’s people that He had always desired from them.

The New Testament indicates that the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer is the true indicator of genuine conversion. John wrote: “*We know that He abides in us by the Spirit whom He has given us,*” and “*By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit*”¹⁷ Paul similarly affirmed, “*If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.*”

While all true disciples possess the Holy Spirit, not all who sincerely name the name of Christ appear to *personally* know the power of the Spirit as described in the New Testament. It may be our pastoral instinct, when dealing with such frustrated people, to rush to confirm to them that they really do possess the Spirit, despite the lack of evidence in their lives. However, in view of Jesus’ statement that not all who think themselves to be Christians really are disciples,¹⁸ we may be doing a disservice in assuring someone of salvation when “*the Spirit Himself,*” is not bearing witness in confirmation.

It is, of course, possible that one who bemoans the lack the evidence of the Spirit’s indwelling may be looking for the wrong evidence. To hear the testimonies of some people, one might think that they continually experience a dynamic awareness of the Spirit’s presence and power—hearing His voice giving them instructions moment-by-moment, working miracles through them, and regularly giving them esoteric revelations. Some speak of profound emotional experiences and strange phenomena occurring when they were filled with the Spirit. Is this typical?

Having such a sensate awareness of the presence of the Spirit is something that may be common with some individuals, or in certain seasons of life, more than in others, but such a sensation is not necessarily the universal proof of the Spirit’s presence—as we shall see. It may be that the Spirit’s witness in some is more subtle than in others. If regeneration occurs, then the Spirit has been given. When the Spirit comes, He is, in some sense, self-announcing. “*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.*”¹⁹ As there are very different temperaments, the experiencing of this “witness” may be more profound in some than it is in others. John says that there is some measure of such a witness of the Spirit in everyone who has been genuinely born of the Spirit: “*He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself...*”²⁰

¹⁶ Acts 1:5

¹⁷ 1 John 3:24; 4:13

¹⁸ Matthew 7:21-23

¹⁹ Romans 8:9, 16

²⁰ 1 John 5:10

However, we should not lightly pass over as necessarily insignificant the absence of any inward assurance, nor of the power which Jesus promised to His disciples: *“tarry...until you are endued with power from on high,”* and *“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”*²¹

It is possible to be born again and in possession of the Holy Spirit, and yet to not be *filled* with the Holy Spirit—just as it is possible for a bottle *to have oil in it but not to be filled* with oil. Paul told the Ephesians that they had already received the Holy Spirit when they believed in Jesus, and yet he urged them to be continuously *“filled with the Holy Spirit”*²²—as if such a condition was not automatic, or necessarily constant, for a believer. To “have” the Holy Spirit, then, is not necessarily the same thing as to be “filled” with the Holy Spirit. It seems that there can be varying degrees of fullness, and one may at times be in need of “refilling”—as seems to have been the case with the apostles, in Acts 4:31.

In Acts 2:4, being “filled” with the Spirit is used interchangeably with being “baptized” with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5) and also with receiving power when the Spirit comes “upon” a person (Acts 1:8). The *presence* of the Spirit *regenerates* the repentant sinner; the *fullness* of the Spirit *empowers* the committed disciple. This fullness is not the privilege of a few special Christians but, as Peter declared, *“the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”*²³ Spiritual empowerment is the birthright (though perhaps sometimes left unclaimed) of every child of God. How is this obtained and maintained?

Perhaps the words of Jesus may answer this question adequately: *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”*²⁴ Asking in faith, as a genuine child of God fully surrendered to Christ as Lord, seems to be the condition for receiving the promise. In biblical times, the giving of the Spirit was sometimes accompanied by the laying on of hands,²⁵ which can, no doubt, be practiced in our times as well.

Paul implied that one who has been filled with the Spirit must remain filled, and that this is facilitated by maintaining certain habits of the inward life:

*...be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God.*²⁶

²¹ Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8

²² Ephesians 1:13; 5:18

²³ Acts 2:39

²⁴ Luke 11:13

²⁵ Acts 8:17; 9:17; 19:6

²⁶ Ephesians 5:18-21

Paul is indicating that maintaining a heart of worship and continual gratitude toward God, and a servant's heart toward others, are necessary for one who would live a life in the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

Charisma and Character

The power of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life is manifested through both *gifts*²⁷ and *fruit*²⁸ of the Spirit. The Greek word for the gifts is *charismata* (plural), or *charisma* (singular). According to Paul, each believer possesses some gift, or *charisma*, which enables him or her to make some specific contribution to the overall functioning of the Body of Christ, through the special enablement or anointing of the Spirit. When all members perform their individual functions, no part of the work of the Kingdom goes neglected. When one member does not contribute according to the *charisma* given for the task, things that should be done are left undone—at least until God can raise up a replacement for the negligent member.

By contrast, the *fruit* of the Holy Spirit refers to *character*. Paul gives a partial list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23: “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*” This is clearly a description of the character of Christ. The Holy Spirit is given primarily to make us Christlike and to enable us to walk as He walked—in gentleness, humility, generosity, patience, mercy, fairness, faithfulness and love. Paul said that one should desire “*the best gifts,*” but that love (which is the *fruit*) is the “*more excellent way.*”²⁹ He said that it doesn't matter if someone has the most impressive gifts, if the fruit of love is absent. Without this fruit it all counts for nothing.³⁰

The Argentine pastor and author, Juan Carlos Ortiz, distinguished the relative value of *gifts* and *fruit* as indicators of personal spirituality with the following illustration:

Gifts do not indicate spirituality, because gifts on a person are like gifts on a Christmas tree. In a crowded city like Buenos Aires, we do not have many trees. Most of our Christmas trees are artificial creations of wire and cable and green paper. But we fix them nicely. We buy them for two or three dollars and hang watches and rings and other gifts on them. They look very nice, even though they are not natural trees.

But when you step outside on December 26, all the Christmas trees are in the garbage. They may have carried expensive Omega watches yesterday, but today they are in the garbage. So you

²⁷ E.g., Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-10; 1 Peter 4:10-11

²⁸ Galatians 5:22-23

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:31

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

can't say much about the tree on the basis of its gifts. The gifts do not indicate what kind of tree it is.

Only by the fruit can you tell something about the tree. If the apples are good, you can say you have a good apple tree, and so forth.

Of course, the best thing would be for a tree to have both good apples and Omega watches, both fruit and gifts. But if that is not possible, at least the fruit should be good. A person may be excused if he doesn't have gifts, but there is no excuse for not having fruit. If we say to the apple tree, 'Why don't you have a nice ring on you?' the tree could say, 'Excuse me, but no one has put a ring on me.' But the apple tree cannot get away without having apples on it, because apples are the result of a normal apple tree.³¹

Individual gifts are the Holy Spirit's sovereign bestowal upon every believer according to His will for each one.³² Interestingly, the scriptures never actually encourage us to "discover" our spiritual gifts. At some point, they should become rather obvious. As we walk in the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit will do through us whatever He has gifted us to do. Others will probably know what our gifts are before we do. If you wonder what yours is, ask someone who knows you well. If you keep hearing the same answer, it is a good bet that you have discovered your *charisma*. If we never know the names of our gifts, nor know what labels to affix to ourselves, there is little loss—except perhaps to our egos. If we walk humbly in the Spirit, our gifts will be functioning, which is far more important than our knowing what to call them.

Some have argued that at least some of the gifts of the Spirit are no longer functioning in modern times. However, no biblical passage can be produced to suggest that any of the *charismata* have vanished from the Church (though counterfeits also abound, as was also the case in New Testament times). It would be strange if God had begun His enterprise in the power of the Spirit, and then expected later generations to complete the mission in the power of the flesh alone. Neither Jesus, nor the apostles, were able to conduct their ministries without the spiritual gifts. It would seem uncommonly bold to suggest that Christians deprived of this power can do so.

The most important manifestation of supernatural power is seen in His working in the inner man to transform a former rebel into a lover of God and humanity. The Spirit's primary miracle in our personal lives is our character being transfigured into the likeness of Christ's character, which is manifest in the fruit of the Spirit. "*By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, so you will be my disciples.*"³³

³¹ Juan Carlos Ortiz, *Disciple* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 1975, 1995), 43-44

³² 1 Corinthians 12:11

³³ John 15:8

Walking on the water

The story of Jesus walking on water was not merely the tale of a sensational demonstration of Christ's miraculous power. As in all of the miracles of Jesus, God was not merely "rolling up His sleeves" or "*putting on the Ritz*,"³⁴ just to show how awesome He is. Every miracle God ever performed clearly has such an effect, but the miracles of Christ have deeper meanings. John refers to the miracles of Jesus as "*signs*."³⁵ Like all signs, Jesus' miracles (no less than His sermons) conveyed a message, or illustrated specific lessons. For example, Jesus demonstrated...

- in the healing of the blind, that He is the *Light of the World*;³⁶
- in His feeding the multitudes, that He is the *Bread of Life*;³⁷
- in His turning water into wine, that He is the *True Vine*;³⁸
- in His raising the dead, that He is the *Resurrection and the Life*;³⁹
- in His general healing ministry, that He is the Messiah who would *Heal* Israel's backslidings.⁴⁰

Jesus expressly made the point that His healing of a paralytic visibly revealed His invisible, but real, authority to forgive sins.⁴¹ His exorcisms demonstrated that He is the Victor over the strong man (Satan) and the Inaugurator of the Kingdom of God.⁴²

So what spiritual lesson are we to learn from the miracle of Jesus walking on the water? One thing demonstrated by it, as well as by His stilling of the storm, was certainly that He Himself acts with the prerogatives of Israel's God. In the Old Testament, the stilling of storms and walking on the sea are activities that are said to be uniquely actions of Yahweh.⁴³

However, Christ's walking on water no doubt conveys an additional, more specific, truth. Matthew's account of the story includes an element omitted in the parallel accounts elsewhere—

³⁴ Lyrics from *Our God is an Awesome God*, by Rich Mullins, 1988

³⁵ John 2:11; 20:30

³⁶ John 8:12 with 9:1-7

³⁷ John 6:11-13 with v. 35

³⁸ John 2:7-9 with 15:1

³⁹ John 11:25 with vv.43-44

⁴⁰ Isaiah 6:10; 30:26; 53:5-6; 57:18-19; Jeremiah 3:22; Hosea 6:1; 14:4; Matthew 8:17; 1 Peter 2:24-25

⁴¹ Matthew 9:4-7

⁴² Matthew 12:28

⁴³ Stilling the storm, compare Mark 4:35-39 with Psalm 107:23-30; Walking on the water, compare John 6:18-19 with Job 9:8.

namely, the fact that Peter also briefly walked upon the water.⁴⁴ What is the value of that addition to the narrative?

I believe this miracle speaks of the supernatural nature of the Christian walk, as a parallel to the way Jesus walked. Like you and I, Peter could not walk on water in his natural abilities. Jesus, whose entire walk in this world bore the stamp of the supernatural, lived and walked as no other man had ever walked. Such a walk is humanly impossible—as impossible as walking on water. When Peter saw how Jesus walked he cried out, “*Lord...command me to come to You on the water.*” So, Jesus said, “*Come.*”⁴⁵

There was no practical reason for Peter to wish for this ability. However, the one who desires to be like Jesus possesses an innate desire to “*walk even as He walked.*” Having seen the life and activities of Jesus, it is natural that those who follow Him would desire—and need—the ability to walk where He walks and as He walks. For us, that would mean walking in the supernatural ability to

- love as Christ loves,
- forgive as He forgives,
- live a holy life, as He did,
- bear spiritual fruit, as He did,
- terrify the demons, as He did, and
- advance the Kingdom of God, as He did.

This is living in the realm of the Holy Spirit and enjoying God’s supernatural aid, as Jesus did. This is what it means to walk as He walked. It is just as impossible for us to do so as it was impossible for Peter (or any of us) to walk on the surface of the sea.

Notice that Peter did not pray for the ability to walk on the water but simply asked Jesus to *command* him to come to Him on the water. It is always the will of God that we come to Jesus. Peter must have known that when Christ gives any command it will always be accompanied with the power to perform the thing commanded. When God created the world through Christ, He simply gave commands: *Let there be light; Let there be a firmament; Let the dry land appear;* etc. These things had no power to create themselves from nothing. The command was accompanied with the power to effect the result.

*For He spoke, and it was done;
He commanded, and it stood fast*⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ Matthew 14:28-32

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, vv.28f

⁴⁶ Psalm 33:9

If Jesus had not given him such a command it would have been presumptuous for Peter to get out of the boat and expect not to sink amid the waves. We must believe that when Christ gives us an impossible command, He will render the thing commanded possible. In that sense, one can take the *command* of Christ as a *promise* ready to be realized by faith and obedience. Has Jesus commanded us to love the unlovable? to forgive the unforgivable? to glorify Him in afflictions? to remain faithful in a difficult marriage? to be generous in our time of lack? to overcome insurmountable trials and temptations? Take all such commands as promises of empowerment for the task. God will never command His followers to do what He will not also empower them to perform. Years ago, I was asked to serve in a role of responsibility in the church of which I was a part. I accepted, but in conversation with one of the deacons afterward, I confessed that I was not at all sure that I had the competence for the particular ministry I was being asked to perform. His response to me was, “Just trust the anointing, Brother.” Though I was unfamiliar with that particular phrase, I knew the concept well enough. If God puts you in the position, He will provide all the gifts necessary to perform its duties.

In the account of Peter’s brief excursion walking on the water, the power enabling both Jesus and Peter to walk on the sea was the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was *walking in the Spirit*, and so, for a while, was Peter.

And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, “Lord, save me!”⁴⁷

As we have previously observed, walking in the Spirit, like any other walking, is executed step-by-step. Every step that Peter took while trusting in the command of Christ was supernaturally enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit. It was when Peter changed his focus from Christ and began to entertain fear and doubt that his next steps failed. The Holy Spirit empowers us as we are obeying and trusting in Christ. Each step is a “*step of faith*.”⁴⁸ Though Peter received a rebuke from Jesus, it was not because He desired to walk supernaturally, as Jesus did, but because he did not retain his confidence in Christ’s enabling command: “*And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’*”

For most of us, walking in the Spirit will not involve literally walking on water—nor, necessarily, the performing of obvious miracles—unless, of course, one is given the gift of *the working of miracles*⁴⁹ (which very few seem to have). However, the life of discipleship depends, from beginning

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, vv.29-30

⁴⁸ Romans 4:12

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:10

to end,⁵⁰ upon the supernatural working of divine power in the believer. This power is realized in our being filled with and walking in the Holy Spirit.

As with Peter, we have the commands of Christ. Our obedience to His commands marks us as disciples of His. This obedient walk is done by trusting that God has given His Holy Spirit to those who ask Him and then by stepping out to obey the command of Christ in every situation. None can consistently obey these commands without being filled with the Spirit of Christ, nor without faith in His authority and power supplied through the Spirit. It is our privilege to live the life God has demonstrated in Christ. As many as do so are the children of God.⁵¹

Empowered by the Spirit

To summarize: walking in the Spirit involves living in acknowledged, helpless dependence upon His enablement. To live the life of discipleship is impossible for man, but not for God. Whatever the Spirit guides us to do, He enables us to do. This requires no self-confidence on our part, and is seemingly hindered by it. Paul expressed this idea:

*For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.*⁵²

*Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God*⁵³

*And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."*⁵⁴

Ours is to simply be confident in God Himself, that He will provide the strength, and then to move forward. Such a walk involves a repose of the soul upon the invisible resources provided in Christ so that we might "walk even as He walked." The key to successful living as a follower of Christ is learning to depend fully upon Him. This is the "rest to your souls"⁵⁵ that Jesus promised to accompany the wearing of His yoke. This is why His yoke is easy and His burden light⁵⁶—not because it is not a challenging course of life, but because His Spirit empowers those who rest in Him.

Isaiah told the people of Judah that they would be facing very trying times, and that even the strongest among them would be unequal to the challenges. He compared the difficulties with those

⁵⁰ Galatians 3:3

⁵¹ Romans 8:14

⁵² Romans 7:18

⁵³ 2 Corinthians 3:5

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12:9

⁵⁵ Matthew 11:28-29

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, v.30

of a strong athlete running a marathon that was just too difficult for any human to run: *“Even the youths shall faint and be weary, And the young men shall utterly fall.”*⁵⁷ By contrast, Isaiah described God as one of inexhaustible strength:

*Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
The everlasting God, the Lord,
The Creator of the ends of the earth,
Neither faints nor is weary.*⁵⁸

Then follows the promise:

*He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength...
But those who wait on the Lord
Shall renew their strength;
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.*⁵⁹

The word “renew” in that last verse means to *exchange*. Those who “*wait upon the Lord*” (this means patiently hoping in Him to perform what He has promised) find that they exchange their small strength for His infinite might. This exchange of strength is likened to an eagle who, upon reaching the proper altitude, positions her wings to exploit the force of the powerful thermals. Once her wings are properly positioned to catch the wind, the eagle expends very little of her own energy to remain aloft for hours. Those who lean upon the Holy Spirit, resting in His power to accomplish His work through us, will similarly “*not be weary*” nor “*faint.*” In exchange for their weakness they have received the inexhaustible strength of one who likewise *neither faints nor is weary*. This is the answer to God’s not-entirely-rhetorical question to Jeremiah: “*If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses?*”⁶⁰

Corrie ten Boom, when speaking to crowds, liked to provide visual object lessons. She would sometimes pull out a ladies’ cloth glove and, dangling it between two fingers, would say, “Do you think this glove could pick-up the Bible in front of me?” She would then lower the five limp fingers into contact with the Bible, demonstrating the absolute impotence of the glove to do any such thing.

⁵⁷ Isaiah 40:30

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, v.28

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, v.29, 31

⁶⁰ Jeremiah 12:5

Then she would put the glove on her hand, and say, “Now do you think this glove can pick-up the Bible?” Suiting the action to the words, she would then demonstrate that the glove, filled with her hand, could easily do anything that her hand was capable of doing. It was a childlike illustration, but profoundly made her point. Like an empty glove, I cannot fulfill any of the requirements necessary to please God and to advance the Kingdom of God. The key is to be filled with Christ’s Spirit, who can do these things Himself while “wearing” me. *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”*⁶¹

The irony is that the stronger and stiffer the glove, the more inhibited is the working of the hand in it. In my youth, I was impressed with, and bought, a pair of ski gloves (I never skied, but they seemed like the warmest gloves imaginable). These gloves had thick leather exteriors, leather lining and thick padding in between. They were very warm in cold weather. The problem was—there was too much glove! They were so heavy and thick that I could hardly bend the fingers. I had to take them off whenever I wanted to do anything requiring movement or dexterity. The gloves were a hindrance to working because they were *too strong*.

Our own natural strengths may interfere with God’s working through us, as well. This is why Jesus said to Paul: *“My strength is made perfect in [your] weakness.”*⁶² The Apostle also wrote:

*Brothers and sisters, consider your calling: Not many were wise from a human perspective, not many powerful, not many of noble birth. Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, so that no one may boast in his presence.*⁶³

It requires divine enablement to walk like Jesus in this world. Fortunately, God’s strength is exactly what is provided to those who trust and obey Christ. It is foolhardy for any disciple to attempt to pull this off by means of any power other than that of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, God says through Isaiah:

*“In returning and rest you shall be saved; In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.”*⁶⁴

⁶¹ Philippians 4:13

⁶² 2 Corinthians 12:9

⁶³ 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 CSB

⁶⁴ Isaiah 30:15

Chapter Seven

The Leading of the Holy Spirit

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

(Romans 8:14)

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;

I will guide you with My eye.

(Psalm 32:8)

Divine guidance

Walking, in the ordinary sense, involves two indispensable aspects: 1) the strength to stand and walk on your two legs, and 2) awareness of where you want to go—including a means to navigate the proper course. These are also the two elements involved in walking in the Spirit. We must have the Spirit's power to make the journey, and we must have the Spirit's guidance to navigate the proper path.

At one important level, the walk is an *internal* one. It is a journey taken in the heart to become more and more like Christ. This is our true life's destination, the road to which is a challenging one. The inward guidance of the Spirit results in His reshaping us inwardly, so that we are being "*transformed into the same image [i.e., that of Christ] from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.*"⁶⁵

The process of transformation has something in common with sculpting a bust from a slab of marble. There is a probably-apocryphal tale about Michelangelo, that when he was asked about the difficulty of sculpting his masterpiece, David, he answered: "It is easy. You just chip away from the stone whatever doesn't look like David."

When God initially rescues us out of the world, we are badly in need of refashioning. God's chisel must remove from our lives everything that does not look like Jesus. This He does through the multi-faceted process of replacing our original heart of stone with a new heart of flesh,⁶⁶ writing God's laws and ways on our hearts,⁶⁷ supernaturally transforming our orientation from self-centeredness to God-centeredness,⁶⁸ convicting us of sins to be repented of,⁶⁹ opening our understanding of the

⁶⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:18

⁶⁶ Ezekiel 36:26

⁶⁷ Jeremiah 31:31-34

⁶⁸ 1 Corinthians 6:11; 2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 9

⁶⁹ Ephesians 4:30; John 16:8

scriptures,⁷⁰ and filling our hearts with the love of God.⁷¹ Perfection in this inner life is not instantaneous. It is a step-by-step process that can take a lifetime (perhaps longer) to complete.

The expedition is also an *external* odyssey through this world, involving daily mundane and spiritual decisions related to the challenges of family life, career, relationships and ministry. It is in these areas that any inner transformation shows itself externally to the world. The Holy Spirit must guide us every step along the way as we maneuver amid the obscure paths and frequent forks in the road. How does the Spirit guide us in these affairs of daily life?

The Bible tells me so

When it comes to the Spirit's guidance in outward matters—in our daily decision-making—there is no single way in which the Spirit always makes His will known. The scriptures are the most trustworthy repository of the Spirit's wisdom and guidance given to His people. They are written by divinely chosen men who were "*carried along by the Holy Spirit*"⁷² in their teaching and preaching so that the words of scripture are "*profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*"⁷³ Being rightly instructed from scripture is, in fact, a fine means of being directed by the Holy Spirit who inspired the authors for our benefit.⁷⁴

When I began to teach the Bible regularly in 1970, it was during the California Jesus Movement. Because I taught the Bible, people would sometimes ask to meet with me for counseling. Since I was only 16 years old, with very little personal life experience and absolutely no therapeutic or psychological knowledge, I felt very unqualified to counsel people in their complex problems. Nonetheless, I allowed them to share with me what was bothering them. This happened very often. After several such sessions it began to dawn on me that their problems were not really that difficult to address. In essentially every case, what little I knew of the Bible was sufficient to provide guidance for the issues they were experiencing. This was, at the time, an unexpected discovery for me. In the fifty years of subsequent ministry, I have rarely heard anyone relate a personal problem for which there was not a solution in the Bible.

In 1982, I was asked to speak to a group of several hundred *Jesus People* living in Christian community in New South Wales, Australia. Most of the members of the community were young converts from *hippie* backgrounds, who were dealing with such issues as new believers coming out of drug and sex-abusing lifestyles typically face. The elders asked me to address the whole gathered

⁷⁰ Luke 24:45; 1 John 2:27

⁷¹ Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22

⁷² 2 Peter 1:21 ESV

⁷³ 2 Timothy 3:16-17 ESV

⁷⁴ Romans 15:4

community every evening for a week. When I inquired about the desired subject matter, I was supplied with a list of biblical topics—e.g., the authority of scripture, repentance, discipleship, suffering, spiritual warfare, etc. Each night, I spoke for a couple of hours on one of these subjects, teaching strictly what the Bible said about them, and covering the elders’ wish-list in the course of the week.

At the end of the week, the pastor and elders gathered to express their appreciation. The pastor said, “You know, almost every day our pastors have their whole day filled with counseling appointments made by church members having struggles. However, this week we have been amazed to notice that no one at all was requesting counseling appointments. The detailed practical teaching of the scriptures that they were receiving each evening apparently was sufficient to answer all of their questions and meet their needs.”

Fairly early in my ministry, a troubled lady who kept several pastors busy with frequent counseling sessions once asked me, “Steve, where do you go when you need counseling?” I was at a loss for an answer. I had to think for a moment, trying to remember the last time I had sought another’s counsel in a life problem. I felt embarrassed that I could not remember a case of going to a counselor about anything. The reason for the embarrassment was that we were, in those days, under strong teaching about the interdependency of the members of the Body of Christ to one another, and were continually informed that there were to be no spiritual “Lone Rangers.” We need each other. It then dawned on me that my life had been sufficiently stable and happy simply by following the scriptures in all matters of life. I was not “independent,” but did benefit, a great deal, from preachers and teachers who expounded the Bible well. Having received and applied what they taught, I had never felt the additional need for private counseling. Living consistently by scripture generally results in a degree of stability and happiness that may render human counselors redundant. This does not mean that people requiring guidance should never consult older, seasoned mentors, and need only read the Bible on their own. We will always have our personal blind spots, which others may be able to identify for us. However, when one does seek guidance from a counselor, that counselor will be most helpful who can counsel from a thorough grasp of what God’s Word instructs.

Your testimonies also are my delight

And my counselors.⁷⁵

Guidance on demand?

⁷⁵ Psalm 119:24

Though we must acknowledge other possible means of guidance to be valid as well, the proper understanding and application of scripture is the *most reliable* means of being guided by the Holy Spirit. We may prefer to receive special revelations or personal “words” from the Lord, but we cannot command God to speak to us at any given time if He has nothing special to tell us at the moment. Upon meeting someone who said he had been saved for three years but had never been baptized, I asked in bewilderment, “Why have you neglected so long to be baptized?” He answered that he was waiting for God to lead him to do so. I was happy to inform him that this required no special word from the Lord, because there is a general command in scripture for all believers to be baptized. It is disingenuous to be asking God to speak specially to you about a matter concerning which He has already spoken unambiguously to all in the scriptures. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for not following the written scriptures given by Moses and the prophets. He said, “*if you do not believe [Moses’] writings, how will you believe My words?*”⁷⁶ If we neglect what God has already said through His inspired messengers in scripture, He is not likely to speak further on the matter.

When God was not speaking to him “*either by dreams or by Urim or by the prophets,*”⁷⁷ King Saul was not content to hear nothing from God. Because God was not accommodating his demand for a word from heaven, Saul went to a medium to summon the deceased prophet Samuel out of *Sheol*. For this action, clearly forbidden in God’s Law,⁷⁸ Saul was condemned to die in battle the following day.⁷⁹ He could have avoided every disaster that befell him if he had only consistently allowed himself to be guided by the written Word of God. Doing so would, at least, have kept him from consulting the medium.

We must consider two theories about the Spirit’s guidance. On one view, God has a specific thing that He wants each person to do at every given moment. Our duty is to get a word from God to guide us in every choice we make—what we buy at the grocery store, whether to sit in the front or the back of the bus, whether to talk to someone on the phone or to go and see them in person, whether to put on the left shoe first or the right shoe, etc. On this view, every choice is crucial and potentially capable of causing us to “miss God’s will” in the moment. Those who hold this view of guidance are often very nervous about making sure they have *heard* God correctly before making any move. One young man I knew in the Jesus Movement would not even eat breakfast before he was convinced that the Lord had revealed to him which cereal to choose. True story!

A polar opposite view of guidance is that God has a generic will for everybody and seldom, if ever, has a specific task that one is specially assigned to perform, as opposed to any other equally good action. The rules and principles to guide every choice are given in scripture, and so long as we remain

⁷⁶ John 5:47

⁷⁷ 1 Samuel 28:6

⁷⁸ Leviticus 19:31; 20:6

⁷⁹ 1 Chronicles 10:13

within their general perimeters, we are within the generic “will of God.” Thus, God will not necessarily tell you whom to marry, but simply has principles governing the *kind* of person a Christian ought to choose. God, on this view, would not prefer for you to attend one particular college, or to take any specific career path, so long as you are living and choosing according to godly and biblical standards, etc.

Frankly, a case can be made for either view—but not either view *alone*. It seems clear from scripture that God allowed Israel, once settled in the land, to make their own day-by-day life choices so long as they remained within the boundaries of the *Torah’s* general instructions. If God was involved in such choices at all, it was generally *behind the scenes*. This invisible, providential guidance is seen, for example, in the leading of Abraham’s servant to Rebekah’s village at the exact moment that she was coming out to draw water. He only recognized God’s guidance after the fact: “*being on the way, the Lord led me...*”⁸⁰

However, God also gave special direction, through angels, dreams, visions, prophets, etc., to certain individuals about special missions that He had for them. They could not get this special guidance just any time they wished for it, as King Saul discovered. Whenever God had a special assignment for someone, He knew well enough where they lived and how to get in touch with them.

Similarly, while we read of special guidance—dreams, visions, angels, prophets, etc.—being sent to guide certain individuals in the New Testament also, there is no evidence that every step they took required such special revelations. In fact, when it came to the lives of most in the disciple community, we do not read that special revelations were a commonplace experience guiding their daily lives. Instead, we read that they *continued steadfastly* under the apostles’ teaching⁸¹ (teaching which we now have preserved in the New Testament) and they generally “*walk[ed] in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.*”⁸²

Even the apostles could not get a direct revelation whenever it would have been desirable or convenient. When Paul and his second missionary team were seeking which direction to go from Troas, they apparently made two false starts in the wrong direction. They obviously were not getting special revelation until Paul finally did get a dream directing them westward to Macedonia. They certainly would have appreciated a word from the Lord before making their first two abortive forays toward Asia and Bithynia, but initially they got no clear guidance, other than that “*the Holy Spirit did not permit them.*”⁸³

From the experience of God’s people in both testaments, it would appear that much (most?) of the time, God is pleased for His people to freely choose their daily activities within the boundaries

⁸⁰ Genesis 24:27

⁸¹ Acts 2:42

⁸² *Ibid.*, 9:31

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 16:6-7

established in His Word. This no doubt included such important decisions as one's choice of a career, whom to marry, how to steward resources, etc. That God may work secretly behind the scenes through our entirely natural-seeming decisions is assumed. It is likely that almost every biblical character selected the partner he or she would marry through the ordinary means of attraction, good judgment, or even the use of matchmakers, in the absence of special prophetic revelations informing their choices.

There were exceptions, of course, as with Isaiah⁸⁴ and Hosea.⁸⁵ There is no evidence that Mary and Joseph originally became betrothed as a result of any specific divine revelation given to them, though Joseph did receive dreams subsequently encouraging him to carry through with the wedding plans despite Mary's unexpected pregnancy. In such examples, we see the combination of godly people making many important decisions without receiving special revelations, angelic messengers or prophetic dreams—as well as occasions when God intervened to give special instructions when necessary. It may seem more “spiritual” to be guided by supernatural revelations, but consider: Which would require more faith—to confidently press forward after receiving an angelic visitor describing the mission, or to proceed, if necessary, in the dark,⁸⁶ trusting in the promise: *“In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths”*?⁸⁷

There are cases in which one's career, marriage partner, or specific stewardship decisions are of unique importance to God's purposes. In such cases, He may direct, either unobtrusively behind the scenes through what appear to be natural circumstances, or by giving special guidance when He has something special in mind. In the absence of the latter (if we have truly asked for God's direction), we must trust that the former is in play. It may be true that God has a specific will concerning each one's career, stewardship, or marriage choices. If so, there is reason to believe that He is capable of steering that one's life subtly in such a way as to see that these objectives are realized. I don't see any evidence that each Israelite or New Testament believer was expected to be paralyzed until he or she could be satisfied that an unmistakable word from the Lord had come directing every prospective action.

Having said that, I believe that God's calling to, and guidance in, vocational ministries will be unique to individuals. In fact, I am persuaded that anyone entering a ministry vocation should have a clear sense of a specific “call” or summons from God to pursue that activity. Such a sensed call will probably take some such form as *“Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!”*⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Isaiah 8:1-3

⁸⁵ Hosea 1:2-3

⁸⁶ Isaiah 50:10

⁸⁷ Proverbs 3:6

⁸⁸ 1 Corinthians 9:16

The letter Vs. the Spirit

Some Christians have expressed the sentiment that following scripture is not as *spiritual* as is the following of prophetic dreams and inward voices, etc. Some cite Paul's words, "*the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,*"⁸⁹ as meaning that, ideally, Christians should get direct revelations from the Spirit, rather than from the written Word. Their mistake is in taking Paul's use of the word "letter" as a reference to written materials⁹⁰—as if Paul would speak in this disparaging manner even of his own written letters! It is not more "spiritual" to follow the insights which we think are given to us directly by the Spirit than it is to follow the insights given by the same Spirit to the prophets and apostles of Jesus Christ. These men actually discerned His voice more infallibly than we do. If we neglect to read, study, meditate upon, and apply scripture, we cannot blame anyone but ourselves if we fail to be led aright by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit owes no new revelations to those who possess, but neglect, that revelation already provided to the unique prophets and hand-picked apostles of Christ.⁹¹ No genuine revelation of the Holy Spirit will contradict what He has previously revealed through Jesus or the apostles.

My sincere impression is that many who prefer special and personal revelations to those provided in scripture may be just a bit academically indolent (I almost said "lazy"). It requires years of disciplined (and delightful!) study and meditation upon the scriptures to derive a clear sense of the mind of God on the various matters concerning which we regularly need guidance. There are clearly those who have little taste for such disciplines. However, a lack of fervor for the study of the scriptures would seem to evince one of two deficiencies—either 1) apathy about those things that God has seen fit to reveal to the Church through His uniquely-chosen agents, or 2) insufficient confidence that the Bible is the authentic revelation of the mind of God.

It is true that most Christians throughout history had no access to personal copies of the Bible and may even have been illiterate. Obviously, in such cases, believers either had to trust their (sometimes unreliable) priests and pastors, or receive guidance directly from the Holy Spirit by other means. Many of those who lacked Bibles, like many today who have them but do not study or learn well from their Bibles, were vulnerable to a wide variety of errors.

Most Christians who have convictions are confident that these have come from the Holy Spirit, but those who have and study the Bible are in a much better position to discern between which impressions are really those from the Holy Spirit and how many are human misperceptions or demonic deceptions. No one can deny that there have been many of the latter which have been adopted by people who thoroughly believed they were following the Spirit's leading. On occasion, I

⁸⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:6

⁹⁰ In context, Paul is referring to the written law code given through Moses

⁹¹ Luke 16:31

have been led by the Spirit through various means external to the scriptures, but I always feel *safer* if the guidance I am getting can be confirmed by relevant texts of scripture. These are written by God's chosen agents who reliably heard from God and wrote His instructions for our direction.

Supernatural means of guidance

While the Bible does give instructions directing us in our conduct in almost every imaginable circumstance of life, there remain times when choices have to be made which have no moral or scriptural component to guide us. Personal life choices or special assignments that God may have for a person may, at God's discretion, be directed by special divine interventions in the form of dreams, visions, prophetic words, angels, etc. Now when I just listed these things, I am sure some readers thought, "Well, I have followed you this far, but this is too much!"

Throughout history, the Spirit has led the godly in specific vocational and relational situations, through a variety of methods—both natural and supernatural. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that "*at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.*"⁹² These *many ways* included dreams and visions,⁹³ the audible divine voice,⁹⁴ a still small voice,⁹⁵ the coming of prophets sent to convey personal instructions⁹⁶—and even angelic visitations.⁹⁷

There are some who believe that these are the normative means by which God still speaks to all believers today. It is entirely possible for God to do so—since such communications were not restricted to Old Testament times, but also occurred in the Book of Acts.⁹⁸ Some of the epistles indicate that the churches were sometimes instructed by prophetic words.⁹⁹

Some Christians today have decided (seemingly arbitrarily) that God cannot or will not behave like Himself anymore. They seem to believe that He who spoke supernaturally to His servants throughout the entire Bible has inexplicably lapsed into silence for the duration. Needless to say, there is not a line of scripture that can be rationally exegeted to yield such a conclusion. It is apparently the mere expression of someone's personal sentiments.

Our understanding of the subject needs to be more nuanced. It is not at all clear that these methods were ever the most common means by which godly people, including prophets and apostles, were guided day-by-day. In scripture, those who received such spectacular revelations were not

⁹² Hebrews 1:1

⁹³ Numbers 12:6; Acts 16:9-10

⁹⁴ John 12:28-29; Acts 9:7

⁹⁵ 1 Kings 19:12

⁹⁶ Acts 21:4, 10-11

⁹⁷ 1 Kings 19:5; Acts 5:19; 12:7

⁹⁸ E.g., Acts 2:17; 5:19; 8:26; 10:3-6, 8-16; 13:2; 16:9-10; 20:23; 21:4, 9, 10-11; 27:23-24

⁹⁹ E.g., Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 14:29-32; 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21; 1 John 4:1-4

usually the rank-and-file Jews or Christians (though some of them may have been¹⁰⁰). No one should regard his or her experience to be sub-normal for lack of having received angelic messengers or apocalyptic visions. Even in biblical times they were relatively rare, and in most cases were entrusted to special messengers. Nonetheless, it cannot reasonably or scripturally be ruled-out that the Holy Spirit might speak to and guide someone today in any of these ways.

Believing such things comes with a built-in risk. The dark forces are also capable of counterfeiting all of these methods,¹⁰¹ so any guidance one might believe has come in this manner must be checked against what scripture already teaches. *“Test all things; hold fast what is good.”*¹⁰² Scripture is the standard of truth by which all presumed revelation must be measured. *“If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.”*¹⁰³

It is not for the disciple to coax, or wring out of, God the kind of revelation some of us might wish to receive. Nor should we feel guilty if we are not “hearing” from God in any of these ways. He knows best how to direct you where He wants you to go.

The Spirit of wisdom

The Holy Spirit is also called *“the Spirit of wisdom.”*¹⁰⁴ In Proverbs, the voice of wisdom is recognizable as the voice of God, or of Christ Himself,¹⁰⁵ and nothing can be clearer in that book than the fact that wisdom is recommended as a reliable means of decision making in the will of God. Paul wrote: *“Do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”*¹⁰⁶ If failing to know the will of the Lord is equivalent to being “unwise,” then it must be the will of God for us to walk wisely.

The Holy Spirit may be leading us more than we realize to make decisions based upon what seems as natural to us as the exercise of godly wisdom and common sense, which is really another means of His guidance. It may not sound as “spiritual” to say, “this decision makes sense, while the alternative does not,” than to say, “Jesus appeared to me in the night telling me to do such-and-such.” However, some of us may need to recalibrate our “spirituality detector.” Spirituality is happily doing the will of God without demeaning the method by which He chooses to make it known.

Humans are the only species that God created in His own image, and the only species we know of that has the capacity to reason abstractly, or to evaluate how choices may lead to remote consequences. This capacity seems to reside within that astonishing computer inside our heads,

¹⁰⁰ E.g., Luke 2:25-27; Acts 9:10ff

¹⁰¹ 1 John 4:1-3; 11:14

¹⁰² 1 Thessalonians 5:21

¹⁰³ Isaiah 8:20

¹⁰⁴ Isaiah 11:2

¹⁰⁵ E.g., Proverbs 1:20-33; 2:6; 8:1-36; 1 Corinthians 1:30

¹⁰⁶ Ephesians 5:17

which happens to be the most complex arrangement of matter in the known universe. That is quite a gift we have all received! What an insult to the Giver for us to neglect it! No doubt God had every intention of us stewarding these unique abilities responsibly. This is why it is so wrong to tamper with this special machine by introducing substances that damage brain cells and are known to impair mental function. It is also why anti-intellectualism in religion is wrong-headed.

There is a certain ilk of Christians who denigrate intelligent, clear thinking—calling it “worldly wisdom.” Wisdom is not worldly, in itself. Wisdom is the capacity to choose a desirable outcome and then to calculate the most expeditious means to achieving that outcome. Do you want to avoid poverty? Holding a job and staying out of debt is wisdom’s recommendation to gain such an outcome. Would you prefer not to become stupid, arrogant, and repulsive? Staying sober would go a long way toward serving that end. Do you want your kids to be well-behaved, responsible adults? Then it would be wise to begin their discipline and training early in life. Do you want to avoid falling into sexual sin? Then keep your eyes and your feet away from the seducers. Do you want the blessing of God on your life? Then live honestly, mercifully, and generously. You may recognize these as some of the themes found in Proverbs. It is a book of wisdom—and a book of scripture. Such wisdom literature in the Bible informs us that wisdom is one of the ways in which God gets His will across to us.

Worldly wisdom and godly wisdom function in the same manner, with the exception that the former seeks selfish and worldly ends and means. To seek pleasure and wealth more than the approval of God reflects an alternative set of values, though the wisdom employed in seeking those goals functions the same way as that employed to gain other goals—weighing and assessing ways and means. All wisdom—whether godly or worldly—is mindful of the relation of causes to their effects, and of where respective trajectories are likely to culminate. If one chooses as a goal the attainment of rank above others, for example, that is a worldly goal. Worldly wisdom will lead such a one to sacrifice relationships, integrity, and values in a ruthless pursuit of promotion—and may well attain it. Jesus said that *“the sons of this age are more prudent than the sons of the light, in respect to their generation.”*¹⁰⁷

This may be intended as a compliment to the sons of light. After all, we *should* be less wise in worldly pursuits than are the unbelievers, since such pursuits do not motivate us. On the other hand, Jesus may have meant to shame us if we employ less prudence in the seeking of godly ends than the worldly employ in seeking theirs.

In any case, divine wisdom is characterized by a more enlightened set of values (e.g., to put God’s eternal interests above our own temporal ones), and a good understanding of what steps ought to be taken in order to best assure the attainment of those goals. Godly wisdom is therefore superior to

¹⁰⁷ Luke 16:8 YLT

worldly wisdom at its starting point—putting God first: *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”*¹⁰⁸ Once the proper goal is in place, ordinary intelligence is often all that is needed to avoid pitfalls and to know what steps God would prefer to be taken in the circumstances—since they will move us closer to God’s objectives.

Wisdom is often gained by wise counsel. Sometimes others can see a side of the matter to which we are blind, which needs to factor into our decisions. Fools can counsel you into destruction, but listening to several wise counselors provides multiple perspectives to evaluate, and from which to make well-considered decisions. The seeking of counselors is a great way to get a grasp on the combined wisdom of a group, though, once you have gathered all the data that they have to offer, the decision remains with you.

Walking as Jesus walked is walking in the Spirit of wisdom: *“See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise.”*¹⁰⁹ *“Walk in wisdom.”*¹¹⁰ This is walking in Christ, who *“became for us wisdom from God.”*¹¹¹

Other considerations

Some decisions cannot be made by appeal to specific verses or principles of scripture—and wise analysis often cannot present an easy choice between equally good options. Add to this the fact that no dreams, visions, angels, or prophetic words have come to indicate what to do. The choice between alternative opportunities—like pursuing one marriage partner over other equally good options, or one job offer out of several good possibilities, or which house to buy from a range of equally appealing alternatives in the same price-range, etc.—are not inconsequential decisions! Yet, we may sometimes be in a position to choose when no obvious guidance has come. In such cases it may be best to pray for God’s direction and to wait as long as is possible for new insight to come. When a decision cannot be further delayed, and no clear word has come from the Lord, it may be necessary to step forward counting on His guidance to be secretly operating. Since He has promised to guide us, it is sometimes reasonable to simply go forward counting on this promise. Someone has said, “God has promised to steer the car, but He can’t do so until you put it in motion.”

There are a number of other factors in discerning the will of God, however, which we have not considered at length, but can be mentioned briefly:

¹⁰⁸ Proverbs 9:10

¹⁰⁹ Ephesians 5:15

¹¹⁰ Colossians 4:5

¹¹¹ 1 Corinthians 1:30

1. It should not be discounted that the thing that is God's will for you is also that which He knows will ultimately fulfill your deepest needs. Therefore, it should not be thought that God's call will necessarily be at odds with your deepest desires. It is more likely that the Spirit has been placing desires within you that correspond to what He has in mind for you. Though it cannot be assumed that everything God wants you to do today will match up with what you would prefer to do today, it also should not be surprising if what He leads you to do conforms to the passion that has been growing in your own heart. There is a promise: *"Delight yourself also in the Lord and He shall give you the desires of your heart."*¹¹²
2. There may be somebody to whom you should be submitting your decision, through whom God will make His purpose known—e.g., a parent, a husband, a creditor, or anyone to whom promises have been made. No decision should be considered to be on the table where proper submission to authority will be compromised, or which would involve the defaulting on a legitimate prior obligation.
3. A great number of decisions can be made by the recognition of "open doors"—that is, opportunities that have actually arisen, which can be reasonably regarded as providential. It may be that a strong desire to move a certain direction is present, but the door is closed and does not seem to yield to attempts to open it. This could be an indicator that the Spirit is forbidding this step.¹¹³ On the other hand, if there are several desirable opportunities that one can imagine, but only one of them has really opened up, there is reason to think this may be the Spirit's guidance.
4. Mind the "checks" in your spirit. When you have prayed, and are planning to take a step, give attention to your inward state of spirit. Are there any remaining inner subjective reservations that cannot easily be explained away? Does the move just not seem *quite right*? These can be the warnings from the Holy Spirit that you are proceeding in the wrong way. Many brides and grooms have gone through with their weddings after they had already begun to have vague misgivings about the decision. In many cases, this has led to bitter regrets. Do not ignore these "checks" in your spirit. More likely than not, this is God warning you of an impending mistake. The scripture promises that God will lead His people forth with peace.¹¹⁴ Paul said that the peace of God must be allowed to "rule" in our hearts.¹¹⁵ The Greek word for "rule" that Paul used is found only once in the New Testament. It means to be the arbiter or umpire. When there is a dispute in the game, the

¹¹² Psalm 37:4

¹¹³ Acts 16:6-7

¹¹⁴ Isaiah 55:12

¹¹⁵ Colossians 3:15

umpire makes the call and it is decided. When there are two options, and one is attended by the peace of God while the other is not, let God's peace make the call.

5. It is not often recommended, but in cases where no alternative is clearly superior to another, but where a decision must be made, people in the scripture have been known to cast lots (equivalent to flipping a coin or throwing the dice!). I know of no one who recommends this as a means of divine guidance, but I am not sure why not. Joshua resorted to this means in distributing the land portions to the tribes of Israel,¹¹⁶ and the mariners on Jonah's ship did this to discover who was aboard whose presence might be the cause of the storm threatening to sink the ship.¹¹⁷ In the latter case, it seems that the sailors' superstitions about the cause of storms played a role. What is interesting is that even in that case, God caused the lot to give the correct result in order to forward His will for Jonah. Solomon wrote: "*The lot is cast into the lap. But its every decision is from the Lord.*"¹¹⁸ That sounds like a recommendation.

I would not recommend using this method in a storm to decide who should be thrown overboard—unless the boat is going to sink due to the weight of one too many passengers! However, the apostles seemed to have some confidence in this recommendation from Solomon, because they cast lots in choosing a new apostle to replace Judas. They first found two qualified candidates and prayed, referring to the new man as the one "*You have chosen...*"¹¹⁹ They then cast lots and let the decision of the lot stand.

Of course, this all happened before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, so one may reasonably object that this is not a case of the Spirit's guidance. However, it is an Old Testament way in which disputes were settled according to the will of God. In cases where there is no clearly discernible guidance from the Spirit, there is nothing to suggest that He would not let His will be known in such a manner as this. I would note however that this was only resorted to by the apostles in a situation where there were only two candidates—both possessing equally sterling qualifications—and where, so far as anyone could tell, either of them would make a good replacement (Judas, we may judge, was not a hard act to follow).

In cases like this, where all the options seem good from the human vantage point, and a choice must be made among them, the flipping of a coin may break the deadlock. One would be at liberty to see the result either as God's sovereignty directing the decision through the coin toss, or as God's way of simply getting you off the dime to go forward in a situation where He has no preference between two equally fine choices!

¹¹⁶ Joshua 14:2

¹¹⁷ Jonah 1:7

¹¹⁸ Proverbs 16:33

¹¹⁹ Acts 1:24-26

Trust the competence of the Shepherd

The Bible likens the guidance of Christ through His Spirit to that of a shepherd with his sheep:

*He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.*¹²⁰

This doesn't sound nerve-racking for the sheep, does it? Sheep graze rather tranquilly under the eye of their shepherd. Sometimes all he wants them to do is remain for some period of time in the place and activity to which he has last led them. "*He makes me lie down in green pastures.*"¹²¹ If we are not sensing any direction from the Spirit to embark on some new adventure, we might well assume that we are to remain productive at the last post to which we were assigned until a new command is heard.

If a shepherd wants his sheep to move on, it is his responsibility to lift up his voice to the point of its being discernible to the sheep. If they can't hear his voice, it is because he has not yet spoken loudly enough to be heard. It is the shepherd's responsibility to speak in such a manner that the sheep can recognize his voice; it is the sheep's responsibility only to follow when that voice is heard. Guidance is not stressful for the sheep. Jesus said, "*My sheep hear my voice...and they follow me.*"¹²²

It is not ours to *require* God to speak to us about things. We should certainly pray for His guidance, but then we must await His own time to clarify the path forward. If He has special instructions for us, He knows how to deliver them effectively. I don't believe that we are to be nervous about getting a specific "word" for every daily activity. "*My yoke is easy.*"¹²³

If we are asking the Shepherd to guide us, we can trust that, if we were to innocently make an error when He has something else in mind, He will reach out His shepherd's crook and yank us back to where He wants us to be. Ultimately, Christ's trusting sheep will end up where He wants them to be. He has His ways of guaranteeing that. Remember, "*they tried to go...but the Spirit did not permit them.*"¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Isaiah 40:11 ESV

¹²¹ Psalm 23:2

¹²² John 10:27

¹²³ Matthew 11:30

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16:6-7

Chapter Eight

The Law of the Kingdom

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another;

as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

(John 13:34-35)

...to those who are without law, as without law

(not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ),

that I might win those who are without law...

(1 Corinthians 9:21)

Anarchy never works out well for any society. Effective government is the opposite of anarchy, and God's Kingdom is an effective government. No king would see chaos as an acceptable or safe condition within his realm.

Typically, kings rule through systems of law. Since they cannot personally supervise and direct the actions of every individual in the realm every moment, the placing of a framework of laws upon the whole society becomes the most practical, and potentially the most just, way to maintain order and justice in their kingdoms. In this respect, the present Kingdom under Christ differs from the kingdoms of the world, and even from God's kingdom in Old Testament Israel.

Before God established Israel as His Kingdom at Mount Sinai, there were already many pagan kingdoms on earth. One of the earliest was Nimrod's kingdom, beginning with Babel¹ in Mesopotamia, only two generations after Noah's flood. The region was later ruled by Hammurabi, about 300 years before Moses' time. This Babylonian ruler left us a record in stone of his extensive legal code, containing 282 laws, mostly case-law dealing with civil administration and criminal justice. At a number of points, it resembled the ethical laws that God would later encode for Israel at Sinai. At one time, scholars speculated that Moses' laws, despite the fact that the Bible attributes them to Yahweh's authorship, may actually have been influenced by those of Hammurabi. This view is less widely held today simply because the two legal codes differ far more than they resemble one another and there is a far better explanation of the points of similarity.

The commonalities between the code of Hammurabi and that of Israel do not demonstrate the dependence of the latter upon the former. What they demonstrate is that certain human actions were regarded as unethical or antisocial in more than one ancient society, as is the case today. In fact, there

¹ Genesis 10:8-10

are now known to have been a number of societies earlier than Hammurabi's, which had similar law codes.² Those actions identified as crimes in most systems included murder, adultery, theft, and kidnapping which were attended with severe penalties. It would seem strange for any civil society to be created that did not regard such actions as immoral or harmful.

This means that there have always been what might be regarded as universal moral standards, some of which were recognized in legal systems throughout history. It would be surprising if it were otherwise, since God has given humans a conscience to render them morally sensible. The earliest codified law immediately after the flood legislated a penalty for murder. God told Noah's family, "*Whoever sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed...*"³ No doubt the reason this law is given first priority after the flood was that the condition that had precipitated that judgment had been the prevalence of murderous violence that filled the earth.

It is important for us to realize that the giving of this law to Noah did not *create* the ethical standard. It only *identified* it. Even before God forbade murder in this post-flood mandate, the act of unjustly taking a human life was already morally wrong. This is why Cain, hundreds of years prior to the flood, was punished for killing his brother. There had been no law specifically given forbidding murder (which is probably why Cain's penalty was less severe than it would have been after the law came), but the act was still morally wrong and punishable. Every man and woman should have known this instinctively.

Ethics and morals, whether encoded into law or not, are eternal verities because they are rooted in God's own unchanging moral character. Mankind was created to resemble God and to reflect His own character in all human interactions. Deviations from this standard represent moral wrongdoing, whether before, during, or after the giving of any laws forbidding specific actions. Morals are not created by laws. They are transcendental boundaries for human behavior determined by God and planted by Him into the intuitions of mankind. Laws, while not *creating* moral reality, should *reflect* the moral absolutes that God has placed in the human conscience—and virtually every legal system known to man acknowledges these norms in some respects.

Thus, when Yahweh adopted Israel to be His earthly Kingdom and gave them laws by which to govern themselves, these laws included some of those which were common to most civil societies. Laws requiring the honoring of parents, proscribing murder, adultery, theft, slander, etc., as found in the Ten Commandments and certain other laws given to Moses, were not unique to Israel, but are the common requirements God places upon all mankind in every age.⁴ These morals, as we shall see,

² E.g., The Cuneiform laws, written as early as 2350 B.C.; the Code of Urukagina, 2380 B.C.; the Code of Ur-Nammu, 2050 B.C.; and others.

³ Genesis 9:6

⁴ The rabbis identified some such code by which the Gentiles would be judged by God, and called this code *the Noachide Laws* (because they were, allegedly, given to Noah as the representative of mankind). The Talmud first identified 7 such laws, though the number was later increased to 30. The *Noachide Laws*, however, are

were not only valid prior to the giving of the Torah, but remain valid in the New Covenant with the passing away of Torah.⁵

Moral laws Vs. ritual laws—Is there really a difference?

When Yahweh established the nation of Israel as His kingdom, He also gave them many laws that were not commonly found among the nations. These were the laws that were to distinguish them from other nations. They involved such matters as circumcision, the keeping of Sabbath, and numerous other holy days, the avoidance of certain foods and persons designated as “unclean,” a very regulated order of sacrificial worship, a separated priesthood, a unique building for their worship, and so on. Laws of this type have often been called *ceremonial*, or *ritual* laws. In theological discussions a distinction between *moral* laws and *ritual* laws in the Torah is often assumed. While there are those who insist that such categories are nowhere identified in scripture, this is not quite true. While we never find the terms “moral law” and “ritual law” distinguishing different categories, moral and ritual commandments are nonetheless fundamentally distinct in their very nature, and both testaments recognize a disparity in the importance of one group over the other. In scripture, ritual laws (such as those governing sacrificial practice and distinctions between clean and unclean foods) are regarded as being of lower priority than are those that describe morally upright behavior.

This is why David, due to the extremity of the case, was not punished (and did not even need to repent) for unlawfully eating the holy bread which was only lawful for priests to eat. This was a violation of ritual commandment. By contrast, he was called to account and required to repent for his later acts of adultery and murder. His repenting of these sins induced Yahweh to suspend his normal sentence and to bring lesser consequences upon David for his crimes. David, and some of the prophets, made a clear distinction between sacrifices (with which all the ritual laws were associated) and issues of moral uprightness. For example:

Sacrifice and offering You did not desire...

Burnt offering and sin offering You did not require.

Then I said, “Behold, I come...

I delight to do Your will, O my God,

And Your law is within my heart.”⁶

not identified anywhere in scripture and would not, in all points, correspond to a universally recognized moral code.

⁵ The mere mention of the passing away of the Torah (Mosaic Law) is more controversial today than it once was among Christians. This idea will be developed anon.

⁶ Psalm 40:6-8

*For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it;
You do not delight in burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,
A broken and a contrite heart—
These, O God, You will not despise.⁷*

*For I desire mercy and not sacrifice,
And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.⁸*

*To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" says the Lord.
"I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle.
I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats...
The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies...
Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates...
Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes.
Cease to do evil, learn to do good;
Seek justice, rebuke the oppressor;
Defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.⁹*

*With what shall I come before the Lord,
And bow myself before the High God?
Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings,
With calves a year old?...
He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justly,
To love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God?¹⁰*

Jesus made the same point, illustrating with the example of David eating the shewbread.¹¹ He also showed that some ritual laws, like observing the Sabbath, could be preempted even by other ritual requirements—such as priestly service¹² and the required eighth-day circumcision of an infant.¹³

⁷ Psalm 51:16-17

⁸ Hosea 6:6

⁹ Isaiah 1:11, 13-14, 16-17

¹⁰ Micah 6:6, 8

¹¹ Mark 2:24-26

¹² Matthew 12:5

¹³ John 7:22

These actions involved labor, which was generally forbidden on Sabbath, but the Jews were willing to permit these exceptions. How much more, Jesus argued, should acts of mercy be done even if the Sabbath should be violated in their performance!¹⁴

Jesus also distinguished between ceremonial and moral requirements of the law when He said that the Pharisees dutifully paid their tithes (a ritual requirement for the upkeep of the Levites and the priesthood), but that they “*neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.*”¹⁵

Tithing was a part of the ritual temple duties. By contrast, justice (fairness), mercy (compassion) and faithfulness (integrity) are all universal moral duties—imitations of the divine character and required of all mankind. Jesus referred to the latter as “*weightier matters of the law.*” Clearly, such moral issues take precedence over ritual issues. This is also why Paul identified a qualitative difference between the eating of foods forbidden in the law (a ritual issue), on one hand, with sexual immorality (a moral issue), on the other.¹⁶

I said earlier that ritual and moral laws differ from each other in *nature*. How so?

1. Moral laws can never be altered because they are based upon God’s character, which never changes and which defines the standard of righteousness by which all will be judged. God is just. Therefore, all *injustice* is immoral. God is merciful. Therefore, it is always immoral to be *unmerciful*. God is faithful. Therefore, it is always immoral to compromise personal *integrity*. The same is true of God’s other character traits and their moral implications upon humans. The Law of Moses did not render behaviors like murder, adultery, theft, the dishonoring of parents, or slander, immoral. As breaches of justice and faithfulness, all of these behaviors were already immoral prior to the giving of the Law. The fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth commandments, rather than creating a new moral code, simply conformed to the existing standard of righteous social behavior based upon the revelation of God’s character.
2. Ritual laws, by contrast, are not based, in the same sense, upon God’s character, but upon certain actions of God, seen either retrospectively or predictively. An obvious example would be that the command to rest on the seventh day of every week commemorates God’s having rested on the seventh day of the creation. The annual observance of Passover reminded Israel of God’s liberating them from Egypt. By contrast, the sacrificial system, with its associated rituals, and *Yom Kippur*, were predictive of things that God would do in the future—namely, the sending of Christ as an atonement for sin. Rituals of remembrance, and of anticipation, regarding certain

¹⁴ Matthew 12:11-12; Luke 13:15-16; John 7:23

¹⁵ Matthew 23:23 ESV

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:13

specific actions on God's part, have symbolic meaning. They symbolize things more important than themselves.

Rituals do not exist *of necessity*. It was not absolutely essential for God to institute them. His character would have remained uncompromised if He had required Israel to sacrifice pigs and chickens instead of sheep and bulls. If He had never asked them to circumcise their children, or to observe a Sabbath rest, there would have been no violence suffered to His nature. After all, godly people were not required to be circumcised before Abraham's day, nor was the Sabbath observance commanded before the Exodus. People were capable of being just as holy and righteous in those earlier times (e.g., Abel, Enoch, Noah). If God had required Israel to observe one, two, five, or ten week-long festivals per year, instead of three, this would have been within Yahweh's rightful prerogative to decide without compromising anything in His moral nature. The same cannot be said about the commands not to steal, murder, or commit adultery. Such actions violate God's very nature of justice and faithfulness—His unchanging character. For example, He could never command such a thing as "Thou shalt commit adultery."¹⁷

Jesus fulfilled the Torah: What does that mean for me?

Among the 613 laws given through Moses to Israel, some reflected such moral obligations as apply to all men at all times, while most others regulated ritual issues specific to Israel's temporal status as a community anticipating a Messiah. The ceremonies were temporarily valid and, like prophecies of future events, would serve their purpose of prediction only until their fulfillment. This is why Jesus spoke of His mission to "fulfill" both the Torah and the Prophets:

*"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled."*¹⁸

There is much disagreement as to the meaning of "*till heaven and earth pass away*," with relation to the passing of the Law. The matter cannot be fully settled here. Some think it means the Torah will endure to the end of the world. Others think the passing of the heavens and earth is symbolic for the passing of the temple system in A.D.70. Others think the phrase is hyperbole, simply meaning, "This declaration is eternally true." Another view compares it with the similar statement in Luke 16:16,

¹⁷ A rather humorous anecdote: One edition of the King James Version of the Bible, published in several copies in 1631, contained a typographical error, so that the sixth commandment, at Exodus 20:14, read "*Thou shalt commit adultery.*" It was an honest error of the printers, but that edition, which still exists in a few copies, has been dubbed "The Wicked Bible."

¹⁸ Matthew 5:17-18

which reads, “*And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail.*” With this parallel in mind, some suggest that the statement in Matthew really means, “It would be easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for any portion of the Law to pass away *prior to its fulfillment.*”

It is not my concern here to determine the import of these words at this point. Regardless how this phrase comes to be interpreted, it cannot be denied that Jesus is predicting the passing away of *the whole Law* at one time—at the time of its fulfillment. Not the smallest detail of the Law will pass before it is *all fulfilled*. *Torah* stands and falls as a unit. It all passes away when any part passes away as fulfilled. Jesus said that He came to accomplish the latter.

The one thing that this statement of Christ cannot allow is the notion that some of the laws of *Torah* will have passed away as fulfilled, while others would remain in force. All Christians recognize that certain laws of *Torah* (e.g., the sacrifices and tabernacle rituals) were fulfilled in Christ and have passed away. These ritual regulations need no longer be observed. Many Christians, however, inconsistently insist on keeping intact some portions of the *Torah* to this day, as requirements for Christ’s disciples. Among these there are different theories:

- For many, it would be the moral laws that are retained, while everything ritual is dismissed as fulfilled in Christ’s death.
- Some say the Ten Commandments, written in stone, are permanent, while the other 603 laws are no longer to be observed. This solution differs from the first in retaining Sabbath observance (a ritual) because it is found in the Ten Commandments.
- Others (modern Judaizers) say that the whole *Torah* ought to be observed by Christians, since the heavens and the earth have not yet passed away.

Of these three, the first could make the best case from scripture. However, one can put a finer point upon it. This interpretation, as it stands, does not conform to the wording of Jesus’ statement. He there says that no portion of the *Torah* will pass away until it has all been fulfilled. It seems impossible to exclude either the moral or the ritual laws from the statement about the whole *Torah*, unless we assume (which may be possible, but it is speculation) that “the Law and the Prophets” refers only to the *ritual* laws and the Prophets.

It seems simpler to say that the whole Old Testament system, with its laws and such, has been fulfilled in Christ, to whom the whole thing pointed. Christ has done what He said He came to do. He fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. Instead of thinking of “the Law” in terms of so many individual commandments, we ought to see “the Law and the Prophets” as a reference to the whole system or

covenant inaugurated at Sinai. A new covenant was introduced and established by Jesus¹⁹ and the Sinaitic covenant, having served its purpose, is entirely defunct. As the writer of Hebrews puts it: *“In that He says, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete.”*²⁰

Instead of a *system of law*, the Kingdom of God is now governed by a *Lord*. I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that most kings could not personally supervise or direct their subjects individually, day by day. This is why they governed by systems of law. While this is true of *other* kings, it is not true of *our* King. Entering into His Kingdom involves His entering into us in the person of His Spirit, so that He is actually with each of us, moment-by-moment, every day. This means that He, unlike mere human kings, can govern His people directly in personal relational interaction. *“For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”*²¹ He does not distance Himself from us by sending a rigid legal system for us to keep. Instead, He resides with us and we simply do His will as He leads—rather like a shepherd with his sheep.

The Law of Liberty

It is not that there is no law for the Christian. There is, in fact, a very exacting standard of conduct. However, it is not based upon a written code—including the one *“written and engraved on stones.”*²² We are commanded to love one another as Christ loved us.²³ When we love others, we do not violate any of the moral standards that God imposes on humanity, because doing so would be unloving and unlike Christ Himself. Legitimate standards of behavior issue from God’s own nature and character—which is love.²⁴ Every person’s obligation is to approximate the image of God Himself, and thus to act upon the same principles as He does: *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.”*²⁵

When one violates God’s moral code, it is simply a case of not loving as God does, and as He requires all to do. Jesus calls this obligation the *“new commandment”*²⁶ that He has given us. All moral commands are subsumed in this one:

For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not bear false witness,” “You shall not covet,” and if there is any other

¹⁹ Luke 22:20

²⁰ Hebrews 8:13

²¹ Romans 8:14

²² 2 Corinthians 3:7

²³ John 13:34

²⁴ 1 John 4:8

²⁵ Ephesians 5:1 ESV

²⁶ John 13:34

*commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*²⁷

The reason this does not place us under a system of laws is that love is the fruit of the Spirit in us. *"The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit."*²⁸ Being led by the Spirit results in our loving our neighbor from an inward impulse, not an external compulsion.²⁹ This means that whenever we are not as loving as Christ Himself, we are simply not walking in the Spirit. The solution to this problem is not the adoption of a legal code. We don't meet God's requirements by fleshly observance of laws written in a code, but by walking in the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit's guidance and work in our lives keeps us clear of violation of laws, so that we do not need to gauge our behavior by appeal to laws. Of the fruit of the Spirit, Paul declares, *"Against such there is no law."*³⁰

Jeremiah 31:31-34 stated that one provision of the new covenant would be that God's law would be written in the believer's heart. Ezekiel 36 also speaks of this inward transformation in different (but confirming) terminology:

*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.*³¹

Jesus told Nicodemus that one must be *"born...of the Spirit"* in order to enter His kingdom. It should now be clear why this is so. The exchanged heart spoken of by Ezekiel, and the writing of God's ways in the heart as in Jeremiah, are both describing supernatural regeneration. While this phenomenon is available to anyone desiring to enter God's Kingdom on His terms, it is not possible apart from the Spirit of Christ coming into, and imparting the new life to, the believer. Once this has happened, as the believer walks in the Spirit, Christ's Spirit within leads the disciple in the way of love. That which is humanly impossible becomes a natural behavior.

James refers to this law of love as *"the royal law"*³² because it is the law given by the King, and also as *"the law of liberty"*³³ because the Spirit within makes us *want* to live it. Thus, when we are required to love, we are being required to do the thing that, by regeneration, we have been made most inwardly desirous to do. Following one's inclinations is the very definition of being at liberty. *"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."*³⁴

²⁷ Romans 13:9

²⁸ Romans 5:5

²⁹ Galatians 5:22

³⁰ *Ibid.*, v.23

³¹ Ezekiel 36:26-27

³² James 2:8

³³ James 1:25

³⁴ 2 Corinthians 3:17

What is often misunderstood is that we are only freed from the law because we are walking in the Spirit: *“if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”*³⁵ When doing so, we do not fulfill the lusts of the flesh.³⁶ Instead, we exhibit in our own lives the character of Christ, who is living His life through us by His Spirit in us. The fruit of our lives is then seen to be “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...” There is no law against such things,³⁷ and, since the law is only for people who misbehave, not *“for a righteous person,”*³⁸ the law’s authority does not ever have to “kick-in,” unless we cease to walk in the Spirit of Christ.

Revisiting the matter of walking in the Spirit

We are exhorted to “walk in love.”³⁹ This is a matter in which some Christians feel frustrated. We are to love even our enemies and our persecutors, which many feel that they cannot do. Since *agape* love is the fruit of the Spirit, it only comes naturally to us when we are walking in the Spirit, as we always must do. As mentioned previously, there is always the danger that we will cease to walk in the Spirit given that “walking” is a step-by-step enterprise. Ten successful steps do not guarantee that an eleventh step will be successful, as anyone who has tripped over a rock has found. *“We all stumble in many things.”*⁴⁰

The presence of the Spirit in the believer has not eliminated the presence of the rival flesh: *“For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.”*⁴¹ Therefore, it should not be surprising that we sometimes do not find it easy to love others. Our flesh is easily offended, wants its own way, and wants to excuse its bad moods and irritations. Success in defeating the flesh is a step-by-step proposition—walking in the Spirit. Such a walk simply means resting in God’s power as one follows His guidance. Yet, walking in the Spirit is sometimes like walking on an icy sidewalk against a stiff wind, and is maintained by determination, diligence and caution.

This may sound labor-intensive, but it is no more so than is, for example, maintaining your love for your husband or wife. It requires commitment, but it is entirely possible, if it is a chosen way. Breaches against such love for one’s spouse are to be guarded against and repented of when they occur. It is true that the self-centered individual seeking one’s own satisfaction would find both

³⁵ Galatians 5:18

³⁶ Galatians 5:16

³⁷ Galatian 5:22-23

³⁸ 1 Timothy 1:9

³⁹ Ephesians 5:2

⁴⁰ James 3:2

⁴¹ Galatians 5:17

activities—consistent walking in the Spirit and the proper loving of one’s spouse—difficult. The Kingdom is entered by the willing renunciation of self and the embracing of a cross to carry.⁴²

The kingdom of Satan is existentially threatened by the progress of the Kingdom of God, and by any individual who is determined to defect from Satan’s control to Christ’s. Adequate resources have been given to the disciple in this warfare, but there is no place in the battle for the half-hearted or lukewarm.⁴³

The really good news is that, to those who make a deliberate choice to come into Christ’s Kingdom, and to loyally live in it, the Spirit of God will be given to reshape his or her inward orientation. The Holy Spirit imparts the *agape* love that is required to fulfill the royal law. Stumbling in response to the flesh’s resistance does not disqualify one whom Christ knows to be loyal to Him. John tells us that those who are born of God do not sin,⁴⁴ but this is like saying that vegetarians do not eat meat. The latter statement does not mean that you will never find a vegetarian succumbing to a temptation to indulge in a slice of bacon! It means that the vegetarian is, by definition, not a meat-eater. He is determined not to eat meat, and any succumbing to temptation is regretted. Falling does not diminish the vegetarian’s determination to avoid such failure in the future. Similarly, Christians are known to “stumble” into sin, but they do not live and walk in it. They are determined not to sin, and when they do sin, they repent and determine not to be so careless or deceived again. The disciple of Christ walks in love.⁴⁵

John is really quite balanced, encouraging us not to sin, but also encouraging us in the event of our stumbling into momentary failures:

*My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins...*⁴⁶

This recognition of human imperfection, and our occasionally being broadsided by temptations of the flesh, does not change the general truth that true followers of Christ are committed not to follow their lusts, the world, or the devil. They are following Jesus, learning how to walk in the Spirit, and doing so as consistently as they know how. This results in the maturing of love, the Spirit’s fruit, being the most distinguishable feature of those in society of the King. “*By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*”⁴⁷

We will explore this subject further in the next chapter.

⁴² Matthew 16:24

⁴³ Deuteronomy 20:2-8; Judges 7:3

⁴⁴ 1 John 2:3-4, 29; 3:6-17; 4:8; 5:2, 18

⁴⁵ Ephesians 5:2

⁴⁶ 1 John 2:1-2

⁴⁷ John 13:35

Chapter Nine
Love—more than a feeling

But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

(1 John 3:17)

“So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?”

And he said, “He who showed mercy on him.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

(Luke 10:36-37)

When I was growing up in a Christian home, my parents would sometimes counsel me, “You don’t have to *like* that person, but you have to *love* him.” Frankly, this struck me as a somewhat nonsensical cliché, and I found it puzzling that anyone could think it to be a meaningful statement. My problem, like that of very many, was that I thought of “love” as a considerably more intense version of “liking” someone.

If I say that I love a certain painting, a certain view, or a certain flavor of ice cream, I am using the word “love” as an intensified version of liking. I mean that the thing gives me great pleasure. How could you get to the point of liking others supremely if you could not first bring yourself to like them at all? This is not what *agape* means. The object of your love may not be pleasant to you at all. The word has more to do with what you do for the beloved than what the beloved does for you.

To think of *agape* love as a superlative degree of *liking* is to confuse apples and oranges. If I am seeking an orange I will get no closer to having one by increasing the number of apple trees in my yard. Multiplying apples does not produce a single orange, just as increasing the amount that you like someone does not produce *agape* love. If I could increase the amount of “liking” that I can feel toward an unpleasant or unattractive person, it will not bring me any nearer to fulfilling what Christ commands when He says, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”¹ Jesus also said, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.”² To lay my life down for someone is not a *feeling*, but an *action*.

¹ John 13:34

² John 15:13

While I may be more enthusiastic about doing this for someone whom I really like, it can equally be done for someone whom I find completely unlikeable.

Yes, there are people who are objectively *unlikeable*, but none who are *unlovable*. This is because “liking” is an emotion, and no one can reliably summon any emotion at will. By contrast, surrendering one’s life for another, which may or may not be accompanied by an emotion, is always possible to do. This is because it (like all moral obligations) is a choice, not a feeling. Liking anything or anyone is simply a matter of taste. I don’t like certain foods. This is neither a virtue nor a vice. It is merely an innocent matter of personal taste. A man may not like his wife’s personality—which may be genuinely abrasive. However, he can daily serve and gladly sacrifice for her, as a husband is required to do. This is loving your wife as Christ loves the church. Similarly, a wife may not be able to make herself enjoy sexual intimacy with her husband, but she can recognize his genuine rights and needs in this realm, and lovingly give herself to him.³ This is truly “*laying down [one’s] life for a friend*,” which is, according to Jesus, the very definition of *agape* love—and the very essence of discipleship. By the grace of God, a Christian may acquire a taste for some things not currently enjoyed, but there is, no doubt, a limit to how many disgusting things one may learn to like. There is no moral obligation in the matter of liking people. Some behaviors and traits are simply not likeable.

It is often possible, of course, once you have gotten to know someone whom you find repulsive, to nonetheless begin to see things about them that inspire fondness toward them—but this is not what love is or what it requires. It is, no doubt, very desirable to develop fondness for certain undesirable people, but fondness is not love. Fondness is an emotion; love is action. Fondness only makes love more pleasant to the one required to offer it.

In order to show kindness and concern toward people whom we find personally off-putting, it is not necessary that we first convince ourselves that they really are not all that obnoxious. They may indeed be very obnoxious—and possibly worse than we know! This does not make them unlovable, only unlikable. No one is unlovable because our loving someone is a choice on our part controlled by no one else. The choice to lay down my rights and prerogatives to bless an annoying, or even evil, person is a choice that I make in obedience to, and imitation of, my Master, and inspired by His Spirit in me. Jesus loved everybody, including those whom He found unpleasant, like the hypocritical Pharisees who obviously annoyed Him. It was His love for all (and for His Father) that induced Him to die for every last one of us.

When the Bible says that God “hates” certain kinds of people, this is referring to His emotional response to their behavior—not the absence of *agape*, or of any unwillingness to lay down His life for

³ Likewise, a man who knows that his wife struggles with sexual intimacy can lovingly refrain, as much as possible, from asking her to do what she finds tormenting. A loving couple is one in which both parties seek to outdo one another in personal self-sacrifice. This dance is quite an art, which requires finesse and much grace on the part of both partners.

their benefit. *Hate* in such contexts is the opposite of *like*. It refers to *loathing* or *abhorrence*. You cannot *like* what you *loathe*. Hating, in such contexts, is not referring to the opposite of loving, since Jesus died willingly even for them.

It is entirely consistent for God, as well as for us, to find things about a person unpleasant and irritating and at the same time to value that person or thing.

Exhibit A: Yourself. You certainly must be aware of and annoyed by certain of your own personality quirks and behaviors—the kind of things that drive others away, and which, if you found them in others, would tend to drive you away from them. Yet, you love yourself, as seen in how many things you happily do to please and serve yourself. You might not like yourself, but you do love yourself. Even one who contemplates suicide loves himself or herself, because no one contemplates this unless he or she is very unhappy and thinks this action would end the unhappiness. We naturally and selfishly look out for our own interests. “*No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it.*”⁴ Now we must learn to love others as we already love ourselves—to value their happiness and interests as much as our own. We already know how to do it, since we have practiced on ourselves all our lives. It’s just a matter of shifting the object from self to others.

Exhibit B: Your children. If you are normal and have normal children, they probably irritate you at times. Yet you would die for them in a heartbeat. This would probably be true even if you were not a follower of Christ. This is because they are *your* children. Everybody is somebody’s child. Do your children deserve your love more than do other people’s children? It is more natural to love yours than another’s offspring, but both can be done.

Your best friend’s children may be horrible monsters, but you probably tolerate them, and would assist them in need, because you know the love your friend has for them. You don’t require yourself to like them but, for your friend’s sake, you love them. As Christians, we need to learn the same instincts toward everyone’s children, whether juveniles or adults. In other words, we need to act toward all of God’s children as we naturally act toward our own. Before we conclude that only Christians can be regarded as God’s children, we need to remember that the prodigal was still regarded by the father as his son, even when he was “lost” and “dead.”⁵

There are, no doubt, many esteemed works of art, which would not suit my personal tastes, but whose value on the art market I would acknowledge. I might not enjoy looking at them, but I would still know to handle a valuable work with respect if it were committed to my care. Because every person is made by God as a bearer of His image, each is of value to Him. All humans have done things to offend God, and some, as a result of wicked choices (I’m sure we have all made a few), have been transformed into monsters of iniquity. We know enough of God’s emotions from scripture to know

⁴ Ephesians 5:29

⁵ Luke 15:24

that God does not “like” wicked behavior or its perpetrators. He says He hates them. Yet, God was “*in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses against them...*”⁶ If Jesus would sacrifice His life and His preferences for the unlikable, is it asking too much that we should sacrifice our own lives and preferences for them as well?

Our own? But we are not *our own*! In the act of coming to Christ, we have already agreed to the legitimacy of His purchasing us by His own blood. From where did this idea of our owning ourselves creep in? “*Or do you not know that...you are not your own? For you were bought at a price.*”⁷

The love that God requires of His servants is seen in action, not emotion. Loving someone means cheerfully making a sacrifice of one’s life, time, convenience, money, preferences, etc., for the advantage of another person. This is a choice, but it is done cheerfully out of love—appreciating that the other person is as valuable to God as we are, and is no less worthy of God’s love than ourselves.

When this choice is made out of sheer obedience, it is often mysteriously discovered that the emotions associated with love actually follow this decision. The emotions may develop gradually (or not at all), but the choice to lay down my life for another is made in an instant. It is not the feelings, but the choice, that constitutes loving a person. Otherwise, love could not be commanded, and its presence or absence could not be regarded a moral responsibility.

This principle has often informed successful marriage counseling. When a couple does not feel the love that they once felt for each other, the counsel is sometimes wisely given, “Just act toward that person the way you acted when you were feeling that love.” Of course, when people feel that they love others, they very naturally and happily...

- defer to them,
- defend them against criticism,
- take a sincere interest in their concerns,
- listen intently to them for long periods of time,
- view all their comments and actions in the best light,
- graciously endure disappointments from them,
- serve in order to bless them,
- encourage and compliment them,
- shower gifts and affection upon them, etc.

No one has to tell young lovers to do these things, if what they feel has any connection to real love. It is very often the case that, when couples whose love has grown cold begin to do these things for each other again, they find the original love rekindled within them. It’s not really that mysterious.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:19

⁷ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Love is putting another person above oneself. Once one becomes selfless enough to do this in practice, that selflessness allows *enjoyment* in pleasing that person, because the motivation of pleasing self has been replaced with the joy of serving another. Pleasing the other person becomes pleasing to oneself.

What is true in marriage is often true in any relationship. When I was a wimpy kid in the seventh grade, there was a boy named Jim in my P.E. class, who bullied me gratuitously. I can't say that I liked the kid. However, when I was forming a band and heard that Jim was a drummer, I invited him to join the band. He was surprised to be asked, of course, but being in a band appealed to him and he accepted. As a result, we had to spend time together on friendly terms at band practices and performances. He had to be friendly with me, because it was *my band*, and I chose to be friendly with him. There wasn't any room left for antagonism. Though we never became best friends, I began to feel more warmly toward him, and he toward me. This was not the case before I took the risk and reached out to him.

The feelings associated with love are not the same as those that cause us to like someone. The latter are somewhat natural, based upon our tastes and the other's personal attractiveness. The feelings we have toward one whom we love, but may not particularly like, are more like *compassion*, or *pity*. This is how Jesus described one's love for a neighbor in His parable of the Good Samaritan: "*he had compassion on him.*"⁸ This was in His parable expounding on the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. We love people, not because they deserve it, or are likeable—nor, certainly, because we selfishly want to get something from them. We are to love people because *they need it*.

A Catholic charismatic priest was telling me many years ago that he had been driving someplace and spotted a rather seedy-looking person ahead on the road, holding out his thumb for a ride. The priest said that he had the following exchange with the Lord:

"Lord, I am going to pick that man up."

"Why are you going to do that?" the Lord inquired.

"Well, Lord," he said, thinking the answer would have been obvious, "I want to tell him all about You!".

The Lord replied, "Why don't you pick him up because he needs a ride?"

The Good Samaritan helped the man who had been assaulted and robbed because he was moved with compassion for him. No mention is made of any intention to convert the man to his benefactor's religion. Obviously, we know what people need most is Jesus. But what if we have occasion to help, but no opportunity to share the gospel? Are we eager to meet the other's needs simply on the grounds

⁸ Luke 10:33

that, if we were in similar circumstances, it is what we would hope someone would do for us? To naturally love others as we should, we need to consistently look upon them from the standpoint of our own selves in their position. What would it be like to be them? to be in their situation? to have their needs?

It is also possible to cultivate genuine love and compassion for strangers or enemies by choosing to see that person, not only from the standpoint of our hypothetically being in their circumstances, but also from that of how God actually knows them. God sees every human as a valued, loved, but marred and scarred, image of Himself. God has observed that person from birth, and through all the stages of life. To Him, that person is the same one who was a baby, a toddler, a child, and an adolescent. Being a resident of Planet Earth, that growing child has suffered disillusionment, betrayal, and abandonment. That child got bigger over the years, faced temptations, made bad decisions, was damaged by the decisions of others, harmfully self-medicated, developed self-protective mechanisms—some of them annoying and offensive. Nonetheless, that bitter old man or woman is the same kid who started out so innocent and optimistic. God's eye never left that person, and sees the same child now grown and ugly. When we talk to that unpleasant adult whom we are supposed to love as God does, we must attempt to see that person as if we knew him or her as God does.

This is true whether that person is a grumpy neighbor, a cynical vagrant, the cocky CEO of a large corporation—or your clueless husband or wife. A man may be a transvestite prostitute, a homeless drunk, or a capital criminal in prison. Some things are true of all: All were born knowing nothing about life, and vulnerable to being shaped by our environments. All have sinned and have the same need for God. All have been deceived by Satan into doing evil things without full apprehension of their magnitude or outcomes. All are trapped in a life that they partly made for themselves and partly had handed to them. All have lost cherished relationships. All live with regrets. This is not mere bleeding-heart sentimentalism. In a large degree, to God's mind, we are all children still.⁹ Making myself see another man or woman as I know God does, has made it possible for me to feel some modicum of what I think God feels in His love for badly broken humanity. Jesus wept over the people of Jerusalem, knowing what life could have been like for them, as opposed to what they had become.¹⁰

Learning to *like* someone is not something required by the commandment to love my neighbor, but it definitely helps. Since we must love others, and lay down our lives for them, it makes it a lot more enjoyable for us if we can develop a measure of fondness for them in the process. Affection, obviously, makes sacrifice considerably more enjoyable.

Service in sincerity

⁹⁹ John 21:5

¹⁰ Luke 19:41-44

Jesus said that the whole of the Law and the Prophets “hang” on two commandments:¹¹ to love God with all your heart,¹² and to love your neighbor as yourself.¹³ The former is assumed to be the initial motive for entering the Kingdom of God. Loving God is the only legitimate motive for entry.

The second of these commandments was paraphrased in the Sermon on the Mount in Christ’s famous aphorism, *“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”*¹⁴

Thus, loving your neighbor, which fulfils all the Law and the Prophets, is the same as acting toward your neighbor as you would like for others to act towards you—which is also said to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. The so-called *Golden Rule* is simply a rephrasing of the Royal Law in practical terms. Not only Jesus, but Paul also twice identified love as the fulfillment of all the law:¹⁵

*“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*¹⁶

*For the commandments...are all summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*¹⁷

What does “love” do? According to Paul, it “serves” and “does no wrong” to one’s fellow man. Only one thing is required—harmlessly serving others, as you would want to be unharmed and your needs served. Love, therefore, is behavior—rightly motivated by esteeming the other above yourself, as Paul also says in another place:

*...[have] the same love...in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*¹⁸

Beware of the possibility of serving and sacrificing for another person out of motives other than love. Paul wrote: *“And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”*¹⁹ Hyperbole aside, what is Paul thinking? How can someone sacrifice all of one’s wealth—and even his life—without this being an expression of love?

¹¹ Matthew 22:34-40

¹² Deuteronomy 6:5

¹³ Leviticus 19:18

¹⁴ Matthew 7:12

¹⁵ Romans 13:8-10;

¹⁶ Galatians 5:13-14

¹⁷ Romans 13:9-10

¹⁸ Philippians 2:2

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:3

This question requires only a moment's reflection to answer. What appears to be generosity or selflessness can often be a mere outward show performed by one interested in nothing more than what others may think of his or her heroic demonstration of ostentatious benevolence. It should go without saying that the God who looks not on the outward appearances but on the heart is not fooled by external actions that have no correspondence to the internal motivations.

So, our outward good works which men observe are of no value unless they arise from the inward impulse that the word "love" clearly implies—a genuine valuing of the other person, and a sincere belief that his or her needs and well-being are at least as consequential as our own. These inclinations arise from love for God and a desire that God alone will be glorified in our service to those whom He loved enough to sacrifice Himself for them.

Earlier, I mentioned two ways in which we should look at others, in order to help us to love them as Christ commands—to see them from the perspective of our being in their position, and to see them as God sees them. There is a third: to see them as Jesus in disguise. It may be enough simply to see them as possible angels in disguise. The writer of Hebrews wrote: *Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.*²⁰ What if we suspected that a given stranger in need was actually an angel sent to test our level of compassion and hospitality? This would no doubt cause us to be more eager to serve and relieve his or her needs.

How much more so, if we believed they were not angels, but Jesus Himself! The two men on the road to Emmaus found themselves in exactly that situation. The risen Christ walked and talked along the road unrecognized with them. They did not recognize Him until they had offered to have Him join them at their evening meal. I'll bet they were glad that they had shown that hospitality once they knew who their guest had been!

Service and sacrifice to others, especially those in the Body of Christ, is in fact service to Jesus Himself. Disciples of Jesus are inhabited by Him and incorporated into His Body on earth. They are literally, not figuratively, Jesus "with skin on." That is how intimately He identifies with His people. Jesus said, *"inasmuch as you did it unto one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."*²¹

If we love Jesus, we will love to serve Him, and He is served by our service to those He loves. Most of us know what it means to treat a friend's children well for no other reason than that their parent is our friend. *"Whoever loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him."*²² To be harsh or ungenerous toward your friend's child would be felt by your friend as the same treatment toward him or herself. Our love for God is manifested in multiple small acts of service and compassion to His children. This should actually be spontaneous so that we habitually put their interests before our own whenever possible. We do so knowing that serving them is serving Jesus. It is thus that our

²⁰ Hebrews 13:2

²¹ Matthew 25:40

²² 1 John 5:1

service to people is said to be done *unto the Lord*: “*And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men.*”²³ This can come down to very mundane and practical actions.

For example, suppose you are in the home of Christian friends or family and, as a result of your visit to the WC, the toilet paper spool is completely depleted. What do you do? How many would leave the empty spool for the next person to discover and to replace? How do we decide? Perhaps pray to receive a “word from the Lord” as to how to respond to the situation?

Let me make it easier. Suppose you knew that the next person who would access the facilities, and might need the roll, would be none other than Jesus Himself. Jesus said that anything done with regard to members of His Body is action taken toward Him. It is clear then that the next person waiting to use the facilities is, in fact, *going to be Jesus*.

What will you do about the empty spool now?

God’s “love language”

In his book, *The Five Love Languages*,²⁴ Gary Chapman points out that not everyone has the same way of expressing or sensing emotional love. For example, *receiving gifts* might be a husband’s “love language,” so he seeks to communicate his love for his wife through lavishing upon her flowers, candy, cards, jewelry, and other tokens of his affection. He also looks to her for similar gifts as tokens proving that she loves him. Perhaps, however, her “love language” is *quality time*. The gifts he gives her do not register with her as expressions of his love, because he is too busy to spend much time with her. For her part, she feels she is expressing her love to him by suggesting places they can go together just to sight-see or have unhurried conversations. Both partners are communicating love to each other in the language with which they are familiar, but neither may be receiving the message that the other is sending. It is as though a man who speaks only French is married to a woman who speaks only Japanese. Both may be saying, “I love you,” to each other as best they know how in their respective languages, but the message is not being received.

What is God’s “love language”—that is, how can we express our love and devotion to Him in the manner that He appreciates? The Pharisees believed that God’s love language was *religion*. They sought to please Him by the offering of their formulaic prayers and their sacrifices, as well as abstaining from things that religion defined as “unclean.” However, they were missing the target completely. Though they were conscientious beyond measure in the observance of petty ordinances, these actions really did not register with God as the kind of thing that bespeaks great love for Him.

²³ Colossians 3:23

²⁴ Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts* (Chicago:Northfield Publishing, 1992, 2015)

Jesus scolded the Pharisees for having neglected what God seeks most as the expression of a person's love to Him. What they were neglecting, in their meticulous observance of the minutia of the religious law, was what Jesus called "*the weightier matters of the law.*" Obviously, he meant that certain matters of the law mattered more to God than did others. He identified as examples of requirements in this category, three duties: *justice and mercy and faithfulness.*²⁵

Elsewhere, Jesus said that the only thing that really sums up all that God desires of us is *agape* love.²⁶ The reason that justice, mercy, and faithfulness are the *weightier matters* of the law is that Christ's law, like God Himself, is love²⁷—and these weightier matters are simply the components of which loving behavior consists. God's love language is, simply, *loving*—which breaks down to being just, merciful and faithful in dealing with people.

We have observed that loving our neighbor is more a matter of actions than of emotions. Doing to others what we would wish to have done to ourselves is the way that Jesus summarized the Old Testament command to "*love your neighbor as yourself.*" Both statements are said to describe the fulfilling of the whole law.²⁸ To be treated fairly, mercifully and faithfully by others is clearly what everyone desires for oneself. We also desire to live in a society where all people treat each other according to these standards. We all know how it grieves us to be treated unjustly, or for someone to act mercilessly, or unfaithfully, toward us. These weightier matters define the fundamental commitments upon which love's actions are grounded, and by which they are governed.

What is it that is unloving about committing murder, theft, or slander? Is it not the injustice involved in these acts? Such actions violate a neighbor's natural rights to his or her own life, property and good name. What makes the neglect of the poor, or retaliation against one's enemies, contrary to love? It is surely the lack of mercy demonstrated in these behaviors. And why is it unloving to walk out on a marriage, or to default on a commitment? Is it not that these are acts of unfaithfulness, rendering false the promises upon which others were depending?

Justice, mercy and faithfulness are the *essential components of loving behavior.* We know this well when we are stung by acts of injustice committed against us, or when one shows a callous lack of concern toward our misery, or when we are betrayed by a trusted—but treacherous—friend or spouse. Justice, mercy and faithfulness are not so much individual Old Testament *commandments* as they are the *principles* of which all of the moral commandments provide examples. Remember, *God is love,*²⁹ and His justice, His mercy and His faithfulness are the most often emphasized aspects of His

²⁵ Matthew 23:23

²⁶ Matthew 22:36-40

²⁷ 1 John 4:8, 16

²⁸ Matthew 7:12; Romans 13:8-10

²⁹ 1 John 4:8

character and behavior toward mankind in scripture. His moral commandments all reflect these character traits in Him, and in His people.

Jesus said that one's personal righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Otherwise, one cannot enter the Kingdom of God.³⁰ Surely this does not mean that a person must be more *religious* than were the scribes and Pharisees! Persons more conscientious in religious matters than these men cannot be imagined. Their lives were set apart to the continuous observance of the ritual requirements of their religion. But the chasm between *religious* behavior and *righteousness* can be enormous—as anyone knows who has been burned by an unscrupulous religious person. The superior righteousness of life that God requires is based upon a more thoroughgoing, and more inward, application of the spirit of the Law.

Jesus made this scathing comment about the inadequate righteousness of the Jewish leaders in His *Sermon on the Mount*. After thus denouncing them, He immediately launched into His own authoritative exposition on the requirements of the *Torah*.³¹ In His exposition, there are six paragraphs, each of which identifies a popular Jewish notion of the Law's requirements followed by Jesus' assessment and application of those requirements. In each paragraph Jesus follows the same template: "*You have heard...but I say to you...*"

The specific examples Jesus provides have to do with the Law's teachings on murder,³² adultery,³³ divorce,³⁴ breaking oaths,³⁵ legal retaliation for injury,³⁶ and the duty of love for a neighbor. The last of these had been amended in the rabbinic teaching to exclude any duty to love one's enemies.³⁷

In every case, Jesus first described the minimal, external obedience practiced and taught by the Pharisees. Jesus then added His own comments, raising the bar in each case so that the Law was seen to prescribe matters of the heart, as well as actions of the body. In looking at the six examples given, we will find that two of them pertain to *justice*, two to *faithfulness*, and two to *mercy*—which, as we have seen, were elsewhere called by Jesus "*the weightier matters of the law.*" Consider the following:

- The commandments forbidding murder and adultery (along with many others in the Torah) exhibit God's concern for *justice*—the non-violation of a man's rights to his life or to his wife. A person who has committed no crimes has the natural right to live unmolested. To kill such an innocent person is heinous injustice. Similarly, the marriage contract involves each party's

³⁰ Matthew 5:20

³¹ Matthew 5:21-48

³² *Ibid.*, vv.21-26

³³ *Ibid.*, vv.27-30

³⁴ *Ibid.*, vv.31-32

³⁵ *Ibid.*, vv.33-37

³⁶ *Ibid.*, vv.38-42

³⁷ *Ibid.*, vv.43-48

exclusive right of sexual access to one another.³⁸ For one man to sleep with the wife of another is the violation of this universally recognized covenantal right. Jesus indicated that the heart must be every bit as submitted as are the actions to these principles. Not only must murder and adultery be avoided, but also the heart conditions of anger and lust, which motivate those who commit such crimes are also to be abandoned. It is evil even to contemplate committing such injustice.

- Christ's teaching concerning divorce and the keeping of oaths both illustrate God's concern for *faithfulness*. This is the basic requirement of being trustworthy, as God is trustworthy. It means the diligent maintaining of one's character and integrity. Not only must one not tell lies, but one must never turn a sincere promise into a lie by the non-performance of what was pledged. Jesus taught that, especially in this area, God's demands had been compromised in common Jewish practice. The rabbis' legal interpretations had culpably allowed for divorce for trivial reasons. This was the violation of the sacred vows of the marriage covenant.

Additionally, they had developed a corrupt system of swearing oaths. To swear an oath, in those days, was like the signing of a contract for us. The rabbis had developed a sophisticated system whereby they identified certain oaths as "binding," and others as "non-binding" (see Jesus' rebuke about this in Matthew 23:16-22). The untrained Jewish layman did not know the difference between one oath and another, and would accept an oath as binding which the Pharisees secretly regarded as non-binding. This would be the equivalent of our signing a contract with disappearing ink, without the other party realizing it. Thus, the rabbis had transformed a righteous system, intended to keep people honest, into yet another way to defraud their neighbor. Jesus denounced this whole corrupted oath-taking system, and told His disciples that God's people simply need to be fully committed to keeping their word and maintaining their integrity in all things. A faithful person does not require oaths to keep oneself honest.

- Jesus' comments about non-retaliation and love of neighbor are related to the principle of *mercy*.³⁹ If someone wrongs you, or has a need for something that you do not owe to them, a merciful disposition will give generously, and will forgive offenses. Once again, the rabbinic teachers had misrepresented the heart of God in these matters, and had even said that it was not required to love one's enemies. They went so far as to falsely represent the law as

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 7:4

³⁹ In Luke's parallel of this segment (Luke 6:27-36), the duties of mercy are expounded further, and the section ends with the summary statement, "*Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful*" (Luke 6:36)—replacing Matthew's "*Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48).

commanding hatred for enemies. Jesus pointed out that even your enemy is a neighbor, though an unfriendly one, and is thus included in the duty to “*love your neighbor as yourself.*” A seamless mercy requires forgiveness and love to all who are in need, including those who have no intrinsic right to expect assistance. There is no manifestation of mercy in loving those who love you, and who therefore deserve to be loved. Mercy is, by definition, extended to the undeserving.

What Jesus does, in expounding upon the righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees, is to demonstrate that a legalistic avoidance of bad behavior is not in itself pleasing to God. God’s laws are rooted in larger principles—principles dominant in God’s loving character. Those principles are to be embraced and followed seamlessly, not only in external behavior, but all the way down to the motives and commitments of the heart.

It’s all about *love*, and love is about *justice, mercy* and *faithfulness*. It is all-important that we get this right, so let’s examine each of these concepts more closely.

Chapter Ten

The Weightier Matters: Justice

*“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
For you tithe mint and dill and cumin,
and have neglected the weightier matters of the law:
justice...”*
(Matthew 23:23 ESV)

*He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justly...*
(Micah 6:8)

In the first volume of this project¹ it was pointed out that the *fruit of the Kingdom* that God sought from Israel, and which He is determined to receive from us, is justice and righteousness.² In that earlier discussion the focus was on the global and societal phenomenon of justice, which God desires from nations (like Israel and the Church) as a whole. This justice needs to be reflected in civil laws and litigation, in non-discriminatory policies of law enforcement, and in the protection of the rights of all people by the laws and policies of the state.

When we talk about justice as a component of *agape* love by which disciples of Jesus are to be distinguished³ we are focused on *personal* behavior toward one’s neighbor in all relationships and all interactions. When Jesus addressed the Mosaic principle of “*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*,”⁴ He was not, as many imagine, teaching that this is a bad civil law. When He tells His disciples to turn the other cheek, rather than to press charges,⁵ He is speaking about their own response to a personal affront—not calling for governments to abolish criminal penalties for assault. Jesus never addressed the civil magistrates about how they should govern (although both John the Baptist and Paul did⁶). His immediate mission was not to modify the civil law codes, nor prescribe different penalties for

¹ Steve Gregg, *Empire of the Risen Son*, Book One: *There is Another King*, 2020

² Isaiah 5:7; Matthew 21:43

³ 1 John 4:7

⁴ Matthew 5:38; cf. Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21

⁵ Matthew 5:39

⁶ Luke 3:19; Acts 24:25; 25:10-11

courts to impose on those who wronged their neighbors. In fact, He refused to get involved in such matters even when He was urged to do so. He regarded them to be the legitimate concerns of the courts.⁷

When Jesus spoke of the Mosaic “*eye for an eye*” law, He did not criticize it, nor suggest an alternative penalty to be exacted against the violent criminal. The oft-quoted line, attributed to Gandhi, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth will leave the whole world blind and toothless,” seems to assume that Jesus (or at least Gandhi) meant to disparage this Old Testament law. Apart from the fact that no one can find it among Gandhi’s recorded sayings, the statement is itself an absurdity. It suggests that every act of legal redress will create a chain of Hatfield-and-McCoy-type feuds, which would eventually deprive every head of both eyes. Israel lived for 1,400 years under that legislation, and it did not result in a blind and toothless society.

The law in question (also known as the *lex talionis*) simply dictated a proportionate penalty for the courts to administer to a violent offender who had caused his victim an irreparable injury. This simply prescribes proportionate redress, the only possible alternative to which would be *disproportionate* redress—which would be injustice. To over-punish or to under-punish a criminal is a clear violation of criminal justice—and is not what Jesus is advocating. He is, however, teaching that the *victim* (not the courts) could kindly forego pressing charges against the one who injures him. The *lex talionis* prescribes a legal penalty proportionate to the crime, and thus the perfectly just remedy. While it is not the place of the courts to be vindictive, neither is it their role to be forgiving of perpetrators. The execution of criminal penalties is the state’s divinely appointed duty.⁸

Jesus was not an anarchist who wished to abolish governmental law and to defund all criminal justice systems. He believed that victims of crime should have recourse to a legal defense.⁹ In the Sermon on the Mount, He did not criticize the state’s exercise of criminal justice (what is the state for, if not for this purpose?), but taught His disciples how to love their neighbors—including the extending of mercy to those who do things for which there might be a legal remedy available. The state’s role in maintaining societal justice is a good thing. The disciple’s love for an enemy is another question.

Some preachers speak as if “justice” is an undesirable thing: “We sinners don’t want justice; we want mercy!” This is apparently intended to underscore the fact that the just penalty for our sins is hell, and our only hope is that God will forego justice in favor of mercy. We should remember that God Himself does not violate justice in His showing of mercy. The reason He set forth Christ as a propitiation for us is so that He could forgive without compromising His own justice:

⁷ Luke 12:13-14

⁸ Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-14

⁹ Matthew 5:25-26, 40

*...Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood...that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*¹⁰

If we do not want justice to prevail, then we do not wish for the gospel to be effectual. Because of Christ and the cross, *“God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.”*¹¹ While God does not owe it to us to forgive our sins, He does owe it to Christ to forgive those for whom He paid the price of justification with His blood. God will not shortchange His own Son. It is because God is uncompromisingly just that we can have confidence in our being acquitted in Christ.

Some people may become nervous when thinking of justice in relation to themselves before the judgment seat of Christ. However, when referring to a principle of behavior among men, justice is, without a doubt, that for which all honest men yearn. In human interactions, what would we prefer in its place—*injustice*? You will never find a human being who desires to live in a society where others are permitted to treat him or her unjustly. None but a condemned criminal hates justice.

We are validly shocked and offended when justice is violated in the courts. We are acutely aware of injustice when it is committed against ourselves or our loved ones, and we strongly desire to be treated fairly. A person committed to “doing justice” will feel equally the sting of injustice when it is committed against another, and will protect his neighbor’s reputation, property, life, marriage, and all his other rights, as vociferously as his or her own, from abuse. This is loving your neighbor as yourself. “Do you want justice for yourself?” says Jesus, “Then equally stand for the rights of your neighbor.”¹²

A disciple of Jesus, concerned to do justly, will find many situations in which he or she may make a difference in relationships, simply by placing the rights of another on the same level of importance as one’s own:

1. In the Home

Marriage is unlike every other relationship, because it is the only one voluntarily entered into with the promise that each party will belong to the other for life, with no exit strategy. This promise confers to both parties a mutual, exclusive ownership of each other for life. Paul says that *“the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.”*¹³

Paul applies this principle to the sexual relations between a married couple. Marriage confers unique rights upon each partner in terms of intimate access to the other—specifically in sexual

¹⁰ Romans 3:23-26

¹¹ 1 John 1:9

¹² Matthew 7:12 (paraphrased)

¹³ 1 Corinthians 7:4

intimacy.¹⁴ The point that Paul makes is that neither the husband nor the wife should deprive the other of this access, because to do so violates the other's rights.¹⁵ It is often the case that, when approaching marriage, a couple gives each other the impression of mutual sexual interest, but, after the marriage, one or the other loses much of the original interest, leaving the other lonely or frustrated.

There are good reasons for the neglected party to learn self-control, and to appreciate whatever valid reasons the other may have for the lack of interest—which may be due to physical illness, pain, impotence, embarrassment, frigidity, emotional stress, exhaustion, trauma—or the increased unattractiveness of the mate. The Christian who wishes to be like Christ will endure the loss of rights graciously.

However, no disciple of Jesus should ever lightly deprive another of his or her rights, and every believer should be more willing to sacrifice for the other than to please oneself.¹⁶ One party may have genuinely lost sexual interest in the years since the honeymoon, but if the other has not, then lovingly giving of oneself to maintain the rights and desires of a partner is what marriage calls every believing spouse to do.

It should not be necessary to state (though, sadly, it is) that justice also means staying away from another man's wife, or another woman's husband. Marriage partners have promised, and owe each other, complete fidelity and it is the duty of outsiders to stay clear of any interference in their fulfilling this mandate. It is often hard enough for married partners to navigate the complexities of living together without having to deal with meddling seducers or discouragers from the outside. Even flirting or engaging in "emotional affairs" is a violation of spousal rights, because the husband and wife do not only have exclusive claims upon one another sexually, but also romantically.

Jesus indicated that even emotional and mental affairs are in the category of adultery.¹⁷ If a woman has given herself to a husband, leave her alone. If a man has taken a wife, he is unavailable—look elsewhere. An adulterous affair, even of the heart, is *unfaithfulness* on the part of the married party. It is also, on the part of the interloper, *injustice* toward the spouse of one's intended target.¹⁸

The practice of justice within marriage also means that neither party ought to take unfair advantage of the other. The husband is usually physically the stronger of the two, although the reverse may sometimes be true. The physically stronger party must be careful not to place selfish requirements on a partner just because the ability to do so exists.

¹⁴ This is the specific meaning of Paul's comment just cited.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:3, 5

¹⁶ Romans 15:1-3; Philippians 2:4

¹⁷ Matthew 5:28

¹⁸ 1 Thessalonians 4:5-6

In addition to being physically stronger, the husband is traditionally and scripturally the party charged with the leadership of the family.¹⁹ This fact is not generally assumed in the modern world as it once was, but the Bible still teaches it. Many men still reasonably believe that this is true and expect submission from their wives. If one embraces the biblical definition and norms of marriage, such submission is actually acknowledged to be implicit in the contract.

The submission of one party to another in a hierarchy is not an injustice. Many human activities acknowledge roles of oversight for some while others are subordinate. What would be an injustice would be for anyone to voluntarily accept a subordinate position in any hierarchical institution and then prove rebellious or uncooperative to the one to whom submission was pledged. A fair and considerate boss is seldom resented by his or her subordinates, but a husband, no matter how fair and considerate, is often resented in our present society if he accepts his divinely assigned role as the leader in the home.

While a balanced, loving leadership in the home is a husband's proper vocation,²⁰ such Christlike behavior is not instinctive with many men. It is too common to find a husband who bullies his wife and children, demanding his way in every conflict—even resorting to physical abuse. Because of this defect in many men, there are some (including some professed Christians) who have argued for the overthrow of the biblical roles in the family. It has been asserted that the problem of husbands abusing their wives and children cannot be solved until our society sheds the belief in patriarchy—that is, of the established biblical norm of male leadership in the home.

This suggestion, however, is naïve. The presence of male leadership does not predict domestic abuse. Leadership is not intrinsically harsh or abusive. The simple truth is that there are character defects in some people—men and women—that cause them to abuse any who are vulnerable or subordinate to them. This is not only true in the home, but in every social or business relationship, and is often seen in those possessing political power. This is a problem inherent in particular individuals, not in the systems themselves. If the whole society were to overthrow the biblical norm of the husband's headship, and would officially give that role to the wife (or, perhaps, to the children), the same number of men would still abuse their wives and children—because they tend to be physically stronger, and are able to do so. Decent men will not deliberately abuse anyone—especially their family members whom they are desirous to protect—whether they are in positions of leadership and power or not.

Men who abuse women are not attempting to follow biblical norms anyway, since the Bible flatly forbids harsh treatment of wives.²¹ Why would such scoundrels change their behavior simply because all Christians decided that the biblical norms (already being ignored) should be reversed?

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:22-24

²⁰ Ephesians 5:25-29

²¹ Colossians 3:19; 1 Peter 3:7

Even when the patriarchal norm is acknowledged, many women rebel against it. Why wouldn't violent men do the same, if the roles were reversed, and the wife was now officially regarded as the head of the home—or if the home was regarded as a democracy? It is simply too easy for the dominant spouse to demand his or her way in every area of life at the expense of the other spouse and others under the same roof. Men and women can be equally guilty of this.

Strength in a man is not a bad thing—in fact, most women desire it in their men. In a good man, strength deployed on behalf of his family allows him to protect and to provide for them. Only a strong commitment to maintain justice would cause a natural abuser to reform his brutish behavior. Those who possess power, whether men or women, are particularly responsible to maintain just dealings with those vulnerable to them.

This abuse-syndrome manifests in maladjusted parties of both sexes, and children in the home are particularly vulnerable to being treated unfairly or harshly by either parent. We may wrongly entertain a stereotypical image of a father who is severe, angry, and intimidating, while the mother is nurturing and protective of the children. This paradigm is probably a generation or two out of date. Many husbands have become wimps, and many women more domineering in the past half-century. Most of my readers have probably lived long enough to have seen families where the stereotypical roles were reversed, so that the father is the gentle parent, while the mother is harsh and abusive.

Parental child abuse is particularly unjust, because children did not ask to be brought into the family. Unlike a husband and wife, who willingly subjected themselves to each other when they married, the children did not volunteer to become part of a dysfunctional family. Additionally, unlike the abused spouse, children cannot easily escape from the abusive parent, or safely live independently. They require support and nurture from an adult parent, or surrogate, for many years. The Christian parent should be especially sympathetic to the children's plight, and be very conscientious not to unjustly demand too much of them or punish them too severely.²²

The Bible clearly teaches “traditional” family roles—the husband as the head of the wife, and both parents as authorities over the children—with the submission of all to their proper authorities. But every hierarchy in society provides the opportunity for ungodly parties in authority to mismanage their roles. Paul expressed his view concerning his own authority over his spiritual “children,” in Corinth, in these words: *“Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand.”*²³ Where there is not justice, there is not love; and where love is absent, the law of the King is violated, and redress awaits.

2. In the workplace

²² Ephesians 6:4

²³ 2 Corinthians 1:24

There are many ways in which the principle of justice applies in the realm of a believer's work. First, there is a principle, ever since the fall of man, that food is produced through labor.²⁴ Farmers work to grow food and others work for money or barterable goods to exchange for the food grown by the farmer. If someone eats food, then someone—either that person or another—must work to provide that food. The person who eats, but does not labor, is requiring another person to labor not only for his or her own food, but also for the food of the dependent party. If the latter is able-bodied, an injustice is committed against the person required to do extra work to underwrite another's neglect or sloth. *"For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat."*²⁵

Such parasitism is not rendered any less egregious when the government makes laws requiring the productive taxpayer to support a fellow citizen (frequently not a taxpayer) unwilling to carry his or her own share of the weight. Since the government has no money other than what it takes from laborers, the one receiving government aid is taking earnings involuntarily taxed (that is, expropriated) from productive workers. Having the government as one's accomplice in this confiscation does not render it any less a form of theft. The hiring of armed thugs to take one person's money by force to give it to another is immoral and unjust—even if the theft is made legal by unjust legislators. It is a flawed society whose lawmakers are not committed to, or aware of the meaning of justice.

The government has been ordained for a task delineated in scripture—namely, the protection of the innocent and the punishment of predators. God has not authorized the government authorities to become predators themselves. The confiscation and redistribution of a working man's earned income against his will, in order to give it to one who will not work, is neither just nor a prerogative of governments defined in scripture. One who is capable of working, but receives stolen goods laundered through governmental agencies, is in the same position as one receiving goods that were stolen by hired thugs at gunpoint. According to Jesus, the government has no authority but that which is given from above.²⁶ The right to steal in order to buy future votes is not one of those tasks assigned to the state by God.

Whenever this point is made, someone will say, "I do not object to paying taxes to be redistributed to the poor, so I do not consider it robbery." Excellent! I also do not object to a large part of my earning being used to help the poor. That is why there are *voluntary* charities available. These usually channel donated funds to the poor more efficiently than does any government agency ever created, with the added advantage that they do not steal from unwilling donors. To *willingly* give to the poor is

²⁴ Genesis 3:18-19

²⁵ 2 Thessalonians 3:10

²⁶ John 19:11

virtuous. Everybody who can do so should do so *voluntarily*. However, taxation takes from both the willing and the unwilling. If all those who want to help the poor would do so voluntarily, there would be no injustice involved. It is when the goods are taken from their rightful owners, against their wishes, that their rights to their legitimate earnings are being violated. If you have a heart for the poor, then give to them. Do not seek for politicians to force others, who have their own stewardship commitments, to support the state's favorite "charities."

If one suggests that Christians should *give up* their rights to their property, they may have a very good argument, but it is beside the point. The just person may *give up* his rights to his heart's content, but no just person would ever move to *take another man's property rights* from him against the owner's will. The former action is charity. The latter is theft.

No disciple of Jesus will wish to receive the goods stolen from others in this manner²⁷ (I say this as one who spent several decades in poverty, and never coveted a dime from others in better circumstances). Rather, the follower of Christ will be determined to work—and not only for the goods he and his dependents intend to consume. Knowing that there are those who truly cannot support themselves, the disciple of Christ will seek to work the more diligently in order to earn enough to assist those who are legitimately poor. "*Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.*"²⁸

There are those who, through no fault of their own, are incapable of working and they should be supported by people who are generous. State programs have nothing of generosity about them. The funds have been confiscated against the will of the "donors," and those who deliver the resources to the needy are not sacrificing their own things. In fact, they receive fat salaries for their administrative roles in the transaction. There is nothing of generosity in any part of it. One who possesses a genuine passion for justice will be loathe to receive unnecessary aid at another's involuntary or uncompensated expense. A just marketplace is characterized by every transaction involving an equivalence in the value of products or services exchanged.

A business owner has the right to compensate employees unequally according to the terms of their employment agreement.²⁹ Yet, a just employer, other things being equal, will seek to reward hard work and merit, rather than showing favoritism. To promote or raise the pay of an employee out of friendship or nepotism, at the expense of other workers who actually work harder or more productively, is within the legitimate prerogatives of the business owner. However, it may breed resentment and a perception of injustice, because the harder worker feels deprived of what he has

²⁷ Unless, that is, they are so out of touch with the reality as to not know that the money they are receiving was involuntarily confiscated from others. They should, in that case, be educated.

²⁸ Ephesians 4:28

²⁹ Matthew 20:1-15

earned. The avoidance of nepotism is suggested in the proverb that speaks of the deserving servant being promoted above a lazy and unworthy son.³⁰

Just as in the hierarchy of the home, those in charge of businesses must guard themselves against the tendency to selfishly exploit subordinates. The Christian boss on the job will desire never to use the position merely for personal advantage, but will seek the advantage of all concerned. This includes those who serve as subordinates as well as those higher in rank.

The godly employee will be conscientious not to receive pay for working less than is expected by the employer. Coming to work late and leaving early, taking extended coffee or restroom breaks—simply to avoid putting in as much work as the job assigns—is another form of stealing. The true disciple obsessed with justice would sooner do more work than is required for the pay, than to be paid for performing less than is required. It is always better, in the sight of God, to put others in your debt by doing more than is required, than to become morally indebted to one who pays for goods or services not received. Jesus talked about inviting guests to a feast who cannot repay you, so that God will reward you in the resurrection.³¹ A similar principle certainly applies to the workplace. Better to come to the end of your life having given more than you received in return, than to face God with the opposite circumstance on your account.

When one is self-employed, the duty to work diligently is not diminished. A Christian who was a self-employed building contractor once told me that he chose self-employment to avoid having an employer. He said he wished to be free to come and go as he wished, and not to be answerable to anyone. The same man was currently working on a job for a homeowner which he had promised to finish in two months, but he had dragged it out more than three times that long. Assuming, as he did, that he was answerable to no employer, he typically arrived on the job later than promised (if at all) and left early, at his convenience. He spent much of his time during the workday standing around chatting with friends over the phone for extended periods. He did not seem to realize that no Christian, nor any honest worker, is actually self-employed. Every self-employed contractor has a client who is a temporary employer and a responsibility diligently to fulfill agreed-upon obligations. This is no different from any other normal employment.

More importantly, every Christian worker has an employer in Christ Himself. It is Christ's name and honor that is harmed when a Christian worker is lazy and irresponsible, or cheats and defaults on a contracted job. Every disciple who is working, whether for an employer or for a client, is in the position of a servant to a higher Master. At one level, we serve those who pay for the work (and we should serve them diligently and honestly), but we ultimately answer to Jesus, the Master, in whose service all believers labor. Paul exhorted servants:

³⁰ Proverbs 17:2

³¹ Luke 14:12-14

...obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.³²

Every lazy Christian worker is cheating an employer or client, and bringing reproach on the King.

3. *In all relationships*

To do justly should not be seen as a burden, but as the most pleasing way of life in the promotion of an alternative society that honors God and serves humanity. Our great delight in behaving justly comes in knowing that God's will is being done, as well as the maintaining of a clear conscience before man. Paul said: *"I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men."³³*

A proper passion for justice will affect every interaction in every relationship. When people have dealings with Christ's disciples, they should experience a refreshing sense that they are being treated fairly—and should be struck by the difference between this treatment and that which one usually receives from others. This is too seldom the case. The standard which Yahweh demanded of Israel was no more stringent than that which He expects from those who have His laws written on their hearts: *"You shall follow what is altogether just."³⁴* Justice in all dealings would include the following:

- *Giving others the benefit of the doubt*

This expression means that, when an accusation is made, but guilt has not been established beyond doubt, then that "doubt" leaves room for the possibly of eventual exoneration. If another's guilt is not certainly known, then giving that person the "benefit of the doubt" means that you judge as favorably as the evidence will allow. One example of this is seen in Paul's instruction not to receive an accusation against a spiritual leader without the presence of two or more witnesses.³⁵ In the law, no guilt could be established without the testimony of two or more who had personally witnessed the crime.³⁶ There may be more ways to establish guilt today than there were in biblical times—e.g., DNA evidence, email records, audio/video recordings, etc. This means that the establishment of guilt may be possible without literally two human witnesses being present, but the principle remains the same: Judge as charitably as the existing evidence will allow. The presumption of innocence is to be maintained until guilt is proven.

³² Colossians 3:22-24

³³ Acts 24:16

³⁴ Deuteronomy 16:20

³⁵ 1 Timothy 5:19

³⁶ Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; cf., Matthew 18:16

- *No gossip*

This differs from the above in that a person's guilt in a matter may be thoroughly established and confessed, but the retelling of the information about that person may be uncharitable, unnecessary, and unfair. Bringing up another's faults to other parties *may sometimes* be necessary, if the one being informed is a part of the ongoing problem or is a legitimate part of the solution. However, gossip is the retelling of the errors of a person who is not present to parties who have no need to know. Gossip is particularly unjust when the person in question has subsequently repented.

Of course, not all gossip does concern well-established guilt. Much of the time gossip is one person telling another about how a third party (not present) simply irritates or offends the one reporting the matter. One should not welcome such reports when the other party is not present to balance the story.

Many years ago, I sat with a group of Christian men in a coffee shop where the conversation turned to the subject of another man, whom I will call "Norman," who was not present. The speaker had a laundry list of complaints against Norman for alleged irresponsible actions. When the conversation had taken this turn, another at the table interrupted the speaker and said, "Excuse me, but, while I do not know Norman very well, to the degree that I do know him I consider him to be a friend. I don't feel comfortable hearing negative reports against him without his being present to have a chance respond." The conversation immediately changed direction to some more edifying topic, and Norman was never heard of again—in that conversation, I mean. This strikes me as a very good way to stand for justice in a conversation that devolves into gossip.

On another occasion, several Christians were visiting in a living room, when someone began speaking negatively about another believer who was not present. Others who felt the same way joined in, affirming their respective complaints concerning the absent party. After some time, a young woman who had previously remained silent spoke up and said, "Wow! I wonder how you all speak about me when I am not here." This brought an immediate and justly embarrassed silence to the room.

In the older English translations of the Bible, a gossip is called a "talebearer."³⁷ The two accounts related above are examples of what a friend of mine would call "cutting off the tale of the talebearer." It is a good habit to protest inappropriate and unjust reports about persons whose actual guilt may not be known, or who, in any case, are not present to answer for themselves. The easiest rule by which to assess the injustice of any such conversation is to put yourself in the place of the absent party, and ask, "If I were the one being discussed in this manner would I believe that I was unjustly denied the opportunity to answer for myself?" It is quite a simple, and universally reliable, test.

³⁷ Leviticus 19:16; Proverbs 11:13; 18:8; 20:19; 26:20, 22

- *Things borrowed and owed*

If you have become indebted to someone by their having done you some favor, or their having delivered a product or service for which payment is owed, the only just recourse is to give them what is owed immediately, or by the date it is due. In biblical times, most day-laborers were paid at the end of each workday because they were poor peasants and usually did not have any food at home to last beyond the next day. Therefore, Solomon advises:

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,

When it is in the power of your hand to do so.

Do not say to your neighbor,

“Go, and come back,

And tomorrow I will give it,”

When you have it with you.³⁸

Paul famously wrote, “*Owe no one anything, except to love one another.*”³⁹ In the context, this does not address the incurring of debt, but only of its non-payment. Many can attest to the freedom and security afforded by living within one’s means, and never incurring debt. However, sometimes debt cannot easily be avoided. If you accidentally damage something belonging to another and cannot immediately repay him for the damage, you may have to make restitution in incremental payments thus incurring debt. Similarly, unless we pay for our utilities, prior to using them, we will carry a debt to the service provider until a bill arrives. Some debts may be impossible to avoid.

Few people can purchase a home without a mortgage, and most homeowners will continue to make payments for decades before their homes are paid off. It can be reasonably argued that the bank still owns the house until payment is made in full. The only indebtedness of the buyer is in the duty to make the monthly mortgage payments (like rent paid to a landlord), or in the case of an unforeseen inability to do so, to surrender the house to its owner—the lender. In saying “*Owe no one anything,*” Paul is not forbidding all debt. In the context, his words mean, “Leave no debt unpaid.” If it were sinful simply to incur debt, then it would be wrong to lend to others, placing them in the sinful circumstance of indebtedness. Yet Jesus urged His disciples to lend to the poor.⁴⁰ The Bible sees debt as both undesirable and a bondage,⁴¹ but not as a sin in itself.

³⁸ Proverbs 3:27-28

³⁹ Romans 13:8

⁴⁰ Luke 6:35; cf. Psalm 37:26; 112:5

⁴¹ Deuteronomy 15:6; 28:12; Proverbs 22:7

Every debt must be repaid on schedule, even when the creditor is not as poor as we are, and would not suffer greatly from delayed repayment. We who care as we should about justice will not allow others to be wronged in any way at our hands. For a follower of Christ, it is much better never to borrow than to borrow and default on a loan.

Also, when I borrow anything from another—a book, a tool, a car, etc.—I am indebted to return the borrowed item in the same condition in which I received it. Otherwise, I am wronging my neighbor. If I borrow your car and, through no fault of my own, it gets damaged by another careless driver, I am still responsible for whatever repairs may be necessary to restore it to the condition in which it was lent to me. People often borrow books from me. Sometimes I never see them again, and sometimes they are returned much the worse for wear. I was pleasantly surprised once, when a man who had borrowed a worn and tattered book from me, returned to me a brand-new copy. He explained that he had spilled coffee on my copy of the book, so he felt obligated to replace it with a new one.

This justice principle is found throughout the *Torah*. If a man's livestock grazed in another man's grain fields, or if he lost control of his fire so that it damaged his neighbor's crops, he had to replace the damaged goods from the best of his own.⁴² The same was true if he had stolen. Upon repenting, if he could not restore the original item, he had to replace it along with an interest penalty.⁴³

A young Christian friend of mine was converted in jail. He had been a burglar prior to his arrest and his subsequent surrender to Christ. After his conversion, while still in jail, he made a list of everything he had stolen and from whom he had stolen it, with a mind to restore everything to its proper owner. When he was released, he took a job at a gas station and worked long hours to repay his victims. While doing this, he lived at home with his mother in order to pay this debt as quickly as possible. A year after his release, he had paid back every person whom he had victimized.⁴⁴ Such is a true disciple's passion for justice.

Examples could easily be multiplied, but I trust that those provided here may stir up the godly minds of true disciples of Jesus to be diligent in practicing justice in all dealings with others. To act justly, by the way, is the *very least* that we should do in fulfilling the law of Christ. As we shall see in the next chapter, *agape* love, while never neglecting to do justly, will go further still.

⁴² Exodus 22:5-6

⁴³ Exodus 22:1-4

⁴⁴ With one exception, which was a man from whom he had stolen something irreplaceable, which the thief had carelessly destroyed. The owner would not forgive him nor allow him to make any restitution. My friend lived for years with regret over the loss that this man had incurred at his hands.

Chapter Eleven
Weightier Matters: Mercy and Faithfulness

*You...have neglected the weightier matters of the law:
...mercy and faithfulness...*
(Matthew 23:23 ESV)

Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.
(Luke 6:36)

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.
(Revelation 2:10)

Mercy

On a level with justice, mercy ranks among the weightiest obligations for the child of God. This principle, again reflecting God's own character, is that of compassion and magnanimity toward others. Mercy goes beyond justice without incurring injustice. Justice is the upholding of the rights of others, while mercy is the voluntary surrender of one's own rights for the benefit of others. In scripture, mercy is seen to be evidenced primarily in voluntarily assisting the poor,¹ and in forgiving others for injuries sustained at their hands.²

Mercy is the gracious surrendering of our own rights when doing so will genuinely benefit another. When we freely give our money or goods to others, we surrender our legitimate right to retain our own possessions for our own enjoyment. When we forgive, we surrender our right to retaliate or to hold a grudge. Giving to the poor is neither an act of justice, nor a violation of justice. It is surrendering our right to what is lawfully ours, and imparting to others what is not theirs by right. This gives the recipients a new right which they do not inherently possess—the right to spend money we earned as they wish. When one gladly, and without duress, gives-up one's own rights, it is neither justice nor injustice. It is mercy.

Likewise, when someone wrongfully injures us and we choose to forgive, we are surrendering our right to retaliate. We thereby give the offender a new right—the right to escape the just consequences of his or her actions.

¹ Proverbs 14:21, 31; Daniel 4:27; Luke 6:35-36; James 2:15-17; 1 John 3:17

² Numbers 14:19; Daniel 9:9; Matthew 18:32-33; Mark 11:25-26; Ephesians 4:32

Mercy is therefore not the opposite of justice, but a step beyond justice. The opposite of justice is *injustice*, which violates the rights of another. Injustice is *less than just*, while mercy is *more than just*.

The Bible mentions two reasons that we must be merciful to others: first, because we ourselves have received mercy, which requires us to allow the mercy we have received to flow out to others who need it as we do;³ and second, because it is a condition for the receiving of further mercies from God.⁴ It is doing to others what we would have others, including God, do to us. Jesus said, "*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*"⁵

True mercy is not doing a favor in order to have generosity reciprocated. To give or to forgive with such motives is flatly forbidden by Christ:

*"But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful."*⁶

*"When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just."*⁷

The person walking in *agape* will naturally be compassionate and merciful. The principal expressions of mercy are the following:

1) Forgiving and cancelling debts

When we think of our receiving mercy from God many of us may think primarily of His forgiving our sins despite our not deserving it. Jesus commands His followers to forgive others as we have been forgiven by God. Forgiveness can take the form of extending release from reprisals to one who has committed wrong or offended. It can also take the form of cancelling a debt.

Paul states that we should forgive, as God has forgiven us.⁸ Our forgiving others is a function of our gratitude for being forgiven by God. Ingratitude is a major focus in Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant who, having been forgiven a great debt, was shockingly ungrateful and unmerciful. He refused to forgive a small debt owed to him by a fellow servant.⁹ Israel was

³ Matthew 18:32-33; Ephesians 4:32

⁴ Matthew 6:14-15; Mark 11:25-26; James 2:13

⁵ Matthew 5:7

⁶ Luke 6:35-36

⁷ Luke 14:12-14

⁸ Ephesians 4:32

⁹ Matthew 18:23-35

commanded to be kind to strangers because they themselves had been strangers in Egypt, and were shown kindness by God in their deliverance from bondage.¹⁰ Gratitude for mercies received is a great motivator to the showing of mercy to others—whereas ingratitude is a great sin and offense to God.¹¹

Jesus went so far as to say, on several occasions, that our refusal to forgive others will disqualify us for receiving God's forgiveness.¹² His mercy flows into us as we allow the same mercy to flow out to others. However, *"judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy."*¹³

There are two aspects of forgiveness. One arises from the loving disposition of the injured party, while the other arises from valuing relationships as God values them—seeking the reconciliation of estranged parties. The first is done internally, in the heart. The second is realized externally, in the relationship. To forgive another in your heart is an automatic decision to love your enemy, to give up your right to retaliate, and to hold no bitterness. It keeps the heart and conscience clean and avoids giving place to the devil.¹⁴ This is done unilaterally, whether or not the offender repents. Jesus commanded His disciples to routinely practice such automatic forgiveness:

*"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you."*¹⁵

*"And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."*¹⁶

On the other hand, Jesus elsewhere tells us to approach the offender to elicit his repentance, and *"if he repents, forgive him."*¹⁷ This is because Jesus does not only value our having a right heart, but He desires the restoration of the relationship as well. You can love people unconditionally, but you cannot trust them unconditionally. Once your heart has been made right, it is necessary to attempt to make the relationship right also. This will require repentance on the part of the other party. The responsibility to initiate the reconciliation lies on both sides. If the offender does not initiate it, then Jesus said the offended party should do so. If there is repentance, and you forgive, the relationship is recovered.

This is of very high priority with God, and the devil is very interested in keeping offended Christians unreconciled. Those wishing to further the agenda of Kingdom of God, rather than the devil's agenda, will want to restore every broken relationship that can be responsibly restored. I

¹⁰ Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Leviticus 19:34

¹¹ Romans 1:21; Luke 17:17

¹² Matthew 6:14-15; 18:34-35; Mark 11:25-26

¹³ James 2:13

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 2:10-11; Ephesians 4:26-27

¹⁵ Luke 6:27-28

¹⁶ Mark 11:25

¹⁷ Luke 17:3-4

mention the word *responsibly* because a valid reconciliation does not necessarily overlook offenses of which one has not repented. There needs to be restored trust, as well as mercy. This is why Jesus says that one should approach the offender to elicit such repentance.

If the offender will not repent, there are additional steps to take, outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17. Each step is intended to bring about repentance and reconciliation. If these steps have been followed and the person has not repented, then the injured party has discharged his or her duty. There is nothing more to be done other than to let the unrepentant offender go his or her way unreconciled. If the offender never repents, the disciple is commanded still to love the enemy¹⁸—but there is no command to trust, or to further pursue the relationship.

Some relationships, despite God's wishes and the best efforts of the believer, may never be reconciled. This is why Paul places limitations on our duty in this respect: "*If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.*"¹⁹

2) Non-retaliation

This is what Jesus was illustrating in His command to "*turn the other cheek.*"²⁰ Though this is sometimes taken to be a forbidding of self-defense, it is actually forbidding retaliation. The command is not set in a context in which self-defense would be a consideration. If someone is trying to hurt or kill you this verse would not directly apply. Jesus does not envision such a situation in this passage. To ward off an attack is not vengeance, but self-defense—which is a different matter. We can see the difference between these two ideas expressed in the *Torah* concerning burglary. The law states that, in the case of a home invasion at night, a burglar might end up dead at the hand of the homeowner who is defending his home and his family. The homeowner is said to incur no guilt for the killing in such a case. This is not only self-defense, but also the defense of others in the home. Yet (the passage continues), if the thief has gotten safely away and is hunted down and killed by the homeowner (which is an act of retaliation, not self-defense), this will incur bloodguilt on the part of the killer, since the prescribed penalty for theft is to make restitution, not to be killed.²¹

Even if we would question the applicability of the above law to Christians today, we can see in it God's making a distinction between a man defending himself and his family, on the one hand, and his later taking vengeance when there is no immediate danger, on the other.

The words of Jesus in the *Sermon on the Mount* are not picturing a violent or dangerous situation at all. The man who strikes you "*on the right cheek*" (assuming him to be right-handed) must be slapping with the back of his hand, not punching with a fist. Feel free to test this with someone at

¹⁸ Matthew 5:44

¹⁹ Romans 12:18

²⁰ Matthew 5:39

²¹ Exodus 22:2-3

home—gently! Stand facing another person. Then (in slow motion) try to naturally punch his right cheek with your right hand. A right-handed punch will naturally strike the left cheek of one facing you. Jesus is describing a slap with the back of the right hand to the other person’s right cheek. This does not represent a threat, but an insult, or an attempt to aggravate. Thus, Christ’s teaching does not refer to self-defense but to retaliation. Mercy does not desire to retaliate.

Paul was applying this teaching of Christ when he wrote: *“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”* On the contrary, *“if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”*²²

By showing kindness to those who hate us when we might justly settle the score, we leave it to God to redress the matter as He may see fit. As long as the score remains unsettled by God, the wrongdoer is accumulating future punishment, as if coals of fire are piling up on his head.²³

3) Hospitality and assistance to the needy

Many of us live in countries where there are few needy people who have no other recourse than to receive hospitality from generous benefactors. A great many of the poor among us are capable of working, but prefer not to do so. Many choose homelessness rather than to adopt responsible habits of health, self-maintenance, and productivity. This is not merely theory. One may discover this by one’s own experiment, as many have done. Inquire of ten homeless people why they don’t stay in the available shelters set aside for people in such a condition, and see how they answer. If honest, many will tell you that they are not allowed to drink or use illegal drugs in those shelters. They would rather stay on the street than give up the things that have, in many cases, put them there in the first place. Another experiment: Approach three people holding signs that say, “Will work for food,” and offer to hire them to clean your rain gutters. I have a feeling you’ll end up cleaning those alone. Those who are unwilling to work typically have access to a variety of government programs that guarantee the supply of their basic needs. In contrast to biblical times, bringing strangers into your home, today, may not often be meeting a need that cannot otherwise be easily provided.

Nonetheless, there are many truly destitute and helpless people throughout the rest of the world needing the help of those who can afford to assist them. The care of them will burden the heart of the

²² Romans 12:19-20

²³ It is common to hear teachers of this passage suggest that “heaping coals upon the head” is to be seen as a good deed done in a culture where people normally carried on their heads the coals from a communal fire to their homes for baking and such. This is a nonsensical interpretation because Paul is teaching that by our showing kindness to enemies, we are leaving it to God to punish them. Coals of fire are a common image for God’s judgments (e.g., 2 Samuel 22:9; Psalm 11:6; 18:8, 12, 13; 140:10). If Paul (or Solomon, whom he is quoting) wished for the heaping of coals on one’s head to represent a welcome act of assistance, it would turn his argument into a tautology: *“acting kindly to your enemy is like..well, it’s like doing something kind for them.”*

merciful disciple of Jesus, who will desire to alleviate their misery. Since many of us cannot fly to India or Africa to deliver supplies personally to the destitute, most of us will probably take the opportunity to give by means of charitable Christian organizations. For some of us, it may involve volunteering with such organizations—or even starting one.

This concern for the poor must retain a prominent place in our awareness—especially as we make lifestyle choices and purchases for ourselves. *“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*²⁴

It is not necessary to look overseas for opportunities to relieve the poor. Even in prosperous lands, there are the hard-working poor, whose needs are barely met by their low wages. Such people may be found even in the disciple community.

The hard-working poor (e.g., people with large families, those working for minimum wage, single mothers, etc.) may encounter special emergencies. Our generosity may allow them to meet such emergencies, or simply to do something special for their families—things that many of us do for our families routinely without much thought. As conscientious Christians, some of the helpless poor may have godly convictions preventing them from seeking aid from government programs. It is the place of Christians to bear the burdens of their brethren—and so *to fulfill the law of Christ.*²⁵

We are not only to be concerned about assisting fellow Christians in these circumstances. We must also be willing to help unbelievers in need, though according to Paul the priority will be to assist the brethren in Christ: *“as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”*²⁶

When a Jewish lawyer asked Jesus concerning the proper application of the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself, Jesus answered with the parable that we call “The Good Samaritan.” An unfortunate man was in desperate need of a benefactor, who owed him nothing, to incur personal inconvenience and risk in bringing him relief. This need was met by a foreigner who was the least qualified to view him as a “neighbor,” since the two were of different, and mutually hostile, races, nations, and religions. Jesus turned the question back upon the questioner, requiring him to identify which of the characters in the story was the true “neighbor” to the unfortunate man. The lawyer reluctantly admitted that it was *“he who showed mercy on him.”* Jesus said, *“Go and do likewise.”*²⁷

Jesus explicitly taught that only those who show mercy toward others can count on God’s mercy being shown toward them: *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”*²⁸ If we are generous

²⁴ Matthew 6:21

²⁵ Galatians 6:2

²⁶ Galatians 6:10

²⁷ Luke 10:25-37

²⁸ Matthew 5:7; cf. James 2:13

to others, God will be generous to us.²⁹ If we forgive others, God will forgive us.³⁰ Genuine love for our neighbor, and gratitude toward God, will not allow us to remain unmoved by the cry of the needy or the remorseful.

Faithfulness

Anyone who has ever been betrayed by someone whose loyalty mattered, knows the value of this word “faithfulness.” It is a rare trait to find among either men or women. Solomon, a keen observer of human nature, suggested that, in his day, it was a challenge to find a man possessing this quality: “*Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, But who can find a faithful man?*”³¹ Nor was he under any illusions about the virtue of the fairer sex. He asked the same rhetorical question about wives: “*Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies [i.e., “rare”!]. The heart of her husband safely trusts her...*”³² Many wives and husbands have been trusted by their partners, but only a faithful woman or man can be *safely* trusted.

The faithful person is one in whom confidence, or faith, may safely be placed—by God and by others. It is the quality of being reliable and dependable. It is what we commonly call *integrity* or *character*. It describes the old-fashioned virtue of being “as good as your word.” God wants all people to be aware of His faithfulness, so that they can trust Him, and believe His words. Since the Christian is a self-identified imitator of God, our behavior speaks loudly to the world around us of the character of God. If God is not viewed as trustworthy then He will not be trusted. If God’s people are found to be unfaithful and untrustworthy, this increases the likelihood that those who see us will assume the same to be true of the One we are imitating. It is the most common thing in the world for unbelievers to assume Christianity (and thus God Himself) to be false for no better reason than that the Christians they have observed have proven themselves to be false and unreliable.

Faithfulness is also that quality that distinguishes between those who remain loyal to God under persecution, and those who lapse under pressure. It is the difference between the person who, having foolishly incurred a debt, actually pays it off—perhaps over a period of years—and one who files for bankruptcy and considers him or herself free of further obligation to the creditor. It is the difference between the person with a difficult but faithful spouse, who stays to fulfill sacred vows made before God and man, and the one who takes the coward’s way out seeking a divorce and breaking his or her promise. “*He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much.*”³³

²⁹ Luke 6:38; Proverbs 19:17; Deuteronomy 15:9-10

³⁰ Matthew 6:12, 14-15; 18:21-35; Mark 11:25-26

³¹ Proverbs 20:6

³² Proverbs 31:10-11

³³ Luke 16:10

Promise keepers

Faithfulness is the principle that underlies the commandments to abstain from bearing false witness, false oaths, divorce, and lying in general. It is also directly related to the commandment forbidding adultery, the specific act most commonly referred to as “unfaithfulness” in popular parlance. When Jesus cited the commandment against adultery, he addressed the aspect of the injustice of a man intruding upon the marriage of another man. The other side of the coin is the woman’s violation of her oath of faithfulness to her husband. This kind of unfaithfulness was the metaphor that God chose to use in speaking of His own covenant people’s betrayal of Him.³⁴

Every marriage that ever fails does so because of unfaithfulness on the part of one or both parties. If all people were faithful, no divorce would ever occur. The only allowable divorce occurs due to the unfaithfulness of one spouse. If the person is seeking a divorce on any other grounds, then that party is committing an act of unfaithfulness, by needlessly violating their sacred wedding vows. *Remember those?* At the time of marriage, vows are taken which include (since the definition of marriage demands) that each party will remain faithfully in the marriage until one of the parties has died. People who do not intend to keep their oaths—that is, to maintain their integrity—should not make sacred oaths in the name of God, as both the bride and the groom do at their wedding. Solomon wrote:

*Do not be rash with your mouth,
And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God.
For God is in heaven, and you on earth;
Therefore let your words be few...
When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it;
For He has no pleasure in fools.
Pay what you have vowed—
Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.³⁵*

It is sometimes stated that the three most common causes for divorce are differences over finances, sex and children. None of these are causes of divorce—any more than crime is caused by poverty. Bad behavior is caused by bad character. Not all poor people become criminals, and not all people who find their marriages crippled by major areas of incompatibility choose to divorce. Difficulties in life do not force anyone to sin. The only thing that can ever cause divorce is unfaithfulness to an oath. No marriage ends, short of the death of a spouse, until one or both parties default on a vow made to God and to others. That vow contained promises that both parties will

³⁴ See, for example, the extended parables of Israel’s shameless adultery in Ezekiel chapters 16 and 23.

³⁵ Ecclesiastes. 5:2, 4-5

remain committed uniquely to each other for a lifetime. The traditional vows, very rightly, include the lines “for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health...” There is a reason that these vows have taken this form in Christian tradition. It is because treacherous people look for loopholes to excuse themselves for breaking their promises. There is no place for covenant breakers in the Kingdom of God: *“Those who are with Him are called, chosen and faithful.”*³⁶

There is no divorce which does not either involve or incur unfaithfulness. That is why God hates divorce. The option of backing down on a promise or a commitment is anathema to the faithful individual.

Of course, as with all sins, unfaithfulness sometimes occurs among believers at weak moments. We all stumble in many things. However, when disciples fall, they repent and get back on the right path. If a believer has broken any promise to any person, it is necessary to repent and to return to the place of keeping that promise. Only a dishonorable person will default on a promised obligation and fail to repent.

Swearing to your own hurt

Faithfulness is the settled determination to always be true to your word regardless of what unforeseen inconvenience, personal difficulties, or suffering one may have to endure for the sake of maintaining integrity. This is the character of the one *“who swears to his own hurt and does not change.”*³⁷ That phrase refers to one who promises, or *swears*, to do something and afterward discovers that the keeping of that commitment will hurt, or cost more than was originally anticipated. In such circumstances, the faithful man or woman does not back out of the promise, nor change course. Faithfulness keeps commitments because character matters more than convenience. Keeping all of your promises is only difficult for a single lifetime. Life is short; but eternity is long.

The faithful person values truth and trustworthiness above convenience. When one’s spouse becomes disabled, requiring intensive and difficult care, or becomes unattractive, unresponsive, cantankerous, demented, or otherwise repugnant—the duty of the disciple remains unchanged. Due to one’s commitment and sacred vows of lifelong faithfulness, divorce will not be a consideration.

Many years ago, I knew a self-employed cleaning contractor with unshakeable Christian convictions about integrity. Though he was a very reliable and conscientious man, he had less work than he needed, and little money. On one occasion, he gave a reasonable bid on a job which he assumed to be the work of a single day. He was hired, but when he showed up the next day to do the job, he discovered that there was a hardened substance on the surfaces to be cleaned, which had not

³⁶ Revelation 17:14

³⁷ Psalm 15:4

been visible to him when he had originally given his bid on the job. It became belatedly clear that the clean-up was going to require multiple days' work. Realizing that he could hardly afford to tie up so much time working on a job for which he would be paid the wage of a single day, he was sorely tempted to either adjust his bid upward, or walk off the job. Many would have taken one of these options. However, as a disciple of Jesus determined to be notorious for his uncompromising integrity, he became one who "*swears to his own hurt and does not change.*" He felt that his integrity as a Christian was worth more than any amount of money, and that he would rather go broke than to default on his verbal commitment. As a result, he finished the job, and received the low payment originally agreed upon. He took a hit financially, but without regret. Building and maintaining character is far more important than the building of a nest egg. God takes care of His faithful ones. Today, many years later, that man is financially comfortable—but, more importantly, his conscience is also comfortable. Even though he could have chosen differently by asking the client's leave to alter his bid,³⁸ he nonetheless has no regrets now for having chosen integrity over convenience. God honors those who honor Him, and honoring God requires honoring our commitments.

Unbelievers should be able to see the glory of God in nature, but God's character, in particular, is supposed to be displayed in the behavior of His people. Our truthfulness in speech is to be a witness to the truthfulness of God's words. "*With my mouth will I make known Your faithfulness.*"³⁹

No one can trust another who is perceived as untrustworthy. When an unbeliever meets or does business with a believer, that is the occasion when the character of the King is on display to the skeptic. A cynical businessman once told me, "When a car pulls up in front of my office with a fish bumper sticker,⁴⁰ I know I am about to be swindled." This was, no doubt, intended as hyperbole. The irony was that, decades earlier, he himself had formerly been a believer, but had deserted his wife and three children to marry the family's babysitter. An unfaithful man tends to view all others as unfaithful. In his case, perhaps, his cynicism of the integrity of Christians was a mere case of *projection*. However, very many unbelievers have become embittered toward Christ due to the dishonesty of those who have represented themselves as Christians. Unscrupulous behavior has not only reflected badly on the integrity of Christians in general, but upon the God whom they profess to imitate. "*For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you....'*"⁴¹ Jesus spoke of being thrown into the sea wearing a millstone necklace as a fate associated with those whose compromise stumbles others.

³⁸ To seek the release from a foolishly-made promise is not forbidden in scripture. If the one to whom the commitment was made is willing to grant release (Proverbs 6:1-5). This does not apply to wedding vows, however, since both parties are contracting with God in making such vows. None but God can grant release.

³⁹ Psalm 89:1

⁴⁰ Referring, of course, to the simple fish drawing formed by the intersecting of two arched lines, which has historically been the identifying symbol of the Christian.

⁴¹ Romans 2:24

*Sir, we wish to see Jesus*⁴²

There are many reasons for God's concern that His disciples love others, but none can outweigh the fact that God's own reputation for being loving—a God of justice, mercy, and faithfulness—rides upon the impression the world gains from interacting with, and watching, the King's followers. As Christ's name has been entrusted to us, so has His reputation.

When unbelievers tell us about scandalous behavior they have observed in believers, we are quick to say, "Don't look at Christians! Look at Jesus."

What else can we say in such cases?

Yet, just where is it that the world is expected to see Jesus, if not in His followers?

Agape love is manifested in action, not merely emotion. Those actions are justice, mercy and faithfulness—exhibited in all relationships. It is the law of the Kingdom. Loving one's neighbor is a simple, though costly, law to obey. The Holy Spirit works in the heart of the trusting follower of Christ to produce the inward desire to love and serve others at one's own expense. To the disciple, serving others is the fulfillment of the heart's desire. This is why love is also called "*the law of liberty*."⁴³ Remember, "*it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure*."⁴⁴ However, our responsibility is to follow that inward leading to "*work out*" in our choices and behavior what God has worked into our hearts.⁴⁵

Despite being the law of *liberty*, justice, mercy, and faithfulness are nonetheless *mandatory*. The King does not hand down mere suggestions. While the New Testament believer is not under the Law of Moses, he or she *is* under *the Law of Christ*.⁴⁶ The world needs to know that there is another King requiring their loyalty, and that those who are truly in His Kingdom adorn His message by their love.⁴⁷

⁴² John 12:21

⁴³ James 1:25

⁴⁴ Philippians 2:13

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, v.12

⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:20-21

⁴⁷ John 13:35

Chapter Twelve

Stewards of the King

*“For the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man traveling to a far country,
who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them.
And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own
ability; and immediately he went on a journey...
After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.”*

(Matthew 25:14-15, 19)

*“A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. So he
called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas,
and said to them, ‘Do business till I come’...“And so it was that when he returned, having received the
kingdom, he then commanded these servants,
to whom he had given the money, to be called to him,
that he might know how much every man had gained by trading.”*

(Luke 19:12-13, 15)

*“There was a certain rich man who had a steward,
and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods.
So he called him and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you?
Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.”*

(Luke 16:1-2)

Imagine that you have established your dream business and have brought it to a place of reliable, sustained growth. You own the building, the furnishings, and the inventory, and there is a comfortable cushion of capital on hand to carry you through several years. The company has a reputation and loyal clientele, and you think it's time to turn the management of the business over to your heirs so that you can maintain less of a hands-on role in the daily operations. You will still own it, but your children are the potential future owners, and are now the managers...

Or, you have acquired several units of rental property in another state, so that you have had to hire a property management company to keep an eye on things, maintain the properties, collect the rents, and so forth, on your behalf...

Or, you and your spouse are finally in the position to take a year to travel around the world and fulfill your bucket list, so you leave the family farm under the management of your children, so that you can return to a continuing prosperous operation after your absence...

Or, you received an inheritance of a large sum, and you delivered it over to a broker to invest on your behalf, so that it might grow and become the means of your retirement...

These scenarios resemble, to a large extent, what Christ has done with us in connection to His Kingdom enterprise. The business and property managers' duties include maintaining and improving the profits of the owner. In the case of the children, they are also heirs to the farm or the business, and have a personal stake in its prosperity. In the same way, the disciples of Jesus have been given charge of the affairs of the Kingdom of Christ in His absence to preserve and improve the gains and to promote the expansion of the enterprise. Jesus and the apostles have gotten the project off to a tremendous start, and have passed along the responsibilities to each succeeding generation to carry on. The question that should weigh upon us is whether the interests of the Kingdom will suffer, or be advanced, under our management. When our generation is replaced by the next, will Christ's enterprise have become the richer or the poorer in the currency that matters to Him?

Imagine your chagrin if, in your absence, your business was driven to bankruptcy, or if your properties became dilapidated and trashed by tenants, or if the farm animals died, the crops failed, and the land had gone wild. Perhaps your investment capital had been partly embezzled and partly misdirected under the management of those to whom you had entrusted your assets.

Jesus told a story¹ about a man who had trusted a steward to manage his grain business, but found that the man had been wasting his assets so that he had not prospered, but rather had lost money under his management. Of course, the owner gave his steward walking papers—who wouldn't?

The relevant question for our lives is, what does Jesus think about our management of His concerns? We have said that becoming a disciple in Christ's kingdom involves the surrender of all possessions to His ownership. There is nothing magnanimous on our part in signing over to Him the title to all that we have. After all, He created everything we have including ourselves. It was He that gave us everything,² and (as Job found out³) God is able to take any, or all of it, back from us—whether we are of a mind to surrender it or not! Our surrender of all that we are and all that we have is simply the reasonable acknowledgement of reality, and a demonstration of our willingness to live under His sovereign prerogatives.

In examples like those mentioned above, the stewardship of goods may be entrusted to one's heirs, to servants, or to agents hired to manage the estate. As servants who have been "*bought at a*

¹ Luke 16:1ff

² James 1:17

³ Job 1:21

*price*⁴ by Christ, it should be easy for us to view our possessions, no less than ourselves, as belonging to the one who paid the price for our redemption. It is said of the first Christian community: “*the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.*”⁵

To say that they had renounced personal ownership of their possessions does not mean that they now considered those things to be owned by other people. Their possessions now belonged to God, and the former “owners” had now become mere stewards, or managers, of the property of Another. They would be called upon, at the Final Judgment (if not before⁶), to account for every penny that had been entrusted to them. This was a duty they took seriously, as seen in their sharing of goods with others in their community who had need.⁷ They had reason to believe that this was one way the Master would desire to have His resources dispersed. Had He not spoken of the “sheep” and the “goats”? The latter had failed to assist the needy and were severely punished, receiving the rebuke, “*inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.*”⁸ These acts of generosity in the early church were done freely and without duress, choosing to steward God’s properties according to their understanding of His priorities.

Although the parables of stewardship describe the assets managed in monetary or financial terms, and even though we see in the early Christian community that they practiced good management with their material possessions, the responsibility of such oversight is not restricted to the management of physical assets. Money is used as the medium in the parables, generally, because finances are an area of stewardship to which almost everyone can relate. However, having given the parable of the wasteful steward, Jesus indicated that money was not the only commodity to be tended: “*Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?*”⁹

Being entrusted with the stewardship of finances is simply the test to determine whether one is qualified for the next level—being entrusted with “*the true riches.*” What might those include? As Virgil Vogt writes:

Jesus was only using business success as an example to teach a broader point. He wasn’t necessarily saying that he wanted us to be successful in business. It is important not to focus the content of our stewardship too narrowly. When Jesus ascended into heaven and transferred the conduct of his ministry on earth to his stewards, he didn’t have any money or real estate to

⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:20

⁵ Acts 4:32

⁶ See Acts 5:1-11

⁷ Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-37

⁸ Matthew 25:45

⁹ Luke 16:11

distribute. That wasn't the 'treasure' which he left behind for the disciples to invest and manage. Instead, he left them with a missionary mandate—the Gospel and the instruction that it should be preached in all nations. A knowledge of God and his Kingdom, a message of the forgiveness of sins, the power of the Holy Spirit, and authority to heal and cast out demons—this is what he distributed among his stewards. He invites us to invest the Gospel and do business for the Kingdom of God. The increase of this treasure, which he will require at his coming, is not in terms of dollars but in terms of fruit that will abide through all eternity.¹⁰

Diversified assets

Biblical writers also spoke of stewardship in terms other than financial, as Paul said that he and his companions had been made “*stewards of the mysteries of God.*” And lest we feel that such conservancy duties are given only to the missionaries and preachers who carry the gospel to the world, Peter speaks of the responsibility resting upon every believer:

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”¹¹

Peter says that each spiritual gift (and every Christian has at least one) represents a personal stewardship of God's variegated grace, which he goes on to summarize in the categories of speaking and serving. Some are gifted to speak, others to provide one or another service to the body of Christ. Every gift can be turned to the profit of Christ's Kingdom—or not. That which is used in the service of Christ will bear fruit, for which the believer will be told, “*Well done, good and faithful servant.*”¹² On the other hand, every gift that is not so employed will produce nothing in the Master's interests, and will receive the displeased rebuke, “*you wicked and lazy servant!*”¹³

The duty of the fulfillment of the Great Commission lies upon the whole church, and upon every Christian—which is why each has been equipped with some function or gift in the body. The commission's success does not depend only upon the faithfulness of evangelists, preachers and teachers, but also on those charged with the gifts of giving, serving, leading, showing mercy, encouraging—as well as the more spectacular gifts like healing, working miracles, prophesying, etc.¹⁴

For every *preacher* in the field, it may require a dozen or more *givers* and as many *servers*, just to keep his ministry afloat. Besides the preaching ministry, however, we should never underestimate the power of exerting influence for Christ through such practical assistance as the non-preaching gifts

¹⁰ Virgil Vogt, *Treasure in Heaven* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1982), 70

¹¹ 1 Peter 4:10

¹² Matthew 25:21, 23; Luke 19:17

¹³ Matthew 25:26; Luke 19:22

¹⁴ See Paul's lists in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:7-11

provide (Mother Teresa immediately comes to mind!). Such gifts include giving to the poor, counseling the dejected, comforting the bereaved, visiting shut-ins, cooking and cleaning for the disabled, serving the sick, etc. The work of the kingdom is not all talk. *“For the kingdom of God is not in word [only] but in power.”*¹⁵

Many feel that they have no discernible spiritual gifting. This mistake may be due to the disproportionate focus often placed upon those who have spectacular gifts in the realm of public ministry. Remember that Jesus was more impressed with the two pennies quietly given by the widow, who was a sacrificial giver, than with the large sums given by more ostentatious contributors. There is every reason to apply the same principle to the faithful steward of the more modest gifts, which do not impress the whole world, but which make a tremendous impact on one person in need. Never discount the potential of a few fish and loaves of bread to eventually feed a multitude, when placed into the hands of Christ. If you think you have no identifiable gift to steward for the kingdom’s profit, consider—can you

- cook?
- sing?
- play an instrument?
- create artwork?
- write children’s stories?
- babysit for a single, working mother?
- help a disabled person?
- cheer people up?
- help tidy-up?
- type?
- edit the sermons of others for publication?
- answer phones?
- send encouraging notes and cards?
- teach Sunday School class?
- host home Bible studies?
- bathe an elderly or disabled person?
- provide medical or paramedical care?
- provide legal services?
- Act in drama?
- make gifts?

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:20

- make money?
- give money?
- mediate between estranged parties?
- tend a garden?
- visit a shut-in?
- wait on tables?
- fix cars?
- build or repair houses?
- excel in athletic events?
- install or repair plumbing or electrical systems?
- dig holes?
- do data entry?
- program computers?
- invent useful items?
- clean toilets?
- wash dishes?
- cultivate a good marriage?
- nurture and rear children (or grandchildren) in a godly manner?

Do you have

- useful social connections?
- popularity?
- leisure time?
- physical attractiveness? (Yes, in our society, good looks are a commodity that opens many doors)

The list seems endless.

If it sounds like I am simply listing any conceivable ability—apart from immoral or criminal activities—this is just about the case.¹⁶ Everything we can do, ought to be done in the name of Jesus for the advancement of His Kingdom. Not every activity is likely to see the same immediate or dynamic results as will others. Some abilities may be of such a nature as to make dramatic and quantifiable advances in the cause of Christ, while others may be less capable of achieving visible or

¹⁶ I have not included every non-criminal activity—e.g., watching TV, playing *Solitaire*, being able to burp more loudly than anyone else in the room, etc. The ministry potential for such abilities has not yet been discovered.

measurable results. Not everybody is going to have the same impact upon the world as did Billy Graham or Mother Teresa.

Some have been given five talents, some two, and some only one. The distribution is according to the will of God, and He knows what each, when stewarded faithfully, might be expected to achieve. Though the man with five talents returned ten to his master, while the man with two only returned four, the implication of the story was that the faithful stewardship of the two was as pleasing in the master's sight as was the faithful stewardship of five. Both were commended as good and faithful servants.

It is not required that a steward produce as much profit for his master as another may—especially when one is entrusted, from the beginning, with less than another has been given. There is no command that one must increase the profit of his original capital by any particular percentage. We are not equal to each other in abilities, nor in the amount of capital that each has received at the outset. The one thing that we stewards will be judged by is our faithfulness in the role—something of which all are capable of possessing in equal degrees. *“It is required in stewards that one be found faithful.”*¹⁷ The disciple who takes the gift given by the Master, whether large or small, and who is faithful in using it as an asset in His service, may be confident that he or she has pleased and profited the one who owns all.

This is clearly taught by Jesus when He remarked that the widow, who had only contributed the two pennies (which comprised her whole living), had in fact *given more* than any of the richer worshipers who had given larger sums.¹⁸ The factor that makes one's investment in the kingdom costly is not its intrinsic worth, nor how much it is valued by others, but the greatness of the sacrifice that it represents to the giver. Only Jesus and the widow herself knew the true value of the contribution that she committed to God that day.

Every asset that one possesses, however worldly in nature—e.g., athletic ability or good looks—can be exploited, either for worldly or for godly ends. We all know of athletes or entertainers who use their celebrity status as a platform to speak for Jesus. Too often, we have many advantages or assets that we take for granted. We might simply think ourselves to be *lucky*—or worse, *superior* to others who lack the assets that we have. Instead, we must recognize our advantages for what they are, unusual gifts received in trust. This places the possessor under greater responsibility to turn them to the Kingdom's advantage.

George Müller of Bristol, England, is famous for having cared for more than 10,000 orphans in his lifetime. However, besides building and running orphanages, Müller exemplified to a rare degree what it means to take one's role as a steward seriously. It would be hard to imagine any opportunity

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 4:2

¹⁸ Luke 21:1-4

that this man did not cease to promote the Kingdom of God throughout his long life. He recommended and lived a life entirely defined by faithful stewardship. He believed that giving to God's interests should take first priority over business success or personal prosperity. Obviously, if one is successful and prosperous in business, more good can be done through the proper stewardship of one's assets. On the other hand, Müller advised that even those experiencing reversals in business should conscientiously step up their faithful giving to the Kingdom:

How should we respond if prosperity in our business, our trade, our profession, etc., should suddenly cease, notwithstanding our having given a considerable portion of our means to the Lord's work? Solomon's reply would have been, 'When times are bad consider' (Eccl.7:14). It is the will of God that we should consider our ways, that we should see whether there is any particular reason why God has allowed this to happen to us. We may discover that we have taken our prosperity too much as a matter of course rather than having recognized *practically* the hand of God in our success. Or it may be that while the Lord has prospered us that we have spent too much on ourselves, and we may have, though unintentionally, *abused* the blessing of God. I do not mean by this remark to bring the children of God into the bondage of a scrupulous conscience that worries over every penny. Yet, there is truly such a thing as propriety or impropriety in our dress, our furniture, our table, our house, our lifestyle, and in the yearly amount we spend on ourselves and family.¹⁹

A stunning example

This man, George Müller was one of the most remarkable examples of taking stewardship seriously to be found in any generation. Coming into the Kingdom at age twenty, out of a debauched and immoral past, Müller hit the ground running radically for Christ and never stopped. For over seventy-years of full-time ministry, he never received a salary and never allowed his needs to be known to any human being. He lived entirely by faith, while being the sole provider for thousands of orphans, in Bristol, England. His outlook certainly sounds similar to that advocated in the New Testament. He wrote:

*"It ill-becomes the servant to seek to be rich, and great, and honored in this world where his Lord was poor, and mean, and despised."*²⁰

¹⁹ *George Muller on Faith: A 30-Day Devotional Treasury*, Lance Wubbels, ed. (Lynnwood, WA: Emerald Books, 1998), Day 29 (pages unnumbered).

²⁰ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/george_muller_201624

It would be hard to dispute the logic of such an observation. Müller himself, whose life spanned the last three-quarters of the 19th century, was one of the greatest examples of faithful stewardship of his money, time, and talents in the history of modern Christianity. Though never letting his needs be known to any human, over a period of seven decades, he received the equivalent of over 8 million dollars in unpredictable and unsolicited gifts for the support of the orphans. He was the faithful steward of every penny, and turned all of it to the housing, feeding, clothing, educating, and evangelizing of over ten thousand destitute orphans in 19th-century England—the period during which Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist*. Dickens, by the way, visited and was impressed by Müller's orphanages.

This was only one of Müller's many contributions to the Kingdom of God, because he also pastored a church (unsalaried), and spent seventeen of his last twenty years preaching in over thirty countries, on five continents—traveling over 200,000 miles in pre-aviation times. In his lifetime, he opened 117 schools which provided Christian education for 120,000 students, and distributed almost 300,000 Bibles and 1.4 million New Testaments—all without charge.

This provides a stunning example of what a devoted disciple can do with the time and money God has entrusted to him. You and I, most likely, will not accomplish as much as George Müller did in seventy years' time, but why not aim as high as possible? We should not let what seems an unattainable example prevent us from making the most of the opportunities that remain for us to advance the fortunes of the Kingdom of God in our own generation.

Principles of Stewardship

The great evangelist and revivalist, John Wesley, founded Christian gatherings, or *societies*, which met one to three times a week for encouragement in personal holiness. These were not churches but schools of discipleship. Wesley himself had uncompromising convictions about money and stewardship. In one sermon called *The Use of Money*, he recommended to his hearers three principles of good stewardship: 1. Gain all you can; 2. Save all you can; and 3. Give all you can. We should understand and carefully consider these three principles:

1. To gain all that one can, within one's individual calling, is good stewardship. Time and money are both valuable assets to be stewarded for God. Time cannot be increased, since every person has 24 hours in a day and seven days in a week. In some measure, life can be extended by healthful practices (care of the body is another stewardship responsibility), adding more days to one's lifetime—but no one gets more than 24 hours to accomplish the work of a day. Unlike time, *profits* of a single day can be diminished or increased by one's chosen activities. To use the time to increase profits is only sensible—so long as other duties (e.g., to family) are not neglected in the process..

There is no virtue in voluntary poverty, unless the time that could have been employed in generation of wealth is expended in labor more productive of fruit for the Kingdom than of money. The value of money itself should not be lightly regarded in terms of its potential to further God's concerns. Wesley said of this:

[Money] is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of his children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked: It gives to the traveler and the stranger [a place] to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of an husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain; it may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death!²¹

The parable of the minas²² included the case of a man who had been given money in trust by his master, but who did nothing to increase its value. When his master returned, the servant had no profit to show for his time. By contrast, each of his fellow servants had invested the same amount of capital, with one increasing its value fivefold and another increasing his tenfold. The fact that some servants put their initial trust to greater advantage than did others was met with commensurate differences in reward to each one. If we have the ability to make money in our individual callings, it simply makes better stewardship sense to generate as much as possible for the Master's cause.

2. To save all you can does not necessarily refer to storing up goods in a bank account, though this may be a part of good stewardship, as the Lord directs. After all, this is what Joseph did during the seven productive years in order to meet the needs of the seven lean years.²³ It is also the way of the ant, whose wisdom in this respect is recommended to us to imitate.²⁴

On the other hand, Jesus said that we should not lay up *for ourselves* treasure on earth. Both Joseph and the industrious ant laid up supplies, not for themselves, but for their whole communities. That which we save up is not our own, but belongs to the King, and must be viewed as resources available for the promotion of the Kingdom.

The idea of saving all you can, as Wesley expounds it, is seeing *saving* as a contrast to *frivolous spending*. If we gain as much as we can, we may wrongly view this as warrant to spend as much on ourselves beyond our needs as we can afford to. Wesley is advocating frugality, not hoarding. Any purchase that we make represents either God's money wisely spent or money that should have been

²¹ John Wesley, Sermon 50—*The Use of Money*

²² Luke 19:11-27

²³ Genesis 41:47-49

²⁴ Proverbs 6:6-8

held back awaiting God's direction for its better use. Thus, to save all you can is not referring to hoarding wealth, but to wasting as little as possible.

Since we will give account of our stewardship on the Last Day we might wisely ask the following three questions concerning any prospective purchase or expenditure:

- Is this how God would wish for His money to be spent?
- Can this expense be honestly offered up as a sacrifice to God?
- When I stand before God, will I be rewarded for this expenditure?

If we can answer affirmatively to each of these tests, then we can confidently regard the decision as an exercise in good stewardship.

3. Give all you can. The needs of the world are enormous and expensive. People are starving, displaced from their homes, and lacking in medical care. Money is the one thing more than others that can relieve such conditions. Obviously, another thing needed is boots on the ground to minister personally to these needs. Personnel can be recruited, transported and/or sustained on the field if there is sufficient money available. In most cases, this money must come from generous givers.

Obviously, the greatest need of the world and the chief of Christ's concerns is that people should know God, enter His Kingdom, and become true disciples. This project requires available workers to be transported and sustained, food, medical supplies and materials printed and purchased. *"The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few."*²⁵

We are to pray—but also to *pay*—that the Lord may send more laborers to the harvest. These needs exist domestically as well as in foreign lands. There are helpless indigents in our own communities to whom we may be led to give of our resources. Also, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and various Christian workers in our own land require financial support in order to beat back the encroaching darkness, and to carry out their ministries. There will never be a lack of legitimate places to give.

Such needs may be so great as to overwhelm. Some excuse their lack of giving by appeal to Jesus' statement, *"The poor you have with you always."* Therefore, what's the point of trying to end poverty? But Jesus did not mean this statement as a discouragement from giving. In fact, His next words were, *"and whenever you wish you may do them good."*²⁶

There is an oft-repeated story²⁷ of a man on the beach where hundreds of starfish had been stranded by the receding tide and were dying in the sun. The man was picking them up one by one

²⁵ Matthew 9:37

²⁶ Mark 14:7

²⁷ There are numerous versions of the story, adapted from *The Star Thrower*, by Loren Eiseley

and throwing them back into the surf. A by-stander commented, "Why bother? There are far too many of them for you to make any difference!"

Tossing yet another into the sea, the man answered, "It made a difference for that one."

We may never end world poverty, but if you or I were destitute, we would wish for someone to end *ours*.

Chapter Thirteen

Your Money or Your Life

There is a severe evil which I have seen under the sun: Riches kept for their owner to his hurt.
(Ecclesiastes 5:13)

For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?
(Luke 9:25)

*But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you;
then whose will those things be which you have provided?'
"So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."
(Luke 12:19-21)*

While acknowledging that our stewardship responsibilities extend beyond the management of financial assets, the fact remains that monetary wealth is probably the most quantifiable, versatile, liquid, and traceable asset of all, and provides the ideal medium for the teaching of stewardship principles. This is no doubt why Jesus used monetary sums in the parables, which actually speak of our broader responsibility of managing every advantage and opportunity for His profit. The lessons Jesus taught about money are transferable, in measure, to other assets and opportunities in one's life, to which the same stewardship principles also apply. Understanding these principles, when applied to mammon¹ will inform us concerning responsibilities in terms of other assets.

Another reason that money is a good medium for teaching stewardship principles is that, for most of us, money represents *time*—the commodity of which our *lives* actually consist. A lifetime is measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, and years. Unless we have received an unusual windfall, the money in our possession represents hours and years of our *lives* spent in labor. Our time, including every breath,² is a gift from God, which a disciple consecrates to the Giver. Every person is given twenty-four hours every single day and 365 days every year. Though not everyone receives the same number of years, the use of the time given to each of us lies equally upon the hands of the receivers. Our financial resources are therefore the Lord's, as is the time exchanged for them.

Despite the fact that the spending, investing, saving and giving of money metaphorically represent the management of *life* itself, we must not erroneously equate *quantity* of money with

¹ *Mammon*, Aramaic for "money," found in Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:9, 11, 13 (KJV, NKJV), usually rendered "money" in modern translations.

² Daniel 5:23

quality of life. The love of money is called *covetousness* in scripture, and there seems to be no end of warnings about the danger of succumbing to its Siren call, e.g.,:

*Beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.*³

*Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'*⁴

*But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints;*⁵

*Therefore put to death...fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*⁶

The early Christians did not simply nod complacently, as some of us might, when hearing these familiar passages. They not only took them to heart, but also regarded them as expressing the only acceptable rule for a Christian's attitude and behavior toward material possessions. Consider how various Christian leaders in the second and third centuries taught about such matters:

*Do not hesitate to give, and do not give with a bad grace; for you will discover who He is that pays you back...Do not turn your back on the needy, but share everything with your brother and call nothing your own. —The Didache*⁷

*The expression, 'I possess, and possess in abundance, so why should I not enjoy?' is suitable neither for the individual nor for society. More worthy of love is: 'I have, so why shouldn't I give to those in need?...It is monstrous for one person to live in luxury, while many are in want. —Clement of Alexandria*⁸

*[One who knows God] impoverishes himself out of love, so that he is certain he may never overlook a brother in need, especially if he knows he can bear poverty better than his brother. And if he suffers any hardship because of giving out of his own poverty, he does not complain. —Clement of Alexandria*⁹

³ Luke 12:15

⁴ Hebrews 13:5

⁵ Ephesians 5:3

⁶ Colossians 3:5

⁷ *Didache* 4:7, 8

⁸ *Clement, Instructor* 2:13

⁹ *Clement, Miscellanies* 7:12

We who used to value the acquisition of wealth and possessions more than anything else now bring what we have into a common fund and share it with anyone who needs it. —Justin Martyr¹⁰

These are examples of the mentality toward possessions among those who were first called *Christians*. Does it embarrass us to use the same label to describe ourselves—we who are so attached to our things? William Law, an early mentor to the Wesleys, described many of the “Christians” of his own century (the 18th) in terms that can easily be seen as true in our day as well:

Christianity commands us to ‘take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink?’ Yet Christians are restless till they can eat sumptuously...They are to take no thought for the morrow, yet many of them think they have lived in vain if they are not able to leave large estates when they die. It must not be said that there is some defect in these doctrines, or that they are not plainly enough taught in the Scriptures because the lives and behavior of Christians are so contrary to them.¹¹

A spiritual EKG¹²

Covetousness is a disorder of the heart or spirit. It is spiritually as deadly as is any physical heart disease. According to scripture, many have forfeited salvation due to its hold on their hearts:

...those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things...¹³

It is often difficult to objectively self-diagnose in the matter of whether or not we have succumbed to the sin of covetousness, against which God has taken such great pains to warn us. The difficulty lies in determining what standard of measurement ought to be adopted. What is the “baseline” for a normative enjoyment of possessions by believers, as opposed to the amount divested, or invested, for the sake of God’s Kingdom? If we should compare our own estates with those of others, then *which* others should we choose for the comparison? We might compare ourselves with people of Third World countries (if we want to feel very guilty), but more often we compare ourselves with other middle or upper-class families within our own fellowship circles.

¹⁰ *Justin Martyr. First Apology, chap.14*

¹¹ William Law, *Christian Perfection* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1975), 43-44

¹² Electrocardiogram—a diagnostic tool for detecting the condition of the heart

¹³ 1 Timothy 6:9-11

To my mind, neither alternative provides a reliable standard of what God expects of us. It is not possible for people in First-World nations to house and feed their families on the amount that families in the Third World attempt to do. It is unreasonable to chastise oneself for not being able to live on \$12 a day. On the other hand, the comforts and luxuries enjoyed by the average family in America, and other prosperous societies, far exceed what anyone would consider to be necessary for the survival and security of a family. Should we feel guilty, or comfortable?

We typically assume that, as long as we are not greedy, and are content to live on an average, middle-class income, we are spiritually balanced. Agur, the author of Proverbs 30, was one who exhibited such an attitude toward wealth. He wrote:

*Give me neither poverty nor riches—
Feed me with the food allotted to me;
Lest I be full and deny You,
And say, "Who is the Lord?"
Or lest I be poor and steal,
And profane the name of my God.¹⁴*

How reasonable and moderate! No doubt we might regard Agur as the ideal contented man. Hardly! Agur was spiritually fragile. He believed that either poverty or wealth might ruin him—the one making him an apostate and the other a thief! He is the opposite of Paul. As a contented Christian Paul was able to be rich or poor as the Lord might choose the circumstances without harm to his soul:

I know how to be abased and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.¹⁵

This question of covetousness and contentment must be addressed to the satisfaction of every man or woman's conscience, in the sight of God. It is impossible to justly judge another in matters that vary as much as do individual family needs and assets. It is wiser to judge one's own standard of living by the ideals laid-out for disciples in scripture, as in the following passages:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust

¹⁴ Proverbs 30:8-9

¹⁵ Philippians 4:12-13

destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.¹⁶

Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: 'The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying... I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?" 'So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.'¹⁷

Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.¹⁸

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter...¹⁹

Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.²⁰

From these verses, we would conclude the following about the proper attitudes that justify our chosen standard of living:

- First, if our hearts are right, we would be able to be content even if we were reduced to living upon the provision of our basic needs. *Having food and clothing...we shall be content.* This does not obligate us to unnecessarily choose such a baseline standard of living. Paul Himself was not always reduced to such extremity. He knew what it was like, economically, to *abound*, and what it was like to be *abased*. His point, like his personal example, was to be able to be content "*in whatever state.*"²¹ We can easily fool ourselves. We might say, "If I were in those circumstances,

¹⁶ Matthew 6:19-212

¹⁷ Luke 12:16-21

¹⁸ Mark 10:24-25

¹⁹ James 5:1-5

²⁰ 1 Timothy 6:6-8

²¹ Philippians 4:11

I could choose to be content.” However, even in our present circumstances, are we really content? Do we at all times feel that we have everything we could ever need for our satisfaction and happiness? If not, we have not learned the “mystery” that Paul had learned.

- Second, if we have material things, how much are we in danger of them really having us? Where your treasure is, your heart will be. It would seem very unnatural and rare to encounter someone whose treasures were wholly invested in earthly pursuits, but whose heart was really where it ought to be. How rare? Like the rarity of seeing a camel pass through the eye of a needle, according to Jesus. A possibility with God...but otherwise impossible.
- Third, one should be heavily investing in heavenly stock. To leave God’s money lying around, where thieves can steal and rust can devalue it, makes no sense when resources wisely invested in the Kingdom are secure, and pay off in better currency than do mere worldly investments.

Follow the money

The first Christians were notorious for the sharing of their possessions in the interest of supporting others in the Kingdom who had needs. It may be startling the first time we read of the extent of their non-attachment to their possessions:

Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.²²

Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common...Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.²³

Many biblical interpreters, with good reason, understand “*had all things in common*” to mean that they had a common *heart*, and not strictly a common *purse*. This agrees best with the circumstances of the early church as described throughout the Book of Acts. The mentioned liquidation of properties probably does not mean that people instantly sold all their properties when they entered the fellowship of the Kingdom. Instead, they regarded nothing as their own, but all as the Lord’s, and were thus in the habit of selling-off *the Lord’s* extra lands, houses, and such, to meet other’s needs as

²² Acts 2:44-45

²³ Acts 4:32, 34-35

they arose. According to both passages, they seemed to be selling these things, not automatically, but occasionally, “*as anyone had need.*”

As seen in the notable case of Acts 5, this selling and giving was not regarded as mandatory, nor as a matter on which anyone could judge another’s choice. A married couple in the Church sold property and pretended to be donating all of the proceeds for the relief of the needy, while secretly keeping some back for themselves. Peter pointed out to them that there had been no demand upon them to give at all—nor to sell their property in the first place—but there was no tolerance of their lying about it and pretending to be what they were not.²⁴

We know that not everyone sold their goods as a matter of course when they came to Christ, because many years later one of the original members still owned her house in Jerusalem (which had become a center for the prayer meetings).²⁵ The New Testament also refers to private houses owned by Christians throughout the empire, many of which were used for church gatherings.²⁶

Our stewardship will be evaluated by Christ on the Last Day. Our faithfulness will be assessed on the basis how much we invested in the Kingdom, compared to how much we retained or spent for our own enjoyment. We are not forbidden to enjoy God’s provision. In fact, Paul said that God has richly given us *all things to enjoy*.²⁷ However, the one who wishes for us to enjoy all that He has given expects us to share in His values and to enjoy that greatest of the blessings that come with prosperity. Jesus has told us that “*it is more blessed [“happy” or “gratifying”] to give than to receive.*” Since God wishes for us to enjoy what He has provided, He obviously wishes for us to use as much of it as possible in the activity that is more gratifying and enjoyable than is the gaining of wealth—namely, *giving*.

No man can rightly judge another in this matter. Each must answer only to his own Master. Yet, we should certainly inquire as to whether God views the amount as excessive that we ourselves keep in order to underwrite our own lifestyles.

God does provide riches for some Christians more than for others. There is no merit, nor blame, in this reality of disparate providence between equally diligent working people. A doctor who is serving the Lord in his profession may be bringing home twenty or thirty times as much as does a lower-wage worker, who works just as hard for the same number of hours. This disparity may be due to many considerations, but covetousness or worldliness may not necessarily be a factor. Some people make more money because of the greater value of the service or products they provide. Some saints inherit wealth. Neither of these circumstances is bad—and each can be viewed as quite good.

²⁴ Acts 5:4

²⁵ Acts 12:12

²⁶ E.g., 9:11; 10:32; 16:40; 17:5; 18:7; 21:8; Romans 16:5; Philemon 2; etc.

²⁷ 1 Timothy 6:17

Greater wealth provides greater opportunities, accompanied by greater stewardship obligations. Jesus stated this plainly:

For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.²⁸

Joseph, serving in Potiphar's house, provides a great example of what it means to be a steward of great wealth. Like the disciple of Christ, Joseph was actually a slave who owned neither himself nor anything he saw or touched. Because his master found him faithful, the entire estate was entrusted to Joseph's management. He lived in a fine house, wore clothing suited to his high position, had other servants under him, and certainly managed a fortune on a daily basis. To all appearances, Joseph was a wealthy man—just like some disciples to whom much has been entrusted.

However, he knew well that he owned nothing at all. His task was to administrate his master's affairs, and to do all that he could to increase his master's wealth. If Joseph had begun to think of any of the things that he managed as his own, or had begun to use these resources merely to fulfill his own desires, he would have been arrested and convicted as a thief. Outwardly he looked like a rich man, but inwardly he knew he was only a penniless slave bearing tremendous responsibility for the wise management of another's fortune.

Having received much does not necessarily translate into an obligation to immediately liquidate all surplus wealth in giving to charity. Great wealth requires great consideration in its management and dispersal. It is sometimes difficult to ascertain to what charities money may safely be given, since some charities are known to deplorably waste much of what is contributed to them. It is not obvious from the advertising of charitable organizations or missionary agencies exactly how good an investment in the Kingdom a donation to them may be.

Having great wealth means having great responsibility. It can make stewardship sense to hold some assets in reserve until their best use can be ascertained. God might even lead someone to accumulate money for some future need known only to Him. Those who have lots of money are in a different world of finance than I am, and I would not be qualified to evaluate the wisdom of most of their management choices. God knows (and may reveal to them) whether it is wisest to keep some wealth in reserve in the form of real estate, investments, etc., until such a time as God may call for it.

So long as the person holding the funds really regards them as the Lord's, and is eager to distribute them as He wills and directs, then no outsider has any grounds for criticism. Since some people in the early Church had houses and lands, which they were holding in reserve awaiting the proper time to assist the poor, this must have been normal. They were selling and donating as needs

²⁸ Luke 12:48

arose in the Christian community.²⁹ Acts indicates that, before liquidating these things, the possessors of them did not regard them as their own, but as the Lord's.³⁰

It is best to keep household obligations and expenses to such a minimum as may be suited to one's individual calling in Christ. Whatever is not needed at home can be invested in the Kingdom in various ways. Here are a few suggestions:

- One may give directly to legitimately needy people in one's own circle, or whose needs come to one's attention by reliable report. These can be the involuntarily unemployed or underemployed, or those who have encountered a special financial crisis—e.g., from fire, theft, health issues, etc.;
- One may give directly to those who are preaching the gospel effectively, or who are helping the poor and the sick in Jesus' name, or any other worthy outreach for Christ;
- One may establish or support a business enterprise to employ and provide for others, with the mind of providing work for those needing jobs, and generating more funds for missions;
- One may use the money to underwrite one's own outreach activities;
- One may invest the money in some wise manner as to increase its principal, so as to have more to use for some legitimate cause already in mind, or which God may reveal;
- One can be creative in finding ways to turn assets into advantages for the Kingdom.

What about tithing?

In the church that I attended in my childhood, one Sunday every year was called "Stewardship Sunday." This meant that the pastor was going to preach on what he called "stewardship." This really turned out to be a message about "tithing." *Tithe* is an Old English form of the word "tenth." Apparently, many pastors find it difficult to persuade church members to surrender a tenth of their income to the Church. If every member of the Church had already been *tithing* (giving 10%) I suspect that the pastor would have felt the coffers were sufficiently full to allow him to quit teaching about "stewardship."

However, tithing is not the same as stewardship. In the Old Testament, the tenth of the gross national product was a tax that everyone had to pay. This was Israel's appointed means of supporting

²⁹ Acts 4:34-35

³⁰ *Ibid.*, v.32

the temple staff. By contrast, stewardship is the New Testament duty of the followers of Christ to manage God's assets entrusted to them. There is no command in the New Testament for believers to give ten percent to a church or to anything else. A modern local church is not the equivalent of the Old Testament's temple (that role is filled by the global Body of Christ). The local churches have a closer parallel in the Jewish synagogues, to which no tithes were commanded to be given. A habit of giving a tenth of one's income to the Church might in some cases be a reasonable starting point for one's personal stewardship, if the Lord so directs. However, to tithe to the local assembly is never mandated by Christ or the apostles. It is wrong to conclude that the duty automatically carries over from the old temple system to the New Testament Church.

There is a world of difference between the Israelite's debt to pay a tenth of their income as a tax to the Levites and the Christian's responsibility to steward one hundred percent of what God has entrusted to his or her management for the Kingdom. How different are these concepts? Exactly ninety percent different. The older concept allows a person who has paid the tithe to imagine the other nine-tenths to be available for the funding of whatever projects or standard of living he or she may be able to afford. Christians who live by this tithing principle are missing the mark nearly 100%.

It would require very little sacrifice or self-denial to live on ninety percent of the income of most Americans. True, doing so might not enable one to afford a new car every few years, or a state-of-the-art entertainment system. Eating out might have to be reduced or sacrificed, but what percentage of the world's population even has the luxury of eating out at all? The kids might not get their own smart phones, iPads, or vacations to Disneyland—but in whose value system are these things regarded as necessary (or even *good*) for children? The examples I am selecting come readily to mind because my own family and children were content without having these things—as have the overwhelming majority of humans since Adam and Eve. In order to bring our standard of living up to that of the average middle-class American family, our household income would have had to be doubled or tripled. Yet, I am pretty sure that it never occurred to any of us to think that we were being deprived of anything worthwhile in life.

Though we had less income than the average American family, we still chose to live on less than eighty percent of what we received, because I would have been embarrassed to give back to God only a tenth of what He graciously provided. I have always had a hard time believing that any but the most destitute of American Christians would be unable to give back ten percent. Nor does it seem that they should do so. Most Americans who give God ten percent of what they have are probably giving less than they could reasonably afford to give. The pastor might be very pleased with tithers, but is God?

George Müller wrote: "I know many believers who, from giving ten percent at first, have increased to fifteen and twenty percent, and I know of some who give sixty and seventy-five percent of their

whole income, because they desire to be 'rich toward God'..."³¹ The present author has pursued that very path and found in it great financial peace and blessing.

When Jesus healed ten lepers, and one returned to give Him glory, did Jesus say within Himself, "Hmmm...A ten-percent return...not bad!"? No, he said, "*where are the other nine?*"³² When God receives a ten-percent return from us on whatever He has entrusted to us, I suspect His thought, in most cases, may be, "*Where is the other ninety percent?*"

Indeed, where *is* the other ninety percent? That is His as well. Where has it gone? On the day when He returns to settle accounts, His servants will be overjoyed if they can give Him a good answer to this inquiry.³³

The New Testament church knew nothing of a Christian's duty to pay tithes. Jesus never let His disciples off that easy. He wants 100% from His followers. Irenaeus, around AD 170, testified to the early Christians' rejection of tithing:

*Offerings are no longer offered by bondsmen, but by freemen...They [Old Testament saints] offered their tithes; but those who have received liberty set apart everything they have for the Lord's use, cheerfully and freely giving them (2 Cor 9:7), not as small things in the hope of greater, but like that poor widow, who put her whole livelihood into the treasury of God (Lk 21:4).*³⁴

So, do I have to live in my car????

Jesus' teaching was, "*whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.*"³⁵ If forsaking "all" literally required that we have nothing in our possession, then this would include the clothing on our backs. Our duty then would be to strip ourselves naked, as did St. Francis of Assisi when he abandoned his old life to follow Christ (he subsequently allowed himself a monk's habit). Before we assume that Jesus expects us to sleep naked under a bridge, we should remember that Peter and the apostles were said to have "left all"³⁶ to follow Jesus, but the gospels record that Peter still possessed a home, a boat, and fishing tackle. In his own mind, these were devoted to Christ's service, and his own ownership of them had been renounced. Anything that a disciple has received in trust from God, and which has not been consecrated to His service, can be counted as stolen from Him.

³¹ *George Muller on Faith: A 30-Day Devotional Treasury*, Lance Wubbels, ed. (Lynnwood, WA: Emerald Books, 1998), Day 28 (pages unnumbered).

³² Luke 17:17 NIV

³³ Matthew 24:45-47

³⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*

³⁵ Luke 14:33

³⁶ Matthew 19:27

Stewardship does not necessitate that everything one owns be liquidated for cash and then the money be distributed. It can mean that things that are not abandoned are maintained and used for the Kingdom, as in the case of people's houses being centers of hospitality and fellowship, or Peter's boat being used to transport the disciples and Jesus.

Faithful stewardship requires that one meet legitimate obligations first—and then wisely give or invest the rest in meeting the needs of the kingdom's expansion. If my life is devoted to God's service, then the housing, clothing, feeding and meeting the needs of dependents in my household represents a valid aspect of my good stewardship. The one who does not provide for his legitimate dependents, which may include extended family and elderly or disabled parents, "*has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.*"³⁷ The first responsibility of the steward is to meet every *legitimate* obligation since we are not at liberty to give or invest money to which someone else has a prior claim.

While caring for many needy children in his orphanages, George Müller, even when in great need, would not accept gifts from donors who had prior, unmet obligations. One of his biographers relates:

During a season of great straits Mr. Müller received a sealed parcel containing money. He knew from whom it came, and that the donor was a woman not only involved in debt, but frequently asked by creditors for their lawful dues in vain. It was therefore clear that it was not her money, and therefore not hers to *give*; and without even opening the paper wrapper he returned it to the sender—and this at a time when there was *not in hand enough to meet the expenses of that very day.*³⁸

There are those who have a legitimate claim on a portion of our income. Therefore, one must provide for one's wife, children, aged parents, creditors, tax collectors, etc., before it can be imagined that a surplus is available for giving. This being the case, it is wise to stay out of debt and to keep legitimate living costs as low as can possibly be arranged in order to free-up a greater portion of our income for outreach beyond the home.

My stewardship must promote the agendas most important to my Master. As near as the Bible would reveal, such things as fancy buildings, fat salaries for preachers and ministry staff, private jets, and expensive wardrobes, do not rank high on God's priority list. The two revealed priorities of the Kingdom of God are: 1) assistance to the needy, and 2) the propagation of the message of the Kingdom. To these goals as much as possible of our money, time, talents, opportunities, etc., should be devoted. That is, unless there is something we value more than hearing the words, "*Well done, good and faithful servant!*"

³⁷ 1 Timothy 5:8

³⁸ A.T. Pierson, *George Müller of Bristol: His Life of Prayer and Faith* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999). 339, Italics in the original.

It is important for me to examine the things I am devoting to my own indulgence and to ask myself whether I have taken-on more expenses in pursuit of a preferred standard of living than is wise for one whose livelihood comes from a portion of Another's money, which has been put into my hands to manage on His behalf. In the end, every person's stewardship is his or her personal responsibility before God, not subject to the judgment of fellow servants. *"Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls."*³⁹ However, the Master Himself has promised a time of reckoning in the end.

³⁹ Romans 14:4

Chapter Fourteen

The Walk of Faith

For we walk by faith, not by sight.

(2 Corinthians 5:7)

...who also walk in the steps of faith which our father Abraham had...

(Romans 4:12)

Trust in the Lord with all your heart

And lean not your own understanding.

(Proverbs 3:5)

What is faith?

To hear atheists define it, one would get the impression that the faith of Christians is a gratuitous acceptance of irrational propositions for which no evidence exists. In a debate between the atheist Richard Dawkins and the Christian John Lennox,¹ Dawkins tried to push this definition of the word,² asserting, “We only need to use the word ‘faith’ when there isn’t any evidence.” Lennox responded, “I presume you have faith in your wife. Is there any evidence for that?” “Yes, plenty of evidence.” said the atheist—not realizing his mistake. The laughter of the crowd indicated that the contradiction had not been lost on them. Dawkins had thought faith was about believing alleged *facts*, for which no evidence exists. Lennox pointed out that faith can be trusting, or placing confidence in, *someone* for whose credibility there may be a very great deal of evidence.

It would certainly be irrational to place confidence in a person who has provided no evidence of his or her trustworthiness, but it is a different matter with those who have given abundant evidence of their personal integrity. Dawkins counts his wife to be such a person—and we have no reason to doubt his assessment. It is true that faith exists where absolute proof is lacking, but lack of *proof* is not the same thing as lack of *evidence*. We can obtain absolute proof of very few things, but everyone holds numerous *unprovable* convictions which rest upon excellent evidence.

¹ “The God Delusion Debate” viewable on Youtube (accessed 4/25/20)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zF5bPI92-5o>

² We must assume that Dawkins made up this definition, since it corresponds with no definition known to Christianity, nor to any Hebrew, Greek or English dictionaries.

Both sides of the God debate have to consider the available evidence and reach their respective conclusions based upon rational extrapolation. The same is true of a man's "faith" in his wife. His confidence in her may be quite justified by evidence, though there is no absolute proof that she will always be trustworthy. It is on the same basis that we trust, or distrust, a surgeon, an airline pilot, or a politician soliciting our vote. We may feel that we have evidence of their competence and good will, but the evidence can hardly amount to undeniable proof. In the end the conviction that a competent man or woman ought to be trusted comes down to an assessment of the character of one who, we feel, has earned our confidence, and has done nothing to earn distrust.

The faith of the disciple of Jesus is placed in God—who is both omniscient and truthful. Gullibility is not faith. No doubt there are individuals who believe whatever they are told, and who accept the idea that there is a God without regard to any evidence. However, this is not the way that the people in the Bible nor intelligent Christians through the ages have arrived at their belief in God. If a person is irrational, he or she may, with equal disregard for evidence, choose between atheism, Christianity, or any other faith system. No intelligent Christian would recommend such an approach. Nor does the Bible. The scriptures do not encourage a blind or irrational faith. They present abundant reasons for trusting a God who cannot lie and who never fails to keep His promises. This is not the place to enter into a polemic concerning God's existence. That is a discussion for novices whose exploration of the topic is at a more elementary stage than that of my assumed reader.³

Having considered the best evidences available that God is there, that He is faithful, and that the scriptures contain His true words, we are ready to embark on the walk of faith. We will assume for our discussion a definition of faith more in line with the dictionaries, and with scriptural usage, than the one suggested by Dawkins. To the believer, faith is a *persuasion*, a *conviction* and a *settled confidence* in God. To have faith is to believe and trust God, demonstrated by resting in His faithful character, following and obeying Him with confidence.

Hebrews 11 is a great chapter illustrating what such a faith looks like when lived out in those who possess it. At the outset we are told that faith is that which provides assurance of things that have been promised, as well as providing knowledge of the unseen realm.⁴ In this respect, all people have more faith than they know. If you are persuaded that lands like Madagascar or Papua New Guinea exist without having been to either place, then they belong to the "unseen realm" in your case. The only way you know about them is by faith—that is, by trusting books, magazines, maps, documentaries, and such, by people whom you regard to be reliable witnesses. The same is true about your knowledge of any historical events that occurred before you were born, or in places where you

³ Feel free to call my radio program to engage in that discussion: www.thenarrowpath.com

⁴ Hebrews 11:1

could not witness them. Even Richard Dawkins has faith in many scientific theorems (grand-scale evolution, for one), which neither he nor any human has ever observed.

To accept to be true something that one has never observed, nor personally proven to be true, is to exercise faith. Not only does everyone have faith, but we could not function without it. When I drive down the street, I do not know that other drivers are not intending to smash into my car, but if I did not trust them in this matter, I could never drive on the public roads. If I trusted no one concerning things I am not able to prove, I would never know whether the food served to me had been poisoned, whether the captain of the airliner has chosen this flight for his spectacular suicide, or whether the pharmacist has given me a substance that is safe to ingest. We actually trust people more than we realize, and do so every day. Christians are not unique in this respect, except that they put their confidence in God and Christ—both of whom have given abundant evidence of their trustworthiness. After trusting flawed humans on a daily basis, it is a small matter to be able to trust in a God who never lies. *“If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater.”*⁵

After providing his helpful definition of faith, the writer of Hebrews catalogues, by way of Old Testament examples, a number of both visible and invisible results in the life of the believer which testify to the presence of such faith in God:

- It provides assurance of that which cannot be seen as surely as sight does of the visible realm.⁶
 - It is manifested in one’s obedience to God.⁷
 - It is often rewarded with divine deliverance and victory in danger.⁸
 - It inspires steadfastness under trial when such deliverance does not come.⁹
- And, most importantly,
- It pleases God, resulting in His approval.¹⁰

In Hebrews 11 there are no examples provided of people who had this kind of faith and either did nothing about it or experienced no special assistance from God. None of the examples describe faith as a quiet, privately held, secret set of beliefs. Abraham’s faith is especially featured, because he is often held up as the prototype of the believer justified by faith like ourselves.¹¹ In Hebrews 11, Abraham’s faith is described thus:

⁵ 1 John 5:9

⁶ Hebrews 11:1, 3, 7, 13, 20, 27; 35

⁷ *Ibid.*, vv. 4, 7, 8, 17, 24-25, 27, 28

⁸ *Ibid.*, vv. 7, 23, 29, 30, 31; 33-35

⁹ *Ibid.*, vv. 23, 27, 35-38

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vv. 2, 4, 5-6, 7, 16, 26, 39

¹¹ John 8:39-40; Romans 4:1-3, 9-24; Galatians 3:6-9.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise...¹²

Abram, as he was called at that time, was apparently a wealthy man in Ur of the Chaldees (Babylonia) when God first called him to leave his home and travel without a known destination. Because he believed Yahweh's promise, he left his family home on God's errand. We might think this a small matter. Didn't all those old, Middle Eastern guys live nomadic lives, like the Bedouins of today? Some did, but Abraham was a cosmopolitan man living in or near a very settled and civilized city in Babylonia about which today's archaeologists know a great deal. He did, in fact, become a nomadic chieftain as a result of God's call, but it was a sacrifice for him to change his life in this way (the statement in Hebrews probably suggests that the life he had left was not in a tent, but in a house¹³). For him the sacrifice would be no less than it would be for any established city dweller to become a homeless wanderer, with no set destination in mind.

Abram didn't take his steps of faith in one giant leap (though he should have). He moved to another village, called Haran, closer to the Promised Land, and settled there until his father's death. Only after his father died did Abram fully obey the call—but when he did, he cut all ties to the past. He was seventy-five when he came to Canaan, and he lived there in a tent for the next hundred years. It seems He never owned a house in the Promised Land.¹⁴

Abraham lived a life of faith in Yahweh. It is likely most accurate to see his faith as a maturing phenomenon (as with most believers), which was punctuated by occasions of doubt. At one point, God promised Abraham that his wife, who had always been barren and was now past child-bearing age, would give him a son to be named Isaac. While Abraham (and Sarah, his wife) both laughed in disbelief when they first heard this promise,¹⁵ they soon fully put their trust in God's promise. Of Sarah, we are told:

By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.¹⁶

¹² Hebrews 11:8-9

¹³ See also Genesis 20:13; 24:7

¹⁴ He is seen as living in a tent throughout his life in the Land. References throughout the story to Abraham's "house" appear to be references to his "household"—comprised of his family and servants—not his domicile.

¹⁵ Genesis 17:17; 18:12

¹⁶ Hebrews 11:11. Translators disagree as to whether this is a statement about Sarah's faith (KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV, CSB, RSV, NIV, YLT), or Abraham's, in the face of Sarah's barrenness (NET, NRSV)

Notice that the writer sees faith as a *judgment one makes of God's character*. Sarah believed because she *"judged Him faithful."* When I was a child I wondered, "Why is God so concerned that people would believe in Him?" This now is easy to answer. How do you feel when you earnestly try to get important information across to someone, and they say, "I don't believe you"? Aren't they calling you a liar? To believe what God says is to reasonably judge that He is faithful. John plainly identifies the only alternative to trusting God: *"he who does not believe God has made Him a liar"* (1 John 5:10).

A settled faith or confidence in God exists as an outgrowth of perceiving Him as He really is. He is a God who "cannot lie."¹⁷ His understanding is unlimited.¹⁸ He cannot make a mistake. He is omniscient, so that He cannot fail to do the thing He promises to do.¹⁹ He is love,²⁰ so He can never choose anything but the very best for His children. Faith recognizes these things and finds such a One impossible to distrust.

To disbelieve God is to judge Him, without warrant, as being unreliable and dishonest. Thus, faith is not some mystical quality that some people are fortunate to possess while others are consigned to live in doubt and insecurity. Having faith boils down to this: choosing to make a positive judgment, as opposed to a negative one, of the very character of God. If you lack faith, you are not a victim of "little faith"—someone who has been denied something that has been given to others. Rather, if you lack faith, you are simply someone who is gratuitously (perhaps unknowingly) insulting God's character and calling Him a liar. This is something you can stop doing at will—and the sooner the better!

In praising Abraham's faith in God's promise of a son, Paul waxes verbose:

... And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness."²¹

Paul sees Abraham's faith, to be a "persuasion"—a "*being convinced*"—that God is able to keep His promises. This conviction inspired Abraham to change the trajectory of his whole life, reshaping his perception of his destiny and his purpose for living. This life-altering quality in his faith is actually said to be the reason that his faith was counted to him as righteousness: "*therefore it was accounted*

¹⁷ Titus 1:2

¹⁸ Psalm 147:5

¹⁹ Daniel 4:35

²⁰ 1 John 4:8

²¹ Romans 4:18-22

to him for righteousness.” The word “therefore” clearly means, “because of this.” Because Abraham’s faith had such a life-changing impact upon him, he was counted as righteous by God. If we are assuming that a faith which makes no change in our lives will be accounted to us for righteousness, we will find no support from Paul.

Nearer the end of his life, Abraham’s faith was tested by the command to sacrifice his son. Of course, God does not approve of human sacrifices, and would never have allowed Abraham to go through with it, but Abraham did not know this. He had no Bible and only knew of God’s faithful character from his own limited experience of Him. Therefore, it was a true test of his faith, because there were as-yet-unfulfilled promises of God concerning Isaac’s offspring—and Isaac was, at this time, unmarried and childless. The writer of Hebrews recalls:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,” concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead...²²

We who believe the Bible look back upon a history where a number of people (Christ, and others in both testaments) have been raised from death. Even so, we would have difficulty in trusting that any given person we have known and who has died will be raised to life again prior to the final resurrection. Abraham had no such history to look back upon. There were no precedents for God raising the dead. He had never heard of such a phenomenon. Yet, since God’s promises could not be fulfilled with Isaac dead, and Abraham fully intended to carry out the sacrifice as ordered, Abraham concluded that it would be necessary for God to raise Isaac in order to fulfill His other promises. The faith it would require to go through with such a thing could only be found in one who had learned that God is completely faithful and good, and should be obeyed in all matters.

Paul describes those who are saved today as those who “walk in the steps of faith which our father Abraham had.”²³ Abraham walked and lived by faith. What does that look like in the lives of modern disciples?

Living by faith

The Bible contains, primarily, two kinds of material: 1) truths to be *believed*; and 2) commands to be *obeyed*.²⁴ Examples of the first category would be the statements affirming the goodness, love, and omnipotence of God. Examples of the second would be instructions forbidding us to worry about

²² Hebrews 11:17-19

²³ Romans 4:12

²⁴ This does not exhaust every category of the contents, but certainly the vast majority.

tomorrow, commanding that we forgive our enemies, abstain from worldly lusts that war against the soul, etc. Sometimes Paul's letters (e.g., Ephesians and Colossians) are equally divided into these two categories. The first type of statements forms a foundation for the second type. That is, because of the truths that are affirmed we safely can, and must, do the things commanded.

The only reason anyone would disobey God, it seems, would be one's failure to believe His promises. If I choose a carnal and disobedient lifestyle, it can only be because I do not believe the biblical statements that such a choice leads to death and grief and that a life of obedience is one of surpassing peace and joy. If I do not forgive my enemy, I must believe that this is not the wisest and best policy, regardless what God commands. If I worry about tomorrow, I can hardly be trusting His promised commitment and ability to turn everything for the good of those who obey and trust Him.

The believer does not only accept God's assertions as facts, but also lives his or her life counting on those facts being true—by obeying God without fear or insecurity. Therefore, the walk of faith simply means living as if God and His word are faithful—the only sensible course, since they *are*.

Prayer and action

The whole walk of faith presupposes a life of prayer. Faith is not a vague optimism that good things will “manifest” under the smile of the universe due to the mystical power of positive thinking. Genuine faith always has an object in whom its confidence rests. In the case of the believer, it involves an interactive relationship with a faithful Creator and Provider. Through the overflowing generosity of God, many blessings come to people whether they pray for them or not. However, God's way with His own people is interactive, involving our asking and His response. There are things He will do and provide, if asked, which will not be done if we do not pray: *“You do not have because you do not ask.”*²⁵

Prayer is an acknowledgment of human impotence and dependence. It is the child's expression of faith in the Father. It keeps us in touch with Him, as would not be the case if every blessing simply was granted unilaterally without being requested. God is pleased to meet every need of His children who ask and trust Him.

Prayer does not replace effort and responsible action, but it must accompany and direct such action. While I trust God for my daily bread, I must still consider that He may provide this through my diligence and labor in earning a living. We must trust God for our health and longevity—but not when we are neglecting His instructions or irresponsibly stewarding our bodies. We entrust our children to God's care, but we must not neglect our duty to nurture and protect them from harm. We know that, when we have done all that we can do in the will of God, there remains more to be done, which only God can do. This is especially true with regard to our efforts to promote the Kingdom of

²⁵ James 4:2

God.²⁶ Every effort and every concern for which we labor should be accompanied by prayer: “...in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God”²⁷

Faith and foolishness

It is never foolish to trust in One who can and will reliably deliver on His promises. However, it is possible to mistake our own assumptions for promises of God. For example, there are those who believe that God has promised to miraculously heal every sickness for those who have sufficient faith. It is often assumed by such people that obtaining medical assistance when they are sick would exhibit a lack of faith in God, dishonoring His promises and possibly disqualifying themselves for divine healing. For this reason, many have died unnecessarily who misplaced their “faith” in this fantasy. There is no promise of God in scripture that can responsibly be interpreted to guarantee that all who have enough faith will be healed. Biblical faith is not wishful or uninformed thinking.

On the other hand, many people seem obsessed with self-preservation. They look to doctors, as to gods, believing that the prolongation of life is uniquely in their power. In such an age of placing confidence in medical experts, one is often regarded as foolish when not uncritically trusting and depending upon the doctor. In the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, the world economy was brought to the edge of total disaster due to the gross miscalculations and mistaken predictions of some of the world’s most trusted medical experts. Consultation with physicians and following their instructions can be entirely compatible with trusting in God—just as taking expert financial advice can be compatible with trusting God for finances. God can provide and protect, with or without such assistance, according to His specific will in a given case. He has provided natural resources and opportunities to promote human health and well-being, but to face a desperately deadly condition or to meet an impossibly large expense without using natural means would leave supernatural alternatives as the sole option.

Miraculous interventions are not unknown, but they should not be presumed upon simply because we prefer them. Presumption is not faith, since “*faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*”²⁸ If we have either the promise or the command of God requiring something of us which cannot naturally be accomplished, then to expect supernatural assistance is true faith. Otherwise, it is presumption.

Medical science does not have all the answers, and some of the answers that they do have may carry ethical or moral baggage to which a Christian would object. Obviously, to receive organs for transplant which have been harvested from healthy aborted babies, or from living prisoners in

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 3:6

²⁷ Philippians 4:6

²⁸ Romans 10:17

Chinese prisons, would be objectionable to a disciple of Jesus upon moral grounds. The believer who would choose to die, rather than to receive such an organ transplant would be seen as foolish by the atheist, but as a hero by those who value a Christian conscience (as God does). Christians might reasonably decline to be kept alive indefinitely by artificial means and at great cost to relatives or taxpayers when their conditions strongly suggest that God's chosen time for their inevitable appointment has arrived.²⁹ A person dying of cancer might ethically choose to decline certain elective treatments which cannot promise to heal, which are grossly invasive, or can only briefly prolong a degraded quality of life. There certainly are reasonable occasions for a believer to question or reject medical recommendations.

Believers know that God can legitimately use the skills of a physician to promote healing (Jesus said as much—Matthew 9:12), but they also know that their life and well-being are ultimately in the hands of God, not the medical professional. The use of such assistance must be subject to the dictates of one's conscience before God. A medical option may be God's means to heal and prolong life, but our trust is not in the method, but in God, and our chief concern is not for long life, but for the will of God to be done.

To the unbeliever the entire enterprise of a life of faith appears foolish. For those who have no other life to anticipate there is no higher value than earthly longevity. For the believer, death is not the ultimate tragedy, but an inevitable appointment each of us must keep according to the will of God. The ultimate tragedy is not to die, but to die unprepared to meet God. It is not foolish to trust in God's actual promises.

Nor is it foolish to accept what some would regard a premature death because it was unavoidable in the course of obedience to God. Job said, *"Though He slay me, yet I will trust Him."*³⁰ If a person dies on the field of battle out of loyalty to the Homeland, that one is feted as a hero. By contrast, if someone dies in the course of obediently trusting God in a dangerous missionary venture, even many religious people will consider that one a fool.

One such martyr memorably answered such thinking with his immortal riposte: *"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."*³¹ This is little more than a paraphrase of Jesus' own words: *"Whoever desires to save his life³² will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."*³³

The Promises of God

²⁹ Hebrews 9:27

³⁰ Job 13:15

³¹ Jim Elliot, in *The Journals of Jim Elliot* (entry October 28, 1949)

³² Meaning, through cowardice or compromise

³³ Matthew 16:25

Obedience to Christ is the most secure course of life in the world. In days of social chaos, pandemics, terrorism, tyrannical rulers, and international hostilities, many wonder where they might find a secure place for themselves and their families. Some consider relocation to safer regions. Others have stocked up bunkers, or have “bug-out” plans in place. Given the global and universal nature of the factors that potentially threaten the liberty or safety of every person, none of these options can really be viewed with complete confidence or a sense of absolute security. Historically, it has not been unknown for God to instruct His people in danger to flee to safety,³⁴ and one should do so when thus instructed. The wise believer knows that the safest place on the planet is in the center of the will of God³⁵—whether in a secure place, or under martial law, in a gulag, or amid social turmoil. The believer has a secret weapon against all insecurity—a faithful Father who has made unassailable promises. *“Deliver me, O Lord, from mine enemies: I flee unto thee to hide me.”*³⁶

*He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High
Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress;
My God, in Him I will trust.”
(Psalm 91:1-2)*

Some people speak of “claiming the promises.” This is a phrase not found in scripture, though the scriptures do record prayers of the godly which contain reminders to God that He had said certain things that they were counting upon.³⁷ Talking about “claiming” the promises, while valid, sometimes carries the tone of one demanding that to which one believes he or she is entitled. I think the walk of faith is better described as *resting* in the promises. That is, rather than coming to God with demands that He must do what we *think* He promised to do, we simply take it as a given that He is faithful, and His promises provide a firm foundation for a life surrendered to His will:

*“In returning and rest you shall be saved;
In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.”*³⁸

One who counts on such promises is not thereby prevented from taking precautions. One may wisely feel God wishes for him to take safeguards against future contingencies—as God led Noah to

³⁴ Genesis 7:1; 19:17; Jeremiah 6:1; Matthew 2:13; 10:23; 24:16; Acts 22:18

³⁵ Nehemiah 6:11; Psalm 11:1; 69:20; Luke 21:36

³⁶ Psalm 143:9

³⁷ E.g., 2 Samuel 7:28f; 1 Kings 8:24f; 1 Chronicles 17:23ff; 2 Chronicles 6:16; 20:7ff; Acts 4:24ff

³⁸ Isaiah 30:15

build an ark, and Joseph to store up grain against a coming famine.³⁹ Solomon said, “*A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, But the simple pass on and are punished.*”⁴⁰ We may take every step that wisdom may dictate, within the will of God, but we should constantly check our hearts to be sure that our confidence is not in anything but God Himself. Faith is not the opposite of preparation. It is the opposite of insecurity, anxiety, and worry.

God has given promises covering every contingency. He has promised to provide food and clothing,⁴¹ safety from outward dangers,⁴² guidance⁴³ and, of course, His own presence in trials.⁴⁴ These are promises that pertain to this life. There are also promises that pertain to eternity. This distinction between the temporal and the eternal is important to bear in mind because this life is impermanent and promises concerning this life pertain only to the timespan of our appointed days.

For example, Jesus said we needn’t worry about food, because God feeds the sparrows, who are far less valuable to God than we are. The cynical person may point out, “Yes, God does feed the sparrows, but they have been known to die of starvation, or of exposure to the elements, or by predators.” This is quite true and needs to be factored into our understanding of God’s promises concerning temporal things. These promises apply only until death, which occurs whenever God chooses. Sparrows do die—and so do we. But Jesus said that not one sparrow falls to the ground “*apart from your Father’s will.*”⁴⁵ The disciple of Jesus is obsessed with the will of God, not with earthly longevity. One should be less concerned about dying than about surviving “*apart from your Father’s will.*” Dying is inevitable but Jesus assures us that, for one trusting in God’s care, dying apart from God’s will is impossible.

God’s various promises assure us that we will not starve, that our enemies will not permanently harm us, and that we will never lack any good thing. This should be understood to mean, “*These things are all true until they are no longer relevant.*” When God is finished with me in this life, the time will come when His promises to preserve this temporal life will expire and will be replaced with something “*which is far better.*”⁴⁶ If God is finished with us here and has nothing left for us to accomplish for Him, what possible reason could exist for wishing to live another day in this vale of tears? Is it that I wish to see my grandchildren and great-grandchildren? As understandable as such desires may be, doesn’t God know as well as I do whether my living to see such things is for the better or the worse? The walk of faith happily leaves all such decisions in the hands of God.

³⁹ Genesis, ch.41

⁴⁰ Proverbs 22:3; 27:12

⁴¹ Psalm 34:10; 37:19, 25; Matthew 6:25-33;

⁴² Psalm 34:7, 17; 91:1ff;

⁴³ Psalm 32:8; John 10:27; Romans 8:14

⁴⁴ Joshua 1:5, 9 (Hebrews 13:5); Psalm 34:18; Matthew 28:20

⁴⁵ Matthew 10:28

⁴⁶ Philippians 1:23

"God always gives His best to those who leave the choice with Him." – Jim Elliot

Chapter Fifteen
The Adventure of “Living by Faith”

*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,
and all these things shall be added to you.*

(Matthew 6:33)

*And my God shall supply all your need
according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*

(Philippians 4:19)

*I have been young, and now am old;
Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken,
Nor his descendants begging bread.*

(Psalm 37:25)

To live by faith means, very simply, to concern oneself only with doing what God has assigned one to do, and then to allow God to worry about all outcomes. Our only responsibility is to make sure we are doing the will of God; everything else—finances, our health, opposition, etc.—become His problem. Trusting God means resting in Him, knowing that all things will be taken care of while we follow Him, and being resigned to whatever His choice of outcomes may be. It’s His problem, not ours.

When we commit something to someone (as I have at this moment committed my vehicle into the hands of an auto mechanic because it is making mysterious noises) it means that we entrust the problem and its solution to another. The other person is now in charge and responsible to take care of the issue. It is not our headache, but His. We simply rest in the competence and trustworthiness of the One to whom the thing is committed and trust that the problem will be solved.

This is also the case when we commit our lives into the hands of God. Our problems are now His problems; meeting our needs is His assignment. Our assignment is to seek first His Kingdom and righteousness, and it is He who will provide all things necessary to us. This is the principle informing Peter’s instructions to those Christians who suffer persecution for doing what is right:

*Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good,
as to a faithful Creator.¹*

¹ 1 Peter 4:19

The elements informing these instructions include the following:

- Doing the will of God may incur suffering (for whatever reason).
- The response to such is to persevere in the same good and obedient behavior, without respect to consequences.
- Such continuing to do good is the means of committing yourself and outcomes into God's hands.
- It is safe to do so, because He is a faithful Creator.

This is the whole of what it means to *live by faith*. It also applies to *dying* by faith, as Jesus and Stephen both demonstrated in their deaths:

*"And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, 'Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.'"*²

*"...they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'"*³

The term "living by faith" has frequently been adopted to speak of a distinct way of life practiced by some Christians in full-time missionary work or other ministry. It often refers to those who choose to trust in God alone for the sustenance of their families and their ministry needs in the absence of any visible source of predictable income or support. For some, this simply means not having a job, but one is not living by faith in God if one is not doing the will of God. The will of God for most people is that they work for a living, and His provision usually comes to them through that activity.

Those who live by faith in the manner here referred to are also working. They simply have been called to work in ministry activities for which they cannot, in good conscience, charge money. Jesus told the disciples, "*Freely you have received, freely give.*" Based upon these instructions, many who minister in the Word of God have refused to charge anyone for their service rendered to God or to others on His behalf. There is no risk in this policy, because they are laboring in God's employment and God knows that "*the laborer is worthy of his food.*" God provides for His workers. Obviously, this provision will almost always come through human agents. Such benefactors will be providing this support voluntarily, often without being solicited, and not because there has been a charge laid upon them by God's servant.

Some who live with no visible means of support choose to help things along a bit by letting their needs be known to others who might potentially send them support. There is no sin in doing this,

² Luke 23:46

³ Acts 7:59

though it then becomes more difficult to know whether the support came because God approves of and wants to support their work, or because of pressure laid on others by the solicitation. Others have famously lived by faith without ever soliciting a gift or even allowing anyone but God to know their needs. As far as we know, this is how Jesus lived, as did many other early Christian workers.

Many, including this author, have been inspired by modern-day examples of Anthony Norris Groves, George Müller, Hudson Taylor, and numerous others who chose such a course of life. The first of these, Anthony Norris Groves, has been called the “Father of Faith Missions.” Originally a London dentist, in the early 19th century, Groves left his occupation to become a missionary in Baghdad, and later, in India. Groves believed that all Christians should live economically, trust God to supply their needs, and devote their income to the needs of the gospel’s expansion. His example, and his little book called *Christian Devotedness*, had a major impact upon his more celebrated brother-in-law, George Müller. Through Müller, these convictions also seized the great missionary to Inland China, Hudson Taylor. Groves also inspired C.T. Studd, Amy Carmichael, Rees Howells, Watchman Nee, Jim Elliot, Edith Schaeffer,⁴ and many others.

I mentioned George Müller in Chapter Twelve, when discussing stewardship. As noted there, Müller accomplished many noteworthy things, but is best-known for his belief that God’s promises of provision are as true as are His promises of salvation. Converted after a wild and sinful adolescence, in 1825, Müller observed that most Christians do not really believe that God can be trusted in all things. He grieved to see many professed believers who lived with anxiety concerning their material circumstances. He married Anthony Norris Groves’ sister, Mary Groves, and was himself very moved by his brother-in-law’s faith convictions. He reasoned that if God is faithful and the Bible is true then God already knows the needs of His children and servants before they ask, and has promised to provide them all. It should not be necessary, he concluded, to let anyone but God know about any such needs. He felt it to be safe to leave all financial concerns to God alone, who could move others to give to the support of his ministry, and never to tell any of his needs to another soul.

These convictions led Müller as a young, married pastor to give up his salary, and to pledge never to speak to anyone but God about his personal needs or those of his work. Though often living at the poverty level, he nonetheless found that God faithfully provided all things needed in a timely manner—never too late. As the Müllers expanded their ministry, adding the care and education of thousands of orphans, the establishment of Bible schools, and the distribution of millions of Bibles and tracts, he never departed from his policy of simply believing God would provide. He stubbornly refused to allow any man or woman to know his needs, even when they were desperate, and even when potential benefactors would specifically ask about them. Müller lived this way for almost 70 years, until his death. He has become legendary as one who “lived by faith” and is sometimes referred

⁴ There are biographies of all of these people available, which I highly recommend.

to as the “Apostle of Faith.” He would not have welcomed this title. He believed that he was only living according to the faith available to all the children of God. In fact, his principal motivation for following his policies so strictly was to encourage all Christians to believe that God can be trusted in all things without human manipulations.

In one famous case, there was a day (like many others) when no food was on the premises in one of his several orphanage houses. The time came for the orphans to have their breakfast. Mr. Müller, knowing that there was no food, came and stood before the three-hundred orphans standing in rows behind their chairs awaiting their meal, and he said, “There’s not much time. I don’t want any of you to be late for school, so let us pray.” When the children had bowed their heads, Müller prayed, “Dear God, we thank you for what you are going to give us to eat.” As the children were seating themselves at the table, there came a knock at the door. It was the local baker, who said that he had been unable to sleep the night before, thinking that the orphans might need some bread. He had gotten up at 2:00 AM to bake three large trays of bread, which he now presented to the seated children. Minutes later, another knock came at the door. It was the milkman. A wheel had come off his cart as he was passing the orphanage. In order to fix the wheel, he had to unload the cart of ten large cans of milk. He asked Mr. Müller whether the children might need some milk, which he would donate without charge, since it would go bad before he could repair the cartwheel. So, the unpredictable provision of God for breakfast arrived even as the children were being seated at their bowls. Stories like this abound in the lives of Müller and others who have lived in this manner of trusting God.

When Hudson Taylor was a young medical apprentice in England, he was determined to go to China as a medical missionary. His employer, Dr. Hardey, was a kind but forgetful man and, as Taylor was to be paid quarterly, the doctor told him to remind him whenever the salary came due. The young apprentice fully intended to someday “live by faith” in China, as Groves and Müller were currently doing in their respective venues of ministry. He therefore decided that he should learn to do the same in England, prior to embarking on such a mission. He determined that he would not remind Dr. Hardey about the payment when due, but would trust God to remind him. As a result, the salary was often delayed, while Mr. Taylor would watch his meager funds diminish.

Sharing one example of many in his journal,⁵ Taylor wrote:

At one time, as the day drew near for the payment of a quarter’s salary, I was as usual in much prayer about it. The time arrived but Dr. Hardey made no allusion to the matter. I continued praying. Days passed on and he did not remember, until at length upon settling up my weekly accounts one Saturday night, I found myself possessed of one remaining coin—a half-crown

⁵ The excerpts from Hudson Taylor’s journal are taken from Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor’s Spiritual Secret*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989) 33-42

piece [a former British coin worth two shillings and sixpence—worth about 60 cents in US coin at the time]. Still I had hitherto known no lack, and I continued praying.

The following day, as he was doing some ministry work in the slums near his own dwelling, he was approached by a destitute man who begged him to come and pray for his sick wife who lay dying. In discussing the man's situation, *en route*, it was discovered that the man had nothing, and his family was starving. As Hudson Taylor's rent was immediately coming due, and he had enough food in his house for only a bowl of thin soup that night and the next day's breakfast, he was in dire financial straits himself. Yet, he thought within his heart, "If only I had two shillings and a sixpence instead of this half-crown, how gladly would I give these poor people a shilling!"

He was conducted through a very rough neighborhood, into a courtyard. He describes the scene that met his eyes at this man's lodgings:

Up a miserable flight of stairs into a wretched room he led me, and, oh, what a sight there presented itself! Four or five children stood about, their sunken cheeks and temples telling unmistakably the story of slow starvation, and lying on a wretched pallet was a poor, exhausted mother, with a tiny infant thirty-six hours old moaning rather than crying at her side.

"Ah!" thought I, "if I had two shillings and a sixpence, instead of half-a-crown, how gladly should they have one-and-sixpence of it." But still a wretched unbelief prevented me from obeying the impulse to relieve their distress at the cost of all that I possessed...I began to tell them, however, that they must not be cast down; that though their circumstances were very distressing there was a kind and loving Father in heaven. But something within me cried, "You hypocrite telling these unconverted people about a kind and loving Father in heaven, and not prepared yourself to trust Him without half-a-crown."

I nearly choked. How gladly would I have compromised with conscience, if I had had a florin and a sixpence! I would have given the florin thankfully and kept the rest. But I was not yet prepared to trust in God alone, without the sixpence...I knelt down. But no sooner had I opened my lips with, "Our Father who art in heaven," than conscience said within, "Dare you mock God? Dare you kneel down and call Him 'Father' with that half-crown in your pocket?" ...The poor father turned to me and said, "You see what a terrible state we are in, sir. If you can help us, for God's sake do!"

At that moment the word flashed into my mind, "Give to him that asketh of thee." And in the word of a King there is power.

I put my hand in my pocket and slowly drawing out the half-crown gave it to the man...I well remember that night as I went home to my lodgings how my heart was as light as my pocket.

The dark, deserted streets resounded with a hymn of praise that I could not restrain. When I took my basin of gruel before retiring, I would not have exchanged it for a prince's feast.

The next morning a mysterious package arrived in his mail from an anonymous benefactor, containing half-a-sovereign—a gold coin worth four times the amount of the half-crown he had given away the night before—but still not enough for his rent, which was due the upcoming Saturday night.

On Saturday afternoon Mr. Taylor was working in the clinic. Dr. Hardey, sitting nearby, said, "By the by, Taylor, is not your salary due again?" With a joy in his heart that he had passed the test by refraining from bringing the matter up himself, he replied as quietly as he could that it had been overdue for some time. To Taylor's chagrin, Dr. Hardey said, as he walked out the door to go home, that he was sorry not to have been told sooner, because he had already taken all the money to the bank, and would not be able to pay him until Monday—too late for Taylor to pay his rent due that night! Hudson Taylor's joy turned immediately to despondency as the door closed behind the departing doctor. He knew that his landlady needed the rent no later than that very night. More importantly, he was afraid that his experiment of trusting God without informing anyone of his need had failed.

As he was himself about to leave and retire for the evening, he heard Dr. Hardey returning to the door, laughing within himself. It so happened that one of his wealthiest patients, who could easily have paid his bill at any time, had not been able to go to sleep until paying what he owed the doctor that very night. As a result, Dr. Hardey returned with Taylor's salary in hand, and the landlady received her rent on time.

My own story

Anecdotes like the above are very numerous in the biographies of men and women who have lived in this manner. They may fail to have their proper impact upon us if we suppose that such experiences are only for those of special importance, and are irrelevant to the experiences of modern, ordinary Christians. Is it possible that God dealt with His servants in this manner in simpler times, but that our modern circumstances render such a way of living unworkable and unrealistic? To allay such suspicions, I would like to share some of the experiences of an ordinary, contemporary person who has lived this way for fifty years. I share my own story, not in any sense to equate my importance to that of such great men and women as these, but for the opposite reason. My experience proves that God's faithfulness is the same at all times, even to an ordinary Christian in the 21st century. Modern

disciples need to be encouraged that *“His faithfulness endures to all generations.”*⁶ Today, as always, *“they that trust Him wholly find Him wholly true.”*⁷

During the “Jesus Movement” revival of the early 1970s, when I began my vocation of teaching the Bible, I was determined to live in such a way as to guarantee that I would never lack for confirmation of God’s continuing approval of my ministry. This might have been selfish, and even faithless on my part, but I judged it substandard to live, in an allegedly *supernatural* Kingdom, a life devoid of confirmatory supernatural results. Evidences of divine involvement and approval, it seemed to me, should accompany a life of regular interaction with the Creator of the universe. I knew it would be unlikely that my teaching ministry would be characterized by wonder-working (working of miracles is a different gift from teaching)—and teachers usually see less quantifiable results than do evangelists.

I calculated that one way that I would never lack for palpable evidence of God’s ownership of my ministry would be to follow the Müller model of financial support. One great benefit of this way of life, besides its being scriptural, is that it would be a very simple matter for God to “pull the plug” on my ministry, if He ever felt I had drifted or had outlived my usefulness. Very few in “professional” ministry have access to this safeguard. Automatic paychecks often continue to come in, even when a minister may be backslidden and having affairs with ladies in the church (many of us have seen such things)—so long as he can conceal these things from the ones who sign his paycheck! There are many ministers whose anointings (like Samson’s hair) have been shorn as they slept, due to their compromises. As Samson, awakening from the harlot’s lap with self-confident bravado *“did not know that the Lord had departed from him,”*⁸ so also they are oblivious to the fact that they have become spiritually *“weak...like any other man.”*⁹ A minister’s downfall needn’t take the form of immorality. Like King Saul, from whom the Spirit departed,¹⁰ one’s may take the form of losing his former humility, and becoming addicted to power.¹¹ It was such terrifying prospects as these that I hoped at all costs to avoid.

I knew that, by choosing the George Müller model, if God wished to end or sideline my work, He would have to do nothing extraordinary. He would only have to *stop doing the extraordinary!* All that would be necessary would be for Him to withhold the supernatural providences that otherwise would allow me to continue. If He were to withdraw Himself, it could not go unnoticed, since my bills would go unpaid!

⁶ Psalm 89:1; 119:90

⁷ From the magnificent hymn, *Like a River Glorious*, by Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-1879)

⁸ Judges 16:20

⁹ *Ibid.*, v.17

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 16:14

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15:17, 23

Observing the manner in which Jesus and the apostles conducted their ministries—and encouraged especially by the lives of George Müller and his ilk—I concluded that I had adequate biblical grounds for accepting the following policies for ministry support:

- To never allow the acquisition of money to be a motivation in the consideration of any ministry opportunity into which God is leading me: *“...men of corrupt minds...suppose that godliness is a means of gain”* (1 Timothy 6:5; cf., Acts 8:20-21; 2 Peter 2:3).
- To never charge a salary or request to be repaid for any ministry activities: *“freely you have received, freely give”* (Matthew 10:8).
- To never inform any living person, other than God, about any of my current needs: *“by prayer and supplication...let your requests be made known to God”* (Philippians 4:6; cf., Matthew 6:8, 31-32; 7:11).
- To live contentedly, if necessary, even at a level of mere subsistence—which is all that is promised in scripture: *“having food and clothing, we will with these we shall be content”* (1 Timothy 6:8; cf., *Ibid.*, vv.6-8; Philippians 4:11-13).
- To live within my means without incurring debt: *“the borrower is servant to the lender”* (Proverbs 22:7; cf., Hebrews 13:5).
- To give away as much of my income as possible to those less fortunate than myself: *“give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail”* (Luke 12:33; cf., *Ibid.*, 6:38).
- To do these things without judging others who may choose for themselves different policies than mine: *“Who are you to judge another’s servant?”* (Romans 14:4).

These have been my policies for fifty years. For the first thirteen of those years, since my ministry responsibilities did not occupy all of my time, I was able, and felt responsible, to hold various jobs to supplement my own and my family’s support. In 1983, responsibilities in the ministry grew to the point of requiring my full-time attention, precluding my holding an additional wage-earning job. This required my living entirely upon unpredictable and unsolicited (from a human standpoint) providence.

As the family’s sole provider raising five children, I never held a ministry position which promised regular or predictable financial remuneration. This was true despite my being the worship leader and an elder in more than one church, directing a Bible school for sixteen years, and hosting a daily

radio program for, at the time of writing, twenty-three years. In place of a predictable income, I found that I had a predictably faithful Father who keeps His promises to provide for His servants. There have been literally hundreds of times when I had no money or known source of money, with bills soon coming due. In every case, provision came on time—often from the most surprising places—and rarely in amounts much greater than what was currently needed.

An example from one of my journal entries gives some idea of what life has been like for me living in this manner:

January, 2006, began with my writing a check for this month's rent for \$700, as I do the first day of each month. When I checked my bank balance, before writing the check, the amount on deposit was \$701. I also had about \$26 in my pocket. That means that, of all that I had received in the year 2005, and after paying rent the first day of 2006, I had spent or disbursed all but \$27. No mail came on January 1st (a Sunday), nor on the next day, which was a holiday. However, my son Timothy remembered to repay me \$40, which he had borrowed earlier, and which I had forgotten that he owed me. I found another \$20 in the house. This was enough for my immediate grocery needs. Tuesday, January 3rd, the mail came, and it contained a check for \$125 from the School of Biblical Studies in Kona, Hawaii, where I taught in December. They had already given me an honorarium several weeks ago, so there was no reason to expect an additional gift from them. This is how our finances began at the beginning of 2006.

We once had nothing on hand, and a utility bill of \$80 due within a week. As usual, I prayed that this money would come in on time. Before the week was past and the bill came due, I had received exactly two checks in the mail. One was for \$50, which arrived as a gift from missionaries in India (from whom I had never received any gifts previously, nor have I since). The second came from New Jersey (I lived in Oregon). That check was, of course, for \$30 and came with a note that read, "I don't know if you remember me, but we met two years ago at [such-and-such a place], and I just felt the Lord wanted me to send you this gift." When the \$80 utility bill came due, we had exactly \$80 on hand, due to these two gifts. I have to admit, I did not remember meeting the New Jersey donor two years earlier, but I have obviously never forgotten him since!

On another occasion, when I lived in Idaho, my car broke down near Salem, Oregon, and I managed to get it towed to a nearby truck stop. While sitting in a Taco Bell, five-hundred miles from home, and contemplating my options, a burly trucker sidled over to the table where I was sitting. He said, "Are you a pastor?" I have no idea how he divined that I was even a believer, much less a minister, since I was wearing a greasy tee-shirt and jeans, and did not have a Bible or any paraphernalia around me to identify me even as a Christian. I told him that I was not a pastor, but I was a servant of Christ. He then pulled a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket, and said, "The Lord told

me to give you this.” After handing it to me, he walked away without further comment. Although I did not have need for that exact amount, I took the gift as a token of God’s being aware of my circumstances, stranded far from home.

While living briefly in Salinas, California, in 2003, my family and I were in an apartment that cost \$1,150 to rent. There was an occasion when, three days before the rent was due, I had only \$300 on hand, and was therefore short by \$850! It looked as if we would not be able to pay the rent on time, since I had received nothing from any source for several weeks. Having prayed about this need one morning, a check for \$350 arrived that day from a stranger, who knew nothing of our circumstances. Two days later, when the rent was due, another check came in the mail. This was from some friends who also had no idea of our need. Of course, the check was for \$500.

Such stories could be multiplied, without exaggeration, a hundredfold.

While we were raising our children my wife and I did not carry any health insurance. This is not because of any objection in principle to medical care. Fortunately, we almost never had occasion to see a doctor, but when we did, it was always for something minor, for which we paid immediately out-of-pocket. We never considered or discussed the question of getting health insurance. Had it ever come to our minds, it would have seemed to us something of a redundancy. I was already trusting God for all our financial needs. Since health insurance does not, and cannot, guarantee good health—and only promises to provide money to cover medical expenses—I did not view it as belonging to a separate category from that of our general financial needs. Healthcare services simply represent another kind of monetary expense. Since we were accustomed to trusting God for all necessary expenses, it seemed that these expenses, too, would be covered when needed. In thirty-four years of raising five healthy children, the need to consult with doctors about anything very seldom arose. My reasoning about medical matters may seem foolish to some, but was warranted by scripture and unassailable logic—ultimately vindicated in experience. Certain facts seemed obvious, such as that:

- God can keep His servants from sickness, if He is pleased to do so.
- If He allows His servants to get sick, He may choose to heal miraculously, or allow natural recovery, without a physician, if He is pleased to do so.
- If He does not choose to heal without a physician, He can provide the money required to cover any necessary medical interventions—just as He provides every other need.
- If He chooses none of these options, He can take His servants home to be with Him (something that is inevitable, in any case), an option which Paul describes as a “*gain*” and “*far better*.”¹²

¹² Philippians 1:21, 23

These convictions are absolutely scriptural, and always proved reliable. We never looked to any insurance company, any government program, nor concerned friends, to cover anything for us. For the most part, God simply kept us all healthy. I am now a member of a Christian health co-op, but have never needed it, and joined only when it became mandatory for all Americans to have healthcare coverage during the Obama Administration. Such Christian health co-ops, unlike regular insurance plans, allow the body of Christ to meet each other's needs according to scriptural principles, even if a member never requires any assistance. Instead of paying premiums to cover the salaries of corporate executives, all monthly payments go directly to the meeting of the needs of other Christian families. This seems like the scriptural norm of "having all things in common" with reference to healthcare expenses.

During the child-rearing years, we never had a regular family doctor. Minor illnesses were treated at home or by an affordable doctor's visit. Such visits were so rare that we never saw the same doctor twice, nor remembered any of their names. Major illnesses just never occurred. Our babies were born inexpensively and healthily at home, without doctors present.

By 2007, all my children were grown and out of the house except for my youngest, who was sixteen. None of us had ever seen the inside of a hospital, other than to visit sick friends. One day I went to the mailbox and found a check made out to me for \$2,000. It came from a man in Texas, with whom I was not acquainted. The enclosed note said that it was intended as a gift of appreciation for all the lectures he had downloaded and listened to for free from my website. I had never previously received such a large gift from a total stranger.

Not being aware of any particular need at the time, I wondered why the Lord would have so uncharacteristically sent us such a windfall. Since God seldom provided for me more than was necessary, my first thought was, "Uh oh. What is this going to be for?" I didn't have to wait long to find out. The next day, my son had an accident on his skateboard and broke his arm. In thirty-four years of child-rearing, no one in our family had ever broken a bone. He went to the ER and, since I had no insurance, I paid the medical bill from my own resources. It so happened that the hospital bill came to exactly \$2,000.

As my son and I were driving home from the hospital with the cast on his arm, he asked me, "Now don't you wish that you had medical insurance?" I said, "Not even a little bit! If I had paid insurance premiums throughout the past thirty-something years that I have been raising kids, I would have spent over \$100,000 for this one broken arm! Instead, it only cost me \$2,000, and God sent the check in yesterday's mail to cover it!"

Objections?

In choosing this way of life, it never occurred to me that I would meet ministers who would argue against living in such a manner as provides so much occasion to glorify God. In half a century, I have never had occasion to regret or to reconsider the validity of any of my convictions about this. Imagine my surprise the first time I encountered a professed believer who referred to the practice of sharing such testimonies as “bragging.” But such reports claim nothing other than that God is faithful and His promises are true! I have actually heard Christians desperately trying to discredit George Müller’s testimonies—usually by saying that he didn’t really conceal his needs, since he published an annual report of the Lord’s provisions during the previous year for the edification of readers. Of course, testifying about past needs after they have been met is nowhere near the same thing as letting anyone know about the current needs that come up so frequently throughout the year. What I find mysterious is why any servant of God would be skeptical or embarrassed about the genuine tangible proofs that God is there and He is trustworthy. Is this somehow threatening?

Full disclosure: in sharing my testimonies, I have not embellished the truth in any way, nor have I ever told such stories in order to make any impression other than that God is faithful to keep His promises and that His children can safely trust Him. That is what these reports actually demonstrate, and nothing more. Such accounts are strictly about God—and they confirm what every Christian professes to believe about Him. The reports include little that would flatter the receiver of the benefits, who is the helpless (and sometimes faithless) mendicant in all such stories. God is the only hero and all the credit goes to Him.

For my part, I could never boast, since I have not been perfectly consistent in keeping to the above convictions. God has always been consistent, but I have not. I have sometimes had anxiety and doubt, though I have never renounced my principles. Honest people do not renounce what they know to be true. I have personally fallen short in the matter of faith on a number of occasions. I have not followed these convictions perfectly. I can recall three specific times in my life in which my faith failed under testing and I caved-in, ultimately borrowing funds from friends. In each case, God provided for me to pay-off these personal loans almost immediately after incurring them, as if to show me that I had not needed to borrow in the first place and had unnecessarily lapsed in faith.

Also, when I was in my thirties, I received my first credit card. I had no interest in buying anything on credit, and accepted the bank’s offer with a mind only to use it when renting a car. That was the only thing in the world that could not be paid for with cash (debit cards did not yet exist, or I would have preferred that option). I intended to put certain expenses (like gas) on the card and to pay them off each month. This, not surprisingly, did not work out well. I had no guarantee of any future income, and sometimes ended up buying things that were not actual *needs* (usually books), against future income that I presumed would come. I would sometimes then find myself at the end of the month unable to pay off the card immediately as I had determined to do. When I discovered this failure was becoming a trend, I paid off the card and tore it up. So, I confess that I have had failures or missteps

in my own practice—but, in retrospect, none of them was ever actually necessary. They were my own failures—occasions when I compromised on one or more of my beliefs. Such were not failures on God’s part to fulfill His promises, but on my part to follow with sufficient rigor the convictions He has put into my heart. I am sure my hero George Müller would frown on me! I can honestly say, as did Hudson Taylor, “I am not a man of great faith, but I serve a God of great faithfulness.”

Some have objected that the Bible never requires us to keep our needs a secret from others—and I have not suggested that it does. I only claim that the Bible assures us that it is safe to do so—unless, of course, God should instruct us to do otherwise. Likewise, borrowing is never forbidden in scripture, but are not those who live debt-free to be envied over those saddled with an unpaid balance?

The principles I have adopted represent personal convictions of *my own*, based on how I believe God has led me in trusting His word. Living by faith simply means doing the will of God, and trusting God with all outcomes. As Hudson Taylor also said: “God’s work done in God’s way will always have God’s supply.” This is, roughly, a paraphrase of Jesus’ own promise: “*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.*”¹³

Some have objected that this way of life works for me because, as a radio broadcaster, I have a somewhat higher profile than do many pastors. This means that, in my case, there is a larger pool of people from which support may come. Of course, these circumstances could as easily predict the opposite result. If you listen to a national radio host, who never mentions having any personal needs, it would seem unnatural for the thought even to occur to you that this person would need personal support from you, or for you to be motivated to send that person a gift. It would seem more natural to assume that the more-visible person already has his or her personal needs covered. I myself tend to assume this about others and would be more inclined to give my support to a lesser-known minister who has less visibility. When giving to larger organizations, I tend to assume their staff are paid. Nonetheless, I was living by these principles for many years before I ever had any media or online visibility, at which time I was as obscure as is the pastor of the smallest congregation, and God’s promises proved true then as well as now.

Such objections are entirely focused on natural considerations, rather than on God’s faithfulness to keep His promises. It is hard not to think this way. I have had to learn not to do so. After being on the radio for four years on only a few small stations, in 2001, I went through a family crisis which led me to step aside from all ministry activities in order to serve my four homeschooled children as a single dad. My carnal assumption was that becoming thus invisible to the public would cause personal donations for my family’s support to dry-up completely. Being sidelined from all public ministry for a year, and not even having so much as a mailing list or a newsletter, I naturally assumed

¹³ Matthew 6:33

that I would be forced back into working a normal job to support my children and myself. I fully intended to do this, as soon as the meager few hundred dollars I had on hand would inevitably run out. However, the cruse of oil never emptied. As I stayed home every day to care for my children, the gifts kept coming in the mail—almost all of them from complete strangers! At the end of my first year at home with the kids, circumstances allowed me to go back on the air. Although I remained a single dad for almost another decade, I was able, gradually, to return to full-time ministry. I think the reason the Lord supported me in this manner, even when I was not able to minister publicly, was to remind me that I am not supported by *my ministry*, but by *the Lord*.

While the Bible does not insist that ministers serve without a salary, it seems impossible to imagine Elijah, Jesus, or Paul looking to some religious organization to issue their weekly wages. Strange as it may seem to us, the early church regarded a preacher as a false prophet, if he asked to be given money for his personal support.¹⁴ It seems only reasonable that those who minister to the church should at least know how to trust God for their own needs. If one does not know this most basic biblical requirement, how can he credibly teach the flock how to trust God in the real world where they live? In a time when “professional ministry” is the norm, I fear the walk of faith has become too much a lost art.

I once was in a conversation with the senior pastor of a very large church. He told me that his church had once been much larger, and had employed many more ministers, but that a controversy that had arisen in the church, causing a significant portion of the membership to leave the church. The great reduction of attendees was accompanied by a corresponding reduction in offerings. The pastor told me that he had found it necessary, with great reluctance, to terminate many of their former pastors.

Upon hearing this sad story, I said, “Though you haven’t asked my opinion, would you mind if I told you what I would have done in your position?” He welcomed my input, so I said, “If I were to find myself in that situation, I would call in the entire church staff and say something like this:

You know, of course, that the offerings have been reduced drastically, to the point that we are unable to continue meeting our former payroll obligations. I am forced to do one of two things: First, I could lay-off enough staff to continue paying full-salaries to the few that we can afford to maintain—but that would seemingly force some of you out of the ministries to which you believe God has called you. I am proposing an alternative solution. There will be no salaries at all. Any of you who believe that God has called you to continue in your present ministry activities may continue doing so, knowing that God Himself will faithfully provide all your needs as you fulfill

¹⁴ *Didache* (circa., probably, between AD 70 and 100) XI:6, 12—speaking about visiting ministers: “But if he asks for money, he is a false prophet...if anyone should say in the spirit, ‘Give me money,’ or anything else, do not listen to him. But if he tells you to give on behalf of others who are in need, let no one judge him.”

His calling on your life. I also will receive no salary, will trust God to support me, and will be content at whatever reduced standard of living He may choose for me. If you are confident that God has called you to serve this church in your present capacities, you can be equally confident that He will provide for all your needs in it—though, of course, it may involve a reduced standard of living from that to which you are accustomed. If you are not sure that God has called you to minister here, this is a good opportunity for you to find the place of service elsewhere that He has in mind for you, where you can count on Him supporting your work. As for those who continue to serve without pay, we will clearly inform the congregation that all church staff are unpaid volunteers who serve God without any guaranteed remuneration. We will let them know that we all depend upon God’s unforeseeable providence for the maintenance of our families. This knowledge will allow the members of the church, as God leads them, to voluntarily give personal gifts to those from whose ministries they are truly receiving spiritual benefit. God will provide for all of His obedient servants. I know this from scripture, and from decades of experience.

The pastor replied that such had never occurred to him. Nor, I imagine, has it occurred to very many full-time pastors. Yet, to adopt such a policy would bring many benefits to the church:

- First, no truly called and anointed ministers would ever have to be removed from their ministries for lack of support, since God faithfully supports those who are doing His will.
- Second, it would mean that only those who were really spiritually qualified (meaning they know how to trust God) would remain in the public ministry. Think of how this could increase the spiritual quality of the ministry staff.
- Third, it would remove any financial motivation that might tempt those who are not called by God to apply for ministry “jobs.”
- Fourth, God’s continued provision for the ministers, under such terms, would cause their own faith to grow, and be a great testimony of God’s faithfulness to the church. Imagine how real God would become to many for the first time!
- Fifth, think of how the church leaders will be motivated to keep short accounts with God, and to please Him in all things, knowing that it is He who is supplying their needs on a daily basis.
- A sixth benefit, relevant specifically to our modern times, is that where there are no paid church “jobs” in existence, no secular law could be passed requiring a church to “hire” staff who do not conform to biblical standards of moral conduct—since the church *hires* nobody.

Salary Vs. Support

Some will certainly object to these suggestions. They will say, “But the Bible teaches that those who are taught should support those who teach them”¹⁵ and “*the laborer is worthy of his wages.*” Precisely so! This is exactly what these suggestions allow for. A worker’s wages are generally paid by his employer. For whom does the pastor work? Is it for a corporation or for a King? If it is the King, then it is He, not a corporation, from whom the laborer will look for His support. I have lived by this principal all of my long life, and have never lacked “my wages” from God. Nothing about what has been suggested here precludes a minister’s being scripturally supported by gifts from appreciative beneficiaries of their service, just as Jesus and the apostles were.¹⁶ In fact, such support is guaranteed by God’s Word to those serving faithfully at their assigned roles.¹⁷ If God does not support a servant at his post, then one is not serving in the position God has assigned to him (or else is not serving with sufficient diligence as to warrant God’s support).

There is a fundamental difference between a “supported” ministry, and a “salaried” ministry. The supported ministry involves a servant looking to the Lord of the harvest and trusting Him to move His people to contribute personal gifts for the servant’s support—which God will do. By contrast, a salaried minister is typically a contracted executive working for and being paid by an organization—a 501(c)(3) corporation, to be exact. There may be no sin in this (and I hope that no reader will misjudge the heart his or her pastor who follows different convictions about this), but does it not seem far removed from the way Jesus and the first century church ministers lived? The salary seems to reduce the man of God to an often-frustrated contract-laborer working in *the system* of a religious institution. It would be hard to find such an institution that is not run as much by internal politics as is any secular corporation. Some pastors seem to work the system to their advantage, while others simply end up burned-out and disillusioned—or even “fired”—as if a faithful servant of God could be “terminated” by men! Didn’t Jezebel wish she could’ve fired Elijah? It was not an option, since he was no employee of hers!

I don’t wish to use too broad a brush, but I have known far too many men of God who began their ministries with a passion to serve God and the needs of the people, but who over time become either the CEOs, or the slaves (or both), of a religious corporation that pays their salaries. Like a secular CEO, their “job description” changed from that of serving actual people to working for the advantage of the *entity*. The man who began with a heart for God and His people slowly morphs into the “company man,” focused on the success of the enterprise. The church then becomes a great deal like

¹⁵ Galatians 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:17-18; 1 Corinthians 9:9-14

¹⁶ Luke 8:1-3; Philippians 4:15-19

¹⁷ E.g., Matthew 6:33

any other secular organization, except that it peddles a religious product. The once-spiritual leader has little choice but to either break out of the system or else find a way to the top of the food chain and rule the roost in the same manner as do “*the rulers of the Gentiles.*”¹⁸

The leader, like any corporate CEO, then must re-cast himself as the man of *vision*. He must sell to the congregation (i.e., the entity’s *clients*) the “vision” which they are now expected to support financially and emotionally. Instead of his being the actual servant of the people the roles are reversed, and the people are expected to serve and support *his vision* (Oops! I almost said *his agenda*).

The common people who complain that the organization is no longer feeding the sheep soon become expendable—even undesirable—especially if they are not significant financial contributors to the entity. It is refreshing whenever we find exceptions to this gloomy stereotype, but as a life-long evangelical churchman, and a sometimes church-leader, I have too seldom seen things go differently with contracted leadership (I do not say there are no exceptions).

Does it not seem preferable from the standpoint of the minister himself and to all concerned that he, like Jesus and the apostles, would be a servant of God freely serving real people rather than a religious corporation. I myself head up a Christian 501(c)(3) corporation,¹⁹ and answer to a board of directors. However, being an unpaid volunteer, I enjoy freedom in the Holy Spirit to minister according to my conscience. It is possible for such a one to be removed from the corporate leadership by men, but only God can remove him from the ministry. Are not God’s true servants led by the Holy Spirit and looking to their King as their Master and Provider? I would think that most dedicated ministers would feel completely liberated in such a manner of serving. My Brother Ministers, “*You were bought at a price; Do not become slaves of men!*”²⁰

In 1982, I began to occasionally teach for an organization that trains missionaries around the world. Their program involves bringing in a series of teachers, each speaking on an assigned topic for five days. I have had occasion to minister in these schools around the world for almost forty years. This organization does not hire teachers. Those who teach in their schools do so freely and without charge but typically receive some honorarium, according to the ability of the individual school to thus express its gratitude.

In the late 1980s, I was only traveling and teaching for this organization a few weeks out of every year, and the honoraria from those weeks were usually very helpful to our family financially. We lived in a Christian school where all the faculty and staff were unpaid volunteers, and many had less income than even we had. Therefore, I often shared as much as half of my income with families in greater need than ours.

¹⁸ Matthew 20:25-28

¹⁹ i.e., The Narrow Path, Inc. (www.thenarrowpath.com)

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 7:23

At that time, there was one particular location where I would go to teach for the aforementioned organization about twice a year. It had become somewhat predictable (though never guaranteed) that I would receive \$300 for the week, which involved 15 hours of teaching at that campus. Though \$300 dollars was not very much for a week's income, even in the 80s, it was more than I would receive the average week ministering at home.

In those days, I was extremely poor, and these honoraria made a big difference in my family's support. After many years teaching occasionally for this particular school there was a time when I had finished my final lecture of the week and the school leader handed me a coffee mug and two tee-shirts bearing the organization's logo and said, "Here is your honorarium." I chuckled at what I assumed was a joke. Then I realized he was serious. Their school had a very small enrollment that season, and this was all they could give me for my week's labors. I received these gifts graciously without complaint, but wondered how I would meet my obligations at home without the anticipated honorarium. It was foolish of me to wonder. I immediately reminded myself that I was not an employee working for this organization and they owed me nothing. I was there as God's servant, and it was He who would look to my needs, as always. Shortly after I returned home, a man I knew, but who knew nothing of my circumstances, walked up to my car window and handed me an envelope. It contained \$400, which covered all my expenses for some time. I was again reminded that the servant of the Lord does not look to those to whom he ministers for remuneration. Those who directly benefit from our ministries may not be able to repay us. This is as Jesus said it should be.²¹ Our wage comes from our Master. He always supplies the needs of His servants.

What about those not in full-time ministry?

There is only one thing needful with which the believer must concern him or herself—doing the will of God. The missionary Groves, the orphan-rescuer Müller, and the missionary doctor Taylor are all examples of full-time ministers, who, due to the nature of their callings, had no opportunity to work in secular vocations for a living. They were fully dependent upon God's timely providences.

Most Christians, however, are not called to full-time preaching or missionary labors. The great majority of Christians fulfill God's will for their lives by glorifying Him in their secular employment, which, incidentally, is also the principal means by which God supplies their financial needs.²² For them *seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness*, includes glorifying Him in the gainful employment to which God has called them. God's adding "*all these things*" to them is normally and properly accomplished through their receiving a paycheck.

²¹ Luke 14:12-14

²² Ephesians 4:28; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12

As illustrated in the case of the doctor's apprentice Hudson Taylor, even those who work for a salary are not exempt from learning the lessons of trusting in God. A profitable job can be unexpectedly lost, or unexpected expenses requiring more than the salaried employee earns may easily arise. Christians who are gainfully employed must view God (not their job) as their true Provider. It may be that He provides at this moment through one's employment. That employment might end, or prove inadequate. So long as the believer continues seeking the Kingdom and doing only the will of God, the assurance of God's continued provision is a matter of His own honor. We can be confident that He is capable of looking out for His own reputation, and this involves His providing for His trusting and obedient children. Learn to simply obey God's calling in your life and trust in God for all the results. This is called resting in the Lord. It is also the adventure of living by faith.

Giving by faith

Do you need more faith? Here is a valuable secret: Our faith grows when we exercise it. Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ (now known as "Cru"), spoke about Christians making "faith promises"—a concept he borrowed from Oswald J. Smith. Bright wrote: "The basis of this concept is faith in God's ability to supply out of His resources what we cannot give out of our own."²³ This refers to committing to give a determined amount beyond one's present ability in order to support Christian missions. Paul praised the Macedonian Christians for having done this very thing: "...according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing [to give]."²⁴

Bright explained, concerning the "faith promise": "First, it is an agreement between us and God. No one will try to collect. Second, it is a commitment, not a pledge. Pledges are made on the basis of what we can give out of our own resources." He follows this explanation by providing many testimonials of "ordinary" Christians (i.e., not *rich* Christians or *ministers*) who made such promises. They committed privately with God to give a certain dollar amount or a certain percentage of their incomes to missions, if God would only provide for them to do so. Of course, in each case, God's provision came in, allowing them to fulfill their faith promises. In some cases, they increased their promises each year, often reducing their own standard of living in the process. The time came when they were giving a great deal more than they ever dreamed possible, and seeing their faith grow by witnessing God's amazing provision.

A man with whose circumstances I have been personally familiar for many years made the choice long ago to live a simple lifestyle so as to be able to give as much as possible to needs of the Kingdom of God. He began with the pledge of a designated percentage, which was somewhat greater than the

²³ Bill Bright, *As You Sow* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1989). 190

²⁴ 2 Corinthians 8:3

tithe (tenth) of his modest income. As God increasingly provided to meet these giving goals, he committed, by increments, to an increasing percentage of giving. Each time he increased the percentage, he did so with the caveat that he would only be able to keep the new commitment insofar as God's provision permitted. Each increase in his commitment overreached the limits of his current income. Although his hope is to reach the level of giving 90% of all his income, he was particularly delighted when he reached the 50% mark, with a mind to John the Baptist's instructions: "*He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none, and he who has food, let him do likewise.*"²⁵ To be able to give away as much as he personally lived on seemed a significant milestone. Each increase in his commitment required the assumption that God, if He wished to honor this proposal, would have to provide sufficiently to fulfill it.

His income has consistently grown to accommodate each pledged increase. To his own amazement, at last report, he is able to meet all of his obligations while living on 30% of his income and giving the rest to missions, needy brethren, and Christian charities. It simply comes down to keeping one's standard of living appropriately modest while trusting God to increase the seed to be sown: "*Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness.*"²⁶

So, is this one of those "give and get rich" messages? Not at all. Prosperity teachers may give the impression that giving (usually to them) is a means of the giver becoming wealthy. This is a false gospel of prosperity based upon worldly values. The examples I have mentioned are of individuals who have no interest in becoming rich. Like all true disciples, they have a passion for the Kingdom of God and choose to live modestly in accordance with God's value system. This does not necessarily involve any increase over time in their standard of living, but as they commit to greater giving they prove the truth of the promise of Christ:

Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you."²⁷

²⁵ Luke 3:11

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 9:10

²⁷ Luke 6:38. I did not wish to burden the text of this book with the following, but for readers interested in what a life like this looks like, I thought to provide the following excerpt from my journals, which is fairly typical of the past several years:

The first month of 2014 was an exceptionally good month for personal income, but the level coming in in February fell drastically—not even reaching the level of my monthly expenses (they were just barely met by the surplus from the previous month). It was hard, that month, to maintain my --% giving policy, but I counted it as a test of my resolve, so I continued. March, then, proved to be a good month for income, so that I was easily able to meet my commitments, both in giving and in family support. Seven of the first ten months of 2014, my personal income (after giving) fell below the level of my basic expenses, but there were three prosperous months that made up for the deficiency. When the income for January through October was averaged, my income was \$140 per month above my costs of housing, utilities and food...

Those who walk in faith and confidence in God are not interested in getting rich. They realize that, whom God prospers, to them He also assigns more responsibility to share with those in need:

“Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods.”²⁸

I strongly encourage any who would follow Jesus in this world to study and take to heart the promises of God, and to count on them being true, just as He is faithful. Doing so will lead to a contented life and to an ever-increasing faith as God repeatedly shows Himself faithful to you as His trusting servant.

October and early November, however, were good months, in which a considerable surplus was received above my expenses, so I began to wonder whether it might be time to bump up my giving to --% in 2015. I began to pray specifically for sufficient finances to come in, if God wished for me to make this increase. By the end of the first two weeks of November, I had received enough to cover the month's expenses. In the third week, I received two large gifts the same day (Nov. 18th). One was about \$1,400 that was forwarded to me by Frank [our ministry's financial officer], consisting of multiple listener-designated donations to me that had been accumulating for a few weeks. The other was an international transfer of funds from a man in India, whom I had known when he lived in the States. He had formerly been living in this country and really appreciated the resources at the website. He moved back to India four years ago, in order to take over the management of his family's business, since his father was retiring due to age and health issues. I had heard nothing of him since his move. Suddenly, in late November, 2014, he wrote to me telling me that he was sending me a personal gift. He did not say how much it would be, but when I checked my bank account, he had deposited \$2,000. This seemed a clear confirmation from God that I should increase my giving to --%.

²⁸ Matthew 24:45-47

Chapter Sixteen

A Kingdom of Priests

“And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

(Exodus 19:6)

“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation...”

(1 Peter 2:9)

“Worthy are you...for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

(Revelation 5:9-10)

Christ’s disciples are citizens of the Kingdom and since it is a Kingdom of priests, this means that the citizens are priests. Like so many other biblical concepts, the role of priests has been greatly neglected in many evangelical churches—though not entirely, since it was a phrase emphasized in the Reformation and the modern churches spawned by it. Even though it is well known that we are a Kingdom of priests, what is often not so well understood is what that may mean.

Are congregational leaders “priests”?

What is a priest? In modern western societies, the term is most familiarly used as the title for the parish clergyman in a Roman Catholic or Anglican congregation. To many, the term means little more than what the word “pastor” means to most Protestants—though the concepts are entirely different. The normal Greek word used in the New Testament for a local congregational leader is *presbuteros*, from which, through a circuitous etymological route, the derivative word “priest” came into English.¹ The older Catholic Bibles, when speaking of church officials, actually translated *presbuteros*, as “priest.”²

However, the Greek word *presbuteros* actually has no connection to the concept of a priest. Biblical Greek employs an entirely unrelated word when speaking of priests—which more often than not, refers to the officiants of the Jewish temple.

¹ Old English *prēost*, of Germanic origin; related to Dutch *priester*, German *Priester*, based on ecclesiastical Latin *presbyter* ‘elder’.

² E.g., Douay-Rheims (1899), in Acts 14:22; 15:2; 1 Timothy 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14. This seems disingenuous, since they do not do so when the word is not speaking of a church leader (e.g., Luke 15:25; John 8:9; Acts 2:17; Romans 9:12; 1 Peter 5:5), where they follow the Greek more honestly.

In the Greek Bible, the word for Jewish priests is *hiereus*. This is the same word used of pagan priests, like the Philistine priests of Dagon, the Phoenician priests of Baal, and the priests of Jupiter at Lystra.³ The proper Greek word for a priest is *hiereus*—not *presbuteros*. The former has the basic meaning of one who ministers at an altar of sacrifice, serving as a mediator between men and God. In the New Testament no church official is ever given this title.

Unlike *hiereus*, the word *presbuteros* is used in speaking of church leaders in the New Testament. This is simply the generic Greek word for an older man, and is more accurately translated “elder” (as in Protestant Bibles). Elders, as leaders of the original Christian congregations, had no priestly or mediatorial functions. There were no officials in the early churches who had such functions.

The word “pastor” is an English word meaning “shepherd.” These English words translate the Greek *poimen*. The most common usage of this word, in scripture, is of an individual who tends actual sheep.⁴ The second most frequent use in scripture is when it is applied to Jesus,⁵ where it is always translated “Shepherd.” Just one time in the New Testament⁶ the word refers to church leaders—where it is translated “pastors,” in some versions, and “shepherds” in others. The verb form of the noun (“shepherding”) is used to describe the duty of a church elder (*presbuteros*).⁷

So, to summarize this rather complex issue, there were no leaders in the apostolic churches that were called any word meaning priest, nor who performed any functions of the priests of sacerdotal religions like temple Judaism or the pagan temple religions. Instead, the leaders of local congregations were referred to as presbyters, or elders. It is to the elders that the apostles gave the charge of shepherding (or pastoring) the congregations. Shepherds are not priests. According to Jesus, the primary duties of a shepherd, are:

- to feed the flock,⁸
- to lead by example,⁹
- to protect the sheep from harm,¹⁰ and
- to pursue and recover the strays.¹¹

³ 1 Samuel 5:5; 2 Kings 10:19; Acts 14:12

⁴ E.g., Matthew 9:36; 25:32; 26:31; Luke 2:8, 15, 18, 20; John 10:2, 12

⁵ John 10:11, 14, 16; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4; Revelation 7:17

⁶ Ephesians 4:11

⁷ Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-2

⁸ John 10:9; cf., Ezekiel 34:2, 15; 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; 2 Timothy 4:2

⁹ John 10:3-4; cf., 1 Peter 5:3; Philippians 3:17; 1 Timothy 4:12; Hebrews 13:7; 3 John 11

¹⁰ John 10:10-12; Acts 20:28-31; Ezekiel 34:5, 22

¹¹ John 10:15; Luke 15:4; Ezekiel 34:6, 11-12

Applied to church leaders, the first of these duties is usually interpreted as the leader's faithful presentation of the word of God. Jeremiah speaks of God giving shepherds who will "*feed you with knowledge and understanding.*"¹²

The other stated activities of spiritual shepherds are found in the exhortations of Paul and Peter to the elders of the churches (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Paul also writes to the church leaders in Thessalonica: "*Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.*"¹³ Therefore, the scriptural duty of a *pastor*, or *shepherd*, is simply the care and feeding of the sheep. In the Bible, these shepherding duties belong to the elders. In the first-century churches, the elders were the "pastors." The labels, biblically, are interchangeable.

What do priests do?

By contrast, a *priest* has an altogether different role. A priest mediates between men and God. This mediation occurs at an altar, and involves the offering of sacrifices. There have been priests in virtually every pagan religion, whether Canaanite, Egyptian, Babylonian, Hindu, etc. These religions may recognize different gods, or pantheons, but the priests all have similar duties—namely to stand in the place of the people as their agents before deities and to offer sacrifices on their behalf.

This was, of course, also the case in the religion of Israel under the temple system. A particular family—that of Moses' brother Aaron—was set aside from other Israelites, with the oldest male identified as the High Priest. Like priests in other religions, they were assigned the task of offering various sacrifices on an altar in the tabernacle or the temple of Yahweh.

When we come to the New Testament, we still see the Jewish priests continuing to function until the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. However, with Jesus, there is a change in the legitimacy of priesthood. The New Testament replaces the Aaronic order of priests established through Moses. Jesus now serves as the permanent High Priest—after a different order, that of Melchizedek.¹⁴ Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross, the sprinkling of His blood on the heavenly altar, and His perfect mediation, are said to have rendered all continuing Jewish priesthood irrelevant.

In the Kingdom of God, there is a different order of priests. While we never find any officials or separated class who are called priests, we do find that the Christian community is itself a Kingdom comprised entirely of priests! We are a "*royal priesthood*"¹⁵ meaning priests in service of the King.

The traditional priesthoods of most kingdoms (including Israel) mediated between the deity and the common people. By contrast, the common people of the Kingdom of God are themselves the

¹² Jeremiah 3:15

¹³ 1 Thessalonians 5:14

¹⁴ See Hebrews 7:1ff

¹⁵ 1 Peter 2:9

priestly caste, serving the nations under Jesus, the King and High Priest. God has committed to us the task of mediating between God and the nations of the world. Since the coming of the Kingdom with Christ, the whole world now has for its benefit a divinely ordained priesthood consisting of the global community of Jesus' disciples. However, in outward respects this priestly service does not resemble, in garb or ritual activities, service of Jewish, pagan, or even Catholic priests.

Holy unto the Lord

The first duty of priests in the old order was to be holy:

*"They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God, for they offer the offerings...therefore they shall be holy."*¹⁶

To some, "holiness" may sound like a stodgy concept, consisting in the wearing of unstylish clothing, having no personal ornamentation, and abstaining from smoking, drinking, dancing—in general, anything that might bear the taint of being slightly *fun*. The famous skeptic and newspaper editor, H.L. Mencken clearly thought this way about those who desired to be holy. He described Christian Puritanism as "The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."

The truth is, people who have taken their holiness seriously often are drawn away from certain activities that they once enjoyed, but not out of some legalistic fear of worldly enjoyments, or shame in feeling happy. The opposite is the case. They have been weaned from merely mundane amusements, through the discovery of far more gratifying enjoyments in another realm. It is a bit like a child who ceases to enjoy the pleasures of the tricycle when he has matured and moved-on to the two-wheeler stage.

Of God it is said, *"In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore."*¹⁷ There is a world of difference between eternal pleasures and "fullness of joy," on the one hand, and mere "fun," on the other. Those who live only to keep the entertainment-quotient high in their lives eventually find frustration in the shallowness of the pursuit. Such pleasures tend to be subject to the law of diminishing returns. Those who have genuinely found a relationship with God often give up their former meaningless activities, not because those activities are too much fun to be allowed, but because they have come to seem insipid and uninspiring compared to the meaningful enjoyment of God and a life of purpose.

No one could know this better than Solomon, who was both fun-loving and philosophical—and who, unlike most people, had no limit to his funds and privilege to pursue his wildest dreams. By his

¹⁶ Leviticus 21:6

¹⁷ Psalm 16:11

own recollection, he had indulged in every pleasure to his heart's desire—unlimited purchasing, an enormous harem, parties, booze, as well as dabbling in music, horticulture, architectural design, epic construction projects, scientific investigation, and philosophical discourse. Unlike the common man, he was the richest king on earth and was restrained in no activity or possession that money could buy. He was seeking meaning in life—inquiring wherein lay man's chief good "*under the sun*" (i.e., among merely worldly options). His conclusion, after spending years in every indulgence to the point of dissipation, is recorded in his memoirs entitled *Ecclesiastes*: "*I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*"¹⁸

Today's rich and famous often repeat Solomon's experiment, hoping to get a different result. One might as well continue experimenting endlessly with the boiling temperature of water hoping eventually to get a different result than 212 degrees Fahrenheit at sea level. The attempt to transform worldly pleasures into personal satisfaction is as futile as that of an alchemist seeking to turn lead into gold. Lead isn't gold, and passing pleasures of the world are no substitute for true satisfaction. Humans were created to enjoy true "*pleasures forevermore*" such as can be found only in a loving and trusting relationship with one's Creator.

The word "holy" does not, in its primary usage, speak of abstinence from things *per se*, nor even of behavior itself. The word has the meaning of being "set apart" or "separated" from other uses distinctly for God's purposes.

For example, the temple was a *holy* building, containing *holy* furniture, *holy* cups, bowls, spoons, and such. It is clear that the holiness of these things did not inhere in their abstinence from worldly behaviors! Even the priests of the old order were said to be "holy"—especially the high priest, who wore a turban sporting a gold plaque reading "*holiness to Yahweh.*" These people were set apart for God, but they didn't always behave well. The Old Testament prophets complained frequently about the corrupt behavior of the Jewish priests, and it was Caiaphas, a Jewish high priest, who unjustly condemned Jesus, using extortion to persuade Pilate to crucify Him against Pilate's wishes.

Being holy means being set apart and in a different category from ordinary uses. It means being specially chosen by God to have no lesser function than to exclusively serve God's purposes. It is an objective categorization, not dependent on moral or personal choices made by the person bearing that status. The tabernacle was distinctly set apart from all other buildings to be the place of sacrifice and worship of Yahweh. Playing Bingo on Thursday nights would have to be done elsewhere. The holy spoons could not be taken home by one of the temple attendants to stir his coffee. They could only be used in the various worship rituals in the tabernacle.

Most pertinent to our point, a man could not decide to be or not be a priest. God chose the sons of Aaron for that distinct privilege and duty. Anyone who was not of Aaron's family had no

¹⁸ Ecclesiastes 1:14 NIV

opportunity to become a priest in Israel. There was no training or application process that a non-Levite might pursue in order to become a priest: *“no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.”*¹⁹ At the same time, a male descendant of Aaron could not, even if he wished to, decide to become a builder, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a merchant. He had been born into the holy class and it was no less than Yahweh who had stamped the label “priest” upon him at birth.

Being born again into the Kingdom of God is in that sense like being born into the family of Aaron. Hereditary priestly status belongs to every member of the family of God. The Kingdom as a whole is the new Priesthood. The thorny problem often faced by the Roman Catholic church as to whether it is time to extend the parish priest’s office to include women is a moot point in the Kingdom of God. In God’s Kingdom, nobody is a priest, in that sense—and everybody is a priest in the truest sense. No individual other than Jesus mediates between God and others in the Kingdom. However, the Kingdom itself is the collective priesthood through whom God communicates and interacts with the outside nations. Every disciple of Jesus is a priest in this order.

The priesthood has thus changed.²⁰ Unlike the economy of the Old Testament, the role of religious leadership is no longer that of a special caste whose duty is to mediate and offer sacrifices on behalf of the unwashed masses of God’s people. There are no *unwashed* masses in the family of God. All disciples of Jesus have been washed,²¹ and everyone in His Kingdom is called to embrace the summons to personal holiness as God’s priests: *“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation...”*²²

As mentioned, being holy means being objectively set apart by God for a purpose. As was demonstrated by the priest of the Old Testament, it is tragically possible for one to be objectively set apart for a purpose but by rebellion and self-will to fail to live up to that privilege or fulfill that purpose. Being set apart by God for special service should result in one’s determination to conscientiously fulfill such a high calling. Behavior, therefore, is expected to conform to the privilege of the office: *“...but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’”*²³ This requires our remaining separated from sinfulness, which is the spiritual virus that we, like physicians, are laboring to cure in others. But how does a believer manage to overcome sinful habits, to resist temptation, and to live a holy life unto God? As we have seen, this is done by walking consistently in the Spirit. An illustration from Greek mythology may clarify the options.

Holy conduct—how is it done?

¹⁹ Hebrews 5:4

²⁰ Hebrews 7:12

²¹ 1 Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 5:25-26; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 10:22

²² 1 Peter 2:9

²³ 1 Peter 1:14-16

In the mythology of the ancient Greeks, the Sirens were murderous monsters living on an island and masquerading as lovely women who could sing such a beguiling song that it was beyond the ability of any man to resist its lure. Mariners that came within audible range of the Sirens' song inevitably came under its spell and could not resist directing their ships nearer to the island. Those who did so were invariably killed as their ships splintered to pieces on the invisible offshore reef. The island was strewn with the corpses and skeletons of those who had succumbed to the alluring song of the Sirens—which is an apt analogy of the lure of temptation and sin, which always pays its wages in the coin of its own realm, death.

Two separate Greek myths tell of occasions when mortal men beat the odds by hearing the Sirens' singing—both resisting the temptation and surviving to tell the tale. The first of these was the warrior Odysseus (also known as Ulysses) from Homer's *Odyssey*, on his homeward voyage after fighting in the Trojan War. Having been warned of the danger of the Sirens by the goddess Circe, he was determined to hear their famed singing and to live to tell the tale. His strategy was to place wax into the ears of the entire crew of his ship, but not into his own. Thus, he would be able to hear, and they could not. He instructed the crew to bind him fast to the mast of the ship, and then to navigate to within hearing distance of the island where the Sirens sang. The crew were strongly commanded to ignore any orders he might give them to release him throughout this ordeal. Thus, Odysseus succeeded in hearing the Siren's song that drifted across the waves. Their song went like this:

*Odysseus, bravest of heroes,
Draw near to us, on our green island,
Odysseus, we'll teach you wisdom,
We'll give you love, sweeter than honey.
The songs we sing, soothe away sorrow,
And in our arms, you will be happy.
Odysseus, bravest of heroes,
The songs we sing, will bring you peace.*

Notice all the standard elements of temptation are present here—flattery, the promise of love, of wisdom, of peace. To Ulysses' eyes, the Sirens looked like beautiful women but to his crew, who could see but not hear them, they looked like hideous monsters! The song was too much for Ulysses—but so were the ropes that bound him to his mast. He vainly struggled against his restraints and shouted to his crew to turn-in and approach the shore—but his crew had wax plugging their ears and ignored his protests as they had been instructed. In the end the ship was beyond the range of the singers' voices, and the grateful captain enjoyed the distinction of being the first man to hear the Siren song, and to survive. He was the first—but not the last.

There is another myth, which comes from the third-century B.C. poet, Apollonius Rhodius, in his epic poem *Argonautica*. The hero in this story is the legendary instrumentalist, Orpheus, whose musical talents were reputed to be able to charm all things, including stones! While Orpheus was traveling with the Argonauts, the ship drew dangerously near to the island of the Sirens. As their beautiful music wafted over the sea into the ears of the Argonaut crew, they naturally came under its spell and endeavored to redirect the ship to what would certainly have been its doom. However, Orpheus was aboard the ship. He pulled out his lyre and proceeded to play a song of his own, which was far more beautiful than that of the Sirens—thus thwarting their evil intentions. He and his shipmates sailed safely past. The difference between his shipmates and those of Ulysses' ship was that the latter survived either by not hearing the song or being bound to the mast of the ship. By contrast, the Argonauts survived despite having been nearly seduced by the irresistible song—*irresistible*, that is, until it had to compete with another song even more captivating.

The two stories taken together perfectly illustrate two means of avoiding temptations. The first requires submitting to external restraints. Ulysses deprived himself of his liberty, and wanted desperately to give-in to temptation, but was trapped in his bonds. This resembles a certain religious mentality whereby a Christian is kept from sinning by being bound to religious rules and laws. The one being tempted truly and desperately wants to give-in to the temptation and to sin, but his legalistic rules bind him, as if to a ship's mast. No doubt, some sins are successfully avoided in this manner, but it is an exceedingly unpleasant and frustrating approach to living a holy life.

The case of Orpheus is, of course, the way of liberty. Orpheus and his crew were not restricted by bonds of any kind—they just knew good music when they heard it! The disciple who lives a life separated to God, hears and feels the Siren pull of the flesh, the world, and the devil, but has attuned his ear to far more pleasing music of heaven itself. Such persons are aware of the deceptive beauty presented to the senses in the course of temptation, but have set their focus upon One who is far more beautiful than all else. They behold the Lord in the beauty of holiness and are drawn to that beauty as their dominant desire. As the old hymn puts it, when the eye is turned upon Jesus (like the ears of the sailors were turned to the song of Orpheus), "*the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.*"²⁴ To those who know Him, the words and person of Jesus far overwhelm the power of the world and its baubles. This is true only when one is walking in the Spirit of Christ, where His song is heard in the soul. "*I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.*"²⁵

²⁴ From the hymn by Helen Howarth Lemmel, *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus*, 1922

²⁵ Galatians 5:16

This separation from sin, and to God, is required of any who would approach and dwell in the presence of God. The psalmist asks and answers his own question as to who might have such a privilege:

*O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent?
Who shall dwell on your holy hill?
He who walks blamelessly and does what is right
and speaks truth in his heart;
who does not slander with his tongue
and does no evil to his neighbor,
nor takes up a reproach against his friend;
in whose eyes a vile person is despised,
but who honors those who fear the Lord;
who swears to his own hurt and does not change;
who does not put out his money at interest
and does not take a bribe against the innocent.
He who does these things shall never be moved.²⁶*

To be holy (or set apart for God) in all of one's conduct is to behave like one who has only one purpose for even existing. That purpose is to please and to serve God for His glory and for the benefit of humanity. Every behavior is chosen in the light of the goal of reaching the rest of the world for Christ. Restoration of the world to God is the goal, and the Kingdom of priests is the agency assigned to bring about the reunion.

Priestly privilege

I have said that being a priest is a special privilege. This is how it was viewed in the time of the Levitical priesthood: *"Then the Lord said to Aaron: "You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel."²⁷* All the other tribes inherited mere farmland—a worldly portion. The Levitical clan received no land, but inherited God Himself, making them, in truth, the richest of the tribes!

The average Israelite could not enter within the first or second veil of the temple. Only the priests and the high priest, respectively, could do so. Thus, direct proximity to God was denied to the

²⁶ Psalm 15:1-5

²⁷ Numbers 18:20

common Israelite but was granted to the priests. To those who value God, this was the highest privilege that can be enjoyed by humans.

Growing up in an evangelical Protestant Church, I heard much of the Protestant doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers.” Such was our heritage as heirs of the Reformation. Martin Luther had discovered and publicized the biblical truth that there is no special class of priests within the church, but that the church itself was the priesthood of God. In the times of Luther’s controversy with Rome, this placed the emphasis on every believer’s privilege of access to God. The roles of the Catholic priests as mediators for the laity were no longer required (and never had been). The worship of God in His very presence, which only priests could enjoy under the Old Covenant, is now available to every believer, as the author of Hebrews emphasized:

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace...Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith...”²⁸

I do not have personal access to the President of the United States, nor to any high-ranking government official or celebrity. Nor can I at will show up at the door of any such person and announce that I am free to visit for a while. Some people have such access, but it is not available to just anybody who might desire it. Those common people who are personally acquainted with famous or powerful people often cannot resist the temptation to “name-drop”—that is, to boast about their special connections with those whom others may not approach. Such access impresses some people. Yet, celebrities and officials are mere flesh and blood like ourselves. How incomparable is the privilege of approaching the Creator of the universe on personal, family terms. This is the greatest entitlement imaginable, and it is this aspect of the “priesthood of the believer” that tends to eclipse all others in discussions of the topic among Protestants, like myself. However, along with privilege, there always comes responsibility, which we will examine in the next chapter.

²⁸ Hebrews 4:16; 10:19-22

Chapter Seventeen

The Functions of a Priesthood

In many decades of hearing sermons about the *privilege* associated with the priesthood of the believer, I do not recall ever hearing a sermon about my *functions* as a priest. What exactly do priests do—especially now that there is no temple, no altar, no animal sacrifices? What functions remain to keep a priest occupied?

One of the principal duties of New Testament priesthood is still the offering of sacrifices, as we shall see—though, unlike the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament—these offerings are spiritual in nature. Scripturally, there are three duties of priests:

1. *To be holy.*

We have already spent most of the previous chapter talking about the concept of Christian holiness. The first duty of the person who has been selected and set apart for special service to God is in one sense simply recognize one's status and to *show up* for duty. To be set apart for God's service requires that one is always *available* to God for service. The priest is always on call, and must not allow him or herself to be distracted into activities unrelated to his separated calling. We are told: "*be holy in all your conduct*"¹—which involves having all of one's behavior conform to the holiness of the priest's calling.

This does not mean that the disciple, as a priest, must be continually doing *religious work*, and renouncing all "secular" activities to this end. This might have been the way the Old Testament priests had to separate themselves, but things are different in New Testament ministry. Not everyone in the Kingdom is called to do "religious work," *per se*. Instead of abandoning all non-religious vocations, most Christians are called to sanctify their so-called *secular* activities, transforming them into Kingdom assignments.

Reaching the world for Christ does not mean standing around in front of the religious worship center waiting for sinners to show up and request assistance in finding God. The King's priests go out into the world. They are scattered throughout every sector of society where people are to be found, where they serve as agents of the King. Jesus made it clear that God is not primarily concerned about religion but about justice, mercy and faithfulness.² These spiritual dynamics are to reshape every aspect of secular activity—whether it be the neighborhood, in City Hall, in the schools, in the

¹ 1 Peter 1:15

² Matthew 23:23

workplace, in the churches, in the media, etc. Therefore, today's priests do not have to hang around a sacred building to do their duties. In fact, as the New Testament emphasizes, there are no sacred buildings.³ Disciples act as agents of the King and perform their duties as mediators in their homes, at school, in their jobs, and in their recreational activities.

This is what it means to be holy *in all manner of conduct*. The only conduct in which the disciple engages is that which he or she hopes may in some degree advance the work of the Kingdom. This applies to recreational activities and relaxation as well. It applies to purchases, and even to our eating habits: "*Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*"⁴ Do my eating habits (and the resultant weight gain or loss) glorify God? Does my every activity adorn the gospel,⁵ and present an appealing advertisement for the Kingdom of God?

It might seem that this commitment to being separated in all things to God would drive people away, in that it appears to deprive one of freedom to pursue his or her own selfish course of life. However, pursuing one's own selfish course is definitely overrated. Such nihilistic emptiness is that to which the Kingdom has provided a meaningful alternative. It is not as if God calls us from enjoyable activities to activities that are less enjoyable. He calls us from meaningless diversions to significant activities capable of changing the world for God. Peter tells his readers that their salvation rescued them from their former "aimless conduct,"⁶ which had been the result of their following the values of the dominant culture. It is true that for one who is set apart for Christ certain kinds of enjoyment are replaced with another, a much more fulfilling kind.

We have been called to live significant and fruitful lives for the glory of God. Many have no taste for such, and are free to keep their shallow lives. Some of us believe that, having received the stewardship of only one natural life on this earth, it is necessary to find greater meaning and purpose than the world offers or even knows about. The Kingdom of God is that purpose.

2. Teaching God's Word to the nations

In biblical times, as well as much later, there was no efficient way to duplicate written materials for distribution to the masses. This only became possible with the invention of the moveable-type printing press in the late fifteenth century. It is hard for us to imagine a time when the average person had no need for literacy, because few would ever have actually seen a book! What books there were had been assiduously copied by hand from earlier copies at tremendous labor and expense. The

³ Matthew 23:38; Acts 7:48-49; 1 Peter 2:5; Ephesians 2:20-22

⁴ 1 Corinthians 10:31

⁵ Titus 2:10

⁶ 1 Peter 1:18

writing materials were expensive, in themselves, but the real cost of duplicating a book was in the labor it involved for a scribe or copyist.

Obviously, the average Jew had no personal copy of the Bible to read. Yet, Yahweh expected every Israelite to know and obey the written Torah. This was to be accomplished initially by public readings at national assemblies. Every seven years, at the Feast of Tabernacles, the nation was to assemble to hear the whole Law read aloud to them by the priests, who alone possessed the few precious copies of the scrolls in existence.⁷ The people would stand in reverence to hear the word of God read aloud. Those of us who gain much from reading our Bibles can only imagine the rare pleasure of Israelites, who had no Bibles of their own, to be able to hear the whole *Torah* read aloud to them once every seventh year! Sadly, this practice was often neglected just as it is neglected today in many pulpits—resulting in widespread illiteracy in the things of God.

Since the priests were the sole custodians of the written scriptures, they had the duty of becoming well-versed in them, and to teach others what God expected in terms of their conduct. It was possible for a layman to approach one of the priests to inquire concerning God's mind on any matter for which the inquirer was seeking counsel. In Leviticus, God commanded Aaron and his sons to master the written scriptures, "*that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moses.*"⁸

Along the same lines, God said through Malachi:

*For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge,
And people should seek the law from his mouth;
For he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.*⁹

Therefore, the duty of the disciple of Jesus as a priest to the nations includes the responsibility of "*teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.*"¹⁰ As a Kingdom of priests, we bear the responsibility of communicating and applying the Word of God for the benefit of those who do not possess, read, or know it—"for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame."¹¹

It should be obvious that, before we can faithfully teach and counsel others from Christ's commandments, we must first become acquainted with them and conform our own lives to them. Not everyone is given the special gift of teaching,¹² but all mature believers, after some period of learning

⁷ Deuteronomy 31:9-13; Nehemiah 8:13-18

⁸ Leviticus 1:10-11

⁹ Malachi 2:7

¹⁰ Matthew 28:20

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:34

¹² 1 Corinthians 12:29

and application, “*ought to be teachers.*”¹³ That is, teaching may not be the main calling or gifting of every Christian, but every instructed believer should be able to address issues and answer questions raised by unbelievers in accordance with biblical truth. “*But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear...*”¹⁴

Suppose a friend at work is having difficulty in her marriage and is contemplating divorce. What counsel from the scriptures would you give her? What if a friend comes to you for advice about going into debt or getting into a get-rich-quick scheme rather than working for his family’s support? Would you be able to communicate Christ’s teachings on such a subject? What if a friend at school is thinking of moving-in with her boyfriend or aborting her baby—could you instruct her according to the word of God? If your child is confused about his or her gender identity, or is desiring to marry a partner of the same sex, do you know enough of the Word of God to communicate to that one the mind of the Creator on such issues? What if you should see that your married friend at work is flirting with an attractive co-worker. Would you be able to be God’s instructor to him or her?

Being teachers of God’s Word does not only mean preaching the message of salvation to the lost, but it also means speaking for God on any issue concerning which God has spoken, and teaching the nations the ways of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. The people of the world have need of priests of God in their lives to teach them His ways. “*The coastlands shall wait for His law.*”¹⁵

This is not a life for cowards. If keeping your unbelieving friends on your side is your priority, or you are afraid to be labeled with one of the shaming labels given to the politically incorrect, or you want to avoid jail at all costs, then you really are not ready to fulfill the role of a priest—being Christ’s emissary and representative—to the nations. Those who are said to be excluded from the New Jerusalem include the *cowardly*.¹⁶

Many of us have known far too much comfort and immunity from controversy to grasp that we are in a spiritual war zone, where nothing less than courageous engagement with the forces of deception will serve. The days of comfortable apathy are past (if they ever legitimately existed). Remember the encouragement of the writer of Hebrews:

He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we may boldly say:

*“The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”*¹⁷

¹³ Hebrews 5:12

¹⁴ 1 Peter 3:15

¹⁵ Isaiah 42:4

¹⁶ Revelation 21:8

¹⁷ Hebrews 13:5-6

What can man do to me? Man can do many hurtful things to me—including kill me! Or can he? It is true that disciples often suffer physical and other harm at the hands of Satan’s dupes. However, there is an unseen reality that lies behind every occurrence affecting the child of God—providence. God does not micromanage every thought and action of people, but He certainly retains the right to intervene to protect His people from the hostile intentions of the wicked. He retains this right, and has more than adequate power to do so. He protects us from whatever He wills us not to suffer. He sometimes lifts the force-field around us to allow us to face various sufferings, which are within His will for us for reasons that we may or may never discern. The important thing is that God has pledged Himself to our welfare and our fortunes are in His hand. Those who desire only His will are eager to embrace both the times when He protects and the times when it is His will to allow us to suffer...or to die (It has to happen *sometime*—isn’t it most desirable that it happen in the perfect will of God?). Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of your Father. You are worth more to Him than many sparrows.¹⁸ Do you imagine that you can suffer harm or die apart from the will of your Father?

If you know the mind of God, and do not share this knowledge with those who do not know, then what answer will you give to your lost friends and neighbors on the day of judgment? Upon hearing the decree of their condemnation, they may turn to you with terror in their eyes and say, “*You knew about this? Why didn’t you tell me?*”

3. Offering sacrifices

The sacrifice of animals to atone for sins is no longer required nor relevant to God’s program. Jesus offered Himself once and for all¹⁹ as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world²⁰—an act that never needs to be repeated, because it remains eternally valid. So, what sacrifices remain to be presented by Christ’s royal priesthood?

The word “sacrifice” in modern parlance seldom refers to an animal being burned upon an altar. At least in Western Civilization, most religions that practiced such rituals have long been extinct. In today’s secular usage the word sacrifice commonly refers to a costly or painful deprivation—like the sacrifices made by athletes in training, by parents rearing their children, or by soldiers in battle. There is no getting around the fact that life involves costly choices and painful losses. This is true of life in the service of the Kingdom at least as much as it is of any other chosen pursuit.

The difference is that the sacrifices made in the service of God are never wasted nor regrettable. Some such losses are hard to endure but they never incur the loss of the soul. This is in contrast with the things sacrificed in the ordinary lives of those in rebellion against the King. The pursuit of selfish

¹⁸ Matthew 10:29, 31

¹⁹ Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10

²⁰ Isaiah 53:6; John 1:29; 3:17; Romans 5:18; 2 Corinthians 5:19; 1 Timothy 2:6; Hebrews 2:9; 1 John 2:2

ends may well incur the loss of friends, possessions, health, and life. The same is true of obediently following the King. Neither of these life choices is predictably easier or more difficult. However, the loss sustained by the rebel is the forfeiture of that which was the ultimate purpose for his or her having ever been born. *“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?”*²¹

However, the principal concept inherent in the word “sacrifice” is not the idea of painful surrender, but of presenting an offering to God with a mind to please Him. It is likely that most of the sacrifices offered in the Old Testament did not represent a severe hardship or significant loss to those offering them. Some value to the worshiper is inherent in the concept. God was offended by Israel’s lukewarm devotion, which was demonstrated in their bringing blind and lame animals—things of no value to themselves—as their offerings to God:

*“When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor?” says the Lord of hosts.*²²

By contrast, David, when acquiring a piece of land to serve as an altar site to worship Yahweh, balked at the landowner’s offer to give David the land without charge. The king replied to this generous offer, *“No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing.”*²³ This was the man after God’s own heart.

Though offerings to God are not always very costly the lover of God takes pleasure in making any sacrifice that is believed to give God pleasure. A loving husband knows this kind of pleasure in seeing the delight of his wife when he has sacrificed to give a gift which he knows will bring her joy. It would be a strange relationship between a King and His devoted subjects if they were never given the opportunity to give personal gifts demonstrating their love and loyalty.

Doing so is not only possible but normative for a “Kingdom of priests.” Peter speaks plainly of this function of priests, telling his readers that they, along with all believers, are *“a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”*²⁴ So, a spiritual priesthood is to offer up spiritual sacrifices (as opposed to a hereditary priesthood, like Aaron’s, that offered ritual sacrifices). But what are these sacrifices, and what qualifies them as “spiritual”?

Spiritual sacrifice #1: Presenting our bodies

²¹ Matthew 16:26

²² Malachi 1:8

²³ 2 Samuel 24:24

²⁴ 1 Peter 2:5

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*²⁵

Though Paul never actually refers to believers as “priests,” he assumes that his readers understand this as their function. He expects Christians to fulfill the unique functions of priests in offering sacrifices to God. As of first priority, he says, we offer ourselves—specifically our *bodies*. The typical sacrifice offered by priests in the Old Testament consisted of the body of a bull, a sheep, or a goat. The bodies of the victims were drained of blood, placed on the altar and burned as “sweet aroma”²⁶ to Yahweh (I know that I have been made in His image because I also love a barbeque!). By contrast, the bodies we place on the altar are not those of barnyard animals, but our own! While the animals offered in the temple were killed prior to being sacrificed on the altar, we offer ourselves alive in order to live our lives, as it were, “on the altar.”

The altar is, of course, a metaphor for complete consecration to God. The presentation of our bodies has the practical meaning explained by Paul in another passage in Romans 6:13: “*And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.*”²⁷ The verb “present” is the same Greek word in both passages (Romans 6:13 and 12:1). The one passage explains the other. To “present my body” means to present each part—each of my members—to God. This is not a mystical or symbolic transfer, but amounts to the practical yielding of every member of my body daily as an “instrument” of righteousness to God. Unlike a dead or dying victim, a living sacrifice has practical and useful value in the Kingdom’s ongoing campaign of righteousness. The bodies presented to Him become living instruments²⁸ for Him to use in furthering His objectives.

An old preachers’ quip points out that the difficulty with a *living* sacrifice, rather than a dead one, is that the living victim always has a tendency to crawl off the altar. Like most humor, this is funny primarily because it is so true. The sacrificial animal had no difficulty lying submissively on the pyre while it burned—for the simple reason that it was already dead.

Sometimes our consecration leads to actual death for Christ (can a more privileged way to die be imagined?). There have always been some believers who become literal martyrs for the Kingdom—sometimes even being burned alive. Martyrs may be immortalized by the public, and have long-term honor bestowed upon them by the surviving church.

We rightly honor those who have remained faithful through such an ordeal as martyrdom, and who have *not loved their lives even to death*.²⁹ It is a different challenge, however, for one to live

²⁵ Romans 12:1 ESV

²⁶ E.g., Exodus 29:18, 25, 41; Leviticus 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9, 12 etc.

²⁷ Romans 6:13

²⁸ Actually, Paul’s word in Romans 6:13 translated as “instruments” (Gr. *hoplon*) actually means “weapons”

²⁹ Revelation 12:11

steadily (and perhaps obscurely) for Christ. Such a life requires thousands of individual, daily decisions to deny oneself, and to choose the more difficult of two paths, spread out over the course of a lifetime.

In times of international conflict, every loyal citizen is willing to present him or herself as a dying sacrifice for king and country. Unbelievers will do this much out of love for their homeland. To do the same for Christ and His Kingdom is not an expression of *extraordinary* loyalty. To give Christ less than we would give to our earthly nation would appear to be a case of idolizing the latter. But how many who never have the opportunity to become martyrs demonstrate their fealty to God by spending every day of their lifetimes surrendered to His will, remaining submissively on the altar?

Paul mentions that the body that we surrender as a living sacrifice is to be “holy.” Remember that this word refers to something set apart from all purposes other than divine service. Every ordinary animal, when sacrificed, was holy, because Yahweh established it as a principle that, “*Whatever touches the altar shall become holy.*”³⁰ This means that a lamb brought to the temple was like any ordinary lamb in the field until it was presented upon the altar. At that point, it was uniquely set apart for the Lord. Until that moment the worshiper had the option of withdrawing his gift, returning the lamb to the flock, and perhaps substituting another one for it. Such an option ended when the lamb touched the altar. Once something has been offered, it could not be withdrawn without sacrilege.

The exhortation to present our members as instruments to God in Romans 6:13, follows closely upon Paul’s discussion of the implications of baptism.³¹ The believer consecrates him or herself to God at baptism. In this transaction there is an implied transition from death to life. We renounce the world’s claims upon us to embrace God’s. At that point, we are on the altar. We are given to God, and there is no retrieving our lives for ourselves without robbing God of what has been given to Him.

This has implications for those who sincerely came to Christ and were baptized³² at one point and have subsequently slipped away into behavior unworthy of the King. The backslider may feel that the earlier commitment has been legitimately revoked. It is in our power to revoke it, but not legitimately. If we default on our earlier commitment, we stand condemned as perjurers. There is no legitimate removal from the altar of what has once been offered there to God. The obligation remains to repent, find forgiveness, and fulfill one’s former commitment.

*When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it;
For He has no pleasure in fools.*

³⁰ Exodus 29:37 ESV

³¹ Romans 6:3-11, 13

³² As responsible, mature parties.

*Pay what you have vowed—
Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.³³*

But how is the offering of our *physical* bodies regarded to be a *spiritual* sacrifice? The act is *spiritual*, not in the sense of being non-physical, but in contrast with being merely a *ritual*. A sacrifice ritually made in the temple might or might not correspond with a spiritual state of heart and mind on the part of the worshiper. It was a common thing for people to keep such rituals without heart—sometimes living ungodly lives and thinking the ritual alone will cover for them. Solomon emphatically denied that God could be pacified this way:

*The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination;
How much more when he brings it with wicked intent!³⁴*

The genuine surrender of ourselves to God is assumed to be a decision made from spiritual motivations, informed by spiritual values and interests. It is made possible only by working of the Holy Spirit. It is regarded as a spiritual act, insofar as it corresponds to a spiritual state of heart.

Spiritual sacrifice #2: Giving of material relief to the needy and to gospel workers

Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.³⁵

Paul was in prison, unable to ply his usual trade as a tentmaker. Therefore, he was dependent upon the gifts of generous friends on the outside for the meeting of his physical needs. Such friends included the disciples in Philippi who sent him financial aid on more than one occasion.³⁶ Just prior to his writing the Philippian letter, yet another token of their devotion had arrived in the form of another gift of assistance to Paul. He wrote the letter to thank them for the gift, to tell of his circumstances, and generally to encourage them. In doing so, he mentioned that their gift was not only appreciated by himself but by God also, who received it from their hands and hearts as an acceptable and pleasing sacrifice to Himself.

In His parable of “the sheep and the goats,” Jesus indicated that whatever acts of mercy we might do for His brethren are actually regarded as given to Him.³⁷ Every charitable act, done authentically in the name of Christ, is a proper sacrifice offered to Him. It counts as an exercise of faithful priestly

³³ Ecclesiastes 5:4-5

³⁴ Proverbs 21:27

³⁵ Philippians 4:18

³⁶ Philippians 4:16

³⁷ Matthew 25:40

service to be rewarded in the end. “And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.”³⁸

This too, while being an offering of physical substance, is a *spiritual* sacrifice due to the spiritual motivation of love that inspires it. “But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”³⁹

Spiritual sacrifice #3: Thanksgiving and praise

*Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.*⁴⁰

The giving of verbal praise and thanksgiving—*the fruit of our lips*—is a unique type of sacrifice that we offer in worship to God. One thing unique about it is the fact that what is offered is not something physical, but something spiritual in its very nature. That which proceeds sincerely out of the mouth is the overflow of the heart, or spirit.⁴¹ Insincere praise and thanksgiving are not pleasing, but rather offensive, to God, who knows the hearts of all:

*These people draw near to Me with their mouth,
And honor Me with their lips,
But their heart is far from Me.*⁴²

Heartfelt praise and thanksgiving are the only things we can freely offer to God that He would not otherwise be able simply to take from us. He can take our lives, possessions, health, families, friends, and anything else from us—whether we like it or not. On the other hand, verbal expressions of true gratitude, adoration, and love are in our power to withhold from Him if we choose. The free and willing offering of these represents a sacrifice of unique value to Him.

Praise is also the one sacrifice of value to God that costs the worshiper nothing in tangible terms. What is there that requires less energy than speaking words? Some of us can do that in our sleep. But what words! Words of thanksgiving require hearts of humility and resignation, full of gratitude and admiration. They require the humble recognition of our undeserving state and of our inferiority to the majesty and virtue of God.

³⁸ Matthew 10:42

³⁹ Hebrews 13:16

⁴⁰ Hebrews 13:15

⁴¹ Matthew 12:34-37

⁴² Matthew 15:8, citing Isaiah 29:13

The Bible is full of exhortations to God's people to give Him the praise and thanksgiving that is His due. It is notable that God is not usually the one issuing these exhortations to praise Him. It is not common for God to say, "Praise Me!" It is usually the psalmist, or some other believer, who exhorts everybody to give God the praise and glory. Withholding such would be blindness, injustice, and ingratitude. It is typical for people who are in love to encourage others to affirm the beauty, wit, charm, etc., of the ones they adore. "Isn't she gorgeous?" a young man asks his friends, probing for their agreement with his own opinion of his beloved. "Isn't that writer brilliant?" "Isn't she talented?" and "Isn't he funny?" are the spontaneous expressions of one admirer seeking to spread among others the delight found in the object of admiration. It is natural, and almost unavoidable, that one who is infatuated will wish to share that pleasure with others. This is what praise is about. In Psalm 100, the writer urges us to approach God through such verbal expressions:

Make a joyful shout to the Lord, all you lands!

Serve the Lord with gladness;

Come before His presence with singing...

Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,

And into His courts with praise.

Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.

For the Lord is good;

His mercy is everlasting,

And His truth endures to all generations.

The supreme privilege of priests is to approach God, and this (according to the above passage) is done through singing, thanksgiving, and praise. Thanksgiving is the expression of gratitude for things received from God, while praise is the expression of admiration and awe with respect to God's own character and virtue. Gratitude would be seen in telling someone, "Thank you for the gift!" Praise, on the other hand, would sound something like, "You are so generous and thoughtful!" In this sense, praise is more personal and complimentary to the benefactor. According to the Psalm, thanksgiving brings us to, and through, the gates entering God's presence. Praise brings us into the King's very courts.

Although we offer praise to God for His own sake, His appreciation of it would not seem to be merely for His own sake. He is not a needy egotist who thrives on compliments from others. We are so inferior to Him that it is hard to imagine what strokes it would give to His ego for such specks of dust as ourselves to give Him accolades. God, as seen in Jesus, is so selfless and others-oriented that His desire to be praised by us must have reasons other than the mere seeking of an ego-boost.

Our praise to God appears to advance the Kingdom's purposes. For example, our praise and worship of God seem to make a spiritual impact against the kingdom of darkness. The demons apparently react to our praising God as would an army being repelled by force.⁴³

*From out of the mouths of infants...you prepare praise because of your enemies, to depose the enemy and the avenger.*⁴⁴

That God is praised is to the benefit of all. Giving sincere praise to God turns one's attention away from oneself—always a healthy reorientation! Praise intends to please its object. It aligns the heart of the worshiper with the correct orientation of the whole universe. The acknowledgement of the virtues and greatness of God brings our thoughts and awareness into alignment with the simple truth about Him, which sets us free. Even the heavens naturally declare the glory of God,⁴⁵ and all the angels worship Him.⁴⁶ Beyond these things perhaps only God knows the value and power that exists in the worshiper's praise, but it is among the sacrifices that royal priests have the privilege and the duty to offer to the King. The priests of Yahweh are *warrior priests*, who push back the forces of darkness, defeating blindness and deception through their priestly service to God and man. It's what a royal priesthood does until the time comes when *the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*⁴⁷

⁴³ 1 Samuel 16:23-24; 2 Chronicles 20:22

⁴⁴ Psalm 8:2 (LXX)

⁴⁵ Psalm 19:1

⁴⁶ Hebrews 1:6

⁴⁷ Habakkuk 2:14; cf. Isaiah 11:9; Numbers 14:21

Chapter Eighteen

Colonies of the Empire

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.

(Matthew 5:14)

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem... to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven...

(Hebrews 12:22-23)

...not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together...

and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

(Hebrews 10:25)

Christ's Empire is colonizing Planet Earth.¹

Sometimes those who are serious about following Christ as His disciples feel as if they are somewhat alone in their faith—even when they attend weekly church gatherings. It is difficult to find, even in religious circles, likeminded believers who really want to give Christ His due in their whole lifestyles, careers, and families. We sometimes can relate with Elijah in his complaint— *"I alone am left."*² However, God corrected him by pointing out *"Yet I have reserved seven thousand...whose knees have not bowed to Baal."*³

This information must have surprised the prophet, who lived in a time of wholesale spiritual compromise in Israel. We know that there were a hundred faithful prophets hidden in a cave from Jezebel's purge,⁴ and there were other sons of the prophets meeting in low-visibility societies in

¹ *Colonialism* has negative connotations among many in the modern world, due to certain First World, militarily powerful nations like England, Spain, France, Holland, Russia, and America colonizing third-world countries in past centuries, exploiting the people and appropriating their natural resources for the enrichment of the colonizers. In the years since WWII, colonization began to recede so that very few colonies of Europe remain in the third world. The term retains a negative connotation in modern thought.

My use of the term with reference to Christ's Empire differs from historical colonialism in that those nations that colonized others had no intrinsic right to exploit them, but did so by sheer superior strength. By contrast, Christ, as Creator and Redeemer of all mankind, properly owns all lands and all people, but forces His rule on no one. When He takes a territory by the consent of the conquered, He claims only what is rightfully His. He does not exploit and rob His subjects, but brings in His Kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

² 1 Kings 19:10

³ *Ibid.*, v.18

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18:3-4

several cities⁵—but seven thousand? Where were all these people? No doubt they were looking for each other.

True followers of righteousness in a corrupt age naturally crave the encouragement of like-minded friends. When they find them, they naturally gravitate toward seeking times of fellowship together. That is, no doubt, why the sons of the prophets gathered together to seek the Lord while most of their Israelite neighbors worshiped Baal. Not only is such gathering together something naturally desired by the disciples of Jesus, it is also an essential part of the strategy of the Kingdom's conquest of the world. Regular assemblies of disciples serve as colonies of the Empire, beachheads for further outreach, and a spiritual family in which believers can be nurtured. They are essential to the purpose of God in the earth.

The Kingdom of God is an alternative society on the earth, which is globally invisible, but is manifested in local venues in the countercultural colonies of the Kingdom. The relation between the global Church and the localized communities would be that, in the latter, believers live in intensive involvement with each other, bearing one another's burdens, visibly fulfilling the law of Christ.⁶ By contrast, the global Body of Christ is never fully gathered together nor can the various members be fully aware of each other.

Nonetheless, the sense that we are in one global Body with all disciples everywhere is sometimes acknowledged and celebrated practically. For example, Christians in prosperous areas often sense, and respond to, needs of their brothers and sisters in poverty-stricken regions, or support those in countries where believers are persecuted. In the New Testament we see such expressions of this global unity in the offering taken up by the Antioch Church for famine-stricken believers elsewhere.⁷ Another example is Paul's gathering of finances from Churches in Asia and Greece to give to relieve the poverty of the Judean Churches.⁸ The oft-repeated exhortation of Christ to the seven Churches—*"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches"*⁹—suggests the duty of each individual believer to be mindful of the truths communicated to churches in localities other than one's own.

Therefore, though Paul writes to the Corinthian Church a very personal letter addressing their local concerns, he nonetheless indicates that he simply sees them as part of the larger global community of saints—*"To the church of God which is at Corinth...with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord..."*¹⁰ It is not only locally, but also globally, that Paul's words apply to the

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20:35; 2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7; 6:1-2

⁶ Galatians 6:2

⁷ Acts 11:29-30

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24:17; Romans 15:16; 1 Corinthians 16:1-3

⁹ Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:2

Body of Christ: *“if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.”*¹¹

Some Assembly Required

We may sometimes think of our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. This idea is not absent from scripture, and seems to be what Paul is affirming in 1 Corinthians 6:19. However, the New Testament temple imagery more often envisions the whole assembly of Christ’s followers as a corporate dwelling place of God. It is being built, like Solomon’s temple was, out of individual stones. This is why Peter describes Christians as *“living stones...built up a spiritual house,”*¹² and Paul says that we are *“being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”*¹³

This dwelling obviously does not refer to any of our physical worship centers, or any *“temples made with hands,”*¹⁴ since it is constructed out of living materials—people, not bricks. Nor does it refer to any particular local church or organization. It refers to the network of relationships between the members of the Body, in which *“the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies...by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body.”*¹⁵

In order for a pile of stones to grow into a “house” or “temple,” they must be assembled, or connected in proper relation to each other. Like the stones that comprise the walls of a building, each one is shaped to fit into a complex series of connections with other stones—some above, some below, some to either side. Since disciples are “living stones” the parallel to these physical or spatial relations would be in the spiritual associations that God has established among His people. These relationships are defined by the contributions each member of the Body makes not only in gatherings but also (perhaps primarily) their everyday interactions in the world outside the meetings. This was no doubt why the early Christians lived in close proximity and gathered for meals and other activities frequently—sometimes daily.¹⁶ This frequency of contact and interaction made it easier than it sometimes is today for believers to be involved in each other’s lives.

The gifts of the Spirit, which all members of the Body are to exercise in the community of faith, include such functions as “giving,” “serving,” “encouraging,” “showing mercy,” etc.,¹⁷ in addition to teaching, prophesying, etc. The first group of gifts mentioned would seem to function more often (though not exclusively) in daily interactions apart from special gatherings, while the latter would

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12:26

¹² 1 Peter 2:5

¹³ Ephesians 2:22

¹⁴ Acts 7:48

¹⁵ Ephesians 4:16

¹⁶ Acts 2:46

¹⁷ See Romans 12:7-8; 1 Corinthians 12:28-31

seemingly be more important in the assembly. The important thing to note is that the relationships that exhibit the Body to outside observers are those lived out in the real-world. They are not merely the functions expressed in the intentional assemblies that punctuate the community's life.

Our assembling, therefore, does not only have to do with our weekly, or more frequent, meetings but with the connections that exist among Body parts 24/7. The true Church, whether viewed universally or locally, is a community of *agape*. Love is expressed among community members both in their corporate gatherings and in their daily interactions and mutual sharing of burdens. Often the sacrifice of our free time, elective resources, sleep, privacy, and convenience will be what mutual commitment and *agape* requires of us.

The fact that this kind of community does not always exist among those who attend religious meetings must not be allowed to cloud the issue. Modern churches often do not conform very closely to the biblical concept of being colonies of Christ's Kingdom on earth. Do not assume that the social life experienced in modern religious institutions is necessarily a model of New Testament community. In many respects, most have departed considerably from the patterns of community life seen in the New Testament Kingdom colonies.

The need to be part of a society

From the beginning, God expressed the ideal of humans living in societies. When the first man was created, God declared, *"It is not good that man should be alone."*¹⁸ Of course, the immediate solution to this situation was the creation of the most basic of human societies, a marriage. God gave man a partner, not only to alleviate loneliness but to facilitate the larger purpose that God had for man, to *"Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it."*¹⁹

The first marriage, and the family that grew out of it, comprised the first community of mankind. A family is a microcosm of the greater human society. Though all humanity is really one large family, the dispersal of the race after the Tower of Babel incident caused humans to establish individual clans, communities, and nations. All of these are forms of human society in which individuals interact with others in social relationships, and seek a measure of collective conformity. These interactions tend to generate a societal consensus and culture, which, more often than not, is contrary to the culture of God's Kingdom.

As Elijah discovered, it is not easy to live as one of the King's men alone in a society where your convictions are generally despised and scorned. Those who take the road less traveled by are misunderstood, slandered and feared by those who have no inclination to think outside the box of

¹⁸ Genesis 2:18

¹⁹ Genesis 1:28

the dominant culture. The loyal follower of the King desires the support of fellow believers to encourage him or her in resisting the pull of the world. Like a fish swimming against a strong current of social pressure, a disciple of Christ is to be loyal and obedient to God, and be able to sing, *“Though none go with me, still I will follow.”*²⁰

Yet, it is not expected that none will go with me! The Psalmist observed, *“God sets the solitary in families.”*²¹ God has provided for the individual disciple a family or a colony of likeminded loyalists of which her or she is a part.

The colonies are outposts and beachheads for further Kingdom expansion. In some respects, they resemble Robin Hood’s band of merry men (and women). If you remember the legend, Britain’s King Richard Lionheart had been taken captive during an expedition on one of the Crusades. In his absence, his wicked brother John had seized power and was a traitorous tyrant, opposing his brother’s rightful rule. Robin and his men remained loyal to King Richard until he safely returned to reclaim his throne. In the meantime, Robin and his company comprised an underground resistance group opposing John’s illegitimate control. They formed a society of loyalists to the True Crown, living as an alternative community in Sherwood Forest. The parallels in our resistance to Satan’s kingdom, in the physical absence of our true King, should be obvious.

1. The need for mutual encouragement

God’s great family of the redeemed around the world gather together in local “family gatherings” for mutual encouragement and cooperative ministry. This is normal and should not be avoided: *“let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another...”*²²

The fallen world is always around us. We live in the middle of it. However, we are not of it, and are to live unashamedly contrary to its values and attitudes. Most of us are surrounded in our workplaces, our schools, possibly even our homes, by the constant bombardment of false messages and pressures to compromise our standards as followers of Christ. One of the main reasons that the Church community exists is to be a counterculture that affirms the truth. A colony of believers provides encouragement and positive peer support to help individual believers to resist and counteract the world’s constant influence. Though we should be able to stand strong when we are involuntarily deprived of supportive fellowship with others, as did Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon, such isolation is not what God intends as the normative Christian experience.

²⁰ From the song, *I Have Decided to Follow Jesus*, based upon the last words of a Christian convert in India, and reportedly set to the tune of an Indian folk song by Sadhu Sundar Singh

²¹ Psalm 68:6

²² Hebrews 10:25 NLT

There are some churches today who attempt to approximate biblical norms of fellowship and mutual encouragement, but many churches do not. Many are little more than concert and lecture halls, where the leaders often do not know most of the attendees by name. It is far too common for people who attend a modern church to never develop deep relationships with more than a very few others in attendance. Generally, only a small percentage find any avenue for serving with the gifts which the Holy Spirit has given them—nor experience any appreciable growth in grace or in the knowledge of Christ.

Some churches actually discourage personal spiritual growth beyond the level attained and recommended by the leaders themselves—which is sometimes not very advanced. If some in the congregation do begin to grow in their understanding of the things of God, many find the churches to be resistant to change and inhospitable to radical discipleship. Leaders sometimes become uncomfortable with a member who is a self-feeder and does not depend only on them for his or her nurture and growth. Some leaders feel their position is threatened by those in the church who may have thought their faith through more thoroughly, or more uncompromisingly, than has the leader himself. Those who speak up to question the *status quo*, or to encourage actual spiritual progress, are commonly seen as simply rocking the boat.

For this reason, we increasingly encounter displaced believers who seem to have outgrown their “churches.” They themselves are filled with pent-up, life-transforming “*new wine*,” while the institutions which may once have served them have proven to be “*old wineskins*,”²³ seemingly incapable of accommodating spiritual growth beyond a very basic level. More and more of these disciples have left their churches—not because they are themselves lukewarm or backsliding, but because the institutions themselves seem to have done so. The only occurrence of the word “lukewarm” in scripture refers not to individual Christians, but to a whole church.²⁴

Obviously, such harsh judgments of churches are sometimes made and expressed by self-righteous, arrogant, and disgruntled malcontents, whose spiritual condition may be worse than that of the ones they criticize, but this is not always the case. There are humble and growing saints who have made every effort to remain in their churches, but whose passion for Christ and desire to follow His leading have made them uneasy, or put them at odds, with the assemblies where they have attempted to fit in and serve.

In this way, some churches may serve the opposite purpose of that which Christ intends for the gathering of the believers. Instead of being a haven of encouragement toward holiness for those escaping from the darkness of the dominant culture, it is not uncommon for churches actually to discourage these goals. Many churches even reproduce, to whatever extent possible, the dominant

²³ Matthew 9:17

²⁴ Revelation 3:14, 16

worldly culture in the church itself. The problem may be that the leaders of the church have themselves not grown beyond the level of understanding and holiness at which they are currently comfortable. They may, in fact, not wish to be challenged to leave their comfort zones and may feel threatened by anyone in the congregation who seems to surpass them in zeal, godliness, or loyalty to scripture. I hope this is not the case with most ministers, but the phenomenon is widely experienced among growing Christians in the churches.

2. The need for corporate expression of Christ's Body

Jesus said, "*For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them*"?²⁵ What did He mean by that? Are we not to believe that He is with each of us individually, even when we are not assembled with others? I will suggest two possibilities (there may be others):

- He may be saying that the collective Church has a special authority to act officially on His behalf in a sense that each individual cannot. In the context of His statement, two verses earlier, He mentioned the church's role in excommunicating a sinful member who will not repent even after being given several opportunities to do so. The result is that the person thus disciplined is officially regarded as having no part in Christ's Body. An individual believer would not have similar authority.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians on the very same subject and spoke similarly: "*I indeed as absent in body but present in spirit have already judged...when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ...*"²⁶ Paul is instructing the Church to exercise official discipline of an unrepentant member and to "*deliver him to Satan.*" This is a weighty act. What Paul seems to be implying is that though he was physically absent, he was authorizing them to take this solemn action in his stead. It would be as though he was present among them taking the required action himself. Indeed, He told them they would be acting in Christ's "power." It is as if he said, "When you assemble for this purpose, I am standing with you in this action, as is Christ Himself." Could this be what Jesus meant in speaking to His apostles about church discipline and His being among them when they are gathered? The Body of Christ, acting under Christ's and the apostles' authority, acts officially for God in a manner that an individual Christian would seem out of line doing alone.

- He may also be saying that the gathering of the saints, in some measure, manifests or even *incarnates* Christ's presence beyond that which would be possible in a solitary individual. Each

²⁵ Matthew 18:20

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 5:3-4

disciple is only one member of the Body, and cannot alone manifest the full-orbed expression of Christ as is the case with many diverse members combined. A hand or a foot alone is no adequate expression of the whole body of which it is a part. *“If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling?”*²⁷ Yet, a congregation of diverse members working in concert may well display Christ and allow Him to function very adequately through His Body. Paul said the Church has the role of being *“the fullness of Him [Christ] who fills all in all.”*²⁸ Of course, Paul did not have in mind those man-made, institutional, non-profit corporations that we today call “churches.” They did not yet exist in his day, so he never made reference to them. He had in mind the true, universal Church,²⁹ which finds expression in clusters of disciples in the local colonies of heaven among the nations.

When Jesus was here, He alone possessed and ministered through all the necessary *charismata*, but this is not true of any individual Christian in the corporate Body of Christ. Each of us has only one, or at the most, a few, of the gifts necessary to fully continue the work of Jesus. Christ is speaking and acting through the various gifted members of His Body. Some gifts minister to the physical (e.g., serving, giving), some to the emotional (exhortation, showing mercy), and some gifts to the spiritual (teaching, prophecy) needs of the Body. While every gift can be used outside the context of the gathered assembly, the greatest concentration of gifts ministering to the spiritual needs of the congregation is potentially found in the gathered assemblies. When *“the whole church comes together in one place...”*³⁰—because of the manifestation of the most-edifying gifts—even a visitor should be able to recognize that *“God is truly among you.”*³¹

It is not as though, when two or three are gathered, Christ is a fourth person present. Rather, when the Body gathers, they *are* the Body of Christ present in that place.

3. The need for corporate worship

I mentioned in the previous chapter that the verbal worship of God not only pleases Him, but also reorients our hearts, strengthens our faith, and terrifies the devil. This is true of praise and worship on the individual level. How much more is this the case on the corporate level? David said that God inhabits the praises of Israel.³² This statement occurs in a Messianic Psalm, in which David’s own

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:17

²⁸ Ephesians 1:23

²⁹ Unlike in many of his epistles, in the Book of Ephesians Paul never speaks of local assemblies, *per se*, but always speaks of the “Church” as the global community of followers of Jesus—God’s family on earth (3:14-15), the habitation of God on earth (2:19-22), the Body (1:23; 2:15-16) and the Bride of Christ (5:23-32).

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:23 (see especially vv.23-26).

³¹ *Ibid.*, v.25

³² Psalm 22:3

words may be seen as those of Christ.³³ It is notable then that David, as a type of Christ, says, in that Psalm,³⁴ *"In the midst of the congregation I will praise you."*³⁵ As Christ is among us wherever two or more are gathered, so our sincere congregational worship and praise gives expression not only to our own, but to Christ's heart of praise to the Father. In this sense, Christ Himself inhabits the praises of the assembly, and sings in our midst and through our mouths.

When the mouths of the King's gathered followers loudly proclaim "Long live the King!" it makes His rivals nervous. We see a similar situation in the case of David's successor Solomon's coronation.

Adonijah, one of David's sons, had decided to become the king in place of his father, and to edge out his rival Solomon. He gathered support from members of the military establishment and the priesthood, and held a feast at which he expected to be proclaimed king of Israel.

Nathan the prophet learned of their scheme, and told David, who quickly arranged an ad hoc assembly where the citizens of Jerusalem loudly proclaimed, *"Long live King Solomon!"* The enthusiasm of their proclamation made a great noise: *"the people played the flutes and rejoiced with great joy, so that the earth seemed to split with their sound."*³⁶

Adonijah and his followers were in the next village at their planned usurpation, but even they could hear the sound of the uproar in Jerusalem. A messenger arrived and reported to the subversive gathering that Solomon had been proclaimed king in place of his father. This proclamation struck terror into Adonijah's group of rebels, and we read: *"So all the guests who were with Adonijah were afraid, and arose, and each one went his way. Now Adonijah was afraid..."*³⁷

The vigorous declaration that Christ is King has a similar unnerving effect upon the dark powers. They know these words are true, and they tremble.³⁸ The four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, and the innumerable company of angels in heaven, all continually declare these things "with a loud voice."³⁹

There is an old joke about a woman who praised God extraordinarily boisterously in church, to the annoyance of some of those around her. Finally, another woman spoke to her and said, "You know, God is not hard of hearing," to which the enthusiastic worshiper replied, "True, but He isn't nervous either." However, the devil is indeed nervous, as he has every reason to be. The enthusiastic praises to God and Christ must torment him continually.

³³ *Ibid.*, vv.1, 14-18, 22

³⁴ In a verse that is quoted as messianic, in Hebrews 2:12

³⁵ *Ibid.*, v.22

³⁶ 1 Kings 1:40

³⁷ *Ibid.*, vv.49f

³⁸ James 2:19

³⁹ Revelation 5:11-13

Of course, while we are encouraged to “*make a joyful noise unto the Lord*,”⁴⁰ this does not mean that worship should be a random cacophony of unmelodious clamor. In one of David’s psalms, he exhorts the worship leaders to “*play skillfully with a shout of joy*.”⁴¹ In other words, musical and vocal skill should be a factor in songs of praise. God has some tone-deaf children. They should not be discouraged from worshipping enthusiastically—though it helps if those who can actually carry a tune sing more loudly! Since God created music, and inspires some to produce it, we should make every endeavor to worship beautifully. Where this is not possible, we should at least do so heartily!

Most of the long-standing hymns of the Church, and some of the popular choruses sung in churches are very worthy and uncompromising proclamations of Christ’s lordship. The more voices that sing these truths, the better! Of course, there are a great number of insipid, meaningless songs that have become popular among worshipers in recent decades. It is hard to imagine that miscellaneous, poorly strung together phrases of questionable meaning, focused more on the feelings of the worshiper than on the majesty of God, would have any adverse effect on the enemy. Who knows but that he himself may have had a hand in introducing such as replacements of the hardy proclamations of Christ as King that once were heard in the songs of the gathered warriors of the Kingdom.

Of course, worship is not restricted (as we sometimes may imagine) to singing and verbally praising God. Corporate worship also includes giving to the needs of the poor,⁴² ministry to one another as unto Christ,⁴³ and corporate prayer.⁴⁴

Jesus seemed to teach that corporate prayer may influence the hand of God even more than does “*the effective, fervent prayer*” of one righteous man (which itself “*avails much*”!).⁴⁵ That Jesus expected our prayers to be offered in concert with the like minds of other believers is seen in the exclusive use of plural pronouns in all the petitions of the so-called “Lord’s Prayer”: “Give *us* this day *our* daily bread,” “Forgive *us our* debts” and “Lead *us* not into temptation, but deliver *us*...”⁴⁶ In teaching us to pray thus, Jesus clearly had in mind corporate prayer offered by the assembly on behalf of the whole colony and of the Empire worldwide.

Involvement with institutional churches?⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Psalm 100:1 KJV

⁴¹ Psalm 33:3

⁴² Acts 4:34-35

⁴³ Matthew 25:40

⁴⁴ Acts 4:23ff

⁴⁵ The allusions are to Matthew 18:19 and James 5:16

⁴⁶ Matthew 6:11, 12, 13

⁴⁷ Some may feel that the institutional churches are here critiqued with too broad a brush. Most of my comments specifically mention “many” and “most”—not “all.” If the shoe does not fit your church, there is no reason to wear it. My assessment comes as one who has worshiped and taught in scores of churches over the past 50 years, who has been in many kinds of churches—both as a leader and a layman. Rather than take offense, any

It is conventional wisdom among Christians that they should “go to church.” But what does this mean? There are “churches” in every town and village in Christendom. Most cities of any consequence house hundreds of them. Believers are regularly encouraged to attend, and even to join, one of these groups—but this raises several legitimate questions. Why are there so many? What is their relationship to each other? Which one is best? What does it mean to “join a church”? Why is this necessary? Is it biblical?

Let’s begin by considering what is meant by “church membership.” Most churches, if you attend them for very long, begin to wonder when you might be considering becoming a “member.” This kind of talk illustrates a deviation from scriptural norms of thinking about churches. In the apostolic times, there was only one Church worldwide. This is still the case, as far as God is concerned. The one true Church was understood to have a footprint in each evangelized town. Every disciple of Jesus belonged to this Church from the moment of baptism. The baptized believers in a given town were regarded as “the Church” in that town. Apart from baptism, there was no special action of “joining” the church. If one is a baptized believer, the Holy Spirit has joined him or her to the Body of Christ globally and locally.

The modern idea of “joining a church” arose as a consequence of the chain reaction of divisions occurring in the Church after the Reformation. Before the Reformation, there was one Church in Western Civilization, as there had been in the time of the apostles. It was very unlike the Church in apostolic times, however, because it had become corrupted by the papal⁴⁸ leadership. In the sixteenth century, certain concerned teachers attempted to reform and purify the Church—among them, Martin Luther. Luther found the Church unresponsive to reform, and was excommunicated. Therefore he, and those sympathetic with his ideas, began to have meetings independently of the papal Churches.

This was the beginning of denominations. Once there were two competing options for Church involvement, there seemed no reason that there could not be three, four, four-hundred, or 44,000 (as there allegedly are today). Centuries later, every evangelized city had congregations of several different denominations. The denominational churches actually had more loyalty to the other churches globally that were associated with their own denominations than with the other churches in their same towns who belonged to other denominations. These denominations, rather than seeing themselves as one Body with all other believers in Christ, existed in rivalry with the otherwise-denominated churches in their same towns. Each competed with the others for the loyalty of

church that feels the sting of any of these observations might choose to examine the validity of the criticism. If it is found not to apply, then there should be no “sting.”

⁴⁸ Younger readers may need to be informed that I did not just misspell PayPal! The term papal means “pertaining to the popes.”

“members”—like Costco and Sam’s Club. One difference between the denominational churches and these large membership stores, however, is that Costco is not offended if you have membership in both their store and Sam’s Club. By contrast, those who hold modern concepts of “church membership” do not think it proper to be a member of two churches of different denominations. Just ask, when they invite you to become a member of their group, “If I become a member of this church, can I also be equally a member of all the other churches in town?” In all likelihood, they will not know what to say. How can you be a member of two different *competing* churches? Didn’t Jesus say you can’t serve two masters?

It is this reaction that tells you all you want to know about institutional churches. They often do think of their group as a “master” over their members. Their CEO is called a “pastor.” He has the “vision” for the organization. “Members” are the clients who fund and work for the pastor’s vision. This is the language of corporate business—not of functioning as a member of Christ’s Body. The latter is made of people, not of organizations. To them, being a part of the Church does not mean being a part of the Body of Christ (to which every Christian already belongs), but it means being a part of their organization, to the exclusion of comparable involvement in the rest of the Body of Christ locally.

This generally describes the mentality of the average institutional church in America. There are exceptions. At one end of the spectrum are the large megachurches, whose pastors possess the aura of superstars, who either are, or know how to hire, great event organizers, slick musicians, etc. They know how to put on a show and draw the crowds. I am not wishing to cast aspersions on the sincerity of such leaders. Hopefully, most of them really believe in Jesus and think they are doing God’s work—and well they may be—since God’s work can take many forms. What they are not providing, in most cases, is an environment where the kind of inter-relational involvement of their members can resemble that of the early Church. When you have over 5,000 congregants in a single gathering, only a tiny percentage can hope to find opportunity for expression of their particular gifts. My impression is that many such pastors don’t worry much about “church membership” as the average pastor tends to do. Some of these big churches don’t even have what most would call “membership.” So long as they remain the best show in town on Sunday mornings, they will have more in attendance than they can easily accommodate. There is little for the multitudes to do as “members.” Having people continue to come and fill the seats and the offering bags is perhaps the most that they can expect from 90% of those who show up on Sunday mornings.

At the other end of the continuum are those humble and honest pastors who do not covet loyal members of their own groups, who are not in it for a paycheck, and who genuinely see themselves as servants, not bosses. Their churches are often smaller, because they are not following every modern gimmick to lure warm bodies into their buildings. They preach the Word as faithfully as they know

how to preach it, and they love the people whom they serve. May their tribe increase—they are increasingly difficult to find.

Should the true disciples abandon these institutional churches? I do not recommend doing so—though, if remaining in one of these, it would be desirable to find one that is more faithful to scripture and to Christ than are others. If you find a group whose leaders are humble and non-controlling, whose people are characterized by loving mutual-involvement, where scripture is honored and loyalty to a particular doctrinal camp is not required, where your contributions (other than merely of money) can be appreciated, and where they do not covet you to be exclusively their member, then you would have very good reason to participate in that community as long as they allow.

You should not voluntarily alienate yourself from any of the children of God, including those who know no other Christian experience than that found in such institutions. Paul said, *“If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.”*⁴⁹ If they let you stay on good terms, do so. They are family.

Living peaceably does not mean that we should not *“speak the truth in love,”* so that we may *“grow up in all things into Him who is the Head—Christ.”*⁵⁰ Disciples who hope to grow cannot afford to be snowflakes who must be handled delicately. Anyone who is triggered by someone presenting the words of Christ and of His apostles has a tenuous claim to belonging in the colony of the King. My habit has been to remain among the Christians in institutional churches and to be supportive of anything there that I can support. There are plenty of weak and immature Christians toward whom we should follow Paul’s instructions to *“warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.”*⁵¹ Though these instructions, in their context, are directed to the Church leaders, there are many churches whose leaders may not be getting around to doing this pastoral work. True disciples of Jesus will serve wherever they see a need and can be of assistance to others. Some of the true spiritual leaders that God has given the church may not be part of the leadership team.

If your experience turns out to be anything like Elijah’s, by speaking the word of God faithfully (and humbly), you may find the Ahabs of the church labeling you a *“troubler of Israel,”*⁵² and taking forcible measures to remove your influence. If that happens, your decision will have been made for you.

In addition to any formal church involvement one may or may not have, one will usually need to find additional fellowship life beyond that which institutional churches offer. More will be said about that presently.

⁴⁹ Romans 12:18

⁵⁰ Ephesians 4:15

⁵¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:14

⁵² 1 Kings 18:17

Staying in the institutional churches may not be an option for any of us indefinitely. Developments in our current society may eventually drive Christian meetings underground, in which case, many of the ills of the modern churches may cure themselves. In countries where the Church is driven underground by persecution, fellowship life often naturally takes on the dynamics of the life of the early Christians, and the corporate machinery so familiar in institutional churches just ceases to exist. Richard Wurmbbrand noted that, in the underground gatherings of the Christians in Communist Romania, there were no Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists or Pentecostals—just Christians.

Many sincere disciples of Jesus have sought, to no avail, to find churches that actually follow the King and His approved patterns of life among His people described in scripture. Those shepherds who feed themselves, not the sheep, will always have difficulty maintaining credibility with those who weigh their ministries and find them wanting. Already, there is something of an exodus of godly families from the institutional churches which seem to be appealing to the most carnal attendees in the meetings, and neglecting the nurture of the maturing disciples. These churches may currently be attracting many new people to replace the escapees, but the ones leaving are often the ones whose presence had been like the *“cloud as small as a man’s hand”* through whom showers of blessing and revival might otherwise have come to the Church.⁵³

Involvement in “colonies” or “societies” of the King

Regardless whether, or how long, one may remain in the institutional churches, a believer’s best hope for spiritual health and survival is in some additional, smaller society that meets elsewhere, and at other times, than the Sunday gathering of the churches. There is no scriptural mandate to meet on Sundays, nor in a church building, so one may benefit more from some alternative gatherings. Any continuing activity in the big churches may need to be viewed as extracurricular fellowship, additional to the real place of growth in holiness in one’s life.

There have been, for many centuries, societies of believers meeting in homes or other non-religious venues to encourage, support, teach, learn from, pray with, and keep short accounts with one another. Before the Reformation, those who were dissenters from Roman Catholicism (e.g., Paulicians, Waldensians, Lollards) met separately from the institutional church in small groups for study and mutual encouragement. Of course, many larger churches today have organized small groups and “cell” meetings in addition to the main services. These may do fine. Sadly, too often, the unchallenging culture of the larger body tends to continue in the small groups. These groups can be good for individual growth, but often do not result in any change or improvement in the overall institution.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, v.44

Though small, religious societies had existed alongside the mainstream churches before his time, John Wesley, in 18th century England, became notable for his forming what came to be called “Methodist societies.” Wesley remained a member of the institutional Anglican church all of his life, but knew that, in order to spiritually thrive, his converts would need a more-New-Testament-like experience in addition to the Sunday services.

Anyone can start doing this kind of thing without “permission” from the churches, if he or she can find two or more like-minded souls to commit to such. For those in the institutional churches, such a supplementary fellowship may be just what is needed to allow them to break out into Christian liberty and spiritual growth. More and more “pastors” of formerly-Christian churches are now promoting corrupt social movements—pushing for the normalizing of social injustice outside, and sexual perversion inside, their assemblies. For those who find they cannot remain in these increasingly apostate churches, the small societies may fill a need for fellowship until the time when the whole fetid religious enterprise collapses under the weight of its own apostasy. When the rains and floods come, the institutions built on sand will be washed away, and the site will be cleared for the emergence of a less compromised movement of faithful Kingdom colonies built upon the Rock.

A Methodist blogger, Wes Magruder, posted an article⁵⁴ in which he bemoans the loss of the thirst for holiness, and the disappearance of the societies planted by their founder, in the United Methodist denomination. They are not alone. Magruder reminds those of his denomination:

The Methodist movement began with the alluring, impassioned, desperate desire to be holy, to get close to God in an intimate way...in a way that the local parish church wasn't providing... John Wesley wanted to stir up desire for holiness. So he organized societies. The only requirement to become a member of one of these societies was “a *desire* to flee from the wrath to come and to be saved from (one's) sins,” a “desire for holiness of heart and life.”⁵⁵

The Anglican Wesley, with his Moravian friend Peter Bohler, started their first society meeting in 1738 with the following two rules:

- 1) That they will meet together once in a week to confess their faults one to another and to pray for one another that they may be healed, and
- 2) That any others, of whose sincerity they are well assured, may, if they desire it, meet with them for that purpose.

⁵⁴ <https://um-insight.net>

⁵⁵ <https://um-insight.net/blogs/wes-magruder/holy-passion%2C-or-why-the-umc-needs-to-rediscover-%27society%27> — accessed 8/1/20

They held their meetings on Wednesday nights for two hours and their society grew. As they grew they divided their membership into smaller bands, which would meet as many as three times a week, giving more opportunity for intimate conversations and the sharing of their lives.

Wesley was a successful evangelist, preaching often in the open air to the average laboring men of eighteenth-century England, and many were convicted under his preaching. He offered no “altar call” after his messages. Instead, he invited any who had been (as he put it) “awakened” or were curious to learn more to attend a “society” gathering. This way, if the awakened conscience led to conversion, the new believer was already in a healthy, nurturing environment where true discipleship could take place. Magruder explains:

But this was not “church,” nor was it “worship,” properly speaking. The point was to provide a safe haven where interested persons could gather for support and encouragement as they began the “way of salvation.” The society was not simply a place of fellowship; it was a serious school of discipleship. Thus, one had to live up to the standards espoused by the society. In fact, Wesley would regularly toss people out of the societies if they did not make a serious attempt to follow Christ!⁵⁶

From such small beginnings, bigger things developed. Describing the later societies in Wesley’s day, Magruder writes:

The society buildings were a beehive of activity and excitement. At Foundery Lane [the original society meeting], the society held 5:00 am preaching services every morning. They also held regular love-feasts (simple meals), as well as watch-night services...[Wesley] admired the original discipline of the Church and was convinced that, if its main features could be reproduced, an opportunity would be given for the deliverance of men from sin and their growth in holiness.⁵⁷

Magruder’s blog indicts his denomination in words that would easily describe a great many other denominational groups as well: “[John Wesley] tried to lead people to Jesus and then to growth in holiness; we have become content to lead people to the Church, and then to growth in volunteerism.”⁵⁸

During the revival of the 1970s called the “Jesus Movement,” there were hundreds of thousands of young people converted in the short space of a few years. Many of the established conventions of traditional church were critically re-examined and new wineskins were sometimes adopted. Many of

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Bold type in original

the converts had previously been hippies who had been familiar with communal lifestyles. As a result, “Jesus communes” began spontaneously to form where dozens or hundreds of *Jesus People* lived simply, and worked jointly, to promote the Kingdom.

One phenomenon, in which I participated a great deal at that time, was what one might call the “ministry house.” These had names like “House of Miracles,” “Mansion Messiah,” “Maranatha House,” “Shiloh House,” “Thy Brothers’ House,” and such. These mostly consisted of single adult disciples, along with the occasional married couple, who wanted to share lodging expenses, band together in outreach, and have a place of fellowship and discipleship to accommodate new converts. Perhaps five to twelve people would share a rented home, sleeping in bunk beds, sharing bedrooms, working during the day for a living, and holding Bible studies evenings in the living room for both the residents and the public. I lived in such houses most of my single years, and taught Bible studies in numerous others. The value of these houses was that high standards were encouraged, providing young believers with a “new normal” to replace the lives of hedonism that many had known as hippies.

There is no standard paradigm for the colonies of the King’s Empire. The true fellowship of saints is supposed to be led by the Spirit, not by any specific program—though Paul makes a strong appeal for orderliness in Christian gatherings.⁵⁹ It is not the gatherings alone that characterize the King’s colonies. It is the love and the purity seen in the lifestyles of the colonists in daily conduct.

Those who experiment with trying to improve on the institutional models of assembling are in danger of falling into two opposite errors—legalism and libertinism. *Legalism* seeks to improve the holiness of the life of the community by imposing rules, rather than by cultivating love for Christ (remember Odysseus and Orpheus?). *Libertinism* is the allowing of loose behavior among the saints. These opposite errors are often reactions to past experiences in churches that either were too libertine (resulting in one’s swing toward legalism to compensate⁶⁰), or that were too legalistic (tempting one to over-compensate by swinging the opposite direction⁶¹). The Galatian churches made the first error; the Corinthians made the second. Either error will destroy the spiritual life of the colony—and so will the allowing of a critical, judgmental spirit toward people and groups that do things differently.

The true way of discipleship when practiced according to the Spirit and teachings of Christ will result in a community of *agape*. Love is neither legalistic nor loose-living. Nor is it hyper-critical. It is following and imitating Christ in all things. The community of those who live like Jesus will shine like a light on a hill, glorifying God and drawing those whose hearts God has touched to join the Kingdom community. By full participation in the colony they will trade their old cultural ways for those of a

⁵⁹ 1 Corinthians 14:40

⁶⁰ In the worst case, resulting in a new Judaizing movement advocating “*Torah observance*” for believers.

⁶¹ The opposite extreme from legalism is the heretical opposition to “*Lordship Salvation*” and the “*hyper-grace*” movement—which assert that righteous behavior is not required of the believer who is saved by grace.

culture characterized by *“righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”*⁶² Without such community, the chances of a new disciple thriving are minimal.

⁶² Romans 14:17

Chapter Nineteen

Extending the Kingdom

“...a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image...And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth...And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.”

(Daniel 2:34-35, 44)

*“And whoever falls on this stone will be broken;
but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.”*

(Matthew 21:44)

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”

(Matthew 13:31-33)

In Daniel’s explanation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, and in Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed, we find that it is the destiny of the Kingdom of God to be extended to the entire world. In the parable of the leaven, Jesus described the internal impact the kingdom would have upon society. The rising of the lump of dough corresponds to the elevation of human culture and society brought about by the bringing of the Light into the darkness that once covered the earth. Such is the predicted impact of the Kingdom of God on this planet.

To a remarkable degree, this has already happened. You and I have arrived somewhat late in the story, after significant progress had been made by earlier generations. There is today no nation on earth where the influence of the King, Jesus Christ, has not been introduced and had an impact. At the time of this writing, approximately one-third of the people on earth are self-identified as “Christians.”

Of course, there are many pockets of ignorance and of resistance remaining within every nation. In some parts of the world, the Kingdom has as of yet exercised little cultural influence, and Christians remain a small, persecuted minority. Also, the masses who identify themselves as Christians are often poorly evangelized and poorly educated in the things of Christ. Many of the believers in Third World and non-English-speaking countries, have not had access to Bibles and resources in their languages,

and have ignorantly retained cultural superstitions from their past, intermixed with their belief in Jesus.

Even in the highly educated, historically Christian sectors of the world, the main core of the gospel has often been misapprehended and those who belong to the churches do not seem to understand the implications of the message preached. Even preachers, too often, merely repeat the traditional message of the denomination under which they themselves were evangelized and trained. They often do not do much in the way of fulfilling Christ's commission to teach all nations *to observe everything*¹ that Jesus commanded.

With this much ground yet to cover, we should be devoted to the task of bringing the knowledge of Christ's kingship to our own generation, hoping, where necessary, to redress the deficiencies of some of our predecessors. Jesus said that our first priority in life, even above the pursuit of our own sustenance and physical needs, is to "*seek...the kingdom of God and His righteousness.*"² But what does this mean, and how is it done?

What does it mean to seek the Kingdom of God?

Our lives are inevitably spent in some pursuit or other. Perhaps it is the desire for an ideal marriage and family, or a certain standard of living, or success and recognition in a specific field. There is nothing evil about such blessings, but they are the wrong focus. If you aim at any such personal goals you may actually obtain them—or you may not. If you do, they can offer a measure of personal gratification for a temporary period of time. They might even, in the providence of God, have some secondary role in furthering the Kingdom of God. However, as pursuits in life, they represent the wrong priority.

When we seek the Kingdom of God first, it does not mean that we do not obtain a family, a home, or a career. Jesus promised that the pursuit of the Kingdom would bring with it all necessities of life in its train. Of course, what God regards to be "necessities" will not include all that one could selfishly desire. Although I have been seeking the Kingdom of God for my whole adult life, and have lived with relative financial scarcity much of the time, I have never lacked for any good thing. Looking at the circumstances that God has brought about in my life, I am amazed how many of the good things of life have come to me without my making them objects of pursuit.

To "seek" the Kingdom must certainly include the determination to enter and to eventually inherit the Kingdom for oneself. I say "determination" because Jesus said that "*the violent [meaning, the forceful] take it by force.*"³ Jesus juxtaposes this "forcefulness" with that of worldly powers that

¹ Matthew 28:20

² Matthew. 6:33

³ Matthew 11:12

seek to oppose the advance of the Kingdom. This statement of Jesus is parallel to the similar observation in Luke, where Jesus says of the Kingdom: “*everyone is pressing into it.*”⁴

The daily internal and external opposition to one’s decision to surrender his or her own will to the will of God renders it a life not for the faint-hearted. Jesus Himself appears to have sweat blood under the stress of surrendering His will to the Father’s with regard to the “cup” that was given to Him.⁵ The writer of Hebrews provides perspective to those running the hard race: “*You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.*”⁶ This suggests the degree of determination appropriate and necessary for success. However, when Jesus experienced this struggle we are told that an angel was sent to Him to strengthen Him.⁷ God does not leave His trusting servants to fight and struggle alone. The grace of God is supplied and is sufficient⁸ to strengthen you for heroic endurance.

Beyond endeavoring to enter the Kingdom oneself, there is the equal determination that God would be glorified in the additional conquests of the nations and subcultures that have either not known or resisted His claims until now. Every potential activity of ours must be evaluated through the lens of whether it is advantageous or detrimental to the Kingdom’s ultimate success.

Thus, the very management of a home for hospitality, of nurturing and discipling children, or of working faithfully in any vocation in which God has placed you, are all Kingdom-advancing activities that one can do without seeking missions farther afield. Remember, the Kingdom consists of *people*, and meeting the needs of the Kingdom means meeting the needs of others.

Most types of regular employment can be conducted as an adjunct to a primary pursuit of the interests of the Kingdom of God. Some forms of employment contribute directly to the advance of justice, the reduction of poverty, the improvement of human relationships, the production of resources and tools for others who are employed in such activities, or the propagation of the gospel. There are no realms of life—whether domestic, social, economic, or political—which cannot be improved by the introduction of righteous methods and just outcomes. If we have been led to consider such objectives as merely “secular” concerns, we should remember that Jesus said that the good works people see done by the Church will lead them to glorify God.⁹ How can this be regarded as a secular goal?

The presence of a disciple of Jesus in any workplace provides an opportunity for a witness for Christ to impact others there, and may be the very reason for God’s placing one of His agents there. Those in the other cubicles or offices, behind the counter, or on the assembly line, may be doing identical types of work, but the one seeking the Kingdom has unique motives for doing a good job—

⁴ Luke 16:16

⁵ Luke 22:42-44

⁶ Hebrews 12:4

⁷ Luke 22:43

⁸ 2 Corinthians 12:9

⁹ Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:12

namely, to glorify God. Everyone else is just making a living for themselves, but the agent of Christ's Empire serves in that place as a spiritual saboteur to undermine the dark lord's grip on the lives of others there and to bring the conquering Light into that place.

Even if one's employment seems to provide no opportunity for social interaction or interpersonal impact, every job shares one feature with every other kind of gainful employment—it generates revenue. For the disciple of Christ, working for a living is working for the Kingdom of God. The support of one's own family is a legitimate concern of the Kingdom of God, though it should be done at a level of expense that reflects one's priorities to waste little or none of the Master's resources. The goal is to distribute as much as possible to the needs of the poor or to the preaching of the gospel by others who do so effectively.

Likewise, in one's recreational and leisure time many good works for the Kingdom may be pursued. Those who have time on their hands due to retirement, underemployment, or flexible work schedules have particular opportunity and responsibility to turn time into fruitfulness. The same is true of those who have weekends and vacation time available for activities that can be exploited to produce a net value to the Kingdom and its various concerns—e.g.,

- taking a short-term mission trip to build houses or churches or to dig wells or to conduct Vacation Bible Schools,
- volunteering for useful church work, or for a Christian non-profit organization,
- visiting shut-ins,
- mowing the lawn, planting flowers, or housecleaning for a disabled person,
- fixing a car or an appliance for a single mother,
- mentoring fatherless boys or girls,
- growing garden crops for your table or to bless others,
- going out to share one's faith by random encounters, etc.
- writing letters to prisoners.

While such opportunities may not be the first things to come to mind in a leisure moment, they invariably bring greater satisfaction and do more good than does the spending of the same time playing a videogame, chatting endlessly on the phone, watching television, or aimlessly surfing the web.

These suggestions are directed especially to those whose careers and gifts are not those of the evangelist, pastor, missionary, Christian writer, or broadcaster, or other such vocational servants of the Word. Though most believers are not preachers, *per se*, this does not diminish their opportunities to seek the expansion of God's Kingdom interests. Seeking the Kingdom involves doing all that one can do to guarantee one's own place in it and producing as much fruit for the kingdom as

opportunities and resources allow. It means doing all other things for the glory of God and advancing any ends consistent with Christ's ambition to bless "*all the families of the earth.*"¹⁰

Praying for the kingdom's success

Regardless what we may do or preach, the kingdom's expansion is God's doing. Jesus made this clear in the parable about the growing seed,¹¹ where the emphasis is on the fact that the farmer, after planting the seed, does not make it grow. It grows whether he is awake or sleeping. He doesn't know how. The actual growth of the plant is owed to mysterious forces incomprehensible to the farmer.

Paul spoke the same way about his successfully planting the Kingdom colony in Corinth. Paul preached the gospel there initially. After he had moved on, Apollos came and also preached there. Apollos also eventually left. Through their serial efforts, a colony of the Kingdom was planted and was growing in Corinth. Using the same agricultural metaphor as Jesus' parable, Paul said: "*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.*"¹² The success of the Kingdom in Corinth, as in any pagan city, required the total moral transformation of the converts. Humanly speaking, such transformations are impossible. Of the Corinthians, Paul wrote:

"Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."¹³

Paul attributed the power to accomplish such major life transformations to "*the Spirit of our God.*" Though we participate in the work, the expansion of the Kingdom is God's doing. The field belongs to God. Those who plant and water the seeds cannot make them grow—but God does:

*"For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven,
And do not return there,
But water the earth,
And make it bring forth and bud,
That it may give seed to the sower
And bread to the eater,
So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;*

¹⁰ Genesis 12:3

¹¹ Mark 4:26-29

¹² 1 Corinthians 3:6

¹³ 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

*It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please,
And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.¹⁴*

Only God is capable of doing His own work. He works through people who are filled with, empowered, and gifted by the Holy Spirit as instruments. The work accomplished is therefore the Spirit's accomplishment. This means that there is no more limitation upon the potential success of our enterprise than the limits of God's own ability and power—limits which have never yet been discovered. Is the task large? It is huge! Is the power and competence to succeed sufficient? It is unlimited!

The power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in His global endeavors is available through prayer. *"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"¹⁵* If the labor is done by spiritually-gifted workers doing the will of God, but the work still does not succeed or progress, the failure may be on the part of those who have not prayed: *"You do not have because you do not ask."¹⁶*

No doubt most of us do not pray *as much*, or *as well*, as we should—unlike Jesus, who regularly rose a long time before daylight to pray alone. The prayer, *"Your kingdom come; Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,"* passes the lips of hundreds of millions of Christians every day (in some cases, repeated numerous times in rapid succession!). Yet, the kingdom's progress in terms of hearts captured and of lives deeply changed is often not as we could wish. Is there something more than just praying required? Yes—praying *well*.

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures."¹⁷ It would appear that the prayers of many are without effect, due to their not being prayed in the right manner. There are several aspects of prayer that seem necessary in order to move the hand of God even in His own cause:

1. Jesus said that Prayer is addressed to the Father.¹⁸ This is how Jesus and the apostles prayed.¹⁹ While there can be no objection to speaking also to Christ in prayer, the norm, and the instructed method, is to pray to the Father. Now, this fact presupposes that prayers are being offered by those who are actually God's children and who, as such, can address Him as their Father. This is predicated on a relationship of love, trust and obedience to God on the part of the petitioner, and on God's recognition

¹⁴ Isaiah 55:10-11

¹⁵ Luke 11:13

¹⁶ James 4:2

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, v.3

¹⁸ Matthew 6:9; 7:11; John 16:23

¹⁹ Mark 14:36; Luke 23:34, 46; John 12:27-28; 17:1ff; Acts 4:24-30; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 3:14

of that person as a member of His own family.²⁰ One must be a true child of God, approaching Him as a son or daughter approached a father. When a disciple approaches God with a valid request, he or she approaches One who is already committed and predisposed to accommodate the needs of His child.²¹ If prayers seem to be unavailing, this may be a consideration. One must be a disciple of Jesus—and thus a child of God.

2. *Prayers are to be brought in Christ's name.* Requests must be brought by one who has authoritative access and standing in the throne room. Christ has such standing, of course, and any authorized agent of His is welcome to present petitions to the Father on Christ's behalf (the meaning of *in His name*). Authority in prayer inheres in the standing of the one bringing the petition. As those authorized to act and pray in the name of the King—meaning those who are His authorized agents—we have the same standing to make requests of God in Christ's name²² as Jesus has.

3. *Prayers must be prayed with God's overriding interests in mind, not our own selfish ones.*²³ Prayers for selfish ends are the very description of heathen prayers. *"After all these things the Gentiles seek."*²⁴ The pagans and many professing Christians see the deity as a means to some personal gain. There is no such bell-hop deity enthroned in the heavens. The instructed disciple's prayers are presented to the Father in heaven, whose name is sacred, and whose Kingdom and will on earth are the chief ends of legitimate prayer. Prayer must conform to the will of God.²⁵ Prayers for the success of the Kingdom already qualify on that score.

4. *We must have a sincere interest.* When praying according to the will of God, the petitioner ought to take the requested matter as seriously as he or she expects God to take it. In our prayers, do we really bring to God our heartfelt burden for the fortunes of the Kingdom, or are we like those of whom Jesus (quoting Isaiah) said: *"These people draw near to Me with their mouth...But their heart is far from Me"*²⁶?

Prayer is partnering with God in His projects. As such, we see ourselves as having the same stake in them as He has, and share with Him an equal concern for their accomplishment. To pray for the salvation or relief of people in need, we need to be prepared to be inconvenienced in pursuing the requested outcomes. On one occasion, Jesus told His disciples to *"pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."*²⁷ No sooner had He set them praying, but He divided them into teams

²⁰ Mark 3:33-35

²¹ Matthew 7:9-11

²² John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23

²³ *Ibid.*, v.3

²⁴ Matthew 6:32

²⁵ 1 John 5:14-15

²⁶ Matthew 15:8

²⁷ Matthew 9:38

of two, and sent them out into the harvest fields to work them.²⁸ Another time, the disciples approached Jesus with concerns about the hungry multitudes. He answered, “*You give them something to eat...How many loaves do you have? Go and see.*”²⁹ If you pray, expecting God to take an interest in something, you should possess at least an equal interest and be invested enough to become part of the answer to your own prayers! God might say to you, as He said to them, “That’s a great suggestion—you go and do that!”

No doubt this is why “watching” and “fasting” seem to be encouraged as accompaniments to prayer. “Watching” is like fasting—but from sleep. Fasting specifically refers to abstinence from food, and watching specifically refers to abstaining from sleep. Jesus exhorted His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, to “*Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation.*”³⁰ He chided them, when they fell asleep, “*Could you not watch with me one hour?*”³¹ We often stay up late, or rise early, in order to do things that are important or enjoyable to us—to go to work, to see the sunrise, to go fishing, or to get an early start on a vacation trip. What does our failure to do so for the sake of prayer reveal about its importance to us? Whether fasting or watching, or both, the addition of such measures to our prayers indicates our being in earnest about our supplications. Making such sacrifices is a way of showing a willingness to “put our money where our mouth is,” so to speak. If we care enough to expect God to do something about a matter for which we are praying it is only proper that we should also be prepared to sacrifice personally for that end, if called upon to do so.

5. *Prayers must be asked “in faith.”*³² Prayer is warfare. Paul told Timothy to “fight the good fight of faith.”³³ The promotion of the kingdom involves warfare against demonic darkness and satanic deception, which lies upon the minds of the benighted world and on the heart of every unredeemed person. The mission is the dispelling of the darkness by the bringing of the Light of the world.

For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people;

But the Lord will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you.

*The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising.*³⁴

Prayer is the most effective means for the advancement of spiritual light against darkness. The disciples’ power against demons was diminished when they lacked prayer and faith. When they asked

²⁸ Matthew 10:1ff

²⁹ Mark 6:37-38

³⁰ Matthew 26:41

³¹ *Ibid.*, v.40

³² Mark 11:24; James 1:6-7

³³ 1 Timothy 6:12

³⁴ Isaiah 60:2-3

Jesus why they had been unable to exorcize a particular demon, He replied, “*because of your unbelief.*”³⁵ He then added, “*This kind can come out by nothing but prayer.*”³⁶

When praying properly, faith is placed in God Himself,³⁷ rather than in a particular result or outcome. Of course, it makes no sense to pray that God will do something that we do not believe He desires to do and can accomplish. Jesus asked two men desiring a miracle from Him: “*Do you believe that I am able to do this?*”³⁸ Prayer desires God’s power to be dispatched on behalf of those who rely upon Him and who call upon Him to act on His own behalf. However, the faith of the petitioner must be, first and foremost, in the faithful character of God³⁹ and the authority of Christ. Christ always has the power of the veto. If God chooses to do something other than the specific thing that we ask Him to do (as He did in the case of Lazarus, for whom his sisters had sought healing), the trusting child will correctly assume that God *has a better idea* than the one presented in our petition.

Prayer is to be offered in faith—meaning trusting God’s wisdom and power to accomplish the very best result. It does not necessarily mean that a specific requested outcome will always occur. Faith is not in outcomes, but in God. His character and His concern for the needs of His family and the success of His enterprise can be counted on. If the prayers conform to the will of God, we can be confident that they will be granted as asked. If, unbeknown to us, our prayers are misdirected, we trust that God will override them and proceed to do the thing that He regards as best, instead. This is faith in God.

6. *We must persevere in prayer.* Delays in seeing prayers answered give occasion for us to wonder whether our prayers really accomplish anything. The temptation to neglect prayer is often due to the distinct feeling that when we are praying we are doing nothing useful. We know that direct action or labor brings immediate and visible results—but praying? It is in the delay that our faith is tested. Do we believe God’s promises? We need to remember that Jesus said that prayer moves God to do those things that only He can accomplish. It is thus, potentially, the most effective, world-changing use of time in which we can be engaged.

For reasons undisclosed to us, the answers to some prayers meet with greater resistance from the enemy than do others. God is not reluctant to answer His children’s proper requests, but he apparently delivers the answers through agents who can be temporarily resisted by demonic forces. This is what we learn from Daniel’s experience in Daniel 10. The prophet prayed and partially fasted over a period of twenty-one days, seeing no results. Finally, a heavenly being dispatched to carry the answer to him from God arrived. In a rare unveiling of the invisible workings of the heavenly realm,

³⁵ Matthew 17:20

³⁶ Mark 9:29 (some manuscripts add “*and fasting*”)

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11:22

³⁸ Matthew 9:28

³⁹ Mark 11:22

the messenger told Daniel that God had released the answer the same day that Daniel began to pray.⁴⁰ The twenty-one-day delay in its arrival was due to interference encountered by the messenger, *en route*. A demonic principality had sought to intercept and derail God's answer, and the divine messenger had spent three weeks fighting off this opponent.⁴¹

It may well be because of Daniel's perseverance in praying and fasting that additional reinforcements were eventually sent in the person of Michael the archangel to assist this messenger.⁴² Only the arrival of this additional assistance allowed the prayer's answer to be delivered to Daniel without further delay.

Similarly, our wrestling *against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age and against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies*⁴³ is largely through our prayers. In his famous exhortation about the armor of God, Paul first tells us to suit-up in the armor and to take up the sword. Having done so, the only warfare activity he specifically mentions in the engagement of the enemy is "*praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints...*"⁴⁴

Notice how many modifiers Paul adds to the mere exhortation to pray. Prayer is to be "in the Spirit." This means to be guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus Himself depended upon the Spirit, in order to defeat the dark powers: "*If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.*"⁴⁵

Paul also mentions that prayer is to be accompanied by *watching*, which we discussed above.

Our prayers must also be "*with all perseverance,*" continuing steadfastly in an activity that can be daunting and exhausting. Battlefield fatigue is a very real part of striving in prayer. Jesus knew this well. His disciples fell asleep when they should have been praying. Jesus was clearly disappointed, but sympathetic. Upon discovering their neglect, He mused, "*The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*"⁴⁶ As David also consoled the faithful, "*He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.*"⁴⁷

The fact that Christ can empathize with our weakness, however, does not change the fact that the battle needs to be waged and won and that we are letting Him down when we sleep on the job. In Luke 18:1, we are told that a parable of Jesus was given to make the point "*that men always ought to pray and not lose heart*"—revealing that Jesus was well aware of the temptation to give up or to neglect prayer.

⁴⁰ Daniel 10:12

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, v.13

⁴² *Ibid.* v.

⁴³ Ephesians 6:12

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, v.18

⁴⁵ Matthew 12:28

⁴⁶ Matthew 26:41

⁴⁷ Psalm 103:14

Why do you suppose the devil tempts our flesh to be lazy, discouraged, or apathetic in this regard? Is it not because prevailing prayer is the only power on earth that is capable of overwhelming him and energizing God's human and angelic forces?

The parable that Jesus told to make this point was about a widow frustrated by her powerlessness in her cause against a powerful legal adversary. She begged the judge to vindicate her cause, but he seemed uninterested in her case. In the face of such rebuffs, she was not prepared to "lose heart." She believed that persistence with the judge would win the day. She was right. The judge in the story was not a man of principle or compassion but he was persuaded to defend the widow against her foe—even if only to get her to stop pestering him.

Jesus is clear on the fact that God is not like the judge in the story. He is more like a father who enjoys giving good things to His children when they ask Him. However, sometimes our unanswered prayers may make God *seem* unconcerned with our case. Jesus' point was, if the woman could get her request granted through persistence from a judge who cared nothing about her, *how much more* should God's children confidently persist in prayer to a God who is attentive to their every need and concern!

As long as there remain enemies of Christ who have not yet been brought under His feet in subjection, let us pray! The kingdom is expanded through prayer—hence the command to pray, "*Your kingdom come.*"

Preaching the gospel of the kingdom

Backed by prevailing and faithful prayer, there is no weapon more efficient in conquering hearts and territory than the preaching of the Kingdom of God. After listing five pieces of *defensive* "armor," Paul mentions only one *offensive* weapon: *the Word of God*—by which he means the *preaching* of the Word of God—the gospel: "*And take...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*"⁴⁸ It was through preaching the message of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated and nurtured His Kingdom at the very beginning. Subsequently, it was through men "*preaching the kingdom of God*"⁴⁹ that the Kingdom grew in the apostolic times.

The Kingdom grows and expands by taking more people into itself. Every individual is either in the kingdom of Satan or in the Kingdom of God. When the gospel is preached, and people respond in repentance and faith, they are translated from the dark lord's power and are added to the loyal following of King Jesus. God's Kingdom grows at the expense of Satan's kingdom—which explains Satan's motive for resistance, however futile it may be. The transition from darkness to the Light

⁴⁸ Ephesians 6:17

⁴⁹ Luke 4:43; 9:2, 60; 16:16; Acts 8:12; 20:25; 28; 31

occurs when the minds and the hearts of men and women learn of Christ's lordship, and are persuaded to change their allegiance to Him.

The gospel itself is the "*power of God to salvation for everyone who believes*"⁵⁰—but only when the true gospel is communicated. Paul told the Corinthians that they had been saved by believing the gospel he had preached to them.⁵¹ We may be too quick to assume that the gospel, as preached in the modern American churches, is one and the same as the gospel that was preached by Paul, and the rest of the early church. But what if Paul's fears that churches could receive "another gospel"⁵² have been realized?

Consider the word "gospel" itself. What do we mean—or what do people *think* that we mean—by that common term? Most Christians are at least aware that the English word "gospel"—and its biblical Greek counterpart *euangelion*—have the generic meaning "good news" or "glad tidings." This much we may know, but what have we been communicating about the specific contents of these particular good tidings? We certainly have good tidings for the world—but *about what*?

This is where we had better be sure we understand what is meant by the term "Kingdom of God."⁵³ If we think that the gospel can be summarized as the good news about going to heaven because we are justified by grace through faith, then we are about average in the evangelical world. These facts are true, but if that is all that we have grasped, then we have not fully comprehended or preached the gospel as it was understood and proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles.

What if the popular gospel we have heard is not actually that by which Paul's converts were "saved"? Could this explain why so many of those who have come into the churches under such preaching have such a substandard Christian experience? Might this be the best explanation for the weakness and the worldliness of so much of the modern Churches? The early church was populated by excited, engaged, serious disciples ready to suffer or die for Jesus. This is because the gospel preached to them demanded their whole lives and infused them with a thrilling vision of purpose and mission.

God sacrificed His own Son in order that His true message to humanity might take hold and transform our lives and God's world. The Church is the custodian of this message. We are to preach it to the nations. If by neglect we fail to grasp and transmit it correctly, the effect will be adverse in both the present world and the age to come. It is primarily the former that has been so greatly neglected in popular preaching.

⁵⁰ Romans 1:16

⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 15:1-2

⁵² 2 Corinthians 11:3-4; Galatians 1:7-9

⁵³ If you are not clear on the meaning of this term, I recommend the first book in the present set, *The Empire of the Risen Son: A Treatise on the Kingdom of God—What it is and Why it Matters*; Book One: *There Is Another King*, by Steve Gregg, 2020

Chapter Twenty

Have We Been Preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom?

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

(Galatians 1:6-9)

*For if someone comes and proclaims...
a different gospel from the one you accepted,
you put up with it readily enough.*

(2 Corinthians 11:4 ESV)

We naturally assume that the gospel as we have heard and believed it is essentially the same as the gospel that Paul's converts had heard from him. If we thought otherwise, we would change our understanding of the gospel to that of Paul's. However, if our gospel had drifted sideways from that to which the early Christians had responded, and had done so generations ago, so that no one we knew had heard differently than we had, how would we notice this? By appeal to scripture, no doubt. However, we do tend to read the scriptures through the lenses of our assumptions. We believe we know what they teach and, more often than not, we read them as supporting those things that we have assumed to be true—even if there are a few relevant verses that don't seem to fit our paradigm quite perfectly.

Some groups admit without embarrassment that they preach a different gospel than that which Jesus preached, but they think Paul did so as well, and that Paul's version of the gospel is the more appropriate one for the present dispensation. They believe that the gospel they preach, though differing from that which Jesus preached, is nonetheless the correct one that Paul preached. That they find any significant difference between Jesus' gospel and Paul's is a peculiarity of their modern system, and can easily be proven to be a misapprehension on their part.

Jesus and Paul both preached the same gospel. Every element of the one true gospel is found in both the teachings of Christ and the writings of Paul. Of course, the other apostles likewise preached the same gospel as did Paul and Jesus. The question for us today is: Are we preaching that same

gospel, or would Paul speak of what we preach as “another gospel”? There is enough at stake that we must be brutally honest with ourselves about this.

Justification by faith—is that the gospel?

In the Reformation the true doctrine of *justification by faith alone* was reemphasized as a biblical teaching after centuries of inadequate preaching by the Medieval Church. This doctrine is certainly to be found in the teaching of Christ, but was expounded as a special emphasis in a few of Paul’s letters.

We may justly affirm that justification is by faith alone, but this affirmation is not the whole of the gospel preached by Christ and the apostles. In the teaching of both Jesus and Paul, we find no suggestion that either justification or faith are ever really *alone*. Justification, seen as the legal acquittal of the sinner on all counts, is not the total equivalent of the word “salvation” in scripture. The latter word is much broader, so that justification represents a small part of the whole concept. The preaching of justification is, therefore, not exactly the same as preaching salvation in the Kingdom.

In addition to justification, biblical salvation includes regeneration, reconciliation, restored fellowship, sanctification, functioning as a member of the believing community, Christian service, spiritual transformation, perseverance, and eventual glorification. None of these in the absence of the others defines the full-orbed phenomenon that the New Testament calls “*so great a salvation*,”¹ nor the complete message of the gospel preached in the New Testament. These are all aspects of what it means to enter the Kingdom of God. Salvation is inclusion in this Kingdom. Justification cannot even be said to be the most important part of salvation—just the initial part.

Justification refers to God’s expunging the sinner’s record of guilt, removing the default condemnation that otherwise would debar all sinners from His presence. In justification, the former deserter receives absolution and pardon, freely and immediately, upon repentance as in the case of the thief on the cross.² This allows the believer to enjoy the original blessings of living in harmony with the King, which had originally been forfeited by sin and rebellion. Having come into the family of God, one is now an obedient child with an inheritance and an assignment. The believer is enlisted in the King’s armies and engaged in His battles.

¹ Hebrews 2:3

² Luke 23:42-43

According to scripture, apart from initial justification, other aspects of salvation come at the cost of determined striving,³ diligence,⁴ and “pressing in.”⁵ Full salvation involves the redemption, not only of the soul, but of the whole life in all its parts—as Peter and Paul both emphasize.⁶

The truncating of the gospel, as popularly preached, has led to the truncating of the salvation experience of the seemingly “converted.” N.T. Wright has observed:

“...in many classic Christian circles, including the plethora of movements that go broadly under the label “evangelical” ...there has been the assumption, going back at least as far as the Reformation, that ‘the gospel’ is what you find in Paul’s letters, particularly in Romans and Galatians. This ‘gospel’ consists, normally, of a precise statement of what Jesus achieved in his saving death (‘atonement’) and a precise statement of how that achievement could be appropriated by the individual (‘justification by faith’). Atonement and justification were assumed to be at the heart of ‘the gospel.’ But ‘the gospels’—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—appear to have almost nothing to say about those subjects.”⁷

In addition to what Wright said about the four gospels, we should add the Book of Acts as well, where we find numerous examples of post-ascension evangelistic messages preached, especially by Peter and Paul. As one would expect, the message they preached after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, required the declaration of these vital events. These elements were present, but not emphasized, in the teaching of Christ,⁸ and a new emphasis on them in apostolic preaching did not involve the subtraction of any feature of the original message preached by Jesus in His lifetime. No significant element of Christ’s teaching is absent from the apostolic message, and Paul specifically said that the mark of a heretic is his departure from affirming Jesus’ words (1 Timothy 6:3).

According to the preaching of the apostles in Acts, salvation is the same as entering and living in the Kingdom of Christ—just as Jesus had always preached. They recognized the significance of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, not exclusively for their atoning function but also as the completion and confirmation of the Kingdom message Jesus had preached. They saw these events not only as the means by which Christ paid for sins, but also as the means by which He was exalted to His throne.⁹

Amazingly, the subject of the atonement hardly appears in Peter’s or Paul’s recorded gospel sermons. Their message was that, in Jesus, the Messiah-King had appeared, bringing the long-awaited

³ Luke 13:23-24; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Hebrews 4:11

⁴ 2 Peter 1:5-11

⁵ Luke 16:16;

⁶ See Romans 6:15-18; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 1:15-19

⁷ N.T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 6

⁸ E.g., Mark 10:45; Matthew 12:40; 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 22:44; John 2:20-22.

⁹ Acts 2:30-36; 13:28-34

Kingdom, to which He was now actively recruiting followers. The only thing they added that was not as prominent in Christ's preaching was that the King had subsequently, by means of His death, resurrection, and ascension, been officially installed by God on His throne and over His Kingdom, so that His kingly authority had now become universal.¹⁰

Grasping the content of the gospel of the Kingdom, as it was originally preached by the apostles, is so urgent for those who would extend the Kingdom by preaching, that we should carefully examine the actual content of the evangelistic preaching of Peter and of Paul. Fortunately, we have several helpful samples recorded in the Book of Acts. I take the liberty of citing an excerpt on this subject from one of my earlier books¹¹—

The gospel which “must be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations” is the good news “of the Kingdom” (Matt.24:14). Judging from the samples of evangelistic preaching found in Acts, we would have to conclude that the main elements of this message were as follows:

1. Long ago, God made promises to the patriarchs and to David that a King of David's lineage would be permanently enthroned in David's place—one called the “Messiah,” or “Christ;”¹²
2. These promises have been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, the Promised One, whom God publicly endorsed by working acts of power through Him before many witnesses;¹³
3. Jesus had enemies, who crucified Him, but God restored Him to life, after which He was seen by witnesses, prior to ascending to His throne at the right hand of God;¹⁴
4. Since Jesus has been enthroned, it is incumbent upon all people to acknowledge His royal prerogatives (or “lordship”), and to repent of their rebellion against Him. To those who do this—embracing Him as Lord and Messiah (King)—He will graciously grant amnesty for all past rebellion.¹⁵

It is evident that the gospel, as preached by Jesus and His apostles, had an entirely different focus from that which has become standard evangelistic fare in American evangelism. Modern presentations are commonly directed to the self-interest of the hearers (“Come to Christ so you can escape from the punishment you deserve in hell”). By contrast, the biblical sermons appealed to God's interests: Christ's crown rights and man's duty to surrender, here and now, to His

¹⁰ Acts 2:33-36; 10:36, 42; 17:31; Philippians 2:9-10

¹¹ Steve Gregg, *Why Hell?* (Thomas Nelson, 2013; Zondervan, 2024), 60-61

¹² Acts 2:16-21, 25-31; 3:18, 22-25; 4:11; 10:43; 13: 27, 29, 32-35; 26:22

¹³ Acts 2:22; 3:13, 16; 10:38-39; 13:23

¹⁴ Acts 2: 23-24, 32-35; 3: 14-15, 26; 4:10; 5:30-32; 10: 39-41; 13: 28-35; 17:31; 26:23

¹⁵ Acts 2:36-39; 3: 19-20; 4:12; 5:31; 10:43; 13: 26, 34, 38-39; 17:30-31; 26:23

Lordship and to become a part of His expanding Kingdom. Primitive preaching focused on giving Christ the place that He deserves, rather than on sinners escaping from the place that they deserve.¹⁶

Few, in modern times have been evangelized by anything other than a promise of justification, seen, almost exclusively, as a free pass to heaven. It is startling, once we look for it, how seldom this element is encountered in the evangelistic preaching of Christ or of the apostles. There, it is eclipsed by the larger context of *Kingdom* salvation, perceived as a restoration to proper relationship with God—as a son to a father, as a servant to a master, and as a subject to a king.¹⁷

Justification is not the whole, nor the end goal, of biblical salvation. It is the entry point. It is the amnesty granted by the King to a repentant deserter who is returning to living under the King's dominion. It allows the pardoned defector to return to his proper position of loyalty and submission to the King with all that such a relationship implies. That reconciliation and the ensuing relationship are inseparable aspects of salvation. For the justified man, there remains the business of serving his King faithfully for the rest of his days on earth.

Children born into a family neither receive nor maintain their standing in the family by their good works or obedience. This does not mean that family life does not entail any duties for the children. The child is born into a role in which obedience to one's father and mother is fully expected.

Similarly, the believer is not justified and reconciled to God *by* obedience, but he or she certainly is reconciled *for* obedience.¹⁸ Anything less than the child's obedience is an affront to a parent—and especially to a king. The remorseful prodigal returning to his father is immediately and freely forgiven, and returned to sonship status. He has now become (it is assumed) a faithful son who has vowed to respect and honor his father's authority as he previously had neglected to do. In biblical salvation, justification results in reconciliation with God, and initiates a lifelong submission to Christ's authority. Justification is by faith alone, but justification never *exists* alone. It is part of a larger benefits package.

When a baby is born, it is a wonderful thing. However, the birth is not viewed as the *finale* (except momentarily, perhaps, by the relieved mother!), but as the child's initiation into the society of the family. Birth is not an end goal but the beginning of a new life for that child. He or she is now part of some larger plan, having relationships to respect, an education to gain, a role to perform, and an eventual inheritance to receive. Sometimes our evangelistic mentality toward the convert seems to

¹⁶ It is true that we don't have the complete sermons of all the apostles recorded in Acts. However, it seems that Luke has endeavored to preserve the germ of their messages. For us to suggest that any particular element was present in their preaching which is nowhere recorded in scripture would be a case of our importing our own ideas of what we think they ought to have said, and assuming they agreed with us.

¹⁷ Luke 15:18-24; 17:7-10; Matthew 22:1-14

¹⁸ Luke 6:46; Acts 5:29, 32; Romans 15:18; 2 Corinthians 10:5; Ephesians 2:8-10; Hebrews 5:9; 1 Peter 1:2, 14

be, “Well, we caught that fish; throw it in the bucket and let’s go catch some more.” Imagine a father who, as soon as his baby was born, said to his wife, “Wonderful! We successfully landed that one! All the family is rejoicing! Now, let’s get us some more!”—as if the birth of the baby was the only part of its life that matters. I have heard many people, when returning from an evangelistic outreach, report how many sinner’s prayers were prayed by their contacts. I always think, “So where are they now? Do they have any idea what to do next? Do they know there is anything more to being saved than merely saying a prayer, and getting a ticket to heaven? Who will disciple them and instruct them of the implications of their reconciliation with God?”

Faith alone?

As justification is never *unaccompanied* by other aspects of salvation, neither is the faith that procures justification ever *alone*. According to scripture, faith is what brings us back to God, but it is also the principle by which the believer’s life is lived. When saving faith is present, other phenomena come along with it. The writer of Hebrews expected his readers to exhibit in their lives “*things that accompany salvation*.”¹⁹ What things? A change of direction in life is certainly among the first. The follower of the King no longer follows the patterns of the rebel against the Crown. The believer has adopted new goals, new values, a new worldview. The mind is being transformed.²⁰ The fruit of Christ-likeness appears as a result of the working of the indwelling Spirit.²¹ Change is being experienced “*from glory to glory*” as the believer is being transformed into the image of Christ.²² Sinful behaviors, anxieties and depression give way to “*righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*.”²³ This is being “saved” from sin into a life newly created,²⁴ which is naturally devoted and loyal to another King—Jesus. This is the life associated with being in the Kingdom of God.²⁵ You will not find Jesus or any biblical writer suggesting that anything less than this is normative salvation. Salvation is life lived with the King, in His Kingdom, both now and forever.

When James writes, “*Faith without works is dead*,” he did not mean that adding good deeds to faith is the means by which one is justified. Rather he is pointing out that true justifying faith is accompanied by a changed heart and direction in life exhibited in behavior. In most New Testament

¹⁹ Hebrews 6:9

²⁰ Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23

²¹ Galatians 5:22-23

²² 2 Corinthians 3:18

²³ Romans 14:17

²⁴ John 3:3, 5; 2 Corinthians 5:17

²⁵ Romans 14:17; Ephesians 5:3-5

contexts, the word “works” simply refers to one’s generic actions or conduct.²⁶ A changed mind is seen in changed behavior.

It is ironic that many, who seem to understand neither James nor Paul properly, have accused these men of being at odds with each other on this matter of faith and works. Yet, Paul says essentially the same thing in Galatians 5:6: “*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.*” Paul’s “*faith working through love*” is no different from the faith that produces works, of which James speaks. Both men are speaking agreeably to the earlier teaching of the Lord, who plainly challenged the one who professed faith and loyalty to Him, “*Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?*”²⁷

The truly saved and justified person is known by his or her obedience to Christ. This means that righteous *behavior* will be in evidence: “*Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness [that is, exhibits righteous behavior] is righteous [genuinely justified], just as He [Jesus] is righteous.*”²⁸ We may have told people that, when justified, they are “righteous, just as He is righteous.” This is true. But John says that the justified person is known by his or her practicing righteousness. He implies that no one whose life fails to be characterized by righteous behavior can be thought to be one who is justified by faith. Faith is not unaccompanied. It brings with it righteous living. John’s statement is introduced with a warning not to be deceived by any contrary notions. Are we deceived? Have we deceived others?

Complacent self- certainty

It should be terrifying enough, given the anathemas pronounced by Paul on those who alter the gospel message, for us to suspect that we might be among those against whom he made these pronouncements! We should beware of any default self-assurance on our part which would exempt our own case from cross-examination—simply because *we think we know* that ours is the authentic gospel. We feel confident of this for the following reasons:

- We know we are within a venerable tradition with roots in the Reformation (which we all appreciate).
- Our preaching is generally in agreement with many of the successful evangelists of the past four centuries.

²⁶ Exceptions to this generalization would be in discussions specifically of “works of the law”—meaning ritual works such as the Jews specially observed—circumcision, dietary restrictions, and the observing of special days that are commanded in the *Torah*.

²⁷ Luke 6:46

²⁸ 1 John 3:7

- We ourselves have been saved under the very kind of preaching and message that we are presenting to others—and we see others also being saved through it.
- Learned people, who know the Bible better than we do, have often seen things the way we have been taught to see them.
- We can easily cite Bible verses in support of every major point of the message we preach.

This list, at first blush, grants to our message impressive credentials. We should, however, see our own experience in the proper context, realizing...

- The Roman Catholics whose concept of the gospel was rejected by the Reformers, were also encouraged by seeing themselves as followers of a venerable, thousand-year-long tradition (Roman Catholicism), which viewed itself as having its roots in Christ and the apostles.
- Medieval believers within the Roman Church, from whom the Reformers separated, also had been told by their leaders that the doctrines of their system were the means by which they were saved.
- The fact that every camp has its scholarly advocates suggests that being scholarly is no guarantee of being right. Every theologian belongs to some community of scholarship who tend to shape and confirm one another's outlook. Every denomination has its own academic community. Specialized biblical training may, for this reason, simply encourage and reinforce the party's collective interpretations of scripture, and render the trained scholar less objective than is the untrained disciple in seeing the statements of Christ and the apostles for what they actually say. Jesus acknowledged this phenomenon when He said, *"I thank You, Father...because You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes."*²⁹
- All heretical cults can cite Bible verses in support of the major points of their systems. Very many Roman Catholics, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses have been every bit as convinced that the scriptures supported their positions as you and I are that they support ours. Many from these groups have since awakened to the fact that they were mistaken in their interpretations which—although seeming to support their false impressions—actually required their ignoring even more scriptural data than that which they felt supported their case. In what sense do they differ from us?

²⁹ Matthew 11:25

In making these observations, I do not mean to imply that the truth of the Bible cannot be known with certainty. While some aspects may be left a bit vague by the biblical writers, certain knowledge of every matter of consequence (like the gospel itself) can be gained by honest and thorough searching of the scriptures. The problem here is in the word “honest.” While not calling anyone in particular a deliberate deceiver, I know the difficulty we have of being completely honest *with ourselves*. In matters as important as our salvation, we have a vested interest and seek to gain certainty early in our religious experience. We then tend to cling tenaciously to that which we believe has become the guarantee of our heavenly security. This is an understandably strong impulse. However, we must not be defensive of that which provides our sense of security (which could prove to be false security) in the face of conflicting scriptural statements of the King and His apostles themselves.

The true gospel of the Kingdom may agree admirably with the message many of my evangelical readers have accepted and are already preaching. I hope this is the case. But not all evangelicals preach the same message, and very many preach a denatured gospel, emphasizing a mistaken goal and an unscriptural means to that goal. In American evangelicalism, in particular, we are sometimes like advertisers selling merchandise, and tend to make the gospel an irresistible message of advantage to the prospective convert. Listen all day to Christian radio broadcasts and see how many times the presenters imply that their unconverted listeners should consider becoming Christians simply because they will thereby secure a home in heaven after death. Take note of whether you ever hear a word that suggests that the reason one should follow Christ is because, as the Supreme Ruler, *He deserves it*, and submission is *owed to Him* by God’s decree.

Many of us assume that no one would come to Christ without strong appeals to their selfish nature. The question should be asked, are those who are responding to appeals made to their selfish natures actually *coming to Christ*? How many of us would think to declare to sinners, “Even if you could get absolutely nothing out of a full surrender to Christ—even if there were no heaven, hell, or rewards in this life or any other—Jesus is nonetheless your rightful King. Obedient subjection to Him is what God requires of all people”?

I suspect (I wish that I did not) that many preachers do not think that Christ Himself is particularly attractive to the sinner, and feel that He is a “hard sell” unless we lure people with extra premiums and bonuses. I always have to wonder whether they have met the same Jesus I have known and enjoyed serving since my youth. Do we perhaps give people the subliminal impression, by our manner of preaching, that they would not find walking with Christ itself to be enjoyable? If we present Christ to people as He really is, we will find that He Himself holds enormous appeal to the sinner. He always did. If we preach heaven instead of Christ as Lord, those who respond will often be doing so because they want heaven, rather than because they have much interest in Him.

The dangers of a modified “gospel”

I want to guard against giving the impression that no one ever gets genuinely saved upon hearing and receiving a regrettably inadequate presentation of the gospel. Some actually do, and those may include some of those reading this page. I would say that the preaching under which I myself was converted and became a follower of Christ was, in many respects, deficient when compared with the apostolic gospel in scripture. I do not remember being given any real explanation of what the Kingdom of God is, or the meaning of key concepts like “lordship” or “repentance.” This was unfortunate, but somehow, what I heard made me love and revere Jesus, and to know that obedience to Him was my reasonable duty.

The Holy Spirit apparently worked through an abbreviated version of the gospel upon a heart that was primed to submit. Without knowing the nomenclature or meaning of some of these concepts, I experienced them, nonetheless. This does not mean that I was not somewhat crippled spiritually by deficiencies in my understanding, but I was capable of coming under the lordship of Christ without a clear understanding of the relevant terminology. That is because salvation is a work done by God when our hearts surrender to Him. No one can come to Christ unless God draws him.³⁰ I mention this in order to clarify that I do not doubt that many have been truly saved under poor gospel presentations. The true surrender of the heart to God and Christ is the key to conversion, which some people genuinely choose, even without their having heard the whole story.

On the other hand, our modern gospel (in contrast to the gospel of the Kingdom) is capable of appealing to sinners who are in no sense prepared to come to Christ on *His* terms. This allows many to “make a decision for Christ” without really having a clue as to what it is they are deciding—and without having any interest in knowing or doing what Christ demands.

The apostolic gospel presentation, as recorded in the Book of Acts—while never mentioning anything about the afterlife, heaven, or hell—nonetheless had respondents spontaneously surging forward (without an altar call) and eagerly beseeching the preachers, “*Men and brethren, what shall we do?*”³¹ There is the power of the true gospel. It is, in fact, the power of God to salvation for all who believe it.³² By contrast, our failure to preach the gospel of the Kingdom, in favor of the truncated gospel of much of American evangelicalism, often produces a variety of bad fruits:

1. False assurance of salvation

³⁰ John 6:44

³¹ Acts 2:37

³² Romans 1:16

We have returned several times already to the terrifying words of Christ predicting that “many” on the Day of Judgment will arrive there fully, but falsely, assured of their own good status as Christians. Some of these will even have exhibited powerful spiritual gifts. However, as Jesus warns, many of these will be chagrined to hear, from the one on the throne: “*I never knew you!*”³³

I do not know how anyone can read that warning with complacency. These people were sure of their standing, but theirs proved to be a false assurance of salvation. Can any of us be so un-self-reflective as not to wonder whether any of these shocked people might be among those whom we have evangelized? Or whether they might be *us*?

At age fifteen, I was trained in soul-winning by a respected evangelical organization. We were instructed that we must bring the candidates to the point of saying a “sinner’s prayer.” We were told, “You must never allow them to leave until they have assurance of their salvation.” This point was strongly emphasized. If the respondent said a sinner’s prayer, and did not spontaneously receive assurance of salvation, we were instructed in how to impart this missing element.

After the prayer, we were to ask them, “So are you saved?” We were told to expect the probable answer, “I hope so!” We were to reject that answer. We were to read to them 1 John 5:13—“*These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life...*” Did you notice that phrase, “*that you may know...*”? After reading this verse we were to ask them again, “So, do you *know* that you have eternal life?” Apparently, the most frequently anticipated and encountered answer to this second query was still, “I *hope* so!” This would not do. We were to continue reading the same verse repeatedly, asking the same question—coaching them as to the right answer, if they were slow in getting the point—until we received the response desired: “Yes! I *know* I am saved!” Having acquired our aim, we were to give them some materials or instructions about the need to pray, read the Bible and go to church, and then we were free to seek out another sinner and repeat the process.

When I was older, having spent hundreds of hours immersed in the scriptures, I began to doubt this practice. I read in scripture that the Holy Spirit “*bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God,*”³⁴ and that “*He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself.*”³⁵ It seems that those who had made a saving response to the apostolic gospel normally had an inward assurance that they had passed from death into life. When the Holy Spirit truly regenerated a person, in those days, such a radical phenomenon was expected to be noticeable internally as well as externally. The apostles seemed to believe that when the Spirit enters the soul, He announces His own arrival. These statements in scripture resonated with me when I discovered them, because I was aware, in my own case, of that very phenomenon.

³³ Matthew 7:22-23

³⁴ Romans 8:16

³⁵ 1 John 5:10

Now, suppose I were to induce some poor sinner to “say the prayer,” but there was no accompanying self-announcement of the Spirit in his or her heart—should I proceed to convince the candidate that all is well with his or her soul? How could I affirm to such a “convert” a matter about which God Himself had withheld from them any such affirmation? If such a witness of the Spirit within were present, it would seem superfluous for me to beat the candidate into submission with scriptures to provide an assurance already present. On the other hand, if the Spirit’s witness is lacking, who am I to insist that the person has really been converted? Might I be in danger of providing a false assurance of salvation that will lead that person to a terrifying revelation in the end?

1 John 5:13 tells us about the salvation of no person in particular. It is a general statement about “*you who believe*.” How do I know whether the person who mouths a formulaic prayer really believes anything at all in a saving way? It would seem truer to scripture to say that the one who lacks the Spirit’s witness is one who has not yet come to believe.

The pertinent question is, “*you who believe what?*” We may reasonably assume that the person we evangelize may not be led to believe more truth about Christ than we have presented in our version of the gospel. Many have been rushed into saying a sinner’s prayer based upon the simple message that Jesus died for their sins and will become their “personal Savior” if they will merely “accept Him into their hearts.”³⁶ I believe this is the message most often heard and preached among American evangelicals. The real question is, how much of it has any correspondence to the biblical gospel, and how much of the true biblical gospel (perhaps the very core?) has been left out of such a presentation?

Many people can be persuaded to confess that Jesus is their Savior when they have no concept of any cost attached to this acknowledgement. While the Bible does tell us that Jesus is the Savior, it nowhere says that the acknowledging of this fact, or “accepting” Him in this specific role, will save anyone. Paul said with utter clarity that one must acknowledge Christ as “Lord” in order for Him to also be one’s Savior.³⁷ Do the unbelievers to whom we speak even know what the word “Lord” means? Do they know that this means Christ is the Owner and King, to whom they are being called to humbly submit their wills, instead of following their own dreams or agendas?

Perhaps our prospect knows that Jesus died on a cross, but does he or she know that a cross awaits every follower of Christ? I suspect that few have understood any of these facts when they were evangelized—therefore what they were consciously agreeing to when saying “the prayer” may have been far less than what the gospel requires. Kings are to be obeyed. Those who do not obey their Kings stand condemned as rebels and deserters.

³⁶ No part of this message, after the phrase “died for their sins,” contains terminology found in scripture,

³⁷ Romans 10:9

To preach the true Kingdom of God message will mean we probably cannot report back to the gathered Church every weekend that we have had 37 people “say the prayer” on our recent outreach (unless a true revival breaks out). But wouldn’t one *true* disciple, genuinely converted, be worth more than 37 counterfeit believers, who remain unconverted after we have sent them home falsely assured that they are true Christians? The former result will provide the greater consolation of knowing that we have not set up some poor sinner for a terrible shock at the judgment seat of Christ, and that we will actually see the new disciple happily serving God at our side in days to come.

Unlike some readers, perhaps, I have no fear that the above paragraphs will cause a truly saved person to lose his or her assurance of salvation. From my reading of the early disciples and martyrs in the first three centuries, I do not believe it is possible to thus rob of assurance one who has the Spirit’s inward witness given to God’s true children. There is no tragedy in disabusing someone of a false assurance, and (I am persuaded) no possibility of depriving a true disciple of his or hers. It is not our job to assure anyone of his or her salvation. This is what the Spirit is to do.

2. Fragile or carnal Church members

Years ago, I witnessed two Christians discussing an eschatological controversy. At one point, one of them exclaimed, “Well, if there is no pre-tribulation rapture, then I don’t even want to be a Christian!” I was sorely tempted to say to that person, “Don’t worry. You probably aren’t. Since Jesus and Paul both promised that disciples will experience tribulation in this world,³⁸ you might save yourself time and later embarrassment by walking away now, before you bring further reproach upon Jesus.”

More recently I heard a pastor on YouTube telling his congregation (a direct quote):

If you're unsure concerning the pre-trib rapture, I feel so sorry for you. How are you able to sleep? How are you not freaking out if the rapture is not before the seven-year tribulation?...if I had any uncertainty about that, I'd be digging a tunnel. I'm not trying to be funny. This is not hyperbole. Were it not for the sound doctrine and the biblical truth of the pre-trib rapture, I would literally go out of my mind! I would go insane and I'm serious about that. That is not hyperbole...were it not for that, I'd be curled up in the fetal position!

Shockingly, this man holds the position of “pastor” in an evangelical church, but does he even know what it means to be a Christian? Does he not know that faith in God provides restful sleep in times of danger (Psalm 4:8)? Unlike this pastor, Peter slept comfortably the night before his

³⁸ John 16:33; Acts 14:22; 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4; Revelation 2:10

scheduled decapitation!³⁹ This pastor apparently became a follower of Christ (if such he is) upon the assumption that this would provide an exemption from tribulation, imprisonment, torture, and premature death. The gospel he heard in his denominational setting (a movement with an end-times obsession, that ironically prides itself on teaching through the whole Bible verse-by-verse) somehow failed to include the most important part of the gospel—namely, that *it isn't about you escaping from your trials! It is about your loyalty to King Jesus—even to death, if it comes to that.*⁴⁰ How foreign is his faith to that of Paul, who told the Ephesian elders:

*...the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*⁴¹

Imagine having a pastor who has never learned what Christians throughout history learned in such trying circumstances—namely, that God gives the grace to go through times more hellish even than those that he hopes to escape. We mustn't forget the saying of Jesus—

*These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*⁴²

How many whom we regard as fellow brothers and sisters in the Church would think similarly to that fragile believer—even if they are not honest enough to say it out loud? What gospel have they heard and believed that allows them to imagine that they are true followers of the King, and yet leaves them entirely unprepared to be loyal to the King in a hostile world?

Suppose the pastor of a megachurch with thousands of professing Christians in attendance were to begin regularly to inform the congregation that sometime very soon their commitment to Christ might realistically cost many of them their homes, their jobs, their freedom, or their lives. What might we predict about the near future of that Church? My guess would be that they would soon be looking for a buyer for their property, and seeking a smaller venue for their gatherings—but what great fellowship with true disciples of Jesus they would then have!

This is not merely hypothetical. Already it is extremely common to find Church members who apparently cannot retain their faith under the slightest test or inconvenience. Many professing Christians seem to have too little stability even to endure a difficult marriage—to say nothing of enduring martyrdom! Christ calls us to be faithful to Him unto death. What are we to think of a man

³⁹ Acts 12:6

⁴⁰ Matthew 16:24-25; Luke 14:26-27; Revelation 2:10; 12:11

⁴¹ Acts 20:22-24

⁴² John 16:33

or woman who cannot even stay faithful to a partner through periods of conflict and temptation to bail out? To hear of Church members abandoning their marriage vows, and effectively renouncing their faith by divorcing their faithful spouses, has become so commonplace as to cease to shock us.

Many are known to cheat in their businesses and in their marriages, to behave like unbelievers behind closed doors, and to shrink from speaking their faith in an environment where telling the truth may hurt their careers or get them a black eye. What never ceases to shock me is the complacency of the churches they attend in tolerating such abominations within their ranks.

If today's Churches would practice godly Church discipline (as both Jesus and Paul commanded to be done), and would uphold the standards of holiness among their members that the apostles required in their churches, we would already see most of these people repentant or gone. It may be for this very reason that church leaders so regularly defy the commands of Christ in this matter, knowing that a diminished congregation size would correspond with a diminished church budget (including diminished staff salaries). A mind to "pleasing men" is indeed a trap, as Solomon said.⁴³ Paul realized that he had the option of pleasing men—but it would be at the cost of being no servant of Christ.⁴⁴ Every man needs to decide what he will be...and whom he will serve.

Since Jesus said that only those who endure to the end will be saved,⁴⁵ would it not be better to populate the Church with those who will endure because they have been informed from the beginning about Kingdom salvation and discipleship? I suspect many a good-hearted preacher has reasoned within himself, "If I can only get these half-converted folks to stay in the church long enough, I can someday be more honest with them about the claims of Christ."

So how is that working out? The longer a fragile believer is allowed to remain in the congregation without being confronted with the true claims of Christ the more he or she will become established in the conviction that all is well—and the more offended when the biblical norms are finally enforced (if that ever actually happens). In the meantime, the Church that should be filled with warriors for Christ remains impotent—more like a hospital where the number of invalids hopelessly overwhelms the few doctors. Until the gospel of the Kingdom begins to be preached as the apostles preached it, our churches will continue to be viewed as they often are now—places for comforting patients with crippling spiritual disabilities, but who never really receive curative treatment that they need. Where is that vibrant and militant community of those who are strong in the Lord and in the power of His might? They are where the gospel of the Kingdom is faithfully preached in the power of the Holy Spirit.

3. Reproach upon the gospel, Christ, and His Body

⁴³ Proverbs 29:25

⁴⁴ Galatians 1:10

⁴⁵ Matthew 24:13; Revelation 2:10; 17:14

Some will protest, “But isn’t the Church supposed to be a hospital for the spiritually sick?” This certainly would not be the first analogy to come to mind from scripture. The more scriptural metaphors would be those of a majestic and holy temple,⁴⁶ a growing and maturing Body,⁴⁷ a family of stalwart and faithful sons,⁴⁸ an armed and armored company ready to engage the enemy,⁴⁹ a glorious bride,⁵⁰ a shining city on a hill,⁵¹ a Kingdom confronting and terrifying its evil rival.⁵² These are the actual metaphors for the Church found in scripture.

A Christian leader might reply, “but you have to work with what you have! Through no fault of my own, my church is full of spiritual cripples and invalids.” How did this come to be so? What kind of gospel was preached that brought such unhealed and unspiritual “disciples” into the fold?

Yes, it often happens, as Paul says, that the “*uninformed and unbelievers*” may occasionally wander into the gathering of the saints out of curiosity.⁵³ Paul does not suggest that such a person should be entirely comfortable in the gathering—finding there a group of similarly uninformed unbelievers. The Church’s normative evangelization takes place among sinners in the marketplace, and outside the Christian assemblies. Church gatherings are for believers under instruction. I am not saying the unbelieving visitor should be made unnecessarily uncomfortable by finding bizarre behavior in the meeting. He or she, as Paul warned the Corinthians, should not find a room full of people resembling “madmen”⁵⁴—but neither should it seem that he or she has entered a familiar, worldly environment. The unconverted visitor is stepping out of one’s own world and visiting another society where he or she is an alien. According to Paul, when the unbeliever visits the Church, the ideal would be that such manifestations of the Spirit’s presence should be found there that “*he is convinced by all, he is judged by all*” and so “*falling on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.*”⁵⁵ How often do the visiting unbelievers have this reaction to our modern assemblies?

The Bible nowhere describes the Church as a medical clinic, though Jesus did once compare Himself to a physician visiting sick patients. Of course, the patients to which He referred were unbelievers, not disciples.⁵⁶ They were not in the Church, but in Israel’s red-light districts. Christ described His evangelistic mission as being “*to call...sinners to repentance.*”⁵⁷ If churches are filled

⁴⁶ Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5

⁴⁷ Ephesians 4:11-13

⁴⁸ Ephesians 5:1; 1 John 2:14

⁴⁹ Ephesians 6:10-17; Revelation 12:11

⁵⁰ Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 21:9-11

⁵¹ Matthew 5:14; Hebrews 12:22-24

⁵² Matthew 12:28; Luke 14:31-32

⁵³ 1 Corinthians 14:23

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, v.23

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, vv.24-25

⁵⁶ Matthew 9:12

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, v.13

with unconverted sinners this may present a great opportunity for the preacher to call them to repentance—but *this is not what the Church assemblies are supposed to be*. The true Church is the Body of Christ, comprised of reborn disciples whose gatherings are not evangelistic services but occasions of expressing Christian community, mutual love and edification, and the training in what it means to observe all things that Christ has commanded His followers to do.

Our problem may simply be that our churches rarely even aim at being actual *Churches*—gatherings where the disciples assemble to celebrate Christ’s reign among themselves as true disciples of His Kingdom. For a religious institution to bear in vain the name of “*church*” can do little other than to continue to invite the reproach that the world has learned to heap upon Christ’s Kingdom. This contempt is largely due to alleged Christians whose lives do not portray the same loyalty to Christ that was displayed in the lives of the original apostolic community.

***So, when all is said and done, what is the apostolic gospel of the Kingdom
that needs to be preached to all nations?***

I have never believed in prepackaging a presentation of the gospel. The gifted evangelist must speak as the Spirit directs, drawing from a complete understanding of the message entrusted to the Church. The selection and arrangement of the elements of their message was not standardized in the biblical examples of apostolic evangelism. However, there was an underlying narrative from which they never deviated nor failed to draw their central points. In short, it is the message of the sovereign privileges, or crown rights, of the Messiah Jesus combined with the demand of submissive surrender to His lordship by any who would enter His Kingdom.

Anyone wishing to check the accuracy of his or her preaching and its agreement with apostolic preaching should take the trouble to examine and analyze the contents of the recorded evangelistic messages of Peter and Paul in the Book of Acts.⁵⁸ While I think it likely that these are abbreviated accounts, one may reasonably connect the included elements together—filling in the gaps from the apostles’ writings. From the sum of these, I myself would distill a message such as the following (others may slightly differ in their summaries):

I come to you with great news! The God who created all things (in accordance with promises He made long ago through the prophets of ancient Israel) has sent and appointed His unique Son as the all-powerful and loving Ruler over all of heaven and earth! Because of this, God requires all who breathe to honor and submit to His Son as their legitimate and absolute King.

⁵⁸ A sampling of these may be found in the following passages: 1) Peter’s sermons: Acts 2:14-39; 3:12-26; 10:34-48; 2) Paul’s sermons: Acts 13:16-41; 16:22-31; 22:1-21

This King previously lived on earth as one of us—as the man, Jesus of Nazareth. While He was here, God proved His Son’s credentials through His miraculous healings, signs, wonders, and deliverance of the victims of demonic power. There were numerous credible eyewitnesses to these things. Jesus was deeply resented by those whose power was threatened by His claims. They eventually arrested Him and had Him executed on a Roman cross—though He had committed no wrong.

Even His death was part of God’s plan for our salvation from the bondage of Satan and from the power of our own sins. His death provides for the criminal record of every former defector from His reign to be expunged, and removes every barrier that formerly prevented our access to Him on good terms.

After His crucifixion and burial, God vindicated His Son by raising Him from the dead three days later. Many were allowed to encounter and interact with Him after His resurrection, and they have reliably testified to this. Jesus returned to heaven, where God has coronated and installed Him alongside Himself as King over God’s entire realm. That realm includes every one of us.

When His present reign has reached its goals, Jesus will return to judge the world in uncompromising justice. His visible reign of universal justice and peace will then be among us forever. His Kingdom currently exists visibly among men on earth in the company of those who acknowledge His status as King and Lord. These are those who willingly submit to Him as His servants.

According to God’s decree, since Jesus is the rightful King of all, every person owes Him total allegiance. His only requirement is that we switch our allegiance to Him and follow Him at all costs. Upon our doing so, He grants us full amnesty and pardon for our earlier rebellion against Him. Returning to Him means that we turn from our old lives and live as His followers, trusting in Him for all things, and remaining loyal to Him as our Ruler for the remainder of our lives in the midst of a hostile but doomed world order. When this decision is made we must be baptized to signal the transition we are making from our old loyalties to our coming under Him in His universal Empire. He will fill us with His own Spirit, by which He will dwell always inside us, enabling us to live the new life in a manner altogether pleasing to Him.

That is His message to the people of the earth. Resistance is futile, since He will ultimately conquer all who oppose Him and return to judge and reign personally among us.

It is truly good news! There is now for us an alternative to our aimless lives of rebellion and alienation from God. There is another King—one Jesus. Do with this information what you will, but know that we shall all stand before God and give account of our decision.

Afterword: The task remaining

There is still much to be done, and the accomplishments of our forebears—some of them heroic, and some abysmal—have, at best, secured only a toehold in the global target zone. What remains? Those who have not yet heard of Christ must be reached with the true gospel of the Kingdom, and many of those who have already been recovered for Christ have need of being re-educated (that is, *disciplined*) in the things of Christ’s Kingdom. The fact that a gospel has been preached throughout the world does not mean that “*this gospel of the Kingdom*”⁵⁹ has been thoroughly preached and made known in the evangelized regions (nor even in the Christian *assemblies*).

When considering the ground yet to be covered in the fulfilling of the Great Commission—especially the teaching portion—one might be tempted to despair at the magnitude of the remaining task. Such discouragement may arise especially if we had previously been thinking that the end of the world and the second coming of Christ are very near, and that there are just a few “finishing touches” lacking in the fulfilling of the Great Commission. Perhaps, understanding the nature of the gospel we are to preach, seeing the failure of many churches and missions to actually preach it, we may begin to feel that the coming of the Lord may not be as near as we had hoped.

Perhaps it is not. It is not possible for us to see, as God does, the full degree to which the mission is already accomplished. He alone knows how many of those in our churches are actually evangelized or genuinely converted, how many battles and victories remain to be won, and how long it may take to accomplish His goals. Perhaps, as some have speculated, we are still living in the *infancy* or the *adolescence* of the Church. What if the task requires two or three thousand more years to complete? We all hope this may not be the case, but if it were we would not know it. Jesus gave no indication nor any way to calculate how long the task would require, or how distant His return might be. I know that the conditions in the present world, juxtaposed with the popular perception of end time prophetic scenarios, render it difficult to imagine that human society can continue even another generation or two without self-destructing. This is the way many Christians felt a thousand years ago about their own times, as well. My generation certainly felt that way fifty years ago. On matters left unrevealed (like the proximity of the end) our capacity to be mistaken should never be underestimated.

On the other hand, perhaps the task will be completed in the lifetime of some who are living today. We do not know and must not presume. The disciples in the first century were as curious and impatient as we are. The last question they asked Jesus, before His departure, was, “*Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*”⁶⁰ His answer to them is as relevant to us today: “*It is not for you*

⁵⁹ Matthew 24:14

⁶⁰ Acts 1:6

to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me...to the ends of the earth.”⁶¹

The charge of the Master leaving his affairs in the hands of his stewards was, “*Do business till I come.*”⁶² Jesus forewarned the disciples that they should simply continue faithfully in their servant roles until his coming should take them by surprise:

“Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods.”⁶³

To remain faithfully engaged in the work, until we are interrupted either by death or by the return of the King, is the disciple’s responsibility as defined by Jesus. However, Jesus implied that the wait might be longer than His servants expected it to be providing, perhaps, a temptation to discouragement, apathy, or compromise. We have no excuse for succumbing to such, since Jesus went out of His way to forewarn us of this:

But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”⁶⁴

The parable of the ten bridesmaids,⁶⁵ who were to remain alert and ready for the bridegroom’s approach, makes the point that his delay may result in many failing to persevere in their duty. The failure on the part of five of the bridesmaids, who had not counted on so long a wait, was that they had only brought enough oil for their lamps to render them prepared for a short vigil. The wiser bridesmaids had known that it could be a long wait, and prepared by bringing sufficient oil for such a contingency.

Attempts have been made to identify the “oil” in this parable with the Holy Spirit, or some specific spiritual asset that the five wise virgins possessed and the other five lacked. It is not necessary to attach specific significance to the oil, other than to say it represents the necessary preparedness to meet the coming bridegroom. To bring extra oil on such an errand simply means anticipating the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, vv.7-8

⁶² Luke 19:13

⁶³ Matthew 24:45-47

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, vv.48-51

⁶⁵ Matthew 25:1-13

possibility of a long wait, and being sure that one will still be able to fulfill one's responsibility in the event of a prolonged delay.

We must live daily in the awareness that our work may be interrupted by our death or the coming of the Lord. This should spur us on to patient perseverance in the field of service and battle. If we have seen God's vision of His kingdom's universal conquests, we should keep that goal in mind as we patiently run the race that is set before us. We can embrace and exploit the delay, and make our own short lives worthwhile, by remembering that our whole purpose is to extend the Kingdom until He comes.

This book is the second of a two-volume set. Look for the first volume under the same title,
Empire of the Risen Son, subtitled “*There is Another King*”
(a study in the Kingdom of God)

Hear and call-in to the author’s live, call-in radio broadcast, “The Narrow Path,” aired daily (weekdays) at 2:00 PM (Pacific Time). The program can be heard on radio stations across the United States and globally, either live-streamed online or over the free mobile app by the same name. The website and the app both provide access to archives of past programs, as well as over 1,000 expository lectures by the author on every book of the Bible and on many topics. All downloads and materials offered on the website are free.

Visit the website and/or get the app at:

www.thenarrowpath.com

About the Author

Steve Gregg's teaching ministry began in Southern California, near the beginning of the "Jesus Movement" revival, in 1970. Throughout the ensuing half-century, he has taught around the world on every continent, directed a small Bible school (called *The Great Commission School*), in Oregon, for sixteen years, and numerous small, summer-long discipleship programs, in Santa Cruz, CA.

Since 1982, Steve has been a frequent guest lecturer in Youth With A Mission (YWAM) *Schools of Biblical Studies* (SBS) and *Discipleship Training Schools* (DTS) around the world.

Steve has been the on-air host of a daily radio talk show entitled *The Narrow Path*, since 1997. As of 2020, this program airs weekdays on about 30 radio stations nationwide, and is streamed worldwide over the Internet from the website: www.thenarrowpath.com. The program's format is one of live, call-in, Bible questions and answers.

Besides the present two-volume project, Steve currently has two previous books in print:

Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary

(Thomas Nelson, 1997, revised 2013)

Why Hell? Three Christian Views

(Thomas Nelson, 2013; Zondervan, 2024)

Steve has also authored many magazine and journal articles, including several for the *Christian Research Journal*. These can be found online at www.Matthew713.com.

Over 1,500 of Steve's recorded, classroom Bible lectures are posted online. These can be downloaded free of charge from www.thenarrowpath.com. The catalogue of lectures includes in-depth verse-by-verse expositions through the entire Bible, as well as hundreds of in-depth topical lectures on biblical subjects of interest to believers. He has also engaged in formal public debates with Christians and atheists throughout his ministry career. These lectures, and every resource at the website may be downloaded free of charge.

There is also a free mobile app available for Android and iPhones from which the radio program can be heard (live or in archives), and the lectures from the website can be streamed (search: thenarrowpath.com).

Several YouTube channels contain libraries of videos of Steve's lectures. The main one can be viewed at www.youtube.com/user/Biblegate.

Based upon his lifetime teaching labors, Steve was offered and awarded an honorary D.Div. from Trinity Theological Seminary (Evansville, IN), in 2017.