**Now that I think about it…**

**(so far, anyway)**

A Collection of Published Biblical Articles

by Philip C. Strong

A word of explanation…

Sometime around the late spring or early summer of 2010, I received a phone call from the editor of the local newspaper in Jacksonville, Texas, where we lived at the time. She asked if I would be interested in writing a weekly (unpaid) column for the Religion section of the paper. After ascertaining that I could write on any biblical subject I desired, that neither she nor any of her staff would edit the articles, and that our local church contact information would be included with the publication, I quickly agreed. The arrangement continued until January of 2016, six months after we moved to Indiana to work with the Southport congregation in Indianapolis. What follows is mostly a collection of those articles. Perhaps this information will help to explain the subject matter and style of writing contained within them.

However, many of the articles also appeared in our local church bulletin (and a few others scattered across East Texas, Western Louisiana, and Southern Arkansas). They were also published online via our church website, and to interested individuals through a weekly email subscription list.

Though the impetus for many of the articles may have come from brethren, preachers, family, friends, and community acquaintances from various places, please do not blame any of them for the content as I wrote all the articles myself! If you find something with which you disagree, feel free to let me know, but please be advised that as time marches on I find even I don’t always agree with what I’ve written previously- so good luck!

I’m sure these articles still have many typos, despite the valiant efforts of a dedicated church secretary who “proofed” them at the time of their original publication. Please excuse our failures to find them all.

If you deem any of these articles to have merit or benefit to the Cause of Christ, please feel free to share or use them as you see fit without further permission required. They are not copyrighted, and are therefore freely given. I only ask two things: Please don’t edit, and do credit.

Finally, these articles have been collected into this format primarily to share them with my parents- who have been my great encouragers to “preach the gospel” for over 35 years now. They’ve counseled, critiqued, and advised, but always encouraged. Thanks for everything, Mom and Dad!

Philip C. Strong, October 2017

412 Hall Drive

Greenwood, IN 46142

Email to: mrpcstrong@hotmail.com

\*Though I’m not writing for the Religion section of the newspaper anymore, I still write an article almost every week. So beware, another volume may eventually be forthcoming!

\*\*The articles are in a “running page” format with no table of contents (because that was just way too much work!). The original date of creation, or the date of most recent revision, appears in parenthesis at the conclusion of each article. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible. Since the articles did appear in our local newspaper, some of them contain advertisements of (then) upcoming local church events (such as gospel meetings). If you publish the article, feel free to edit out the advertisements.

**Are You 4F, AWOL, MIA, or a POW?**

The word “soldier” does not occur in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (in the NASV), but a good portion of chapter six is filled with the imagery of ***armor***and ***warfare****.* He writes of: *“the* ***full armor*** *of God,* vv.11,13; *“our* ***struggle****”* (or *“wrestle”* in some versions- to *fight*), v.12; *“****loins girded with truth****,”* v.14a; *“the* ***breastplate of righteousness****,”* v.14b; feet *“****shod*** *with the* ***preparation of the gospel****,”* v.15;and*“the* ***shield of faith****,”* v.16. And then, of course, there is *“the* ***sword of the Spirit*** *which is the* ***word of God****”* in v.17. So even though the word “soldier” is not present, there is no doubt that being a Christian is supposed to involve us in warfare- a fight against the *“schemes of the devil,”* v.11, and *“world forces of darkness”* and *“spiritual forces of wickedness,”* v.12! But does it always? The answer depends on the individual soldier! For instance…

**Are you** **“4F”?** This is the military designation given to those “not qualified for service in the Armed forces” because of “physical, mental, or moral” unfitness. Though *physical* fitness is not nearly as important in the Lord’s army as in Uncle Sam’s, ***mental***and ***moral***fitness are vital to the soldier of Christ! Intimate knowledge of the weapon itself, and its capabilities and limitations, is crucial to the proper use of the *“sword of the Spirit, which the word of God”!*  Hebrews 5:12 highlights the importance of good training with the *sword* in preparation of its proper use, *“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for some one to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God….”.*  Thus, ***mental*** fitness is important for the soldier of Christ- but, so too, ***moral*** fitness is required. Note 2Timothy 2:21 in this regard, *“Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.”* The *“things”* from which Paul urges us to cleanse ourselves are further clarified in the context as *“wrangling about words,” “worldly and empty chatter,” “ungodliness,” “wickedness,”* and *“youthful lusts,”* vv.14,16,19,22. Given these things, are you “4F,” or **physically, mentally,** and **morally** fit for service in the Lord’s army?

**Are you** **“AWOL”?** This is the military designation for those who are “absent without leave.” It means they left their post and/or duties without permission to do so. This is a problem in the Lord’s army too! On a local level, the church is plagued by AWOL members who think nothing of absenting themselves for weeks at a time from the assembly, and its fellowship and duties, without a word to anyone. If questioned about it, they sometimes bristle and become indignant at the question, or pass it off with something along the lines of, “Oh, we’ve been really busy lately.” Can you image an infantryman explaining his being AWOL that way? No one is suggesting that local church members need some sort of advanced “permission” to be out of town for business or pleasure. But at the same time, shouldn’t members feel some sense of obligation to their local church families? What happens to our responsibilities to *assemble* with one another for *worship,* and to *teach, admonish,* and *encourage* one another when we choose to be AWOL for weeks at a time? Do we expect God and our brethren to just “suspend” our responsibilities because we prefer to be somewhere else doing something else? Please consider 1Corinthians 11:18-34; Ephesians 5:18-21; and Hebrews 10:19-25 in these regards.

**Are you** **“MIA”?** This is the military designation for those who are “missing in action.” I suppose the correlation this case would be comparable to church member being away from his own “regiment” (local fellowship), but still working for the Cause. That is, he may not be with his own congregation, but he is assembling with and encouraging others wherever he is to be *“strong in the faith.”* Is this the attitude you have when away from home- to find brethren that you can help to strengthen and encourage with your presence and participation? Or, is it more along the lines of, “I’ll go somewhere for worship if it’s not too far and I’m not too busy or tired.”? The first one is MIA- the second is probably just AWOL!

**Are you a** **“POW”?** This is the military designation for those who are “prisoners of war.” Unfortunately, in *physical* and *spiritual* wars, there are captives. There are some who, despite their efforts to “fight the enemy,” fall prey to them and become POWs. They become *entangled in* the *defilements of the world* and the *affairs of this life* and are *overcome,* cf. 2Timothy 2:4; 2Peter 2:20. In short, they are *overrun* by sin, Hebrews 12:2, or *caught/captured by trespasses,* Galatians 6:1. Is this you? Are you a POW? If so, you’re supposed to have fellow soldiers out diligently searching for and rescuing you, Galatians 6:1ff; Hebrews 12:12,13,15!

What about it? Are you **4F, AWOL, MIA,** or a **POW**? Or, are you still a “hard-fighting soldier” in the Lord’s army? (9-24-13)

**491**

I’ve never really had a “lucky” number- figured those were for folks who like to gamble. I haven’t really even had a “favorite” number- it seemed kind of pointless, I suppose. While I still don’t have a “lucky” number, I do now have a “favorite” one! It has taken me roughly fifty years to decide that my favorite number is **491**!

In the Bible, numbers are sometimes significant. For instance, God specified *exactly* how many of each type of animal Noah was to take into the ark, Genesis 7:2-3. He also used numbers in *representative* ways. For instance, He specified that disobedient Israel would wander in the wilderness for 40 years- one year for each day the faithless spies were in the land of Canaan, Numbers 14:34. In the book of Revelation, numbers are also used in a *symbolic* way: the number **one** symbolizes *unity* (as in *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, etc.); **three** symbolizes God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit); **four** symbolizes the world (north, south, east, and west); **seven** symbolizes as the *perfect* number (the combination of the divine number, three, and number of the world, four); and **ten** symbolizes *completeness* (as a *complete* set of fingers/toes).

What does God’s use of numbers in the Bible have to do with my newfound favorite number? Consider Matthew 18:21, *“Then Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’”*  Jesus had previously (in vv.15-17) been teaching the disciples about how to treat a brother that sins- some versions include *“against you,”* which, if accurate, better explains Peter’s question. The Jewish rabbis of the time taught that one was obligated to forgive a person that sinned against them three times. Peter, in his question to Jesus, has evidently doubled this requirement, and added one more time for good measure. But he surely didn’t expect the answer he received from the Lord in v.22, *“But Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’”*  If you’re following the math, 70 x 7 = 490.

Think about what Jesus is saying. If your brother (physical, spiritual, or worldly) sins against you 490 times (or *“seven times a day,”* cf. Luke 17:3-4), and returns saying, *“I repent,”* Jesus says to *“forgive him.”* The point seems to be that our willingness to forgive should mirror God’s in that it is limitless. I don’t think Jesus meant that although we are expected to forgive a sinning brother 490 times, at 491 times he’s out of luck!

Think about that: How many of us would be willing to forgive someone who *sinned* against us- not just hurt our feelings, or said something that we felt was insulting, but sinned against us either *seven times* in one day, or *490* times overall? However, I’ve been married for almost 32 years now, a little over 11,000 days. While I’m not sure about seven times in one day, I’m fairly sure I’ve needed forgiveness of some sort more than 490 times! Likewise, I’ve been a Christian for about 15,000 days. I am absolutely certain I’ve petitioned God to forgive me far more than 490 times! The point is that if we expect others to forgive us, and more importantly, if we ask God to forgive us these exorbitant numbers of times, how can we refuse to forgive those who sin against us? Even those who do so repeatedly? *“For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment,”* James 2:13.

One of the greatest blessings of being a Christian is the *limitless* forgiveness of God that is available to those who humbly confess their sin(s) to Him, and sincerely ask for His merciful forgiveness. *“If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,”* 1John 1:8-9. While this truth surely should not be taken as some sort of *license* to sin, cf. Romans 6:1-2, what a great God of love, mercy, and forgiveness we serve! The number **491** reminds me of these things, which is why it is my favorite number- and probably will be so as long as I live. (12-16-14)

**“Accepting” Jesus, or “Becoming Acceptable” to Jesus?**

We’ve heard for years about the importance of “accepting Jesus.” And indeed, the New Testament teaches that there are some things about Him we must accept. We must accept, for instance, that He was/is the Son of God, *“…if you knew Me, you would know My Father also….for unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins.”* (John 8:19,24). We must also accept that He was born as *“Jesus the Nazarene,”* God-incarnate (God in *human* form), Acts 2:22. Additionally, we must accept that He was crucified for our sins but triumphantly raised *“both Lord and Christ”* from the grave on the third day, Acts 2:32,36. If these things are what is meant by “accepting Jesus,” then I agree that such is certainly required in order to be saved. But, if we think that this is all there is to “accepting Him,” then I must disagree. There is a simple reason for my disagreement: such is not all that the New Testament has to say on the matter. Let me show you.

Just about everyone who desires some level of acceptability with God knows John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.”* While this great passage has become the proof text for “accepting Jesus,” is that all He had to say on the matter? In the same chapter (John 3:36) Jesus also said, *“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”* It sure sounds like that there is more to this matter of salvation than just “accepting” the facts of who and what Jesus was and is. James 2:24 makes the matter even clearer when it reads, *“You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.”* I’m admittedly no Einstein, but apparently our “accepting Jesus” doesn’t mean that Jesus necessarily accepts us! *“You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless.”*  These are not my words, they come from James 2:19-20, and thus are the inspired words of God through James.

So, if salvation is not just about “accepting Jesus,” but also includes becoming “acceptable to Jesus,” how do we get to that point of acceptability? There are many passages that could be used, but notice carefully Titus 2:11-14, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.”* This passage has several salient points to the issue at hand.

* Salvation is certainly by the *“grace of God”*- it would be foolish and wrong to assume or assert otherwise, cf. Ephesians 2:8-9.
* Salvation has been *“brought to all men”*- that is, the *opportunity* to be saved is available to everyone. Yet we also know that not all will be saved- Matthew 7:21, *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven.”*
* So, if salvation is *by grace,* and is also available to *all men,* but *not everyone* will be saved, what determines who is lost and who is saved? Think about the next question carefully, and refer back to Titus 2:12.
* In what ***form*** did *salvation* by *God’s grace* appear to mankind? The first word of v.12 is *“instructing”-* God’s gracious provision of salvation appeared to mankind in the form of ***instructions!*** The rest of vv.12-14 include the instructions for what one needs to do to become *acceptable* to Jesus, and therefore capable of receiving His redemption.

Thus, those who *follow the instructions* given by God receive His gracious provision of salvation through Jesus Christ. That means they become “acceptableto Him” through obedience. And those who refuse to heed the instructions, well, 2Thessalonians 2:8-9 says, in part, that God will deal out *“retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction….”*  So, the choice is evidently ours- we can “become acceptable” to Jesus through obedient faith, or suffer the consequences. Sounds like a pretty simple choice to me! Have you become “acceptable” to Jesus through obedience to His will? If not, will you become “acceptable” to Jesus by obeying His will? (4-14-15)

**Why Aren’t People Afraid of God and Hell Anymore?**

Fear, or the lack therefore, is very much a part of our pop-culture. Allow two opposing bumper stickers to illustrate (with apologies in advance), **“Fear This”** vs. **“Ain’t Skeerd!”** Both of these stickers are trading on fear. It seems our society is obsessed with fear- on one side by promoting it through intimidation, and on the other by claiming immunity from it.

Let’s consider a biblical example of this “Ain’t Skeerd” bravado. The “thief on the cross” made a now-famous request of Jesus for salvation, but previously had asked a lesser-known question to his comrade in crime as they hung upon their crosses. The other criminal was hurling the same abuses at Jesus as was the crowd, Luke 23:39. In the next verse, the penitent thief rebuked him and asked, *“Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?”*  The rhetorical implication of his question is that the impenitent thief **should have been afraid of God**, and **hell,** but wasn’t, despite the peril of his circumstance.

Perhaps this impenitent and unafraid criminal is all too representative of people today, who, despite their spiritually perilous lifestyles, have no real fear of God, or hell. Why is it that so many people seemingly have an “Ain’t Skeerd” audacity toward their eternal Judge and destiny? It’s not necessarily an atheism problem, as even those who claim to believe in God, heaven, and even hell are largely no longer afraid. Why? Here are a few possibilities…

**Some have been so inundated with “grace and love” preaching/teaching that they’ve concluded that the concept of eternal punishment is just not possible from such a loving God.** But there is a major problem here. The same Book that manifests the “grace and love” of God also reveals His justice and willingness to punish. *“For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who inflict you…when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,”* 2Thessalonians 1:6-9.

**Some seem to think they’ll live forever- or just don’t want to think about dying and eternity.** Regardless of whatever healthcare we do or don’t have, everyone is going to die- some sooner rather than later, and harder rather than easier. Refusing to accept and prepare for this reality doesn’t change it. The rich man, who *“habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day,”* died as did the *“certain poor man named Lazarus,”* Luke 16:19-20. The only difference was that the rich man’s spirit went to the place of *“torment”* because of the way he chose to live his life, and Lazarus’ spirit was taken to the place of comfort for the way he chose to live his, cf. vv.22ff. Refusing to accept and prepare for the realities of death and eternity don’t negate them.

**Some have been so influenced by PMA** (Positive Mental Attitude) **in thought generally, and preaching specifically, that there is a cultural bias against “negative” motivations such as fear.** PMA has its place and benefits, but remember that God chose to use fear as ***a*** (not *the,* as in only) motivator for us spiritually. Otherwise, why are we given graphic and horrifying pictures of hell, such as: Mark 9:42, *“it would be better for him if with a heavy milestone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea;”* orv.43, *“the unquenchable fire;”* or vv.47b-48, *“cast into hell, where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched;”* or Matthew 8:12, *“cast into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”?* Preachers that proclaim *“the gospel”* must proclaim these realities just as they do the joys of heaven, for the same Book provides them both.

**We live in a “second, third, ad infinitum chance” world of endless *redemptive* possibilities.** While God’s saving grace is available to *“all men,”* Titus 2:11, it comes in the form of *instructions,* Titus 2:12a, and is, therefore, only applied to those who willing to follow them, Titus 2:12b-15. Two realizations of these truths must thus be concluded: 1) God’s saving grace is applied only to those willing to obey Him; and, 2) Our opportunities to be saved by God’s grace are limited to our willingness to obey Him **now**- for it is the only time we are guaranteed, Hebrews 3:12-15. When our willingness to obey ends, or our life does, so also do our chances of redemption.

These things ought to scare us, and such fear isn’t a bad thing! *“Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men…”* 2Corinthians 5:11. (9-9-14)

**The “Ahhh” Factor**

I’ve become old enough, cranky enough, and arthritic enough that purchases having anything to do with my person now must have the “ahhh” factor. If I am going to sit in it, lie on it, wear it, use it, or it’s going to otherwise be in direct contact with me, it must have the “ahhh” factor. For example, not too long ago, I decided that I needed a new office chair. I didn’t necessarily dislike the chair I’d had for several years. I bought it when I was having a lot of lower back problems, and it was very supportive. But it didn’t have the “ahhh” factor that had become important to me. So, I took off to Tyler one morning on a quest to find a new chair.

I went straight to a big office supply store, and they had a cornucopia of chair choices. They had chairs that looked old, they had chairs that looked new, they had chairs that they apparently stocked to supply the local mad scientists’ needs for torture devices in their labs (which I didn’t even know Tyler had!), and they had chairs that looked like that if you accidentally to pulled the wrong lever or pushed the right button, they might sprout rocket propulsion jets and blast off into space. I tried them all, but some of them for no longer than it took my posterior to hit bottom and spring right back up again accompanied by, “Oh no- that’ll never do.” Then it happened, I plopped down in one leather-clad big and tall “executive” chair, and was immediately and absolutely compelled to utter a long and audible “Ahhh.” It was an unstoppable involuntary bodily function, no more controllable than a sneeze during a bishop’s prayer. That’s the way the “Ahhh” factor is though- when it is finally achieved or found, vocalization is mandatory.

The “Ahhh” factor is somewhat hard to define. You may not be able to completely understand or describe it, until you experience it. I didn’t really know exactly what I needed or wanted until I sat in the chair that forced the “Ahhh” out of me. It was adjustable to reach the perfect height, its back curved at just the right place to match my back, the armrests were at the perfect height (which eliminated most of the previous candidates), and the memory foam padding was, as Goldilocks would say, “just right.” I didn’t begin my quest with this particular criterion in mind, I just knew my current chair wasn’t all it could or should be. But, when I found one that was, it became obvious.

What has all of this to do with spiritual matters? Anthropology tells us that cultures all over the world and throughout man’s history have worshipped some form of “god.” Why? God created man with an innate knowledge of a “higher power,” and a need to worship “it.” Without knowledge of inspired revelation (cf. John 1:18; Hebrews 1:3), the form of these “gods” and expression of worship varied, and still varies, greatly. But the knowledge and need is there, unless it is suppressed.

Thus, men have searched *“that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us,”* Acts 17:27. This search, when divine revelation is ignored, is vain and unsatisfying. Oh, we can know that God exists from simply observing the world around us, or even contemplating the presence and wonders of our own bodies, Romans 1:19-20; but the “Ahhh” factor of really understanding God and having a real relationship with Him requires the knowledge and application of His revealed word. Hear Romans 10:2-3 regarding Israel on this point, “*For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.”*

Simply put: Unless we are willing to read God’s revealed word, and do what it requires of us, our lives and the conduct of them will never have the “Ahhh” factor. There will always be something missing, though we may not even be sure exactly what it is. Jesus said, *“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot* ***enter*** *the kingdom of heaven,”* John 3:5. The Spirit reveals that water baptism is a necessary part of being “born again.” But notice also v.3, *“Unless one is born again, he cannot* ***see*** *the kingdom of heaven.”* Unless we read God’s revealed word, and do what it says, “the kingdom of heaven” specifically, and spiritual matters generally, will elude our comprehension, and we will never have the “Ahhh” factor of truly knowing God. (12-26-12)

**Alcoholic Spirits vs. Spirit-Filled**

I am a preacher- not a psychologist, psychiatrist, politician, or policeman. My job is not easy, but it is fairly straightforward. I attempt to *educate* folks on what the Bible (and therefore God) says, and *encourage* them as best I can to obey it. However, it is not within my purview to *enforce* the Bible. I couldn’t even if I wanted to do so. People must be *drawn* rather than *driven* to obedience, cf. Acts 18:4; 19:8, hence the emphasis on *educating* and *encouraging* instead of *enforcing.* Thus, my purpose in broaching the subject of alcoholic spirits is not to (en)force my personal feelings about the matter on anyone. Instead I’ll attempt educate you a little regarding what the Bible says on the subject in hopes that you will be encouraged to heed it. But really, my ultimate purpose in this piece is to get you to think about the comparison posed in the title.

The New Testament is the law to which Christians today are amenable. The Law of Moses (or Old Testament) was a law given by God only to Israelites who lived between the time of Moses and the death of Christ. Since then, all men are subject to the Law of Christ contained in the New Testament, Hebrews 9:15-17. However, throughout the Bible, “drunkenness” is universally condemned as sinful, cf. Genesis 9:21; Proverbs 20:1; and Ephesians 5:18 for examples. At this point, you may wisely ask, “Are there other forms of partaking alcoholic spirits that are condemned?” Since we are subject to God’s law of the New Testament, let’s take a look at what it has to say in at least one significant passage.

1Peter 4:3, *“For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts,* ***drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties,*** *and abominable idolatries.”*  Since our interest at this point is relative to alcoholic spirits, we’ll forgo the part about *sensuality, lusts,* and *abominable idolatries,* to consider *drunkenness, carousals,* and *drinking parties*. First, ***“drunkenness”***is, again, condemned as sinful. The Greek (the original language of the New Testament) word that is translated as *“drunkenness”* is the term “oinophlugia,” and literally means “wine overflowing.” That should need no further explanation since we’ve already seen that God always condemns drunkenness. But the second word of that string is ***“carousals.”*** It comes from the original term “komos,” and means *reveling, rioting,* and *carousing-* a *letting loose* with drink, if you will. This use of alcoholic spirits is also condemned. The third term of consideration from the verse is ***“drinking parties.”*** This is translated from the Greek term “potos”- which literally refers to a “banqueting” or “drinking party/contest.” Clearly, again, this use of alcoholic spirits are forbidden by God.

To summarize thus far, *drunkenness* is sinful. A *letting loose* and/or *carousing* drinking is wrong. And, a *drinking party* or *contest* is likewise a violation of God’s law. While there are many other Passages that could be added from the Word of God about the consumption of alcoholic spirits, it is hoped these will give you a starting point for further personal study. But think a step further with me.

Ephesians 5:18 reads in part, *“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation,* ***but be filled with the Spirit…”***  Do you realize that this is at least the third time in Scripture that *drunkenness* (being filled with *alcoholic spirits*) is somehow compared with being *filled with the Spirit* (meaning the *Holy Spirit*)? Hannah, when she prayed to herself, was accused of being drunk in 1Samuel 1:12-15. The Apostles, on the Day of Pentecost, when *“filled with the Holy Spirit,”* were likewise accused of being drunk, Acts 2:4-13. And now, *drunkenness* is again compared in some way to being *Spirit-filled.* Why is this? What is the comparison between these two activities that would appear otherwise to be so diametrically opposed?

When someone is *drunk* *with alcoholic spirits,* they began to do things they don’t do *normally* or *naturally*- like think they can *sing,* or *dance,* or *fight,* or that they are *irresistibly attractive to the opposite sex,* or… well, you get the picture. Herein lies to the connection to being *Spirit-filled****:* it likewise causes one to think and do things that are against our normal human nature- only in a good and godly way!** Go back to the text of Ephesians 5:18 and realize that the sentence condemning *drunkenness* but commending being *filled with the Spirit* doesn’t end with that verse. In fact, the next verses identify three things that being *filled with the Spirit* cause us to do that we might not normally: **(1) *Sing-*** *“speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord”* v.19; **(2) *Be Thankful-*** *“always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father”* v.20; and **(3) *Subject Ourselves to One Another-*** *“and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.”*

The servant of God who is *filled with the Spirit* doesn’t say, “Oh, I can’t sing praises to God- I’ll leave that to others,” he sings from the heart to his Lord. The servant of God who is *filled with the Spirit* isn’t ungrateful and unappreciative, but instead constantly thanks God for all the blessings He provides. And the servant of God who is *filled with the Spirit* isn’t selfish, arrogant, or domineering, he is willing to subject himself to others for his good, their good, and the good of the kingdom of God. These things may not be “normal” or “natural” attitudes and actions for us all-too-human beings. But for those who are becoming *“partakers of the divine nature”* (2Peter 1:4) by trusting and doing those things the Spirit tells us in the New Testament- thus making us *led by* and *filled with the Spirit,* it is oh so much better than being *“drunk with wine”* and doing stupid sinful stuff that only brings condemnation from God! Think about it, won’t you? (8-18-10)

**All Lives Matter- All *Souls* Matter Even More**

Of course all lives matter- of every race, nationality, occupation, socio-economic status, or maturity (pre-birth, immature, mature, or aged), they ALL matter. But I’m afraid we’re missing the point as to why this is so. It is not just because life is “precious,” though such is certainly true. It is not because we’re all “human beings” and ought to respect one another as such, though such is again true. All lives matter because there is a *soul* attached to each one! Having an opposable thumb or higher thought processes is not what separates us from that of animal life. Nor is the value of every life necessarily tied to its temporal impact on the lives of others. Instead, all human lives matter because our Creator invested an eternal soul into every one of them.

Every “human” life matters because in each one God has placed a soul that will live forever. Sure, every life matters because of its inherit worth and potential in the here and now, but beyond that, each life determines the destiny of the eternal soul it *temporarily* houses. “Nothing lasts forever” has so permeated our thinking that the notion of an *ever-lasting* soul boggles the mind. Through time and our emphasis of it, we’ve cheapened “life” to the extent that we’ve forgotten that its most important function is the preparation of the soul for eternity. “Life” is temporary, but the soul it briefly houses is eternal. “Life” may last a relative short or long time. It may be filled with joy or heartache. It may be well regarded or despised by others. It may be prolonged and benefited by others, or taken all too soon by others. But the soul each life contains- however briefly, lasts lives forever. This is the true value, and opportunity, of each and every life!

Unfortunately, we can so easily become preoccupied with *living* and *extending* “life” that we forget or neglect its true purpose: the preparation of the *soul* for eternity*.* So think seriously about a few questions for a moment.

* Is what you’re doing day in and day out, week in and week out, and year in and year out, preparing your *soul* for an eternity *with* or *without* God?
* Are you giving more attention, concern, and effort to your *temporal life* or to your *eternal soul?*
* Is your *life* more or less important to you than your *soul?*

These are admittedly tough questions (for me also!), but they are questions that, if really considered, force us to think about what makes “life” matter. This next Sunday through Wednesday, **September 13th through 16th**, we are having a special series of lessons at the **Southside Church of Christ** here in Jacksonville (602 Henderson; directly across South Jackson from Subway) to help us all focus on what really matters in life- the preparation of each and every soul for eternity ***with*** God!

**Bro. Dee Bowman** (of Pasadena TX) will be speaking in this special series of lessons. Bro. Bowman is highly regarded throughout the nation for his knowledge of God’s Word, his ability to present it with clarity, distinction, and enthusiasm, and perhaps most importantly, his genuine love of souls- each and every one of them! Please consider this your personal invitation to come and worship God with us, and to hear these vitally important lessons. We’ll meet at 9:30 and 10:20 Sunday morning, again at 6:00 Sunday evening, and at 7:00 Monday through Wednesday evenings. There is absolutely no cost or obligation to attend, and we won’t do anything to embarrass or pressure you either. We just want everyone to have the opportunity to hear the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Your “life” matters, but your soul matters even more- both to God and to us! Please let us help you prepare your soul for eternity with Him. *“For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or, what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”* Matthew 16:25-26. For more information, please call us at 903-586-3121, or find us on facebook at southsidecoctx. (9-8-15)

**The *Ancient Landmarks* vs. The *Novelty of the New***

Proverbs 22:28 reads, *“Do not remove the ancient boundary* (or *landmark,* KJV) *which your fathers have set.”* The *boundary,* or *landmark* to which the writer refers was probably a property or tribal territory marker. However, folks are sometimes tempted to interpret and apply the injunction in a much broader way to include traditions related to spiritual matters. When a favorite way of doing some aspect of the service, or some long-held belief is challenged as being only “traditional” rather than “scripturally mandated,” the quick-draw retort is often to appeal to Proverbs 22:28, “Don’t remove the ancient landmarks!”

Landmarks are usually placed with deliberate intention and consideration. Such markers should not be removed ill advisedly, or without due consideration of *who* placed them, and *why* they were put *where* they were. In other words, “Don’t remove old markers just because they’re not new.” Surely the *wisdom* of these words is easily discerned, so why make a big deal about it?

In every generation, or perhaps at least in every other one, there is a general rebellion against the “old” in favor of the “new.” This relates to more than just styles of hair and clothes. Younger folks are sometimes opposed to anything that has been around longer than they have, and are conversely in favor of anything that has come about in their own time (even if it is only being *recycled* from past generations). Thus, the *novelty of the new* is deemed favorable to the *antiquity of the aged.*  “New” ways of doing “old” things are favored just because of the relative age of each. This generational desire for the *novelty of the new* is usually rebuffed by the members of the older generation in favor of the *ancient landmarks* of the past. But the truth is, either of these perspectives can be just as wrong as the other.

Without dismantling the proverbial admonition, the *ancient* should not be favored just because it is old anymore than the *new* is to be rejected just because it is *recent!* The value of each must be measured by its merit. Any doctrine, or the practice of it, must stand or fall on the veracity of scriptural soundness. And, any way of doing something is only “sacred” when it is specified in the *sacred* text. A new way of doing something that is a matter of judgment (and therefore not mandated in the text) is not “wrong” or “bad” just because it is different any more than the old way was “right” or “good” just because it is “the way we’ve always done it.” However, caution should be exercised in both directions regarding these matters.

Holding tenaciously to the *ancient* ways just because they are “the way we’ve always done it” lends itself to some dangerous consequences. Perhaps the most obvious of these potential pitfalls is that we tend to make traditional matters of judgment or expediency into “law.” Thus, on which side of the communion table the bread is placed becomes all too important. Or, having one song, a prayer, two songs, the Lord’s Supper, and then the sermon becomes the only “right” way to order a worship service. No passage specifies any such things, and these types of tendencies need to be altered to remind us of that fact. Being unwilling to try something different or new that is itself acceptable according the Scriptures, is arrogant in that it assumes there isn’t a better or more conducive way to accomplish the needed objective. It thus lends itself to ritualistic repetition, stagnation, alienation, and isolation.

But on the other hand, an unquenchable thirst for the *novelty* of the *new* also has its own set of problems. For instance, having a dramatically different order of services every time the congregation meets can become confusing and a distraction to the overall purpose of the assembly, which is to worship. To desire a “change” just for change’s sake can ignore the possibility that there may be good and reasonable reasons why something has always been done a certain way.

Most of us are creatures of habit, which is not necessarily a bad thing, unless those habits become so entrenched in our thinking that we forget they are not “law.” Conversely, constantly desiring something “new” and “different” ignores the potential value of “tried and true.” The good news is that these two philosophies don’t have to be mutually exclusive. We don’t have to “change everything” to keep things fresh, and we don’t have to “leave everything just the way it is” to remain faithful either. (8-23-17)

**Applying and Abusing God’s Grace**

The *grace* of God is generally defined as *unmerited favor*. While this probably is an overly simplified characterization, it is, nonetheless, adequate for our purposes here. But even with this basic definition, we understand God’s grace to be *phenomenal* in its nature*, magnanimous* in its scope*,* and *overwhelming* in its effect. Is it any wonder Christians so enthusiastically embrace it, so completely depend upon it, and so universally sing its praises? After all, it is *amazing, wonderful, greater than our sin,* and *reaches even me!* However, these things don’t always prevent us from trying to misapply it, or from abusing it…

We tend to *misapply* God’s wonderful grace in one of two ways: 1) we attempt to apply it where He **has not** promised to do so; or, 2) we refuse to acknowledge where He **has** applied it. Let’s take these one at a time.

The *application* of the benefits of God’s grace, contrary to the thinking of some if not most, has requirements. This can be plainly seen through Noah and the Flood. God’s grace was present and active in the saving of Noah and his family. After God decided to destroy the exceedingly wicked world, the text says *“But Noah found* ***favor*** *in the eyes of the Lord,”* cf. Genesis 6:5-8. Note that this *favor* (*“grace”* in some translations) was evidently bestowed particularly on Noah because he *“was a righteous man, blameless in his time, Noah walked with God,”* Genesis 6:9. However, Noah was not, because of these things, saved from the Flood. Instead, and undoubtedly because of his previous penchant for *walking with God,* God’s grace was extended to Noah in two forms: 1) a *warning* about the upcoming destruction of the world, Genesis 6:13,17; and, 2) *instructions* on how to avoid this destruction, Genesis 6:14-16,18-21. But the *application* of God’s grace in the saving of Noah was dependent upon Noah precisely following God’s specific instructions- which Noah obviously did, Genesis 6:22. Now, nothing has changed. God’s grace is still extended in the form of *instructions* to avoid a *coming destruction*. Note, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,* ***instructing*** *us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age,* Titus 2:11-12. God has warned those willing to listen about the coming destruction of the world (see 2Peter 3:8-10), and through His grace provided *instructions* by which we can be saved- **if we obey them.** If we can see that Noah was saved *by grace* because he heeded God’s warning and in *faith* obeyed the instructions provided by it, then we can understand how we are saved *by God’s grace* AND *our faith* working in concert, Ephesians 2:8-9. Here’s the point: We cannot attempt to apply the benefits of God’s saving grace *where* and *how* He has not.

The other way we tend to *misapply* God’s grace is by refusing to acknowledge where He **has** applied it. Obviously, we don’t actually *apply* God’s grace for Him- ever. He does so for Himself *where, when,* and *how* He chooses. But, if we refuse to *acknowledge* His application (as specified in His word) we will find ourselves out of agreement and fellowship with God, which is never a good place to be! How do we do this? Usually, we do so by refusing to *forgive* and *fellowship* those whom God, by His grace, has forgiven and accepted. Initially, Jewish Christians had a problem accepting Gentile Christians, Acts 15:1ff. Some churches apparently excluded those from fellowship whom God had accepted, 3John 9-10. We are not the arbiters of God’s grace. When *anyone* meets the requirements of God’s saving grace by faith and obedience, who are we to hold grudges or refuse to forgive and accept those whom God has accepted?

One more thing before we’re done: *abusing* God’s grace. As Christians, when we sin we are supposed to confess our sin to God and others who are affected by it, and pray for forgiveness, cf. Acts 8:12-13,18-24. However, this gracious provision of forgiveness we (including me!) often abuse **by refusing to repent** and turn from the sin. Instead, we continue to sin, thinking we can just plead for pardon again as needed anyway. This is exactly the *abuse of grace* that Paul addressed in Romans 6:1-23. Please read this text and think soberly about how you attempt to apply and use God’s *wonderful* grace. We all need it. We all must properly understand and apply it to receive its saving benefits. (8-18-15)

**Appreciation Usually Involves Training**

We tend to appreciate things we’ve been trained to appreciate. For instance, classical music is not on the list of things I enjoy. I wasn’t exposed to it in my formative years, which is really OK with me- I’m really not complaining here. I never learned to play an instrument of any kind. I can play a radio, if it works right and doesn’t have too many buttons! So, the complicated chords and rhythms of classical music really don’t appeal to me. I can’t sing along with it, whistle, hum, or tap my foot to it. None of which means that I’m unimpressed with the dedication and talent of those who can play it, or that I’m somehow prejudiced against the snobs (just teasing!) who spend countless hours enjoying it. I just haven’t been trained, nor have I trained myself, to truly appreciate classical music. So I don’t enjoy it.

If we can understand that simple illustration, perhaps we can see why so many people “get nothing out of” worship services. The probable cause is that they haven’t been trained to appreciate them. They were not exposed to them as children, at least not properly exposed. Even if you were “taken to church” as a youth, did your parents demonstrate the attitude of the Psalmist, *“I was glad when they said, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’”* (Psalm 122:1)? Or was it more like, “Come on Johnny, we ***have to*** go to church, and I’m going to tan your hide if you make us late or misbehave!”? Children learn to appreciate and enjoy what they’re taught to appreciate and enjoy. They also often learn to appreciate and enjoy what they see their parents appreciating and enjoying. If assembling with the saints is a “have to” task you participate in only begrudgingly and when it is convenient, it will likely never be anything more for your children. If you “pass the time” in services by watching and/or playing with babies, doing your nails, sighing, sleeping, or constantly going to the restroom or water fountain, services will likely never truly be “worship” for your children either.

Worship is supposed to be a pleasurable experience. Unfortunately, some who realize this fact and yet recognize that it isn’t so for many folks have sought to make New Testament worship into something God never intended it to be: entertainment. Instead of teaching and training people to appreciate and enjoy the true worship of God, we’ve made the services about us. We want it to be more dramatic, so we add drama. We want it to be more fun, so we add entertainment. We want it to be more emotional, so we add elements to stir the emotions. As the old timers might say, “We’re chewing on the hind-leg of the problem here!” New Testament “worship” doesn’t need propping up with gimmicks and tricks. The problem isn’t with the “worship”- it is with the “worshippers” who are more dedicated to themselves than to God. When our services are dictated by “what we like” instead of by “what God said” we’re on the wrong track! Ask yourself this question: **If our worship *innovations* are such good ideas, why didn’t God think of and provide for them in the New Testament? Did we really think God didn’t know how He was best worshipped?** Listen closely to John 4:23, *“…true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers.”*

God never promised to accept anything and everything we give to Him just because we call it “worship.” That notion didn’t fly under the Old Law (read Malachi), and it won’t work under the New Testament either. We can’t do what pleases us and call it “worship”- God defines how we should worship Him. Instead of trying to cater to the whims of our carnally-minded selves, why not learn to appreciate and enjoy: (1) reading and studying God’s divine Word together, 1Timothy 4:13-16; (2) singing praises to His great name with emotion and understanding, Colossians 3:16; (3) blending our hearts together in earnest prayer and petition to the Almighty who loves us, 1Timothy 2:1-8; (4) generously and thankfully returning a portion of that with which He has blessed us to Him, 1Corinthians 16:1-2; 2Corinthians 9:6-7; and (5) commemorating the blessed and holy sacrifice of Jesus Christ by partaking the emblems that represent His precious body and blood, 1Corinthians 11:23-34? We can do all of these things in a spirit of true appreciation, deep emotion, and glorious praise if we try. And we can enjoy participating in them if we train ourselves to appreciate doing things God’s way. (7-20-11)

**Are You an Excellent Wife?** (Men, keep reading- this question is for you also!)

Proverbs 31:10-31 is a daunting text. The wife/mother depicted is so…. so perfect, and yet the description of her seems to be such a hopelessly unattainable aspiration for women, and also an impossible expectation for men to seek and find such a wife. Nonetheless, let’s note, in overview fashion, some of the characteristics and habits of the wife whose value is *“far above jewels.”*

She engenders *trust* from her husband for she *does him good and not evil all the days of her life,* vv.11-12.

She is *diligent* and *dedicated* in her work to *provide sustenance to her household*, vv.13-15,24.

She is *thoughtful* and *proactive* in her *preparations for the future,* vv.16,25.

She *takes care of herself* that she may have *endurance* in work and *takes pride* in her *productivity*, vv.17-18.

She is *skillful,* and utilizes her talents to care for the *poor* and *needy* as well as her *family* and *herself* to be sure all are adequately prepared for *hardship,* vv.19-22,27.

She is *never a disgrace* to her husband, and he is, surely at least in part due to her *faithfulness* to him and *charity* to others, *well-respected* in even the most noble circles*,* v.23.

She is *clothed* with *strength* and *dignity,* and thus *smiles* at the *future,* v.25.

She is careful with her words; *wisdom* and *kindness* characterize her speech, v.26.

She is not *idle* and *takes care* of her own *household,* v.27.

Because of all of these things, she is *blessed by her children* and *praised by her husband* as well as her *works,* vv.28-31. Not to diminish or belittle any of these things, surely we’ve heard all of this before…

But, have you ever considered these characteristics **as the *bride of Christ?* What kind of *wife* are we/you to our/your *spiritual husband,* Jesus Christ,cf. Ephesians 5:22-33?**

Do we/you ***engender trust*** from our spiritual Husband because we/you ***do Him good and not evil all the days of our/your life?*** Ephesians 5:22-23

Are we/you ***diligent*** and ***dedicated*** to our/your work in ***providing sustenance*** to our ***spiritual household?*** Romans 15:27

Are we/you ***thoughtful*** and ***proactive*** in our our/your ***spiritual preparations for the future?*** Matthew 6:19-21

Do we/you ***take care of yourself*** spiritually so that we/you will have ***endurance*** to complete our/your ***spiritual work*** in such a way that enables ***pride in productivity?*** Hebrews 12:12-13; 10:36

Are we/you ***spiritually skillful*** with the *tools* provided to care for the ***spiritually poor and needy,*** as well as for the ***spiritual needs of ourselves/yourself*** and ***your family?*** Galatians 6:1-5

Are we/you a ***disgrace*** to your spiritual Husband, or does our/your ***faithfulness*** to Him and ***charity*** to others cause Him to be ***well-respected*** even in the most noble circles? Matthew 5:16

Are we/you spiritually ***clothed*** with ***strength*** and ***dignity****,* and thus able to ***smile*** at our/your spiritual ***future?*** 1John 3:21-24

Are we/you ***careful*** with our spiritual ***words*** so that ***wisdom*** and ***kindness*** characterize them? Colossians 4:5-6

Are we/you spiritually ***idle***, or do we/you ***take care*** of our/your own spiritual ***household?*** 1Thessalonians 4:9-12

If we/you are an *“excellent wife”* to our/your spiritual Husband, we/you will be *blessed* by the *children* of our/your Husband, and *praised* by Him also. Furthermore, our/your *works* will follow you to the *gates* of heaven! Matthew 25:34-40 (5-5-15)

**Aroundtuits & Mañana**

There are some tendencies that transcend national borders. It doesn’t matter whether you speak Texan or Spanish, there is a word for “not now, maybe later.” In Texan, the word is “aroundtuit”- as in, “When I get ‘aroundtuit’ I’ll take care of that for you.” For those who might not speak Texan, the word “aroundtuit” does **not** necessarily imply that one is otherwise occupied, or otherwise unable to perform the specific task under consideration at the moment. It just means he’s not going to do it right now! Furthermore, he may not ever get “aroundtuit,” but will perpetually kept the task on the “to do” list just the same. Such reminds me of the time a fellow told me he would never beat me out of the money he owed me. He said he might die owing me, but he wouldn’t beat me out of it! Aroundtuits are like that too.

Our Spanish-speaking friends have a word that doesn’t translate into aroundtuit, but it gets to the same place anyway. Their word is “mañana.” More properly, mañana usually refers to “in the morning” or “tomorrow”- but that’s only when it is used *more properly*. When most folks say “mañana” they just mean “not now, maybe later.” See? Spanish-speakers have a word for aroundtuit also!

Such is all well and good as long as we’re talking about some chore the wife or the neighbor wants you to do for them. In those cases, either “aroundtuit” or “mañana” will do depending on which language is more appropriate. But what about if “it” is instead some duty or responsibility owed to God? Well friend, that is a horse of a different color in any language!

Several O.T. passages stress the importance of not delaying when it comes to fulfilling our responsibilities to God: *“Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.”* (Isaiah 55:6); *“Give glory to the Lord your God, before He brings darkness and before your feet stumble on the dusky mountains, and while you are hoping for light He makes it into deep darkness, and turns it into gloom.”* (Jeremiah 13:16); *“When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the Lord you God will surely require it of you.”* (Deuteronomy 23:21); and the Psalmist added, *“I hastened and did not delay to keep Your commandments.”* (Psalm 119:60).

Why do you suppose so much is said in the Bible about procrastinating? Could it be that the God who created us best knows our weaknesses and tendencies? ***Absitively*** and ***posolutely!*** Therefore He said, *“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.”* (Proverbs 27:1). In the Epistle of James, after echoing some of the same warnings and reasons as above, He added, *“Therefore, to the one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.”* (James 4:17) The meaning of these things is pretty clear: God doesn’t accept “aroundtuits” or “mañanas”! He expects us to read, understand, and obey His Law **now** while we still have the opportunity to do so. The danger of procrastination is shown by parable in Luke 13:25, *“Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord open up to us!’ then He will answer and say to you, ‘I do not know where you are from.’”*  You can wait too long to obey the Lord.

“Aroundtuits” and “mañanas” may work with your neighbor- they may even get you by with your wife, but they won’t work with God! Friend, if “getting right with the Lord” is on your to-do list, don’t wait until you get “aroundtuit” or until “mañana”- do it now. *“But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”* (Hebrews 3:13) Remember, “now” is the only time any of us is guaranteed. (7-12-17)

**An *Attested* Man**

In Acts 2, when Peter and the rest of the apostles sought to convince the audience on Pentecost that Jesus was *“both Lord and Christ- this Jesus whom you crucified”* (v.36), they began by saying that He was ***“attested,”*** v.22.

“Attested” is an interesting word. It is translated from a compound Greek word, *apodieknumi,* which is derived from *apo* (apart), and *deiknuo* (to show or give evidence). Thus, it basically means, “to point out.” Here it is being used to indicate that Jesus had been ***demonstrated***or ***proven****.*  How? Notice the rest of v.22, *“a man* ***attested*** *to you by God with* ***miracles****, and* ***wonders****, and* ***signs*** *which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know…”*

For the purposes of this article, I’m not as interested in *how* Jesus was shown to be divine as much as that He *was* shown to be divine. The ***miracles*** (power), ***wonders*** (awe-producing), and ***signs*** (evidence of supernatural cause) ***attested*** (proved/demonstrated) that Jesus was both ***Lord***(Master) and ***Christ***(Savior).

The *attesting* power of Jesus’ miracles was even admitted by the Jewish leaders after He healed the man born blind (John 9), and raised Lazarus (John 11), *“What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs,”* John 11:47. They could not deny the power of Jesus, so they sought to get rid of Him. *“So from that day on they planned together to kill Him,”* v.53. Eventually, of course, they succeeded in getting the Romans to crucify Him, despite their own admission of His divine power! However, let’s take this a bit further.

In the process of the Jewish leadership procuring the death of Jesus at the hands of the Roman government, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, sought to dissuade their desires by instead offering them a *“notorious prisoner, Barabbas”* (Matthew 27:16). It was customary for the ruling governor to release any prisoner his subjects desired at the time of the Feast (cf. Matthew 27:15). Think about this. Barabbas is said to be *“notorious”-* which means that he was notably infamous. He was a well-known insurrectionist and murderer, Mark 15:7, and as such, deserved to die. Apparently, Pilate thought that, given the choice between such a ***notable***murderer and menace to society, and one ***known***to have performed miraculous acts of healing, they would surely choose Jesus. But he was wrong, for they instead shouted, *“Away with this man, and release for us Barabbas!”* (Luke 23:18).

Here’s the point: **Both Barabbas and Jesus were *attested!*** Both had been *demonstrated* and *proven*- one to be a murderer, and One who *“went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him,”* Acts 10:38b. And yet, as Peter would later point out to the Jews in Acts 3:14-15, *“you disowned the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted you, but put to death the Prince of life…”* One took life, and one gave life- even by raising the dead to life, *physically* and *spiritually*. But alas, the evil was chosen over the good, despite the fact that both were well known, and their true natures were well *attested!*

This really shouldn’t surprise us, nor should we be too condemning of their choice. After all, do not we do the same thing when we *knowingly* choose evil over good in our lives? The differences between the two are well attested, *“Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil…”* 1John 3:7-8. And yet, we, like those who chose Barabbas over Jesus despite their *attested* natures, often love *“ the darkness rather than the light,”* John 3:19. (10-30-12)

**Attributes of a Preacher and His Preaching**

It’s usually easy to blame the “tool” rather than the person holding it (especially if it’s you holding it!). Likewise, and more importantly, it is all too easy for a “leader” to blame the “followers” for not following correctly, fully, or at all. In fact, it’s amazing how well and often we can “see” the faults of others, and how difficult it is to see our own failures, and how seldom we do so- usually because we don’t look for them quite as diligently! God reveals a sobering truth concerning these matters through His prophet Malachi. After identifying the *people’s problems* in Malachi 1:2-14, the *“oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel”* turned the revelatory spotlight on the *priests’ failures.* Please take time to read Malachi 2:1-17 also.

Though it is certainly possible for a church’s *leadership* (elders, deacons, preachers, and teachers) to be saying and doing the right things, and the *members* fail to take heed and practice them, it is also very possible that we as leaders aren’t providing them with the information, tools, and examples they need to be faithful and pleasing to the Lord. To that end, let’s note some attributes of a gospel preacher and his preaching from the apostle Paul’s *words* and *example* in 1Thessalonians 2:1-12. **A *faithful* gospel preacher:**

* **Does not come/work *in vain* (in or towards futility), v.1;**
* **Is willing to *suffer* and be *mistreated* for the gospel, v.2a;**
* **Speaks *the gospel* with *boldness in God,* even, if necessary, *amid opposition,* v.2b;**
* ***Exhorts purely* and *without deceit,* v.3;**
* **Works the *approval of God,* and in *appreciation* of that with which he is *entrusted,* v.4a;**
* **Is cognizant of God’s *examination* of our *hearts* and *motives,* thereforealways strives to *please God* rather than *men,* v.4b;**
* **Never preaches *with flattery,* or *for greed,* v.5;**
* **Does not *seeking glory from men,* v.6a;**
* **Instructs not with *burdensome demanding,* but with *gentle leading,* vv.6b,7;**
* **Has a *true* and *fond affection* of his audience that produces a personal *self-sacrificing* spirit, v.8;**
* **Is willing to *labor,* even in *hardship,* so as not to be a *burden,* v.9;**
* **Behaves *devoutly, uprightly,* and *blamelessly,* v.10;**
* **Maintains the affection of a *father- exhorting, encouraging,* and *imploring,* v.11;**
* **Always keeps in mind the *proper purpose,* v.12.**

May we, as proclaimers of the great and powerful Word of God, ever keep these attributes in mind that we might fulfill our noble purpose with the utmost care and fruitfulness. And may congregations *seek, find,* and *appreciate* preachers of this attitude, aptitude, and activity. (8-12-16)

***“Back to Basics”***

Sometime around 51-52 A.D. the apostle Paul came to Corinth to preach the gospel. Many of the Corinthians *“when they heard were believing and being baptized.”* (Acts 18:8) Thus began the church at Corinth. It was a church with a lot of potential, but by the time Paul wrote 1Corinthians back to them five or six years later, it was a church with a lot of problems. The litany of troubles this church had developed is quite evident from simply reading the letter Paul wrote them. We note they were: divided(1:10ff); spiritually immature and carnal (3:1-3ff); spiritually arrogant (4:6-21); tolerant of gross immorality (chp.5); sinfully litigious (6:1-8); apparently needing to flee immorality (6:18ff); turning the Lord’s Supper into a common meal (11:17-34); and abusing spiritual gifts (chps.12-14). As if this wasn’t enough, some of them evidently no longer believed in the resurrection of the dead (15:12ff).

These surely seem to be a lot of problems for a church to develop in only five or six years of existence! But we need to be careful since our churches have likely been around a lot longer, and probably have many, if not more, of the same problems. We also have to realize that churches with problems have them because they are comprised of members with problems. Actually, it is not much different for individuals than it is for churches: those with potential are also potentially problematic. The same energy and enthusiasm that “gets the ball rolling” can just as easily roll it “into the ditch” unless constant reassessment occurs.

So what do we do when we, or our churches, seem to have “rolled into the ditch” of sin or stagnation? The answer is very simple: **We get *“Back to Basics.”*** Every athlete has heard it from a coach at some point. When the baseball or golf swing is out of whack, “Get back to basics.” When tackles are being missed or volleys hit into the net, “Get back to basics.” When the jump shot or free throws aren’t falling, again, the answer is “Get back to basics.” There’s really no difference in spiritual matters. When our life is in shambles and completely off course, we have to “get back to basics” there too.

Look again at the Corinthians. What were they told to do? Those *divided* were told to *“agree… (and) be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment”* through the *“name* (authority) *of our Lord Jesus Christ”* 1:10. Those who were *immature* and *carnal* were told to *grow up* and become *spiritual,* 3:4-23. Those who were *spiritually arrogant* were told *“not to exceed that which is written,”* and to *“be imitators”* of the humble servant Paul, 4:6-16. Those who *tolerated gross immorality* were told to *“remove the wicked man from among yourselves”* and *“not to associate with immoral people”* in the church, 5:5-13. Those *sinfully litigious* were told that it was better to be *“wronged.… (or) defrauded”* than to go to law with one another. Those involved in *immorality* were told to *“flee”* it and to remember that they were *“bought with a price”,* 6:18-20. Those *abusing the Lord’s Supper* were told to remember *how and why* it was instituted, 11:23-26; to eat it in a *worthy manner,* 11:27-29; to *“wait for one another”* in their partaking, 11:33; and to *eat their common meals* *at home,* 11:34. Those *abusing spiritual gifts* were given rules to govern their proper usage, 1Cor.14:26-38. And those *mistaken about the resurrection* were told again the things *“of first importance”* from the gospel*,* 15:1-8. None of these “solutions” was necessarily complicated- the Corinthians just had to **“get back to basics.”** The same thing holds true for us too!

Is your spiritual life in need of getting **“Back to Basics”?** If so, we hope you’ll join us at the **Southside Church of Christ** this coming Sunday through Wednesday for a special series of lessons on this very topic. **Bro. Mike McLemore** (Huntsville, AL) will deliver six lessons (Sunday at 9:30 &10:20 AM and 6:00 PM; Monday through Wednesday at 7:30 PM) to help us all remember and return to the fundamentals of faith. Bro. McLemore has done local church work for 26+ years in Texas, Mississippi, Virginia, and Alabama. His lessons are easily understood, dynamically presented, and Bible-based. We do hope you’ll join us at 602 Henderson St. for this spiritual feast from God’s Word!(10-3-11)

**The Four P’s of New Testament Baptism**

After Jesus had been crucified, resurrected, and spent forty days instructing His apostles, and just before He ascended back into heaven, He gave them this charge, *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned,”* Mark 16:15-16. With this simple commission, they were sent forth and the world was forever changed. The formula for salvation is put forth in its simplest terms: Belief + Baptism = Salvation. However, although few argue for salvation without faith, many seem to doubt or understand the importance of baptism. Let’s use the *divine commentary* of other NT passages to see if we can provide some clarity to half of what Jesus said produced salvation. For the sake of simplicity and hopefully help us remember the prerequisites and purpose of baptism, let’s use four P’s…

**1. Precept.** A ***precept***is a ***principle***or ***teaching****.* How is this vital to proper baptism? Let’s face it: There are a lot of *unscriptural,* and thus *improper,* motivations for baptism. Some are baptized because they think they’ve already been saved, and it will add them to a local church. But 1Peter 3:21 clearly states, *“baptism now saves you.”*  Saul of Tarsus had *seen* and *spoken* to the Lord, *obeyed* Him by going into Damascus as instructed by Him, and spent three days *fasting* and *praying,* but was nonetheless afterwards told by the Lord’s prophet Ananias to *“And why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name,”* Acts 22:16. Baptism is *unto* salvation, not *because of* it. Others are baptized simply because their friends are doing it and they don’t want to be left out. Still others do so because they think it will please someone else- their parents or spouse perhaps. None of these motivations are the reason set forth in the NT for baptism. Instead, candidates for baptism were *convicted* of their sins and told of the need for *repentance* through *precepts* of the gospel, cf. Acts 2:36-38a, and then were *instructed* to be *“baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins,”* Acts 2:28b. Thus, proper baptism is preceded by the teaching of the ***precepts*** of the gospel: faith in Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen Son of God, conviction of sin and therefore the need of salvation, and belief in Christ and baptism for the remission of sins. This is exactly what Jesus said in the Great Commission: Belief + Baptism = Salvation.

**2. Person.** Given the information above, this element of baptism now becomes easy to see. The proper ***person*** for baptism is the *penitent believer.* Notice that those who *believed* Jesus was the Christ, manifested *repentance* for their sins (Acts 2:36-37), and were properly *instructed* on what to do to have their sins remitted, *“received his word and were baptized,”* Acts 2:41a. They were then (by God) *“added”* to *“those who were being saved,”* Acts 2:41b,47. Babies can’t comprehend these things, or chose to obey them, and thus should not be baptized. Adults who don’t *receive* or *accept* proper teaching regarding Jesus Christ or how sins are remitted through Him, should likewise not be baptized. People of any age who are desiring baptism without true knowledge of and faith in Jesus, or understanding of the place of baptism in the process of the remission of sins, should not be baptized. The proper candidate for baptism is the *person* who *knows* who Jesus Christ is, is willing to *repent* and follow Him, and *understands* why baptism is an essential part of salvation.

**3. Practice.** By *practice, application* is intended rather than *repetition.* In other words, baptism has to be properly administered to be scriptural. None in the NT was “sprinkled” or had water “poured” on them to be baptized. The reason is simple: baptism was and is a “burial” through “immersion” in water. Colossians 2:12*, “having been buried with Him in baptism in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”* Note specifically that baptism is a *burial,* that *by faith* it is done *with Christ,* and from it *God raises* one from the *deadness* of sin. Sprinkling or pouring is not a *burial* from which one is *raised.* For baptism to be scriptural, it must be *immersion/burial* in water, cf. Acts 8:38.

**4. Purpose.**  The blood of Jesus is the *redemptive* price of salvation, Ephesians 1:7. We are *“released from our sins by His blood,”* Revelation 1:5. But how do we *contact* and have that blood *applied* to us to accomplish this remission of sin? Note carefully Romans 6:3-4, *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized* ***into His death?*** *Therefore we have been buried with Him* ***through baptism into death****…”* When was Jesus atoning blood shed? When He *died* on the cross for our sins. How do we contact/appropriate that atoning blood? Through faith and baptism- *“buried with Him* ***through baptism into death****,”* just as Romans 6:4 says.

For baptism to be scriptural, and thus accomplish its goal, it must be based on the right ***precepts****,* have a penitent believeras the ***person*** to be immersed*,* be ***practiced*** as a burial in water, for the ***purpose***of contacting the redeeming blood of Jesus- the **4 P’s** of baptism. (7-28-15)

**Basketball Time**

My love of basketball originated early; even before I was big enough to hoist the ball all the way up to and over the rim (we didn’t have ‘kid-height’ goals back then). So, I kept jamming my fingers trying to learn to dribble, and doing my best to grow tall and strong enough to throw the ball up to the goal, which was over three times my height. Eventually, all the grass was worn away from a lane-sized area of red clay that became as hard and smooth as I imagined the parquet floor at the old Boston Gardens.

By the time I was in Junior High, and thus able to play on the school team (no Little Dribblers then either), I was a small but decent basketball player- the only seventh grader on the “A” team. By the time I finished my eighth grade season, Coach had a plan. Since I was a pretty good student, and everyone has five years of High-School eligibility (of which he assumed I would only need four), he proposed using me on the Junior Varsity High School team for that season also. So, with class schedule rearranging that surely could not be legally accomplished now, I played the High School season that year too. My following freshman year, I was placed on the Varsity team, where I then played all four years. At the completion of my senior season, after we lost badly in the State 1A Championship game, Coach asked if I was interested in pursuing any Junior College try-outs. I wasn’t, and replied that although I loved and enjoyed playing the game, it was time to get on with life. So, I enrolled in college, and in about two years, was happily married, preaching “full-time” with “part-time” pay, and was working 40-50 hours a week building motor homes. Soon, preaching became my sole vocation, and has been since. Truly, I have been blessed! But this basketball-related history tour has a spiritual three-pointer involved.

**‘Want to’ is vital, but not sufficient.** It did not matter how badly I “wanted to” throw that basketball high enough to reach the rim, it took time and sufficient growth for such to be possible. The same is true with spiritual growth and development. Certainly, the *desire* to be pleasing to God is necessary (Ephesians 5:10), but that is not all there is to it, as Romans 10:1-3 indicates. *Knowledge* of how to please God is a must, and comes from Him, not us. And, *time* is also factor in spiritual growth, maturity, and skills. We can’t be twenty-year Christians soon after being born again anymore than I could throw that ball through a basket three times higher than me! Certain things just have to grow over time. However, too much time is also a problem, see Hebrews 5:12ff.

**If you work hard and do well, rewards and privileges follow.** I had spent countless hours alone on that dirt court bouncing and shooting that ball, and all that preparation paid off. It was a great honor to be the lone seventh grader on the eighth grade team. And it was certainly a privilege to work out and play with the High School team while still in Junior High. But to play four years of varsity, and get to play in the State Championship, to me, then, that was the simply the best (except for that cute sophomore, Donna Mobley)! After Cain’s failure to offer a pleasing sacrifice, he pouted when God refused to accept what had not been authorized. But God encouraged him, *“If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?”* (Genesis 4:7) If we commit ourselves to discovering and doing what God desires, we too will *do well,* and *our* spiritual *countenance will be lifted up!*

**There is a time to play, and a time to put away childish things.** As much as I enjoyed playing basketball, once out of High School, I was done with playing organized ball. It was time to make a living for that beautiful young lady, Donna Mobley Strong, and myself. Taking on the adult responsibilities of marriage meant that it was time to *“put away childish things”* (1Corinthians13:11). So too, when we take on the adult responsibilities of being *married to Christ* as Christians, it’s time to put away the childish, temporal delights of “play” and get serious about our commitment and responsibilities to Him. Too many today seem to stay in perpetual spiritual infancy- they just want to “play” at their religion. So, they show up and are involved only as it suits them, which is usually only when it is “fun”! Such need to heed Paul’s words and grow up.

So, how’s your spiritual **“want to”**? Are you **“doing well”** spiritually? Have you **“put away the childish things”** and taken seriously your commitment to Christ? (3-20-12)

**Be *That* Christian Who…**

**Knows that the New Testament is the sole source of authority for life and godliness.** Why the New Testament? The Old Testament, while *inspired* and *profitable* (cf. Romans 15:4), was the Law of God for Jews at Mt. Horeb (Sinai, cf. Deuteronomy 5:1-5), until the cross of Jesus Christ, Hebrews 9:15-17. It was fulfilled by Jesus and superseded by *“the gospel of the kingdom,”* Luke 16:16, the *New Testament.* Furthermore, what *you* or *I* think or feel or believe doesn’t cut it either- what God has said in the New Testament is vital. The *“word of His grace”* is that *“which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified,”* Acts 20:32. Be *that* Christian who knows this.

**Understands that “worship” is about *pleasing God* instead of self.** The act of *worship* is supposed to pay *homage, reverence,* and *praise* to God for whoHe is and what He has done, Hebrews 13:15. Attempts to placate and pleasure attendees fall feebly flat of that purpose. There is no doubt that the act of worshipping God also benefits the participants, but its focus must remain on God and what pleases Him. The New Testament says nothing of choirs or orchestras, dramatic performances or praise dancing- why not let God tell us in His word what pleases Him instead of doing what we like, and expecting Him to accept it? Be *that* Christian who *worships* God *“in spirit and truth,”* John 4:23-24.

**Regards others as more important than self.** Selfishness is at the heart (and in it too) of almost every sin we commit. We *want* and *do* what pleases us. Throughout His life, Jesus did the will of God and served others, Matthew 20:28. The only way to follow His example is to *want, do,* and *take pleasure* from doing God’s will instead of our own. Such requires *selflessness* instead of *selfishness.*  *“Do nothing from selfishness, or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others,”* Philippians 2:3-4. Only in this way can we *“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,”* Philippians 2:5. Be that *selfless,* rather than *selfish,* Christian!

**Loves those who don’t love them.** “Oh no, I just *can’t* love and be nice to people that hate and mistreat me!” Then you can’t be a *child* of God because that is not only what He did, but also what He requires of His children. *“But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you; in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven…”,* Matthew 5:43-44. Jesus went on to say (vv.46-47) that even the godless love those who love them. Christians have a higher calling- one that emulates their Father who loved those opposed to Him enough to offer His own Son as a sacrifice to save them. *Wholeness/completeness* is found only in *loving* and *doing* as God does, Matthew 5:48. Be *that* Christian who *loves* and *does* as God and Christ have done.

**Loves righteousness and hates lawlessness.** Note that Hebrews 1:9 doesn’t say Jesus “loved the righteous and hated the lawless,” but rather *“righteousness”* and *“lawlessness.”* The difference is huge. To hate the *lawless* would violate Matthew 5:43-44 as demonstrated in the previous paragraph. Instead, and simplified for the sake of clarity, to be like God and be His child we must love *right conduct* and *hate wrong conduct.* Admittedly, it is difficult to “hate the sin” and “love the sinner.” But such is exactly what God does, and what He expects His own to do also. Unfortunately, the tendency is to think of these things in regard to other people’s conduct. What about our own conduct? Be that Christian who *loves righteousness* and *hates lawlessness* in his own life first, and then also in the lives of others.

**Appreciates the value of every soul.** While all *lives* do indeed matter, all *souls* matter even more, cf. Matthew 16:25-26. While every Christian should appreciate the value of *his own* soul, he must also appreciate the value of *every* soul. Such will cause him to think, feel, speak, and act in a way that enables the saving of as many souls as possible. Be *that* Christian who can’t stand the thought of any soul meeting its Maker in judgment without first having had the opportunity to hear and obey the gospel.

**Wakes each morning and thinks, “What can I do today that will glorify God?”** To *glorify* is to *praise* and *honor.* If such is regarded as our daily privilege, then our thoughts, intentions, and activities take on a new and *sanctified* (set apart as holy) purpose. Sure, we have daily tasks and duties that are not particularly *holy* in nature. But still yet, even they can be accomplished in a way that brings honor and glory to God, cf. Colossians 3:17 – 4:6. Consider Jesus’ words of Mathew 5:16 in this regard, *“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven.”* Be *that* Christian who everyday seeks to *glorify* God in everything. (9-1-15)

**“Being Right” versus “Helping Others Become Right”**

In most cases, the reasons we act (or don’t act) matter tremendously. Our motivations and intentions often determine how we act, even if the decision to act has already been made. Hebrews 4:12-13 makes it clear that God recognizes and judges our thoughts and motives as well as our actions. Jesus makes the same point (including also our feelings/emotions) in Matthew 5:21-48.

I often write and preach things which are “corrective” in nature- lessons that seek to address commonly held misunderstandings and misapplications of God’s Word. I don’t do this to be different, or to attract attention. Neither is my purpose to prove that I’m right and others are wrong. God’s Word is “right” and “true” whether or not I am. Instead, the purpose I try to always keep in mind is to help others become right according to the Word. It is for this reason that I attempt to *“contend earnestly for the faith which was once delivered to the saints,”* Jude 3. Certainly, we should all be diligently *“handling accurately the word of truth”* that we can be *“approved to God as a workman”* who does not need to be ashamed, 2Timothy 2:15; but we should also be just as concerned with helping others to be the same. If we are primarily concerned with just “proving ourselves right” in our contending for the faith, without regard for the resulting impact on others, our motives and efforts are just plain wrong.

In writing to the young preacher Timothy on how to carry out his mission of preaching the Word, the apostle Paul gave these inspired instructions, *“instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering God’s provision which is by faith****.*** *But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions,”* 1Timothy 1:3-7. See? The motives matter. Preaching, teaching, and discussing the Bible is not supposed to be about proving yourself right and others wrong- it is about “being right” **with God** and helping others to “be right” **with God** also! Faithful *contenders for the faith* are trying to produce in others the *“****love from a pure heart*** *and a* ***good conscience*** *and a* ***sincere faith****”* of which Paul wrote. If this is not our objective, then we are just wrong, and wrongly motivated.

Hopefully, these points will help to explain a few things. I press hard for *“accurately handling the word of truth”* (again, from 2Timothy 2:15) because the truth matters- in fact, nothing matters more because it is only through the truth of His Word that Jesus sets us free from sin and its eternal consequences, cf. 2Thessalonians 2:10. However, “the truth” does not “makes us free” unilaterally, despite being often misquoted that way from John 8:32. One can possess the truth without being made free by it. Most everyone has a Bible, or at least access to one. Does such make them “free” from sin and its consequences? Of course not! The rest of the verse, which is typically omitted, is, *“and you shall* ***know the truth****, and the truth shall make you free.”* Having a Bible doesn’t make you a Christian anymore than owning a scalpel makes you a doctor. One has to know how to accurately use and apply the Truth to be made free by it, or to help others to be made free by it! Don’t get me wrong, one need not possess a PhD in Divinity to *“handle accurately the word of truth”* to his own and others’ benefit. But he must have accurate knowledge of the biblical text, and the right motive and purpose in mind for its use.

Truth matters. And the purpose and motivation for our use of it matters too. The Truth is able to make all people free from the shackles of sin and destruction if we understand and handle it accurately, and it is believed and applied correctly. Please study the passages mentioned (as well as the rest of the New Testament!) and think on these things. If you find them to true, do them- not because I wrote them, but because you found them to be true according to God’s Word. If they’re not true, please let me know because I want to know, practice, and teach only “the truth” so that I and as many as possible can be saved, see 1Timothy 4:16! (11-16-11)

**Believing and Loving the Truth**

2Thessalonians 2:10,12 issues a dire warning of impending doom for two distinct, but perhaps related, groups of people: 1) those who do not *love the truth so as to be saved,* v.10; and, 2) those who do not *believe the truth.* Let’s consider the second group first.

We usually have reasons for what we do- they many not be good reasons, but we have them nonetheless. Why would anyone possibly refuse to believe the truth when presented with the opportunity to accept it? The answer is provided by the rest of v.12, *“but took pleasure in wickedness.”*  Truth- especially the biblical variety, is often refused because it contradicts our desires. Rather than admit the wrongness of the desired activity, we reject the standard that pronounced it “wrong.” We may do so by saying that the Bible is not really the word of God; or that it has been altered, and is thus inaccurate; or that it has been damaged, and is therefore incomplete; or that it is simply out of date, and consequently rendered impotent as a standard of truth for modern living. Any of these so-called “reasons” can and have been proffered as motivations for rejecting the Bible as the “truth” it claims to be, cf. John 17:17. But the real motivation for refusing to believe the truth is usually much more simple, and much less “enlightened.” The most common reason we reject the truth of God’s word is that it contradicts our own desires. It says that what we want to believe is false, that what we want to feel is improper, or that what we want to do is forbidden. So we reject it, and make up reasons that sound noble to others and with which we salve our consciences sufficiently to enable us to think, feel, and do exactly what we want.

What about that other group- those that don’t *love the truth?* These are different. They don’t rejectthe truth as being *untrue, inaccurate,* or even *out of date.* They believe God’s word to be true, accurate, and relevant. So what’s their problem? They don’t *love the truth* enough. Enough for what? Enough to be saved by it. How so?

For the truth of God’s word to save us, we have to believe what it says enough to obey it, cf. John 8:31-32. This involves both our minds and our hearts. With our minds we must conclude that it is true (Hebrews 11:3), and understand what it requires (Hebrews 11:6; 5:9). But with our hearts, we must choose to love/value truth over:

* Our own personal desires. James 4:1-4 identifies the *source* of many of our *quarrels and conflicts* as being our *own pleasures* and *wrong motivations.* Put another way: when we desire and demand *our* way over *God’s,* it *fractures* our *fellowship* with Him and causes all sorts of other related problems! Do you love truth more than your own desires?
* Societal norms. It is not easy to love and stand for truth when most of society seems to prefer lies and living them. And yet, the truth requires that we *“prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life…”* Philippians 2:15-16. Do you love truth more than being liked and accepted by the world?
* Ancestral traditions/beliefs/expectations. Jesus said that the *sword* (of truth, the gospel, cp. Ephesians 6:10) would separate families- a son from his father, a daughter from her mother, and a daughter-in-law from her mother-in-law; that family members would become enemies, Matthew 10:35-36. Why? Because some will *love* the truth and follow it, while others will love “family” more, and follow them into disobedience, Matthew 10:37-38. Do you love truth more than your parents, children, and in-laws?
* Spousal relationships. A *non-believing* spouse may leave if you love truth more than them, cf. 1Corinthians 7:10-11. Would your love and preference of truth be sufficient for you to let them go and live alone in obedience to God? Do you love truth more than your spouse?

*Believing* God’s word to be true is essential to salvation, and many will surely perish because they refuse to do so. However, perhaps just as many- if not more, will perish despite believing God’s word to be true, because they do not *love* the truth enough to prefer and practice it above all else. (6-27-17)

**“Believing *In* God” or *“Believing* God”?**

Although the numbers are surely diminishing, in this part of the world, a significant portion (if not most) of the population still “believes *in* God.” But what does “believing *in* God” really mean? That…

* God exists only in the totality of the Universe (or Nature), rather than as the *Divine* *Personage*? This is **Pantheism**, and if this is your concept of “God,” you believe *in* the wrong one. The God of the Universe *“made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them,”* Acts 14:15, but is not *contained* within His creation.
* God exists and can be found and fellowshipped through many different *paths* that are all *equally valid?* This is **Pluralism**, and blatantly contradicts the Bible. *“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me,’”* John 14:6. Also note Ephesians 4:4-5, *“There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”* Pluralism may have become the most common form of “believing *in* God,” but its popular acceptance certainly doesn’t make it correct, cf. Matthew 7:13-23.
* God *exists,* but is found through *reason* and *observation* of the *natural world* rather than by *revelation?* This is **Deism**. The *natural world* certainly gives evidence of God and His creation of it, *“For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse,”* Romans 1:20. But the verses that follow show the limitations of man’s *reasoning* and *observation* skills regarding this evidence, *“For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures,”* Romans 1:22-23.

You may have noticed that Pantheism, Pluralism, and Deism all have one thing in common: they not only *contradict* the Bible, but they seek to eliminate it as being *authoritative.* In essence, these false concepts of God remove the *obligations* of God’s Word, the Bible. After all, if “God” can be found in *Nature,* and “spirituality” (as a false concept of *fellowship*) is achieved through any one of multiple and equally valid paths, what need do we have of a *specific revelation* (the Bible) from Him? None- if any or all of these belief systems were accurate, and therefore valid. But they aren’t. They all contradict what God has *revealed* in the Bible about Himself, and what He *expects* of those who “believe” Him!

So by contrast, what does *“believing God”* then mean? *Believing* God is much more than coming to the mental acceptance of His existence. It means:

* That *“we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible,”* Hebrews 11:3.
* That *“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work,”* 2Timothy 3:16-17.
* That unless we are willing to *live in faith* by obeying God, our “faith” is vain. *“You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? … You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone,”* James 2:19-20,24.

“Believing *in* God” is just an acknowledgment of His existence in one *form* or another, and requires no action, but promises no spiritual future. But, “believing *God”* means to accept all that He reveals about Himself, all that He requires of us, and all that He says about the future *reward of the obedient* and *punishment of the disobedient* in His Word, the Bible (see 2Corinthians 5:6-19)! Now, do you “believe *in* God,” or do you “believe *God”?* (5-5-17)

**Biscuits at the City Dump**

H. Osby Weaver (I just realized I don’t remember what the “H.” stood for!) was a preacher friend of mine way back when. He and his lovely wife, Mary Helen, were forty-two domino- playing partners with Donna and me. Such was somewhat of an odd pairing, since they were among the oldest couples in the congregation, and Donna and I were among, if not *the*, youngest couple in the group there in Nacogdoches. But no matter, we were good friends. Osby was the preacher for the church there at the time, and I was just starting to preach regularly.

Though I didn’t especially care for Bro. Osby’s manner of presentation- he was very dry and somewhat monotone when speaking publicly, I loved his knowledge of the sacred text, and greatly appreciated his wisdom in the application of it. He was among the first to encourage me to preach “full-time.” Though his sermons weren’t my favorites, I learned a lot from him nonetheless. But in more private settings, like around the domino table, Osby had a great wit and keen sense of humor. Every once in a while, both would break through that serious façade of his to make a great point of application from the Truth.

Once Osby was being questioned, or perhaps challenged (and he usually didn’t appreciate or deal particularly well with either) by a young college student who apparently thought pretty highly of his own opinions and judgments- even in comparison to those of the venerable old servant of the cross. This young man was trying to defend attending “R-rated” movies because, as he put it, “They almost always contain at least one good life lesson.” The unflappable wise one simply replied, "**You might also find one *good* biscuit at the city dump, but the city dump is a *bad* place to look for *good* biscuits."** You’ve just got to love logic and reason like that! The young man got the point, whether or not he took it to heart is another matter entirely.

What Bro. Weaver so eloquently and succinctly stated was the same, in essence, as the principle stated by inspiration in a couple of places. James 4:4 reads, *“You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”* And, 2Corinthians 6:14 adds, *“…what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?”* What both of these texts are emphasizing is the point the young man was trying avoid: God expects those who would be godly to separate themselves from ungodliness. There are just some activities in which a Christian ought not participate, and should not desire to do so. We can try to justify or excuse our involvement any way we choose, but the truth remains steadfast: “The city dump is just a bad place to look for good biscuits!”

Bro. Osby wasn’t trying to legislate what was “right” and “wrong” for this young man by creating and maintaining an arbitrary set of rules- and neither am I. But, if we really want to be godly and live lives of holiness, barraging our senses with ungodly and unholy sights and sounds isn’t going to help, cf. Roman 13:14. The real problem this young man faced is one with which we all must deal. It is the inner conflict between wanting to belong to and be saved by God, and still yet wanting to be like and to be liked by the world. Perhaps Jesus said it best, *“No one can serve two masters…”,* Matthew 6:24. We must choose which it will be for us- it simply cannot be both godliness and worldliness, cf. 1John 1:6; 3:7-10.

Are you looking for “good biscuits in the city dump”? Though you might occasionally find one there, the city dump “is a bad place to look for good biscuits!” (12-18-12)

**Black, Red, and Redder Letters**

The level of credence we give to some statements is often determined by who said or wrote them. If the author or speaker is someone we consider wise, successful, or in perhaps the worst case scenario, popular or famous, we listen to and consider their words. In short, we pay more and better attention because of the source. Such is not necessarily bad. But of course, the value of this process is dependent upon the inherent quality of our basis of evaluation. If we give credence to what someone says because they’re famous instead of understanding and wise, we’re setting ourselves up for disappointment and misery. Statements *should* stand on their own merits- they are either “true” or “false” regardless of who said them. However, that’s not our reality since “who” made them often supersedes what is written or said in our evaluations.

Unfortunately, we take this same flawed system of evaluating validity into our reading and applications of Scripture. Some people only pay attention to the “red letters” in the Bible. The “red letters” are the recorded words of Jesus. Obviously, we should pay close attention to the statements made by the Son of God and Savior of the world, but do those “red letters” really deserve more consideration than the “black ones”?

Consider a “red letter” statement in John 14:26 about the then future inspiration of the apostles by the Holy Spirit, *“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.”* If the Spirit’s mission was to remind the apostles of everything Jesus said, should we give less attention to the things they wrote by the Spirit’s inspiration- even if recorded in “black letters”? Notice also John 16:13 on this same point, *“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak of His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.”* When Jesus said (in “red letters”) that His apostles would be guided *“into all truth”* by the Spirit, can we really devalue what they wrote in “black letters”? Paul said he wrote by the *revelation of the Spirit* so that *“when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,”* Ephesians 3:3-5. Again, this begs the same question as before: Can we diminish that which God revealed by the Spirit to the inspired writers of the New Testament because they are in “black,” rather than “red,” letters? Certainly not, but these things do lead us to an additional consideration.

Not only do we tend to distinguish and devalue the “black” letters in favor of the “red” ones in the sacred text, we evidently have an additional, though perhaps subconscious, line of demarcation: apparently there are “red” and “redder” letters. Even within the “red” letters, there are some passages that we are inclined to accentuate more heavily than others- or there are some that we apt to overlook completely in favor of others. Note an example. Jesus indeed said, *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”* in Mark 16:15; but He also said, *“Do not give that which is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine”* in Matthew 7:6. We tend to ignore that He was speaking specifically to His apostles rather than “us” in the first case, and that “we” are expected to use some discretion and judgment in our efforts to spread the word in the second instance. Matthew 15:14 is similarly often ignored, though recorded in “red” and on the same point.

How about another example? Jesus clearly taught that those who would be His disciples should be concerned with, and help, their fellowman, Luke 10:25-37; Mark 10:21; *et al*. But are you also familiar with His statement in Mark 14:7? There He said, *“For the poor you always have with you, and whenever you wish, you can do them good…”* If we emphasize the first set of statements, and deemphasize or ignore the other one, we could become so involved in the physical needs of our fellowman so as to forget that his *spiritual* needs are actually more important, cf. John 6:26-27.

So, what’s the solution to our tendencies with regard to “black” vs. “red” vs. “redder” letters? The answer is found in 2Timothy 3:16, *“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”* Understand that no passage of Scripture contradicts another; and therefore the correct view of any passage (or principle) is found through harmonizing it with everything else the Bible says on the subject- whether it is found in “red” or “black” letters! (12-8-16)

***Blessed are the Dead***

Between us, Donna and I attended four funerals in nine days. The deceased were mostly family members of our spiritual family, and family members of our friends. Our hearts go out to them all. There have been several high-profile singers and actors that have also died recently. Death is hard, prevalent, and inevitable. Obviously, death is just as much a part of life as birth- though we sure don’t view (or memorialize) them the same. But have you ever considered how differently from God- the Creator and Sustainer of life, we view death? John was specifically instructed to write, *“Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord from now on!”* in Revelation 14:13. The Greek word translated as *blessed* means “happy” or “fortunate.” Indeed, those dying *“in the Lord”* are just that! Even when the departed was, as far as we can determine at least, a *righteous* person who lived and trusted *“in the Lord,”* do we really view their passing as a *“blessed”* event? Typically, we do not. Why not? Shouldn’t Christians view the passing of other Christians as “blessed” like God? When you get right down to it, shouldn’t we strive to view everything as God does?

**To have the proper view of death, we must first have the proper view of life.** This means viewing *life* as God does. Please consider the following points, and perhaps they will help…

* **The *quality* of life is not tied to *length.*** We view and react very differently to the death of someone who has lived a long life than we do to the passing of those who have lived but a short time. Perhaps this is only natural, and human. However, *how* the departed lived is much more important, and a more accurate measure of their life, than the length of it. Whether “long” or “short,” was their life one of spiritual content? If so, their death was and should be viewed as a *“blessed”* event! *“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones,”* Psalm 116:15. A *godly* life is precious to God, and should be praised, celebrated, and emulated by us regardless of its length.
* **For one who has lived righteously, death is *graduation day.*** Life is but preparation for eternity. It is “the school” of but a few years that prepares us for our eternal home and occupation. Thus, the *school of life* trains us for either: an eternity of misery, torment, anguish, and regret of what might have been (together with the Devil, his demons, and the dregs of human society from all of time); or alternatively, an eternity of joy and blessedness in the presence of God singing praises with the angels of heaven. For those who have *lived life* in preparation for eternity, death is the culmination of all their labors, and the temporal hardships they endured. Thus, for the righteous, death is a *graduation-* a day of celebrated accomplishment, and the completion of a necessary but preparatory journey. Thus, life is to be viewed as *“momentary, light affliction”* that produces *“an eternal weight of glory, far beyond all comparison,”* 2Corinthians 4:17.
* **Living a godly life can be hard- death is a *rest.*** Life can be, and often is, hard. Once we commit ourselves to living a life of service to God and preparation for eternity, Satan will do everything within his power to make us doubt, retreat from, and recant that commitment- he can, and often does, make life difficult, if not miserable. But for the one who perseveres in godliness, death is a blessed *rest.* God said that for those who *“die in the Lord”* death is a *“rest from their labors,”* Revelation 14:13. Whatever pain, hardship, temptation, and trials Satan threw their way to dissuade them has ended. The toil and labor of “working for the Lord” and His Cause is likewise completed. Death is blessed, sweet, happy rest for the godly.

Our *physical* bodies were not “built to last.” They were created to be but a temporary abode for an eternal spirit that God placed within them. As we’ve heard and know, our bodies will all *“go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust,”* Ecclesiastes 3:20. But our spirits *“will return to God”* who gave them, Ecclesiastes 12:7. Thus, death is the necessary conclusion of physical life as much as birth is its beginning- for everyone (see 1Corinthians 15:35-58). But if we view *life* as God does, *death* can be a *precious, blessed, rest* that culminates in eternity with God. We may selfishly mourn the passing of a righteous loved one for what we lose, but please be happy for what they have gained! (1-19-16)

**Booting the Routine**

Recently, Donna and I spent the day with Dad in the hospital as he was recovering from surgery. He was doing OK, but was medicated and slept most of the time. We tried to keep our conversation and other noise-making to a minimum so as not to disturb him. But by mid-afternoon, boredom and lunch were conspiring to lower my eyelids. I panned the room for some distraction that would arouse my attention and senses. That’s when I spotted it- a candy, cookie, and every-other-kind-of-snack-imaginable bouquet Mollie had sent! I wasn’t at all hungry, but each tasty morsel was displayed on the end of stick in an array that far surpassed long-stemmed red roses. I plucked the cheese and cracker sticks from the spray and sat back down like a cat that had caught his first bird!

As my fairly large hands and arthritic fingers began to fumble with the wrapper- you know, the plastic one that makes enough noise to double as the bird deterrent siren at the airport, I decided that this pigeon wasn’t going to be easy to pluck! The package had apparently been hermetically molded to the stick with some type of aerospace hot glue from NASA, and the little plastic window covering the tempting morsel was evidently bullet-proof. Finally, Donna took pity on me- either that or she could no longer concentrate on the recipe she was perusing in Family Circle due to all the noise. She took it from me, and with adeptness probably best comparable to a twenty-third generation Redneck field-dressing an illegally taken deer beside the road, handed the opened package back to me in a millisecond.

That’s when it happened. Dad, though motionless and seemingly asleep, opened one eye and addressed me, “You mean you can take a motor completely apart and put it back together but you can’t open cheese and crackers?” All I could muster in reply was, “Apparently not.” As I softly snickered at his witty observation while relishing the deliciousness of my now succumbed prey, the event reminded me of a baseball player who makes the spectacular diving catch of a line drive in one inning, only to boot the routine two-hop grounder with a Sunday bounce in the next one. After further reflection, it dawned on me that many Christians suffer the same affliction: **We profess and perhaps even perform great feats of faith in extreme circumstances, only to fail miserably on the daily duties of being a Christian.**

When there is some “big” event or tragedy in our lives, our faith bursts forth to the surface in a brilliant display. But that same faith stays submerged, untapped, and unobserved on the day-to-day task of being a Christian. Do you think Jesus knew we would have this problem when He said, *“If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross* ***daily****, and follow Me.”* (Luke 9:23)? Probably. We’re kind of like Naaman in this regard- we want our association with God to be something grand and magnificent for all to see, *“Behold, I thought, ‘He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper.’”* (2Kings 5:12) But Naaman’s servants had it right when they reasoned, *“had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, ‘Wash, and be clean’?”* (v.13) Naaman almost booted the routine spiritual grounder because he was expecting the laser line drive.

Sound familiar? Notice Galatians 6:5, *“For each one shall bear his own load.”* The word *load* comes from the Greek *phortion* (for-**tee**-on). *Phortion* means a *normal, everyday task.* Here, it refers to the day-to-day obligation of being a Christian. No one else can do this for us. It is our job to be a Christian every day*,* and not *boot the routine spiritual**grounders* that any dedicated follower of Christ ought to easily handle. By contrast, v.2 reads, *“Bear one another’s burdens…” Burden* is translated from a word (*baros*) referring to *excessive*, *abundant;* *trouble*. In this *excessive* or *abundant trouble* we should be able to depend on our brethren for help. But when it comes to being a Christian daily, that’s our job. It’s great when our faith allows us to make the difficult and perhaps spectacular “plays” of life, but let’s be sure that it also permits us to meet the routine spiritual obligations of being on God’s team **daily**. (8-10-11)

**Breaking the Reign Sin in Our Lives**

While every person born has entered a sinful world, no one is born *into* sin or *as* a sinner. Everyone *becomes* a sinner in exactly the same way- by *committing* or *walking* (living in) sin, cf. Ephesians 2:1-3. But, since everyone except Jesus Christ has *committed* or *walked* in sin, how we *become* sinners is not really as important as how we *get out of* sin. Thus, how we break free from the reign of Satan and sin over our lives is of paramount importance. As always, God’s word does not leave us without the necessary information and assistance….

*“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lust”* is the imperative command of Romans 6:12. Sin is like an addictive drug that, if given the opportunity, becomes all consuming. It often begins as a recreational attempt to have a little fun. But soon, again like a drug, more and more of it becomes necessary to achieve the desired effect. Before we know it, the full-blown addictive properties of sin have taken over our lives because of its habit-forming and pervasive powers. We become *servants* or *slaves* of and to sin who are no longer in control of our spiritual lives, Romans 6:16, or at least so it seems. How can we be freed from these shackles of sin and escape the downward spiral of its spiritual destruction and condemnation?

**Stop *obeying your own lusts,* Romans 6:12**. You don’t *have to* sin- it is a choice. “The devil made me do it” is a lie we tell in a futile attempt to mitigate the culpability of our own choices. James 1:14 sets the record straight on this point, *“But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.”* Sure, Satan will assist us by providing opportunities and encouragement to give in to these lusts (cf. Matthew 4:1-11), but the choice is still ours. We choose to either obey our own desires or God’s will. Perhaps the underlying problem in this area is our unwillingness to sincerely pray as Jesus did, *“not My will, but Yours be done,”* Luke 22:42.

**Stop *presenting the members of your own body as instruments of sin,* Romans 6:13.** If the previous point deals with the *thoughts* and *intentions* the *heart* and *mind,* and it does, then this one confronts the inevitable coercion and control these manifest over the *body. ­*Let’s face it: the members of our bodies rarely act in ways that aren’t dictated by our hearts and minds. If our will, as a product of the emotions of our hearts and the thoughts of our minds, is not bent, molded, shaped, and made to conform and subjugate itself to that of God’s, our bodies will certainly follow it into the disobedience of sin. But, there is a remarkable connection between our hearts, minds, and bodies with which our Creator endowed us. We are, largely and most often, creatures of habit. In spiritual matters especially, this is to our advantage. If we will simply change our activities, consistently, our hearts and minds can be favorably altered. If we will commit ourselves to changing the sinful behavior of our bodies into the consistent practice of righteousness, our hearts and minds- and thus our desires and will, conform themselves to our practice. Thus, to at least some degree, we can change our *desires* by changing our *practices.* So, *“do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God,”* Romans 6:13.

**Appropriate *the grace of God* for yourself, Romans 6:14**. The previous two points, from the previous two verses in the text, contain what *we* need to do to break the reign of sin in our lives. This final verse of our present consideration points us to what *God* has done toward this objective. In a word, it is *“grace”!* Though it is our responsibility to change our *hearts, minds,* and *activities,* it is what God has done that allows and enables these changes. This sixth chapter of Romans was introduced by notion that *“grace might reign”* over and control us instead of sin, Romans 5:21. This transfer of sovereignty in our lives is accomplished *“through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”* God’s *gracious* provision of salvation, which enables our freedom from sin’s reign, is accomplished through the *death, burial,* and *resurrection* of Jesus Christ, Romans 6:5-11! So, the question becomes: How do we *appropriate* (receive the benefits of) God’s provision by grace? Romans 6:3-4 tells us that by being *“buried with Him through baptism”* we are resurrected with Him to *“walk in newness of life.”* By belief in Jesus as God’s Son, and by baptism into His death, we are saved, Mark 16:16. This salvation is the basis for our complete freedom from the *reign of sin* in our lives, but we must continue the process by also changing our *will* to sin, and our *practice* of it! (5-2-17)

**Put God First, and the Brethren Second?**

There are plenty of passages that teach us that God must occupy the position of prominence in our lives. We take such passages to mean that He must have preeminence in our:

**Affections,** Matthew 22:36-37, *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? And He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’”*

**Devotions,** Matthew 4:10, *“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Begone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.’”*

**Efforts,** Matthew 6:33, *“But seek first His kingdom, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.”*

Such is certainly true, right, and proper in every regard, and multitudes of sermons have been given emphasizing and expounding upon these principles. And yet, it is also true that knowing and understanding these principles is not the same as living them. We (Christians) tend to put God at the top of our mental “to do” list for the week, and then check Him off after we’ve attended Sunday morning services. So? The major problem, and there are others, is that we then tend to think the rest of the week is ours to be devoted to numbers two through and following on our list with little or no regard for God and spiritual matters. In our minds, we’ve already checked Him off the list by attending Sunday morning! Surely this is not what these passages indicate.

Instead of a sequential list with God in the number one position, try prioritizing this way. Consider an old-time wagon wheel- you know, the kind with a hub in the center and spokes running out the edge. Think of this wheel as representing our week (or life), and the “partitions” created in the spaces between the spokes as the things we want to accomplish. Now we can allow God to be the “hub” in the center from which everything else emanates. With this model, God is at the center of and determines all our other activities and priorities. Thus, He is ***first*** in our affections, devotions, and efforts because everything else is subservient to Him in our lives.

Now, consider the second part of our title. Even if we acknowledge God’s necessary preeminence, in mind if not always in practice, we seldom think about the implications of the second part of Jesus’ answer to the lawyer in Matthew 22. After emphasizing the necessity of proper love for God in v.37, He then added, *“And the second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,”* v.39.There is no doubt that Jesus meant “mankind” in general, and “community” perhaps more specifically as the definition of *“neighbor.”*  But, do these designations exclude our spiritual “brethren”? We are to love one another, 1John 3:11. “So?” Think about it and answer for yourself: are your “brethren” really in “second place” only to God in your life? Do we love them more than all else save God? We’re tempted to quickly retort with pride and zeal, “My family comes second to God!” Is that the example Jesus left for us? Consider Matthew 12:46-50. When Jesus was told that His biological “family” was seeking to speak to Him but could not because of the assembled crowds, how did He respond? Note vv.49-50, *“And stretching out His hand* ***toward His disciples****, He said, ‘Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever shall do the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.’”*  Do **you** feel this way about your “brethren”?

While I may be stretching the point of Matthew 22:39 by applying it so specifically to “brethren,” is that application really any different from Romans 12:10, *“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor,”*? Wouldn’t such *devotion* to our brethren in Christ be a necessary precursor to our love and devotion to those of our “neighbors” outside the Body?

If we truly love and are devoted to our brethren in such a way as to put them second only to God, how will that impact our congregation? “Tremendously” and “positively” are the answers! We will think of them before self in determining how we feel towards, speak to, and treat one another. We will be more concerned with their encouragement than our own selfish desires, or those of our non-Christian physical families, when it comes to attendance and participation in worship. It will also change our prayer life to be more specific with regard to the spiritual well-being of our brethren than our own physical needs, cf. Philippians 2:3. It will make us “brethren” in all that the word is supposed to imply!

What do these things mean? How should it affect us? 1) Put God at the center of your life, and let Him be the “hub” from which everything else is determined and pursued. 2) Put your “brethren in Christ” second only to God in your love, devotion, and preference. Think about it, please. (3-15-16)

**Burdens of Life**

Have you ever been really “burdened” with some heavy load of care, responsibility, debt, etc.? Most of us have. How did it feel when, through whatever means, that burden was lifted? The thrill and freedom of emancipation brings a feeling of relief, joy, and exaltation that only liberty can provide! The trouble is that most of us feel suffocated by pressures of the wrong burdens. I don’t mean that the burdens themselves are wrong, or that we shouldn’t be concerned about them, but rather that we’re probably over-emphasizing them and concentrating the bulk of our anxiety on the wrong burden(s). For instance…

**We are burdened with concern about our health, and that of our family and friends.** Diets, doctors, medications, supplements, insurance, and healthy habits consume a large chunk of our minds (thoughts), hearts (emotions), and wallets (resources). Such is natural to some extent; Jesus was certainly concerned with people’s health and well-being as He went about *“healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people,”* Matthew 4:23b. But, we can “take care of ourselves” and our families without becoming obsessed with health and fitness. The human body was not designed to last indefinitely- but the soul was! Perhaps this is why the first part of Matthew 4:23 reads, *“And Jesus was going about in all Galilee,* ***teaching*** *in their synagogues, and* ***proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom****…”* Jesus’ efforts to heal *the body* were surely born of compassion, as Matthew 14:14 clearly indicates, but they were primarily directed toward the well-being of the soul, *“and He felt compassion for them because they were like a sheep without a shepherd; and He began to* ***teach*** *them many things,”* Mark 6:34. Think about it: Are you more concerned with your *physical* health, or your *spiritual* well-being? Consider the same question with regard to your family and loved ones. No matter how much emphasis and effort we expend, the body will still die, but the soul will live forever somewhere. Exactly where depends on the concern and care you devote to it now. So, how are your diet, exercise, and supplement plans for your soul going?

**We are burdened with concern about finances.** We worry about money because “everything costs so much!” Perhaps the “everything” part is as much of the problem as how much it costs. Our desire for “things” seems insatiable. So, we expend a tremendous of concern, effort, time, and resources to acquire all the “things” we want, and are thus burdened with concern about finances continually. Remember what Jesus said in Luke 12:15, *“Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed;* ***for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.”*** Whoever said “He who dies with the most toys wins” is just plain wrong- as are those who follow him. Moth and rust can destroy these possessions, and thieves can break in and steal them, Matthew 6:19, but ***spiritual investments*** are eternally secure, Matthew 6:20! What about it? How much concern, effort, time, and resources do you expend toward the spiritual investments of *faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness,* and *Christian love?* 2Peter 1:5-11 says that these ensure you will *“never stumble”* and will secure *“entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ…”*  This is quite a contrast to all those earthly “things” that only get even, or even ahead, of the Jones! Are you more concerned with the “here and now,” or the “hereafter”? Make no mistake about it, *“where your treasure is, there will be your heart also,”* Matthew 6:21.

**We are burdened with concern about many other *earthly* things.** The list of burdens nearly equals the number of those compiling it. But, there is one need we all have in common, and which should be our primary concern: **sin, and relief from the burden of its eternal penalty.** Emancipation from this burden cannot be purchased with material wealth, Luke 12:16-21; nor does physical health and well-being secure it, Luke 16:19-23. But, it is this burden that should be our greatest concern, and receive our utmost effort*.*  To relieve this burden of sin and its eternal consequence, Jesus lived sinlessly and died sacrificially, *“that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through the fear of death were subject to slavery all of their lives,”* Hebrews 2:14-15.

Have you been relived of your *burden of sin* through obedience to His will? *“And such* (sinners, vv.9-10) *were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God,* 1Corinthians 6:11. Freedom from this burden will change everything in your life, and put all your other worries in the proper perspective. (9-19-17)

**Burying “Live” Folks**

I’m always in favor of New Testament baptism, which means: the **right *precept*** (or *teaching,* one can’t be taught ‘wrong’ and baptized ‘right,’ Titus 3:5); the **right *person*** (a *penitent believer*, Acts 2:37-38); the **right *procedure*** (*immersion* in water, Colossians 2:12); and the **right *purpose*** (to *“wash away sins,”* Acts 22:16). But, I am against baptism when/if the candidate says he was saved at the point of faith, and then wants to be baptized because “It’s the ‘right’ thing to do.” In this scenario, it is absolutely the ‘wrong’ thing to do, but perhaps not for the reason(s) you suspect….

In regard to salvation, the New Testament uses the term “dead” in at least a couple of ways. For instance, Ephesians 2:1-2 says, *“you were* ***dead******in trespasses and sins****, in which you formerly walked…”.* But, Romans 6:2-7 also describes becoming ***“dead to sin”***that we might *“walk in newness of life”* by being united with Christ *“in the likeness of His resurrection.”*  Obviously, there is a huge difference between being dead ***“in”***sin, and being dead ***“to”***sin! The first implies slavery *through* sin, and yields spiritual condemnation; while the second intimates emancipation *from* sin, and results in spiritual salvation. Let’s look a little further into this second scenario of becoming *“dead to sin”* from Romans 6.

There are some important aspects of becoming *“dead to sin”* and *“alive to Christ”* that we need to consider relative to baptism. In v.2, the divine record says that those *“who died to sin”* shouldn’t *“still live in it.”*  This means that the “saved” person must *“crucify his old self”* and no longer bea *“slave to sin,”* cf. vv.6-11. Baptism is linked to this process in vv.3-4. How so?

Romans 6:3 says that baptism is the means by which we contact Christ’s death, *“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into* ***His*** *death.”* Why is this crucial? Christ’s blood was shed in His death, and we need to contact the blood of Christ for salvation, Ephesians 1:7. Baptism, then, puts us in contact with the redeeming power of Christ’s shed blood by which we are saved.

Romans 6:4 adds that we are *“buried with Him through baptism into death….”*  There are two important points I’d like to make from this. The first one is obvious: baptism is a burial. We are *immersed in water* as Jesus was *immersed in the earth*. No one is “buried” by sprinkling or pouring a little dirt on them and calling it a “burial.” Jesus was “in” the earth, and to be scripturally baptized after this figure, one must be “in” (covered by) water.

The second point from Romans 6:4 may not be so obvious, but is nonetheless critical to our proper understanding: baptism is *“into death”.*  Notice that Jesus’ death, mentioned in v.3, is not specified in v.4. This is because baptism includes both our access *to Jesus’ death* (and therefore, His *blood*), as well as being the mechanism that marks the “end” of our life of sin and slavery to it. In other words, we not only “put to death” our “old man of sin,” we “bury” him because he’s dead to us, cf. v.11!

Now think this through carefully: **If** we become spiritually “alive” (saved) at the point of faith, and thus prior to baptism, we should never be baptized. Why? Because you don’t bury “live” folks- you bury “dead” folks! And as my old preacher-friend, Brother Floyd Offing, once said on this point, “It’s against the law to bury ‘live’ folks just about everywhere!” (He had a remarkable way with words!) Baptism is a “burial,” and you just don’t bury people that are “alive”- either physically or spiritually. You bury the “dead”- physically, but also spiritually. The physically dead are buried to await the great and final resurrection, cf. 1Corinthians 15:12-58. The spiritually dead (to sin) are buried *“in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father,* ***so we too might walk in newness of life,”*** Romans 6:4b.

The New Testament indeed teaches that we *“saved by faith,”* Ephesians 2:8-9. It nowhere teaches that we are saved “by faith alone.” In fact, the only text in which the words “faith” and “alone” appear together is in James 2:24, *“You see that a man is justified by works, and* ***not by faith alone.”***  I want everyone to be baptized- but based on the scriptural teaching, in the scriptural way, and for the scriptural reasons. (5-2-17)

**“Busy” is Not a *Badge***

Many years ago, a friend kept trying to get me to camp out on the river and fish for a couple of days with him. As much as I wanted to take him up on the offer, I kept putting him off because I was “just too busy right now.” In his jovial, teasing manner, he finally replied, “A man that is *too busy* to fish is just *too busy!”* I went and we had a great time. Since then I’ve adapted his statement somewhat, “A man (or woman) that is *too busy* to serve the Lord is just *too busy!”* And yet, that is exactly where far too many of us find ourselves now- “too busy” for God.

Unfortunately, many of us not only suffer from this self-inflicted malady, we seem to enjoy and relish in it. We treat “too busy” as some sort of *badge of honor*- as if it provides evidence of our importance. Work can’t do without me. My family needs me. My civic club or school-support group depends on me. My social network of friends can’t recreate without me (and I need the “escape” because I’m “so busy” otherwise). And yet, many of us still manage to convince ourselves, and perhaps even say to others, “God comes first in my life.” Really? When He and His only get the *left-overs* of our time, energy, commitment, emotions, and enthusiasm? When it comes to God and our relationship to Him and His, “busy” or its relative “just too busy” is not a *badge of honor.* Instead, it signifies much less honorable issues like a lack of commitment, priority, dedication, love, and zeal.

Neither is “busy” an acceptable *badge of excuse*. Being “just too busy” does not exempt us from responsibilities and duties owed to God, His church (cooperatively), His people (individually), or His purpose. None of us can legitimately wave a “Busy Badge” before God and be excused from the services of His church, service to His church, or service with His church to His cause. Even those depicted before Christ in judgment *claimed* to have been “busy” with *deeds done in His name,* cf. Matthew 7:22, and yet were denied entrance to heaven. What do you think will be our fate, when standing before the Righteous Judge, if our defense is that we were “just too busy” to assemble with the saints to worship Him, study our Bibles, encourage fellow Christians, and reach out to the lost with the gospel? Please consider carefully a few related passages…

*“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength,”* Mark 12:30. *“But seek first His kingdom, and His righteousness; and all these things* (*food, shelter, clothing,* from vv.25ff, PCS) *will be added to you,”* Matthew 6:33. *“If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth,”* Colossians 3:1-2.

Our society has become inundated with “busy” people- folks that are “just too busy” for the Lord, His church, and His cause. Don’t be one of them! You (and we) can do better! You can *love God* with your all! You can make *His kingdom* and *His righteousness* first in your life! You can *set your mind* on *spiritual* and *heavenly* rather than *earthly* and *temporal* things! How so?

1. Make a decision that *no thing* and *no one* will be allowed to come before God and His interests. As much as is physically possible, work, family, and social or recreational activities will not be allowed to come before Him, or between you and Him.
2. Set aside time each day (before the day’s other activities begin, and/or after they conclude if nothing else) to be *with God* in prayer and in study of His word. You must make time to *communicate with God* in prayer, and allow Him to *communicate with you* through His word.
3. Determine to be with God’s people every time they assemble to worship Him or study His word. You’ll need this support, and they need it from you.
4. Stick to it, and don’t back up or back down. Consistency and endurance are keys to breaking the “just too busy” habit.

Jesus Christ wants to save your soul. God wants to have a spiritually healthy relationship with you. The Holy Spirit wants to guide you through life by the Word. But They will not do so if you’re “just too busy” to make Them THE priority of your life. (12-15-15)

**By Faith Moses…**

Hebrews 11 not only defines *faith* (see vv.1,6), example after example is given to illustrate it. In each of these examples, faith produces *obedient action.*  That is, faith caused those cited to act in accordance with God’s commands and expectations. Action that is taken from any other motivation cannot be *of faith,* because Romans 10:17 says, *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* However, the decision to live *by faith* usually requires some additional choices along the way…

Consider Moses in this connection. His overall decision to live *by faith* in obedience to God’s instructions involved additional choices that can be easily seen by concentrating on the verbs in Hebrews 11:24-28.

* *“By faith Moses…****refused****,”* v.24. Living *by faith* means ***refusing*** some of the *personally advantageous* options of life. Moses refused a position as *“the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.”*  Being a wealthy and powerful man in the government of the wicked and idolatrous nation of Egypt was something *faith* caused him to refuse. Faith will also cause us to say “No” to other things that might be *personally advantageous* to us- like vocations that are incongruent with God’s word.
* *“By faith Moses…****choosing****,”* v.25. *Refusing* one thing often enables the *choice* of another and better option. In this case, Moses *chose* to endure *“ill treatment with the people of God”* rather than enjoying *“the passing pleasures of sin.”* This *choice* was made *by* and *because of* faith. For us, such a choice usually doesn’t involve the opportunity to be a prince in the most powerful nation on the planet. More normally, it involves a decision to stand with the righteous- even though it involves ridicule, rather than to *party* with the worldly.
* *“By faith Moses…****considering****,”* v.26. In essence, to *consider* means to *spend time contemplating.*  Faith causes one to stop and think- to reflect on how the contemplated course or action “fits” with, or is contrary to, God’s will. Allowing oneself the *time to think* about the relative values of each option, both in the short and long term, provides the opportunity to research or review God’s word on the matter, and to entreat Him for wisdom and courage by prayer. Such *considerations* are the product of faith.
* *“By faith Moses…****left****,”* v.27. The faithful choices to *refuse, choose,* and *consider* also meant that there would have to be *action* taken. To a large extent, the previous choices have been mental; *leaving* is physical. Faith is not confined to the mind and heart, but must also include the body. It is one thing to *think* and *feel* a certain way, but this cannot be all there is to it. Faith acts according to *faithful* thoughts and desires. Moses had conviction regarding what faith required, and followed through in faith. To be *faithful,* we must *act* in faith.
* *“By faith Moses….****kept****,”* v.28. Faith involves both *negative* and *positive* decisions and their incumbent actions. It is not defined or exemplified only by what one *refuses* and *leaves,* but must also include what one *keeps.*  Moses *kept “the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood…”.*  God’s word demands that we *abstain* from many things, but it also requires that we *keep* others also. God considers no one “faithful” solely on the basis of what they *refuse* and *leave*- as Moses’ example teaches. There are obligations to be *kept* also.

Thus, true faith is not a “better felt than told” sensation. It involves and requires: *refusals* of pleasurable but sinful activities; *choosing* lifestyles with benefits that are spiritual and eternal over those that are only physical and temporary; *considering* always God’s will in every decision made and path taken; *leaving* behind anything and everything that is not conducive to pleasing God; and *keeping* His commands. If it isn’t this *kind* of faith*,* it is *vain, empty,* and *worthless. “Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which you also received, in which you also stand, by which also you are saved,* ***if you hold fast the word*** *which I preached to you,* ***unless you believed in vain****,”* 1Corinthians 15:1-2. (8-25-15)

**Cain Faith & Worship**

*“And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. And Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard,”* Genesis 4:2b-5a.

Our first, and entirely *human* reaction to the Lord’s rejection of Cain and his offering might be one of confused sympathy. It seems somewhat harsh and reactionary for God to treat Cain so unfavorably. After all, Cain was *attempting to worship and honor* God. Cain was also *sacrificing* of his own possessions*-* deliberately and willingly giving up something that he had undoubtedly worked very hard to produce,in the attempt. Additionally, Cain was *using his talents* to serve and worship God. And oh by the way, God hadn’t said not to offer fruit and vegetables, had He? All of which creates, initially at least, sympathy for “poor Cain”- he seems to have tried so hard, and done what **he** could to serve and worship Jehovah! How could a loving, just, and merciful God treat Cain so contemptuously? Why would He have such apparent disdain for Cain’s honest and sincere efforts?

As is always the case when “we” find fault with God, there is more to the story than we understand when we do so. Please consider carefully the inspired commentary of Hebrews 11:4 on the matter, *“By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain…”* Those first two words of the verse are of vital importance. What does it mean to act “by faith”? Again, let God provide the inspired answer, *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ,”* Romans 10:17. There is just no other possible conclusion: God told Cain and Abel what sacrifices were to be offered, and how they should be presented. What this all boils down to is that Abel **did *what* God said, *how* God said** **to do it.**

But unfortunately, these things also tell us more about Cain’s attitude and actions. He was not honestly and sincerely doing the best he could to use his talents and abilities to serve God the best way he knew. Instead, he was contradicting divine directives by giving God what he wanted to, calling it “worship” and “sacrifice,” and then expecting God to accept it. That’s rebellion- not faith; and that’s not worshipping God- it’s worshipping “self,” cf. Philippians 3:19! I realize this may not be how we *want* to see Cain and his sacrifice, but it is how ***God*** saw it.

Now let’s get the rubber on the road, so to speak. We are no better than Cain when we today substitute our desires for God’s will, call it “worship,” and then expect God to accept it because it’s what we want to give Him. When Cain did these things, God said he was *“of the evil one,”* 1John 3:12. Why wouldn’t God feel (and say) the same things about us, if we do the same things Cain did? He does, and will, Matthew 15:8-9, *“This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.”*

Read your New Testament- it is the law of God under which we are to operate, Luke 16:16. If God didn’t specify a particular act as proper “worship,” then it cannot be “of faith” and will not be accepted by God as such. Calling something “worship” that God didn’t, and then seeking to justify our actions by claiming they are “honest and sincere” uses of the talents God gave us didn’t work for Cain, and won’t work for us either. We can appeal to all the human reasoning we want to get “our” way, but our end will be the same as Cain’s in the judgment of God- and after all, it’s His judgment that counts!

The Hebrew writer says of Abel, that *“though he is dead, he still speaks,”* Hebrews 11:4. The same could be said Cain. Please listen to them both in regard to not only your faith and its practice, but also your worship of our great God, won’t you? (3-26-13)

**Can We “Fall from Grace”?**

I sure have…. many times…. in many ways…. but, it wasn’t God’s grace that somehow moved away or “threw” me. No, it was I who *stumbled* and *fell*.

It wasn’t that God’s love failed me in a time of need- it remained constant, true, and engulfing- always, cf. Romans 8:35ff.

It wasn’t that God’s word proved untrue or unreliable- ever, cf. Hebrews 6:13-20.

It wasn’t that God Himself was somehow *unfaithful* to or *abandoned* me- He was/is always there for me as a Father should be, cf. 1Corinthians 10:13.

And it wasn’t that God’s grace was non-existent or insufficient- it was always there… providing knowledge and instructions that supply salvation, cf. Titus 2:11-14.

But, think about the concept of “falling” for a moment. Is the concept of “falling” included in the New Testament?

Jesus warned of *stumbling,* Matthew 18:6; but we can’t fall? That makes no sense.

Jesus warned of *stumbling-blocks,* Matthew 18:7a; but we can’t fall? That makes no sense.

Jesus warned of *those who cause/place* stumbling-blocks*,* Matthew 18:7b; but we can’t fall? That makes no sense.

Jesus showed the importance of *not stumbling,* Matthew 18:8-9; but we can’t fall? That makes no sense.

Other inspired writers of the New Testament also warned against “falling”:

Hebrew Christians were warned against developing an *“evil, unbelieving heart, in* ***falling*** *away from the living God,”* Hebrews 3:12.

These same Hebrew Christians were urged not to follow their forefathers into waywardness and rebellion (and subsequent rejection by God), *“Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone* ***fall*** *through following the same example of disobedience,”* Hebrews 4:11.

Galatian brethren were told that if they returned to Judaism and the keeping of the Law of Moses, *“You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have* ***fallen*** *from grace,”* Galatians 5:4.

Paul warned Timothy of a then coming time when *“some would* ***fall*** *away from the faith…”* 1Timothy 4:1.

Peter likewise warned, *“You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you* ***fall*** *from your own steadfastness,”* 2Peter 3:17.

Despite all this, some folks insist we can’t fall from grace. Such makes no sense- biblically or otherwise. If we only had the example of Simon the sorcerer, we could and should know better. Note from Acts 8 that he: 1) *believed* the gospel of the kingdom and Jesus Christ, vv.12-13a; 2) he was *baptized* into Christ on the basis of that faith, v.13; and yet, 3) after sinning, he was told by the inspired apostle Peter that *his heart was not right,* that he was *in the gall of bitterness* and *the bondage of iniquity,* and that he should *repent* and *pray* in order to be *forgiven,* vv.18-23. Thankfully, he did so, v.24! But it sure sounds like Simon, after *believing* and *obeying* the gospel through baptism, fell from grace and was in a lost condition until the matter was corrected through repentance and prayer!

It seems apparent from the both the biblical record and personal experience that we can and do *fall from grace*- so the better question becomes, “**Why** do we fall from grace?” While God’s love, word, commitment, or grace surely do not fail us in the matter- ever, our own *love* for Him, our own *words* of promise to Him, our own *commitment* of faithfulness to Him, and our own *appreciation* for His grace **do fail,** at least that’s what usually happens with me! I hope these things help your understanding of God’s word, your faith in Him and it, and your dedication to them both. *“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord,”* 1Corinthians 15:58. (6-16-15)

**Care and Concern**

I grew up in the country. Dad was the Ag teacher at the country school, and we lived on ten acres a couple of miles away. But up the road, a few more miles further out, was “the farm.” It was about 100 acres where there were a few head of cattle, a couple of horses, the garden (more like a truck crop!), and plenty of work to be done building/repairing fences, cutting firewood, brush-hogging, mowing, and clearing land. When Donna and I married, we lived on the hill at the upper end overlooking the rest of the farm. It was beautiful, quiet, and idyllic. Then came the preaching. The first couple of congregations with which I worked were country churches, so we continued to live on the farm, or in one case, rented a country home from one of the members that was much closer to the building. Then we worked with a couple of “city churches,” and had to move to town. This was somewhat of an adjustment- people actually walked through our yard on a sidewalk, which was a new experience, but we adjusted. However, when the opportunity arose to move back to East Texas, we wanted a place of our own to finish raising our boys.

So, through the local brethren’s generosity, we were able to look for a home of our own- the first one since we left “the farm” some fourteen years earlier. If we were going to live “in town,” it was important to me to at least have space, so we wound up purchasing a home in an older neighborhood with a large lot- just under two acres. Although it doesn’t have a sidewalk, it does have a curb and gutter by the street. Since it is a large lot, it has a **two hundred sixty-five foot** curb/gutter (yes, I measured). Thus began the battle to keep the grass and dirt in the yard instead of the gutter!

The other day, I was performing what I try to limit to a “once” or “twice a year” project of shoveling the dirt out of the gutter that seems to collect there from all over the place. I hate this job. It’s hard work made more so by years spent sitting at a desk with my head in the Book. My hands have become far too accustomed to a computer keyboard, and my back to a comfy office chair, to be good at operating a shovel and wheelbarrow anymore! But there I was, covered in sweat from the cuffs of my shirtsleeves to my socks, shoveling dirt, gravel, and grass out of the gutter. When I took a break to cool off and catch my breath, I plopped down on the bank with my feet in the gutter and my head on my knees. Then it happened. A very nice lady stopped, rolled down her window, and asked, **“Are you alright?”** Somewhat disgusted with my lack of stamina (from eating too well and sweating too little), I replied, **“No Ma’am, I need someone to finish this job for me!”** Shocked, I’m sure, she said, “Oh, well, that’s not me.” Then she smiled, rolled up her window, and drove away. It was sweet of her to stop and check on me. But, this little episode got me to thinking….

In our lives as Christians, we all need someone to care enough to take the time and trouble to stop what they’re doing long enough to simply ask, **“Are you OK?”** If this dear lady’s care and concern invigorated and motivated me to get up and finish the task at hand, despite my disgust at my weakness and lack of endurance, how much more so is it important for us to do the same for one another in the *“race that is set before us”* as Christians? Whether it is through infirmity, weakness, or just generally being “out of *spiritual* shape,” we all get tired and discouraged at times. Someone being concerned enough to just ask, “Are you OK?” can be a real boost. It can motivate us to get up, get busy, and finish the job!

It is so very easy to become so involved with “our own little” world of tasks and troubles, that we fail to take the time to notice someone else that might need just to know we care. She didn’t have to get out of her vehicle, take the shovel, and finish loading the wheelbarrow for me. She just cared enough to stop and express concern. *“And we urge you, brethren… encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men… always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men,”* 1Thessalonians 5:14-15. Remember the song we sometimes sing, “There is room in the kingdom of God, my brother, for the small things that you can do; just a small, kindly deed that may cheer another is the work God has planned for you.” Thank-you, Ma’am, you made my day! (10-22-13)

**Catching Flies**

A well-meaning lady once kindly chided me for what she perceived to be the “negative” tenor of some of the sermons I was preaching. “You know you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar,” she said. Before I could get the emergency brake on my tongue fully yanked, I responded with something along the lines of, “That’s fine, if you’re catching **flies**, but I’m trying to save **souls**!” I don’t think she appreciated my point, though I have often thought about hers.

There are still some, probably much more by now, who think the way to “attract more people to the church” is by “accentuating the positive” (and ignoring the “negative”- though they would perhaps not readily admit to that last part). But even the progenitor of “positive thinking” himself, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, admitted that “Most of us would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism.”

So-called “positive” preaching is fine, provided you mean by that terminology the *positive* aspects of education in the Book, edification (being *built-up*) in the faith, and encouragement to do that right we understand to be right in the sight of God. This kind of “positive” preaching produces knowledge of the Scriptures and calm assurance and comfort in our faith- and there is certainly nothing wrong with that!

But there are a couple of problems with a *pure* “honey” approach (exclusively “positive”) to preaching and teaching the Gospel. First, it necessarily and admittedly seeks to attract people “to the church” rather than “to Christ.” How so? Listen closely to the people who generally advocate this approach. They speak in terms of attracting people to, and bringing people into, “the church.” The church is the ***result*** of people being saved- not the ***cause*** of it. The gospel is *“God’s power to save”-* not the church, Romans 1:16. We don’t “grow the church” by attracting people to it; we seek to save souls to heaven by preaching the gospel- all of it, whether it is “positively” or “negatively” perceived.

To illustrate the point, consider this: Was the sermon on Pentecost “positive”? The audience was told they had crucified the Son of God, and needed to *“Repent and be baptized for the remission of sins”* (Acts 2:36-38). That doesn’t really fit the “positive” mold. But notice carefully what happened next. *“So then, those who* ***received the word*** *were baptized; and there were added* (to the church, PCS) *that day about three thousand souls.”* The preaching told people they needed to change, not that God would love and accept them as they were, which would make it “negative” by today’s standards. The preaching wasn’t “positive,” but it sure had “positive” results because it identified sin, and provided the necessary remedy for it.

All of which brings us to the second problem with a “pure honey” approach: it seeks to bring people to the church with something other than *“the whole counsel of God,”* Acts 20:27. The gospel certainly has “positive” aspects, cf. Matthew 11:28-30; Romans 8:31-39; but it also has prohibitions and warnings that are clearly “negative,” cf. Matthew 7:13-23; Romans 11:22ff; *et al*. How are men to be saved *from* their sins if those sins are never shown to be “sinful,” cp. Romans 7:7? None of us like to be told we are wrong, or that we’re doing wrong, but unless we’re already perfect and thus don’t need salvation, it has to happen for us to be *“transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is good and acceptable and perfect,”* (Romans 12:2)!

The truth is this: The kind of preaching and teaching done produces the kind of members you have (and to some degree, vice versa, cf. 2Timothy 4:3). If you have only arrogant, self-righteous, “condemn everyone” preaching which is “all vinegar,” you’ll probably have those kinds of members. But if you have only soft, emotionally-based and weak “all honey” preaching which is only “positive,” (again, by modern standards) you’ll likely have those kinds of members too. Neither of these approaches is right.

2Timothy 4:1-5 contains the inspired prescription, *“I solemnly charge you* (Timothy and other preachers of the Gospel, PCS)….*preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with great patience and instruction…be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”* This kind of preaching won’t catch many “flies,” but it will save a lot of “souls.” Besides, I never really liked flies anyway!

Addendum:

* “Catching” is not the object of evangelism- *“persuading”* is, Acts 18:4.
* “Flies” are just as attracted to refuse, dung, rotting flesh, and anything putrid as to honey. Mr. Franklin (to whom the original quote is attributed) failed to mention this.
* There is absolutely nothing wrong with proclaiming the “sweetness” of God’s love and grace, or forgiveness, protection, and provision. But preaching the *“whole message of this Life”* (Acts 5:20) also requires that sin be identified as such, it’s awful consequences manifested, and the need for repentance revealed. If such is seen as “vinegar” (negativity), then so be it, for such is also part of the gospel message of salvation. (6-8-16)

**Choices**

Each day we make hundreds if not thousands of choices- when to get up, what to wear, what and where to eat, where to go, what to do (and with whom), etc. etc. etc. But as adults we also make *bigger* choices in life- where we will live, with whom we live (if anyone), what we will do to live (vocation), and how we live (the kind of person we choose to be). At this time of year especially, we have, at least in theory, the ability to choose our leaders and government officials on national, state, regional, and local levels. In many ways and areas of life we are free to choose. Perhaps our *freedom of choice* in so many areas has skewed our perspective regarding spiritual matters also….

**“Attend the church of your choice,”** some people say. But God says there is but *“one body”* that is His, Ephesians 4:4; 1:22-23. You can probably find “a” church that will cater to your every desire, and you can choose to affiliate yourself with them. However, “the” church is the one Christ built (Matthew 16:18) that operates only according to His will (Matthew 7:13-27*).*

**“I choose to worship God in my own way,”** is the refrain of some folks. But God says that He is *“spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth,”* John 4:24. If the way and means you choose to “worship” can’t be found in the New Testament- which is God’s will for us today, then it isn’t Him you are worshipping but yourself, cf. Philippians 3:17-19.

**“I don’t want to be saved that way- I choose to be saved this way,”** is at least the sentiment, if not the actual expression, of others. Think about that logic for a moment. If we need “saving,” aren’t we dependent on someone else to save us? Do we really get to choose *how* they save us? Of course not! Jesus, the Savior, determines *how* we are saved, cf. John 12:48; Mark 16:15-16! No one else gets to choose, *“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved,”* Acts 4:12.

The New Testament uses the word *choose* (or its derivatives) some 42 times. Do you know how many of these occurrences specify an actual *choice* presented to or made by Christians? Two. In both passages, Christians were given the choice of men to represent and serve them in carrying out specific tasks, cf. Acts 6:5 and Acts 15:22. In no New Testament passage does God present us with *choices* regarding which churchto attend, how to worshipHim, or how to be saved. Zero. Zip. None. Nada. It is true that we don’t “have to” believe or obey Him. But **if** we choose to believe Him, we must do things His way by attending and affiliating ourselves with *His* church, worshipping in the ways and with the means *He* has specified, and conforming to *His* requirements in order to be saved.

The ability to *choose*, as in *free moral agency*, is a God-given ability. We are not created as animals that are driven by instinct, cf. 2Peter 2:12. God gave us to the right and the ability to choose, but did not exempt us from the consequences of those choices. Both here (Galatians 6:7-8), and in the hereafter (2Corinthians 5:10), our choices come with accountability. You can choose to believe and obey Him, or you can choose to disbelieve and disobey Him. That choice is unmistakably yours. But if you choose to believe and obey, it has to be all the way. You can’t pickand choose *how* and *when* you will be His and serve Him. Jesus put it this way in Luke 6:46, *“And why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”* Good question. Will you choose to do what Jesus says, or will you attempt to keep trying to choose your way over His? Remember that He *“is the way, the truth, and the life”* and that *“no one comes to the Father, but through”* Him, John 14:6. Choose wisely, my friends. (11-1-16)

**Christians In Cyberspace**

We’ve heard it before, “There’s nothing good/worthwhile on television,” and yet that media has and is being used to spread the gospel. So, too, it is with cyberspace, or the Internet. “The Internet is a minefield of dangers and depravity.” True, but it is also being effectively used to teach people about salvation in Christ Jesus. For instance, a single Facebook post inviting people to services, advertising sermon topics, or linking to sermon outlines and videos can reach hundreds (or thousands) of people who would not have otherwise been invited, or had the opportunity to hear and see the truth of the gospel. The reality is that both mediums, and all others for that matter, can be either good or bad or helpful or destructive, because they are produced by and for people. The quality and capabilities of them are determined by how they are utilized. So, please consider the following observations, along with a little advice and perspective, regarding Christians and the use of the Internet for spiritual purposes…

**Faith, thankfulness, and praise that is *projected* in social media, should also be *practiced* in the pew and in day-to-day living.** One of the problems associated with social media is that they allow a person to select the image of themselves they want to project. This enables the putting forth a persona that is “edited,” and may not be an accurate representation of who he really is in total. It’s easy to portray yourself as a spiritual, blessed, thoughtful, kind, and appreciative person on the internet, it’s another matter entirely to BE that person with more than just posts, comments, and likes. Christianity that is merely *posted* online*,* rather than *practiced* in life*,* is *pseudo-Christianity.*  *“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth,”* James 3:13-14.

**Keyboards and touchscreens shouldn’t be utilized to write things that wouldn’t (or shouldn’t) be said face to face.** In times past, the advice was to hold on to an angrily written letter for a day or two and reread it before deciding to mail it. Such was good advice that can and should be translated to emails and other electronic posts and messages of today. Really stop and think BEFORE you hit “Send.” Another related and good piece of advice is to never write things to or about someone that you wouldn’t (or shouldn’t) say to them face to face. Keyboards and touchscreens have a tendency to embolden us to communicate things electronically that we would never say in person. Perhaps this is because you can’t really get your face slapped or your nose punched through even a high-resolution screen! Remember that our words, whether transmitted electronically or delivered in person, should be *wise,* with *grace,* and for *preservation,* cf. Colossians 4:5-6. *“But let every one be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God,”* James 1:19-21.

**It’s much easier to identify problems than offer solutions.** In other words, it is easier to criticize than to construct. Criticizing and being overly critical is just plain easy through social media. It only takes seconds and very little, if any, thoughtful reflection. Additionally, it is almost effortless to subsequently “hide,” “unfriend,” or “unfollow” anyone who might happen to challenge you for criticizing without first-hand knowledge, or for failing to offer any constructive solutions to go along with your criticisms. Likewise, it is easy to find articles online that are critical and seek to undermine every aspect of Christianity- God, the Bible (as His Word), His church (as an organization), and His people. There are, however, relatively few of them that offer any valid *constructive* criticisms of how to improve our understanding of God or our association with, and obedience to, Him. Note God’s words through Paul to the church at Ephesus on this point, *“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word that is good* ***for edification*** *according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear,”* Ephesians 4:29. Perhaps we need to remember that this command applies to *typing fingers* as well as *speaking mouths.*

The Internet and social media can be powerful tools to *“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works,”* but please be sure to do so in a manner that will *“glorify your Father who is in heaven,”* Matthew 5:16. (2-3-15)

**“The Church Is Not For Everyone”**

To the suggestion of this title I can hear someone quickly reply, “What are you talking about? Of course the church is for everyone!” **But it isn’t.** The gospel, the “good news” of Jesus Christ, is for all (Romans 1:16-17), but the church isn’t. Here’s why: the church is the ***product*** of those who accept the truth of the gospel through obedience. Everyone won’t do that. So while the gospel is for all, the church is not for the simple reason that “all” won’t obey the gospel. Thus, the church isn’t for them. Perhaps this is, at least in part, what is meant in John 1:12, *“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even those who believe in His name...”*

However, refusing to accept and obey the gospel is not the only reason that the church isn’t for everyone. There are other reasons also, but they also ultimately stem from the rejection of truth on some level. The church isn’t for everyone because some folks want the church to be something that it can’t be- or at least it can’t be and remain the church. This shouldn’t be surprising. Jesus was rejected as the Messiah because He wouldn’t be the physical/political king that many of the Jews wanted. He instead said, *“My kingdom is not of this world.”* (John 18:36) So I suppose it should be only natural that some will reject His church because it isn’t what they want it to be.

If the church is to be the *“pillar and ground of truth”* (it is to be exactly that, 1Timothy 3:15), and if one doesn’t really want the truth, then naturally, the church isn’t for them. They will either reject it along with the truth which it supports, or they will seek to change the church into some more palatable and desirable entity.

Some want the church to be a social club instead of the *“pillar and support of truth”* (1Timothy 3:15). Jesus neither designed nor built the church for social purposes. It was designed and built for spiritual purposes, and to be the Lord’s church, it must be maintained the same way. While members of the church certainly enjoy studying the Bible together, worshipping God together, and commemorating the Lord’s death together, it is the pursuit of these spiritual purposes that bring them together- not the desire of social interaction. There are many clubs and organizations which can provide for social needs and desires of man; the Lord’s church is to provide for his *spiritual* needs and desires.

Some want the church to be an entertainment center. Jesus did not die on the cross to provide an organization to meet man’s recreational needs and desires. Please listen to 1Peter 4:6 on this point, *“For the gospel has for* ***this purpose*** *been preached to those who are dead* (meaning *spiritually* dead, though *physically* alive- PCS)*, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.”*  The **purpose** of which this passage speaks is not man’s recreation or entertainment, but the salvation of his soul from eternal destruction. This is the purpose of the church, not to entertain or recreate. If entertainment and recreation is what one wants, the Lord’s church is not for them.

Some want the church to be an educational facility or day-care for their children. While there is certainly nothing wrong with wanting the best education and care for your children that you can get, does such really fit into the church’s purpose of being *“the pillar and support of truth”?*  Romans 1:23ff speaks of those who would *remake* God into their own image. It seems that some folks of our day want to do the same with God’s church: they want to remake it to suit their own needs and purposes, rather than those of God. God didn’t establish the church to provide our children a safe and wholesome place to play while we’re at work; nor did He create it to educate our children in the wisdom of man. God built and established the church to be *“the pillar and support of truth”*- to preach and teach the gospel to the salvation of souls. If it is daycare and education that one wants, the Lord’s church is not for them.

What I hope we see from all of this is actually quite simple. The Lord’s church was designed for one purpose: to be that which *supports, upholds,* and *demonstrates* the truth of the gospel. As such, it is an organization comprised of those who accept and obey the gospel. If one doesn’t want to *obey, support, uphold,* and *demonstrate* the gospel through righteous living, **then the church isn’t for them. Of course, the inverse is also true!** (8-17-11)

**Circumlocution**

“Circumlocution” is a word with which I am familiar, but is certainly not from the part of my vocabulary I typically use! Nonetheless, I am reminded of the proverb of Solomon (Proverbs 25:11) about using the “right” word in the “right” way and at the “right” time. He wrote, *“Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances.”* I’m not claiming that “circumlocution” is that “right” word, or that this is necessarily the “right” time or way to produce the effect of apples of gold in settings of silver either. But I do think “circumlocution” is a word we need to consider.

Dwight D. Eisenhower is attributed with the following quote: “An ‘intellectual’ is a man who takes more words than necessary to tell more than he knows.” We preachers, unfortunately, often fall into this category, but we are not alone. Most of us, especially when faced with a difficult situation or question, do a verbal waltz around the issue without ever really stepping on or in it. This is “circumlocution” exactly.

“Circumlocution” is the combination of two words: ***circum***means *round* or *around,* as ‘*circa’* before a date means that it is *around* that date. Likewise, *circumspect* means to *‘spect,’* or *look,* *around;* and *circumstance* is literally what is *around* your *stance,* or where you *stand.*  **Locution** has to do with speech. It is from the Latin word *loqui*, which means *to speak.* Hence, *elocution* has to do with how one speaks. Now, if we put ***circum*** (*around*) together with ***locution*** (*speech*) we get ***circumlocution:*** talking around an issue; usually without ever really addressing it directly.

Perhaps an example will help to illustrate. Guys, if a woman (certainly not your wife because she surely does not “fit” into this category!), asks you, “Does this outfit make me look fat?” **and it does**, what do you say? You probably do that earlier mentioned verbal waltz around the subject and say anything and everything you can without really ever answering the question, or you just go ahead and get the black eye!

But “circumlocution” has a more spiritual application as well. If your spiritual brother or sister is *“caught in a trespass”* (Galatians 6:1a), or *“sins against you”* (or *someone else,* Matthew 18:15), do you go and talk **to** him, or just practice circumlocution by talking **around** the issue to everyone else? Or even if you do go to your brother, do you address your concerns over his soul directly, or talk **around** it to such an extent that he doesn’t even really know what you said, or why you said it? When trying to *“restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness”* (Galatians 6:1b), or *win back* your brother, he has to know what he’s done wrong- such is the nature of the *reproof* of Matthew 18:15ff. Talking around the issue without really addressing it, which is “circumlocution,” doesn’t do any good!

However, the avoidance of circumlocution doesn’t provide an excuse to be rude, unkind, or ungracious to him. Remember, you’re trying to *win back* your brother- not chase him off permanently! **It’s easy to tell someone they’re *wrong* if you don’t care about them becoming *right*.** But if you really care about their soul, and thus care about them correcting their sin, you have to be much more judicious with your words. Paul put it this way to the Colossians, *“Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person.”* (Colossians 4:6). A good ‘rule of thumb/tongue’ in approaching someone about their sin is this: Speak to them the way you would want someone to tell you about your sin if/when the situation were reversed. And of course, it always helps if you’re not guilty of the same thing, or worse, yourself, Matthew 7:1-5! (3-6-12)

**Is Your Attitude Circumstantial?**

By “attitude” I refer to your overall outlook on things, and your self-perception. The proverbial writer penned of mankind, *“For as he thinks within himself, so his he.”* (Proverbs 23:7) What God’s wisdom seems to be telling us is that we determine who we are. Thus, “sour” people are that way because they choose to be so; and conversely, “happy” people are that way because they choose to be so. While we may accept these things to be generally true of others, we often fail to see the impact of them in ourselves.

Think about this way: do others cause you to be either happy or sad? Oh sure, there are times when others say or do things which affect all of us, at least temporarily. But is your day to day perspective determined by what someone else does? If so, you are what could be termed *reactionary-* that is, you are *reacting* to stimuli others are giving you. And unfortunately, you are allowing others to influence who you are and how you act. Perhaps an illustration will help.

A man pauses at the door, steps aside, and opens the door for female who was also approaching the door to allow her to enter first- or at least he thought that’s what he was doing. She abruptly stops, looks him square in the eye, and begins to berate him for being a “chauvinist.” She told him that she was a mature, accomplished woman and that she prided herself on not being ‘dependent’ on anyone- especially a man! He was somewhat shocked, but she wasn’t finished. “Did you think I was such a ‘helpless female’ or a ’lady’ that I couldn’t even open a door for myself?” He calmly responded, “Ma’am, I opened the door for you not because of who or what you were, but because who and what I am.” She promptly stomped past by him without another word.

She was *reactionary-* her feelings and attitudes were completely determined by what someone else did, which she chose to perceive as an insult. He, on the other hand, *acted* based on who and what he was. He chose to be polite, humble, and gracious because that’s *who he was* inside, not because of who or what someone else was, or wasn’t. Which one of these two do you suppose had a “good” day?

Now let’s get personal. Do you find that your attitude is dependent on what others do? Do you *react* to the bad attitudes and actions of others in kind, or the way Jesus commanded in Luke 6:27-28, *“love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”* If you’re tempted to reply, “Well I’m just not made that way,” then listen closely to what you’re thinking- that you’re not “made” that way. Who made you? God did. Doesn’t He know how to love and treat well those who despise and mistreat Him? The crucifixion of Jesus provides the answer! Didn’t God make us in His own image? Sure did, Genesis 1:26. Did He “make” you that different from Himself? Hardly! So how did you come to be a *reactionary* who bases who you are and how you conduct yourself on what others do? Everyone chooses who they are and how they conduct themselves.

Think back to Cain and Abel, Genesis 4:1-15. Abel listened to God and acted *“by faith”* in offering His sacrifice (see Hebrews 11:4 > Romans 10:17). Cain, on the other hand, made a sacrifice to God which was not according to the command, but expected Him to accept it anyway (don’t ignore this lesson either). When God rejected Cain’s *faithless* sacrifice, instead of repenting and doing right, Cain *“became very angry and his countenance* (facial expression/composure) *fell.”* (Genesis 4:5) But here’s the point: God said to Cain, *“If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? But if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.”* (Genesis 4:7) Cain chose the latter option. He chose to stew in his anger until he rose up and killed his brother. If he had chosen *“to do right,”* his attitude about himself, his situation, and others would have been very different.

We choose who we are, and how we conduct ourselves. We can chose to ***act*** based on who and what we are from the Word of God which we have implanted in hearts, or we can choose to ***react***to who and what others are- but the choice is still ours. (7-6-11)

**College and Church**

There seems to be a growing disappointment manifested by “older folks” (pre, present, and some post “Baby Boomers”) toward “younger folks” (whatever Generation name is utilized- X, Y, Z, Millennial, etc.) First, let’s all admit the truth of the old axiom about *acorns,* or *nuts* as the case may be, not falling very far from the *tree.* Whatever faults of character or tendencies that the “younger generation” manifests are surely the product of the influences of us “older” folks. Whether genetically or environmentally, we were the *trees* that produced the *acorns!*

Therefore, *where* they *fall* is largely up to us. It was “our job” as fathers (and mothers and grandparents) to *“bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord,”* Ephesians 6:4; Titus 2:4-5. Even outside the spiritual realm, we “adults” have to accept responsibility for that which we have produced or encouraged in them- even if it was done by neglect of duties and lack of guidance. I’m not, however, suggesting I agree that anything is necessarily “wrong” with “the younger generation.” They have their obstacles to overcome, and both assets and liabilities with which to do so, as has had each previous generation. Besides, I’m not about to bash the “younger generation”- I may need their help with my cell phone or internet connection!

But these things notwithstanding, give some contemplative time to this: “If young adults pick and attend a college or university for *social* rather than *educational* reasons, they will probably be very popular dropouts.” Why is this? The reasons for “going to college” matter- in fact, probably more than anything else, they determine the “success” of the venture. If secondary education is secondary to social environment and socializing in that environment, true “education” rarely occurs. That’s not hard to predict or see, but let’s follow this thread just a little further.

How did “young people” get to the point of viewing higher education mainly as a social opportunity? Could it be that we “older folks” encouraged this perspective by catering primary education to social influences instead of insisting that education be primary? Didn’t we attempt to make education “fun” to the point that learning and knowing became subordinate to “enjoyable” and “socially acceptable”? We even allowed incremental promotions to be based on “social” factors rather than academic achievement. What did this teach “younger folks” to expect and desire?

Now, if you’re still reading, Thank-you. All of this hasn’t been written to lay blame at the proper feet for whatever generational failures that exist (or that we may think exist) in education or otherwise. There is a spiritual point that has been the intended objective of these observations and illustrations. **Much like attending college, “going to church” has very poor results when we have the wrong motivations.** If, because of similar experiences and past influences, we have come to view “social” purposes as the primary reason to attend church services, we, too, will likely miss the real opportunities and true purposes of the activity. In spiritual terms, we will probably also (or again?) become very socially popular dropouts. Or perhaps even worse, we will attempt to change the purposes for “worship” (praising God) and “bible study” (spiritual education) into something more socially pleasing (feel-good fun). The apostle Paul predicted this in 2Timothy 4:3-4, *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.”*

So, how do we “fix” this? 1) We realize and accept that “worship” is first and foremost about praising God rather than pleasing ourselves, Hebrews 13:15. 2) We realize and accept that “bible study” is first and foremost about spiritual education (learning what the bible teaches) rather than social enjoyment, 2Timothy 3:16-17; Ephesians 4:11-16. 3) We realize and accept that although “worship” and “bible study” have **social benefits** that ***result***from assembling with those of *“like precious faith”* and common spiritual goals,these social benefits cannot be made the ***objective*** of these activities and still remain true to God’s spiritual purposes, 1Corinthians 11:20-30. The “success rate” is much better in college **and church** when we attend for the right reasons. Think about it, please. (12-3-13)

**Common Knowledge and the Scriptures**

What we usually refer to as “common knowledge” is often “common” (shared), but is rarely “knowledge” (true/factual). Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in regard to “common knowledge” of the Scriptures. Perhaps a few examples will help to illustrate the point. Many have said or believed such “common knowledge” precepts as…

**“Cleanliness is next to godliness.”** I suspect this was first introduced by, and rapidly became “common knowledge” to, mothers who struggled to keep their families clean. However, this well-known adage is not in the Scriptures (sorry moms!). Perhaps the closest biblical text dealing with this issue can be found in Matthew 15:1-20. Here, Pharisees (a hypocritical and self-righteous sect of the Jews during Christ’s time) accused Jesus’ disciples of violating God’s Law because they ate with unwashed hands,v.2. Rather than condemning His disciples, Jesus instead indicts the Pharisees for adding their own requirement to God’s Law (since God never said it). He went on to say that spiritual defilement didn’t come from such *external* things, but the *internal* uncleanness of the heart, vv.17-20. Given that God’s thoughts and ways are much higher than our own, cf. Isaiah 55:8-9, we should all pay attention to what God has actually said, and stop adding to it or taking from it, Revelation 22:18-19.

 **“If we would just keep the Ten Commandments, everything would be better and we could all go to heaven.”** What do the Scriptures actually say? The Ten Commandments were given to Jewish people (direct physical descendants of Abraham) living in the time period between the giving of the Law of Moses at Mt. Sinai and the cross of Jesus, cf. Exodus 19:1-8 and Hebrews 9:15-17. Though most of the Ten Commandments are repeated in, and thus made a part of, the Law of Christ (New Testament), the Law of Moses (Old Testament) was actually only given to the nation of Israel living during that time period. In fact, Jewish Christians in the region of Galatia who tried to appeal to the Law of Moses were told they had *“fallen from grace,”* Galatians 5:4. So, we can’t “go to heaven by keeping the Ten Commandments.” God invested His power to save in the gospel of Jesus Christ, Romans 1:16, not the Ten Commandments.

 **“The truth shall set you free.”** This is often quoted in a multitude of circumstances, but is probably not true in most applications typically implied. Although the quote does come from the Bible, this is not all of it. The full sentence of Jesus, recorded in John 8:31-32, is, *“If you abide in My word, then are you truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”*  The “freedom” of which Jesus spoke is spiritual freedom from the consequences of eternal damnation, not the various applications usually made. Furthermore, this spiritual freedom was not based solely on the truth itself. Jesus began the sentence with *“if”.*  The truth only sets us free “if” we meet the conditions stated in the rest of the sentence. Note that Jesus said one must: *“****abide*** *in My word”* (be obedient to it), and thus become a *“****disciple****”* of His(follower, a Christian), by *“****know****(ing) the truth”* (can’t obey or follow without knowledge) in order to be made *“free”* by the truth. So the “truth” that makes one “free” is the “word” of Jesus that is “known” and “obeyed” and “followed”! Anything less doesn’t result in spiritual freedom.

**“Jesus is the reason for the season.”** The birth of Jesus was certainly a momentous event in human history. Do you really know why? God is eternal and thus cannot die. Since God planned and desired to *“give His only begotten Son”* to shed His bloodas a sacrifice for our sin, Jesus would need a *human* body- one that could die, Ephesians 1:3-7. Thus, Jesus became God *incarnate* (in the flesh), Colossians 2:9. So far, so good- but, despite being “common knowledge” that Jesus was born on December 25th, and that we’re supposed to celebrate Christmas to remember and honor His birth, the Bible does not say either of these things. God knows how to tell time and read a calendar, but chose not to reveal the date of Jesus’ birth. And, neither God nor Jesus, or the Holy Spirit-inspired writers of the New Testament, ever intimated that Christians should memorialize Christ’s birth. However, we are told to memorialize His *death,* which His birth obviously enabled, Matthew 26:26-29. This N.T. Christians did on the first day of every week as the Jesus and the Holy Spirit taught, Acts 20:7; 1Corinthians 11:18-34.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with cleanliness, the Ten Commandments, the freedom that truth provides, or the celebration of “Christmas,” but let’s remember to read and practice what the Bible actually says, in the way that it says, rather than depending on “common knowledge,” OK? (12-26-13)

**Communing**

In America, when used as a noun, “commune” has a negative connotation with most folks- though probably not as much so now as previously. In this form it is defined as “a group of people living together and sharing possessions and responsibilities.” Modern examples of communism leave a decidedly bad impression, with good reason. But any form of government, even a representative republic like ours, that operates without the backing morality of Christianity ultimately declines into tyranny, cp. Acts 2:44-45; 4:32,34-35.

But when used as a verb, we view “commune” much more favorably, again, with good reason. Used this way, it means to “share one's intimate thoughts or feelings with (someone or something), especially when the exchange is on a spiritual level; to feel in close spiritual contact with.” Jesus’ prayerful *communing* with the Father in the Garden on the night of His betrayal well illustrates this usage of the word. His faith and resolve were bolstered sufficiently for Him to willingly go to the cross by His intimate and intense *communing* with God in prayer.

While we may shun the idea of living in a *commune*, we innately long to *commune* with our Creator and our fellow man! As always, God who created us not only understands this need, but also provides for its fulfillment.

The Lord’s Supper, as it is sometimes called (1Corinthians 11:20), is not a morbid remembrance of the horrors of Jesus’ death designed to keep participants in perpetual guilt through its weekly observance. God never requires anything of us that is not in our own best interest. Thus, we *need* and *benefit* from partaking of the memorial every first day of the week. How?

**By *communing* with Christ.** Partaking of the *unleavened bread* and *fruit of the vine* helps to *internalize* Christ and His sacrifice, *“He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in Him,”* John 6:56. This isn’t macabre ritual; it is being reminded of the love that Jesus had and has for us, the value He placed on us, and the *oneness* and *fellowship* that He desires with us. Thus, these representative elements of His *body* and *blood* are sustenance for our souls. *“I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever… Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves,”* John 6:51-53. We need this spiritual *food* to keep us alive, healthy, and growing. To illustrate the importance of this weekly *communing* with Christ, note how the Corinthian church was suffering from *spiritual malnutrition* through their abuse of the *Supper, “For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep,”* 1Corinthians 11:30. They were starving themselves of the spiritual life-sustaining *nutrition* weekly *communing* with Christ provides by turning it into a common meal, cf. 1Corinthians 11:20-22. We need the spiritual benefits of the weekly memorializing of Christ’s death to be reminded of His great love and sacrifice for us- how much He *values* our soul(s). And we also need the spiritual benefits of the weekly reminder and proclamation of His return, which gives us hope, cf. 1Corinthians 11:26. You see, everyone needs to know they are *loved,* and everyone needs *hope.* These are provided on a weekly basis by *communing* with Christ through the Lord’s Supper.

**By *communing* with Brethren.** Through properly partaking of the *unleavened bread* and *fruit of the vine,* there is a “vertical” *communing* and *fellowship* with Christ. Such has many benefits- a few of which are enumerated above. But participation in this memorial to Christ and His sacrifice also has “horizontal” benefits. These are often overlooked, or even deliberately ignored. To highlight of this point, consider the Corinthian church. Its fellowship was *fractured,* 1Corinthian 1:10, and its members were *fleshly-minded*, 1Corinthians 3:1. This combination (along with other issues) produced *jealousy, strife,* and even *lawsuits,* cf. 1Corinthians 3:3; 6:1-8. As we noted above, Paul connects the dots of their spiritual degradation to their abuses of the Lord’s Supper when he wrote, *“For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep,”* 1Corinthians 11:30. But what we sometimes fail to note is a part of the prescribed solution. We rightly point out that they needed *examine themselves* in regard to the *manner* of their partaking, vv.28-29. And we note that they were told to *“judge the body rightly,”* v.29. We even show that they were instructed that their common meals should be *eaten at home* from v.34. However, what we sometimes fail (or neglect) to see is that they were also commanded to *“wait for one another,”* v.33. Why was it important for the Corinthians to eat the Lord’s Supper *together?* If it is only a “vertical” *communing with Christ* by an individual, then there is no reason for this particular prescription. But it isn’t **only** a *communing with Christ-* it is **also** a *communing with brethren,* and thus includes “horizontal” fellowship with those who are His, cf. 1Corinthians 10:16-17. The Corinthian congregation’s fellowship was fractured, at least in part, because they were denying themselves the *unifying* benefits of the Lord’s Supper through their abuses of it. That’s why they were told to *“wait for one another”!* If their negligence in these regards **only** pertained to *communing with Christ,* there would have been no need for the instruction requiring that they partake **together**. Each one could have partaken individually and wherever they chose, as long as they *discerned the body,* and did so *in a worthy manner.* The Corinthians needed to properly *commune with Christ,* but they also needed to properly *come together to eat the Lord’s Supper* that so they could ***commune with each other****,* cp. 1Corintians 11:18-20,33!

God knows and has always known what we need. To be spiritually alive, well, and growing, we need to *commune with Christ* to be reminded of how much He loves and values us, and to be reminded of the hope we have of being united with Him eternally. But we also need to *commune with one another* to be reminded that we are not alone- that we have brethren on whom we can depend, and who depend on us, as we traverse this path of life toward heaven. See? We need the benefits of *communing* with Christ **and** one-another through the partaking of the Lord’s Supper! (7-14-17)

**Completely Yours**

Think about it carefully:  What really belongs to you and you alone?

It’s not your spouse– they are, and have to be, their own person.  One human being can’t really belong to another in the absolute sense.  It’s not even your children.  You may have given them life, but you gave it ***to them***.  Therefore, their lives must at some point become ***their own***.  And by the way, as parents we have to let that happen, and be OK with it.  We do have to wait until they’re mature enough to handle it, but it has to happen.  Even in saying these things, there are ways in which all of us must admit that our own lives are not completely our own.

Some might be prone to answer the question by saying something along the lines of, *“Well, it’s my body, and I can certainly do with or to it what I want!”* Really?  Your body?  Let me ask, if I may, what did you have to do with any of that? Where’d you get your eyes? Where’d you get your hair type, amount, or color? (“A bottle” is not what I mean ladies!) Where’d you get your body type, size, and shape? Where’d you get your personality, mental abilities and limitations? To some degree at least, where’d you get your habits, likes, and dislikes? The point is that all of these things, and others which could be listed, came from, or are influenced by your parents, grandparents, and so on.  We speak of someone having “her daddy’s eyes,” “her mother’s good looks,” or “his grandfather’s temper,”  “his grandmother’s patience,” ad infinitum. Can we really say “It’s my body or life”? Hardly!

As I think about it, we only possess one thing that is truly ours.  One thing that is completely independent of everyone and everything- one thing that is completely ours to do with as we please.  One thing that we didn’t inherit, and that no one or no thing can take from us:  **our soul!**  (Admittedly, it too was given to us, and bears similarity to Him who gave it- but is none the less, ours in a more complete sense than anything else.)

It is true that others can influence, either positively or negatively, what we do with our souls, but it is still ours, and the decisions regarding what to do with it are up to us.  It is our one eternal possession.  Everything else, and I do mean everything else, is temporary (see 2Peter 3:10; Ecclesiastes 5:15).  God gives us a soul and it is ours for eternity.  Not only does He give us one forever, He gives us complete control over it.  We don’t have to do anything with it we don’t want to do.  We can nurture and protect it, or we can abuse and neglect it.  But remember, it’s yours forever and it’s the only one you’re going to get!  W**hat will you/are you doing with your only true and everlasting possession?**

Consider carefully the words of Jesus, *“What will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul?  Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?  For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds.”*  [Matthew 16:26-27](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Matthew%2016.26-27%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

**You only have one soul.  It’s the only thing that’s truly yours, and it’s yours forever. Take care of it, won’t you? Feed, nurture, and cultivate it with the Word of God.** (11-24-10)

**Consequences of our New Approach to Societal Psyche**

There are negative consequences attached to our new approach to the societal psyche. These consequences may be unintended, but are an effect nonetheless. Our intentions of a kinder and gentler approach to personal interactions and relationships have sought to remove shame and guilt completely. Therefore, any words, conduct, judgment, or action that cause another to experience sensations of shame or guilt are at best frowned upon, and at worst subject to legal prosecution. I get it- no one likes to feel guilty or be ashamed. These are neither pleasant nor enjoyable emotions. But, shame and guilt are not necessarily as damaging as some think, and can even be beneficial.

Consider two related questions. 1) What is the conscience? And, 2) how does it function? The conscience functions as a *moral brake* to stop us from careening out of control into wrong activities, or to at least slow us down and give us time to consider whether or not participation in a particular action is appropriate, and what the implications thereof might be. But the conscience also functions in the other direction as a *moral accelerator* to get us out of “Park/Neutral” and moving in the right direction. Thus, our conscience both stops or slows and starts or accelerates us when needed- if, of course, it is properly trained and functioning correctly, cf. Hebrews 5:14.

But with regard to the function of the conscience, guilt and shame are often the impetus for the *moral brake* to be applied. When we violate what is understood to be right and good behavior, feelings of guilt and shame are not only appropriate, but also the necessary stimulus for the conscience to *apply the brakes* and cause us to avoid or stop the activity. Unfortunately, we sometimes depend on others to supply these stimuli. If our own conscience has either not been properly trained, or has not yet matured to the point of *discerning “good and evil”* (cf. Hebrews 5:12-13), it becomes necessary for others to point out our mistakes.

Note 2Corinthians 7:8-9 in these regards, *“For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it,- for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while- I know rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.”* The *“letter”* that made the Corinthians *sorrowful* was 1Corinthians- which was filled with *corrections* in both *doctrine* and *activity.*  For the collective conscience of the Corinthians to properly function as a “moral brake,” they had to first understand how wrong they were in the understanding and application of God’s word. They had to “see” their sin, which means it had to be identified or point out to them, in this case by someone else for they certainly had not *discerned* it on their own. Then, this knowledge of sin produced feelings of *sorrow, guilt,* and *shame* precisely because the conscience was working exactly as it should! Notice what happened as a result, *“For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, had produced in you, what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves innocent in the matter,”* 2Corinthians 7:10-11. Paul, in clearly pointing their errors, had given them cause to be *ashamed* of their *guilt, sorrowful* for their sin, and *desirous* of restored fellowship with God. Their conscience worked perfectly precisely because it was given the proper incentive!

However, our modern approach to the collective societal psyche says that we shouldn’t say or do things to make anyone feel guilty or ashamed. I agree- if such is being done regarding things that are beyond the choice and control of the individual(s) involved. But when choice and control has led to attitudes and actions that violate God’s law, then we must recognize that guilt and shame are precisely the impetus that is needed for the conscience to function properly!

In society as well as in pulpits- and there is a definite correlation between the two, our “enlightened understanding” has led us to seek to eliminate guilt and shame, and thereby remove the stigma of sin. But the conscience needs these stimuli to function correctly as a “moral brake” just as much as it needs encouragement and praise to properly act as a “moral accelerator!” Paul specifically stated that his rebukes to the Corinthians were meant to *shame* them, cf. 1Corinthians 6:5ff. He did so to point out that *“some have no knowledge of God,”* and thus through his *shameful educating,* they should *“Become sober-minded as you ought, and stop sinning,”* 1Corinthians 15:34. If we refuse to point out the lack of knowledge of God, His word, and sin because we don’t want to make others feel *guilty* or *ashamed,* then we remove the impetus for the conscience to apply the “moral brake”… and **shame on us** for so doing! (6-6-17)

**Consistency is Key**

Have you ever split firewood the “old fashioned” way? You know, the way where the “splitter” has a handle that is **not** attached to a hydraulic cylinder, but an ax or maul head? Although I have sometimes used the gasoline/hydraulic kind, mostly I still use the other kind of handles to split our firewood. When the boys were younger, they would see me bursting open the blocks and want to give it try. Invariably, they would swing as hard as they could, and also just as invariably, they would miss the spot they needed to hit to get the wood to split. Such is not uncommon- I did the same thing when I was just learning. But the trick is not how hard you hit it, but hitting it with consistency- meaning hitting the same place multiple times. Otherwise, you wind up making more kindling splinters than firewood!

It occurs to me that many of us approach Christianity and our service to God the same way. We want to “hit it as hard as we can” once or twice a year, and expect great results. That’s why we make sure to “go to church” on Christmas and Easter, and are generally much better people during December than we are in July!

This isn’t a new phenomenon by any means. Peter and the other eleven disciples proudly proclaimed, *“… ‘Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You.’ All the disciples said the same thing too.”* (Matthew 26:35) In their minds, they were ready to make the great and grand sacrifice of their very lives for Christ. And yet, in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the same night (of Jesus’ betrayal), when He asked them to *“keep watch with Me,”* He returned to find them sleeping not once, not twice, but three times. (Matthew 26:36-45) At the most pivotal time of His life, they slept. They thought they were ready to make the “big” sacrifice and die for Him, but in reality couldn’t even stay awake and lend whatever support they could offer for a few hours.

Naaman also had this “big thing” mentality with regard to being cleansed from his leprosy. He was a “big” man- captain of the Syrian army, and as such expected Elisha (God’s prophet) to make some appropriately grand gesture to heal him. 2Kings 5:11 records his words, *“I thought, ‘He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper.”* Probably because he knew Naaman’s heart and expectations, Elisha didn’t even come out of his house. Instead, he sent a messenger to Naaman telling him to go and dip himself seven times in the Jordan River to be cleansed. Naaman was furious, at least until his servants questioned him, *“…had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says, ‘Wash, and be clean?’”*  (2Kings 5:13) That’s insightful logic, and a great question! And it worked- Naaman went to the Jordan, dipped himself seven times as commanded, and came up cleansed. It wasn’t a “big” or “grand” gesture that God required of him, just simple obedience.

The same is true for us. While being faithful to God might require the sacrifice of our lives through persecution- and we should certainly be willing to die for Him (Matthew 16:25), given *when* and *where* we live, this is thankfully unlikely. But faithfulness does require the simple, consistent, day-to-day obedience to God’s words. In this way we become a *“living and holy sacrifice”* (cf. Heb.12:1) by ***living* *for Him* daily**, rather than dying for Him once. This isn’t the “big” and “grand” gesture Peter or Naaman had in mind- it is the simple, consistent life of obedience to God. What about you? Are you looking and waiting for the one “big” hit, or are you consistently and patiently “hitting the mark” of obedience every day? Lookie there- we can even learn lessons about godly living from splitting firewood! (12-13-11)

**The Underrated Value of Constancy**

Randy Moss thinks he is the greatest (NFL) wide-receiver of all time, yet the statistical numbers reveal that although he *might* be in the top ten, he is far from the greatest.

His self-perception is out of touch with reality, which reminds me of Gal.6:4, *“For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.”*  There is no doubt that Mr. Moss is a great “big play” receiver with tremendous talent- but it is also equally clear that he is a “diva” with a bad attitude that doesn’t give 100% to the team and its goals. He is much more interested in self-aggrandizement and self-promotion. The sad reality is that he probably could have been “the greatest ever” at his position if he had been willing to work hard on every play- whether he was the “featured,” or “first option,” receiver or not. But this he was not willing to do. He was more concerned with the spotlight for himself, than with the win for the team.

It strikes me that many of us (including me!) are sometimes like Mr. Moss in that we, too, are more concerned with our own “spotlight” or making the “big play” than with the overall good of the team. We’re more concerned with personal glory than with God’s glory. So, we take passages like Matthew 5:16, *“Let your light shine before men…”* in the wrong way- thinking that we have to be the “bright star” that everyone sees. This leads us to constantly shining our “lights” in other people’s eyes to be sure they see how bright, shiny, and brilliant it is. Such misses the point of the passage entirely. The whole verse instead says, *“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”* There are a couple of vital points that must be understood to correctly interpret and apply Jesus’ words.

For one thing, note that our lights are to be shone ***“before”*** men rather than “at” them. Our goal is not to show them how “bright” our lights are so they will realize how good and holy we are- such is a purely Pharisaical approach (cf. Luke 18:11-12). Note specifically that the “brightness” of our respective lights is actually nowhere considered in Matthew 5:16! The only aspect of their brightness is *“that they may see your good works…”*  It does not take a bright light in a world of seemingly total darkness to provide spiritual perception and clarity- it just takes a consistent light. One that is always “on”- not just when everyone is looking, or when the occasion is right for a “big play”!

Consistently and constantly doing the “right things” is of much more value in allowing others the opportunity to “see” and “glorify God” than some “big” or “flashy” play every now and then (in keeping with the football metaphor and Randy Moss). Remember, the purpose of others being able to *“see your good works”* is to allow them to *“glorify your Father in heaven”-* not you (or me)! Our examples are supposed to be about getting the win for the team, which is God and those on His side opposed to Satan and sin, rather than about personal glory or self-aggrandizement!

Look, it is easy to put out maximum effort for one play when you are going to be the featured player. It is another matter entirely to consistently give every play your best whether you get the ball and the spotlight or not. But, God is concerned with constancy. “Constancy” has much to do with consistency- it is freedom from fluctuation and change.

The New Testament (the NASV at least) doesn’t use the words “constancy,” or even “consistency”- but it has a lot to say about “steadfastness.” Steadfastness is that quality or state of being consistent; without the vacillation of highs and lows. Steadfastness is not about making the “big play” or having “the spotlight,” it is about always doing the right things in the right ways. To switch illustrations for just a moment, many of us would undoubtedly be willing to make the “big play” of **dying for Jesus** and our faith in Him. Are we just as willing to consistently and steadfastly **live for Jesus** every day, and every moment of every day?

Do this: take the time to read 1Corinthians 15:58; Colossians 1:11,23; 1Thessalonians 1:3; 2Thessalonians 3:5; Hebrews 6:19; and 2Peter 3:17; and reflect upon the value of constancy, consistency, and steadfastness in your daily walk with Christ. Then, allow your “light”- whether big and bright, or weak and dim, to be seen by others in such a way that the path to Jesus is illuminated for them through how you live your life every day. (2-13-13)

**Contentment**

“Contentment” is not that hard to define- it is “the quality or state of being contented.” But this just leads us back to the root word, “content,” which has two basic meanings. The first is “to appease the desires of” (Webster’s New Collegiate Dict.), that is, to get what you want. This isn’t biblical contentment, but it is, unfortunately, the practical application for most of us. We think we would be content if we could just have all (or most) of our desires fulfilled. However, even when such occurs, it usually doesn’t work that way.

The second definition of “content” is “to limit (oneself) in requirements, desires, or actions,” (*IBID*). Obviously, this is on the other end of the spectrum. Instead of getting everything you want, this is learning to be happy with what you have. Such is exactly the meaning of the Greek word, *autarkeia* (*autos,* self + *arkeo*, to be enough), which is translated as “contentment” in 1Timothy 6:6, *“But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by* ***contentment****.”*

The pivot-point between these two opposing definitions is the difference between ***wants***and ***needs****.* The first definition of “contentment” requires the fulfilling of our **desires** to be reached; while the second one is achieved when our basic **necessities** are met. Consider the next verses in 1Timothy 6:7-8, *“For we have brought nothing into this world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.”* I’m not sure how many of us would be content with just enough food to sustain us, and just enough clothing/shelter to protect us. I do know that whoever is able to be content with those bare necessities, would also be content with whatever luxuries God provided without becoming dependent upon them. Paul spoke of this in Philippians 4:11-12, *“Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.”* Let’s take this basic understanding of “contentment” a bit further.

It occurs to me that the source of many of our spiritual problems is a lack of contentment with God’s provision. Think about it. What causes marital infidelity? Is it not a lack of contentment with the spouse God gave you, 1Corinthians 7:1-5? What causes greed? Is it not a lack of contentment with God’s provision of sustaining material things, Matthew 6:25-33? What causes most conflicts between us? Isn’t it that we are not content with what we are getting from the other person- whether it’s respect, tolerance, understanding, forgiveness, assistance, etc.? But if, in true contentment, we could obey Philippians 2:2-3, *“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others,”*  wouldn’t most of these conflicts disappear?

What about “contentment” in religion? If we would just content ourselves with doing what God said, how God said to do it, wouldn’t that simplify things dramatically? If we were content with Christ’s plan to save through believing (John 8:24), repenting (Luke 13:3), confessing (Matthew 10:32), being baptized for the remission of sins (1Peter 3:21), and living faithfully to the best of our abilities (John 14:15), then unity could result. If we were content with God’s instructions for simple New Testament worship, which included praying (1Timothy 2:8), singing (1Corinthians 14:15), partaking of the Lord’s Supper (1Corinthians 11:23-34), preaching/studying the word (Acts 2:42), and giving of our means (1Corinthians 16:1-2), then we could do away with robe-clad choirs, orchestras, dramatic performances, fund-raisers for every kind of activity and function, and all the “special” groups which divide us. Then, we could be together, and simply worship God *“in spirit and in truth.”* How great is the gain when godliness is accompanied by simple contentment with what God has said, cf.1Timothy 6:6 and 1Peter 4:11!

It is a wonderful thing to content yourself: with God’s physical provision of life’s necessities; in your relationships with family, friends, and brethren; and with God’s plans of salvation and worship! (7-24-12)

**Created vs. Made**

I have said many times before that “we humans don’t ‘create’ anything– we just assemble the pieces and parts God provides into other things.” It’s still true. Think about it. Even the most abstract thing we can imagine always seems to be made up of components that have a basis in reality. We’re still, even in our wildest imaginations, just putting existing bits together in a new or different way. We’re really not ***creating***, though we are ***making*** or ***forming***.

It’s interesting that the Bible makes this same distinction. Notice that God ***“created*** *the heavens and the earth.”* (Genesis 1:1) He didn’t just assemble them from existing parts, He *created* them. The apostle Paul put it this way, *“...God, who gives life to the dead and* ***calls into being that which does not exist.”*** (Romans 4:17) What power! I know of no more graphic illustration of this point than the fact that by His absolute creative power, God said, *“Let there be light”* on first day of creation, Genesis 1:3-5, *“and there was light.”* OK, so? Now notice that He did not create the Sun and the Moon until the fourth day, Genesis 1:14-19. Light was created and present for four days when there was no physical source of it. From where then did it emanate? Surely it came from the very being of God Himself. 1John 1:5 says that *“God is light,”* and James 1:17 calls Him the *“Father of lights”*.

But God also ***made*** or ***formed*** some parts of the world from things He had previously created. Note again carefully a couple of verses from the creation account of Genesis 1:6-7, *“Then God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters. And God* ***made*** *the expanse, and separated the waters which were below from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so.”* Here, God first ***created*** an expanse, and then He further ***made*** it more specific by separating the *waters below* from the *waters above.* While this may not be the best example of the difference between *creating* and *making/forming,* think about another one. In Genesis 2:7, *“The the Lord God* ***formed*** *man of the dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”* God had already *created* the dust, or dirt, *“In the beginning God created the heavens and* ***the earth****.”*  (Genesis 1:1) Now, He takes some of the previously *created* earth, and ***forms*** or ***makes/molds*** itinto man. Then, He ***creates***life in the mass of man ***formed***from the base elements of the earth– again, what immense power!

Some might respond, “OK– I get it: God is able to both *create* from nothing, and *make* or *form* existing materials into something new. So, what’s the point beyond this? That God can *create* while we humans just *mold* stuff?” Yes, but there’s more too.

God did not *create* Jesus. As a divine member of the Godhead, Jesus, like the Father and the Spirit, was and is ***eternal***. Therefore, He has neither beginning nor end (cf. Hebrews 7:3). But God did ***make*** or ***form*** (or even *transform*) Jesus into something else. A man? Yes, but more to the point, a *sinful man*- ***“He*** (the Father) ***made*** (formed or transformed) ***Him*** (Jesus) ***who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf…”*** 2Corinthians 5:21. We know, because we are told by God, that Jesus *“committed no sin”* Himself, 1Peter 2:22. And yet, God ***made*** Him *“sin on our behalf.”* That is, though He had no sins of His own, God *made* Jesus to be as a sinner by placing the burden and penalty of our sins upon Him. But why would He do such a thing?

Note the rest of 2Corinthians 5:21, *“that we* ***might become*** *the righteousness of God in Him.”*  Please get this point: **God *made* Jesus something that He was not– *sin*, that we might become something we are not- *righteous*!** Behold the power of God to ***make, mold,*** and ***transform!*** He who has the power to create by *calling into being that which does not exist,* can surely *transform* you and I into something which we are not: **righteous!** He certainly will not do so against our will or without our participation by faith and obedience, but God can ***make*** any sinner righteous through the sacrifice of Jesus His Son. *“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify* (from the Greek word, *hagiazo,* which means to make free from the guilt of sin) *entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”* The Greek word from which *“bring it to pass”* is translated is *“poieo”*. Do you know how else this word is translated in other places? *Poieo* is often translated as ***“made”!*** Here it means *God will* ***make it so.*** By His *transforming power*, God will make our sanctification entire and complete through Jesus! He will ***form*** us into ***conformity***with Him that we may abide with Them forever in heaven!

While these truths should not be taken as a license to sin so that more of God’s grace and power might be manifested in or to us (cf. Romans 6:1ff), it does provide great hope and encouragement. No matter how sinful we have become, if we will turn to God in faithful obedience to His word, He can and will ***make*** us fit for heaven. Praise be to God for His great power and abundant grace! (6-9-10)

[**The Crisis of Compromise: “Conflict Resolution”**](http://www.southsidechurchofchrist.net/articles/content/the_crisis_of_compromise_conflict_resolution)

I usually try to avoid using the term "crisis" because it is so vastly over used, but it seems appropriate here. Our word “crisis” comes from the Greek, and literally means “decision.” It seems everything now is either a crisis, or has the potential to become so, with most folks- especially those in mass media.  So I hesitate to use it. But “crisis” is also defined as “an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs whose outcome will make a decisive difference for better or worse.”  It is in this way that I use the word in our title.

While going through Tyler once, I noticed the marquee-type sign in front of a private school.  Among other things, it also mentioned that during the month of April, they would be emphasizing “Conflict Resolution.”  This phrase makes my skin crawl like fingernails on a chalkboard.  To me, it smacks of modern psychobabble that seems to have either turned our brains to mush, or taken firm root in our brains of mush to produce the full-fruit of “political correctness.”

Now before anyone gets offended, let me hasten to say that I’m all for “conflict resolution” when it is done right.  So when is it “done right”?  When it is done the way [Romans 14:13-20](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Rom.14.13-20%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank); [1Corinthians 6:1-7](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/1Cor.6.1-7%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank);  [Ephesians 4:29-32](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Eph.4.29-32%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank); and [Matthew 5:38-42](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Matt.5.38-42%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) say that it should be.

That being said, “**What’s wrong with ‘Conflict Resolution’?”** And, **“How is it a ‘Crisis’?**”  Simply put, those passages are not how our world says to resolve conflict.  Our world says the way to resolve conflict is usually something along the lines of: 1) dialogue together to better understand each other’s point of view; and then, 2) try to find a **compromise** to which both parties can agree.

“So what’s wrong with that?” Nothing, if you’re trying to decide at what restaurant to dine, what color car to buy, or some other equally mundane issue.  But what if you’re instead trying to decide exactly what it takes to go from “lost in sin” to “saved in Christ”? Or the right way worship to the Lord? Or whether homosexuality is just an *alternative lifestyle* or is sinful? Or whether abortion is a scripturally viable option? Or whether divorce for *“any cause”* is acceptable? Or any other matter of eternal importance?

The problem is this: our modern solutions for *conflict resolution* have led us to compromise our beliefs; to exchange our standards for what is right and acceptable for whatever *resolves the conflict.*Additionally, modern *conflict resolution* has made everyone’s ideas of equal value. Newsflash: they’re not!  Why not?  **Because some understand, believe, and are willing to stand for Truth, and some are willing to *compromise* anything they believe to resolve a conflict.**  *“Peace at any price”* is not “peace” at all- especially not if we have to compromise Truth and our allegiance to it to attain that peace!

About 2600 years ago, by the inspiration of God, the prophet Jeremiah wrote, *“I know, O Lord, that man’s way is not in himself; nor is it in man who walks to direct his own steps.”*  ([Jer.10:23](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Jer.10.23%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)) Our dependence on inspiration from God should therefore be apparent. Our real conflicts must be resolved with understanding of and adherence to inspired biblical truth.

Furthermore, let’s be sure we really understand the problem. Our biggest conflicts are not: between parents and their children; between adults over who had the right of way; between nations; or even between brethren within “the” or “a” church- though these should also be resolved with obedience to God’s Word. Man’s biggest conflict has always been, and will always be, between his own sinful self and a righteous and holy God.  This conflict is only resolved one way, and (excuse the vernacular) it ain’t “compromise,” but obedience to the Truth- *“Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls…”* (1Peter 1:22a). (6-25-16)

**Take Up His Cross**

The cross holds much meaning for people today. Whether is it worn on chain, displayed prominently on a hill beside the road, hung on a place of worship, eulogized in sermon because of its spiritual significance, or just revered in thought or song, it means many different things to people today. But to the audience of Jesus in Luke 14:27 it meant none of those things, nor held any of those significances. This is true for a simple reason….

At the time Jesus urged the multitudes *following* Him to become *true disciples* through the admonition to *“take up his cross and follow Me,”* the cross had NONE of the spiritual significance the world attaches to it today. It couldn’t mean any of those spiritual things *then* because Jesus hadn’t yet given “the cross” any *spiritual significance.* Then a cross meant only one thing: horribly humiliating and excruciatingly painful **death.** There wasn’t any spiritual significance to it. There wasn’t any deep or metaphorical meaning. It didn’t even imply anything sacrificial or eternal to the hearers. Jesus’ audience didn’t know He was going to be sacrificed, let alone that it would be on a Roman crucifix. They had no spiritual concept of what Paul would later call being *“crucified with Christ”* (Galatians 2:20) or, *“the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”* (Galatians 6:14). To them, **a cross just meant death.** Think about a couple salient points….

* The *cross* to be *carried* in *true discipleship* does not belong to Jesus, but the disciple- *“carry* ***his own*** *cross,”* Luke 14:27. You nor I nor anyone else could bear Jesus’ cross. And even if we tried…
* *My* cross, or *yours,* doesn’t and couldn’t have the same spiritual significance that Jesus’ did and does. Because of sin, I (and you) deserve to die- even if on a cross. Jesus didn’t. His cross meant so much more. And yet….
* Each would-be *disciple* must be willing to *take up* and *carry “his own cross.”* This doesn’t mean the struggles or hardships of life to which we often refer with such language. “It’s just his cross to bear,” or (usually jokingly), “He is just her cross to bear” of a wife’s burden of a difficult husband or a troublesome son. It does mean that…
* Every true *disciple* of Jesus must be willing to *die for Him;* that we would prefer, and would chose, to die rather than give Him up and turn back to self, Satan, and sin. Peter and the other eleven disciples said as much, and surely meant it, in Matthew 26:35. But when push came to shove (somewhat literally) later that night, *“Then all the disciples left Him and fled,”* v.56. And yet, after years of faithful service, all of them died *for* and *in* and *faithful to* Him. It also means that…
* Cross carrying is a *daily* endeavor. All that we learned about discipleship and *cross-bearing* must be an *everyday* commitment. Jesus said so- not in Luke 14:27, but in Luke 9:23, *“…take up his cross* ***daily****…”.* Again, think about what is being said. How different would our days be if, instead of saying a morning prayer about what all we wanted God to help us with or do for us today, we started by affirming our willingness (and really meaning it!) to die for Him **today.**  Just like yesterday, and just like tomorrow, if I don’t die for Him today. Wouldn’t that give us a new, better, and certainly more *spiritual* perspective? To really be willing to die for Him today and everyday? Finally…
* True discipleship, and the requisite daily carrying of our own cross, is ultimately about *self-denial.* Jesus said so in Luke 9:23, *“If anyone wishes to come after Me,* ***let him deny himself****, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”* We can never truly *follow Jesus* unless we are a willing to deny ourselves. Jesus taught us this lesson by example also, *“Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will but Thine be done,”* Luke 22:43.

So, what about it? Are you ready to *take up* your *cross daily* to *follow Him?* I hope so, because that is the cost of discipleship affixed by the Lord. Conversely, you just tag along after Him with the crowds as long as it is convenient, doesn’t cost too much, and you get some physical blessings or benefits. Which will it be for you? (1-17-17)

**Darkness and Weights**

Have you ever awakened from a deep sleep in a completely dark room, and as a result, became completely turned around and confused? Perhaps you were attempting to go to the bathroom, but in the darkness and confusion, wound up in a closet instead? And then, because of the utter disorientation of the moment, had trouble even finding your way back out of the closet? It is amazing how difficult it becomes to navigate across even a familiar space for a short distance without a point of reference. A single ray of light, peeking through a window or doorway- even if it is opposite of the direction you’re heading, provides enough orientation data to our internal compass to enable us to find our way. But in the absence of that orienting light, we end up trying to figure out how so many hanging clothes and shoes wound up in the bathroom!

Or, have you ever tried to carry a significant weight, or load of some kind, for more than a few steps? The further you go, the heavier it seems to get! Even a comparatively light burden becomes almost unbearable after a significant distance. What begins as “No problem” winds up being “I don’t think I can carry this one step more” all too quickly!

Now let’s combine the two scenarios. You’re in complete darkness with no orientation clues, and are trying to navigate your way to a destination of a considerable distance while carrying a load that becomes extremely heavy after only a few steps. **This is precisely how some people attempt the journey of life!**

God, through His prophet Jeremiah, said, *“a man’s way is not in himself; nor it is in a man who walks to direct his steps,”* Jeremiah 10:23. And yet, how often we hear, “You have to look deep within yourself to find your purpose and way in life,” or, “Listen to your heart- it will tell you what’s right.” Poppycock! If such were actually true, and it certainly isn’t, then why would God go to all the trouble to reveal 66 books worth of information, guidance, and instruction? Mark 6:34 records that when Jesus looked upon the people of His day, He *“felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd….”* They were in complete darkness, and didn’t know which way to go! Is it any different, or better, now? The “sheep” are surely just as disoriented, if not more so, now than then. I can’t even imagine how difficult it must be to attempt to navigate “life” without the *orienting “light”* of Truth.

And yet, though disoriented in total darkness, many today are like those of Jesus’ time. He came into the world to *enlighten every man* (John 1:9), but most people *loved the darkness,* because *“their deeds were evil… lest his deeds should be exposed,”* John 3:19-20. It seems nothing has changed in this regard. The even sadder part, if such is possible, is that so many who actually realize both their predicament and the hopelessness of it seem to look everywhere but the Word of God for answers and guidance. We *“grope”* around in the darkness searching for “God” or “answers” though *“He is not far from each one of us,”* Acts 17:27. He is as close as His Word- the Bible. In it, we “find” God, and the orienting answers to life that enables us to find our way to Him. There is a reason Jesus is called *“the Word”* in John 1:1ff! He *explains* God to us (John 1:18), and *enlightens* the path to Him (John 1:9,12); He is the *“Word of life,”* 1John 1:1!

But what about the “weights” we mentioned earlier? Those are the *“weights of sin”* we struggle to carry through life, cf. Luke 21:34 and 2Timothy 3:6. Without the *enlightening* of Jesus, and the *emancipation* He offers from these burdens of sin, we cannot *“run the race”* of life in any kind of way that will enable us to win, cf. 1Corinthians 9:24-27. But without the *light of truth* from God’s Word, we can’t “see” these weights, and don’t realize exactly how much they weigh us down!

We’d never dream of attempting to run in complete darkness and while carrying a heavy load or weight. So why do we attempt the same in the most important journey of “life”? (5-10-16)

**Are You Playing “Let’s Make a Deal!”?**

In the mythology of Blues music, a young musician meets the Devil at “the crossroads” and strikes a bargain in which the future of his eternal soul is traded for temporary but present *other-worldly* skills at playing guitar. In reality, many make the same deal but get even less in return.

Jesus, in Matthew 16:26, asks the question, *“Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”* Though the question was surely intended to be rhetorical, and the answer implied was that there was **nothing** that **man *could give***in exchange for his soul, such hasn’t stopped many men from trading their souls to the devil for much less than musical abilities. Satan merely has to dangle the fleeting flash of *“the passing pleasures of sin”* to entice some to trade. For others, acceptance by peers, or even a limited measure of notoriety is all the trade-bait Beelzebub needs. Still others drive a harder bargain, and require all the things that fleshly men think will bring them happiness- health, wealth, and the gratification of all their sensual desires, to make the deal with the Devil for their souls. But in these kinds of transactions, the most common mistake is to look at the **deal offered** rather than the **Dealer!**

Notice a few things Jesus said about Satan. *“He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies,”* John 8:44. His purposes are to *“steal, kill, and destroy,”* John 10:10. Now, what kind of a “deal” should one expect from a *lying, murdering, destructive thief?*  Exactly! Anything promised in the transaction surely could not be expected to actually be delivered in the first place, or to be accurately represented or retained if it was! Why anyone would want to make a “deal with the Devil,” regardless of what was promised, is somewhat mind-boggling. He lies, he cheats, he steals, he destroys, and he murders. It doesn’t matter what “deal” he offers- he won’t deliver it, or it won’t be as promised, or he’ll steal it back from you, or he’ll just murder you. Then what will you have gotten in exchange for your immortal soul?

We also need to take this “deal-making” tendency of ours in another direction. Some folks want to make “deals” **with God**. You know what I mean- “God, if you will just do *this* for me, ***then***I will *be good / do* *that* for You.” Have we really thought through such deal-making attempts? First, do you realize that what we *want* in such a trade is almost always something *physical,* while what we *offer* is something that we at least presume is *spiritual?* Strange.Second, God created not only us, but the Universe as well, and did so with just His will and His words! Exactly what does He *need* from us? It is true that He *desires* our love and devotion, but the Creator of all things does not *need* anything we can offer so that His blessings and favor can be bought with a “deal”! Lean in and read/listen closely, GOD DOESN’T WANT A “DEAL” *FROM* YOU, HE WANTS *YOU!* He wants ALL of YOU- your *heart,* your *mind,* your *body,* and your *soul,* Mark 12:30. He doesn’t want some paltry portion you’re willing to give up in a trade, He wants all of you. And in case you’re still in a “let’s make a deal” mindset, He already purchased you with the blood of His only begotten Son, *“knowing that you were not redeemed* (literally, to *buy back*- PCS) *with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life…but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ,”* 1Peter 1:18-19.

Still other folks seem to want to make a different kind of “deal” with God- one that could be more accurately called a “bribe,” or “pay-off.” The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, Philo, put it this way, “Impious wretches that they are, thinking that thus they are paying a price to buy themselves off from suffering punishment for their offences. But to such persons I would say, ‘O ye men, the tribunal of God is not be corrupted by bribes; so that those who have guilty minds will be rejected, even if they sacrifice a hundred oxen every day; and those who are innocent will be received, even if they never sacrifice at all,’” (Concerning Noah’s Work as a Planter, 25.107, 108). To put it in perhaps in simpler terms, “We cannot buy or barter our way out of hell or into heaven.” Perhaps we need to stop thinking of our spiritual commitments, in part or whole, as a *sacrifice* that we make in some sort of pay off kind of deal, and consider them more of a *surrender* of all that we have, and all that we are. We end where we began- with Jesus’ question, *“What will a man give in exchange for his for soul?”* (3-10-15)

**Dealing with Regrets**

What’s the line from the old Sinatra song, “Regrets, I’ve had a few….”? While many have honestly said, “I have no regrets” when speaking of a specific incident or the way they handled a certain circumstance, anyone who says they have no regrets about the entirety of their lives has either lived an extremely good and conscientious life, or is an arrogant fool. I’m betting on the latter option.

The apostle Paul did indeed say that he had lived his life *“in all good conscience”* inActs 23:1, but that is not the same thing as having no regrets. One can, as Paul did, live in such a way as to never violate his conscience, Philippians 3:6. But, the conscience, especially apart from divine revelation, is a fallible guide. You’d be hard-pressed to find a better example of this than Paul himself. Though acting *“in all good conscience”* prior to understanding the truth about Jesus Christ, he persecuted Him and the church, Acts 9:1ff. After coming to know Jesus as God’s Son, Paul lived the rest of his life with the pressing weight of a huge pile of regrets! Note his own words in 1Tim.1:13,15 on this point, *“even though I was formerly a blasphemer and persecutor and a violent aggressor…Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.”*

However, Paul also epitomizes the best-case scenario of how to deal with one’s regrets. **The most important key to dealing with regrets is to first stop piling them up.** It is difficult indeed to effectively and productively deal with the mistakes of our past while continuing to add to the list. While we probably will add *new* regrets to our pile, at the very least we should stop repeating the same *old* ones! Isn’t that the nature and composition of spiritual growth and development? So, when Paul realized, by the revelation of truth, that Jesus was the Christ, he immediately and completely changed course. Which, by the way, is the way one is supposed to repent (see also Acts 2:36-42 for an additional example). Paul thus went from being a *persecutor* of Jesus and the church to being a *proclaimer* of Him and a *preacher/producer* of the church. In this way, at least, he stopped piling up regrets!

We don’t have to be a *persecutor* of Christ and His church to have, or continue to pile up, regrets. Jesus said, *“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters,”* Matthew 12:30. If we’re not actively *with* Christ, and actively working *in* His cause and kingdom, then we are *against* Him. This should certainly be a cause of regret, but the solution is simple. Start by repenting of your negligence, and then proceed by moving in the right direction. Cain, after God rejected his improper sacrifice and worship, was angry and dejected. Note God’s own words of admonition to him in Genesis 4:6-7, *“Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?”*

No matter how far you’ve gone on the wrong course, the first thing to be done is to take that initial step on the proper path! You’ll never get to where you need and want to be, spiritually speaking, unless you stop piling up additional regrets by continuing to walk away from God in sin. Long ago, God spoke to His people through the prophet Isaiah, *“Behold, the Lord’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; neither is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, so that He does not hear,”* Isaiah 59:1-2. If you don’t feel close to God, make no mistake about who moved! God is ever accessible and able to save, if we will but come to Him in repentance by doing the right things. *“Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord,”* Acts 3:19.

**The second vital step in dealing with regrets** (after you stop adding to the pile), **is to not dwell on/in them.**  You may never completely forget your past sins- even though God does, Hebrews 8:12, but you can’t wallow or bury yourself in them either. Note again Paul’s example and words, *“Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it* (salvation, PCS) *yet; but one thing I do:* ***forgetting what lies behind******and reaching forward to what lies ahead****,* ***I press on******toward the goal****….”* Philippian 3:13-14. Wise people have regrets, but they stop adding to the pile, and don’t bury themselves in or with it either. Be wise in dealing with your regrets. (7-5-13)

**“I Don’t Have to Decide”**

If you’ve ever been in an administrative position- in business or the church, or if you been a parent, you understand the pressure of decision making. This is especially true when the decision is largely up to you. And of course, the pressure ramps up the more people will be affected by your decision, and the more resources are required to implement it. Having been, at least to some degree, in all of these decision-making positions (managing a tractor/equipment business, serving as an Elder in the church, and certainly as a parent), I am well acquainted with the pressures of making “the decision(s).” While an elder and full-time preacher for a previous congregation, I was often asked what it was like to take on the additional responsibility of shepherding. My initial response to this question was always the same, “You get less sleep!”

Given these things, I have learned **to be grateful for the decisions I** **do not have make**. In fact, as Christians, **we should ALL be grateful for the decisions we don’t have to make. Like….**

**What’s right and wrong.** For those who reject God and His word for atheism- in either its practical or theoretical forms, the burden of deciding “right” and “wrong” about EVERYTHING must be tremendous! Though it is sometimes difficult to have sympathy for the plight of those who *“suppress the truth in unrighteousness”* (Romans 1:18), I do pity them because of the pressure that ensues as a result of their rejection of God and His word. Those that at least strive for some measure of conscientiousness are left with no standard of right and wrong outside of themselves. Every moral decision must be weighed through a complex system of subjective decision-making. It must be tremendously burdensome to even attempt to decide issues of importance such as abortion, capital punishment, homosexuality and trans-genderism, and the like with only their own *subjective* reasoning instead of a divine *objective* standard! The results of such pressures speak for themselves when decisions of how to label public restrooms creates a national crisis, and a teenage boy is allowed to compete and win all the events at girls track and field competitions because he “represents” himself as female. But for those of us who believe in God and trust in His word, *“The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether,”* Psalm 19:9. (See also Genesis 1:27-28.)

**Who’s saved and lost eternally.** I am extremely grateful that my responsibility regarding the eternity of others ends at presenting the truth of God’s word concerning these matters to them, and encouraging their obedience to it. I don’t *have to decide* who will be saved or lost- in fact, not only is such beyond my purview, it is beyond my ability. The God of the Universe is tremendously more righteous and just, infinitely more loving, and exceptionally more gracious and merciful than any mortal could hope to be! Additionally, His omniscience allows Him to see and know that which man cannot, *“for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart,”* 1Samuel 16:7. Therefore, you nor I have to concern ourselves with who will be lost or saved, we just have *“learn what is pleasing to the Lord”* (Ephesians 5:10), then *“practice righteousness”* as He prescribes (1John 3:10), and then *“proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”* (1Peter 2:9). So, let’s *learn, practice,* and *teach* God’s word, and leave the eternal judgments of souls to Him who is eminently qualified to make them… and be thankful we don’t have to decide such matters! (See also 2Corinthians 5:10-11.)

**Whether or not to attend worship/bible class.** Even among those who consider themselves “Christians,” many are plagued with the weekly (or more) decision of whether or not to attend worship services and bible classes. I’m thankful that the weight such deliberations and decisions have never been a problem for me. From as far back as I can remember if you weren’t bleeding uncontrollably, puking up your toenails (sorry for that image!), or running a measurable temperature, you went to services every time they occurred. There were no *ifs, ands,* or *buts* about it- you went. Of course, there were many times that I did not “want” to go, but thankfully, that decision wasn’t left up to me until I had the knowledge and maturity to make it (I often did not want to go to school, take a bath, or brush my teeth either- but that lack of desire didn’t change those outcomes either, and for the same reasons!). By that time, I understood the *value* of worshipping God, learning His word, and encouraging others, and being encouraged by them, to faithfulness in ALL areas of service to God, not just in attendance. But for many, there is a decision-making ritual that has to be gone through to arrive at a conclusion of whether or not to attend services. Such things as *how tired I am, how much homework or extra-curricular activities the kids have, what else needs to be done, whether or not I “feel like it,”* and the like have to be factored into a decision. Although *whether or not I want to go* is somewhat of a separate issue, let’s simplify things down to this: *Can I go?* If it is *possible,* then go and provide others with the blessing of your presence, and God with your worship. There are times when we all have an *ox in the ditch/well* that requires our immediate attention and prevents our attendance, cf. Luke 14:5. But many of us, I fear, lead him there, push him in, and then build a fence around him to prevent his escape! Stop burdening yourself with unnecessary decisions in these regards- if you *can* attend, do so. You won’t regret it now, and your kids will appreciate it (like I do!) later. Just unburden yourself from the decision and GO!

I’m reminded by these things of a little plaque that was prominently displayed in the entryway to a home. It read, “The decisions of the HEAD of this household are not necessarily those of the MANAGEMENT!” In that case, it was obvious that “the management” wasn’t pleased with some of the decisions of “the head.” In our mortal state of relative ignorance and myopic shortsightedness, we may not like all of the decisions God makes for us. We may disagree with some, and feel others are unfair, or even unjust- just like we did toward the decisions of our parents when we were young. But, we eventually grew up and saw the knowledge and wisdom of their decisions. Be thankful that you weren’t allowed to make decisions of importance before you were ready for them by your parents, and be supremely grateful for the decisions that can be left to God…then leave them to Him! (7-26-17)

**“Decisions, Decisions!”**

I saw a car commercial recently which boasted of how many hundreds of thousands of decisions this car made every second. Not only do I not think that fast, I’m not sure I want my car to either! In fact, I’d prefer to do most of the thinking for both of us. Then on the other hand, if that old truck of mine had been one of these new “thinking” types, we might not have rolled over and wrecked recently! But know this: when performing complicated tasks like driving or living, there are a whole bunch of decisions that are going to have to be made by *someone*…or *something* (God help us!).

Such brings a couple of points to mind relative to “thinking” and “decisions”: (1) good decisions typically require considerable thought at first, then become easier as we get used to making them; and (2) eventually, many good decisions come to require no thought at all, and hence cease to really even be decisions- we just do the right thing without even thinking about it. Let’s consider both of these points a little more.

The reason good decisions take more thought when we first attempt to start making them is simple: we lack the experience of having made them before, or hundreds of times before. So initially, we have to pray for guidance (always a good idea), determine what our options are, weigh and consider those options in light of the Scriptures, and we might also *“consider the outcome”* of the decisions others have made in similar circumstances (Hebrews 13:7) before coming to a decision. Having done all of this and come to a decision, hopefully we can then act accordingly. But as we repeat this process multiple times, fewer steps are required to come to the correct answers because we’re learning from our own experience as we go. Unfortunately, as many have said, “The experience required to make good decisions sometimes comes from making bad decisions.” This is true, but the point is that we learn from the process. Some just keep repeating the same mistakes over and over. Hebrews 5:12 speaks of this problem, *“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for some one to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God…”*  If we keep making the same bad decisions over and over, there is something wrong with our process!

The other major point relative to making good decisions is that not only should making them become easier with practice, many of them will cease to be decisions at all. We will just do the right thing(s) instinctively without even having to think about it. After all, before we started trying to make good and right decisions according to God’s word, did we have to “think about” and “decide” to do wrong? Not likely. We had probably become so accustomed to living that way that it became instinctive to us- we just did evil “without giving it a second thought.” Such is exactly what Ephesians 2:3 is addressing, *“Among them we too all lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.”* Therefore, just as bad decisions can become so habitual as to not even require thought, good decisions can also. *“But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”* (Hebrews 5:14)

But the problem is that many of us still have to “think” about things that ought to be *automatic* or *instinctive* by now. For example, be honest with yourself and answer this question: “Is a decision required in your house each Sunday as to whether or not you (and your family) are going to worship the Lord and encourage your brethren?” If this doesn’t require a decision, I know why. You either: (1) never really think about **doing so**; or (2) you never really think about **not doing so!** Again, be honest- why are you still having to think about and decide this? If you’re not sick (too tired or hung-over from the previous day’s or night’s activities doesn’t count) or prevented (meaning that you have no choice or decision in the matter), shouldn’t it be *instinctive* for a child of God to assemble with their brethren to worship Him and encourage one another? If we still have to “think” about and “decide” this one, we might better backup and review how we’re making our decisions. If other “things” take precedence over the *“the Lord’s day”* in our decision-making, are we really *“seeking first the kingdom of God”* Matthew 6:33? (9-14-11)

**Delegating Work and Responsibilities**

Given the title, those familiar with the New Testament will likely remember Acts 6:1-6 where both the oversight (responsibility) and implementation (work) of caring for Greek-speaking Hebrew widows was delegated by *the Twelve* (apostles) to *seven men* whom the congregation selected based upon the qualifications provided. We are not left to our own wondering suppositions about the reason for this allocation since the text provides clear divine commentary from the apostles, *“It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables…. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and the ministry of the word,”* Acts 6:2,4. There were capable and qualified men who could oversee and implement the work of providing food to needy Christians without burdening those tasked with being Jesus’ *“witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth”* (Acts 1:8) unnecessarily with extra responsibilities. But don’t disconnect this delegation of responsibility and division of labor from the results! Not only were the widows adequately cared for, note also Acts 6:7, *“And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”*  The take-away? Things work well and prosper when each does what they are suited and qualified to do through scriptural delegation!

There are a couple of extrapolations from Acts 6:1-6 that can also be helpful:

* The apostles **delegated *responsibility****,* **not just *work****.* Those seven men were *“put in charge”* of the task, v.3. Perhaps too often, church leaders delegate *work,* but not *responsibility.*  The apostles didn’t waste their time or talents micro-managing what had been delegated. They gave the men chosen *responsibility-* and therefore *authority,* to get the job done, and then got out of the way! It accomplishes little, if anything, for leaders to delegate a task IF they are unwilling to let those *put in charge* subsequently handle it. Remember the purpose of the delegation in the first place, cf. vv.2,4!
* Think about the **specified qualifications** for this task: ***“seven men”****-* apparently such was deemed a sufficient number for the job; ***“of good reputation”****-* anyone, regardless of reputation, can *work,* but entrusting *responsibility* requires a proven track record; ***“full of the Spirit”****-* thus, additionally enabled with divine wisdom. Does this sound like “over-qualified”? They would indeed be over-qualified if they were ONLY *serving tables* (no offense intended to more modern *food servers*), but NOT if they were *“put in charge of the task”!*  I take such to mean that these men were **placed *over***the **procurement** (collection and expenditure of necessary funds), **preparation** (and those actually doing the work), and **dispersal** (some being *overlooked* was a potential divisive issue in the church, v.1) of the food. Thus, those meeting the requirements were not at all *over-*qualified, they were *exactly-*qualified! When delegating a task, *qualified* people need to be selected and appointed for it, then (again), get out of the way and let them *take charge* and *carry out* their appointed duties.
* There is a progression of duties and responsibilities that enable each to grow and become more useful to the Master. These seven men, as evidenced by their qualifications, had already learned *service*. Next, they were appointed to a *limited administration* task (oversight/authority in a specified area). The successful administration of *this task* of providing benevolent assistance to needy Christians seems to have prepared and propelled these men to even greater works, since two of the seven’s preaching exploits are further covered in the next two chapters (*Stephen* in Acts 6:8 – 7:60, and *Philip* in Acts 8). Each advancement in *service* was predicated upon the lessons learned and skills developed in the previous level. This concept can also be seen in 1Tim.3:3-4,6,10. So, don’t try to short-cut the process because each step of development is important!

Unfortunately, we sometimes tend to *delegate* responsibilities to others that can’t actually be delegated:

* Just because a congregation has scripturally qualified and appointed leaders does not remove the responsibility we have as individual members to our *wayward* brethren. The obligations to *restore* and *bear one another’s burdens* in Galatians 6:1-2ff are addressed to *“you who are spiritual,”* v.1. The process of dealing with a *sinful brother* in Matthew 18:15-18 begins with the brother against whom he has sinned *going to him* first, v.15. And the charge to *“admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men”* of 1Thessalonians 5:14 is given to *“brethren”* rather than Elders. We all have *edification/correction* responsibilities that can’t be delegated, nor are they absolved by the presence of Elders in the congregation.
* Just because a congregation has *paid preacher* does not remove the responsibility we have as individual members toward evangelism. Remember Paul’s instructions to the *located preacher* (in Ephesus at the time) Timothy, *“And the things you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also,”* 2Timothy 2:2. Notice that the Word is to be *entrusted* (to *commit to one’s charge*)to *faithful men!*  Furthermore, we all have the responsibility to *“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven,”* Matthew 5:16. By proclamation and example, we all have *evangelistic* responsibility. And finally,
* Just because we *contribute of our means* weekly into a church treasury does not remove the responsibility to provide for one another in times of need. *“But whoever has this world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or tongue, but in deed and truth,”* 1John 3:17-18. The presence of a church treasury, or our contributions to it, does not negate our individual responsibilities toward *benevolence.*

Delegation is a good and necessary tool to accomplish divine objectives when: it is done for the right reason, to right person/people, in the right way. But, when it is done for the wrong reasons, to the wrong person/people, and in the wrong ways, it just promotes the shirking of responsibility and the loss of greater potential for the delegator, and unfairly burdens the delegates. Think on these things, won’t you? (10-10-17)

**Denominational, Inter-Denominational, and Non-Denominational**

Let’s start with some hopefully not-too-boring-but-accurate definitions of terms. “Denominational” is a word used to describe a church which is bound by association to an outside organizational headquarters. How much control is exercised over local congregations by the parent headquarters varies from one denomination to another. “Inter-Denominational” is exactly what the word implies- a church comprised of members from various denominations. Such congregations often disavow controlling outside influences from denominational headquarters, but typically retain some standards, practices, and teaching of them internally. However, inter-denominational groups usually think of, and refer to themselves as “non-denominational,” despite the continued acceptance of their concepts and doctrines. By contrast, truly “non-denominational” congregations shun all denominational control, practices, organizations, and teaching. Each congregation is instead completely autonomous (*self-governed*), and therefore, what is taught and practiced is determined within the local congregation itself. Furthermore, in this “non-denominational” arrangement, there is no structure above or beyond the local church; there are no earthly “headquarters” or outside “organizational associations.” Now, the big question: Which of these arrangements is correct? The question is easily answered by a simple search of the New Testament to see which one God ordained. Let’s see what the Book says.

Ephesians 4:4, *“There is one body….”* Since Ephesians 1:22-23 identifies *“the body”* as *“the church,”* having multiple denominations all teaching and practicing different things is not the biblical plan or arrangement. While some seek to use 1Corinthians 12:12ff to authorize the existence of many divergent denominations because the passage speaks of differing *“parts of the body,”* a careful reading of the context reveals that Paul is actually saying that the ***local congregation*** is *“the body”* in this case, and its distinct *“parts”* (*i.e.* the *foot, eye, hand, etc.*) are the ***individual members***, see vv.12-27. Simply put, Christ built *“one”* church, and expects everyone to be *“one”* within it. *“I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word;* ***that they all may be one…”*** John 17:20-21. Multiple “denominations” (which implies *division*) teaching and practicing different things, but all claiming to follow the Bible, was never the intention of Jesus. Instead, Christians were exhorted *“by the name of Jesus Christ, that you all agree*, and there be *no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment,”* 1Corinthians 1:10.

Additionally, the “denominational” arrangement has another significant problem. The New Testament simply does not authorize any organization larger than the local congregation. Local congregations are to be led by *overseers, bishops, elders,* or *pastors-* which all refer to the same office according to Acts 20:17,28 (the terms are used interchangeably). These *overseers* must meet the qualifications for the office as given in 1Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:7-9. Furthermore, their *oversight* is clearly limited to the local congregation in which they have become qualified, 1Peter 5:2 (*“shepherd the flock of God* ***among you****”*). There is just no provision in the New Testament for a separate board of directors, council, or denominational headquarters. Each congregation is to be led by a plurality of *elders* (more than one, according to Acts 14:23) who take the Bible as their only creed, and teach and practice what it dictates.

What about the “inter-denominational” arrangements? The problem with “inter-denominational” is that it either: 1) accepts denominational biases and practices despite differences, instead of insisting on unity through “book, chapter, and verse” authority; or, 2) forces the compromise of convictions for the sake of ecumenism (acceptingdivergent beliefs and practices despite contrary personal conviction). Neither of these consequences agree with scripture. *“If there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the* ***same mind,******maintaining the******same love****,* ***united in spirit, intent on one purpose,”*** Philippian 2:1-2.

What have we learned? The New Testament teaches that God’s ordained arrangement of the church, and its subsequent congregational government, requires: 1) local autonomous groups; 2) led by multiple *overseers* who meet the specified qualifications; 3) and lead the congregation according the Bible only; 4) without the additional control of external boards or associations. Anything else (or more!) just can’t be found in the New Testament, and thus is an arrangement of man rather than God. (2-7-14)

**Denying Self**

*“If any one wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me,”* Matthew 16:24. Perhaps *self-denial* is the hardest of Jesus’ commands to obey, but it is commanded, and therefore required. So, let’s dig a little deeper…

Essentially, this verse is comprised of four **D’s**: ***D****esire-* one has to truly *wish* to be follower; ***D****enial-* one has to be willing to put Christ before self; ***D****estruction-* the cross is an implement of personal and physical destruction (see also v.25); and, ***D****irection-* one must not only *desire* to follow Jesus, he must actually do so. While these points seem worthy of due consideration both individually and collectively, for our purposes here, let’s focus solely on ***D****enying* self.

**Why is *self-denial* required?** It’s simple. Jesus explained it in Matthew 6:24, *“No one can serve two masters…”*  If God is to be our Master, we must deny ourselves the position. Through *self-denial,* we must *subject* (*arrange under another’s control*) ourselves to Him.

**What is, specifically, *self-denial?***Jesus, as always, showed us. Though the Son of God incarnate, He was willing to deny Himself. This wasn’t mere asceticism (a *self-denying* lifestyle; the opposite of *self-indulgence*), it was to give place to God. The man, Jesus, was certainly still divine, but was also human. As such, to please His Father, He had to *subject* Himself to God by submitting to the Father’s will rather than His own. In no place is this *self-denying subjection* more evident than in Gethsemane. Jesus prayed earnestly and intently three times that *“the cup”* of suffering, death, and sacrifice might be avoided. And yet, within the same petitions, He also prayed, *“yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt,”* and, *“Thy will be done,”* Matthew 26:39,42. Even when facing such a horrible death, with all of its agonies and implications, He suppressed His natural and human will in self-denial and subjected Himself to the will of God! Think about Jesus’ self-denial relative to the areas in which we are unwilling to deny ourselves. It may be painful and embarrassing- it certainly is both for me, but do it anyway.

**How can we succeed in *self-denial?***Or, put another way, what specific areas of *self-denial* are needed?

Our **Will-** As used here, “will” is an expression denoting the part of the mind that makes decisions, as well as our *desire, determination,* and *resolve-* which would include both our intellect and emotion. When Jesus said, *“Not My* ***will****, but Thine,”* it was a deliberate subjecting in self-denial of the things His human mind *thought,* and those that His human heart *felt.* So, if we would *follow Him* as His disciples, we must be willing to likewise subject our *thoughts* and our *emotions* to those of God. We must deny ourselves and be willing to *think like,* and *feel like,* God. Consider Matthew 5:43-48 (*love like* God) and Philippians 4:8 (*think like* God) as examples.

Our **Words-** When we lash out with *our* words without taking time to first consider how God would *think* and *feel,* and therefore *speak* in a similar situation, are we not failing to deny ourselves? Are we not, then, using *our* words rather than *His?*  Jesus said, *“For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak,”* John 12:49. Thus, *“while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to judges righteously,”* 1Peter 1:23. Surely we (and certainly “I”!) can do better at denying self through the use of *godly* words, rather than those born only of *human* thought and emotion.

Our **Way-** Our “way” has to do with *course, direction,* and *path* of life. Think about it: God created the universe, galaxy, solar system, and planet in and on which we live; He created everything good we see, touch, taste, feel, know, or experience on it; and He created us, as well as giving His Son to save us eternally. But somehow, we “know” more about how *our* lives should be lived than He does? Really? Isn’t this exactly what we are, in effect at least, indicating when we fail to heed His instructions and live the way His word specifies? When we refuse to “read the manual” of life, or “follow its instructions,” aren’t we arrogantly declaring that we know more about the *way* “my” life should be lived than He who created it? Or if we do read “the manual” only to remark, “Well, I know the Bible says that, but ***I think***…” aren’t we simply refusing to submit “our” *way* to His? Jesus said, *“I am* ***the way****, the truth, and the life;* ***no one*** *comes to the Father, but through Me,”* John 14:6. We do not get to select *our own way* to God or heaven. We must deny ourselves and submit to **His** way.

Let’s learn to deny self and submit our *will, words,* and *way* to God. It may not be easy, but it certainly is best. (11-4-14)

**Elijah, Rain, and Dependency**

No doubt there have been more than a few recent references to the passage in James 5:18ff which repeats the O.T. story of Elijah praying for rain. And I’m sure several of these references to the story also emphasized that *“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours”* from v.17 in an effort to make the point that we too can and should beseech the Father for rain. There’s nothing wrong with any of these things- righteous men (see v.16) should be asking God for rain!

But somehow, the later part of v.17 doesn’t get as much attention. It says, *“and he* (Elijah) *prayed earnestly* ***that it might not rain****, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months.”* Incidentally, the word translated as *“earth”*  can also be rendered as *“land”* or *“country”-* either of which I suspect is closer to the intended meaning of the verse. Now back to the point, I know there have been many East Texans asking God for rain lately, including me, but I wonder if any have been praying that it **might not rain** like Elijah did at first?

Though the account in James 5 does not specify, do you know why Elijah first prayed that it would not rain? The O.T. book of 1Kings 17 records the ascension of Ahab to the throne of Israel. In v.30 it says that he *“did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.”* The text of v.33 adds, *“Thus Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who were before him.”* It seems that the nation of Israel either tolerated or followed King Ahab’s idolatry to such an extent that Elijah prayed for a drought to punish them, and to bring them back to an understanding of their complete dependence upon Jehovah. They evidently needed to be reminded of what Paul told the folks in Lystra- that God *“did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”*  (Acts 14:17) It is so very easy to take things like *rain* and *fruitful seasons* for granted- until you don’t have them!

Now, all of that was to get to a couple of points for your consideration. First, I don’t know whether God has deliberately withheld rain from us to punish us for idolatry or not. But it would sure be a good time to return to the true worship of Jehovah if we haven’t been doing so! By percentage, there are probably more of us worshipping the idol of “self” instead of Him on any given Sunday- not to mention the rest of the week. We should instead *“seek God, if perhaps they* (we) *might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.”* (Acts 1:27) Secondly, I don’t know whether God is trying to teach us that we’ve gotten too big for our britches, and need to return to an understanding of our complete dependence upon Him or not. But I do know that it would be a really good time to acknowledge that it is *“in Him that we live and move and exist”* (Acts 17:28). If you don’t believe that, then you make it rain. Furthermore, I don’t know whether some *present-day Elijah* (remember, he was a man of God) has prayed that it might not rain here or not. But I do know that if drought is what it takes to turn us back to God, the true worship of Him, and the acknowledgement of our utter dependence upon Him, we had better be thankful and start heeding the message! After all, even a summer’s worth of temperatures over 100 is still a lot better than an eternity in hell.

Just to be sure to avoid any misunderstanding, I do not know why we’ve been so long without rain. But when a person, or any group of them, is in sin, it’s always “the right time” to repent, *“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man who He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”* Acts 17:30 Please think about it. (9-7-11)

**Desecrating the Temple of God**

To “desecrate” is to “violate the sanctity of” or to “treat irreverently or contemptuously often in a way that provokes rage on the part of others” (Webster’s). There have been a couple of notable occasions when the Temple of God has been desecrated…

**Manasseh**, the son of king Hezekiah and Hesphzibah, became king over the two southern tribes of Israel that were called “Judah” after the nation split. He was the first king over Judah after the northern ten tribes, called “Israel,” were captured and annihilated by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Manasseh became king at only twelve years of age (a little under 700 years before the time of Christ), and reigned for 55 years, 2Chronicles 33:1. In the first part of his reign, he was a very wicked king who *“misled Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel,”* 2Chronicles 33:9. In addition to practicing *child-sacrifice, witchcraft, divination, sorcery,* and multiple forms of *idolatry,* he also *“built* (idolatrous, PCS) *altars in the house of the Lord”* and *“built* (idolatrous, PCS) *altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord,”* 2Chronicles 33:4-6. He was severely punished by God for these atrocities after refusing to repent. However, he did eventually repent, and was restored to power. He then tried to “undo” all the evil he had done. In many ways, it was too late, for his son who followed him on the throne- surely influenced more by his father’s wickedness than by his repentance and efforts toward restitution, led Judah right back into idolatry and paganism. Manasseh’s act of placing idols *in God’s Temple* was a grave *desecration* of it, and an *abomination* (utterly disgusting) to God.

Another case of *desecration* of the Temple occurred a few hundred years later, during the 400 years between the events of the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, and the beginning of the New Testament record with Matthew. **Antiochus IV (aka, “Epiphanes”)** had inherited a portion of Alexander the Great’s (by then divided and mostly defunct) Greek Empire from his father, Antiochus III. The portion controlled by Antiochus IV included western Babylonia and Syria, while the Ptolemies controlled Egypt. Unfortunately, the “prize” between these two regions was Palestine, and Judah specifically. Antiochus IV was determined to “Hellenize” (convert to Grecian culture and worship) the Jews living in Judah. When some of them resisted his efforts, he flew into a rage and killed, or captured and sold into slavery, some 80,000 Jews in and around Jerusalem. Not being satisfied with this, and being determined to “convert” the Jews to Hellenism, he also renamed the Holy Temple of God as “Jupiter Olympus,” erected an idol in it to the Greek god Zeus, and replaced the altar with a Grecian version on which he “sacrificed” a God-fearing Jew on December 16, 167 B.C. This was surely a *desecration* of the Temple of God on epic proportions!

While we can legitimately be aghast at these historic *desecrations* of the Temple of God by both the wicked Judean king, Manasseh, and the evil Seleucid king, Epiphanes, note also 1Corinthians 6:19 in a similar connection, *“Or do you not know that* ***your body*** *is a* ***temple of the Holy Spirit*** *who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?”*  The *“temple”* to which Paul refers is not the physical structure of our previous examples of desecration, but the *temple* of our own physical bodies. These can be “desecrated” by sin, and specifically in this context, by *sexual* sins (please read 1Corinthians 6:12-20).

Our modern society, in its “evolved” state, has relegated sexual sins (sex *before* and/or *outside* of biblical marriage) to being *outdated* at best, and *irrelative* and *inapplicable* at worst. However, God doesn’t agree! Please consider carefully 1Thessalonians 4:3-7, *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all of these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.”* We don’t have to build *idolatrous alters* in a holy place of worship like Manasseh, or offer *human sacrifices* in God’s house like Epiphanes, to desecrate the *temple of our bodies* and become an *abomination* to Him. All we have to do is listen to society and abandon God’s laws of purity and marriage through sexual immorality! (8-23-16)

**Details Matter**

We live in a world where details matter. Specificity is a “must” in most facets of our lives. Accuracy in detail is seemingly always required. Some of this is the product of living in a litigious environment, and some of it is the result of living with close tolerances of time and money. All of which has made details vitally important in virtually every part of our lives- the details matter to us today; and those who don’t manage the those details well, seemingly get left behind, or out. Most folks realize this, and have thus become “detail-oriented” people.

But here’s a strange contrast: while we have become **more** “detail-oriented” in most areas of our lives, we have also become **less** “detail-oriented” in our religious devotion. Perhaps we’re just “detailed-out” by the time we get to God. Surely God should take priority over all the other details of our lives, but it doesn’t always happen that way. Unfortunately, God is often left with the non-specific “leftovers” of our otherwise “detail-dominated” lives.

The thing that really bothers me about all of this lack of attention to details in our religious devotion is that God is Himself “detail-oriented.” He was very specific in telling Noah exactly how to build the ark, and what provisions and animals to put in it (Genesis 6:13-21). Noah followed God’s detailed instructions to the letter, *“Thus Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did.”* (Genesis 6:22) Because of Noah’s faithful “attention to detail” in his obedience, he, his family, and the animals were saved from the flood, Hebrews 11:7.

Likewise, Moses was given very detailed instructions on how to build the tabernacle (the temporary “tent of meeting” God used to commune with the Israelites during the time of their wilderness wanderings). Hebrews 8:5 records the specificity of God’s command, *“just as Moses was warned by God, when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, ‘See,’ He says, ‘That you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.’”* The “details” mattered to God.

Things didn’t change in the New Testament either. Note the apostle Paul’s inspired warning to the Philippian church, *“Brethren, join in following my example and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us* (meaning, “the apostles”), Philippians 3:17. Details still mattered to God. The abundant grace afforded through Christ did not change the fact that God gave specific instructions that He expected to be fully obeyed in order to enjoy continued fellowship with Him. The New Testament is the Law of God for all people today; cf. Hebrews 1:1-2, so the details and specificity of His commands from it apply equally to us now.

So how is it that many today believe and espouse, “It really doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re honest and sincere”? That just doesn’t seem to match God’s “detail-oriented” nature and commands, does it? While God’s commands for us are not difficult to comprehend or obey, they are specific, and the details still matter. Take the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, for example (cf. Acts 9:1-22; 22:3-15). He saw the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, believed Jesus with all his heart, had a personal conversation with Him, and fasted and prayed for three days afterwards, but still had to meet God’s specific requirement of baptism in order to be saved. How do I know that? Read Acts 22:16, where, after Paul had seen and experienced and done all of the above, he was told, *“And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”* The details of Saul’s conversion were important to the Lord, and should be to us because we’re saved in the exact same way.

Like Saul, we’re not saved through “seeing” the Lord; or through just “believing” in Him; or through having personal conversation/contact with Him; or through fasting and prayer- but through obeying the specific details of His commands. Those other things were important parts of the process, but Saul still needed baptism to be saved. He didn’t quibble, excuse himself, or point to his previous experiences and prior obedience for justification. He just got up and did what God said- because the details mattered to God. They still do, *“He that believes and is baptized shall be saved.”* (Mark 16:16)

We can’t believe and practice anything we want to call “religion” and expect God to accept it as such. We have to do what He said, how He said- **because the details matter to Him.** They did for Noah; they did for Moses; they did for Saul; and they do for us! (8-2-11)

**Devotion To Spiritual Education In The Home**

Most Christians recognize that God entrusts parents with the spiritual education of their children. This was true under the Old Law (Deuteronomy 6:6,7), and is equally true under the Law of Christ (Ephesians 6:4). From the passage in Ephesians, we recognize that the burden of this responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of fathers as the spiritual leaders in the home. At the same time, we understand that mothers have the obligation to aid their husbands in the spiritual development of the children (Genesis 2:18).

Certainly, because of our deep respect for God and His will, we should be diligently devoted to the cause of teaching our children about Him. Furthermore, because we fear standing in judgment with the shame of having neglected our responsibility, we are compelled to be fervent in our efforts (Matthew 25:14-30).

We also recognize another factor that should lead us to be serious in this regard. Peter says we must be sober and vigilant because of the destructive efforts of our adversary (1Peter 5:8). We need to recognize the truth of this statement, and not be ignorant of his schemes (2Corinthians 2:11). Satan knows the best way to destroy a community, state, or nation as a whole, is to begin in the home by striking at the very core of what makes any economy successful. Thus, parents must be careful not to allow him a foothold to deceive them into thinking other things are more important. They must ever be reminded of the importance of making spiritual matters a priority in their own lives (Matthew 6:33), and imparting those truths to their children.

With that said, it is crucial for parents show devotion in teaching their children. Furthermore, it is imperative that they recognize where they are most effective in this endeavor. Too many parents rely on bible classes to meet the pressing needs of their children. While it is true bible classes are very beneficial toward this end, it must be recognized that these, at best, are simply a supplement to the teaching that takes place in the home. In other words, bible classes, as good as they are, will never be as beneficial to our children's spiritual education as will our efforts as parents to daily communicate to them the importance of serving God (Deuteronomy 6:6,7; Psalm 34:11).

No doubt, there are parents today who take this responsibility seriously, and make spiritual education a priority. I have seen firsthand the efforts made by godly parents to train their children in the ways of God, and also the result of these efforts as their children grow to develop their own faith. To these parents, Christianity is not just a show, or something to be taken lightly. It is a lifestyle, and an obligation born out of their love and respect for God, and for the Savior who loved them enough to die for them.

Is this the attitude we have? Are we making spiritual education in the home a priority, or do we neglect this responsibility? Are we so focused on helping our children excel in secular activities that spiritual training gets swept aside? Are we so self-absorbed that we make no time to show love for our children in this regard?

Let me assure you, those devoted to the Lord place the emphasis where it needs to be. They recognize the fact that they will have these blessings in their trust for only a few short years. As a result, they make the most of the opportunity God gives them.

How devoted are we to supplying our children with the spiritual education God expects us to give them? (4-3-13)

**Once Upon a Time…**

In a place not unlike this one, a new minister moved to town, fresh from the seminary. He soon realized that most of the men, including virtually all of the city’s preachers, regardless of affiliation, gathered early every morning (except Sunday, of course) for coffee at the corner cafe. Nearly all of them, including the parsons, had lived most of their lives in this little community, and seemed to enjoy the morning ritual. Wanting to fit in, the “new man in town” decided to join them in an effort to get better acquainted. And so he went. Everyone seemed cordial enough, almost welcoming, but it was also obvious to him that he would have to “earn his place” to be really accepted into the group… but how?

It wasn’t long until just the opportunity he needed knocked on the door of his office. It was “John,” whom he soon gathered was the town drunk. John seemed to have nothing else pressing, and was at least willing to study with the preacher, and so, over the course of a few hours, heard enough Bible to convert the county. He didn’t even shy away from the preacher’s offer to baptize him on the spot. The preacher thought a good washing would surely be good for John’s soul and his body, and would further be the just the feather his own cap needed to assure his place with the men at the cafe. And so the deed was done. John thanked the minister for all of his kindnesses and departed, but the minister could hardly wait to hurry home and tell the Mrs. of his fortuitous conquest.

Sleep was hard to achieve that night as the parson lay in bed. He was eager for the dawn so he could receive the accolades and respect he had now surely earned from the men of the town’s unofficial coffee club. And so, as soon as he thought enough of a quorum had drifted in for their dose of caffeine and camaraderie, he proudly trumpeted the previous day’s triumph to all. At the conclusion of his announcement, he quickly shifted his gaze from the heavenward direction it had been piously pointed to the corner table where the ministers congregated, wanting to be sure to catch their approving congratulatory smiles directly. But instead, he noticed they were all staring down into the black abyss of their cups. Slowly, the whole place fell church-house silent. Finally, the eldest of the ministers slowly raised his gaze to the newcomer and spoke. “Yes, son,” he said with great calmness and solemnity rather than the elated exuberance the minister expected, “We’ve all baptized John at one time or another- but so far, it hasn’t affected him much.”

What about you: Has your baptism **affected you much?**

Baptism **is**: half of the requirements to be preached from the Great Commission, Mark 16:15-16; a vital part of making disciples, Matthew 28:19-20; the act by which we are born again, John 3:3,5; half of what people were told to do to be saved on Pentecost, Acts 2:38; the appropriate response to receiving God’s Word, Acts 2:41; what Saul was told to do to wash away his sins, Acts 22:16; how we are buried with Christ, Romans 6:3; how we are raised with Christ, Romans 6:4; how we are united with Christ, Romans 6:5; how we become dead to sin and alive with Christ, Romans 6:6-11; how we enter the one body, 1Corinthians 12:13; how we enter and are clothed with Christ, Galatians 3:26-27; how we become one with and heirs with Christ, Galatians 3:28-29; and it is the washing of regeneration, Titus 3:5. From this simple survey it is obvious that, along with faith, repentance, and God’s grace, **baptism is supposed to** **affect us much!** If it doesn’t, something is definitely wrong. But…

Baptism is **not** a “magic pill” that suddenly transforms us into all that God desires and expects us to be as soon as we’re dry. While it is an act of obedience by which we are cleansed of our past sins, it does not prevent future ones. Baptism is a rebirth from which we must learn, grow, and mature as Christians. It is supposed to mark the beginning of changed minds, hearts, and lives. Those who fail to truly commit themselves to becoming a new person in Christ through this maturation process, unfortunately waste all the benefits of being born again, 2Peter 2:20-22.

So think and consider soberly: Has **your** baptism **affected you much?** If not, why not? (9-2-14)

**Dieting and Christianity**

While I don’t consider myself grossly overweight, I certainly could stand to lose a few pounds- a fact one of my doctors noted (and commented on!) recently. Such things got me to thinking about dieting.

Do you know why dieting usually doesn’t work? I’m no nutritional expert, but it really doesn’t take one to figure out the problem. Most dieting doesn’t work because of the mindset we take into the process. We like, and therefore desire, what is “bad” for us instead of that which is “good.” Realizing this, in various ways we attempt to restrict our intake of the things we really want, rather than changing the objects of our desires. Put another way, we continue to want the same things that got us into the shape we’re in- which is round, overweight, and unhealthy. Therefore, we feel deprived, and wind up wanting the “bad” stuff even more. The results are all too easy to predict.

What if, on the other hand, we could learn to enjoy the things that are actually good for us? Wouldn’t losing the weight then become easy? If would change our minds to actually desire that which is best for us, the extra pounds would disappear naturally. This “easy” solution to dieting requires one key element: we have to learn to desire and enjoy the things that are the good for us!

I’m not a weight-loss counselor, and this isn’t a healthy-eating article either. But Christians often have the exact same problem losing the extra *weight of sin* (Hebrews 12:1, KJV) which makes our spiritual lives so much more difficult, or even short-lived.

Here’s what often happens. Through the godly influence of a friend, or some tragedy in our lives, we decide to “get right” with God. Our minds and hearts are moved to understand and obey the gospel, so we confess our belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and are baptized for the remission of our sins, cf. Mark 16:16; Acts 2:37-38. But if we’re not careful to continue to grow in the faith, soon the initial emotional high of salvation is worn down and overcome by the sinful desires of our previous life. This is exactly what Jesus described in the parable of The Sower (Luke 8:13), *“And those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with great joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away.”* What went wrong? The heart/mind was not *transformed* and *renewed* (see Romans 12:2) to feel and think differently; and therefore to desire the “good” things of our new life instead of the “bad” things of our old one. But how do we do that?

**First, we realize that God’s way is best-** which means we recognize in our minds that Christ’s intention was not for our restriction and misery, but that we might *“have life, and have it more abundantly,”* John 10:10. His requirements are not *“burdensome”* (1John 5:3), but when obeyed, instead provide us with the very best of this life, as well as the life that is to come.

**Second, we decide to love what is good.** Some might protest, “But I can’t control my heart- what I like or love. It just happens!” This is patently wrong, and is probably the romanticized idea of love that comes from Hollywood. Truthfully, it is a failure to *“Watch over your heart with all diligence,”* Proverbs 4:23. We decide what we will like, and what, or who, we will love. The decision may be subconscious, but it is a decision nonetheless. The key is to decide, by conscious effort, what will appeal to us- what we will value and love, both in things and people.

**And finally, we simply do what our minds understand to be good, and what our hearts have been trained to love.** *Transforming* our lives into conformity with God’s will is easy once we’ve *renewed our minds* to understand what is best, and *retrained our hearts* to desire it. Then, we’re not just *“loving what is good”* (Titus 1:8), we are actually enjoy doing it. See? That’s as easy as pie. Wait- that is a terrible thing to say given how we started this article! (7-17-12)

**Dirty Floors and Clean Lives?**

This is not some sort of rehash of “cleanliness is next to godliness”- which, by the way, is not actually in the Bible anyway. Instead, it is an attempt to highlight a doctrinal principle with an example from everyday life.

A few days ago, I came home to find my dear wife mopping the living room floor. While such is not very glamorous, it is an apparent necessity at my house to prevent having pot-less house plants sprouting right there on the tile floor! How does all that dirt get into the house?

Since the boys have both moved out, I can no longer blame those crumb-snatchers-covered-with-dirt (and noise!) for tracking it in from outside. Perhaps Donna is bringing it in? No, she’s much too clean for that; and we don’t have pets either. So, though I am certainly a believer in Special Creation over of the Theory of Evolution, I am forced to the seemingly inescapable conclusion that dirt must be spontaneously generating itself inside our living room! It has to be, since it seems that Donna sweeps and mops constantly, but then the very next day there is more of it. I can think of no other plausible explanation (he says with tongue heavily imbedded in cheek)!

Does all of this sound familiar? I don’t mean the self-cause denials of a husband part; I mean the bit about the perpetual presence of dirt despite repetitive cleaning. All that dirt in the house actually has a primary source: **people living there.** Dirt in the house is a fact of life, not unlike the presence of sin in our lives. Roman 3:23 says, *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* This doesn’t mean that we have to sin, just that we all have done so. Lest we think we’ve become so “clean” that the dirt of sin is no longer a part of our lives, consider 1John 1:8, *“If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”*  It is worthy of note that John was writing to Christians who had become “clean” by the blood of Christ through their obedience to the gospel, cf.1John 2:12. And yet, they too had spiritual “dirt” in their lives.

So, what do we do about the “spiritual dirt” of sin in our lives? Some say that once we become Christians, we can’t become “dirty” enough with sin as to be eternally lost. However, this contradicts what the Bible plainly says in Hebrews 3:12, *“Take care,* ***brethren****, lest there should be in any one of* ***you*** *an evil, unbelieving heart,* ***in falling away from the living God.”*** It also contradicts clear examples of the same in Acts 1:25 (Judas), and 8:12-13, 18-23 (Simon).

Others say that Christ’s blood “continually cleanses” the Christian from any and all sins he may commit in the future. If by this it is meant that sins committed after becoming a Christian are “automatically” forgiven, the Bible again contradicts, since such surely wasn’t the case for Judas, or Simon, or even the apostle Peter (Cephas) in Galatians 2:11. In fact, the Christians in 1John 1 were told, *“****If we confess our sins,*** *He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,”* v.9.The presence of the conditional “if” in the sentence requires activity on our part to be forgiven when we sin. We must, therefore, acknowledge the sin to God, and repent and pray for forgiveness, Acts 8:22. All of which is far from “automatic,” or “continual” cleansing!

Thus, sin in our lives as Christians is kind of like dirt in the house: it’s probably going to be there; and, we’re going to have to keep doing what is required to get rid of it! We can’t just ignore it, or say that it isn’t really there, and expect it to go away. (7-30-12)

**Direction, Distance, Ratio/Proportion and Our *Spiritual* Course**

In high school, my father was “the” and therefore“my” Vocational Agriculture teacher. So, participation on various judging and Future Farmers of America competition teams was pretty much compulsory for me. Some of them I enjoyed, and others- well, let’s just say I participated with *better than mediocre but less than enthusiastic* effort. But I enjoyed being on the Forestry Team. I liked trekking through the woods and learning to identify various trees of East Texas. However, being on the Forestry Team also meant learning to run a compass course- and it intimidated (OK, “scared”) me a little. You were given a compass and a set of directions which required moving through the woods- briars, brambles, creeks and all, on a heading for a distance specified in hundreds of feet, then taking a subsequent compass heading for so many feet in a different direction, and so on until you arrived a pre-determined but not visibly marked destination. Thus, you were graded on accuracy- distance from the hidden stake. I had been in the woods all my life, and wasn’t at all afraid of getting lost, but those compass courses consisted of several different headings for various distances, so any error made was multiplied and exaggerated by subsequent moves. Being only a degree or two off on your initial heading meant that you could be a really long way off by the end of the course!

There were two key elements to the Forestry compass course: 1) the heading- as determined by degrees on the compass; and, 2) being able to accurately walk a specified distance (no tape measures or other devices were allowed for this part). Reading a compass was fairly straightforward, but being able to accurately step off a specified distance took practice. The way we learned to do this was pretty simple, but tedious. Dad got us out in the open field behind the Ag shop and measured and clearly marked two lines one hundred feet apart. Then, using a normal gate, we walked that distance dozens of times- counting our steps each time. The rule was also simple: you could quit walking when you could consistently traverse the distance in the same number of steps each time. It’s been some thirty-five plus years ago, but the best I can remember, one hundred feet was thirty-four steps for me then. There was, however, still one problem- none of the compass courses required you to step distances of exactly one hundred feet! You’d be required to go sixty-seven feet on a heading of fifty-four degrees, then one hundred and thirty-four feet on a heading of two hundred and thirty-one degrees, and then etc. etc. etc. So, to be able to accurately step the correct distances, you had to use mathematics- specifically, ratio and proportion calculations. Since you (presumably) knew how many steps it took you to go one hundred feet, using a ratio and proportion formula, you could fairly accurately estimate how many steps it would take you to cover any other given distance.

What has all of this to do with spiritual matters? There are a couple of comparative points to be made regarding the “spiritual course” of life:

1. Small errors in direction or distance are dramatically compounded in our spiritual course also. If we go “off course,” even in some way that we might consider “small,” and then proceed for a long while, or make several other subsequent “course adjustments” that were founded on the first deviation, we can wind up “missing the mark” of what God says by a really long way. Someone might object, “It really doesn’t matter what you believe/practice as long as you’re honest and sincere in it.” If such is true (and it patently is not, cf. Matthew 7:21!), then you might as well throw your Bible away. In compass and spiritual courses, errors have a way of compounding themselves, so do your best to stay on the course God has given each step of the way!
2. Being able to work “ratio and proportion” problems can keep you on the right spiritual course. Ratio and proportion (multiplying the known number of paces per 100 ft. by distance specified, then dividing by 100 to arrive at the number of paces per the distance specified) is a way of fairly accurate estimation. In spiritual course running, you also have to begin with the “known” and “specified” to be able to arrive at the “unknown” and “unspecified.” This means “running your course” based on what has been “specified” by God in His word (and therefore can be “known” (see 2Peter 1:3 and 2Timothy 3:16-17) to arrive at the “unknown” place of heaven, 2Corinthians 4:17-18 and 5:6-8.

In forestry compass courses or life, you can’t go off in any direction you want for any distance you want, and expect to arrive at the right destination. No “course” works that way. But here’s the good news:Once you realize your mistake, you can backtrack to the point of your error, correct it, get back on course*,* and still get to where you need to be. It may be difficult, and it requires finding, admitting, correcting your mistake, and trying again, but with God’s help, **you can do it!** And the even better news is that God is patient, longsuffering, willing and able to assist you, and waiting at the finish line with open arms! Paul encouraged Timothy (and all of us) along these lines, *“I have fought the good fight. I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but to all who have loved His appearing,”* 2Timothy 4:7-8. Do the work. Finish the course. Keep the faith. God will help you. (1-10-17)

**Distorting the Scriptures**

*“Handling accurately the word of truth”* (2Timothy 2:15) is about more than just being able to *“rightly divide”* (the KJV translation) between the Old and New Testaments. It also has to do with using a verse in the right way, rather than taking it out of context and forcing an application from it that is not under consideration in the framework of the passage where it is found. Let’s examine some common examples….

Matthew 18:20, *“For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.”* This passage is sometimes used to buttress the resolve of those assembling to worship no matter how few attend. Though I have no doubts that even *two* or *three* who sincerely gather for the purpose of worship evoke the approval and spiritual presence of the Lord, such is not really the meaning of this passage. Jesus has been addressing how to return an erring brother back to spiritual safety, cf. v.15; or if he refuses to repent, how to regard and treat him, cf. vv.16-17. Then, in vv.18-19, He emphasizes the importance of there being corroborating testimony from *multiple, credible witnesses* who are in agreement that sin has indeed been committed. So, the *gathering together* in v.20 is not about worship, but rather an *agreed upon* assessment of sin, v.16; and the proper course of action to be taken in *light of inspiration,* vv.18-19*.* See? Using a passage out of context is not *“handling accurately the word of truth.”*

1Corinthians 15:33, *“Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good morals.”* This verse is often used to stress to young people the importance of “picking good friends.” Again, I completely concur with the wisdom of the principle involved, as such is clearly taught in Proverbs 13:20, but this is just not the point Paul is making here to the Corinthians. The context of 1Corinthians 15:12 reveals that there were some *among the church* at Corinth who believed and taught that *“there is no resurrection of the dead.”* So, beginning at v.13, and proceeding through to the end of the chapter, Paul shows this doctrine to be false. It is in this context that we find v.33. The objects of the admonition are not adolescents, they’re adult church members! And, the *bad company* to which Paul refers is not *heathen teenagers,* but *false teachers* within a *local church.* Spiritually needed principles have a right passage behind them- let’s use it (or them) instead of lifting one from its context that has little, if anything, to do with the principle we’re trying to emphasize.

Matthew 7:1, *“Do not judge lest you be judged yourselves.”* This passage is typically used toward someone who has just issued some form of condemnation or correction. So, the *offender* responds with this passage, or some other form of “you can’t judge me.” While it is true that no human will judge another’s eternal destiny- God will do so, such is clearly not the meaning or import of this passage. Note that vv.2-5 make it clear that *hypocritical* judgment/condemnationis under consideration, not *corrective* judgment/condemnation*.* But even more specifically, does anyone actually believe that: 1) not *judging* is even possible; or, 2) that such would actually excuse one from his own eternal judgment? Jesus actually commanded *righteous* judgment, John 7:24. We cannot fulfill our duties to one another without *judging-* otherwise, how would we know and help one who *“is caught in any trespass,”* and *“restore such a one,”* Galatians 6:1? Or, how could we follow His instructions in Matthew 18:15ff as mentioned above? The passage in Matthew 7:1 *does* prohibit *hypocritical* judgment or condemnation, but does not remove the responsibility that each of us has to help one another “see” and turn from sin. Surely, using a verse in an effort to validate a false principle is “misusing” it, and is not *“handling accurately the word of truth.”*

It is always important to use the *right* passage to make the *right* point(s), but an additional danger associated with *misusing* a verse is that when we do so, we rarely “get” the real point being made by the verse within its context. *“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteous”* (2Timothy 3:16), but its benefit of making us *“adequate, equipped for every good work”* (2Timothy 3:17) is dependent upon our *“handling it accurately”!* By all means, *preach* and *teach* the Word both *publicly* and from *house to house,* but do so without *distorting the Scriptures* (2Peter 3:16).(7-1-14)

***“Do Not Be Deceived”***

I have often said that “The greatest power of the human mind is the ability to justify self.” We humans have the uncanny ability to convince ourselves that some course of action is right, necessary, expedient, or just “the lesser of two evils” no matter how wrong it is- **if it is what we really want to do in the first place.** The further the proposed activity is from what is right, the more prowess is summoned to be able to justify it. But we still manage, if we want it bad enough. (As an example of this ability, some can even justify the taking of an innocent, unborn human life because it is inconvenient to do otherwise.)

Actually, it is not that tough to justify “self” most of the time because the easiest person to deceive is always yourself, 1Corinthians 3:18. It’s no wonder then that the New Testament includes the phrase ***“Do not be deceived”*** several times. The interesting thing is that almost every time the phrase is used, the specific subject addressed is something about which most everyone would say, “Well yeah, everyone knows that!” And yet the admonition is there anyway…because God knows how good we are at thinking that for some *justifiable reason,* the truth of what is being said doesn’t apply specifically to “me”! Let me show you what I mean.

1Corinthians 6:9-10 reads, *“Or 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 effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.”* Now why do we think that this applies to everyone but ourselves? When God says that *homosexuals* don’t go to heaven, He also said that *fornicators, adulterers, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers* and *swindlers* don’t make it either! Please don’t misunderstand, God will forgive any sin from which we will repent and turn, Acts 3:19. But we cannot continue to practice any sin and expect God to save us “in” our sin, Luke 13:1-5. Folks, please don’t be deceived about who goes to heaven and who doesn’t!

1Corinthians 15:33 reads, ***“Do not be deceived:*** *‘Bad company corrupts good morals.’”*  The specific “bad company” of which Paul warns the Corinthian brethren is false teachers (who said that there isn’t a resurrection of the dead, v.12). But the general truth of this statement is agreed upon by just about everyone… again unless it is being applied to “me.” “Oh I know ‘bad company corrupts good morals,’ but this is different because I’m going to influence them for good.” Perhaps- but again, why does the truth of God’s word apply to everyone but “me”? Paul had already written to these same Corinthians, *“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”* (10:13) We worry about the *bad company* our children keep, but somehow think the rule is suspended for us. Don’t be deceived about the power of influence.

James 1:13-16 reads, *“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt any one. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.* ***Do not be deceived*** *my beloved brethren.”*  God doesn’t tempt us to sin, period. He issues commands- either positive or negative, and we either obey or disobey them **because that’s what we want to do!** And for those of you old enough to remember Flip Wilson, contrary to what he always said, “The devil does not make us do it” either. Oh sure, Satan will help and encourage us to violate God’s law whenever he can (cf. Gen.3:4-5), but the true culprit of sin is “self”! That is, our own *desires* and *lusts* cause us to: ignore what God says; rebelliously turn away from what God says; or in some way excuse ourselves from doing what God says. Then we sin precisely because that’s what we want to do. But neither God nor Satan make us do it. So don’t be deceived about exactly who is responsible for your sin. Just look in the mirror to find the answer.

While there are other passages and examples that could be given, perhaps these three will suffice to make my point: God’s Word is true, and it applies to each and every one of us equally. *“…God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him.”* (Acts 10:34b-35) None of us is excepted or otherwise excused from doing the very best we can to do exactly what He says. So let’s stop *deceiving ourselves* by thinking and acting otherwise, OK? (8-24-10)

**Do You Want to Know? Just Read Your New Testament.**

It is amazing that many people who admit to not knowing much about the Bible, the salvation offered by Jesus Christ, and the requirements of living as a Christian, and also maintain that they would like to know more, don’t actually read the New Testament for themselves. There may be many and varied reasons for this situation, but please note the words of the apostle Paul on reading and understanding the Bible, *“that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. And by referring to this,* ***when you read, you can understand*** *my insight into the mystery of Christ,”* Ephesians 3:3-4. Do YOU want to know more about Christ, the gospel, and Christianity? For instance, do YOU:

* Want to know **the main points of the gospel?** Read 1Corinthians 15:3-5.
* Want to know **the wages of sin?** Read Romans 6:23.
* Want to know **the eternal consequences of not knowing God** and/or **failing to obey the gospel?** Read 2Thessalonians 1:6-10.
* Want to know **the horrors of eternal damnation?** Read Revelation 21:8.
* Want to know **the joys of eternal salvation?** Read Revelation 21 – 22.
* Want to know **what to do to be saved?** Read Mark 16:15-16.
* Want to know **how to live as a Christian?**  Read Titus 2:11-14.
* Want to know **the mission of the church?** Read 1Timothy 3:15.
* Want to know **how to worship God in song?** Read Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16.
* Want to know **how to commemorate the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ?** Read 1Corinthians 11:23-33.
* Want to know **how to pray?** Read Matthew 6:5-15.
* Want to know **how and why to study God’s word?** Read Acts 17:11 and 2Timothy 2:15.
* Want to know **God’s desire for your life?** Read 1Timothy 2:1-4 and 1Thessalonians 4:1-4.
* Want to know **what God expects of Christians who sin?** Read 1John 1:5-10.

If we will just read the New Testament for ourselves, God has provided the answers to what we *need* to know in order to be pleasing to Him, and to spend eternity with Him in heaven. The topics listed above are just a small sampling of the basics, but the spiritual answers we need are all there on the pages of your New Testament. God wants you to be saved, and He has provided everything that is necessary to accomplish that purpose, *“His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence,”* 2Peter 1:3. The choice is yours to either: learn and obey His Word; or, refuse and reject it. But, remember what Jesus said in John 12:48, *“He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him in the last day.”*

Please do yourself a huge favor and simply read the New Testament. It’s really not difficult to do so. For an average reader, reading twenty minutes a day even five days a week will get you through it in a month. Also, understanding the general arrangement and purpose of the 27 books of the New Testament will help. It begins with four accounts of the story of Jesus (Matthew through John) because each was written to different group of people. Acts provides a history of the beginning of the church and the spread of the gospel that resulted in churches throughout Judea, Samaria, Palestine, Asia Minor, and part of Europe. Romans through 2Thessalonians are inspired letters to some of these churches providing additional instructions and corrections. 1Timothy through Philemon are inspired letters to individuals (mostly preachers) to provide additional and specific instructions. Hebrews is an epistle to Jewish Christians who were in danger of turning away from Christ and back to Judaism. James through Jude are general epistles providing fundamental instructions for all Christians, and Revelation is the concluding book of prophecy regarding future things. God inspired and preserved the New Testament for a reason (see 2Peter 1:19-21 and 1Peter 1:22-25). Please use it as He intended and READ IT! (2-10-15)

**Does God Hear Sinners?**

None should EVER put themselves in the position of speaking for God regarding what He *will* or *won’t* do in the ABSENCE of divine revelation on the matter. The ONLY way anyone knows what God *will* or *won’t* do is what He reveals to us in His Word, cf. 1Corinthians 2:11-13. That being said, let’s look to God’s Word to see what it reveals regarding our title question. Overall, the best answer seems to be, **“It depends…**

* **On what you mean by *hear.”*** As God is *all-seeing* and *all-knowing*, it naturally follows that He is also *all-hearing,* Psalm 139*.* God is aware of *anything* and *everything* of which He choses to be aware (cf. Genesis 18:20-21). But His *awareness,* or *hearing,* of prayers does not necessarily mean He will grant the petition even though it is uttered with complete sincerity and humility. King David prayed for the life of his illegitimate child, but that prayer, though *heard,* was not granted, 2Samuel 12:16-18. Paul prayed for the removal of his *“thorn in the flesh,”* but again, the petition- though heard, was not granted, cf. 2Corinthians 12:7-9. These prayers were clearly *heard* by God, but were not *answered* in the affirmative by His granting of the petition.

Then too, *hear* can mean to be *audibly aware* *of a sound,* but yet *refuse to listen.*  We *hear* this way all the time with regard to our children. We *hear* the complaints or excuses they give for disobedience, but are unwilling to *listen* to them. God can also *hear* our petitions, but be unwilling to *listen* to (and grant) them.

* **On what you mean by *sinners.”*** All, even faithful Christians earnestly striving to live humbly and righteously before God, are “sinners” in that all *“have sinned”* and *fall short* of the glory of God, Romans 3:23. Likewise, those who *“have fellowship with Him”* and *“walk in the light as He Himself is in the light”* still sin occasionally, and need to confess their sins and pray for forgiveness, cf. 1John 1:6-9. To deny the existence of these occasional sins would make us a *liar,* v.10. However, note that sinning Christians are to *confess/pray* for renewed fellowship, v.9a. Obviously, God hears the prayers of such “sinners” as these, otherwise, why would He require their prayerful confession, and promise to *“forgive”* and *“cleanse”* them,v.9b?

But if you mean by “sinners” those who live in rebellion to God’s will, and put forth little if any effort to know and do what is right according to His Word, that is another matter. 1Peter 3:12 says, *“For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”* This perhaps *uncomfortable truth* from God’s Word is in stark opposition to the *comfortable lie* commonly believed- that “God hears *anyone* who prays to Him at *anytime* and for *any reason.”*  God never said such, and to believe and assert as much is just plain contrary to His revealed Word. With rare exceptions, prayer is the privilege of those truly able to address God as their *spiritual “Father,”* cf. 1Peter 1:17. Let’s consider one such rare occasion.

* **On *for what* they’re praying.** Cornelius was outside of covenant relationship with God, as evidenced by his need for Peter to come and preach the gospel to and baptize him, Acts 10:33-48. But, the text also says that Cornelius’s *“prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God,”* v.4, and that his prayer had *“been heard…. by God,”* v.31. *For what* had Cornelius been praying? He evidently prayed for the opportunity to *hear, know,* and *obey* the truth of the gospel, because such was exactly what God provided. It makes a difference *for what* one prays! All too often, we have little to no regard for God, His Word, His Cause, or His Kingdom in our lives, but when tragedy comes, we want God to heal our sick and remove the causes of our unhappiness. We shouldn’t expect God to grant our petitions to have OUR will be done, when we’re unwilling to pray and live for HIS will to be done!

Prayer, and knowing God hears and will answer them, is a tremendous privilege of being God’s child! But note carefully what God says about this privilege, *“and whatever we ask we receive from Him,* ***because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight,”*** 1John 3:22. God wants to be able to grant our petitions, but also wants us to be His children doing His will first. (9-16-15)

**Does *Shepherding* Sheep Mean….**

The task of *shepherding* is not easy. Growing up in *cattle country*, my meager knowledge of sheep and shepherding largely came from biblical illustrations that used them to describe both members of the Lord’s *flock,* and those who *cared* and *provided for, watched over, protected,* and *sought to find* and *return* the *straying* ones. After having been a *sheep* for roughly four decades, and having served as a *shepherd* also, I’d ask that you please consider the title in conjunction with these questions carefully- **Does *shepherding* sheep mean…**

**Having to convince them they are *sheep* rather than *goats?***Even *straying sheep* are still “sheep,” cf. 2Thessalonians 3:14-15, *“And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”* It shouldn’t, but it will.

**Having to persuade them to wantto be *sheep* rather than *goats?***Desire is always the *heart* of the matter. Sheep shouldn’t, but often *want* to (still) be goats. This is despite the ultimate destiny of each: *“and He will put the sheep on His right… inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world…. into eternal life,”* Matthew 25:33,34,46; *“and the goats on the left…. Depart from me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels… into eternal punishment,”* Matthew 25:33,41,46. It shouldn’t, but it will.

**Having to get them to act like *sheep* rather than *goats?***Review the previous paragraph and then realize that typically we *do* want we *want.* If we *act* like *goats,* it is because we *want* to be *goats-* and God will treat us as such, James 4:1-4, *“…. Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”* It shouldn’t, but it will.

**Having to findthem when they run away from the *sheep* to be with the *goats?*** Yes, Luke 15:4, *“What man among, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which was lost, until he finds it?”* Though this parable doesn’t really address *how* the sheep came to be *lost,* it really doesn’t matter- it *is* lost! It shouldn’t, but it will.

**Having to assurethem it’s better to be a *sheep* than a *goat?*** They’re looking at things wrong- *“For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory, far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the thing which are not seen are eternal,”* 2Corinthians 4:17-18. It shouldn’t, but it will.

**Having to feed them *green pastures* when they prefer *goat grub?*** Remember, *goats* will eat pretty much *anything,* and be *happy* doing so- *sheep* are (and should be!) much more particular, *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths,”* 2Timothy 4:3-4. It shouldn’t, but it will.

**Having to lead them to *still waters* when they prefer the excitement of *rapids?*** Though the benefits are overwhelming and obvious, it’s usually a tough job because, sadly, they’ve fallen *prey* to *“the passing pleasures of sin,”* Hebrews 11:25. It shouldn’t, but it will.

**Having to restore them to the safety of the *fold* when they desire the danger of the *open field?*** A *sheep* alone in the *open pasture* is an easy target- even for a *roaring lion,* 1Peter 5:8. It shouldn’t, but it will.

**Having to tell them about the *wolf* when they say there is *no wolf?*** We’ve been warned that it *will* happen, *“I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them,”* Acts 20:29-30 (see also Romans 16:18). It shouldn’t, but it will.

**Having to….** There are many others that could be added, but perhaps these will suffice to make a couple of points: **#1-** We *sheep* can make the *shepherd’s* job one of *joy* and *happiness,* or *grief* and *heartbreak,* Hebrews 13:17 (strive for the *former* by doing what the verse says!) and, **#2-** *Shepherds,* you shouldn’t *have to do* many of these tasks, but *you will*, and it will be worth it both *now* and *forever,* Luke 15:5-7! (9-6-16)

**Dogs, Hogs, and Dust**

We like to think of the gospel as being *“for all*”- and it is, at least in a sense. Romans 1:16 certainly seems to indicate such, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek* (or *Gentile*).” But what about those who don’t believe? Is the gospel for them?

When the apostle Paul and his companions came to Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14ff; rather than Antioch in Syria), as would become his custom, he went first to the Jewish synagogue and proclaimed the gospel to them, cf. Acts 13:16-41. The sermon was well received, and on the next Sabbath, v.44 says, *“nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of God.”* What a great opportunity! However, the next verse dampens the outlook, *“But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.”*  The point I’d like you to see is found in Paul’s response of v.46, *“It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you* ***repudiate*** *it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.”* In their “repudiation” (a denial or rejection) of the gospel, they *“judged themselves unworthy”* of the salvation it offered. In effect, they rejected their only hope of redemption. Thus, Paul left them and took the gospel to the Gentiles instead.

Paul did exactly what Jesus taught the Twelve to do when He sent them out on the *limited commission* (as compared to the *great commission,* cp. Matthew 10:5 with Mark 16:15), *“And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet,”* cf. Matthew 10:11-14. Proclaimers of God’s word were to pronounce a blessing upon those who were receptive and obedient to it, but were to reject and leave those who rejected it. This *repudiation* of those who *repudiated the gospel* could be demonstrated by leaving even the dust of their houses or town behind in protest, cf. Nehemiah 5:13; Acts 18:6. Such is exactly what Paul and Barnabas did as they left Antioch, Acts 13:51.

What’s the application of these things for us today? To put it simply: “Don’t continue to waste the gospel, and your time and energy in presenting it, on those who prove themselves ‘*unworthy’* by rejecting it.” Every soul needs to hear the gospel and have the opportunity to thus be saved by it. No one has the right to expect to hear it a second time after repudiating it once! Jesus put it this way in Matthew 7:6, *“Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.”*

One proves himself a spiritual ***dog***(an “unclean” animal to Jesus’ audience) or ***swine***(probably the “most unclean” animal to Jesus’ audience) by treating the gospel as a dog would treat something “holy,” or a hog would treat a “pearl” (cp. Matthew 7:6 and 13:45-46). A “dog” would chew it up and bury it in the backyard, and a “swine” would root it down into the muck until it was lost.

Do these things mean we “give up on” those who we understand to be in need of the saving power of the gospel just because they once rejected it? No, not completely; but it does mean a couple of things: 1) it means we don’t continue to “badger” them with the gospel while they are obviously uninterested- things may change later; and, 2) it means we don’t neglect the opportunity for others to hear the gospel *once* because we are overly concerned with presenting it *twice, thrice, etc.* to someone who has heard and repudiated it.

On the whole, we have become a nation that believes in an infinite number of “second chances.” But, such just simply cannot be so when it comes to an opportunity to hear and obey the gospel. Once should be enough, and it might well be the only chance you get- so don’t waste it like a dog or hog lest the one presenting it shake dust in your face! (11-12-12)

**Doing God’s Work God’s Way**

Way back in Genesis, God told Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son; and that through that son, God would make of Abraham a great nation. They were both advanced in years at the time (he was 75 and she was 65). In fact, Isaac was not born to this couple for another twenty-five years! Now in the interim, after the promise of a son had been made to them by God but before Isaac was actually born, Abraham and Sarah tried a couple of times to “help God out,” so to speak.

First, they decided to just adopt a son born to a servant within their house. But God said instead to Abraham, “*This man will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.”* (Genesis 15:4) Next, and since God said it would be Abraham’s own son, Sarah decided that she was the problem. So, she gave Abraham her handmaid to bear him a son- which she did. But again, God said this was not the way, *“I will bless her (Sarah), and indeed I will give you a son by her.”* (Genesis 17:16) So, the couple finally decided to just wait for God to accomplish His purpose through them in His own way, and in His own time. Great decision! Isaac, the *son of promise,* was eventually born to the couple when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90! (Genesis 21:5; 17:17)

The lesson for us in all of this is simple: **When working for God, we have to do *His* *work* in *His* *way*.** Both of this couple’s efforts to “help God out” in the carrying out of God’s purpose through them were in error. They finally went back to whatthe Lord said, were patiently obedient to it, and He blessed them for it. That’s a great recipe for us!

So often today, we too want to “help God out” by attempting to do His work ***in our way(s).*** Friends, learn from Abraham and Sarah- it won’t work, and it often causes additional problems (note Genesis 16:4-6).

We try to “help God out” by inventing all kinds of programs you never read about in the Book. And then we need various administrators with titles and job descriptions you never read about in the Book to carry out all these programs you never read about in the Book. Then we need more money to pay these administrators you never read about in the Book to carry out all these programs you never read about in the Book. And then we need more fund raisers you never read about in the Book to pay these administrators you never read about in the Book to carry out all these programs that you never read about in the Book. And so on, and so on. It all starts with a failure to do **God’s work** in **God’s way**.

When God said He gave us *“all things that pertain to life and godliness”* (2Peter 1:3), and that the *“Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work”*(2Timothy 3:16-17), that means, if you’ll allow me, every work we need to be doing for God, and the proper way(s) to accomplish it, **is found in the Book!** If we don’t read about a “work” or “program” in the Book, it is work of man, not God, Matthew 15:7-9,13. And if we don’t read about a “title” or “position” in the Book, we don’t need it in the Church, Philippians 1:1. It’s really just that simple. Read the Book. Understand the Book. Live the Book. God will be pleased, and we will be blessed. Abraham and Sarah eventually figured this out, and I pray we will also. (9-26-11)

**“Doing No Work at All…”**

I grew up (to the extent I did) the son of vocational agriculture teacher and lived on a farm, so doing “no work at all” has never been part of my life experience. I think my first “away from home job” cutting and bailing hay was during the summer that I was thirteen, and then started a “real” job at a tractor and equipment auction the following year. Since then, I have been “out of work” for almost a full week in about 35 years. Now, I could get fired tomorrow (or even today!) and perhaps be without a job for an extended period before securing another one. But such would result from someone else’s choice rather than mine! On the other hand, folks who choose to do “no work at all” are an entirely different matter.

There is a huge difference between those who **can’t** work and those who **won’t** work. However, exactly where that line of “disability” begins is pretty subjective. I’ve seen a man with one leg and crutches (no prosthetic) mowing his yard with a push mower! I’ve also known of people with a “disability” for which they received governmental support who could out-work or out-play me physically any day of the week! The difference is often simply “want to”- which is probably just another way of saying “pride plus motivation.” The one-legged man was too proud to allow others to do for him what he felt he could do for himself. Conversely, there are many in our society who are more than willing for others to do for them what they could and should be doing for themselves!

The New Testament has a simple solution for this problem, *“For even when we were with you, we gave you this* ***command****: Anyone* ***unwilling*** *to work* ***should not eat****. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we* ***command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ*** *to do their work quietly and to* ***earn their own living****. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter;* ***have nothing to do with them****, so that they may be* ***ashamed****,”* 2Thessalonians 3:10-14. Let those words really sink in, especially the ones in bold print. Following this *“command”* of the Lord will solve a lot of problems. But a cautionary reminder is in order: this passage is talking about those who are ***unwilling***to work, rather than those who are ***unable***to work.

However, this article is not really about social commentary or reform. It just so happens that congregations often contain the same problems in them that are common in society. Churches are all too often filled with capable people who are more than willing to sit back and reap the benefits of others’ labor without lifting a finger themselves. Just to be clear: Churches, like society, have far too many members who are ***unwilling* to work**, but are not ***unable* to work!**

These are those who expect the building to be immaculately clean, but don’t mind leaving “their pew” scattered with hymnals and trash. They also expect there to be “good” bible classes available for adults and children, but never bother to sign-up to teach one, or “work” toward preparing themselves to do so. They are happy when visitors attend, and enjoy having big crowds at services, but never quite get around to inviting or bringing anyone themselves. Theylike “inspiring and uplifting” worship services but don’t really participate by *“singing from the heart,”* or by taking a leading role in any aspect of the worship. They think the church ought to “do something with/for the young people,” but are never the ones hosting a class or get-together for them. They…. never mind, you get the point.

While many of us are all for *“if any will not work, neither let him eat”* in the world, it might be another thing entirely for the same principle to be enforced in the local church. Isn’t such thinking a goose and gander kind of thing? But think about it: What if those not “working” in the church were somehow prevented from enjoying the benefits of anyone else’s labor in it? If we understand and favor the rule for others with regard to *secular* work, shouldn’t we also be willing to abide by in the *spiritual* work of the Lord? (5-7-13)

**Doing the Right Things Is Not That Hard**

The Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day were guilty of attempting to make serving God more difficult than it should have been. Of them and this tendency, Jesus said, *“… they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men’s shoulders…”*  Matthew 23:4. Why would religious leaders of any period want to make it more difficult than God does to be considered “faithful”?

From v.2 we learn that *“The scribes and Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses”-* meaning that they had taken upon themselves a professorial role. Those who read the Law of Moses in the synagogue typically stood to do so (Luke 4:16), but then sat in an elevated chair to expound upon it (Luke 4:20-21ff). The impurity in purpose of the scribes and Pharisees becomes clear, not only from the *“heavy loads”* they placed upon the people while being unwilling to abide by the same themselves, but also from v.5 which adds, *“they do all their deeds to be noticed by men…”* Their intent was not to teach and explain God’s Law, but to elevate themselves by making obedience more difficult for everyone else! Perhaps this is the motivation for similarly misguided attempts to make spirituality harder than it should be currently.

Acceptability to God has two essential parts: 1) knowledge of what God requires; and 2) compliance. James 4:17 puts it succinctly, *“Therefore, to one who* ***knows*** *the right thing to do, and* ***does not******do it****, to him it is sin.”* Now, if either the knowingor the doingof what God expects is difficult, then faithfulness is likewise going to be hard. But, if neither understanding nor following God’s commands is especially complicated or strenuous, then being faithful should be fairly attainable for everyone. Let’s give these matters a “look-see” from the New Testament.

What about salvation? Is it difficult to either comprehend or accomplish what Jesus said was necessary in order to be saved? *“He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned,”* Mark 16:16. That’s not too tough. In fact, one must have “help” to misunderstand Jesus’ simply stated formula: Belief + Baptism = Salvation. Since baptism without belief means you just got wet rather than saved, there is no need to restate the second requirement of baptism. In other words, if one doesn’t believe, there is certainly no reason to baptize him, and it wouldn’t do any good if you did so.

But what about doing the right thing(s) after you’ve become a Christian- surely that’s hard, right? Let me ask a question, and be honest with yourself: “How many of the things you do which are wrong, do you know to be wrong when you do them?” Pretty much everyone in control of their faculties knows that it is wrong: to lie and cheat, Ephesians 4:25; to steal, Ephesians 4:28; to harm or hurt others, Ephesians 4:26,29; to get drunk, Ephesians 5:18, or to have sex with someone to whom they are not married, Ephesians 5:3-5. We may try to repress this knowledge, or to in some way excuse ourselves from the guilt it implies, but we know these things are wrong- even if we don’t know the location of the specific passages which prove it. Knowing the right thing to do isn’t, therefore, hard.

So, if knowing the right things to do isn’t hard, surely doing them must be, right? Again, let me ask a question: “If, when you did what you already knew was wrong, you really wanted to do what was right instead, couldn’t you have done so?” Sure, we all could have done what we knew to be right- if such had been what we really wanted to do. Therefore, the “hard part” wasn’t in the actual keeping of the command either, was it? Just in case you’re keeping score, 1John 5:3 says so, *“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments* ***are not burdensome.”*** “Baros,” the Greek word translated here as *“burdensome,”* means “heavy in weight.”

See? Doing the right things isn’t really hard at all- either in the ***knowing***or the ***doing***parts, if we just get our **“want to”** lined out. When we “want to” do the right thing, learning the right thing(s) is as simple as opening a New Testament and reading. And when we “want to” do the right thing, and know what it is, then doing it is easy. Now, how’s your **“want to,”** or, **your heart?** Does it “want to” be pleasing to God (cf. Ephesians 5:10)? Then get busy- it really isn’t hard! (7-4-12)

**Doors**

Doors serve two primary purposes: 1) as points of ingress and egress to allow movement into or out of a space; and, 2) to prevent the same. God uses doors for both of these purposes…

In Genesis 6:5-7, when God decided to *blot out* mankind because of his extreme wickedness with a flood of water, He also purposed to save the righteous Noah, Genesis 6:8-9. But Noah’s salvation, and that of his family, was going to require his own effort- a lot of it in fact. God told Noah to build an ark to preserve himself, his family, and animals to repopulate the earth after the flood. He gave Noah specific instructions on the type of wood to be used, and the exact dimensions to build it, Genesis 6:14-15 (obviously this salvation was not by “faith only”!). But included with these was the directive to include both a *window* and a *door,* Genesis 6:16.

Noah, because he was a faithful man, immediately began preparing for the coming destruction by doing exactly what God had commanded- building the ark and gathering provisions for his family and the animals, Genesis 6:18-22. But this wasn’t all that Noah did. While building the ark, he apparently also tried to convince his fellowman to repent and join him to avoid the coming catastrophe, cf. 2Peter 2:5; 1Peter 3:20! When the ark was finished and the rain began, Noah, his family, and the animals entered the ark, Genesis 7:7-15. Notice carefully the words of Genesis 7:16, *“And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, entered as God had commanded him;* ***and the Lord closed it behind him.”*** The text does not say, but I can’t help but imagine, that at least some of those who had refused Noah’s pleading *before* the rain changed their minds *after* the floodwaters began to rise. I’m quite sure they *then* wanted to enter the ark- **but God had closed the door**. Even the righteous Noah could not open a door God had closed! The same door that allowed Noah, his family, and the animals to enter, now served as a barrier to exclude all others.

Another “door” comes to mind from the letter to the church at Philadelphia. Note Revelation 3:8, *“I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My Word, and have not denied My name.”*  In this case, the *door* is one of *opportunity* to spread the gospel. While God *shut* the ark’s door and no one could open it, this one is *opened* and no one can close it. The principle is the same: when God opens or closes a door, no one else can change it, Revelation 3:7. Because of past and present faithfulness, God had *opened a door of opportunity* for them to preach the gospel and bring others into the fold of safety.

Now let’s bring these two examples forward to us. In John 10:7 Jesus proclaimed, *“I am the door of the sheep.”* He, as this *door,* allows entrance to **His** *sheep,* but excludes the *thieves, robbers,* and *wolves* who attempt to *steal, kill,* and *destroy,* John 10:8-12. But does He exclude any others? Note that the *door* allowed entrance only to **His** sheep- those who come inside *through* Him! How is this accomplished? Obviously, *opening* the door is not all there is to it. The *sheep* must *know, hear,* and *follow* Him, John 10:3-4.

But now the BIG question: Will this *door* (*of* and *through* Jesus) ever close to those who seek to enter it? Perhaps like those I imagine leaving fingernail scratches on the *outside* of the ark’s door as the floodwaters rose? Note the parable Jesus told in Matthew 25:1-13. It is of ten potential guests to a wedding feast. Five are said to have been *foolish,* and five *wise.* The difference? The *wise* had made all the necessary *preparations* for the coming of the bridegroom and were allowed to enter with him. The *foolish* failed to adequately prepare, and missed their opportunity. Note carefully Matthew 25:10 regarding them, *“And while they were going away to make the purchase* (of *more oil* for their lamps)*, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast;* ***and the door was shut.”*** When the foolish returned and begged for entrance, they were refused, Matthew 25:11-12. The point? Jesus left no doubt, *“Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour,”* Matthew 25:13. The time to *prepare* is now. We are not promised any more time, or second or third chances. Please remember that when God closes the door, no one or no thing can open it. (12-9-14)

**“Free” and “Easy” Salvation**

All of my life, I’ve heard people talk about salvation as being something that was *free* for the taking, and *easy* to attain. One of their favorite words seemed to be “just”- as in, “If you will *just* do this”, or *“just* believe this,” or *“just* feel this way in your heart.” These concepts bother me somewhat in light of what the New Testament as a whole teaches.

I think I understand why biblical salvation is *“free”* in that we can neither buy nor earn it (Romans 5:15ff), and the how the Lord’s way is *“easy”* in comparison to the devil’s, or man’s, way (Matthew 11:28-30). And I think I also understand that salvation requires that we ***believe***and ***do***certain things which are relatively simple in obedience to the gospel (Mark 16:15-16), and that when we believe and do them, we will ***feel***differently about God, ourselves, life, and eternity (1John 3:18-20).

But here’s what I don’t understand: If salvation is supposedly so free and easy that the word “just” is accordingly prevalent in the way folks describe its requirements, then please explain what Luke 14:25-35 and 1Peter 4:17-18 are all about.

Luke begins by telling us about the multitudes of people that were following Jesus, v.25. The Savior then turns to them and almost seems to discourage them from becoming His disciples by telling them how much it will cost! Note the itemized list of the “cost” of discipleship: 1) a ***subjected love*** **of your family** *(“hate”* is from the Greek word *miseo,* which means “to love less”- not to harbor animosity or ill will), v.26; 2) **dailycarrying your own** ***cross*** (an implement of your own death), v.27; 3) a **commitment strong enough to last a** ***lifetime***, vv.28-32; and 4) ***valuing*** **your faith more than all of your earthly possessions**, v.33. Yes, salvation is absolutely “free” in the sense that we can neither earn it nor buy it, but such certainly doesn’t negate the fact that it has a definite “cost” factor.

And then there is 1Peter 4:17-18, which reads, *“For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is* ***with difficulty*** *that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?”*

Again, there are few things that seemingly must be taken into account from the context of this passage. Almost from beginning to end, Peter’s epistle seems to have a couple of main points: 1) those who intend to follow Christ must live lives of holiness and right conduct, 2:11-12; 2) so living may well bring persecution and suffering, 2:19; and 3) God expects Christians to keep doing the “right/good” things even when “bad/wrong” things happen because of obedience, 2:20-23. What is “easy” about that? It seems difficult enough to do the right thing when doing so has no personal and detrimental consequences. So, how is it “easy” to be obedient to God when others ridicule and persecute you for it?

Now before you begin to think I’ve switched sides and started playing for the other team, let me explain a few things. The *“difficulty”* to which Peter refers in 4:18 is **not** a reference to *becoming a Christian.* He is speaking of the difficulty of remaining a faithful Christian until the end despite persecution and suffering. Note the context of the previous, and following verses, (vv.16,19), *“but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God…Therefore, let those who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.”* He is not saying that it is “difficult” to become a Christian (and thus to be initially “saved”)- he is saying it is “difficult” to maintain the necessary faithful obedience through the fires of persecution all the way through to eternal salvation (which was also Jesus’ point back in Luke 14:25-35 by the way). And perhaps just as importantly, he is saying that those who never even begin the journey to salvation by obeying the gospel certainly have no hope.

So, is it easy to become a Christian? Yes, if you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and are willing to obey Him in baptism (Mark16:16). Is it easy to live the Christian life that our initial obedience requires to complete our salvation? No, but it sure beats the alternative- both here and hereafter! (1-31-12)

**Eating Right**

I’ve often joked about being on an “Anti-Nursing Home Diet.” When asked what that means, I say, “Gravy on the chicken fried steak AND the French fries.” Obviously, on this particular diet, you die before reaching nursing home age! So, I’m probably the *last* person you’d want to consult on healthy eating, at least if we’re talking about *physical* food rather than *spiritual* sustenance. But in this article, cuisine of the carnal kind is not on the menu…

For many of us, God’s Word has become more of a condiment than the entrée that was intended. We want just enough of the Holy Scriptures to season our lives with the flavor of Christianity, but aren’t really interested in having it be the main course that feeds and sustains. Evidence? What kind of preaching and bible classes do you desire? Those filled with anecdotes, personal testimonies, and just enough Bible to season chicken-soup-for-the-soul-types? Those that avoid any controversial points or specific applications to doctrinal error and sin-filled lives? Or, exegetical and topical lessons that “shell-the-corn” and aren’t afraid to address every verse in a context, or all relevant passages to a principal or point of application? Put another way: Do you *really* want to know all of what God’s Word says and means, or to just hear a few passages that seem to agree with what you already believe and how you want to live?

Please read carefully and contemplate fully what God said to one of His prophets during the days of Judah’s captivity as recorded in Ezekiel 2:1 – 3:4. “*Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, stand on your feet that I may speak with you!’ As He spoke to me the Spirit entered me and set me on my feet; and I heard Him speaking to me. Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ As for them, whether they listen or not—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, neither fear them nor fear their words, though thistles and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions; neither fear their words nor be dismayed at their presence, for they are a rebellious house. But you shall speak My words to them whether they listen or not, for they are rebellious. Now you, son of man, listen to what I am speaking to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house. Open your mouth and eat what I am giving you.’ Then I looked, and behold, a hand was extended to me; and lo, a scroll was in it. When He spread it out before me, it was written on the front and back, and written on it were lamentations, mourning and woe. Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.’ So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll. He said to me, ‘Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving you.’ Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth. Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them.’”*

Notice the following from this text:

Ezekiel was required to show reverence to God’s presence and words by standing, Nehemiah 8:1-5. Since other passages have people *sitting* to hear the Word, the point is one of *attitude* rather than *posture,* Luke 4:16-30.

Ezekiel was sent to *rebellious, stubborn, obstinate,* and *transgressing* people who supposed themselves to be righteous, 2Timothy 3:1-5.

Ezekiel was commanded *speak God’s Word* whether the people *listened* or *not,* but that they would know *God’s Word* had been spoken, 2Timothy 4:1-5.

Ezekiel was commanded to speak *God’s words* rather than relying on his own testimonyor thoughts, 1Peter 4:11.

Ezekiel was told *not to* *fear* the people or their reaction, but to speak God’s Word, Acts 4:19-20; 5:29.

Ezekiel was required to *eat the scroll* and to *fill his body* with it; to speak or live for God, we must *internalize* the Word, James 1:21.

Ezekiel said God’s words were *sweet as honey* to him. These words of *lamentation, mourning,* and *woe* were *sweet* not because of their *content,* but because of their *Source,* 1Peter 2:1-2.

Is God’s Word the *sweet* and *solid food* that **feeds and sustains you**, or just a *condiment* to the beliefs and life **you want**? A hint to help answer the question: Did you/will you read for yourself the passages provided? (11-9-16)

**The Effects of Atheism and Practical Atheism**

The news has been filled lately with stories which, if they turn out to be true, reflect very badly on a couple of major college sports programs. More importantly, they reflect very badly on society as a whole. The sexual abuse of anyone, but especially children, is a deplorable thing; so is the taking of an innocent, unborn life; so is taking another’s life and property to support a drug habit; so is “I was too drunk to know/remember what I was doing;” so is…you get the point. How did we, as a society, get here?

Psalm 14:1 begins, *“The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”* Certainly there are plenty today who agree, and thus classify themselves as did the psalmist. But the verse continues with, *“They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds…”* When the Gentiles depicted in Romans 1 *“suppress(ed) the truth in unrighteousness”* (v.18), and *“even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God”* (v.21), they indeed became *“fools”* (v.22), just like David said hundreds of years before. Because of this God *“gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to* ***impurity****….gave them over to* ***degrading passions****….gave them over to a* ***depraved mind****…”* (vv.24,26,28). Make no mistake about it: when we remove God, *impurity, degradation,* and *depravity* take firm root in society.

It would be indeed foolish to suggest that all of the atrocities of our societies, past or present, can be laid at the feet of atheism. History has had more than its fair share of purported “believers” in God who have done horrific things to their fellowman- often even in the name of religion itself. It is, however, worthy of note that many individual cases of “religious” atrocities involve mental illness. It is not a belief in God that is to blame, but the mental illness/deficiency of the individual which is responsible. In fairness, mental instability is the real culprit behind some atheistic atrocities also.

But it is equally undeniable that when the critical mass of a society denies (or doubts) the very existence of God, or substitutes “a god” of their own making in His place, they are doomed to destruction- both here, and hereafter. Please note carefully 1Tim.1:8-11, *“But we know that the Law* (meaning “God’s law”) *is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing that law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted.”* Look at this list of unrighteousness again. Some of these are attributes our society tends to praise, if not glorify- like *rebellion;* some we have come to just plain expect from each other- like *lying* and *perjury*; and some are the direct result of removing the very existence of God (and His Law) from our mindset- like *immorality* and *homosexuality.* When we remove the “righteous” God from our realm of reality, some very “unrighteous” activities are going to become commonplace in our society!

Our title includes “Practical Atheism”- so it needs to be addressed also. A story is told of several preachers in a town gathering at a local coffee shop one morning. The newest preacher in town sought to elevate his particular brand of religion by proudly announcing that they had recently baptized the town drunk. One of the old timers spoke up, “Yeah, we’ve all baptized him at one time or another- but it didn’t affect him much!” What I call a “Practical Atheist” is one who may actually claim to believe in God, but it “doesn’t affect him much” either! Unless our belief in God causes us to act in accordance with His Word, we are no better off (and may even be worse) than the demons. James 2:19-20 addresses this kind of “Practical Atheism” as follows, *“You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?”* Practical Atheism gets you to exactly the same place as Atheism- without God, here and hereafter.

Here’s the point of all of this: the more we as a society remove, deny, and dismiss God, the worse things are going to get. We can’t deny God, and expect people to live godly. So, change people’s mind about God, or buckle up- it’s going to get rough. (12-7-11)

**Electronic Bibles**

Many years ago there was a minor controversy, being promulgated by some at least, over which version of the Bible Christians should use. A preacher from another congregation, in an apparent attempt to engage me in the squabble, asked me what I thought (which can be dangerous, as some of you know). I responded with something along these lines, “Well, I just try to get our folks to pick one and read it!” I still feel that way. Oh sure, I have my favorite translation, and others I like, and some for which I don’t particularly care, **but the lack of Bible reading is a much bigger problem than which one is read!**

That was then, this is now. Recently, I was asked about the “electronic bibles” so many are using- you know, the ones that are on a cell phone or some other handheld device. Admittedly, I have teased some of you about your “phone” bibles and “i-whatever” bibles- especially when they didn’t work properly for some reason. My duct-taped and glued-back-together bible doesn’t need a battery or “service” to operate! I’ve also recently visited with some preachers that love and have begun using some form of an electronic bible themselves. But I have heard others express a strong dislike of looking up and seeing a sizeable portion of the congregation looking at their phones during the sermon- but their dislike could be motivated by suspicion that their congregants are playing Angry Bird, checking Facebook, or texting one another about the length of the sermon instead of reading along from the sacred text!

There are a couple of reality checks that seem appropriate here: 1) technology will continue to march on, and many church members will happily join the ranks- so get over it; the Word of God is not “bad” in any form that is accurate; besides, it is not the form (parchment, vellum, genuine leather-bound, paperback, or electronic) that makes the text “sacred”- it’s the *Source,* 1Thess.2:13; and, 2) church members who want to do something other than pay attention to the sermon were doing so long before electronic devices hit the scene, and will continue to do so whatever particular distraction is employed; such is a *heart* problem, not a *device* problem, Matt.13:15.

But I would like you to consider something else along these lines. We change our cell phones about every two years at least, if not more often. Why? Is it because the contract is up, and we can? Is it because the “latest and greatest” one is out and we “just have to have” one? Or, is it because our “old” one is worn out and no longer works properly? Although I’m not really interested in or concerned with how often you change cell phones, or how much and for what reasons you use them, let me ask a question: **By comparison, how often do you change bibles, for what reasons, and how much do you use it** (in whatever form)**?**

Though many of us change cell phones regularly because a new and better one that does more stuff comes along, or because we simply wear them out through excessive use, or because we lose them because we take them everywhere we go and it’s bound to happen sooner or later, **we’ve had the same Bible for years.** Some adults still have the same Bible they were given as children because they’ve never seen the need to “upgrade” to an adult version (one with study helps instead of pictures). Others have pristine bibles because they only get taken to church on Sunday (mornings), and are rarely used at any other time. Still others have bibles with perfect covers because they stay in the box, on the bookshelf, or on the coffee table between occasional excursions to services instead of being taken with them wherever they go. The same question asked another way is this: “How many bibles have you worn out?” Now, how many cell phones have you worn out? Why is there such a difference in these two numbers? I’m not against cell phones, but I am for bibles and bible use!

*“I will meditate on Your precepts and regard Your ways…Your servant meditates on Your statues…And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on Your statutes…O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.”* (Psalms 119:15,23,48,97) Oh yes, one more thing: your child probably has a “good” cell phone, does he/she have a “good” bible- even one that’s on that “good” phone? (5-8-12)

**Trust: the Emancipation of Faith**

(For those who may not know, I was diagnosed with Stage 4 T-Cell Lymphoma in May of 2004, but by the grace of God, modern medicine, and the loving support of my families- both physical and spiritual, I’m obviously still hanging around.)

One of the advantages of having been forced to face your own mortality is the perspective it provides. The platitude, "Live each day as if it could be your last- because one day it will be," has only limited effects and benefits toward providing real impetus for changes in perspective and focus. This is especially true in spiritual matters.

As long as death is a known but “distant” reality, contemplating its consequences is pretty much a theoretical rather than a practical endeavor. But, when one is faced with the very real possibility of dying “soon,” if not "today," the practical implications of such dominate the thoughts and perspective in a way that is difficult to achieve otherwise. Facing mortality in an “up close and personal way” inevitably changes the perspective, and subsequently the focus, of what was previously thought of as “life.” Simply put: **We think differently about our spiritual life when our physical one has a good chance of ending** ***today***. There are many emotions that surely come with and through this process. But, the real changes in perspective, focus, and activity come when we are truly "OK" with dying **TODAY**, if such should be. This “comfort level” with death is truly a liberating epiphany, but how do we get to such a life-changing perspective short of receiving a mortal diagnosis?

The ability to think and live comfortably with the “reality of death- even today” is the growth of a part of faith that we don't think or talk about as much as we should. We emphasize the **knowledge** of faith which is its foundation, Romans 10:17, *“So faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* We also underscore the **obedience** of faith which is its effect, James 2:14-26, *“…Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead….”.* But what we typically ignore, or at least fail to accentuate as much as we should, is the **trust** of faith that is its present benefit. In 2Corinthians 1:8-10, note that Paul spoke of his *afflictions* and *excessive burdens* that were ultimately relieved by his ***trust***in God. *“For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves* ***in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God*** *who raises the dead….He on whom we have set our hope.”*

This **trust** aspect of faith not only pertains to eternal salvation once death has occurred, but also provides present peace and confidence that whatever family and unfinished physical details we leave behind will be graciously cared for and provided for by God and His children. It is this trust aspect of faith that enables our emancipation from the physical constraints of life, and allows our spiritual life to truly develop, grow, and flourish. If our “faith” is only comprised of the *knowledge* and *obedience* components, but lacks this *trust* element, we will live only in the imprisonment of our fear and dread of death. But true “faith” in Jesus delivers *“those who through the fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives,”* Hebrews 2:15. Perhaps this is the primary reason so many of us cling to physical life so tenaciously that we are consumed by its preservation and affairs. Unfortunately, such also renders us incapable of saying (and living) Paul’s words of Colossians 3:1-3, *“If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”*

True biblical faith has *knowledge* as its base and *obedience* as its effect, but must also have *trust* as its current benefit to enable us to live lives that are truly emancipated and spiritual. Think about it, won’t you? And don’t wait for a mortal diagnosis to begin! (12-12-13)

**Emergency Contacts**

Several forms we’re required to fill out these days require “Emergency Contact” information- someone to call if something happens to you. A first cousin, an only child, recently moved back to East Texas to help care for her mother. Her mother is still very independent and capable at 88 years (or thereabouts), but obviously will need some help eventually. This cousin had to fill out a form that asked for an “Emergency Contact.” She has a daughter back in Arizona, but that was deemed unacceptable due to the distance involved. And an 88 year old mother, well, let’s just say that wasn’t the best option either. So, Cousin called my sister and asked if she would be her “Emergency Contact” person- which was a great choice. But it got me to thinking about “Emergency Contacts.” What a blessing family and “church family” can be to us as “Emergency Contacts!”

Several years ago, when I was hospitalized and diagnosed with Stage 4 T-Cell Lymphoma, there were immediate (and much appreciated!) responses from both my *physical* and *spiritual* families*.* Some of both branches took turns staying with me at the hospital, and our two relatively young sons instantly had places to stay for “as long as necessary” with members of our spiritual family. All of their needs, including school, were handled as just a matter of course. What a relief these “Emergency Contacts” were to Donna and me! She was free to do everything she could to take care of me, and did she ever! It’s hard to imagine how people without supports like these make it through life.

But there are people who are somewhat alone in the world. Without physical family- or at least any on whom they can depend in times of trouble or need, if they haven’t developed a spiritual (church) family, to whom do they turn as their “Emergency Contact”? We may not have any control over our “physical family” circumstance(s). However, if we are without a “spiritual family,” **it is all our fault!**  These “spiritual relations” are all up to us. If we haven’t established and maintained them through mutual association and dependence in church fellowship, we have no one to blame but ourselves.

While “church families” primarily serve to spiritually edify and encourage us, there is no doubt that they also provide physical supports. Please note the following excerpts from Romans 12:9-16 which detail some of the benefits of having a spiritual family, *“Let love be without hypocrisy…Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulations, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality…Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another…”* What “Emergency Contacts” spiritual families make!

However, we must also realize that to have this kind of help at the ready in times of need, we must be known and recognized as part of the family. We accomplish this through constancy and devotion- both to the Lord and His people. If the only time we contact our spiritual family is when we have some emergency, or need or want something, we may well find that they really do not consider us part of the “family” at all. And who could blame them? No physical or spiritual family tolerates those who only “take” and never “give” for very long.

Spiritual families are intended and given by God to be our “Emergency Contacts” for all they can provide- spiritually and physically. Obviously, He takes care of the rest Himself. Our church family should be the (spiritual) *friend who sticks closer than a* (physical) *brother*, Proverbs 18:24. But if you never become part of that spiritual family, or don’t maintain and sustain that relationship, who else will you have to put down as your “Emergency Contact”? (1-27-11)

**Emerson on Faith and Trust**

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, **“All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen.”**

“Trust” is a constituent part of faith,Hebrews 11:6, *“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”*   Trust is included in this verse because of the part about “rewards.”  While a faithful life is replete with blessings in the here and now, its true reward is only achieved after death.  Thus, we live “by faith” in that we trust God as an eternal *“rewarder of those who seek Him.”*

But neither our *faith* nor the element of *trust* included within it, are unsubstantiated.  God does not expect *blind faith* or *unmerited trust* from us.  Instead, He provides abundant evidence upon which our faith is to be built, and the most substantial of foundations for our trust in Him.  Note again the scriptures: *“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature,* ***have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made****, so that they are without excuse.”* Romans 1:20.

Get that: **all should be able to comprehend the *eternal power* and *divine nature* of God from just observing the wonders of the world which He created.** One might ask, “How so?”  For anything to be created, someone must exist prior to create it.  God is the eternal ***First Cause*** of creation for He existed before it– thus His power is “eternal.”  As to the second part, God could have created a colorless world completely without beauty to merely sustain its inhabitants, but He didn’t.  He created a world of consummate beauty and spectacular wonders to fulfill the most intense aesthetic cravings of our discerning palates.  Thus, we see the *goodness* of God’s "divine nature."  He wants us to enjoy the things He created for us.  All of which should bolster both our faith in Him, and our trust of Him.

There are many things that God did not choose to reveal to us.  Deuteronomy 29:29 admits as much, *“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.”*  To spend much time in speculation, discussion, and disputes about things *“not revealed”* is pointless and foolish at best- and perhaps sinful at worst.  I happen to believe that the things God didn’t tell us, but about which we sometimes wonder and speculate, were not revealed for a simple reason: we either don’t need to know, or are perhaps incapable of comprehending.  *Trust* leads me to conclude that it was not in our best interest to know, or God would have told us!

This brings us back the quote of our title from Emerson, *“All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen.”*  The poet had it right.  Everything that we observe from nature, and everything God has revealed to us in His word, teaches us to **trust Him** regarding anything and everything we have not seen, and about which we have not been told!

Thus, we don’t have to know exactly what will happen when we die in every detail, **we *trust Him* by living as we should.**  We don’t have to know what our resurrected bodies will be like, **we *trust Him* by making our bodies here conform to His image.**  We don’t have to know all of the parameters and details of heaven, **we *trust Him* by making ourselves living sacrifices here.**  And so on, and so on, and so on.

Isn’t all of this exactly what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote to the Corinthians, *“For we walk by faith, and not by sight”*?   I think so.  Don’t trouble yourself by trying to *walk by sight*- it is utter futility.  **Have *faith* in God, and *trust Him*.**  Doesn’t everything He has done for us, and everything He has said to us, warrant it?  Sure it does! Perhaps the old familiar hymn says it best, *“Trust and Obey”*… but Ralph Waldo Emerson wasn’t bad either, was he? (7-13-10)

**Enactmenting Gruntled Pents**

I know that’s a strange title, but perhaps that is because it emanated from a strange mind… mine! Let me see if I can get this to make sense for you.

A lot of words we commonly use have prefixes. A prefix is sometimes one letter, or perhaps two, or maybe even three that you tack on to the front of a base word to change its meaning. To “sub-marine” therefore means to go “under” the “water.”

But have you ever thought about how some of the words that we put these prefixes on really don’t have a place in our regular vernacular? For instance, you may have attended a Civil War ***reenactment*** if you’re into that sort of thing, or even a crime-scene ***reenactment*** if you were on a jury that took a field trip**,** but have you ever been to an ***enactment?*** Yep, that’s a real word alright, but you don’t usually hear it much around this part of the country.

What about this one: At one time or another you’ve probably been ***disgruntled*** in your life, right? But in your whole life, have you ever been ***gruntled***? I’m absolutely sure I’ve been ***disgruntled****,* and I’m even pretty sure I know what that means, but since the prefix *“dis”* means the opposite or absence of whatever base word it precedes, exactly what is “**gruntled”**? Actually, there is such a word as “gruntle” after all. It is defined by Mr. Webster as “to put in a good humor,” in case you didn’t already know- I sure didn’t!

Now all of that foolishness was to entertain perhaps just a little, but also to get to a point. Our title, in addition to “enactmenting” and “gruntled,” also includes the word **“pents.”** If you look that one up with Mr. Webster he will tell you it means “to shut up” or “confine”- as in, *pent-up* feelings or emotions. But if you add the prefix “re” if front of it, well, then we have problems. If “pent” means to “shut up or confine” and “re” means “again,” then “re-pent” would have to mean “shut up or confine again,” wouldn’t it? Now we both know that doesn’t make much sense- even to the valedictorian (of a total class of 15, mind you) son of an Ag teacher! But hold on, this gets better, I promise.

The trouble we’re having with the word “re-pent” is that it is translated from a couple of Greek words into our English version- and trust me, it makes more sense in Greek! The Greek prefix *“meta”* (translated as “re”) means “after.” The Greek base word is *“noeo,”* and literally means “to think.” Thus, the Greek word, *metanoeo,* translated into our English word “repent,” means “to think again.” Therefore, to “repent” is literally to **rethink**, or **change one’s mind**. Those who had demanded Jesus’ crucifixion, because they believed Him to be an imposter, were told to ***repent*** (and *be baptized*, Acts 2:28) - to re-think and change their minds!

But in the New Testament, evidently “repenting” includes more than just changing the mind. John the Baptist told his audience, *“Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance…”* in Luke 3:8. This changing of the mind is supposed to also produce a change in course, direction, or conduct. It’s not just changing your mind- its changing your mind so that your actions change too!

Now, what if we put all those silly words from the title together in the light of our new-found understanding of them? An “enactment” is something that has been acted out. To “gruntle” is to make happy. And, to “repent” is to re-think and change your mind so that your course, or direction, changes. Put them all together and what do you get? **You become “happy” because you’ve “changed your mind” and are “acting” accordingly, see Genesis 4:6-7a!** See how easy that was? Thanks for playing along, and I hope you learned a little along the way to boot. (1-4-12)

**“Encourage One Another”**

(This article was motivated by my own need to do a better job in this area- perhaps it will help you also.) In our recent adult studies of the book of Hebrews here at Southside, the necessity of “encouraging one another” has become more evident. There is a need in any congregation of the Lord’s people for a Joseph, who was such an encourager that the apostles began to call him “Barnabas”- which, by translation, means “Son of Encouragement,” Acts 4:36. Several such ‘someones’ would be even better, and a congregation full of them would be a tremendous asset to any fellowship! So, what does it take to be an *encourager?*

**Recognition of *need*.** From time to time, everyone needs some encouragement. Even the Savior of the world, often made time to be alone with His Father through prayer (Matthew 14:23; John 6:15; 16:32; *et al.*). Why, do you suppose? Who of His disciples understood the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual strains He was under, or how to comfort and encourage Him in them? Surely none- but the Father could, and did! While the Father can and will always be a tower of strength and encouragement to us, let’s be sure no one of us is left as alone as was the Savior. There will always be someone YOU (and I) can encourage who is in need of a *lift;* someone who is *discouraged* (obviously), or *fainthearted,* or whose faith is at least temporarily *weakened* in some way- perhaps by temptation or tragedy. So, *“encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called, ‘Today,’ lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end,”* Hebrews 3:13-14!

**Recognition of *source.*** God is the true source of all encouragement. The Scriptures also provide tremendous encouragement, Romans 15:4. Remember, however, that we are supposed to be His *representatives* and *agents!* Oftentimes, those most in need of encouragement are not *speaking to God* in prayer, or *listening to Him* through His word, and thus become discouraged. Herein lies the opportunity for us to step up to the plate. “But I don’t know what to say.” Job’s friends didn’t either, which is probably why they just *sympathized* and *comforted* him for seven days *“with no one speaking a word,”* Job 2:11-13. Sometimes just noticing and caring enough to be there is a tremendous benefit to the downtrodden. And we can always ask, “How can I help?” and then listen carefully. And, if the opportunity presents itself, gently point them back to prayer and the Word- after all, surely we can *pray* and *open God’s book* with them, can’t we? The point is this: Though God and His word are the ultimate sources of comfort and encouragement, WE, through human compassion and brotherly love, are the mediums through which these must often come!

**Recognition of *nature.*** To be an encourager, it seems to me at least, that we must first realize what *kind* or *nature* of encouragement is needed. The range extends from the proverbial “kick in the seat of the pants,” Galatians 2:11; 1Corinthians 5, to the most *“gentle…as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children,”* 1Thessalonians 2:7, and all points in between these extremes. As always, what we do and say should be *“according to the need of the moment,”* and with the right purpose of being *“good for edification…that it may give grace to those who hear,”* Ephesians 4:29. *Encouragement* is not always a matter of *educating* the discouraged*-* the “right thing” they need to hear or do is often something they well know, but of which they simply need to be reminded. Whatever has caused their discouraged state may have clouded their vision, their judgment, and even their knowledge of God’s will, cf. Galatians 6:1-2. At other times, *encouragement* requires *education.* They may face a situation or circumstance that is entirely new and overwhelming to them. Pointing them to answers they need from the Word of God is just the encouragement they need! Discernment is, thus, a prerequisite to being a good encourager, and good listening and observation skills are also a must to be discerning of what is most needed in the situation. 1Thessalonians 5:11,14 highlights the necessity of these abilities, *“Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another… And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men.”*

**Recognition of *ability.*** We all have the *ability* to encourage others- if by no other means, then by our faithful examples, cf. Hebrews 10:23-25. But if we *look for*, and are *courageous* enough ourselves to *act on,* opportunitiesto *encourage* others, they and we will be greatly blessed. We just need to get outside ourselves (Philippians 2:3-4) enough to *see* and be *compassionate toward* the needs of others to simply be encouraged. We all **can** help others to be *filled with courage*. The question is, “**Will** you be an encourager?” It takes a *caring heart, listening ears, hands able to hold,* a *discerning mind,* and a *gracious tongue,* butWE CAN DO THIS! (3-3-15)

**Encouragement and Encouraging**

To *encourage* someone doesn’t mean to make them feel better, though that is often a result of being *encouraged.* Think about the word. It literally means to *fill with courage.* Sometimes, *courage* is required to accomplish a difficult, unpleasant, or intimidating task. *Courage* is also needed to take, stay on, or get back on a *narrow/strait* path (cf. Matthew 7:13-14). Thus, *courage* is required of every Christian, and *encouraging* one another should be the goal of every Christian, Hebrew 3:13.

Joseph was evidently a master-encourager. The apostles even renamed him “Barnabas,” which translates as *“Son of Encouragement,”* Acts 4:36. Many of us would love to be encouraging to our brethren, but don’t really know how to go about it. Let’s review some specific examples from the life of this great *encourager* of the Lord’s people….

**Barnabas *encouraged* by his example.** Right after we’re told of Joseph being renamed as *Barnabas,* the very next thing we witness is one of the reasons why- he *encouraged* others by his own example. You see, Barnabas *“owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet”* so they could distribute it to help poor saints, Acts 4:37, 32-35. “Preaching” can and should be *encouraging* (cf. Acts 15:32), but sometimes a good example can do even more to *encourage* and *embolden* others to courageously do the right thing(s)!

**Barnabas *encouraged* by not being afraid of someone’s past.** Saul of Tarsus had been a violent persecutor of the Lord’s church and its members, cf. Acts 8:1ff; 9:1-2. But after his conversion through the conversation with the Lord and the teaching of Ananias, he desired to become a part of that which he had formerly oppressed and victimized. Understandably, the church at Jerusalem both feared him- probably suspecting a trick and trap, and doubted him, Acts 9:26. So, here was a truly penitent and changed Christian man who desired to be part of the church’s fellowship, but was being rejected and shunned, v.26. Enter Barnabas! Note v.27, *“But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.”* Barnabas didn’t *send a note* with Saul- he got involved *personally!* Barnabas did not act without evidence, but neither was he so afraid of Saul’s past as to reject the evidence, nor hesitate to present it to the church on Saul’s behalf. Barnabas not only had *courage* himself, he instilled it in others also- the apostles and Saul, vv.28ff! We often admire the *courage* of the apostle Saul/Paul, but do we really think about who first *encouraged* him, and how he did so?

**Barnabas *encouraged* by not being afraid of new things.** For several years after the church’s initial formation (Acts 2), the gospel was still being preached *“to no one except Jews alone,”* Acts 11:19. But then, with God’s blessing and the assistance of the Holy Spirit, some brethren at Antioch began preaching *“the Lord Jesus”* to Gentiles (non-Jews) also, vv.20-21. When the *Jewish* church at Jerusalem heard about these new *Gentile* Christians, they called on Barnabas to go and investigate, v.23. After he arrived on the scene, and *“witnessed the grace of God”* being manifested toward the Gentiles, Barnabas didn’t recoil, pause, or hesitate because this was so new and different. Though a Jew himself, the *Son of Encouragement “rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord,”* v.23. It’s a good thing Barnabas didn’t prescribed to the old adage, “If it’s new it isn’t true, and if it’s true it isn’t new!” Obviously, neither did he jump in and start *encouraging* this new practice without first investigating it first hand, and noting the *presence* and *blessing of God.* But there is no doubt, that Barnabas wasn’t afraid of *new* things that were approved of God, nor did he hesitate to supply additional *courage* to those who were doing them.

**Barnabas *encouraged* by teaching the truth.** When it came time for missionaries to be sent out to *“the remotest part of the earth”* (cf. Acts 1:8), there should be no surprise that the Holy Spirit would select Barnabas to go with Paul, Acts 13:2ff. The *Son of Encouragement* had courageously led by example, been unafraid of a converted persecutor’s past, and had been fearlessly willing to support and encourage those who blazed a new trail in reaching the lost. Now he would take on an even more active role in proclaiming the truth of the gospel to those destined for destruction by sin throughout Asia Minor. You see, *encouraging* isn’t just about making someone feel better, it is also about filling them with *courage* by **your** example and courage in standing for and proclaiming the gospel. May we all take to heart these lessons, and be *encouragers* like Barnabas! (7-26-16)

**Endurance**

Eons ago in High School, I was actually pretty quick and fairly athletic. I played baseball, basketball, and tennis (our school was too small for football). The coach even talked me into running the 100 yard hurdles one year- I won my heat race, but stepped on the line after clearing the last hurdle and was disqualified. But one year was enough for me. Track wasn’t my thing. I didn’t like just running for the sake of running when I could be chasing a ball! Besides, although I was fleet of foot, I hated distance running. Endurance was definitely lacking in me, and I just wasn’t willing to put forth the effort to develop it (which is probably another way of saying I was too lazy).

Biblically, Christianity is compared to running a race, but isn’t a sprint. After rising from the waters of baptism, enthusiasm is often high, and the new convert sprints forth with great dedication and zeal. But when the initial excitement wears thin, or wears off completely, he soon fades and falls from faithfulness. Such is often due to his reasons for “conversion” in the first place. If the decision to become a disciple of Christ was made from a mostly emotional motivation, it is hard to maintain that infatuation high for very long. Such is represented in the Parable of the Sower as those *“on the rocky soil…who when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away.”* (Luke 8:13) But if the decision to follow Christ instead stemmed from a deeper understanding of God and His will for our lives (cf. Luke 8:15), the long-term goal of heaven is more clearly in mind, and it is easier to “stay the course.” The hare was initially faster, but the tortoise actually won the race.

The Hebrews writer addresses these matters in 12:1, *“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us* ***run with endurance*** *the race that is set before us…”*  Christianity (living the Christian life) is a *race,* but it is not a *sprint.* It is a *distance* race requiring **endurance.**  The usual Greek term in the N.T. translated into our English word “endurance” is defined as “the characteristic of a man who is not swerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings,” (Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon). Purely emotionally-based attachments to Christ, those which lack true and deeper understanding of His Word and its requirements, almost always lack the endurance necessary to *“finish the course”* (cf. 2Timothy 4:7).

All of this begs the question: “Must a Christian *‘finish the course’* to receive the prize of heaven?” Let’s let the Bible speak for itself. In Matthew 10:22, Jesus said, *“it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.”* Paul, in 1Corinthians 9:24, wrote, *“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.”* Jesus, again, said in Luke 21:19, *“By your perseverance* (or endurance, depending on your translation, PCS) *you will win your souls.”* Now, have you ever known anyone to win a race that they didn’t finish, or to win one from which they were disqualified for violating the rules (see first paragraph again as well as 1Corinthians 9:25-27)? Me either.

The N.T. uses the word *“endurance,”* or some form of it, some forty times. Why, do you suppose, if the Christian who is “once saved, always saved” is endurance so heavily stressed? Jesus told Christians at Smyrna, *“Be thou faithful* ***unto*** *death, and I will give you the crown of life.”* (Revelation 2:10, KJV). He was not telling them to be faithful *as long as they lived*- though that is also necessary as we’ve seen above. Instead, He was telling them to be faithful in the face of persecution even if it cost them their lives. “Until” is a designation of time, but *“unto”* is a designation of degree. If Jesus required endurance to the point of death for the Christians of the first century to attain eternal salvation, is any less required of us today? *“If we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us.”* (2Timothy 2:12) Please think carefully about these things, **and finish the course/race!** (6-19-12)

**“Engaged”**

Isn’t it funny how the same word can mean so very different things to different people based on who and what they are? For instance, to a young female, the word “engaged” refers to the promise of forthcoming marriage. To someone who likes to talk, “engaged” refers to someone who is engrossed in a conversation. For me, and those who think in more mechanical terms, the word “engaged” usually first means that one gear is meshed with another, or a another group of gears, to produce a specific movement or activity. All of these various comprehensions of the word are correct, depending of course on how the word is being used at the time. I’m told that this is what makes English one of the most difficult languages to learn– that the same word can have such vastly different meanings and applications.

So what does any of this have to do with spiritual matters? “Engaged,” in all three meanings previously suggested, has spiritual applications.

**In the matrimonial sense, we, as Christians, are *“betrothed to one husband”* who is Jesus Christ (2Cor.11:2).** While *betrothal* is not exactly the same as our “engagement” process today, the two are very similar. The difference between them is that *betrothal* was a binding agreement of marriage which lacked only official consummation. If *betrothed,* you were, for all intents and purposes, married. In fact, to not consummate a marriage after the betrothal required a divorce. The Greek term *harmodzo* (betrothed) meant to *join or fit together,* as a carpenter would join beams and planks to make a house, or as a husband and wife would come together to make a family. In this sense, we are to be *joined* together with our *spiritual husband,* Jesus Christ, John 3:39; Eph.5:23ff; Rev.21:9. So, are you being faithful to the “engagement” promises of marriage you made to your spiritual husband Jesus?

**The second application of “engage” had to do with being engrossed in conversation with another person.** When we speak of someone being “engaged in conversation,” it usually implies that these two parties are exclusively conversing with each other. They may be in a room crowded with people, but are so intent on the conversation with one another that they are oblivious to the other people in the room. There is a spiritual aspect in this definition also. The word used in Acts 24:26 to depict Felix’s (the Roman Governor of Judea) *conversing* with Paul is the Greek word *homileo*, which is defined as “to be in company with; to associate with; to stay with; to converse with” (Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon). Think about being thus *“engaged”* with God in these ways. Are you “in company with” God? Amos wrote that *two cannot walk together unless there is agreement between them.* Do you “associate with” and “stay with” God? Both John and the Psalmist would call this *“abiding”* with God. Do you regularly “engage” in *conversing* with God by reading His Word and talking to Him through prayer? Are you “engaged” in conversing with God?

**Finally, “engaged” had the mechanical application of a gear being meshed together with another gear, or another group of gears, to produce a specific movement or activity.**  How many times have you heard of (or been?) a Christian who “never really meshed in a particular congregation”? What is usually meant is that this person never really *fit in* or *became part of* the work of that local group. There may be many reasons which account for the problem. But the effect is always the same– this person doesn’t accomplish much for the Lord, or that congregation! And, the congregation suffers the loss of whatever the *unmeshed* member had to offer. For a gear or a church member to be involved in “producing a specific movement or activity” (which means “work” in the *mechanical* or *membership* sense) it has to be “engaged in” and “meshed with” the other constituent parts. One gear alone never accomplishes anything! It has to become “engaged” with other gears to produce the desired effect. In church membership terms, this means that we have to “engage” ourselves by becoming involved with the work and worship of the congregation. Again, here’s the question: Are you “engaged” in this sense? Are you active participants in the work and worship of the congregation, or are you, as one gear alone, just sitting idly by and accomplishing nothing?

English may be a difficult language because of the various applications one word may have, but it sure provides *rich soil* for us preachers to expound upon biblical principles! Thanks for following along, and do please consider whether or not you are truly “engaged”! (7-7-10)

**Enthusiasm for/with God**

Our English word “enthusiasm” has etymological ties to a combination of Greek words (the original language of the New Testament). The Greek word “ein” is *in* or *within,* and “theos” is *god.* Somewhat literally, then, “enthusiasm” is to have “God in/within” us! Although I know of no New Testament passage that contains the Greek or English word “enthusiasm,” there are a few that seem to definitely include the idea. Let’s note a few examples, paying particular attention to the surrounding circumstances or associated activities…

**Romans 10:1-3**, *“Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them* (the nation of Israel at that time, PCS) *is for their salvation. For I bear them witness that they have* ***a zeal for God****, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.”* The nation of Israel had a *zeal* for God, but lacked the necessary *knowledge* of God for it to motivate them in the right paths and activities. Does this sound familiar? Isn’t the religious world of our day also filled with those who seem to have a *passionate zeal* for God, but lack the requisite *knowledge* of God to be able to function according to His will? We cannot, like Israel of old, do what we desire and call it “God’s will” or “God’s righteousness.” Zeal is not an excusing balm for willful rebellion or ignorant disobedience.

**Acts 8:29-30**, *“And the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go up and join this chariot.’ And when Philip* ***had run up****…”* Philip manifested *enthusiasm* by *running* to do what God commanded, and for the opportunity to teach an Ethiopian nobleman the saving gospel of Jesus Christ! This is very different from manifesting enthusiasm by *running* with others into *excesses of dissipation,* cf. 1Peter 4:4, or having *“feet that run rapidly to evil,”* Proverbs 6:18. In which direction do your feet *enthusiastically* run? Toward the commands of God, or away from them? To be genuinely *enthusiastic* by having *God with* or *within* us, surely we must be willing to run toward rather than away from His expressed will!

**2Corinthians 7:11**, *“For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you, what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing,* ***what zeal****, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.”* In the first Corinthian letter, Paul had strongly rebuked the church there for allowing a sinful relationship to go on unchecked, cf. 1Corinthians 5:1-13. Not only had the church refused to exercise any discipline toward the offender, and allowed him to continue in fellowship with them, they had manifested arrogance toward the matter. But after his stern rebuke, the church had responded wonderfully in full repentance. Notice from the text quoted above that *godly sorrow* for sin had also produced: *vindication* (through repentance and right conduct), *indignation* (toward past sinful behavior), *fear* (for loss of fellowship with God), *longing* (for forgiveness and restored fellowship with God), and ***zeal***(for moving forward and doing better in the future). As Christians, we sin. We mess up. This, though certainly not ideal, is not the real point. Instead, how we react to our sin becomes the point. Do we in godly sorrow and repentance become *enthused* and even more *zealous* for God and His will to be paramount in our lives? Or, do we become defensive regarding our sin(s), denying or excusing them, and become defiant? Both alternative paths involve *zeal-* but only one can be said to include *enthusiasm* (having God within)!

Enthusiasm is vital to our lives as Christians. We can’t be pleasing to God without putting our whole heart passionately into our relationship with Him, and our service to Him in His kingdom. But enthusiasm has to be real. It has to stem from a right relationship with God to be genuine. This relationship has to be based on *knowledge of His will,* and a *willingness to do it;* otherwise we don’t have true enthusiasm *for* and *with* God. Doing the right things in the right ways- which means according to God’s expressed will, produces enthusiasm for then and only then, is God truly *in* and *with* us! (4-5-16)

**Equal Opportunity, or Equal Outcome?**

Freedom is one of the founding principles of this country. It is probably the one principle more than any other which has made this country great. But like so many things, freedom must be properly understood and appreciated before it can be properly utilized and applied. For instance, is the “freedom” on which our country is based a freedom ***from***something, or a freedom ***to***something? “Both” is the correct answer, because freedom involves a duality. It is a freedom ***from***tyranny and oppression which in turn yields a freedom ***to***pursue our own hopes, dreams, and happiness. We must have the first to pursue the second.

But the word “pursue” is key. A freedom *from* tyranny and oppression does not guarantee our happiness, or that our hopes and dreams will be realized. It just allows us the **opportunity** to pursue those hopes, dreams, and happiness- provided of course, that our pursuit of them doesn’t infringe on the freedom of someone else. A failure to make this distinction is one reason our country (and the world) is having many of the problems that it is currently. Freedom does not guarantee equal outcomes- in fact it can’t and still be freedom. For outcomes to be equal for everyone, someone’s freedom has to be infringed. Instead, freedom pledges equal opportunities.

I have not written these things for political or civic purposes. The principle that freedom provides equal opportunity rather than equal outcome is a biblical one. Please read carefully 1Corinthians 10:1-5, *“For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless,* ***with most of them God was not well pleased****; for they were laid low in the wilderness.”*

This passage is referencing the Old Testament account of the children of Israel journeying from Egyptian captivity to the Promise Land of Canaan. Did you get that? “Freedom” involved both a ***release from*** oppression and a ***pursuit of***hopes, dreams, and happiness. However, the point being made is that despite *“all”* of them having the same **opportunities** because of freedom, **they did not all have equal outcomes!** The text said *“most”* were *“laid low in the wilderness”* (killed or allowed to die by God) because they were disobedient to Him. So, despite *all* having the same opportunities of *spiritual guidance and sustenance* (from God through the *cloud, Moses, spiritual food,* and *spiritual drink*), they did not all reach the Promise Land of their hopes and dreams. In fact, the inspired writer says *“most”* of them- meaning the majority, never attained it. The “freedom” God provided from Egyptian bondage did not guarantee that they would reach the spiritual Promised Land, it just gave them the opportunity to try. Success would be directly determined by their faith in and obedience to God.

What does all of this mean to us? Through the grace of God and our faith (see Ephesians 2:8-9), we attain salvation. This is a freedom from sin and its consequences, (see Romans 8:1-2,21; Galatians 5:1; and Hebrews 2:15). This salvation enables us to pursue the spiritual Promise Land of heaven where all our hopes, dreams, and happiness reside. But despite all of the opportunities God provides us by freeing us from the “bondage of sin,” we still have to faithfully make the journey to heaven through faithful obedience to Him. Freedom guarantees equal opportunity- not equal outcome. Remember: most of the Israelites, despite being freed from captivity and guided by God, did not make it to the Promised Land. They were *“laid low in the wilderness”* because they didn’t continue to trust and obey God after He freed them! The writer of Hebrews put it this way, *“Take care,* ***brethren****, lest there should be in any one of you an evil unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ* ***if*** *we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end;”* (Hebrews 3:12-14). Please contemplate these things carefully- eternity is at stake. (3-2-11)

***Every, No, Any, Some,* and *One* Body**

***Every*body needs saving.**  Salvation is a universal need of mankind. Since sin’s first introduction into the society of mankind in the Garden of Eden, *every*body has become personally acquainted with it, cf. Romans 3:9,23. And thus, *every*body has suffered from its effects. Though sin certainly may have immediate and *physical* consequences that can be devastating, its most dangerous outcomes are *spiritual-* eternal damnation being the foremost of them. Really stop and think about that for a moment: *Every*body needs saving, or else they will be eternally damned. Such sounds harsh, I know, but it is a natural consequence of sin, Romans 6:23 (see also Ezekiel 18:4). Unless they are saved, *every*body will be condemned because *“all have sinned”* and *“the wages of sin is death.”*

***No*body can save themselves.**  Since the *wages,* or *due compensation,* for sin is *death,* what *price* can a sinful man possibly pay to redeem himself and prevent the penalty? None. Jesus made this clear with His rhetorical question in Matthew 16:26, *“Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”* Could a sinful man sacrifice his life as *payment* for the redemptive price of his own soul? How could the *just* *penalty* become the *justification* that prevents the *penalty?*  No, the *redemptive price* for man’s sin could not, and cannot be paid by sinful man himself.

***Any*body can be saved.** Despite the apparent gloominess of the picture painted by the two previous points, *any*body can be saved, *no*body has to be eternally damned, and *every*body has equal access to the opportunity of salvation. It does not matter how sinful a body has become, it can be *sanctified* (made holy) and *cleansed* (justified) by the *“washing of water with the word”* (the obedience of *baptism* based on *faith* from the word), Ephesian 5:26. Access to this opportunity to *hear* and *obey* the gospel is not limited by race, income, or sinfulness- *any*body can be saved, Romans 1:16-17; *no*body has to be lost, and *every*body can be saved (there is no limit to the number heaven will hold, nor will opportunities to go there be exhausted).

***Some*body may need help.**  The Ethiopian eunuch needed a little help and guidance. He was reading the Scriptures, but had questions about the specific passage. An evangelist named Philip began at *the same Scripture* and *“preached Jesus to him,”* cf. Acts 8:30-35. Though the Scriptures are understandable (cf. Ephesians 3:4), most of us need a little help to overcome our preconceived notions of or prejudices against them. Or, like the Ethiopian, we may need some *guidance* to achieve the salvation they offer. Note that *“preaching Jesus”* evidently included instruction regarding “baptism”- for the eunuch, after hearing “Jesus” preached, asked about his own ability to be baptized, Acts 8:36. His *guide* Philip told him that if he *believed* (that Jesus was the Christ), he could be *baptized.* He immediately responded that he did indeed believe, and was straightway baptized by Philip. The Ethiopian *believed* and was *baptized* just as Jesus required of salvation in Mark 16:16; but, he needed *some*body to help and *guide* him to and with the *gospel,* Mark 16:15.

**Members of the *One* body can and should help.** Those who are members of the *one body* of Christ (cf. Ephesians 4:4) *can* and *should* help *every*body to see and know the truth of the gospel since *no*body can save themselves and *any*body can be saved. After all, having become *one body with Christ,* surely they know and can tell *every*body who needs salvation that *no*body but Jesus can save them, and that *any*body can become a part of His *one body* by *baptism* (being *born again*), cf. 1Corinthians 12:13; John 3:3-5.

Please don’t take the above trifling use of grammar as any kind of lack of respect for Jesus Christ, the salvation He affords, or the gospel that tells of both of them. Salvation from eternal damnation is always serious business. I just hope the word play above helps us to see the plain facts of the situation, and our opportunities to change them by the *body* and *blood* of Jesus Christ- given in our stead, for the remission of our sins. Don’t waste that sacrifice, please! (11-3-15)

**“Sunday” vs. “Everyday” Things**

My dad was a vocational agriculture teacher for 35 years. Given that there were four of us kids, he and mother had to be frugal with his teacher’s pay to make ends meet. I can remember him saying to me after I fallen and skinned my knee, “Boy don’t tear your britches- that hide (meaning “skin”) will grow back on its own, but we have to buy those britches!” He was/is a great kidder also, and wasn’t nearly as calloused as that statement makes him sound.

But along the same lines, I also remember a very clear distinction being made in our home between “Sunday clothes” and “everyday/play clothes.” And since money was always tight, we kids didn’t dare get caught outside playing in the red dirt in our “Sunday clothes” because that meant a whipping for sure!

Sadly, it seems that the distinction between “play clothes” and “Sunday clothes” is rapidly disappearing. I’m old enough to still think that people who are going to worship the Creator of the Universe and study His holy word ought to look like that’s where they’re going and what they’re doing, instead looking like they’re going to play ball or cut the grass. Then too, I think that when we dress down too much, our attitude is affected. When we dress like we’re going to ball game, we tend to expect to be entertained, rather than expecting to give honor and praise to God through worship. But lest I get too carried away, let me get back on track.

There is an inverse problem that also exists in our churches today- even among many who still maintain a distinction between “Sunday clothes” and “everyday clothes.” They seem to forget that our “Sunday activity” is supposed affect our “everyday life”! Unfortunately, many seemingly take off their Christianity when they remove their “Sunday clothes.” Thus, *going to church* is something they might do even fairly consistently on “the Lord’s Day,” but Monday through Saturday is still all about them.

I recognize that Sunday is a “special day” for Christians. We assemble together to sing; pray; memorialize the Lord’s death, burial, and resurrection by partaking of communion; give a return of the Lord’s blessing of us through contribution; and “yes” we even listen to the preacher too. We don’t dedicate everyday to doing those things because some of them are specified acts of worship designated for the first day of the week (see 1Corinthains 11:18-34; 16:1-2; Acts 20:7). And then too, we do have to work to provide for our families, and need to spend some time *recreating* ourselves and them during the week as well. But the problem comes in when we so compartmentalize our lives that we forget God is still “God” Monday through Saturday! If we only pray, study God’s word, and think on things that are *true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent,* and *praise-worthy* (taken from Philippians 4:8) on Sunday, then we’re going to have a hard time being much of a Christian Monday through Saturday. What we’re doing in such cases is relegating God to only the Sundays of our lives. We’re taking off our religion when we take off our “Sunday” clothes….and that’s not what Jesus intended Christianity to be, nor how He intended it to affect us.

The Lord addressed the point in Matthew 6:25-33. After telling His audience, which includes us, that all of ouranxieties about *physical things* are really pointless, as in vv.25-32, He then concludes that we should instead *“seek first His kingdom, and His righteousness; and all these things will be added”* to us*.* We don’t fulfill this command by just “putting on our Sunday clothes and going to church” on the first day of the week, and then taking them off and forgetting about God and Christianity again until next Sunday.

Some tend to think of Jesus’ admonition to *“seek first the kingdom”* as a list of priorities with God at the top. If so, we “go to church” Sunday morning, then we proudly check God off as being “first” in our lives, and then proceed through the rest of the list and week doing just as we please. Instead, try picturing *“seeking first the kingdom”* as a wagon wheel with God as the hub in the center. Next, think of the “spokes” of the wheel being all the other things that should and do occupy our time Monday through Saturday. Now all our “spokes” are still tied to God as the “center/priority,” of our lives. Thus everything we do, and every decision we make, still has God at the center! I think that’s more what Jesus had in mind, don’t you? This way, Christianity doesn’t come off with our “Sunday clothes”!

“Sunday clothes” are great for worship. But if we take them off, and put them, our Bibles, and our thoughts and activities of Christianity away until next Sunday, we might as well just have stayed home in the first place. Christianity that is taken off with our “Sunday” clothes, well, to paraphrase the Lord and put it in a colloquial style, “ain’t worth spit” (see His rebuke of the *lukewarm* folks in Laodicea, Revelation 3:15-16). Christianity has to be an “everyday” thing to be of any good to God or us. (8-11-10)

**Faith and Water**

Historically, God has often used water to test would-be followers to see if their faith was sufficient to produce obedience, and therefore become *saving faith,* cf. James 2:17,20,24,26. Please note a few examples:

* Genesis 6-9. Noah needed sufficient faith to build and stock an ark to save himself, his family, and sufficient representative animals to repopulate the earth after the flood. Among all the other amazing facets regarding this story is the fact that Noah had never even seen rain, cp. Genesis 2:5-6; Hebrews 11:7. Nonetheless, by faith he built and stocked an ark for a water event he had never seen or experienced!
* Exodus 14:21-22. After the Israelites had been freed from their Egyptian bondage by God, they journeyed southward toward Mt. Sinai. Before long, they came to a formidable obstacle- the Red Sea. To make matters worse, by this time Pharaoh had changed his mind about their release and pursued them with his army. They were trapped- Pharaoh behind them, and the Red Sea in front of them. Then God tested their faith (with water), and told them to go forward! So, as commanded, Moses stretched out his staff over the water, and God *“swept the sea back with a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land, so the waters were divided. And the sons of Israel went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left,”* Exodus 14:21-22. Have you thought about the faith it required to take your family and all you possessed and walk through the midst of a sea with a wall of water on both sides? Remember, these walls of water, once released by God after the Israelites had safely passed, were sufficient to drown the whole Egyptian army, Exodus 14:26-31!
* Numbers 20:8. As the children of Israel journeyed through the wilderness toward the promised land of Canaan, the record says *“there was no water for the congregation,”* v.2. They complained to Moses and he entreated God for assistance. The Lord replied, *“Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water.”* Since the congregation had already begun a mutiny against him, how much faith did it take for Moses to stand before the whole lot of them and speak to a rock that it might provide water? How silly that must have looked! But because of Moses’ faithful obedience to His instructions, God provided the life-saving water.
* Joshua 3:14-17. When the Israelites finally reached Canaan, there was yet another significant obstacle impeding their way- the Jordan River. Most of the year, the Jordan was a peaceful stream that, in most places, could be easily waded. But it was then at flood stage near Jericho, and was thus impossible to safely cross- especially for two and a half million people carrying all of their possessions! In fact, the Canaanite cities along its western side were depending upon the flooded Jordan to protect them from the invading Israelites. But note God’s instructions to the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant, *“When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan,”* v.8. He also commanded that all the congregation of Israel should go with the Ark, but at a distance of 3,000 feet so all the people could see it. As the priests entered the floodwaters with the Ark, they faithfully obeyed God by standing still. The raging waters *“stood and rose up in a heap”* upstream, and the people again crossed a great body of water on dry land, vv.16-17. When the people finished, the priests carrying the ark also crossed over toward Jericho, and the waters of the river returned to the previous flooded state! Think about it: God required faith sufficient to act in obedience by walking into the water before He stopped its flow.

In these four Old Testament examples, we see how God tested people’s faith to see if they were worthy of salvation. Would they believe enough to obey Him by building an ark in preparation for something they had never seen; or walk into a dry sea bed with two giant walls of water on each side miraculously held in place by God; or speak to a rock in the middle of the desert to obtain life-giving water; or walk into a raging torrent trusting God to stop it? All of these “tests” included two elements: **faith** and **water**. Is it any wonder that Jesus required the same for salvation in His name? *“He that* ***believes*** *and is* ***baptized*** *will be saved,”* (Mark 16:16, ESV). (8-27-13)

**Faith Working Through Love**

Anyone who has spent any time at all reading the New Testament has noted the important role that faith (belief) plays in salvation. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that *“without faith it is impossible to please Him…”*  Having that *“assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”* (v.1) is the very foundation of our relationship with God. Numerous other passages likewise extol the necessity of biblical faith, John 3:16; 8:24; Romans 4:1-6; Ephesians 2:8-9; *et al*. No student of the text would deny the necessity of faith in salvation.

However, it is often stated in one way or another that “salvation is by faith only.” To be fair, if the passages above are all that we read from the New Testament on the subjects of faith and salvation, such might be a fair assessment. But these passages are not all that God said on the matter. So please carefully consider this question: If salvation is indeed by “faith only” (with no mixture of works), then why do the N.T. passages which depict the eternal judgment of man say that it is based on what he **did, or did not do**? Please note: Revelation 20:12, *“And I saw the dead, the great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened…and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books,* ***according to their deeds****.”*Matthew 16:27, *“For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man* ***according to His deeds.****”* Romans 2:5-6, *“…you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; who will render to every man* ***according to his deeds****.”* 2Corinthians 5:10, *“For we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body,* ***according to what he has done****, whether good or bad.”* (see also Matthew 25:14-46 and Revelation 20:13)

Additionally, if salvation is by “faith only” (with no mixture of works), then I don’t understand why Jesus called faith a “work” in John 6:28-29, *“They said therefore to Him, ‘What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in Him who He has sent.”*  According to Jesus faith/belief is a “work”- so how can salvation be by “faith only without any mixture of works whatsoever” if faith itself is a work? Neither can I understand why James would write, *“Even so faith, if it has no works is dead, being by itself”* (James 2:17) if salvation is by “faith only.” He further added in James 2:24, *“You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.”* Friends, these words of Jesus and James just don’t seem to make sense if salvation is by “faith only.”

So how do all these passages really fit together? Some state that salvation is by faith, and some affirm that faith alone (without works) is dead and can’t save us. The skeptic might conclude that they are contradictory, but asserting such doesn’t make it so. We are saved through faith; we are saved by grace; and we are saved by doing what God says (works). Here’s the simple solution. God requires two things of man before salvation is given: 1) faith; and 2) obedience. Take the Great Commission as proof: In Mark 16:16 Jesus said, *“He who has believed”* (that’s faith) *“and has been baptized”* (that’s something we do- hence a work) *“shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”*  The truth is that we cannot pile up enough “good works” to earn salvation, no matter how righteously we live, because the “works” God requires of us do not equate in value to the benefit we receive. By the way, isn’t that the very definition of “grace”- getting more than we deserve? But knowing that our deeds do not equate in value to the eternal value of salvation does not mean that we can be saved without doing what God says either. In this way, salvation isn’t by “faith alone” because our obedience demonstrates our faith to God and others (cf. James 2:18). And salvation isn’t by “works alone” either because without God’s grace and our faith, our works just can’t merit salvation! It’s just like Galatians 5:6 (and our title) says, salvation is by *“faith working through love.”*  Please think about these things carefully- eternal life hangs in the balance. (12-14-10)

**Defining “Faithful”**

People define “faithful” differently. Context is often the key. A dog is considered “faithful” when it is partial to, prefers, and is obedient to its “master/owner.” A spouse is considered “faithful” when he or she doesn’t *cheat* on their mate. A teenager is considered “faithful” when they can be trusted to carry out the parents’ wishes even when the parents are out of town. But Christians are often considered “faithful” when they attend all the services of the local church on a regular basis- regardless of how they choose to live otherwise.

“Faithful” is generally translated from the Greek term *pistos.* “Believing” is also translated from the same word. But *pistos* is additionally defined and translated to mean “trustworthy,” cf. 1Timothy 4:9; Titus 1:9. What does this imply regarding our ideas of “faithfulness”?

We have a dog (she’s actually our son’s) that is allowed inside, but is not allowed on the couch or love seat. She never gets on them *while we’re home*, but I occasionally see doggie footprints and doggie hair on them after we’ve been away for a while. Is she faithful/trustworthy?

Do you have to hide car keys to keep a teenager from taking your car out for a spin while you’re away even though you’ve specifically forbidden them from driving it? Or, do you depend on neighbors to “watch the house” and report any house parties thrown by your teenagers if you’re away for a few days? Are they faithful/trustworthy?

Do you constantly worry and watch your spouse for signs or indications of an affair? Ask yourself, “Why?” The answer is one of two choices: 1) You’re paranoid and have trust issues; or, 2) Your spouse is giving you indications of untrustworthiness or has repeatedly broken your trust in the past, causing you to doubt their fidelity and commitment. If it is #2, are they faithful/trustworthy?

With these examples in mind, let’s switch this up a little. Think about your “faithfulness” and “trustworthiness” to God. Is it limited to consistent attendance at all services, or is there more to it? Are you only “faithful” to Him when He’s “in the room and watching you”? Obviously, there is a problem here since the omnipresence of God indicates He knows everything we do (and think!). Can God “trust” you to do the right thing whether you realize He’s present and watching or not? Do we expect God to continually “trust” us even though there have been many lapses of fidelity in the past? These examples of dogs, teenagers, and spouses should cause us to think about the issue of faithfulness/trustworthiness a little deeper, and more seriously, than just check marks in an attendance book.

But let’s take this subject of “faithfulness” a little further. Shouldn’t our “faithfulness” to God also enable Him to *trust* us to:

* Think about things the way He does? To look to His Word to determine the rightness or wrongness of something instead of bowing to societal pressures or our own understanding?
* Feel about things the way He does? To have the same disdain for sin, compassion for sinners, and love of truth and righteousness?
* Act in a way that is consistent with our profession of “faith” in Him? In brief, to act in a way that He would approve?

Please do not misunderstand. I would never discourage regular and consistent attendance at all worship and bible class opportunities of the local church- such is far too important and beneficial to our spiritual health and well-being. However, “faithfulness” is not defined simply by consistent attendance, and should not be viewed as such. Remember this oft-repeated simple statement, *“God is faithful,”* Deuteronomy 7:9; Isaiah 49:7; 1Corinthians 1:9; 10:13; 2Corinthians 1:18; 1Thessalonians 5:24; 2Thessalonians 3:3. In every circumstance and in all applications, **God is faithful**. While we cannot match or reciprocate His level of “faithfulness” to us, and we certainly don’t want to belittle or discount His *grace,* ought we not at least attempt to come as close as we possibly can to being “faithful” to Him? Think about it, please. (5-24-16)

**On What is Your *Faith* Based?**

A church member once told me she thought she was losing her faith. Knowing her as well as I did, I asked if she had lost her Bible. She didn’t get it. She didn’t understand because her “faith” was based on the wrong thing(s)…

Biblical, saving “faith” comes from and is built upon the Word. *“So faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ,”* Romans 10:17. The Word of God is certainly sufficient on this point, but have you ever wondered *why* or *how* this is so? Think about it for a moment…

We can know that God exists from the evidence provided in the world He created that surrounds us, and from the wonders present within us. The exacting specificities of the universe, the complexities of the human body (as well as animal and plant life forms), and the wonderfully symbiotic relationships present in our world didn’t just *happen by chance.* They were the products of divinely intelligent design*,* power, and goodness, cf. Romans 1:18-20 and Hebrews 3:4. But these ***natural revelations***of God, though they tell us of His *existence, power,* and *nature,* do not tell us how to live in response to God. For this we needed a ***specific revelation***from God. The Bibleis that ***specific revelation***, *“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work,”* 2Timothy 3:16-17. From the Bible, we *“learn what is pleasing to the Lord,”* Ephesians 5:10. Without knowledge of God’s Word, our faith is, at best, *immature, incomplete,* and *impotent* since it is based only on the knowledge of God’s existence and nature, but lacks the ability to provide us the information needed to *please* and be *in fellowship* with Him, Hebrews 11:6. With these things in mind, please consider the following very carefully and honestly.

**Is your faith based on God’s Word, or** **your personal feelings/desires?** How can you tell? If God’s Word contradicts what you *feel* or *desire,* which takes precedence in your life? When we substitute our own feelings and desires for what God has said, we are becoming our own god instead of humbly submitting to *the God.* In such cases, we are selfishly choosing *our will* over *His will.* Remember that *the Man, Jesus Christ,* would not even do this. When facing the horrors of the cross, He prayed, *“Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done,”* Luke 22:42. He set aside His own personal feelings and desires, as difficult as such surely was, to submit to God’s will. Is your faith based on God’s Word, or your own feelings and desires?

**Is your faith based on God’s Word, or** **your experiences?** For some, “faith” is the result of their own personal experience(s) with God. Let’s think about that more carefully and specifically. Eve had personal experiences with both God and Satan. But on what was her condemnation based? Through her experience with Satan, she was tempted to and indeed violated ***what God said****,* cf. Genesis 2:16-17; 3:3-7,13-24. Is it really any different for us today? We experience both the wonders of God’s world and its blessings, as well as the sufferings of evil and sin from Satan. But if our “faith” is based solely on these “experiences,” haven’t we, like Eve, missed the point of true faith, which is obedience to what God says? Isn’t a faith that is based in experience “walking by sight” rather than *“walking by faith, not by sight”* as 2Corinthians 5:7 requires? Is your faith based on God’s Word, or you're your own personal experiences?

**Is your faith based on God’s Word, or** **your families’ convictions?** Again, how can you know? Are you what you are religiously because **you** understand and are trying to follow God’s Word, or because it’s your families’ religion? If you learn that what your family believes or practices is contrary to God’s Word, which will you believe and follow? Jesus said, *“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me,”* Matthew 10:37. Each one of us will be judged *“according to what he has done, whether good or bad,”* 2Corinthians 5:10. Is your faith based on God’s Word, or what your family believes and practices?

Your faith, in order to be the kind that pleases God and enables salvation, has to be firmly based on God’s Word. **Is it?** Please, ***hear***(read and learn) God’s Word, ***believe***God’s Word, and ***obey***God’s Word, because that’s *biblical FAITH!* (4-4-17)

**Fatal Flaws of Ancient Israel (and Modern America?)**

We’ve all heard that “History repeats itself.” But somehow, we never seem to think we’re the ones repeating it- at least at the time. Both Roman 15:4 and 1Corinthians 10:11 warn Christians against duplicating the mistakes of ancient Israel. But have we heeded these warnings? Isn’t America now making the same mistakes as their religious predecessors? I think so, at least in some key areas….

**Ancient Israel *corrupted its worship of God,* 1Kings 12:25-33**. During the time when all Jewish males were required to go to Jerusalem to worship three times a year, Jeroboam, the king of the northern portion of the newly divided nation, set up *alternative* places of worship to prevent his citizenry from going there to worship, and thus possibly being reunited with Rehoboam of the southern kingdom in the process. While this may have been a wise *political* move, it spelled the beginning of the end for the northern kingdom. Those who had allied themselves with Jeroboam in the north but remained faithful to God, when they realized that he had violated and corrupted the worship of Jehovah, moved back to the southern kingdom to worship in *spirit and truth* there, 2Chronicles 11:13-16. This created a “spiritual vacuum” of faithfulness in the northern kingdom that hastened their plunge into rampant idolatry. **Point:** When modern America *politicizes* and *corrupts* the ordained worship of God by making it suit our wants and purposes rather than His, we are repeating the mistake of ancient Israel and will surely suffer similar consequences.

**Ancient Israel *worshipped other (false) gods,* Jeremiah 44:1-14.** Many residents of ancient Israel fled to Egypt to escape the destruction of their homeland during the days of the Babylonian conquest and subjugation of the southern kingdom of Judah. However, while in Egypt, it became apparent that they had not learned their lesson, for they began to adopt the idolatrous practices of their host nation! Faithlessness and idolatry (the worship of ‘gods’ other than Jehovah) had been the cause of their homeland’s destruction, and then they fled to Egypt only to take up even more idolatrous worship and practices. God, through Jeremiah, tells them that although they planned to eventually return to Judah, they would instead be *“cut off and become a curse and a reproach among all the nations of the earth,”* Jeremiah 44:8. **Point:** When modern America goes from one idol and/or ‘god’ to another instead of sincerely seeking and worshipping Jehovah, are we not also setting ourselves up to be *cut off* from the one true God completely, and thus become a *reproach* among all the nations?

**Ancient Israel *disregarded the sanctity of marriage,* Malachi 2:10-16.** God had, from the very beginning of the nation, warned Israel against marrying the *heathen* (idolatrous foreigners) because of the influence toward apostasy and its subsequent destruction (see also Joshua 23:12-13). But throughout their history, ancient Israel did not heed this warning, cf. Nehemiah 13:23-29. Furthermore, they often unlawfully divorced *“the wife of your youth”* in order to marry whomever they pleased. To this blatant and utter disregard for the covenant of marriage, God responded, *“‘But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit…. Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce,’ says the Lord, the God of Israel…,”* Malachi 2:15-16. **Point:** Do we in modern America really think we can take holy matrimony even further into degradation by the rampant disregarding of vows made “before God” through divorce and not suffer consequences that are both temporal and eternal? Can we completely corrupt the union through same-sex marriages with no retribution from the Author of the institution? Ancient Israel’s history surely says “NO!”

If space allowed, we could also consider ancient Israel’s dependence on political/military alliances with other nations rather than faith and trust in God, as well as their destruction due to a lack of *true knowledge* of God (Hosea 4:6; Isaiah 5:13), but perhaps these other examples are sufficient to make the point. Because of ancient Israel’s *corruption of true worship,* because of their endless *affinity for idolatry,* because of their *utter disregard of the sanctity of marriage,* because of their *reliance on political/military alliances* rather than faithful obedience and trust in God, and because of their *abject ignorance of true knowledge* of God, **God abandoned and destroyed them.** Wake up America, we’re repeating history in precisely the same ways! (6-2-15)

**A Father’s Love**

From time to time I have the opportunity to study with a young couple that wants to get married regarding what God intended and requires marriage to be (actually, it’s mandatory if I perform the wedding). In trying to underscore the importance of true love and maturity to the relationship, I’ve often utilized statements along these lines: “A young man doesn’t really understand what true love, maturity, and the awesome responsibility of family ‘headship’ is all about until he has a child. Prior to that point, he’s lived a selfish life. He cried to get what he wanted when he was little, perhaps pouted or became angry to get it when he was older, and bullied, talked, or cajoled his way into getting it as a young man. He may even marry for purely selfish reasons! Other people in his life enabled him to remain selfish by mostly playing along or giving in to his wants. They could have said “No,” and refused to continue to placate his demands **because they weren’t dependent upon him**. But once he becomes a father, everything usually (and certainly should!) change. That little screaming, cooing life that faintly resembles him is different- it **is completely dependent** upon him in ways that his parents, siblings, friends, girlfriends, and wife never were! This new life that came from him therefore melts his selfish heart, and hopefully matures his mind and conduct.”

It is probably about this same time, and for the same reason (the birth of his child), that a young man begins to truly comprehend God’s love for us. He begins to understand how God ***invested*** some of Himself in mankind from Genesis 1:27, *“And God created man in His own image…”* when he sees his own characteristics reflected in his child. He begins to understand his own ***complete dependence*** on His heavenly Father (from Romans 5:6, *“For while we were still helpless…”*) when he’s trying to comfort his own crying child in the middle of the night. He begins to understand ***true love***(from Romans 5:8, *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us…”*)when his own heart wants to break at the least hurt of his child. And He begins to understand ***true sacrifice*** (from Romans 5:10, *“For while we were yet enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son…”*)when all of his selfish desires and pursuits are willingly sacrificed for the slightest benefit of his child.

While this young man may have “known” about these things previously on some level, through this life-changing bundle of joy, he now “understands” a whole lot more about how God thinks, feels, and acts toward us.

The human birth of Jesus was necessitated by one thing: Man’s need of salvation from sin. Romans 6:23 tells us that the just penalty for sin is death. Unless all men were to die for their own sins, a Perfect Man would have to die in their stead. Being sinless, His death could then atone for other’s sins since He would have none of His own needing atonement (cf. Hebrews 9:7,11-14). But by intrinsic nature, “God” cannot die- He is eternal. Therefore, in order to atone for man’s sins, God had to assume human form. This He did by being born of a virgin (of divine, rather than human, progeny), *“Jesus of Nazareth.”*  Then *“the fullness of Deity…was in bodily form”* (Colossians 2:9)- and this *human form* of the very Son of God could atone for man’s sins through death. Simply put: **the *birth* of Jesus is important because it allowed Him to *die* for our sins.**

But unless we’re really sharp and studious of the Word, we may not really appreciate **God’s** *investment of Himself* in human form, or our *complete dependence* on **Him**, or the *true love* **He** has for us, or the true nature of **His** *sacrifice*; that is, until we have children of our own in which **we** have *invested ourselves*, who are (at least initially) so *completely dependent* upon **us**, who **we** *love so completely*, and for whom **we** are willing to *sacrifice our very lives* to save. Now do you get the picture? (12-21-11)

**Fear’s Three Primary Sources**

If you stop and think about it, fear seems to come from primarily one of three sources:

1. **Knowledge.** We know and understand the dangers involved. Therefore, we fear because we *know.* For example, just about everyone knows, at least generally, how a Rattlesnake looks and sounds. And most people also know how dangerous, even deadly, they are. So, they are “deathly afraid” of Rattlesnakes, and even those who aren’t, have a “healthy respect” for them.
2. **Ignorance.** We don’t know or understand the dangers involved, but fear the *unknown.* We fear what we do not comprehend or understand. Rat snakes (also called Chicken snakes- the only real difference is diet) are harmless to humans. But, they are often black in color, and if they’ve been eating well, can get to be quite large. They’re also not afraid of enclosed spaces and are therefore willing to venture into barns, and even houses. So, people find a big black snake in their shed, on their porch, or even in their house, and freak out and want to burn the house down because they don’t know what kind of snake it is, or understand that it is much more beneficial than dangerous to humans.
3. **Emotion.** Although we have some degree of knowledge, and therefore understand that the fear is irrational, we allow our emotions to override our knowledge/understanding and are fearful nonetheless. Take Gecko lizards for example. They have no venom, usually only grow to be a few inches long, are completely harmless to humans, eat mostly gnats and mosquitos, and can be easily squashed without any adverse consequence by even the smallest of people. And yet, despite knowing, understanding, and even acknowledging these things, some people allow their emotions to override their understanding and are terrified of them. The fear is completely irrational and emotionally based, but is present nonetheless.

The first two are based in knowledge, or the lack thereof, but the latter one is obviously purely emotionally based, and is, therefore, irrational. But this article isn’t really about snakes and lizards. What are the spiritual applications of these things? The fears mentioned correspond to these…

**We *fear* God** because we know and understand at least something of His power and nature. And we ought to *fear* God since He has the power not only over life and death, but eternity. Jesus warned His disciples, *“And do not fear those who will the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell,”* Matthew 10:28. But for those who are willing to become God’s children through obedience, *“you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as son by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’”* Romans 8:15. What does this mean? When we *fear God* (with the *healthy respect* kind of *fear*) enough to obey Him, we no longer have to fear judgment (to be *afraid* *of* or *terrorized by* kind of *fear*), condemnation, and punishment, 1John 4:18, *“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.”*

**We *fear* death** because, in ignorance, we think it is the end of everything for us, or because we don’t know what’s on the other side of it. While death will not be *the final end* for anyone (cf. John 5:28-29), we don’t have to *fear* it. Those who *fear* and obey God, are *delivered from the fear of death,* Hebrews 2:15. Therefore, instead of fearing *eternal punishment,* they have confident knowledge that *eternal reward* awaits them on the other side of death, cf. Matthew 25:34. For the God-fearing, death is but the portal to eternal life. Fear God *in knowledge* instead of death *in ignorance!*

**We *fear* Satan** because, despite knowing God’s power over him, and understanding that if we *resist him, he will flee from us,* we allow our emotions to override our faith. I realize that Satan is compared to a *roaring lion* in the Scriptures instead of Gecko, cf. 1Peter 5:8. But consider this: Why does a lion *roar?* One of two reasons: 1) to scare potential prey that he has not yet spotted into running in order to find and catch them; or, 2) to frighten potential prey that he has spotted so badly that they become paralyzed. In either case, he roars to frighten. However, we know that if we stand firm and resist him that *he will flee* from us*,* James 4:8. Is your knowledge and faith strong enough to overcome your emotional and irrational fear? Will you to stand *“firm in your faith”* knowing that if you do the *roaring lion* will *flee from you?* We have the strength to *resist,* and need to realize that *“the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet,”* Romans 16:20 … dare I say, “like a Gecko”?

So: fear God in knowledge; don’t fear death in ignorance; and don’t allow your emotions to create an irrational fear of Satan! (5-23-17)

**Feeding the Lion**

During the time and in the general area that the New Testament was being given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to those who wrote it, the most ferocious beast around was probably the lion. Doubtless, many people were attacked, maimed, or killed by them at that time and in those places. Given these things, it is no wonder that the Spirit chose to use the image of the lion to describe the danger, ferocity, and destructive power of Satan- *“Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”* (1Peter 5:8) But perhaps we ought to think more about this particular analogy….

Satan is indeed aptly represented by the lion with regard to his massive power (against humans at least), his capacity for cruelty, and his destructive capabilities. But consider also the following.

**Satan is a “roaring” lion.** I remember when we took our oldest son, now 21, to the zoo. He was a little boy of maybe two or three at the time. We were somewhere near, but not at, the lion's den when apparently some other zoo patrons coaxed him to roar. That little boy wasn’t the only one who took off running! That lion’s roar was so loud that it seemed to part your hair- even the ones on your arms. His presence was unmistakable. Everyone knew he was near, and hoped that he was still in his cage! But do you know what? “Roaring” lions are easy to identify, locate, and therefore avoid. *“Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”* (James 4:7b)

**Satan is a “caged” or “chained’ lion.** The first mention of Satan being *limited,* or *bound,* is in Matthew 12:28-29 where Jesus spoke of casting devils out of people possessed by them. Satan’s power was being limited. The second reference is in Hebrews 2:14-15 where Satan’s power over man through sin and death is bound by the deliverance and salvation of the cross of Christ. A third reference to the *binding* of Satan is found in Revelation 20:1-3. Satan was attempting to destroy the church through the persecution of the Roman government (the beast), and emperor worship (the false prophet). But these efforts failed, and the church, through Christ’s power and assistance, remained. Satan was again “chained” (or *limited,* or *restricted*). As a lion, he still has obvious power to destroy- but his power is limited by the salvation and protection of Jesus Christ. Now, if one is destroyed by a caged, bound, or chained roaring lion, who really is to blame? A *chained* lion can certainly be *resisted,* 1Peter 5:9, *“But resist him, firm in your faith…”*

**Satan is a lion that has to be fed to be a real threat to us.** Question: what happens to a caged/chained lion that you don’t feed? His power to destroy is obviously further diminished, if not eliminated altogether, right? What we must realize is that Satan is only able to utilize what we give him in tempting us. Notice a couple of passages on this point. James 1:14, *“But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed* ***by his own lust.****”* The word here translated as *“enticed”* means “to bait, to catch by bait.” Satan feeds on what we give him- our weaknesses and temptations, to keep his strength up so that he can *lure* us close enough to destroy us (remember he’s *caged/chained*). Consider also Romans 13:14, *“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and* ***make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.****”* Did you get that? Don’t “make provisions” for your fleshly lusts. Don’t make it easy for Satan to destroy you by continuing to “feed” him with your fleshly/sinful desires. Such is the source of his power. Instead, *“put on the Lord Jesus Christ”!*

Please realize that for Satan to have the ability to destroy us, we have to help him. We must: ignore his obvious warning “roars”; walk into his cage (or within the length of his chain); and continually feed him with our sinful desires. Don’t do it! (10-13-11)

**Finding a Stopping Place**

“Finding a stopping place” can be difficult- like when you sit down to a meal of your absolute favorite food. The “stopping place” is usually the bottom of an empty serving dish. Once you begin, there’s just not a good “stopping place!” Arbitrarily saying, “I’ll go this far, but stop here” is just not an option. The journey is only completed at the finish(ed) line! In much the same way, it ought to be so with our hunger for and application of bible authority. Once we begin to eat this “meat” (Hebrews 5:12-14), we have to continue on to completion because there is just no “stopping point” short of it.

For instance, if we are willing to appeal to the authority of God’s word to understand what’s “right” or “wrong” about one particular issue, how do we then stop short of God’s authority for other matters? If God’s word is the proper authority to determine one issue of morality, why is it not also the right authority to decide all issues of morality? *“For whoever keeps the whole law and stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. For He who said ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not commit murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law,”* James 2:10-11. We simply cannot afford to be “picky eaters” or “tasters” of God’s word to determine morality, we have to consume it all.

Let’s take another helping of this same dish. If God’s word is the proper authority to determine issues of morality, how can it possibly be anything less for issues of faith and doctrine (teaching)? When God’s word says there is *“one Lord, one faith, and one baptism,”* (Ephesians 4:5), how can we say, “Having many differing faiths is a good thing because it allows everyone to find what’s right for them”? Or how can we say, “Baptism is important but not essential”? If having *“one Lord”* is essential, then so too are *“one faith”* and *“one baptism.”*

The same Bible that says murder and adultery are sinful, also says, *“Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment,”* 1Corinthians 1:10. It also says, *“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit,”* 1Corinthians 12:13. The only way we can be “one body” is to all eat and drink fully of the authority of God’s word.

We cannot appeal to our own thoughts and ideas for such is *“self-made religion”* (Colossians 2:23), and making a *“god”* of our own *“appetites”* (Philippians 3:19). Neither can we appeal to the thinking of modern culture for authority because 1Corinthians 1:21 is still true, *“….the world through its wisdom did not come to know God….”* But, we also cannot be true to God while appealing to uninspired the writings of men, whether new or ancient, as the basis of authority. Jesus condemns this in Matthew 15:6-9, *“And thus you invalidate the word of God for the sake of your tradition…. This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.”* There is just no stopping place with appealing to the authority of God’s word short of the bottom of the dish!

Here is one final “helping” of this authority dish. We cannot appeal to the authority of God’s word to determine issues of morality, faith, and doctrine without also allowing it to be the standard for our worship (collectively praising God). Please read your New Testament. It is the authoritative standard for Christ’s church. The Old Testament scriptures were the authoritative standard for Jews living prior to the death of Jesus (see Exodus 20:22; 2Corinthians 3:7-11; Hebrews 9:1-17), but the *“gospel of the kingdom”* of Jesus Christ is the sole authority for all men everywhere today, Luke 16:16; 2Thessalonians 2:14. To worship and please Him, we must do so in the ways and with the means He provides in the authority of His Law. If it isn’t in the New Testament, it can’t be New Testament worship. If we are willing to appeal to the New Testament to determine issues of morality, faith, and doctrine, shouldn’t we also be willing to look to it for authority in worship?

The only “stopping place” to be found with regard to the authority of Jesus Christ is “all the way.” We simply cannot “pick and choose” the parts of His law we are willing accept- we must take and consume/apply it all! (6-17-14)

**Fleeing Youthful Lusts**

In 2Timothy 2:22, Paul urges the young evangelist Timothy to *“Flee youthful lusts…”* I strongly suspect that these words of warning were ultimately intended for a much larger audience! Verses immediately previous in the context sure seem to indicate that he had a much wider target in his sights than just Timothy. So, let’s give this admonishment a little consideration.

The meaning of *to “flee”* seems pretty obvious: it means *to get away from-* usually *as quickly as possible!* *“Youthful”* likewise appears fairly easy to discern- it means *of,* or *pertaining to, the young.* OK, but what about the *“lust”* part of the phrase?

Generally, the word “lust” is used in the New Testament to refer to *unlawful sexual desires,* but can also refer to *inordinate,* or *excessive desires* that are not sexual in nature, cf. Romans 6:12; Ephesians 2:3; Titus 3:3; or, it can even refer to *good desires,* Luke 22:15; Philippians 1:23; 1Thessalonians 2:17*.*  However, in our passage, Paul is using *epithumia* (the Greek word translated as “lust”) in a definitely negative, but not exclusively sexual, sense. So, what do we have? “Quickly get away from young desires”- which begs the question: **“What is it about *young desires* that merit our haste in getting away from them?”**

**Young desires are usually *impulsive.***  This is not meant to be a criticism as much as a statement of fact. Younger folks are much more prone to act based on *spur-of-the-moment* emotionandpassion of the heart, rather than on deliberate thought and consideration of the mind. Unfortunately, such decisions are usually not the best ones we can make. In fact, if we have enough self-control to just stop and think about what God says is the “right” thing to do before we act, many *“harmful desires”* (1Timothy 6:9) can be avoided. And, if we delay acting long enough to pray for guidance and strength also, then the odds go way up of avoiding activities that have very detrimental, and often irreversible, consequences.

**Young desires are typically based on *instant gratification.*** Obviously, this is very much related to the previous point. When we are controlled or directed more by our hearts than by our heads, the result is that we’re usually short-sighted. The heart wants what it wants *right now,* but the head can often think through the situation, and put off immediate gratification for future longer-term benefits. The problem is, again, that the heart is leading us to act before the head has time to contemplate future consequences or benefits. Such is simply a sign of immaturity. 2Peter 1:5-10 tells us that if we fail to *“add to* (grow or mature, PCS) *our faith,*”we are susceptible to this kind of *short-sidedness.* Therefore obviously, if we fail to flee from emotion-based decisions to thought-based decisions, we never really become *“trained to discern good and evil”* (Hebrews 5:12-14), and our *“youthful lusts”* quickly become full-grown problems!

**Young desires are often negatively influenced by *peer pressure.*** Timothy, to whom Paul is writing, is himself “young,” relatively speaking. Paul is urging him to avoid the pressures of the emotionally immature and spiritually carnal. The young, while still in their formativeyears, and searching for their own way in the world, often fall prey to desires to “fit in” with the crowd. If they have chosen their “crowd” foolishly rather than wisely, they are apt to be influenced away from, rather than toward, God. However, being young shouldn’t be an excuse. Too often, parents and adults in their lives excuse bad choices with, “They’re just sowing wild oats,” or “They’re young- they’ll learn better later.” But remember, sown wild oats have a way of sprouting and growing into bad plants; and young folks likely won’t learn better unless we teach them better! Heed another related imperative by Paul from 1Corinthians 15:33-34, *“Do not be deceived; ‘Bad company corrupts good morals.’ Become sober-minded as you ought, and stop sinning; for some have no knowledge of God.”*  While this passage is directed primarily to adult Christians concerning their own poor choices of associates, the principle applies to younger folks also. Young and old alike should decide to associate with those who influence them positively toward holiness and right conduct.

Finally, please note that *“Flee youthful lusts”* is not all there is to 2Timothy 2:22. The rest of the verse urges, *“and pursue after righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”* Failures in these areas render us neither *sanctified* nor *useful* to the Master, 2Timothy 2:21ff. (8-21-12)

**“For Richer, for Poorer, in Sickness and in Health, Until Death Parts Us”**

The words are easily recognizable, and equally understandable- but are they the truth? With these and other words, we promise undying love, endless devotion, and unquestionable loyalty and faithfulness “until death parts us,” and then divorce the mate with whom we stood before God, family, and friends to promise these things. Why?

**“We just fell out of love.”** The kind of love on which biblical marriage is based is not one into which one falls. We may “fall into” lust or infatuation, but not biblical love. True biblical love *establishes a value* instead of *seeking a value.* Think about the following statement: “I love him/her because of the way he/she makes *me* feel.” Or, “I love him/her because of what he/she does for *me.”*  Both of these statements represent *selfish motives* for what is thought to be “love.” But biblical love, the kind upon which marriage is supposed to be founded, is *selfless*. Compare the following statements: “I *love* this person because they are *valuable* to me”- which is representative of *selfish* motives, with, “This person is *valuable* to me because I *love* them.” The first remark *requires* a value, but the second one *establishes* a value. We think we “fall out of love” when those *selfish values* that we mistook for “love” fail or change. The truth is that what we thought was “love” was actually only “lust” (selfish desire). But if, instead, the relationship was based on biblical love, which *established* rather than *requiring* a value, it can and will endure. If these things are doubted, consider that God’s love for us *established* rather than *required* a value, *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,”* Romans 5:8. This is true biblical love- and when marriage is based upon it rather than *selfish desires,* it can and will endure the inevitable changes of time and remain constant and true.

**“We grew apart.”** Though not a scriptural justification for divorce (see Matthew 19:1-9), this one is actually often accurate. Couples who do not work at “growing together” will usually “grow apart.” But should we really be surprised that we “grow apart” when we cultivate or have separate *friends, interests, churches, hobbies, bank accounts, relationships with the children, parenting perspectives, vacations,* and *last names?*  Such things sound as if we’re *working* toward“growing apart”! Please understand that when the Bible speaks of a man and a woman becoming *“one flesh”* through marriage, this *includes* but is much more than the sexual union (cf. Ephesians 5:31). “One flesh” is two individuals becoming one couple to share a life *together*. It represents the uniting of hopes and dreams and the mutual sharing of heartaches and triumphs, “together as one.” It is loving your spouse *as yourself,* Ephesians 5:28-29, and even more so- *sacrificially*, Ephesians 5:25-27; and *submissively,* Ephesians 5:22-24. If we don’t love our spouses enough to live with them in these ways, we will “grow apart” rather than “growing together.”

**“It just didn’t work out.”** We need to understand a couple of things. 1) Marriage is an institution of *divine origin-* this means God created it, and therefore, if it is to be entered, it must be constituted and maintained as His word dictates. 2) Marriage is not “on a trial basis.” The vows (when scripturally based) include, “until death parts us.” It is a lifetime commitment, not a “we’ll see how it goes” arrangement, cf. Matthew 19:6. 3) Thus the problems we encounter in marriage result from doing it wrong. Saying “**It** just didn’t work out” is shifting the responsibility for failure to the institution that God created, and thus, in reality is blaming God! The reality is that God’s institution of marriage works when we do it the way God ordained, and fails when **we** fail to maintain the duties and responsibilities He ordained in and for the union. **This takes work!** Both the husband and the wife must fully understand and responsibly fulfill their obligations to each other consistently and faithfully, and be tenaciously committed to doing so “until death parts us”! It is far too easy to blame the institution, circumstances, luck, or your spouse for failure and quit; instead of being willing to work *hard* together to make the marriage one that pleases God and is a blessing to us and society as a whole. But such is exactly what is required!

**“I wasn’t getting what I needed from the relationship.”** (Review “We just fell out of love” above!). Marriage, done right, is mutually satisfying. But if we love as we should, joy is found in putting the needs of our spouse *ahead* of our own, and then meeting those needs! Philippians 2:1-4 is not specifically addressing “marriage” (instead, it addresses our relationships within local fellowships), but applying those same principles of *“doing nothing from selfishness,”* regarding *“one another as more important than”* self, and *“not merely looking out for your own personal interests”* will surely help make your marriage mutually satisfying.

Please understand that God *“hates divorce,”* cf. Malachi 2:16, but gave us the institution of marriage for our ultimate satisfaction and joy. If we “do” marriage right, which is according to His arrangement and dictates, it provides a foretaste of heaven on earth, Ephesians 5:32-33. But if we attempt to “do” marriage according to our own arrangement and desires, it can surely be a foretaste of hell on earth. Don’t stand before God and your family and friends and lie- mean and keep those vows so that you can reap all of the benefits God intended for “holy matrimony.” (6-23-15)

**Forgetful**

For about fifteen years, we literally lived about 120 seconds from the church building. My study/office was there, so forgetting and leaving something at home was no big deal- jump in the car, make the five minute round trip, and retrieve whatever it was my “forgetter” forgot. But since moving to Indianapolis in July, our home is a fifteen to twenty minute drive from the building, depending on the traffic and weather, neither of which was much of a concern in East Texas.

Case in point: this morning, I remembered: hat (newly and lovingly crocheted for me by D), gloves (also a newly required article of clothing!), coat (we’re actually supposed to be above freezing today!), coffee (duh), phone, the trip to the bank, and another couple of errands along the way. But once I pulled up to the building, and gathered all my paraphernalia to exit the car, I remembered…. that I forgot all three of my Bibles! Fortunately, I have others. They won’t be as comfortable, or work quite as well, but they do contain everything I’ll need today.

Such things got me to remembering a few things any of my Bibles reminds me **not** to forget:

* 2Peter 1:9, *my purification from former sins.* I need to remember my salvation from sin, and what Jesus did to make such possible. In the context of this verse, this means I need to appreciate my salvation enough to keep *adding to my faith* so that His sacrifice is not wasted on me, cf. vv.5-11.
* Hebrews 12:5-6, *God’s motivation and purpose for my discipline.* God disciplines me because He *loves* and wants the *best* for me. Sometimes, this discipline *hurts.* It hurts Him to give it, and me to receive it- but the benefits are worth the hurt for both of us, cf. vv.7-11.
* James 1:23-24, *to be a doer of God’s word.*  It’s very easy to be just a *hearer.* In the analogy given, God’s word is a *mirror.* I need to not only look deeply into it to see myself as God does, I need to also *remember* what I saw while looking and then make the necessary changes, cf. vv.25-26 (see also 2Peter 3:1-2).
* John 15:20, *a slave is not greater than his Master.* Though there are many possible applications of this point, the one Jesus is making is simple: *“If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you”-* that includes me, and you. I need to remember this, accept it, cf. 2Timothy 3:12; and do the *right* things anyway, 1Peter 3:13-17.
* Hebrews 13:7, *leaders and teachers,* and to *emulate their faith.* I would do well to remember that the best way to thank a spiritual *leader* or *teacher* is to *lead* and *teach*. Christianity is all about *selfless service,* and outside of Jesus Christ, no one demonstrates these qualities more than *leaders* and *teachers,* cf. v.15-17; and 2Timothy 2:2.
* Acts 20:35, *it is more blessed to give than to receive.* It’s (in whatever form) never all about me. Jesus said so. There are always others to consider. It is far too easy to become selfish- even with God’s word. If I receive, I need to give. If I am blessed, I need to bless. I need to remember to *bruise my blessings* by hording them.
* 2Timothy 2:8, *Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.* It is the *death,* not the *birth,* of Jesus that gives me hope. It is His death that provides me with forgiveness now, and the surety of resurrection and eternal salvation later. It is His death that makes everything worthwhile, cf. vv.9-15. May I never forget it!

There are a lot of things I may forget with little or no consequences. But the things God tells me to remember, I NEED TO REMEMBER! Perhaps you do too. Please, read the verses and REMEMBER the ones listed above, as well as others that may be even more specific to you. (12-20-16)

***Form* or *Function?***

Which is more important?  Are they *mutually exclusive*?

My wife loves these decorating shows on T.V.  She’s always wanting me (as the one truly in charge of the remote control as any real man should be!) to check and see what’s on the Home & Garden channel or one of those other women’s channels just as the WWII movie is getting to the good part, or John Wayne is about to shoot or slug the bad guy!  And as a “real man” I usually tell her “no” and then change the channel to the one she suggested!   But one thing about it, I’ve learned the lingo of these kinds of shows– through over-exposure no doubt.  [So, please don’t use the “whimsy” or “whimsical” around me as this is the most irritating of all the vocabulary peculiar to these shows.]   But, as in most things, even these women’s shows can have some beneficial ideas when applied spiritually.  Here’s what I mean….

One of the things I hear discussed on these design/decorating shows (not that I really listen or watch with any interest, mind you) **is the challenge of balancing *form* with *function***.   Designs or decorating patterns that are more *function-oriented* are said to be “utilitarian” and usually frowned upon by the frou-frou divas of design.  By contrast, the designs or decorating trends that are often portrayed seem to be overly conscience of *style or form*, but lacking in usability.  They may look great to the design team, but you know from practical experience that they won’t work in a “real” family environment.  **Herein is the challenge of form vs. function.**

Christianity is not immune from this challenge.  All too often perhaps, we can become overly concerned, if not outright obsessed, with form over function.  Paul, after listing what we would consider a whole bunch of heinous offenses, said that such people were ***“holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power”*** ([2Tim.3:1-5](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/2Tim.3.1-5%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)).  Despite being either the possessors or practitioners of these overtly sinful attitudes and actions, they claimed for themselves the “form” of Christianity– hypocritically, of course.  Likewise, Jesus was often chided by the divas of doctrine in His day, as well as questioned by His disciples, about how what He was doing “looked”. They were concerned about the ***form*** of Him eating with sinners rather than the ***function*** of Him **saving them!**

Our challenges today don’t differ much in substance from these types of examples.  Most have roots that stretch deep into the mother-earth of the shallow spiritual commitment.  Because we lack spiritual dedication and a heart of discipleship, **we become overly concerned with what “others” think and do rather than the “right thing” to think and do.**  **And so our “worship services” become more about entertaining “us” and “them” than worshipping Him.** Likewise, our private lives become tainted with the desire to “fit in” with those who we ought to be mercifully convicting of sin and lovingly converting to Christ.

Look, Christianity isn’t all utilitarian.  Properly practiced, it truly is a beautiful thing to behold.  But it’s even more pleasing to the senses when it is practiced rather than just seen in others.  Don’t become too concerned with what the pop-culture of religion today thinks. Do the right thing(s) in worship and daily living anyway!  It really is more important.  (12-8-10)

**Forty Years of Evolutionary Theory**

The “forty years of evolution” in the title is not from the time it has been taught, but from the time of my exposure to it. In that time-frame, the theory has “evolved” (excuse the pun) much, but the basic problem associated with it has changed little.

Hebrews 3:4 records, *“For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.”* In a mere fifteen words, these divinely-inspired words completely undo forty year’s worth of evolutionary teaching. Here’s how.

No right-thinking person looks at a house and proposes an evolutionary cause for its obvious existence. No one thinks that an explosion of materials of unknown origin created the immaculate design, orderly arrangement, and intricate construction of a house. And yet, this is precisely what evolutionary theory tries to convince us happened to create the design, order, and construction of our world and universe!

Our passage uses what is commonly known as “Cause and Effect.” Simply stated, “Cause and Effect” says that for every known **effect**, an adequate **cause** must exist to have produced it. Understand the importance of the word “adequate” in this principle law. In the example of the house, the house is the effect. Its obvious existence cannot be **adequately** explained by an explosion of materials from an unknown source, ignited by a spark of energy from an unknown cause, random chance, or benign environmental forces acting upon those materials. No one makes such outrageous assumptions when they see the “effect” of a house, but somehow many make the very same assumptions, and profusely peddle them, when it comes to the origin of life itself, our world, and the universe!

But houses come into being when an intelligently creative being imagines and designs them, an expressive draftsman reveals the plans for them, and a skilled master builder constructs them. Thus it also is with life, the world, and universe: God the Father designed them (Acts 17:28; 1Corinthians 8:6), God the Spirit revealed the plans for them (1Corinthians 2:10-13), and God the Son built them (Hebrews 1:2b; Colossians 1:15-16).

The atheist sees the “house” (effect) of life and the universe and postulates a theory to be the “builder” (cause) of it- evolution is result. The believer sees the same “house” and understands an entirely different “builder”- God, the first and only *uncaused* Cause. Both start with something. The evolutionist starts with lifeless matter for which he does not have an origin, and has it exploding into life and orderly design. The creationist starts with the eternal mind, power, and person of God as the source of life, order, and design. Think about a “house” (effect), and tell me which one is the “builder” (cause) which is **adequate** to have produced it.

Think also of the collateral results associated with this decision. Since evolution necessarily eliminates God from our existence, the resulting atheism affects all aspects of our lives. If God does not exist, then man is not created *“in God’s image”* (Genesis 1:26), but is only a higher animal with no real purpose other than the instinct to survive as he pleases as long as possible. If God does not exist, then marriage is not an institution of divine origin and regulation created and given for human happiness (Genesis 2:18-24), but a meaningless arrangement to be used and abused as we please. If God does not exist, then a yet unborn child is not a *“gift of the Lord”* (Psalm 127:3), but a “non-viable tissue mass” which we are free to kill at our convenience. If God does not exist, then life here and now is not a necessary preparation for eternity (1Corinthians 15:35-58), but a miserably hopeless pursuit of things which cannot last.

Now, in which “house” do you want to live: the one “built” by God, or the one “built” by evolution? One gives us purpose in life, the greatest happiness this side of heaven in holy matrimony, the unspeakable joy of completely selfless love, and eternal existence in heaven. The other makes us animals with no purpose in life, gives us misery and pain in our closest possible associations, turns us into murderers of the innocent, and condemns us to a hopeless existence terminated only by death. Please think for yourself- it really doesn’t hurt at all! (6-12-12)

**The Futility of Idolatry**

Some 700 years before the time of Christ, God’s prophet Isaiah warned of the foolishness and futility of idolatry in clear and remarkable language the logic of which cannot be denied. In Isaiah 44, he first points out that although a man may plant a tree (or forest), it is God who sends the rain that makes it grow in v.14. But the reasoning of the next few verses is amazing. The man depicted cuts a tree from this forest and: 1) burns some of it to build a fire for warmth; 2) burns some of it to bake his bread and roast his meat; and, 3) *“But the rest of it he mak*es *into a god, his graven image. He falls down before it and worships; he also prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for thou art my god’,”* v.17. The point is crystal clear: Why would anyone worship and pray to a “god” he himself fashioned from the same tree that he also burned to warm himself and to cook his food? Moreover, why would anyone reasonably expect such a “god” to deliver him from trouble or oppression?

The apostle Paul makes pretty much the same point to the idolatrous Athenians in Acts 17:29, *“Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.”*  Man, as the *creation* of God, surely should not think that he could *create* a “god” that is worthy of his adoration and worship!

While there are surely still people in the world who carve a “god” from wood, or form one from some other substance, such are not the most common forms of idolatry today. Instead, many worship the idol of:

**Their Own Desires**, *“For many walk, of whom I have often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction,* ***whose god is their appetite,*** *and whose glory is in their shame, who set their mind on earthly things,”* Philippians 3:18-19. The alternative marginal rendering of the word translated as *“appetite”* is *“belly.”* He’s not talking about gluttony necessarily, but instead refers to making our own selfish desires into a “god,” and obeying them rather than Jehovah. In reality, this is nothing more than self-worship, and is the height of idolatry.

**Mammon,** *“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon,”* Matthew 6:24. The rampant consumerism and commercialism of the current world surely must be the result of worshipping Mammon (riches) rather than the Messiah. If you’d like to know if you’re worshipping this particular idol, read the rest of Matthew 6 (vv.25-34), and then ask yourself this question: “Do I really believe and worship God enough to truly *‘seek first His kingdom and His righteousness,’* or is He just a distant second (or third, fourth, etc.) place in my life to money and the things it will buy?

**Pleasure,** *“If because of the Sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken,”* Isaiah 58:13-14. These words were meant to contrast right and wrong attitudes of worship, and to condemn the idolatry of “pleasure,” to God’s people under the Law of Moses. The Sabbath, God’s “holy day” under that law system, was being corrupted and/or pushed aside for the selfish pursuits of personal pleasure. Though the first day of the week is the day of worship for Christians under the Law of Christ (rather than Saturday/Sabbath, cf. Acts 20:7; Revelation 1:10), the problem of this particular idolatry persists today. In fact, it may well be the most prevalent form of idolatry practiced. God’s “day” has instead become God’s “hour” for many- and only then if it doesn’t conflict with some other recreational activity or preferred pursuit. Surely, such is idolatry.

Will you worship your Creator, or instead bow to the idols you create of your own desires, money, and pleasure? The latter makes no more sense now than it did when Isaiah wrote about it some 2700 years ago! (4-4-14)

**Gadgets and the Gospel**

My astute wife once (sarcastically) noted that *everything* she needed in life could be found on late-night television ads. Through them, she could have a phenomenal income with practically no effort, lose weight by taking a pill but continuing to eat and exercise as normal, clean her whole house with little effort in heels and makeup, get a college degree without ever attending classes, and slice, dice, and chop anything in the kitchen including soda cans for $19.99 (plus shipping and handling of course)! Some of these ads feature great products, I’m sure. But most of them fall under the heading of what we commonly call “gadgets.” Typically, “gadgets” are tools that are specifically designed to do a common task, or several of them, with greater ease or efficiency. Unfortunately, many of them are designed more to sell than to use. Still others, though touted to perform many varied tasks, do none of them very well or efficiently. The kitchen is a prime target for gadgets. We can quickly fill several drawers or cabinets with them. But then too, garages or workshops can hold even more gadgets! So both sexes are susceptible to gadgetitis. These gadgets often wind up in garage sales, or in donation bags.

But let’s think through this gadgetry thing a bit further. The “gadget”- whatever it is and whatever it is supposed to do, is usually supposed to make something we’re already doing easier. They’re typically not purchased to perform a task that is new to us. Furthermore, they most often wind up in the “junk drawer” because they’re too much trouble to set up, clean, or keep up (due to poor design or construction), and we go back to doing it the “tried and true” way. Isn’t it the same with spreading the gospel? Some new “gadget” appears on the scene that is going to “completely change the way we spread the gospel,” and we jump on board. Then, as soon as “the fun” wears off with the newness of it, or we discover that it still requires diligent effort, or it doesn’t actually work as well as we thought, we’re back to square one so to speak. And what is “square one” for spreading the gospel and teaching others about Christ? Glad you asked…

The basis of spreading the gospel is the same as it has always been- *“preaching the word,”* Acts 8:4. While this certainly includes “the pulpit” of local congregations, it certainly is not limited to it. If we notice the context of Acts 8:1-4, persecution had driven Christians from their homes (and their home churches) in and around Jerusalem. But note carefully that *the apostles* stayed behind in the city, v.1. Therefore, it was *the disciples-* not *the apostles* who were responsible for this particular expansion of the church through the preaching of the word. Now the big question: What “program” (think *gadgetry*) did they use to so dramatically increase the Lord’s kingdom by spreading the gospel? Wasn’t it just Christians talking to others about the salvation they found in Jesus Christ? Didn’t they just use the gospel- the “good news” of salvation in Jesus Christ? They didn’t have “programs” or “gadgets” to spread the Word, they just spoke to others and taught them what God said!

Don’t get me wrong. Not every “program” is bad, and not every “gadget” is inefficient or poorly constructed. In fact, some of both can be used very effectively **provided** the gospel remains both the primary focus and means of teaching. It is, after all, *“the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,”* Romans 1:16. All too often, the “program/gadget” can overshadow it to the point of actually becoming more important to the user and recipient. This only results in conversions to the program or gadget used, or to a church using them, rather than to Christ. But preaching/teaching the gospel results in Christians who are converted to Christ! Note Paul’s warning to Timothy in these regards. *“As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus, in order that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than the furthering of God’s provision which is by faith. But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion,”* 1Timothy 2:3-6. Think on these things, won’t you? Don’t become infected with gadgetitis, or programitis either! (3-22-16)

**What We Gain from Giving**

As many before me have said in one way or another, “Free-will offerings aren’t God’s way of raising money; they’re one of His ways of raising children.” It’s similar to Him putting Adam in the Garden of Eden *“to cultivate it and keep it”* (cf. Genesis 2:15). God didn’t need a gardener, but Adam needed an occupation. Likewise, God doesn’t need our money, but we need to contribute. Why do we need to give monetarily to a local congregation? The typical response to this question is “So that the work of the church can continue,” or, “To help spread the gospel.” While both statements are true to some degree, they don’t actually answer the question asked. The question wasn’t “Why does the local church need money?” It was, “Why do we need to give monetarily to a local church?” The former emphasizes *objective* need of the congregation, while the latter considers the *subjective* need of the contributor. So, what’s the answer? There are several, actually….

**We need to give monetarily to the local church to help us learn the importance of spiritual priorities, and our relationship to physical things.** In Matthew 6:25-33 Jesus taught a great lesson that is easy to understand, but difficult to live. The basic principle is stated earlier in the text, *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon 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 destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,”* Matthew 6:19-21. We need to learn what’s really important in life. All too often, material “things” take precedence in our minds, hearts, and activities. But Jesus promises that if we will *“seek first His kingdom”* rather than attempting to build one of our own, *“and His righteousness”* rather than attempting to define one of our own from material thoughts and desires, that the necessities of life *“shall be added to you,”* v.25. Thus, giving monetarily to a local congregation of the Lord’s church helps us learn to value spiritual over material possessions, and to use our material blessings for spiritual rewards rather than the other way around.

**We need to give monetarily to the local church to help us understand stewardship, and our relationship to God.** The concept of *stewardship* is a little foreign to us, at least by that name. It is being put in charge of another’s possessions, and thus being responsible for using them in way to promote the owner’s interests and gains. In reality, it is not all that different from being in a management position with a company. The promotion and furtherance of the company’s interest are made paramount, and from the service rendered, the steward receives his living and commensurate reward, cp. Matthew 24:45-51. So, how does this work in spiritual terms? We must first understand that all blessings- whether spiritual or physical, are the provision of God, cf. Acts 14:15-17; James 1:17. Both in reality and effect, everything belongs to God as Creator and Sustainer of all things in heaven and on earth. Nothing really “belongs” to any of us. Thus, we are merely “stewards” of His possessions. Giving monetarily to a local congregation of the Lord’s church is simply using those possessions of our Benevolent Benefactor in a way that promotes His interests and furthers His cause- and that helps make us good and faithful stewards!

**We need to give monetarily to the local church to involve us as sharers in fellowship, and teaches us about our relationship to our brethren.** There are a lot well-meaning Christians who genuinely want to be in and feel true “fellowship” with a local congregation. Sadly, many of them attend services only once or twice a month because they’re “so busy,” and never really contribute anything- monetarily or otherwise, because they have “so many bills” and “so little time.” If you’re one of those people or families, please read and consider Acts 2:43-47 carefully. The true *sense of belonging* and *oneness* (v.44a) of mind (v.46a), heart (v.46b), and provision (v.45) is, I believe, directly traceable and proportionate to their willingness to be involved in and committed to their local congregation. They *“continually devoted themselves”* to worship, v.42. They studied and learned together *“day by day,”* v.46a. They were *invested* in one another’s welfare *physically,* vv.44-45; and *spiritually,* v.47. And, they had or made time for one another apart from their “assemblies,” v.46b. Obviously, the *oneness* and *fellowship* they enjoyed wasn’t achieved from being “too busy”or having “too many bills” to be truly *involved* in their local congregation. It wasn’t just the property they sold and contributed, but let’s not discount the importance of being willing to first give *“themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God,”* cp. 2Corinthians 8:1-5! To have the sense of *belonging* we have to first *belong;* and to have a true sense of *fellowship* we must first be in the *ship.* But beyond these things, we must also be willing *grab an oar* and start *rowing* by doing our part! Giving monetarily to a local congregation of the Lord’s church is certainly not all there is to experiencing true fellowship, but it does teach us much about *self-sacrifice* and being *joint-participants* (which is the literal definition of *fellowship*), cf.1Cor.9:23.

Finally, think about this: I’ve never found a single expectation of God for us with which complete compliance is not in our best interest. They’re not just to allow us to avoid hell and enjoy heaven eternally. They’re to help teach and mature us into better people, spouses, parents, children, employees, employers, neighbors, citizens, and brethren in the Lord! God doesn’t need the money you give to your local congregation, but you need to give it in order to enjoy all the blessings and benefits associated with being in fellowship with Him and His people. (7-5-17)

**Giving or Receiving**

While Jesus was training the twelve disciples to become *“fishers of men”* (Matthew 4:19), He also told them, *“I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now,”* John 16:12. Have you ever wondered why this was so? Though we are not specifically told, I suspect that the answer has to do with growth, development, understanding, and time. With their spiritual growth and development, their understanding would increase so that as the events of time unfolded, they would later be able to *“bear”* truths that they currently could not.

It’s really not any different for would-be disciples today- it often takes some growth, development, and time for us to really understand and be able to *“bear”* (practice) some of Jesus’ words. For instance, consider His statement recorded in Acts 20:35, *“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”* (By the way, though these words are quoted by Paul and recorded by Luke- both through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they are not otherwise recorded by any of the four gospel writers.) When we are younger- in life or in faith, we may admit that such is true in principle, but have a hard time really seeing the value of it in practice!

But, the principle was not given as a maxim to promote a “holiday spirit” of charity, nor was it provided to be relegated to mere gift-giving applications. Jesus is instead describing a code of conduct in life for those who would be His disciples. While still immature in faith, we may submit to this rule because we know it is right, but not really “feel” the way we should about it. In other words, we may *do* the right thing in this regard without really *believing* or *seeing* the value in it ourselves. But with the growth and maturity that time allows, true understanding of the principle is gained. Let’s consider some specifics to illustrate our point. Do you think (in your mind), feel (in your heart), and believe (in your soul) that **it is better for *you* to give:**

* **Attention** rather than to receive it? Or do you still crave, or even demand other’s attention like a little fella who wants everyone to focus on him? Read Philippian 2:1-4, please.
* **Support** and **Encouragement** rather than to receive them? Are you one who always expects others to “help” and/or “support me,” but never seems to be found on the *giving* end of the matter? Please read 1Thessalonians 5:14-15.
* **Compassion** and **Sympathy** rather than to receive them? Do you always expect others to listen to and commensurate with all your troubles and how “bad” you feel, and to provide sympathy and compassion to you, but rarely (if ever) are truly compassionate and sympathetic to anyone beside yourself? Read Colossians 3:12-13, please.
* **Education** and **Enlightenment** rather than to receive them? When it comes to spiritual education and edification (to build up), are you a “giver” or just a “taker”? Please read Hebrews 5:12-14.
* **Forgiveness** rather than to receive it? Are you one who wants (and expects) everyone else to forgive you whenever you ask- and whether there is any true sorrow for the offence or not, but are very begrudging when it comes to forgiving others? Read Ephesians 4:32 and James 2:13, please.
* **Love** rather than to receive it? Do you desire or even demand unconditional love from others, but are quick to place conditions upon the love you give? Please read Matthew 5:44-48.

Now do you see why some divine directives require the growth and maturity that only time and experience can provide to really understand, *“bear,”* and practice? While we are yet spiritually immature, we would much rather ***receive than give*** all of these things. In fact, our still adolescent faith may not allow us to be able to ***give***them at all. Have you matured in your faith sufficiently to not only understand, but also to *“bear”* the principle that *“It is more blessed to give than to receive”?* If not, then maybe it is time to get busy and “grow up”! (4-23-13)

**Living in a Glass House**

This article is not about eco-friendly off the grid domiciles, or some sort of terrarium-styled greenhouse. Neither is it any sort of a rant in favor of more privacy or less visibility- in fact, it’s just the opposite. Living in a glass house has gotten a bad rap. They’re not just for non stone-throwers; glass houses are great places to live! In a spiritually metaphorical kind of way, they are the very best place for a Christian to live. Here’s why…

**Living in a glass house encourages clean living.** This isn’t a Windex commercial- it’s about cleanliness of *conduct.* Anonymity, secrecy, and excessive privacy make it easier to conceal improper conduct. Conversely, highly visible living encourages us to conduct ourselves in a way that we wouldn’t mind other people seeing. *“Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the truth consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to God. And do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light,”* Ephesians 5:7-13. People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones- but isn’t *stone throwing* fundamentally wrong regardless of what your house is made? Still yet, living in a glass house certainly encourages careful conduct.

**Living in a glass house helps others to see and benefit from your light.** As the previous point highlights a benefit to the *occupants,* this one emphasizes the advantages to *outsiders.* Think about it: Christians are supposed to be the *“light of the world”* by *reflecting* the light of Jesus which shines on us, Matthew 5:14 and Ephesians 5:14. But, if we curtain off and enclose that light in secrecy and privacy, no one else can see and benefit from it. In total, Matthew 5:14 reads, *“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”* Hence, v.15 adds, *“Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under a peck-measure* (or *basket,* KJV), *but on a lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house.”* The point of the passage is that our lives as Christians are supposed to *illumine* the path to God for those around us. *“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven,”* Matthew 5:16. This ***is*** glass house living! Living *in such a way* as to allow others to *see* the light of Jesus Christ in you enables them to *glorify* Him by learning from and following your example!

**Living in a glass house makes it easy to see a lion coming.** We are told to *“be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise,”* Ephesians 5:15. The *“walk”* to which the passage refers is our *manner of life.* In essence, it means to *watch your steps*. To do this, we have to be *circumspect* (literally to *look around*)*,* or aware of our surroundings. There are two important purposes for this instruction: 1) *“because the days are evil,”* v.16b, and thus dangers abound to harm **you** spiritually; and, 2) *“making the most of your time,”* v.16a, by being that *illuminating example* that provides *light* to **those in darkness**, cf. vv.11-13. Both of these purposes obviously go right along with living in a glass house. We’ve already noted the benefit to others in the previous paragraph, but *evilness of the day* is another matter. 1Peter 5:8 describes Satan as one who *“prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”* It is much easier to see a *lion prowling about* outside if you live in a glass house! Those shades of secrecy that we’re prone to hang, and the palisades of privacy that we tend to erect, make it just as difficult for us to see *out* as they do for others to see *in.* But a *prowling lion* has a lot more difficult time making a sneak attack if you circumspectly live in a glass house!

Finally, **living in a glass house is a constant reminder of the fragility of life.** Daily reminders of the delicateness and brevity of life is a good thing. James 4:13-14, *“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.”* See? A glass house really is the best place to live!  (12-2-14)

**Gluttony: More than Just Food**

Several years ago, I met a preacher friend, who shall remain nameless for reasons that will become obvious momentarily, for lunch at a Chinese restaurant that had a really good buffet. After looking at my own overly mounded plate, and then his *how-in-the-world-did-you-stack that-much-food-on-one* plate, I remarked, “From the looks of these plates, I’d guess neither of us will be preaching on ***gluttony*** this evening!” To which he calmly and matter-of-factly replied, “Let me tell you about gluttony: It’s only mentioned three times in the New Testament, and twice it was a false accusation about the Lord.” He paused for just a second or two to allow the coming epiphany to matriculate through my brain a bit before putting the jewel in this remarkable crown of exegesis, “Brother, that’s just not enough to preach on!” We both enjoyed a good laugh out of the exchange, and I accused him of being a little too “ready” with that answer- implying that he had been previously accused. Then we completely devoured our meals like a couple of hogs at the trough, knowing full well that the statement wasn’t exactly true….

“Gluttony” ***is*** mentioned only three times in the NT (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34; Titus 1:12), and two of those ***are*** false accusations against the Lord (Matthew and Luke), but, it does ***not*** necessarily follow that these things add up to it being “not enough to preach on.” The subject is also addressed once in Deuteronomy 21:20 and three times in Proverbs 23:20,21 and 28:7. But surely we understand that the relative importance of a subject to our lives is not determined by how often or few times it is mentioned in the Scriptures. After all, how many times does God have to say something for it to be true?

By definition, “gluttony” is “excessive eating.” But “gluttonous” refers to being *greedy, excessive,* or *insatiable* in ways that may or may not include food.

Sure, we can lack self-restraint regarding **food** to a degree that we destroy our health and literally eat ourselves into an early grave. But is the destruction of our health by food really the problem? Can’t we just as easily destroy our health by ingesting excessive amounts of stress? The food is not necessarily the problem, cf. 1Timothy 4:3, though it certainly can become so. The real issue of gluttony is the lack of self-control. *Self-control* is just as much a *“fruit of the Spirit”* or *Christian grace* as *love* or *joy* or *patience* or *kindness* or *faith* or *godliness* or *Christian love* or any of the rest of them, cf. Galatians 5:23 and 2Peter 1:5-7. And yet, somehow, a lack of *self-control* is laughed off or scoffed at as being unimportant. Let’s be clear: Deciding to enjoy an occasional *feast* with family or friends*,* even indulgently so by eating more than necessary, is not the problem. A lack of self-control regarding food that leads to *constant* over-eating is not only a problem (it does destroy one’s health), it is a sin that can destroy your soul. *“And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable,”* 1Corinthians 9:25.

We can also be “gluttons” for other things- like **attention**. Excessive *cravings for* and *efforts to gain* attention can be just as spiritually problematic as insatiable appetites for food! Like food, everyone has a basic need for a *sustaining amount* of attention. And, also like food, *occasional excesses* of attention are not necessarily harmful. But alas, *too much* of a good thing can be bad! Voracious cravings for attention lead to shameless self-promotion, Philippians 2:3-4; immodesty of *dress* and *conduct,* 1Peter 3:2-4; and emotional instability that becomes dependent upon this excessive notice from others, Titus 2:1-8. Those who allow themselves to become gluttons in this way are constantly saying or doing extravagant things to stay in the forefront of other’s consideration, and garner ever-increasing amounts of attention. All of which obviously runs contrary to Christianity, *“and make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need,”* 1Thessalonians 4:11.

Occasional indulgences of food and attention are one thing, but let’s be sure we don’t allow ourselves to become “gluttons” for either of them! (12-28-14)

**God’s Promise of Romans 8:28**

I suppose the recent tragic typhoon in the Philippines got me to thinking about it, but for years people of faith, and who certainly mean well, have quoted Romans 8:28 to comfort themselves or others when some terrible thing has happened. The application is typically that God causes even terrible events to have good outcomes if patience and trust are present. Please note this verse carefully, *“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”*  Let’s consider this verse and its context a little closer to see if it really promises all that some might expect, or in the way they expect.

**The promise of this verse is limited to *“those who love God”* and those who *“are called according to His purpose.”*** It is not universal in its scope. The chapter began a consideration of blessings and promises given to those *“in Christ Jesus,”* vv.1ff. So, the promise of v.28 must be limited to *“those who love God”* and *“who are called according to His purpose”* who are also *“in Christ.”* This means that they have done, and continue to do, those things that put them *in Christ,* cf. Galatians 3:26-29 (faith and baptism) and 1John 2:3-6 (keeping His commandments).

**The promise of this verse is limited by the *“all things”* God has specifically in mind.** Logic and the harmony of the Scriptures demand that *“all things”* is necessarily limited. Does the *“all things”* which God causes to work together for good include Satan, or his agents, or the sinful actions of self or others? Of course it doesn’t, for although God is certainly powerful enough to control Satan and to prevent the sinful actions of people from having disastrous consequences, He allows us the freedom to choose whom we will obey, Romans 6:16-21. When we allow Satan to influence us to make bad decisions and sinful actions, bad things can and do happen. And the physical consequences of such are often irreversible. For example, if I decide to drink and drive, and kill a young mother in so doing, her husband is without a wife and her children without a mother, and I will likely spend the rest of my life behind bars. Is God then responsible for making “good” things to come from my sinful choices and activities? Such is not the promise of this verse.

So, what are we to conclude that *“all things”* of the verse includes? Note the *spiritual helps* that have already been listed in the chapter: **Spiritual Freedom** from condemnation through the *“law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus,”* vv.1-4; **Spiritual Guidance** from the Spirit’s inspired provision of *“the Law of God,”* vv.2,5-14; **Spiritual Adoption/Validation** as children of God through the *Spirit’s witness,* vv.16-17; **Spiritual Hope** of eternal salvation that sustains us during the *“sufferings of this present time,”* vv.18-25; and **Spiritual Intercession** by the Spirit in prayerto the Father, vv.26-27. Why not understand *“all things”* of v.28 to be referring to these ***spiritual helps*** which have already been listed in the text under consideration, rather than trying to make them apply to every conceivable *physical* force, circumstance, and thing? Thus…

**The promise of this verse is limited to the *spiritual helps* God has promised to those who love and obey Him.**  He has promised *spiritual salvation, spiritual adoption, spiritual hope,* and *spiritual intercession* to those who love and obey Him, but has not promised that *physical “good”* will come from bad circumstances brought about by evil influences and choices.

**The promise of this verse is limited to what God determines and calls *“good.”*** Neither this verse, nor any other, obligates God to cause what we might deem “good” to occur for us (which usually relates to *physical things*),even if we do love and obey Him. Remember that all but one of the apostles suffered tremendous persecutions and were killed for their faith! The simple fact is that we are not good determiners of what is “good” for us in the first place, Jeremiah 10:23; Isaiah 5:20. Instead of the applications that are typically made of Romans 8:28 toward *physical* good as we see it, please realize that God **is** promising that all the *spiritual helps* He has provided will effect our ***spiritual***and **eternal good** no matter what *physical* suffering or tragedy we encounter in life- **if** we use them to continue love, trust, and obey Him. (11-12-13)

**God’s Eraser**

There are several passages in the Old and New Testaments that mention a *“book”* in which God records the names of those who will inherit eternal life. Now I realize, and I’m sure you do also, that God does not suffer the memory lapses that cause us to have to write things down to prevent forgetting them! God is *omniscient* (all-knowing), and thus does not have such human maladies with which to contend. So, why is there this book? The best answer is probably that accommodative language is being used to help our understanding. Heaven is a spiritual place, and thus is not literally composed of physical things like *streets of gold, seas like glass,* and *jeweled gates*- or *books.* All of these images are utilized to convey a *spiritual* place to *physical* minds.

But let’s get back to God’s “book.” Daniel 12:1 speaks of *“the book”* in whose names are recorded those who would be rescued from distress. Jesus, in Luke 10:20, indicates that His disciples ought to rejoice that *“your names are recorded* (presumably in this *“book”*) *in heaven.”* In Philippians 4:3, Paul mentions some specific women *“whose names are recorded in the book of life.”*  Revelation 13:8 adds that it has been *“written from the foundation of the world…”* and 21:27 clearly says that *“only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life”* will enter heaven.

These things beg two essential questions. First, **“How does one come to have their name recorded in God’s ‘book of life’?”** Let’s answer this one by looking at Jesus’ last words to the Twelve, whom He was sending out into the world to preach the gospel to all men that they might be saved, *“Go therefore and* ***make disciples*** *of all the nations,* ***baptizing*** *them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them**to* ***observe******all that I commanded*** *you…”* Matthew 28:19-20. That seems pretty clear! If we want to have our names recorded in “the book of life” so that we can enter and spend eternity in heaven, we must become ***“disciples”*** (literally, *followers*) of Christ by being ***“baptized”*** (immersed) ***“in the name of”*** (by the authority of) the ***“Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”*** (the three ‘personages’ of Deity: Planner, Savior, and Revealer) and ***“observe all that I commanded”*** (do what the New Testament says). By the grace of God, this enrolls our names in His “book of life,” Hebrews 12:23!

The second question this whole “book of life” thing seems to necessitate is this: **“Can a name recorded in God’s ‘book of life’ ever be removed?”** As always must be our course, let’s see what God says. From the Old Testament first, in Exodus 32:33, God is addressing Moses concerning His own people, the Israelites, regarding their sin, *“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against Me,* ***I will blot him out of My book.”*** That seems pretty clear! But what about the New Testament, the Covenant all today are under? In the letter to the church at Sardis, God is again addressing His own people (*i.e. Christians*). Revelation 3:3,5 records these words, *“Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it,* ***and repent****.* ***If*** *therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you….****He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments****; and* ***I will not erase his name*** *from the book of life…”* Now, when God says that He *would not* remove the names of those who overcome sin by *repenting* and *keeping* His word, what does that imply for those who don’t do these things? Plainly, it means that God both ***can*** and ***will* erase their names from His book of life!**

Brethren beware: not only is it ***possible***for us to have our names removed from God’s book after they’ve once been recorded there, it is a ***promise***from God that they **will** be erased **if** we fail to *“hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end,”* Hebrews 3:14! (3-27-12)

***Lady’s* Man, *Man’s* Man, *My Own* Man, or *God’s* Man?**

Most churches are composed of more women than men. This is due, in part, to the general tendency of women to live longer than men. But even among the younger populace of congregations, there are again usually more females than males. I’m not exactly sure why this is so, but for whatever reasons, women generally seem to be more accepting of the gospel and spiritually-minded than men. While this is certainly a commendable reflection upon the fairer sex, it surely doesn’t bode well for the male of the species! So, what can be done to improve the spiritual-mindedness of us guys? Consider three representative types of men: the *Lady’s Man,* the *Man’s Man,* and the *My Own Man*.

**Samson** surely possessed all the physical traits the *ladies* sought in a man. He had long flowing hair (Judges 13:3-5). He had big muscles and tremendous strength (14:6; 15:14-15; 16:13); and he had unmatched athletic prowess and fighting skills (14:19; 15:4,8). Yet despite these physically attractivetraits, he also: had a horribly failed marriage (14:20–15:6); had a penchant for prostitutes (16:1-3); wound up living alone in a cave for a while (15:8); finally took his own life along with 3,000 Philistines (16:28-31). Though blessed by God with wonderful physical attributes, which apparently made him very attractive to the ladies, Samson failed to be a *godly* man, and he also failed to be the *leader* God wanted him to be. He may have been a *ladies’* man, but he failed to be *God’s* man.

**Saul** had the *man’s* man pedigree for leadership- he was from the courageous tribe of Benjamin (Judges 20:15ff), and his father was *“a mighty man of valor”* (1Sam.9:1). He also was blessed with an imposing physical stature that made him look like a natural leader (9:2). And unlike Samson, Saul, at least initially, possessed great humility (9:21). He had the support of the people and the valiant men of Israel (10:23-26; 11:15). The men wanted someone else to do their fighting for them (8:20; 12:12), and Saul appeared to be just the man for the job. He was a true *man’s* man: tall, strong, and capable (11:5-11,15). But there was a chink in Saul’s amour. It seems that the absolute power of the monarchy corrupted him almost absolutely. He took on himself the role and responsibility of performing sacrifices (13:8-13). This was neither his place nor prerogative. He further substituted his thoughts for God’s instructions concerning the destruction of the Amalekites (15:3, 7-9). And when his failures were brought to his attention by Samuel, he denied, equivocated, and blamed the people (15:10-21). Surely this was not the conduct of a *godly* leader. Saul may have been a *man’s* man, but miserably failed to be *God’s* man.

**Solomon** was wise and wealthy enough to have it all- and that was exactly what he had-everything. *“And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure…”* (Eccl.2:10). Solomon became *his own* man! The details of his self-pleasing efforts are abundantly evident (vv.3-9; 1Kings 11:1-3). He thought only of himself and the pleasure he could attain. But ultimately, this pleasure-seeking desire to be “his own man” led him away from God, *“For it came about when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods…Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord…”* (1Kings 11:4,6). Though blessed with wisdom, health, and wealth, this king of Israel was ultimately rejected as the leader of God’s people (v.11). He may have been *his own* man, but failed to be *God’s* man.

So what does it take to be **God’s man**? You don’t need beautiful hair, big muscles, athletic prowess, good looks, large stature, or great wisdom or wealth. You do need a *godly* heart (of love for Him), a *godly* mind (filled with knowledge of His Word), and *godly* determination to live for Him (rather than for women, other men, or yourself). Now, whose man do you want to be? Our families need *godly* husbands and fathers to lead in the home; our community needs *godly* citizens and businessmen to lead in it; and our churches need *godly* men to lead in them. Will you become a *godly* leader, or, are you content being led by *ungodly* desires of women, *ungodly* desires of other men, and/or your own *ungodly* desires?

The Southside Church of Christ (602 Henderson) will be conducting a class on **Becoming** **Godly Men & Leaders** each Thursday evening at 7:30 for the next several weeks. There is no cost or further obligation, and all males from high school age up are invited. Let’s become the men of leadership that God expects us to be: ***godly* men!** (2-17-12)

**What is “God’s Will” for Your Life?**

People sometimes speak of wanting to know what “God’s will” for their lives might be. I don’t want to draw the wrong conclusions from anyone’s words, but they most often seem to think that “God’s will” for their life is something of a journey of discovery to be found through experimentation and introspection. While there is no doubt that introspection can be good and useful, or that we often learn by experience(s), let’s look to God’s Word in a few places that speak specifically of His will…

Mark 3:35, *“For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother.”*  Note that “God’s will” for your life is that you have a *spiritual relationship* with Him by *obedience.* This applies to everyone (*“whoever”*).

Roman 12:2, *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”* “God’s will” for your life is that rather than being *conformed* to society, you are *transformed* into what is *good* and *acceptable* and *perfect* to Him; and that in so doing, you *prove* or *demonstrate* His will to others through exemplary living.

1Thessalonians 4:3-6, *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.”* “God’s will” for your life includes *sanctification-* being *set aside* for *holy* and *spiritual* purposes of God; and, *sexual purity*. Notice that it doesn’t specify whether you are married or single, but that you are *sanctified* and *sexually pure.*

Ephesians 6:5-6, *“Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.”* Since v.9 also requires the *same* submission to “the will of God” of *masters,* it should become apparent that “doing your job” with *“the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ”* is much more important to God than whether you are the “worker” or the “boss.”

1Peter 4:1-2, *“Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of your time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.”* From this text, two things are applicable to our study here. First, “God’s will” must be chosen over our own *desires/lusts.* The two are often diametrically opposed. And second, *choosing* “God’s will” over the *man’s will/ways* may cause you to be *persecuted* by those unwilling to make the same choice(s).

Now, let’s put all of these together in a composite. “God’s will” for your life is that you: *establish a spiritual relationship* with Him by *obedience,* Mark 3:35; refuse to *conform* to the world, but instead *transform* your *mind* and *life* to that which is *good, acceptable,* and *perfect* to Him, Romans 12:2; that whether married or single, you are *sanctified/holy* and *pure* rather than *lustful* and *sexually immoral,* 1Thessalonians 4:3*;* you *do your job* as if you are *serving Christ from the heart* whether you are a “worker” or a “boss,”Ephesians 6,10*;* and, *choosing* and *living* for God’s rather than man’s will may cause others to *persecute* you, but that you should do it anyway, 1Peter 4:1-2.

These things may not be either what you hoped or expected as “God’s will for your life.” But they are a fair representation of what God’s Word says about His will for your life. He wants you to be *saved from sin* as a part of *His family* regardless of what your physical family thinks or does. He wants you to *represent Him* in holiness to others in your life whether you are married or single, whether you are a worker or the boss, and whether you are praised or persecuted for it! “God’s will for your life” can be discovered by reading your New Testament, and accomplished by following it. Yes, God wants you to be happy and fulfilled, but more than that, He wants you to be saved and His, 1Timothy 2:4! (12-8-15)

**The Good Things about New Year’s Resolutions**

The good thing about New Year’s resolutions is not that they are typically available for the next year also- though that is often true for most of us. But there are some positives associated with the age-old custom of making New Year’s resolutions…

**They require reevaluation and realignment of priorities**. It is so very easy for our lives to be consumed by events and activities that in the overall scheme of things aren’t really important. It’s not just that these never-satiated consumers of our time and energy aren’t significant to life (in general or in eternal senses), they aren’t even important to us! And yet, if we’re not really careful and vigilant, they will wind up occupying our time, resources, and energy until there is little left for what truly is important. New Year’s resolutions generally provide an easy avenue to review and reevaluate what is important, and then to realign our resources to those priorities. Matthew 6:33 is oft-quoted and generally well-know because it focuses on exactly these things, *“But seek first His kingdom and righteousness; and all these things* (in context, *food, shelter, clothing, length of life*) *shall be added to you.”*  Do you need to reevaluate and realign your priorities?

**They require assessment of present position and path.** Reevaluating and realigning priorities have primarily to do with the *positional* consideration of *where you want to be.* Once this has been established, two other *positional* considerations have to be taken into account: 1) *where you are now;* and, 2) *how to get* to *where you want to be.* As an illustration of the necessity of these two factors, I’ve often answered the phone at the church on a Sunday morning and been asked, “How do I get to the building there?” To answer this question, I need two pieces of information: 1) *where* the caller is currently located; and, 2) *what route* they plan to travel (if there are multiple ones available). It is the same with *getting to the right place* in regard to resolutions. It is not enough to just identify *where* you need and want to be, you have to also know *where* you are at the time, and *how* you plan to get to the desired destination. Paul wasn’t speaking of New Year’s resolutions in Colossians 3:1-2, but it seems to apply regardless, *“If then you have been raised up with Christ* (by *baptism,* cf. 2:12ff), *keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth.”*  Spiritually, do you know your *present position* and *how to get* to where you need and want to be?

**They are self-centered in a good way**. New Year’s resolutions almost always regard ***self****-improvement.* Rarely are they about someone else, unless they are affected by our own self-improvement. For example, if my resolution to be a better husband by being more considerate, polite, and appreciative of Donna, she is certainly *involved* in the resolution, but is not the *focus* of it. The resolution’s *object* is still me and making me a better husband, though the result will benefit both of us. Self-improvement is typically like that- though *personally focused* on getting and being better; achievement of the goal(s) will also improve every relationship sustained. This is important because, with or without New Year’s resolutions, we can only improve ***ourselves*** and ***our*** *contribution* or *participation* in any relationship or cooperative endeavor. It is also important because we typically find faults and areas that need improvement in the character and activity ***of others*** much more easily, and with more frequency, than we do in ourselves. Matthew 7:3-5 highlights this principle, as does Romans 12:18, *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”* New Year’s resolutions are good because they force us to focus on *ourselves* and toward *self-*improvement rather than merely finding faults in others.

**They focus our attention on improvement.** Let’s face some facts: 1) We need to constantly, (or at least yearly) *reevaluate* and *realign* our priorities to make sure we have the right destination or objective in view; 2) We also must also keep *assessing* where we are on our journey toward the goal, as well as whether or not we’re still headed in the right direction to attain it; 3) We should focus on ourselves in these ways because we simply cannot improve *others-* only *ourselves;* and finally, 4) We have to *move forward* to attain any goal. “Reverse” and “Park” get you nowhere. You have to select “Drive,” take your foot off the brake, and press the accelerator to move *forward.* New Year’s resolutions, properly focused on God’s word as the standard and heaven as the goal, can get you moving in the right direction and keep you on the right path toward eternity with God! Is 2016 going to be the year you *improve* yourself by becoming a Christian? By *returning* to the path of righteousness? *Get moving* toward heaven? Why not? You can do it, if you are properly *resolved!* (1-5-16)

**Are “Gospel Meetings” Still Effective?**

Many of today’s denominations have abandoned as “old-fashioned” and “ineffective” what they used to call “Revivals.” Using the logic that you “revive” something “dead” or “near-dead,” many churches of Christ have long used the term “Gospel Meeting” instead. Without debating the merits of either term, or the logic behind them, the basic question of whether or not they are “effective” is legitimate. The answer, I suppose, depends on how you define “effective.” Thus, whether or not gospel meetings are “effective” has a lot to do with two important considerations: 1) Purpose; and, 2) Standard of Measurement. Let’s take these one at a time.

**Purpose.** If a congregation has a gospel meeting twice a year because “That’s what we’ve always done” without any real focus or intent, then that effort probably won’t be very effective regardless of the knowledge and ability of the speaker engaged. However, if it is realized that such occasions possess unique opportunities to fulfill specific purposes, there is hope for a much better outcome. For instance, gospel meetings *can* (if viewed and used purposefully):

* Provide focused attention on evangelism. Of course we can and should invite our friends, neighbors, co-workers, and acquaintances to our “regular” services where they can hear the gospel’s truth proclaimed, and be exposed to true New Testament worship. But do we? Surely not nearly as often as we should. There are probably many reasons for this failure. And just as surely, most of them are poor reasons at best, and actually excuses at worst. However, gospel meetings help us to be reminded of the importance of evangelism. Most of the people with whom we come in contact on a day-to-day basis are in need, dire need in fact, of the soul-saving truth of the gospel message. Rather than reflecting this *light of truth* into the dark world, we *“put it under a basket”* when we fail to share it with others, cf. Matthew 5:15. It is so very easy to become focused on own needs and desires for health and happiness that we forget the greatest need that anyone and everyone has: eternal salvation. *“For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”* Matthew 16:26. To our point here, what will *you give* in exchange for someone else’s soul?An invitation to hear saving truth?Philip replied to Nathanael’s skepticism about Jesus simply, *“Come and see,”* John 1:46. Gospel meetings remind us of the importance of evangelism, and our own efforts to lead a lost and otherwise perishing soul to salvation in Christ Jesus.
* Provide a recharging of our spiritual batteries. Some ridicule gospel meetings, calling them nothing more than mere “flashlight parties.” The notion behind the criticism seems to be that they are merely opportunities for Christians to come together, exchange warm greetings, and all “shine their lights” by praying piously, singing loudly, offer resounding “Amens!” to primed points of sermons, and then go away feeling “uplifted” as they turn off their lights until next time. Hence, “flash” light parties. Of course, there are particles of truth and realism to such criticisms. But there is another facet of light on this prism of truth. Flashlights (especially now) have rechargeable batteries. “Routine” usage and recharging causes these batteries develop a “memory” that prevents them from reaching their full capacity. While the metaphor may not fit exactly in all aspects, the point is that gospel meetings provide a legitimate and needed “recharge” than can help to overcome the “routine” and enable us to reach greater potentials and capacities. There is absolutely nothing wrong with Christians coming together “extra times” to blend their hearts together in prayer, their voices together in praise, and their minds together in contemplation of divine truth. Furthermore, gospel meetings provide the opportunity for Christians from different congregations to get to know one another, and be encouraged by one another. Even when gospel meetings are not for the express purpose of “evangelizing the lost,” they can provide a “recharging” of our spiritual batteries that enable our lights to shine even brighter and longer to the mutual benefit of those “inside” and “outside” *the house,* cf. Matthew 5:15-16.

**Standard of Measure.** Given the above, purpose is, therefore, obviously an important consideration to determining the “effectiveness” of gospel meetings. As many have said, “If you aim at nothing, you can hit it every time.” But, having the right standard of measure is also vital in determining efficacy. At least two considerations of “standard of measure” come to mind:

* Baptisms derived from gospel meetings. Some dismiss the effectiveness of gospel meetings by saying, “No one is ever baptized at gospel meetings any more.” Even if such were true, realize that the vast majority of our “regular” worship services could be at least evangelically dismissed as “ineffective” on the same basis. We must constantly remind ourselves that the goal for gospel meetings (or even personal bible studies for that matter) is not “baptisms,” but providing opportunities for souls in need of the gospel to hear it. *“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel…”* 1Corinthians 1:17. Gospel meetings provide additional opportunities for the *preaching of the gospel-* and do so for those who many be “regular church-goers” but have never really heard the truth of it.
* Attendance numbers. One of the “standards of measure” usually employed to determine the effectiveness of a gospel meeting is the number of people that attend. This “numbering” would include local church members, visitors from other area churches, and non-church members from the community. Of course, this information can be helpful. If the purpose of the effort was to expose local non-church members to the gospel, knowing how many actually attended can help to better advertise or target such efforts in the future. Likewise, if the event was designed to edify and encourage church members, then again, knowing how many took advantage of the opportunity can be beneficial. But, we must never forget or minimize a couple of things in these regards: 1) gospel meetings are about *providing opportunities*- results such as numbers of those taking advantage of these opportunities are not always within our purview; and, 2) the value of one- whether one or a thousand lost souls hear the gospel, or whether one or a thousand are encouraged to greater faithfulness, each one is still important. Jesus spoke to *one woman at a well,* and a good portion of a whole race of people in that region subsequently came to believe on Him, cf. John 4:7,39-42. But that one woman’s soul was important to Him, whether the rest of the Samaritans came or not.

Are gospel meetings still effective? The answer depends on why we have them- and thus, how we conduct them, and how we seek to measure them. Since Fall is typically “Gospel Meeting Season” for many churches, I hope these considerations help yours to be “effective”! (9-26-17)

**Grace and the “Golden Rule”**

No one who understands the salvation offered through Jesus Christ doubts or diminishes the role that “grace” plays in it. Grace is commonly defined and thought of as “undeserved favor.” While this may indeed be an over-simplified view, it is nonetheless sufficient for our purposes here.

“Grace” is absolutely integral to our salvation for a simple reason: No one deserves the blessings and benefits of salvation and fellowship with God. Thus, God’s “undeserved favor” is manifested toward us in several ways:

* Providing us with knowledge of sin, and thus the need of salvation, through the Word, Romans 7:7-12;
* Providing the essence of grace through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for our sins, John 1:9-17; and,
* Providing “how to” instructions to access the salvation which grace brings, Titus 2:11-14.

These provisions are certainly manifestations of the “undeserved favor” of God toward us in *“grace upon grace”!*

But what does God’s manifested grace toward us have to do with the “Golden Rule”? The so-called “Golden Rule” is found in Matthew 7:12 and reads as follows, *“Therefore whatever you want others to do for you, do so for them; for this is the Law and the Prophets.”* Perhaps over-simplified, but also sufficient for our purposes, it is commonly interpreted as “Treat others the way you want to be treated.” We typically think of this directive as governing *human-to-human* relations. Certainly it does that. We should treat other humans- all of them, the way we want to be treated. This become especially relevant if we contemplate treating others the way we would want to be treated *if we were in their shoes* so to speak. Therefore, we should also be willing to treat others the way we would want to be treated if we were in the predicament or circumstances they’re in- the roles being reversed if you will. However…

Shouldn’t the grace God has so generously manifested toward us also factor into our understanding and applications of the “Golden Rule”? Shouldn’t we be willing to treat others the way God has treated us- at least to the degree that such is possible? Shouldn’t we be willing to treat others the way ***we want*** God to treat us? Consider two passages in these regards. *“For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment,”* James 1:13; and, *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy,”* Matthew 5:7. *Mercy* is the activity prompted by the disposition of grace. The parable of the *unmerciful slave* illustrates how grace produces mercy, and how essential it is to be graciously merciful to those who “wrong” us in order to receive the same from God, cf. Matthew 18:21-35.

We all need “grace” from God. And if we desire God’s grace to be manifested toward us at our eternal judgment, we better figure out how to be *gracious* (full of grace) in disposition and *merciful* (full of mercy) in our treatment of one another now! It’s really not that hard- just treat others the way you want to be treated *now,* and how you want God to treat you then. (2-9-16)

**God’s Magnificent but Misapplied Grace**

The grace of God is what allows us to have fellowship with, and ultimately salvation in, Him. But as wonderfully magnificent as God’s grace is, we have problems with it- two problems actually.

We sometimes refuse to accept God’s grace where He says that He will apply it. When we meet the conditions of grace, and there are conditions as will be shown below, we should have no problem accepting the application of it to our souls. In other words, if God’s word says that He will forgive us by grace when we meet His terms, and we do so, then **we should be able to forgive ourselves because He has forgiven us!** That’s the first common problem we have with God’s grace: refusing to accept and apply it where He does.

The second problem we commonly have with God’s grace is on the opposite side of the coin. Some of us want God to apply it where He never promised that He would. Certainly, all who are saved are so by the grace of God, Ephesians 2:1-10. But how is this accomplished? Exactly what must take place in our lives for God’s grace to save us?

Let’s allow the Bible to speak for itself. The biblical record says that the ancient world had become so wicked that God decided to completely destroy mankind, Genesis 6:1-7. Then v.8 records, *“But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.”* The Hebrew word (*chen*), translated as *“favor,”* is the O.T. equivalent of the N.T. word *“grace”* (*charis*). What this means is that Noah was shown “grace” by God. Why? The next verse reveals the answer, *“Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God.”* (Genesis 6:9) Noah’s faith and dedication to God allowed for grace to be extended to him.

Here’s the BIG question: How did God apply grace to Noah? “He saved him” is the right answer, but **HOW** God saved Noah is vital to our understanding of the application of grace. Did God just pick up Noah, his family, and all the animals and hold them in His hand while the flood destroyed everyone/thing else? Hardly! Instead, Noah was given **instructions** on how to build ark, required to gather all the materials and build it, then fill it with animals and provisions, enter it, and stay in it for over a year, cf. Genesis 7-9. Sounds like “work” to me- but Noah found *favor/grace* by God. Here’s the key: **God’s grace never has and never will remove our responsibility to be obedient to what He says we must do in order to receive it.**  Noah *“found grace in the eyes of the Lord,”* but only received the benefits of that grace when he did everything that God told him to do, 6:22. What we do in meeting God’s conditions for the reception of His grace in no way compares in value to what we receive- salvation; that’s why it is called “grace” (undeserved merit or favor)!

Now let’s bring all of this forward. How does God’s grace save us? Titus 2:11 says, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men…”* In what form does that grace appear? Read the continuation of the sentence in the next verse, *“****instructing*** *us to deny worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age…”* Question: Will all men be saved? Answer: No, Matthew 7:13-14. But why not, if salvation is wholly dependent upon God’s grace with no mixture whatsoever of man’s faithful works? We just read that *“The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all men”.*  God’s grace brought salvation to all men in the form of **“instructions”**- just like it did in the days of Noah. If you obey the instructions, God’s grace is applied to you in salvation. If you disobey the instructions, you will be just as lost as all of those who refused the preaching of Noah and were destroyed in the flood, 1Peter 3:20-21; 2Peter 2:5.

Are we “saved by grace”? Absolutely! But that grace is applied through **instructions** which must be obeyed. It was so for Noah, and it so for us. On Pentecost in Acts 2, those who came to believe in Jesus whom they had crucified asked, *“Men and brethren, what shall we do?”* They were **not** told what to ***think****,* ***feel****,* or ***believe****-* they were told what to ***do:*** *“Repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins…”* (Acts 2:38) They too were given instructions that had to be followed in order to receive the benefits of God’s grace.

Let’s learn not to refuse to apply God’s grace where He has promised to apply it, and let’s also learn not apply God’s grace where He never promised that He would. (6-15-11)

**The Greatest Power (and failure) of the Human Mind**

“The greatest power of the human mind is the ability to justify self.” Here’s why this is so…

The human mind, in its teenage form, can decide it knows more about life and what’s right than those who have lived much longer. The human mind, in its young adult form, can decide it knows more about the world and how to run it than the cumulative wisdom of past generations. The human mind, in its new parent form, can decide it knows more about raising children than parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. The human mind, in its middle age form, can decide it knows more about what priorities should take precedence in life than those older or younger. The human mind, in its older age form, can decide that it knows more about life than anyone else living.

But the real power of the human mind, at any age, is demonstrated through its ability to decide it knows more about anything and everything pertaining to life than God. Through this “ability,” which is really a “failure,” **we find ways to justify ourselves in just about any situation or circumstance.**

Through this powerful ability/failure, we: decide we know more about the formation of relationships than God in our teenage years; decide we know more about how the world was formed and should operate than God in our young adult years; decide we know more about how to properly raise children than God in our new parent years; decide we know more about how to prioritize and spend the productive years of our lives than God in our middle aged years, and decide we know more about “life” and how it should be lived than God in our later years.

In all of these times, and in all of these ways (and many more that could be listed), we think we “see” more clearly than others, sadly including God. So….

In our teenage years, we often rebel against godly parents who are trying to *bring us up “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord,”* Ephesians 6:4. Such rebellion is also against God who commands *obedience* and *honor* be given to the parents by their children, Ephesians 6:1-3.

In our young adult years, we often rebel against past generations and whatever they believed and practiced as guiding principles of life for whatever is “new,” thinking that “new” is always better than “old.” Thus, the tried and true is rejected for what is thought to be new and improved. After several generations of repeating this process, we now routinely abort babies for convenience, celebrate immoral sexual choices (hetero and homosexually), and can no longer even decide how to properly label restrooms. The proverbial warning against *removing the ancient boundaries* seems apropos, Proverbs 22:28!

In our new parent years, we often rebel against even biblically ordained principles for child rearing for what the latest scientific study has revealed, or the latest self-help book has ordained. Do we not see that over-indulgence and over-emphasis on self-esteem has produced selfish and entitled generations that are completely lacking in self-discipline, self-motivation, and personal accountability? If we love our children, we must *discipline them diligently* so that they learn to discipline themselves, cf. Proverbs 13:24; 19:18; 22:6.

In our middle age years, we often rebel against God and His will through our priority choices- such as putting our work, or the recreation abilities afforded through the fruits of our labors, before Him. Then too, as we become perhaps more “family-oriented,” time spent with family away from busy work schedules leaves little room for spiritual devotions and pursuits. Serving God becomes a matter of convenience- when we “have time” and are not “too busy” with work, family, and recreation. Yet, somehow, we convince ourselves that such doesn’t actually violate Matthew 6:33. But it does.

In our later years, we often rebel against God in more subtle, yet equally destructive ways. We decide that it’s too late to change now. That we either can’t reform after all these years of living contrary to God’s will, or that He wouldn’t accept us if we did- neither are true! Or, we may even decide that since we’ve lived all our lives using our ability to justify ourselves, surely God will have to just accept us for who and what we are without us actually changing our minds or lives- but He won’t, Acts 17:30-31!

And yet in lifetimes filled with rebellion against God, we “see” ourselves as justified. Herein lies the great power, and failure, of the human mind. There is none so blind as he who will not see, cf. Matthew 13:13-15. (4-12-16)

**Green Briars and the Tangled Web of Sin**

I hate green briars. I know were supposed to our reserve hate for only the things that God hates- but I hate green briars! When God cursed the ground because of Adam and Eve’s sin, He said, *“…Cursed in the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you…”* (Genesis 3:17-18). When I read or think of this passage, I see green briars as being one of the results of this curse.

Having cleared a good deal of East Texas land in my time, my disdain for green briars comes naturally for me. They are a bane for such pursuits. They seem as tough as barbed wire to cut, and are just as dangerous, if not more so, dead than alive. I have taken a chain saw to bigger ones only to have the chain grab the vine in such a way that it jerks the needle-sharp thorns into me anyway! If you just cut them down at the ground, they’ll sprout right back up at the next good rain. The only way I know to get rid of them is to dig up that giant, bulbous, tuber-like root, and burn it.

But the worst is when there’s a whole bunch of them. They present such a tangled web that it is impossible to get through them without a blood-letting party taking place. Once in the midst of them, there just seems to be no escape that doesn’t involve torn clothing and pain. They grab hold and dig in so that every way you turn, it just seems to get worse. Did I mention **I hate green briars?**

Recently, while help a friend clear some land, we took almost gleeful pleasure in gathering up a bunch of individual green briar vines left by the brush rake, and watching them burn on the fire while they crackled and hissed- it was quite a vengeful, and perhaps sadistic, pleasure for us both! Besides, it’s the biblically-prescribed right thing to do with them*,* Hebrews 6:8.

But I hate green briars for another reason also. They, at least to me, seem to represent ***the tangled web of sin*** in which we sometimes find ourselves. We often don’t know exactly how we got *into the big middle* of such a mess (of sin), but everywhere we turn, there seems to be no way of escape- at least none which are free from the excise tax of pain and suffering. So what do we do if we find ourselves in such a situation?

Well, if green briars remind of us of the tangled web of sin, we ought to deal with sin the way we do with green briars. We could:

* **First, stop!** If we find ourselves *in the big middle* of green briars or sin, the first thing to do is not go any further in! Unfortunately we sometimes think “If I just do this one more sin, though I know it’s not right, then I can get out of this mess.” Sin, or additional sin, is never the answer! Listen to Romans 6:1-2,15, *“Are we to continue in sin…may in never be!....Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!”*
* **Second, evaluate.** Before we can ascertain the right thing to do to extricate ourselves, we need to assess and evaluate the situation. Knowing how to *get out* of sin usually requires understanding how you *got it.* The whole idea of “repentance” is a reversal of mind that leads to a reversal of course or direction- *“Repent therefore and return that your sins may be wiped away…”* Acts 3:19. We can’t “return” unless we know how we got to where we are.
* **Third, move cautiously but deliberately.** When we *“come to our senses”* (Luke 15:17ff) and realize that we’re in a tangled mess of green briars or sin, we can’t lose our heads and go thrashing about like a fish out of water (sorry for the mixed metaphors). After we’ve stopped and evaluated the situation, we have to deal with the most pressing needs first. In green briars, that means deal with the ones that are giving you the most pain, or pose the worst threat. The same is true for sin. Deal with the one that is the closest and most dangerous first. And do so one at a time. You can handle one green briar at a time fairly painlessly, but if you grab a whole bunch and try to rip them out of the ground, you’re going to bleed, and be unsuccessful to boot! So it is also true with “a bunch” of tangle sins- you have to handle them one at a time starting with the that has the biggest and most painful hold on you. Then you can, one by one, work your way free. Such is not to say that we are unable to make “wholesale changes” in our lives when it comes to sin, but we must realize that even this is usually best accomplished little by little with very careful, meticulous, and specific efforts.
* **Finally, get back to safe ground.** Once freed from our entanglement (green briars or sin), we have to move back to clear and safe ground or we will become entrapped all over again. Peter says it is even worse the second time around, *“For if after having escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.”* (2Peter 2:20) “Safety” in green briar terms is clear ground. “Safety” in sin terms is back on the solid and clear ground of living in obedience to the Word of God. Remember Peter’s words: the *escape* comes by *knowledge.* We cannot do the “right” thing unless we educate ourselves from the Word of God on what the “right” thing is. It is truly the only safe place to be.

Comparing green briars to sin may be a simple way of looking at things– but what are we to expect from a simple-minded fellow like me? Besides, didn’t the Lord often use the simple things of nature to teach far-reaching lessons of spiritual consequence? Anyway, I hope this *down-to-the-earth* look at things helps in some way. And watch out for those green briars and sin- entanglements in either sure do hurt. (5-6-10)

**“Gress”**

I’m intrigued by words that we only use with prefixes or suffixes. For example, I’ve never heard anyone speak of someone being “gruntled”- only “*dis*gruntled” (yes, I am aware that a pig with laryngitis is “*dis*gruntled”). If a prefix or suffix can be added, doesn’t the root necessarily have to be a word? Apparently not, at least not in English. Consider: If “gress” was a word, and therefore had a meaning, it would have to refer to “movement.” This conclusion is forced by all the prefixes we add to “gress” that have to do with the *direction* or *type* of movement they describe. Consider that…

***E*gress** means **outward movement.** To be *in Christ,* we have to move *out of* (and *get over*) ourselves! *“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If any one wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me’,”* Matthew 16:24. Consider also Philippians 2:3-7, where the example of Jesus *emptying Himself* and becoming a *servant* in obedience to God is given to show how we must *get outside of ourselves* and *“regard one another as more important”* than ourselves in order to properly serve God and each other.

***Con*gress**means **together movement** (coming together; contrary to popular belief, it does not mean “no movement”!). On the day of Pentecost and following, saved individuals *came together* to listen to the *apostles’ inspired teaching,* to *pray,* and to *the breaking of bread* (generally thought to be the commemoration of Lord’s Supper, cf. Acts 20:7), to *care for one another,* and to simply *be together* and enjoy each other’s company, Acts 2:42-45. Great encouragement and growth were the products of this *coming together,* Acts 2:46-47!

***Pro*gressive** means **forward movement.** After thanking and commending the Thessalonians for their *reception of the gospel,* their *imitation* of the apostles and the Lord in living *the gospel,* and their *continued endurance* in all of these areas, Paul urged them to continue to *“excel still more,”* 1Thessalonians 4:1,10. He is counseling them to *pro*gress- to continue to *move forward* in their faith! Peter makes it clear that Christians must *add to their faith* and *grow* as security against *stumbling*, and to *make certain* of their entrance into heaven, 2Peter 1:5-11. But on the other hand…

***Ag*gressive** means **violent movement.** The apostle Paul said, of his life prior to conversion to Christ, that he was a *“blasphemer and a persecutor and violent aggressor,”* 1Timothy 1:13. Those *violent* and *aggressive* traits and characteristics are supposed to be a part of that which is *put away* when we come to Christ, cf. Colossians 3:5-11. We are to be *peaceable* (loving and making *peace*), *refuse to take our own revenge,* and *kind to our enemies* to *overcome evil with good,* Romans 12:17-21.

***Reg*ressive** means **backward movement.** After the ancient children of Israel had been freed from slavery by God’s miraculous plagues upon the Egyptians, after they had been miraculously delivered from Pharaoh and the Egyptian army by crossing the Red Sea on dry land, and after they had been miraculously provided for and sustained by God in the wilderness, when they reached the promised land of Canaan and most of the spies sent into it brought back an intimidating report, Stephen says of them, *“in their hearts* (they) *turned back to Egypt,”* Acts 7:39 (cf. Numbers 13:25 – 14:4). The Hebrew writer seems to referencing this *turning back* when he urges Jewish Christians of his day (and us today as well!), *“we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul,”* Hebrews 10:39. Thus, *backward movement* is the wrong way for God’s children!

***Di*gressive** means **downward movement.** In Romans 1:18-32, Paul delineates and describes those who, *“though they knew God, did not honor Him as God, or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish hearts were darkened, professing to be wise, they became fools…”* As a result of this rejection of what they knew and could plainly see of God, they *di*gressed away from Him into *degradation, depravity* and ultimately, *destruction.* Surely, this is not the way to move!

We can “gress” (move) *out* of ourselves and *into* Christ; we can *come together* as Christians to worship God and encourage one another; and we can *grow* and *move forward* toward heaven; or, we can continue in *violent, backward,* and *downward* movements toward hell. We get to pick the direction we *move,* but we can’t stay still. Choose wisely! (4-8-15)

**Ground Down or Polished?**

Jacob M. Braude collected and published hundreds of quotes for use in speeches for all occasions. I confess I do not have any of his published works. So I am uncertain if the following quote is an original of his, or one of the other quotes he published. At any rate, consider this tidbit of wisdom: **“Life is a grindstone; whether it grinds you down or polishes you up depends on what you’re made of.”**

While this thing called “life” doesn’t always have to be as hard as we make it (cf. Proverbs 13:15; 29:6), there is no doubt that everyone has their troubles. No one truly lives free from heartache and pain provided they live long enough to make it out of diapers! We look back to Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden, and the subsequent loss of the only true “Paradise” man ever had, as the beginning of the difficulties of life. In response to their sin, God said life from then on would be filled with pain, sweat, and toil (Genesis 3:16-19). But we can’t really blame them. We’ve all sinned too (Romans 3:23), and therefore can’t claim that it’s their fault without being hypocritical.

The “grindstone” of life takes many forms- disease, death, despair, and difficulties of all forms make living tough at times. But if everyone has hardships in life, why do some seem to rise above them while others never seem to escape their quagmires? We might be tempted to say that the extent of the hardship is the determining factor, but we’d be wrong. Some folks overcome tremendous adversities, while others become completely undone by relatively minor obstacles. So the degree of difficulty can’t be the determining factor. Mr. Braude had it right when he suggested that the content of one’s character is the answer.

“Bad things” happen to “good people” too. But “good people” deal with these “bad things” differently. How so? They seem to recognize several salient points:

* That it is Satan, not God, who desires our destruction and will use any means he can to accomplish it, cf. Ezekiel 18:32; John 8:44. Remember that it was Satan who tormented Job!
* That God never promised that “this” life was fair. The reward of faithful lives of obedience is heaven- not “heaven on earth.” If life here was a paradise free of hardship, what desire would we have for eternal glory? 2Corinthians 5:2-4, *“For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.”*
* That these difficulties are supposed to teach us how to live better, and happier. James 1:2-4, *“Consider all joy, by brethren, when you encounter various trials; knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”*
* That “this life,” with all its difficulties, is not all there is. 2Corinthians 4:16-17, *“Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison…”*

Everyone faces the “grindstone” of life. Some are “polished” and perfected for an eternal dwelling with God, and some are “ground down” and destined to an eternal destruction with Satan. Which will it be for you? The answer, in part at least, is determined by how you react to life’s difficulties. (1-26-11)

**Growing “Weeds” instead of “Fruit”**

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to grow weeds and other worthless or undesirable plants? Basically, just do nothing more than refuse to pull them up, chop them off, or poison them, and you’ll have a fantastic crop in no time at all without any cultivating, watering, fertilizing, or real effort. Just leave them alone and they’ll take care of the rest! But by contrast, seemingly the most desirable plants- whether flower, fruit, vegetable, or even grass, are often the most difficult to grow. They require proper soil tilling and preparation, careful planting, optimum amounts of water, nutrients, and sunshine, and freedom from the competition of or destruction by the undesirables (weeds as well as insect and animal pests). And, these things must be done over a sometimes-lengthy period of time just to grow the desirable plants to maturity and productivity. Here, yet again, the *spiritual* mirrors the *physical…*

You see, it’s pretty much the same for bad habits and sin versus the *“fruit of the Spirit”-*  all we have to do to get a full harvest of the *weeds* of sin is just be **unwilling** to:

* ***Work at preventing them.***They will otherwise take root*,* grow, and reproduce just fine. This doesn’t mean that we are born “spiritually depraved” (Genesis 1:26-27; Matthew 19:14), or that we “inherit sins” from our predecessors (Ezekiel 18:1-20). It just means that the *seeds of sin* will quite naturally wind up sprouting in our hearts because we live in a sinful world **unless** we earnestly endeavor to prevent them doing so. Living in a world also occupied by the *“prince of the power of the air”* (Satan) and *“the sons of disobedience”* (those who follow Satan) will influence us to *“live in the lusts of our flesh”* and indulge in *“the desires of the flesh and of the mind”* (Ephesians 2:1-3) so that sin eventually becomes *second nature* to us, **unless** we prevent it by turning to God and allowing the *seed of His word* to be planted and grow within us (Luke 8:11).
* ***Continually ‘weed’ our hearts and lives.***  While “an ounce of prevention *is* worth a pound of cure,” the need for the cureis never completely eliminated. When it comes to the *weeds of sin,* we can’t prevent them all (1John 1:10). Some will just have to be *pulled up* after they sprout! Though he used differing words and metaphors, the apostle Paul often addressed the need for the *continual weeding* of sin from our lives, cf. Romans 6:11-23; Ephesians 4:17-32; and Colossians 3:1-17.

And of course, actually *sowing to our own flesh* just compounds the problem of *spiritual weeds* and assures an abundant harvest of *corruption,* Galatians 6:7-8! But here’s the good news: **It doesn’t have to be this way!** We can instead:

* **Break up/till the *hard ground* of our hearts, Luke 8:5-6,12-13**. This not only *prepares the soil* for the *good seed* of God’s word, it also *uproots* and *chops* up already existing *spiritual weeds!* If we diligently and consistently *put the plow* to our hard hearts, they will be transformed into *fertile soil* for the *good seed!*  Such is not easy. We have to also *dig up* and *cast aside* the (stumbling) *stones* of preconceived ideas, the wisdom of the world, and cherished beliefs.
* **Pull up, chop down, or otherwise poison the *weeds of sin* that do sprout- preferably while they’re young and tender, Luke 8:7,14.** To be as spiritual *weedless* as possible, and thus be more productive for the Lord (cf. Matthew 13:23) we must be *ruthless* in our attitude toward our own sins, and in our treatment of them. We cannot look for or seek to enjoy any of their *passing pleasures* (Hebrews 11:25; James 4:1-4)*,* nor can we *make provisions* for them (Romans 13:11-14) that allow them to take root and grow to maturity. The longer these spiritual *weeds* of sin are allowed to remain, the more comfortable we become with them, and the more difficult they are to eradicate.

It is far easier to just decide that the *weeds* are “good” and starting calling them “flowers”- but God hasn’t and won’t (Isaiah 5:20-21; 2Corinthians 5:9-11), so we better get busy *tilling, planting,* and *watering* that we may *bear much fruit* to the Lord! (6-30-15)

**Hair**

Several years ago, when I was “hairless” due to chemotherapy, I was feeling pretty well one day so Donna and I decided to get out of the house and go somewhere. I was in the shower when she came happily bee-bopping into the bathroom to “fix” her hair. Without really thinking it through, she accusingly asked, “Did you use up all my hair spray?” I slowly pulled back the shower door, stuck my bald head out and said, “No, and furthermore I didn’t wear out your hairbrush or use up all your shampoo either!” Realizing what she had said, she quickly apologized, and we both had a huge laugh. Reflecting on this story started me thinking…

Do realize how many hair-care products there are on the market? Shampoos are advertised with everything from fruit to acai berry antioxidants in them. There are seemingly an endless array of conditioners, detanglers, anti-frizz, straighteners, curlers, color-enhancers, color-changers, and even hair grower/restorer products available. And besides these, all sorts of clippers, trimmers, irons, crimpers, and styling tools are constantly being advertised. Evidently, a lot of us pay a tremendous amount of attention to, and money on, our hair!

The Bible is not devoid of discussion on the topic of hair either. Those taking the Nazirite vow first shaved their heads, burned the hair on the sacrificial fire at the tabernacle, and then didn’t cut their hair again until the completion of the vow, cf. Numbers 6:2-21. Absalom, King David’s rebellious son, though certainly not under the Nazirite vow, was dramatically jerked from the mule he was riding when his long and thick hair became entangled in tree branch under which he rode while being pursued, 2Samuel14:25-26; 18:9-14 (he was later killed by Joab while still suspended there). The boys who teased God’s prophet Elisha about his *“baldhead”* were certainly taught a lesson. Elisha *“cursed them in the name of the Lord”* and then two female bears came out of the woods and *“tore up forty-two”* of them! And who can forget Samson, whose miraculous strength was so closely tied to his hair- because of his Nazirite vow, that when it was finally cut he became powerless to fend off the Philistines, Judges 13:2-5; 16:1-21?

The New Testament also has more than a few references to the hair of the head. 1Corinthians 11:1-16 indicates that the hair can bring either *glory* or *dishonor* depending on how it is kept and worn. 1Timothy 2:9-10 and 1Peter 3:3-4 also warn against elaborate or showy hairstyles, as they are contrary to the godly spirit of modesty and discretion. One of the most touching specific mentions of hair surely must be the penitent woman of Luke 7:36ff. Mary, the sister of Lazarus (John 11:2), wet Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped them clean with her hair! Then too, of course, is Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:36, *“Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.”* Obviously, Jesus never met Miss Clairol!

But to me, the most striking “picture” given in the New Testament of human hair has to do with God’s numbering of them. In Luke 12:1-7, Jesus is speaking specifically to His twelve disciples about their role in preaching the gospel, and the dangers they would face in doing so. In this context He tells them not to *“be afraid of those who can kill the body, and after they have no more that they can do,”* v.4. He then warns them to fear instead, *“the One who after He has killed has the authority to cast into hell,”* v.5. Fear can be a great motivator! But He then bolsters their faith and confidence with these words, *“Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? And yet not one of them is forgotten before God,* v.6. God’s omniscient (all-knowing) powers are incredible! They are, however, not limited to sparrows for the next verse adds, *“Indeed the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows,”* v.7. As incredible as the omniscience of God is, such is not really the point here. Instead, Jesus is telling His disciples that God’s intimate knowledge of each of them should give them confidence in Him to save their souls even if men should kill them for their preaching of the gospel. God not only knows and cares for His own, but He will ultimately bring them to His eternal home if they fear, love, and obey Him!

Though these words were spoken to the Twelve, God knows about your “hair” too- and will likewise do the same for you…if you also fear, love, and obey Him. (4-10-13)

**“Handling” the Truth**

There is an oft-quoted line from a movie in which a young military attorney is badgering an older and “crusty” (to say the least) superior officer in a taut courtroom scene. The young office states that he just wants “the truth.” The crusty old officer replies with great vehemence, “You can’t handle the truth!” We’re tempted to feel and say such things about some folks with regard to “the truth” of God’s word, but that’s not usually the problem….

“Can’t” implies inability. But think about the purpose of God’s word: to warn of the dangers of disobedience and hell, and provide information and instructions that allow us to be saved (by God’s grace!) to the eternal joys of heaven. If: 1) it is God *“desires all men to be saved;”*  2) and that such is accomplished by *“the knowledge of the truth”-* which is what 1Timothy 2:4 says, then, 3) why would He possibly give us *“the truth”* that we **can’t handle?** He didn’t. Paul wrote that *“when you read you can understand….”* Ephesians 3:4.

So, problem isn’t that we ***can’t*** “handle the truth,” but it may be that we:

**Don’t handle it.** Though He is often misquoted, Jesus said, *“and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,”* John 8:32. The ability of the truth to make one free is dependent on one’s *knowledge* of it. Furthermore, in the previous verse, Jesus also said that it was necessary for one to *“abide in My word”* in order to become a true *disciple* (follower) of His, John 8:31. Thus, the truth of God’s word, in and of itself, will not and cannot *“make you free”* apart from *knowing* and *abiding* (living in) it. How is that going to happen if we are unwilling to read, study, learn, and know *“the truth”?* It will not. If we **don’t *handle***the truth in these ways, we die in the bondage of sin and suffer its consequences.

**Won’t handle it.** Sometimes we just won’t face the truth. We procrastinate as long as we can, we obfuscate and duck as much as possible, and then if there is no other recourse available, we just flatly refuse to come to grips with the truth. But there is a sad reality to these tactics. Delaying, distorting, dodging, or denying the truth neither deletes nor deters it. When all is said and done, the truth of God’s word still stands, and it will continue to do so regardless of our refusals to face it. Facts are facts and **truth is truth**. It doesn’t decay or die. Our negligence toward it, our ignoring of it, or our denials of it do not change it. *“The word of the Lord abides forever,”* 1Peter 1:25. Just because we don’t like what it is revealed in the *mirror of God’s word* (James 1:23ff) doesn’t make it untrue. Attempts to break *the mirror* do not destroy the truth it reveals. If we **won’t *handle*** the truth, or refuse to “see” what it reveals, we cannot benefit from the power it possesses to *reform* and *transform* our lives and *prepare* us for heaven.

**Mishandle it.** In most areas, the reasons (motivations) we do things and ways (methods) we do things matter. It’s the same with “handling” the truth. If our motivations are not to *seek, find,* and *obey* the truth- and regardless of what else they might be, our understanding and application of the truth is going to be flawed. Likewise, if we go about *seeking* the truth in the wrong ways, our understanding and applications are going to be flawed. We will wind up “finding” only the truth we want, or “seeing” it through distorted lenses. *Diligence* is required, as well as a *workman* approach is vital to *“handling accurately the word of truth,”* and allows us to be *unashamed* of our efforts to discern it because we are willing to do whatever we find,2Timothy 2:15. We can’t *look for loopholes,* or *content ourselves with trump passages* that we assume override everything else the truth has to say. We have to be honest in our search, consistent in our approach and treatment, and willing to obey what we find to be true. Anything less is ***mishandling*** the truth.

God’s word is His *power for salvation,* Romans 1:16. It is also *living, active,* and able to discern the *thoughts and intentions* of our hearts, Hebrews 4:12. You **can** “handle” it *accurately* and *profitably* to the saving of **your** soul. The question is: Are you willing to do so? (12-29-15)

**The Hard Way**

On September 12, 1962, at Rice University Stadium in Houston, TX, President John F. Kennedy gave his famous “Moon Speech.” In this historic discourse, the President announced, “**We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.” This speech spurred national pride in our space program, and set a very difficult goal for NASA with what some undoubtedly saw as an impossible timetable. But the objective was not impossible- it was “hard,” but not unattainable.**

**Some also view an eternal home in heaven as unattainable. Jesus’ own disciples, at least at one point, seemed to share this perspective. After Jesus had told them of the difficulty of *“entering the kingdom of God,”* they responded with what was evidently to them a question without an answer, *“Then who can be saved?”* His response to their question is of paramount importance, *“With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”* (Matthew 19:24-26) It is “impossible” to reach the eternal abode of heaven without God. But with God, this seemingly unfeasible goal becomes possible- difficult, but not impossible.**

**Many today preach a “cheap” and “easy” salvation. While such may be popular, it is not biblical. Consider again the words of Jesus Himself, this time from Matthew 7:13-14, *“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who enter by it.”* The *narrowness* of both the *gate* (initial point of entry) and the *way* (path to the objective) indicate a difficulty of reaching heaven in comparison to the *wideness* (and therefore *ease*)of both the *gate* and *way* that leads to eternal destruction. It is indeed interesting that the Savior follows these words immediately in the text of Matthew 7:15ff with a warning against *“false prophets”.* Surely they are those who oppose and contradict His Words!**

**The next logical question from these things thus becomes: “What makes *the way* to heaven hard?” Here are a few suggestions.**

**The *way* to heaven is “hard” because it requires faith. Faith requires *assurance* and *conviction* regarding *“things not seen,”* Hebrews 11:1. It is easy to walk (traverse the path of life) by *sight,* but much more difficult to *“walk by faith,”* 2Corinthians 5:7. And yet, *faith* is the only way that is pleasing to God, *“without faith it is impossible to please Him,”* Hebrews 11:6.**

**The *way* to heaven is “hard” because it requires obedience. Faith is not just *believing in Jesus*- even *“the demons also believe, and shudder,”* James 2:19. True, biblical, saving faith includes obedience, *“Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself…You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone…so also faith without works is dead,”* James 2:17,24,26. Eternal salvation is not attained on the basis of what we know, feel, or experience, though all of these are included. These are relatively *easy-* but faithfully and consistently *“doing the right thing”* is admittedly *hard,* James 4:17.**

**The *way* to heaven is “hard” because it requires us to think, feel, and act like God. Perhaps the clearest explanation of this principle can be found in Matthew 5:44-45, *“But I* (Jesus) *say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you; in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven…”* Did you get that? If we want to be God’s children, we must love those who hate us, and do good to them that do evil to us. Folks, such is not easy- it’s hard! But it is also necessary to attain heaven.**

**These few suggestions have only “scratched the surface” of the topic. But lest we become discouraged, and start to think heaven is unreachable, remember Matthew 19:26, *“With men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”*  Do those things that allow you to be *“with God”* both now and forever!** (11-8-11)

**Has American Religion Lost Its Faith?**

For the most part, the answer is “Yes.” Here’s why….

**First, we don’t really understand what “faith” is anymore.** “Faith” is not what I choose to believe, despite the fact that this is how most people who claim to be Christians use the term. “Faith,” according to Hebrews 11:6, is constituted of three essential elements: ***Belief*** *that God is* (knowledge in the *mind*); ***Trust*** *that He is a rewarder* (trust in the *heart*); and, ***Obedience***(*seeking* Him implies compliance with the *body*). Thus, true, biblical faith is made up of *knowledge in our minds* and *trust in our hearts* that produces *obedience* in our lives. “Faith” that lacks any one of these three elements is simply not biblical faith, and leaves one without any real *conviction* or *assurances* regarding anything spiritual*,* cf. Hebrews 11:1!

**Second, we’re misguided about the *source* of “faith.”** “Faith” comes from *hearing the word of Christ,* Romans 10:17*.* Stop and think about that. The *source* of faith is Christ’s word- the New Testament. This is the *wellspring* from which true faith flows, and must flow. Any belief or practice must be found in the New Testament (N.T.) to be *“of faith.”* We can’t claim to be a person “of faith” without *knowledge of, trust in,* and *obedience to* Christ’s word. This is the inescapable conclusion of Hebrews 11:6 and Romans 10:17.

Despite the above truths and conclusions regarding “faith,” American religion has instead substituted the following and called it “faith”:

**Personal Feelings.** Instead of referring to what the N.T. says, “faith” has become based on what we *feel.* Thus, our *knowledge, trust,* and *obedience* nowemanates not from what Christ’s word says, but our own emotions/feelings. This makes “faith” subjective to us, rather than being *objectively* tied to the Word. To explain this scenario in simple terms, “faith” is now determined by how we *feel* rather than what Christ says. Surely we can see this is backwards, and cannot be true, biblical, “faith”! We are subject to Christ and His word, not the other way around. Please understand that our feelings may be the standard by which we choose to live *now,* but they will not be the standard by which we a judged *then,* cf. John 12:48.

**Personal Desires.** We can’t believe and practice what *we want* and call it “faith.” What I/we personally *want* to believe doesn’t have anything to do with true faith- for again, true faith comes God’s word rather than my/your desires. Nor does “because I/we like it” mean that God likes or wants it when it comes to the *practice* of what we might call “faith.” Such quickly becomes *“self-made religion”* (Colossians 2:23) when our *god* is our *“own appetite,”* Philippians 3:19. The foundation of every spiritual *belief* and *practice* must be: “What does the N.T. say?”

**Personal Experience(s).** Psalm 34:8 says, *“taste and see that the Lord is good…”.* The perception of *good* based on *taste* is typically a *personal* perspective that comes from *experience*. But is this passage really indicating that *faith* in the Lord is based on such *personal experiences?* Consider also 1Peter 2:3 where we likewise find the phrase *tasting “the kindness of the Lord.”*  However, note the previous verse for the source of this *kindness* we are said to *taste, “like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word,**that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.”*  Many today, in spite of the implications of these passages, based their “faith” on their own *personal experiences* rather than what they read in God’s word. Often, this *experience* has to do with what they perceive to be God’s answer to a prayer they’ve uttered for deliverance from some physical situation. But what if God had said “No” to their request as He did to Paul, cf. 2Corinthians 12:7-10? Their “faith” would be lost! This is why “faith” is not based on our own *personal experience* but *“the word of Christ”* (Romans 10:17)!

**Personal Relationship.** If by the phrase, “personal relationship” one means that we are saved *individually* based on *faith* and *obedience* to the word of God rather than by *collectively* because we belong to some group claiming to be a “church,” I have no problem with it. But, this in NOT how most people use the phrase “personal relationship.” Instead, they seem to indicate some sort of *personalized relationship* which is unique to them; *i.e.* that they “are saved and worship *in my own way,”* cf. 1Corinthians 14:36. This is patently opposed to the N.T. which plainly teaches that everyone is saved in the same way, Mark 16:15-16. Thus, the basis of your *relationship* with Christ (faith) comes from the exact same source as everyone else’s- *the gospel,* 2Thessalonians 2:13-14! Accordingly, your *practice* of that faith should also be just like everyone else’s for the same reason- it came from the same source: the word of God!

All of this sounds pretty bleak for American religion. The good news is this: It doesn’t have to be this way, and, the solution to the problem is simple! When “faith” is based on the Word, as it must be, it can be established or regained both *individually* and *collectively* by simply returning to *the Book* and doing what it says! And since *“the word of the Lord abides forever,”* cf. 1Peter 1:22-25, any*individual* or *collectivity* of any*generation* can re-establish and maintain the true faith which is essential to salvation, Hebrews 11:6! Please, let *“the word of Christ”* be the foundation of your *faith,* your *relationship* with Him,and *the practice of* it- such is the **only** true basis! (4-28-15)

**Hating Evil and Loving Good**

The word of God says, *“Hate evil, you who love the Lord…”* inPsalm 97:10; and, *“Hate evil, love good…”* inAmos 5:15. This is certainly not going to be a *hate-fomenting* article; the world has far too much of that already. And, to point out what should be obvious, **God** (not man!) gets to determine what is “evil” and what is “good,” and does so through the revelation of His Word to us in the Bible, Galatians 5:19-25. But aside from these things, here’s the question we should be asking, “Is there a difference between ***hating what is evil*** and ***loving what is good/right****?”* Can one be done without the other? The answer is, “Yes,” and “Yes.” One can “hate evil,” and even be repulsed by it, without really “loving right.”

In the parable of “The Good Samaritan,” Luke 10:25-37, Jesus uses the story of an unfortunate man, two “religious” men, and a perceived enemy to teach an important lesson of mercy and compassion. In the story, the *unfortunate man*, while traveling, fell prey to robbers who beat, stripped, and left him half-dead. Both a *priest* and the *Levite* separately happened upon the *unfortunate man,* and saw his pitiful and obviously helpless condition, but *“passed by on the other side”* regardless. These *piously religious* and *seriously devout* men undoubtedly “hated evil”- possibly so much so that they didn’t even want to be close to the “results” of it. Perhaps they were concerned with “getting involved,” or even with becoming “unclean” through contact with someone they might have thought to be dead, cf. Numbers 19:11-13. But whatever their motivations, and though *“hating evil,”* they certainly did not *“love good”* enough to even check on, let alone help, the *unfortunate* man. They just *“passed by on the other side.”*

The Samaritans were a race derived from people imported by the Assyrians to settle the land from which they had captured, killed, or deported the northern ten tribes of Israel (722 B.C.). These “imports” intermarried with the remaining Jews who were deemed not worth the effort to kill or deport to Assyria. So, the Jews of Jesus’ day hated the Samaritans as “half-breeds” and “interlopers,” cf. John 4:9; which is probably why He chose a Samaritan for the “good guy” in this story.

In the parable, this *perceived enemy* of the Jews surely *“hated evil,”* and was repulsed by it, as were the *priest* and the *Levite.* But, his hatred did not end with simple disdain for evil, and avoidance of its results. Because he **also** *“loved good,”* he *“felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him,”* Luke 10:33-34. Additionally, the next day, he paid the innkeeper to care for the man further, and promised to reimburse any additional expenditures incurred when he returned, v.35.

The priest’s and Levite’s neighbors would certainly have vouched for them as “haters of evil.” But, the man who fell among the robbers could vouch for the Samaritan that he was also a “lover of good.” Please contemplate these things, and further consider the following:

* We shouldn’t minimize being properly repulsed by and fleeing from true evil, for the Scriptures teach the necessity of this, 2Corinthians 6:14-18; but,
* Such is very different from turning a “blind eye” toward the innocent results of evil, or avoiding the responsibility of human compassion and care, 1John 3:17-18; 4:20.
* Being even properly and rightly repulsed by and “hating evil” is not the same thing as “loving good.” No one will be saved on the Day of Judgment solely because of what they avoided, or **didn’t** do, Matthew 25:31-46.

“Loving good” requires a corresponding “hate for evil,” and harm it produces, to the extent that it causes us to do something to mitigate or eliminate those effects with compassion, kindness, and the truth of the gospel, Eph.5:11-17. (4-8-14)

**Have We Forgotten What God Has Said, Or Do We Just Not Care Anymore?**

As a society, have we forgotten what God has said, or do we just not care anymore? Have we, in religion and out, so turned our back on the truth of God’s Word that what He has said just doesn’t matter to us? God’s prophet Hosea long ago lamented, *“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children,”* Hosea 4:6. The prophet spoke of his own generation, but are his words any less true of ours? Have we forgotten, or do we just not care that God has said…

**Sex before marriage is wrong?** God placed sexual fulfillment within the covenant of marriage, cf.1Corinthians 7:1-5, and further stated, *“Let marriage be held in honor* ***among all****, and let the marriage bed be* ***undefiled****; for* ***fornicators*** *and* ***adulterers God will judge****,”* Hebrews 13:4. How is it then that we no longer *expect* purity entering marriage, and have excused, allowed, and even promoted sex prior to marriage? “Safe sex,” *physically* and *spiritually,* is sex **within** marriage! “Living together” or “dating” (if that means *having sex*) is not an acceptable *trial run* or *preparation for* marriage- it is sin, period. Have we forgotten, or do we just no longer care what God has said?

**Marriage is between a man and a woman?** Read the divinely-inspired words recorded of the first marriage, *“For this cause a* ***man*** *shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his* ***wife****; and they shall become one flesh,”* Genesis 2:24. The *cause* to which this verse refers is God’s plan for the happiness of mankind, and the continuation and betterment of humanity. God had already said that *“It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper* ***suitable*** *for him,”* Genesis 2:18. Thus, God *“fashioned into a* ***woman*** *the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man,”* Genesis 2:22. Jesus affirmed that God’s laws regarding marriage had not changed in Matthew 19:4, *“Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them* ***male*** *and* ***female…?”*** Have we forgotten what God has said, or do we just no longer care?

**Adultery is sinful?** Since God has placed the sexual relationship between a man and woman *within* marriage, it is equally wrong to have sex with someone other than your spouse *after* marriage (adultery) as it is *before* marriage (fornication). Read His Words from 1Corinthians 6:9-10, *“Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither* ***fornicators****, nor idolaters, nor* ***adulterers****, nor* ***effeminate****, nor* ***homosexuals****, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.”*  Note that these *sexual* perversions of God’s plan for marriage are just as condemning as any other sin; and unrepented (see 1Corinthians 6:11), any of them will prevent the attainment of heaven. Furthermore, it is ludicrous for those who claim to be Christians to rail against homosexuality by claiming it is destroying the moral fabric of America while turning a blind eye, a deaf ear, and a closed mouth against *pre-marital* and *extra-marital* sexual relations. Fornication and adultery have done far more to destroy the morals of America than homosexuality ever has done, or possibly ever will do. This doesn’t make homosexuality right- it just makes “Christians” who decry it **while** ignoring the sins of fornication and adultery hypocrites! Have we forgotten what God has said, or do we just not care anymore?

**Divorce for *any cause* is sinful?** Long ago, God said He hated divorce, cf. Malachi 2:16. Jesus was specifically asked if it was lawful to divorce for any cause. He referred the questioners back to God’s original purposes and intents for marriage, including, *“What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate,”* cf. Matthew 19:1-6. He further stated, *“whoever divorces his wife,* ***except for immorality****, and marries another* ***commits adultery.****”* This isn’t complicated, convoluted, or hard to comprehend: Divorce for *any cause* other than sexual immorality is sinful. “We grew apart” or “fell out of love” or “decided to go our separate ways” doesn’t cut it. Marriage is one man and one woman for life. The only exceptions to God’s rule for marriage are: death of a spouse, Romans 7:1-4; or divorcing a sexually unfaithful spouse, Matthew 5:32; 19:9, period. Have we forgotten what God has said, or do we just not care anymore?

It does not matter how *enlightened* we have become, or how much we have *evolved-* God’s Word does not change or go away, 1Peter 1:23-25. It will be the standard by which all will be judged, John 12:48; Matthew 7:21-24. Please, turn back to God and His Word before it is eternally too late. (9-22-15)

**Have You Noticed?**

Have you noticed that the ***thinner*** and ***lighter*** our televisions get the ***thicker*** and ***heavier*** we get? Could it be because we sit or lay on the couch with a big plate of something fattening and watching other people exercise?

Have you noticed that the ***smarter*** our phones become the ***dumber*** we feel? If your cell phone (isn’t that almost a redundant term now- are there still other kinds?) doesn’t surf, chat, facebook, and tweet, or if you don’t even understand what those things mean either, then we both probably have what the suave young salesmen at the wireless store called a “Senior” phone. That’s OK- mine still makes phone calls, which is exactly what I purchased it to do!

Have you noticed that the ***easier*** our lives are made by technology, the more ***complicated***, they become? Did I actually see a refrigerator advertised the other day with an inventory touch screen and status monitor in the door? Really- a computer in the refrigerator? And I felt lavishly indulgent with a laptop that could connect to the internet without a cord!

Have you noticed that the more ***user-friendly*** something becomes the more ***hateful*** it becomes to the user’s wallet? Exactly when was it that “user-friendly” become synonymous with “expensive”? (See again the previous paragraphs!)

Have you noticed that the ***more*** our cars do for us the ***less*** we can do for them? Is it really true that our cars can now parallel park themselves for us, but we can no longer change the oil in them ourselves? That is, of course, if they still have oil in them.

Have you noticed that the ***greater*** the number of the channels on our televisions the ***fewer*** the number of them we’re interested in watching? I actually found and enjoyed watching a show the other day about a 154-mile classic tractor ride (perhaps because I grew up on a farm and worked at a tractor auction for about six years). It was really neat to see all of those old tractors again, but don’t even get me started on so-called “reality TV,” which has surely destroyed almost as many brain cells in this country as marijuana!

But all of this isn’t just a feeble attempt at a humorous rant- there actually is a spiritual point or three to be made. It seems the older I get, the more I appreciate simple things- the things that require no electricity, remote controls, or connection to the internet and that don’t have any little blue or green or red or orange indicator lights. Things like: a sharp pole ax with a good handle; or a good steak cooked over an open fire; or an evening spent at home with beloved ones playing a game and laughing; or a drive down a tree-covered road with the windows rolled down in a vehicle old enough that I can still hear and feel the engine’s surging growl; or a hand-holding stroll in the cool of the evening conversing with the love of my life; or a morning spent by the softly-crackling glow of the fireplace with a large cup of coffee and my Bible.

Technological advances have revolutionized our lives and made them much easier in many respects. But please don’t allow all these “techno toys” to prevent or even precede the things that really matter: the value of simple hard work that produces sweat; an appreciation of the wonderful world God created for us to enjoy in person, rather than by digital representations; the joy and love of family up close, without typed letters and electronically delivered hugs; and the profound pleasure of reading, studying, and living the Bible- it *lives and abides forever* you know, 1Peter.1:23. These are simple things, good things, things that will never become obsolete with the next generation of technological gadgetry.

I’ll leave you with two passages on which to contemplate: *“…make it your ambition to lead a quite life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you behave properly toward outsides and not be in any need.”* 1Thessalonians 4:11-12; and, *“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”* Micah 6:8. (1-11-12)

**Hearing Voices**

“Hearing voices” can be an indication of mental illness or mental health- it all depends on the voices and what they say. For instance, “voices” that urge you to: hurt yourself or others; do things morally reprehensible; or act in ways contrary to sound logic and reason are obviously problematic whatever their source. But what about “voices” that instead urge you to: help yourself and others; act in morally upright and righteous ways; and conduct yourself in reasonable, logical, and sound courses? What “voices” do this?

**The *Voice of Inspiration.*** *“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work,”* 2Timothy 3:16-17.Are you listening to the *voice of inspiration* for the education and correction it provides to enable you to be useful to God in your life?

**The *Voice of Reason.*** *“I urge you there, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship,”* Romans 12:1. The word translated as *“spiritual”* in this verse can also be rendered as *“rational”* (and is given as an alternate in the margins of some versions). What does this mean? It is not only *spiritual,* but also *reasonable* to listen to and obey God by living *sacrificially* for Him instead of *selfishly* for yourself. Are you listening to His *voice of reason* in this way?

**The *Voice of Knowledge.*** *“I know, O Lord, that a man’s way is not in himself; nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps,”* Jeremiah 10:23. There is an obvious arrogance involved when we think we know more or better than our Creator about anything. So, when facing problems and difficulties, or just seeking to navigate through the mazes of life, do you listen to the ultimate *voice of knowledge,* or assume you have/can get all the needed information yourself?

**The *Voice of Understanding.*** *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts higher than your thoughts,”* Isaiah 55:8-9. Think about it- there are so many times and circumstances in life that cause us to admit, “I just don’t understand.” But, in how many of those times and circumstances do you appeal to God in prayer for assistance AND look to His word for enlightenment? We may tend to ask for His help, but usually fail to search the answers He has already provided for assistance. Are you listening to the *voice of understanding* by trying to “see” things the way God does?

**The *Voice of Wisdom.*** *“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealous and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”* James 3:13-18. Thus, “true wisdom” is only present when the “right” things are done through it. Are you listening to the *voice of wisdom “from above”* in righteous conduct, or still struggling to find peace through the *wisdom from below* (human sources)?

Why not listen to and heed these “voices”? To be sure, there are myriads of “voices” which claim to be those of *reason, knowledge, understanding,* and *wisdom* today. However, there is but one *voice* that really counts- the *voice of inspiration!* Read your Bible- it contains the *reason, knowledge, understanding,* and *wisdom* that matters to eternity. (1-23-14)

**Hearing Well**

Recently, a friend of mine said of a mutual acquaintance of ours, “He doesn’t hear well, and he doesn’t listen well either.” This statement was a commentary on both the man’s physical difficulties with hearing, and his attitudinal difficulties with listening. More personally, another friend of mine quotes me as having said to him on multiple occasions (at least as he tells it), “You have vastly over-estimated my interest in this subject.” So I apparently have the same problem as the first fellow- we don’t always listen well!

Physical impairments are something we’d all much rather avoid, if possible, but over which we often have little control. As we age, our eyes and ears often lose their strength just as do our arms, legs, heart, lungs, and minds- we just wear out, and there is precious little we can do to avoid it short of dying young. But the other part- about not listening well, is another matter altogether.

By way of contrast to these things, I recently had the honor of speaking at the funeral of a brother in Christ. In making preparations for the service, I visited with the family and asked them to describe their loved one, and specifically, to tell me some things about him that impressed them the most. One of the responses I received, while not surprising at all, was striking with regard to the degree of appreciation they expressed for that particular characteristic in him. They said, “He was an excellent listener,” and then proceeded to provide many examples of his abilities in this area. I quickly confessed that he was a much better man than I in that regard (and surely in many others as well). But it was so moving to hear family members lovingly describe how much they appreciated his ability to, and willingness to, listen well. And coupled with the opening examples of this article, it emphasized the rarity of the ability to truly “listen well.”

Jesus once spoke disparagingly of His audience, *“In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn again, and I should heal them.”* (Matthew 13:14-15) In applying Isaiah’s words to His audience, Jesus is not indicating that there was any physical impairment to their eyes or ears, but a spiritual impairment to their hearts! When one refuses to “see” and “listen” to God’s words, spiritual cardio sclerosis (*heart hardening*) has surely occurred!

But aside from this obvious spiritual difficulty, why is it that some of us just don’t listen well? Here are my best guesses:

**Perceived Self-Importance.** Quite simply, we’re much more interested in what we have to say than hearing what anyone else has to say. Consequently, we only really listen for the pauses in their speech so we can interject our own thoughts without so obviously interrupting. This is incongruent with Philippians 2:3, *“Do nothing from selfishness of empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself…”*

**Impatience.** Certainly, this one is related to the previous suggestion. That is, because we consider what we have to say so much superior to whatever anyone else might say, we don’t have the patience (or courtesy) to sincerely listen to them. But *patience* is a *“fruit of the Spirit”* we Christians are supposed to not only possess, but practice, cf. Galatians 5:22ff! We are told in James 1:19, *“let every one be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”* Is it possible that our difficulties with the second two of these imperatives result from a failure in regard to the first one?

It doesn’t require any special skills to be a good listener to God, or others. It just requires us to have the right heart- one that is humble, patient, kind, and wise…which is obviously the real problem many of us face. Let’s all become better listeners by improving our hearts, OK? (5-1-12)

**“Heaven Holds All to Me”**

These are the words of a familiar refrain written by Bro. Tillit S. Teddlie, who was, in my opinion, one of the greatest authors of our hymns.  His songs are singable, melodic, and always seem to carry a thought-provoking and/or inspirational message.  Such is certainly true of this great anthem.  But my question is this:  "Is it really true for you?"  Or otherwise stated, "Can you honestly and enthusiastically sing this particular song?"

I fear we (meaning most church members today) are far too comfortable here.  I fear we do not *“groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven”* in ways Paul expressed to Corinthians as *“walking by faith, not by sight,”* 2Corinthians 5:7. Why?

Perhaps it is because we do not possess the sentiment Bro. Teddlie penned in the opening line of the song:  “Earth holds no treasures but perish with using…”  Most of us have far too many “treasures” here.  I don’t mean that we are too wealthy or possess too much, though that may be true enough, but that we have far too many things here that we “treasure.”  Our storehouse of “treasure” is not in heaven as Jesus said it should be, cf. Matt.6:19-21.  The treasures of earth, rather than those of heaven, occupy our hearts.  What is the evidence of such a claim?

Think about it for a moment.  When you pray, do more “spiritual” or “physical” concerns populate your prayer? I’m not suggesting that physical concerns be eliminated, obviously James 5:13ff indicates we should pray with regard to such things.  But which group gets more of petitional concern from you?  When spiritual duties such as worship are set aside, how often is it done for physical pursuits that are not necessities, such as illness, or truly unavoidable circumstances?  If your checkbook (or bankcard) and Bible were taken without your knowledge, which would you miss first?  Unfair question?  Perhaps so, but it does make us stop and think about which we use, and value, most often, doesn’t it?

But perhaps the most obvious indicator of where our true “treasure” might be is seen in our attitude toward physical vs. spiritual life.  A physical cold gets our attention immediately, but spiritual heart problems often go ignored for years despite the symptoms being just as obvious.  We are far too concerned with physical life and health, and have far too little concern for spiritual life and health.  Everyone dies, Heb.9:27.  That includes me and you– not only should we get used to the idea, we should look forward to it.  If heaven truly holds all to us, death is graduation day!  It will be the culmination of all for which we’ve lived! (11-3-10)

**The Realities of Hell**

I confess some lack of understanding how some people can claim to believe in the eternal reward of heaven, but not in the reality of an eternal punishment in hell. Doesn’t the same Bible that tells of one also describe the other?

While it may be somewhat comforting to think that if we don’t want to “go to all the trouble” of doing what God says to attain eternal reward, that we can live as we want now and then just cease to exist at death, the Bible just doesn’t provide that option. Note 2Corinthians 5:10 in this regard, *“For we must* ***all*** *appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that* ***each one*** *may be recompensed for his deeds in the body,* ***according to what he has done****, whether* ***good*** *or* ***bad****.”* There simply is no “middle ground” here, for the Savior also said, *“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me, scatters,”* Matthew 12:30. So, it is really up to us- God has done His part by graciously providing not only the ***means*** of salvation through the sacrifice of His Son, He also supplied the ***instructions*** on how to appropriate that redemptive price of Jesus’ blood, Titus 2:11-14.

There are two great motivators in life: ***love*** and ***fear.***  God used ***love*** in that He showed us how much He loved us through the sacrifice of His Son, Romans 5:8, in hopes that we would lovingly reciprocate by sacrificing our lives in faith and devotion to Him, Colossians 3:1-14. But He also used ***fear*** to motivate us to do the right things; specifically, the fear of eternal punishment in hell. Note Jesus’ words of warning from Matthew 13:42, *“and they will cast them* (*stumbling-blocks* and *lawless,* from the previous verse) *into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* In Mark 9:48, Jesus further described hell as a place *“where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”* If the notion of an eternal punishment composed of *fire, worms,* and *pain* sufficient to cause one to *bite* at himself and others like a wild animal doesn’t instill a healthy fear in you, well, then you may need to re-evaluate things!

But in all of the descriptions that are given of hell in the Text (see also Revelation 20:10; *e.g.*), the things *absent* also arrest my attention. Note a few of them.

1. There is no ***water*** in hell. With all that fire, there is not a drop of water to be found. Do you remember how the *“rich man”* (of Luke 16) begged for even a drop of water *“to cool my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame”* in v.24? There is no relief in hell.
2. There are no ***flashlights*** in hell. When a storm causes a power outage, one of the first things we want is a flashlight. But hell is described as a place of *“outer darkness,”* Matthew 25:30. There is no way to see in hell.
3. There are no ***fences*** in hell. We use fences to either keep things *in,* or to keep things *out.*  In hell, there will be no desire to keep what we have in, but there won’t be any way to keep the other bad things out either! Since inhabitants of hell will be sharing the abode with those cataloged in 1Corinthians 6:9-11 and Revelation 21:8; 22:15, a fence would be a useful, but unavailable, commodity.
4. There is no **hope** in hell. We humans have been endowed with the ability to endure tremendous hardship and even torture, provided we can see an end or purpose to it. But with the *eternal* nature of hell (see Revelation 20:10 again), such a hope of relief or release is dashed. Instead, hope is replaced with eternal contemplation and regret for opportunities forfeited. Part of the punishment for the “rich man” of Luke 16 was an eternity to *“remember,”* v.25!
5. There is no **God** in hell. If we haven’t figured it out by now, the absence of God is what makes this place of torment “hell”! Physical death is the separation of the body and spirit, James 2:26, but spiritual death, which is *“the second death”* of Revelation 20:14, is the subsequent separation of the unrighteous spirit from God for eternity, Matthew 25:41!

Please understand that our gracious and loving God doesn’t want anyone to spend eternity in hell, 1Timothy 2:4, and has provided the opportunity for us to avoid it, but such does not change the reality of its existence, horrors, or inhabitants, Matthew 25:41. (6-18-13)

**If You Think It’s Hot in East Texas…**

Give a listen to what Jesus had to say about Hell in Mark 9:43,48, *“the unquenchable fire…where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”* Likewise, the rich man of Luke 16:19-24ff said of Hades (which is not Hell proper [Gehenna] but is getting real close), *“I am in agony in this flame.”* We don’t necessarily like to talk about Hell, but the Bible surely does. Just because it is uncomfortable for us to consider the possibility of an eternity in *“unquenchable fire”* does not alter its reality. Hell is a very real place. We find many biblical descriptions of it, just like we do of Heaven. So if we believe in Heaven, we necessarily also believe in Hell because our knowledge of both comes from the same Bible.

The Sacred Text gives some insight into the nature of Hell, but think for a moment about some of the “comforts of home” here that **won’t be found in Hell**.

In Hell there aren’t any **flashlights.** That doesn’t sound so awful. But consider that at least three times (Matt.8:12; 22:13; 25:30ff) Jesus described Hell as a place of *“outer darkness.”* With this phrase He gives us the image of *farthest out darkness-* where there is *“weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* Think of experiencing this without even a flashlight to reveal where such horrors might be lurking.

In Hell there isn’t any **water.** Water is something we take for granted every day. We just turn on the tap and expect it to stream forth sustenance, cleanliness, and the ability to “cool off.” But in Hell there is no water. Remember the rich man in torment that Jesus told us about in Luke 16? He asked that Lazarus might *“dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame,”* v.24. If even a small drop of water on your tongue is seen as comfort to your agony, that’s a lot of agony! But there was not even a drop of water to be found in the torment of Hades.

In Hell there aren’t any **fences.** Again, at first this doesn’t sound so bad. But think about it. We use fences to keep what we want in, or what we don’t want out. In Hell, we won’t have anything we necessarily desire to keep in, but there will sure be a lot of things we would love to keep out! Think of all of the evil that has existed throughout human history that will be in Hell (cf. 1Corinthians 6:9-10; Revelation 21:8). Think of all the evil spirits that will be banished to Hell along with Satan. Think also of all the misery the Bible attributes to Hell. All of these will be there without a single fence to keep them away.

In Hell there isn’t any **hope.**  Human beings can endure untold horrors if we have hope that there is some future end of them. Revelation 20:10 speaks of the hopelessness of those committed to Hell as being *“tormented day and night forever and ever.”* It may be comforting to think of Hell as a “cessation of being,” as some folks do, but unfortunately that is just not true according to the Bible. Perhaps the greatest horror of Hell is that it has no end. Therefore it allows no hope of relief or extrication.

In case you haven’t noticed yet, the main reason that Hell is so horrible is **the** **absence of God!**  *Physical death* is the separation of the man’s body from his spirit, James 2:26. But *spiritual death* is the separation of man’s spirit from God. Matthew 25:41 says, *“****Depart from Me****, accursed ones, into the eternal fire…”* 2Thessalonians 1:9 adds, *“And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction,* ***away from the presence of the Lord*** *and from the glory of His power,”.* It is the complete and permanent absence of God that makes Hell horrific!

But mercifully, there is an alternative. *“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city.”* The *“city”* is heaven. If we, in faith, *“wash our robes”* in the blood of Jesus by baptism, Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1Corinthians 6:11, and, in faith, live for Him rather than ourselves, we avoid the horrors of Hell and are instead graciously allowed to spend eternity with God in Heaven! Otherwise, the reality of Hell awaits: *“Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murders and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying,”* Revelation 22:15 (6-21-11)

**“Here’s Your Sign”**

A comedian by the name of Bill Engvall has been making people laugh (and making a what I imagine to be good living too) for several years by telling “Here’s your sign” stories. The common thread of these stories is the apparently unavoidable tendency we all share to say or do things from time to time that are just plain…. well, stupid. And when we say or do these foolish things, someone is invariably there to hear or see them, and, of course, to bring to our attention just how ridiculous we sound or look. Engvall’s signature tagline to such occasions is, “Here’s your sign”- meaning that someone ought to hand us a “Stupid” sign to wear so that others will know to approach or engage us with caution!

Such is the basis of his humor- and it’s funny to us precisely because it is familiar. Most all of us have “been there” and “done that.” Being able to laugh at ourselves, and see the funny side of the really dumb things we say and do, is probably good, and certainly supplies some healthy humility to our egos. We all need someone to help us to really see ourselves clearly, and to clearly identify us to others.

Actually, there is somewhat of a biblical parallel to these things. Under the Law of Moses, a person infected with leprosy was required to cry out *“Unclean! Unclean!”* to those who approached so that they could avoid close contact with him, cf. Leviticus 13:45. This likely why those who approached Jesus in Luke 17:12-13 *“stood at a distance”* and called out to Him. Though certainly the horrors of an incurable disease are not to be made light of by comparing them to a comedic device, the principle is the same as Engvall’s suggested sign: to let others know you might be dangerous to them!

Given these things, perhaps there are other “signs” which would be helpful identifiers and warnings to others if folks would wear them, like….

A **“Liar”** sign would let everyone know not to trust this person. “Oh, but I’m not really a liar, I just *stretch* the truth a little sometimes.” Well, all that won’t fit on the sign! Besides, Ephesians 4:26 says, *“There, laying aside falsehood, speak the truth, each of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.”*

A **“Thief”** sign would certainly be helpful. That way, everyone would know not to leave valuables unprotected if such a sign-wearer was around. Or, we could all just heed Ephesians 4:28, *“Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need.”*

An **“Adulterer”** sign could be very beneficial also (yeah, I know there was a book and a couple of movies about this one). After all, it would be easier than wearing multiple signs since an adulterer has “lied” regarding the contract made with their mate, and has “stolen” someone to whom they did not have a right. Or, we could just honor God’s rule of marriage: “One man, one woman, for life.” (see Matthew 19:6,9)

Do these things sound too harsh? Though we may have all earned the right to wear one (or all) of these signs at one time or another, or even others similar to them, there are others signs we could wear that would also be helpful to those around us, like….

A **“Washed”** or **“Sanctified”** or **“Justified”** sign could help others to more clearly “see” us, and Jesus’ saving power. 1Corinthians 6:9-10 identifies a whole host of folks who *“shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”*  This list includes, along with several other sins, liars, thieves, and adulterers. But, the very next verse (v.11) adds, *“And such were some of you; but you were* ***washed,*** *you were* ***sanctified****, but you were* ***justified*** *in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God.”*  The great news is the Corinthians changed signs! And you can too- just *“be baptized and wash away your sins”* as Paul did in Acts 22:16; *cleanse yourself from dishonorable things* and *“pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace”* so that you can be *“sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work”* as in 2Timothy 2:21-22; and by these things become *justified- “for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified,”* Romans 2:13. If we have to wear a sign, let’s make it one of these! (8-23-12)

**Heterosexual “Christian” Hypocrisy regarding Homosexuality**

We Christians often bristle or are dismissive of the charge of “hypocrisy” without really considering that it might actually be accurate. To be sure, it is frequently falsely levied as the last (or first) resort for those who have no other legitimate defense for their sinful practices. And let’s be clear, there is no scriptural defense for homosexuality, as 1Corinthians 6:9 clearly indicates. But these things notwithstanding, **Christians *are* being hypocritical regarding homosexuality by…**

**Ignoring, minimizing, excusing, or even expecting and making allowances for *premarital* *heterosexual* sin.**  Let’s face it: Homosexuality isn’t the cause of illegitimate births. And we don’t need statistics to tell us that sexual diseases are contracted more often by premarital heterosexual promiscuity than by the homosexual version of the same. Trumpeting 1Corinthians 6:9 to condemn homosexuality *while* ignoring or minimizing what it says about fornication(sex with someone to whom one is not married) **is** hypocritical. Many who call themselves “Christians” no longer teach or evenexpect their adolescent children to keep themselves pure for their future spouses, and make allowances and provisions for them to be promiscuous. “Boys will be boys” or “men will be men”- or their female equivalents, are nothing more than excuses for sin. Please hear and heed the Word of God on this point, *“Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts,”* Roman2 13:13-14.

**Divorcing their heterosexual spouses without scriptural cause.** It is hypocritical to decry “the desecration of the sanctity of marriage the way God intended it” relative to homosexual marriages *while* disregarding His laws for heterosexual marriage by divorcing *“for any cause at all,”* Matthew 19:3. Yes, God instituted marriage for one man and one woman, but did so for life- not until we “grow apart” or “fall out of love”! There are only two scriptural ways for a marriage to end: 1) death; Romans 7:2-3; 2) adultery (when one spouse divorces another because he/she has had sex with someone else), Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9. Disregarding God’s laws for heterosexual marriage by divorce for any cause has done far more damage to the “moral fabric of our society” than homosexual marriage ever has or will. This doesn’t make same-sex marriage right, but it does make “Christians” hypocritical when they condemn it *while* unscripturally divorcing their mates and living in adultery (through unlawful remarriage) as a result themselves.

**Requiring celibacy of homosexuals but refusing to practice it as heterosexuals.** God placed the rightful expression of human sexual desires within heterosexual marriage, 1Corinthians 7:1-5. This means, among other things, that we have the ability to control our desires until such a time as they can be lawfully expressed within heterosexual marriage. But, while many “Christians” correctly condemn the expression of homosexual desires in or out of marriage, they give little attention (let alone condemnation) to the unlawful gratification of heterosexual desires either in our out of marriage. This **is** hypocritical. If we’re going to require celibacy of homosexuals because there is no lawful way for them to indulge their desires, then we must also be willing to practice heterosexual celibacy when we are not in a position to gratify them lawfully. Premarital sex, extramarital sex, and the use of pornography are just as wrong for the heterosexual as they are for the homosexual. It is just as wrong to *“look on a woman to lust for her”* heterosexually as it is for one to *look on another person* of the same sex *to lust after them.*  When there is no lawful avenue of expression of the sexual desires, celibacy is the only right choice, please read 1Corintians 6:12-20 and 1Thessalonians 4:1-8.

The practice of homosexuality is biblically wrong whether it is in or out of marriage, Romans 1:24-27. But, “Christians” who rail against it **while** refusing to abide by God’s laws pertaining to heterosexual expression and marriage themselves are just as wrong, and will suffer the same eternal fate, Revelation 21:8. Truth spoken from hypocrisy is rarely heard. Truth spoken *in love* and *with sincerity* has a much better chance. (7-14-15)

**Holidays and Commandments**

Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying, *“How many observe Christ’s birthday- how few, His precepts! O, ‘tis easier to keep holidays than commandments.”*

While this article is not some sort of anti-Christmas tirade, we do need to consider the wise words of Mr. Franklin. He’s right. It is easier to spend more than we can afford lavishing gifts on one another and being nice to one another for a month each year (OK, a few days or a week for some of us!) than it is to truly strive day in and day out to be what Christ would have us to be. In urging the Ephesians to *“walk as children of light,”* Paul stated what should be the obvious duty of all Christians- *“trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.”* (Ephesians 5:8,10) I’m afraid that what many of us call “religious service” is actually more about what *we* want than what the Lord wants. We seem to strive to fit God into what we already desire to do, rather than genuinely attempting to determine from His Word what He desires of us in the area of service. For instance, what does the New Testament say is the truest expression of our love for God and His Son? Please consider the following passages carefully to determine the answer:

*“And why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”* Luke 6:46

*“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”* John 14:15

*“He who has My commandments, and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him.”* John 14:21

*“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father’s who sent Me’.”* John 14:23-24

*“If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.”* John 15:6-7

*“If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments, and abide in His love.”* John 15:10

*“You are My friends, if you do what I command you.”* John 15:14

We do not prove our love for or to God through man-made ideas of religious service. We prove our love for God in primarily three ways: **(1) doing what He says in the New Testament** (as seen in the passages above); **(2) striving to emulate Him in our thoughts and ways,** *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just Christ also love you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma”* (Ephesians 5:1-2); and **(3) truly loving one another,** *“This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.”* (John 15:12)

While God’s Word never includes any command of Jesus for us to remember and celebrate His birth (cp. 1Corinthians 11:23-26), it does include many admonitions by Him for us to abide in His word through obedience, to pattern our thoughts and activities after His, and to love one another as He loved us. Read and study your Bible, and do what it says. Jesus said such is the true measure of our love for Him and His Father. (12-22-10)

**Have We Replaced “Holier Than Thou” with “Holy Enough”?**

The problem of “self-righteousness,” or the “holier than thou” attitude and accompanying actions, has been around a long time. But things are changing somewhat in that regard. After all, when was the last time you heard someone actually use the word “thou” in a sentence who wasn’t reading the KJV, or wasn’t on some TV show about the Amish?

“Holier than thou” is a phrase that has typically been used to point out the presumed hypocrisy of self-righteousness in others. Such was certainly prevalent in Jesus’ day. Though He didn’t use this particular phrase in so doing, Jesus did address a parable to those *“who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt,”* in Luke 18:9-14. This pretty well hits the hypocrite nail on the head. In this parable, the tax-gatherer (they were notoriously corrupt) who humbly acknowledged his sin and pleaded for God’s mercy was justified, while the Pharisee (strictest religious sect of the Jews) who lauded and praised his own piety was clearly condemned.

In more recent times, “holier than thou” became the go-to phrase used by folks more or less unconcerned with biblical authority to describe those who sought to do bible things in bible ways. Christians who insisted on a “book, chapter, and verse” were quickly accused of *legalism,* and assigned a “holier than thou” habitude, whether they actually possessed it or not. Nonetheless, the fear of being labeled as either “legalists*”* or “holier than thou” types seems to have been strong enough motivation for some to give the pendulum a shove in the other direction. The result appears to be a “holy enough” attitude.

The “holy enough” attitude is likewise not new on the landscape of biblical history. Toward the end of Numbers 15, God tells Moses that He wants the Israelites to make and attach tassels to the corners of their garments. These tassels were to serve a distinct purpose as a personal reminder to *“to do all My commandments, and be holy to your God,”* Numbers 15:40. In what surely seems to be a response to Moses relaying this requirement to the people, in the first part of the next chapter, some of the priests and leading men *“rose up before Moses”* with a coalition of 250 *“leaders of the congregation, chosen in the assembly, men of renown.”*  What did they have to say to Moses and Aaron, God’s appointed leaders? *“You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourself about the assembly of the Lord?”* Numbers 16:3. In addition to questioning the leadership of Moses and Aaron, they also seem to be suggesting that the Israelites were **already** ***holy enough,***and thus did not need additional requirements to make them more holy! In truth, this rebellion probably had as much to do with the capital punishment of one found breaking the Law as it did this additional requirement, cf. Numbers 15:32-36. In either case, obviously the congregation was not quite as “holy” as they presumed.

But, the point of the preceding paragraph is that the Israelites assumed that they were already “holy enough” because they were *God’s people*, and He was *in their midst.* This satisfaction with spiritual mediocrity caused them to be blind to their own true spiritual condition and needs (cp. Revelation 3:14-22), and thus rebel against any additional effort by those speaking for God to increase their holiness. Does any of this sound familiar? Are we not now, becoming apathetically content with “holy enough” so as to reject any efforts to increase our holiness, as well as those who make them? Have we, perhaps in fear and dread of the “holier than thou” epitaph, swung the pendulum to “holy enough”? Please be aware that as a result of this attitude, and the subsequent rejection of God’s word and leaders, the earth opened up and swallowed alive the ring-leaders of those rebelliously contending for “holy enough,” and *“fire came forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men,”* Numbers 16:31-35.

Obviously, “holy enough” according to men is not the same as *“holy to your God,”* Numbers 16:40. While we should never adopt a “holier than thou” disposition or stance, neither should we ever become content with “holy enough.” Please think on these things. (10-21-14)

**Are Your Children (biblically/spiritually) Home- Schooled?**

This is not an article on the relative advantages and liabilities of public vs. private (home) education. Each has its benefits, and each has its costs. Some send their children to public school because they don’t have the time, inclination, or ability to educate them themselves. Others start with grandiose or even noble ideas about “home-schooling” their children only to become less than diligent regarding the matter, and wind up doing a poor job of providing them with an education. Simply put, there are failures and successes on both sides of the comparison ledger. Obviously and ultimately, parents must take all the factors into consideration, and try to decide and do what they feel is best for their children. But again, this is really not the point of our title question.

As fathers, Ephesians 6:4 lays the responsibility to raise our children *“in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”* upon us. Such isn’t a requirement that is particular to the New Testament. As a part of the Law of Moses, Deuteronomy 6:1-9, required extensive “home-schooling” of their children pertaining to the will of God of every Hebrew father. The fact there weren’t many other options for educating children in the ways of God at the time doesn’t at all diminish the point. Note some specific instructions given them in this regard:

* Love the Lord your God with all ***your heart*** and all ***your soul*** and all ***your might***, v.5. Before any father can begin to “home school” his children about the Lord and things spiritual, he must first invest his whole being in loving God himself.
* The ***words*** of God’s commandment must likewise be on his heart, v.6. It is not enough to simply *feel* the right way about God, the “home schooling” father must also *know* what Jehovah commands. Remember, this is about education- and such requires that specific knowledge of the Lord, His ways, and His requirements be known before it can be taught. One cannot teach what he does not first know.
* Then, with these prerequisites in place, the “home schooling” father can begin ***diligently teaching***these things when he *sits in the house,* when he *walks by the way,* and when he *lies down* and *rises up,* v.7*.* This process of educating is not something that is accomplished by reading a bedtime story from the Bible to a toddler, but is an on-going part of every facet of life and its experiences. It is both a constant and continual effort of raising the child that undergirds every aspect of the father’s association with him.
* The commands of God must be *bound as a sign* on *the father’s hand,* and as *frontals* of his forehead, v.8. This probably refers to the Jewish practice of placing portions of Scripture in small pouches that were tied to the wrist (presumably to help steer or direct the hand to do God’s will), or around the head as a band with the pouch resting upon the temple (to help steer or direct the mind). The idea here is that God’s word is both to control the father’s own thoughts and actions, as well as being an example or sign for the child. “Do as I say, not as I do” has never worked- and never will because children learn as much (if not more) from what their father does as what he says.
* Finally, the Word of God should be written on the *doorposts* of the house, and on its *gates*, v.9. Thus, the first thing the child sees either coming or going from the house is the Law of God. This continual reminder serves as reinforcement to what the father has *loved, demonstrated,* and *taught.* But it must also be understood that simply plastering biblical passages and platitudes in and around the house does little good if the father has not first loved and demonstrated them in an exemplary way.

While Bible Classes at the local congregation level can be tremendous assets, and ought to be utilized by godly parents to the fullest extent possible toward the spiritual education of their children, such can never replace the “home school” of a father taking his responsibility seriously to be the *spiritual head* of his family (cf. Ephesians 5:23ff) and raise his children *“in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”* (Ephesians 6:4). Let’s face it fathers, God didn’t ordain local congregation bible classes to provide the spiritual education for your children, He ordained you to do it! Take that responsibility seriously, or you will likely raise spiritual illiterates instead of strong Christians who will become your spiritual legacy. (1-21-13)

**“Homely” Dads**

The word “homely” has a decidedly negative connotation in our modern vernacular– especially when used as a description of someone’s looks! But Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (which by the way, was “new” to this freshman collegian back in 1983!) lists its first meanings as **“suggestive or characteristic of a home; frequently encountered; of a sympathetic character.”** May I suggest to you that our homes today need exactly those kinds of Dads?

Our homes need Dads who are **“characteristic of a home”** in that he needs to be a part of it. Study after study has shown that the absence of a father in the home is the single greatest contributor to all kinds of problems in children specifically, and in society more generally. “Fathers” who denigrate the very term by their willing absence- whether completely absent, or just consistently absent, cannot possibly fulfill their God-given duty to *“bring them* (their children) *up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”* (Ephesians 6:4b) Sending a monthly check for child support does not cut it when it comes to fatherhood. Dad needs to be, as Mr. Webster suggested in his first definition, “characteristic” of the home. He must be a constituent element of it. He needs to be, if you will, a consistent feature or characteristic of the home to be pleasing to God, and of benefit to his family. How can any “head” of the family, and that is exactly what he is to be according to Ephesians 5:23ff, really be such if he is never around?

I know, I know, I can hear you from here, “Well, I have to make a living!” We all do. And I, like you perhaps, have been guilty of being so worried about and involved in “making a living *for* my family” that I forgot to “make a life *with* my family.” Such takes a very simple thing: time at home with our families. The over-used term “quality time” is just an excuse we use to feel better about our failures in spending too little of a precious commodity where it really should be spent. The second of Mr. Webster’s definitions of “homely” was **“frequently encountered”**. OK Dad, are you “frequently encountered” at home with your family by them, and/or visitors to it? Could you be called a “homely Dad” in that way and for that reason?

The final consideration of Mr. Webster’s definition of a “homely” Dad is that of being “of a sympathetic character” or disposition. Jesus said, *“Permit the children to come to Me, and stop hindering them…”* in Luke 18:16. Surely the Lord was making a point to His disciples with this statement (cf. v.15), but such wasn’t His only reason for saying it. He also was genuinely concerned with, and “of sympathetic character” toward, the children. He was sympathetic to their needs of His time and attention. When we don’t have time for a game of backyard catch, a tea party, a tee-ball game, a soft-ball game, or a piano recital, we aren’t being “homely Dads” because we aren’t being of a “sympathetic character” to the needs of our children. It’s hard to be sympathetic toward those who we don’t really know, and with whom we’ve spent very little time. Ah, there’s that word again-“time”. It seems so much revolves around it. Children can certainly be *over-dosed* with sympathy to the point of enabling weakness and encouraging bad habits. But we Dads must also always remember that they are children, and thus have child-like fears, child-like concerns, and child-like desires, and child-like needs. We can’t make them adults by ignoring that they are children– or these needs that come with them being children. Spend time with your children so that you can be sympathetic to their needs. After all, Moms are great, but Dads are better at finding and scaring away the monsters under the bed!

“Homely” may indeed be less than flattering at best, and down-right derogatory otherwise if applied to a female’s appearance. But when it comes to “Dads,” I hope it fits you to a tee!

Dads, let’s strive to be “characteristic” *of our homes*, “frequently encountered” *in our homes*, and of “sympathetic character” and disposition toward those *at our homes*. And may God help us all to be “homely”- in characteristics rather than looks of course! (6-16-10)

**Hometown Pride**

Bro. Dean Bullock (aka “the Beloved” and “Judge” by some) passed away this past week. I suppose I knew him just about all of my life- like so many other church folks throughout East Texas, and across the state and country. Perhaps as much as anyone else, Dean was responsible for me becoming a “preacher,” at least to the degree that such has occurred. So, now you know whom to blame! More seriously, he was my **preacher** (while he did local work in the congregation where I grew up), my **teacher** (while I worked and studied with him in Lufkin), my **“agent”** (for years he would call me every two or three years to see if I wanted to move to some other “good work” he knew about), my **father in the faith** (as he showed me what a “preacher” was and did) my **brother in Christ** (which is most important of all), and my **friend** (who I will always cherish). But this isn’t going to be tearful recitation of this noble servant’s life. Dean had a great, and very dry, sense of humor. So, let me relay one of his favorite stories, and hopefully make an appropriate point from it.

Dean proudly hailed from the tiny town of Alto, Texas. When he was young, he joined the Navy. Some of his favorite “tales” came from those younger years in Alto, or his time in the Navy. He loved to tell about one of his buddies from Alto who was also in the service (I never knew whether this “buddy” was real or fictitious). This friend asked a passing serviceman, “Hey buddy, whereya from?” The man replied proudly, “I’m from New York city!” Dean’s friend answered quite matter-of-factly, “Is that right?” “Yes sir,” the man responded, “Where are you from?” Dean’s friend immediately stood, poked out his chest as far as he could, and said with great pride, “I’m from Alto Texas!” “Really?” the passerby asked, “I’ve heard of Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and Corpus, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard of Alto.” “Oh, that’s OK,” Dean’s friend said slyly, looking down and kind of kicking at the ground while also peeking back with one eye, “There’s folks in Alto that have never heard of New York city!” (Apologies are hereby tendered to the current residents of Alto, all of which I’m certain know of New York, and some of which have been there.)

Hometown pride is a good thing, but just about every hometown has its good points and its not-so-good points. Hopefully, we can have the good nature to accept these things, and joke about and overcome them as necessary. Most of us are proud of “where we came from” regardless of whatever shortcomings it may have. And many of us, no matter where we’ve been, what we’ve done, and how we’ve lived, want to return “home” at the end of our lives- whether to live out our remaining days, or to “rest” until the Lord’s final call. But for the faithful Christian, things are a little bit different…

“Home” or “hometown” for the Christian means something different, something more- much more. Christians understand heaven to be their “hometown,” though they’ve never been there, except in the mind and eternal presence of God. They long to go “home” to that city from which they *spiritually* originate. They long to go “home” to be with their spiritual Parent, Brother, and family. Earthly ties of friends, family, and places are strong, but pale in comparison to the desire to go “home.” The swelling pride of their eternal “hometown” of heaven is not arrogant or boastful, but is an ever-present, sweet, and earnest longing. Philippians 3:20-21, *“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.”*

We can all be proud of our *physical hometowns*- regardless of their grandeur or humbleness, but Christians should be proud (in a good way) of our *spiritual hometown* of heaven; and more than anything else, long to go there. I will surely miss my friend, but I can’t mourn for *the Beloved,* he’s simply gone “home” to the place he longed to be much more than even his beloved Alto. Oh, that we can all be so blessed! (11-19-13)

**Horses and Carts**

Most of us have probably at least heard of “getting the cart in front of the horse”- it is more likely that we’ve all done just that, at least in one form or another. The phrase has to do with getting things out of order. Perhaps more specifically, it has to do with attempting to do one thing before something else that must necessarily come first. For those unfamiliar with carts and horses, the cart always hitches up behind the horse, rather than in front of him. Thus, those who get things out of the proper and necessary order are “getting the cart in front of the horse.” It’s kind of like trying to “push a chain”- but that’s another story for another time, I suppose. As you may have surmised by now, there is a spiritual application to this whole “horse and cart” thing.

Occasionally, I’ve had someone tell me he wanted to wait “until I get my life straightened out to become a Christian.” Now there’s a cart in front of a horse! There is no doubt that John told some Pharisees and Sadducees that they needed to *“bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance”* before baptism. But if you look carefully at the context of Matthew 3:5-12, you’ll see that he did so in that case because of their hypocrisy. They didn’t really believe they needed to repent of anything. They assumed they were already saved, rather than truly repenting and turning to God through baptism. That’s not the situation at all with the people who say they want to get their life straightened out before they’re baptized. Such is a “horse of a different color” altogether (sorry, that one just slipped right out)!

In such a case, “getting my life straightened out” is the cart, and being baptized is the horse. When we come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and decide to obey Him by being *“born again”* in baptism (John 3:3-5; Romans 6:3-4), we become a *“new creature”* (2Corinthians 5:17), or a *“babe”* (1Peter 2:2), in Christ. From that point, we must grow and develop into a mature Christian. As we mature in Christ, our lives are *transformed* by *renewing our minds* to the will of God, rather than simply *conforming* to the sinful world around us (Romans 12:2). In this maturation process, our lives get “straightened out” when we learn *“to discern good and evil”* (Hebrews 5:14) from God’s word, and live accordingly. If we attempt to get our lives straight prior to becoming a Christian, we are definitely trying to put the cart in front of the horse!

But I’ve often suspected that those who say they want to get their lives “straightened out before becoming a Christian” really mean, “I’m not through enjoying my sinful life yet!” They have in their minds that when they get through sowing all their “wild oats,” then they will “settle down” and become a Christian. But there is definitely a horse fly in this ointment (sorry, there I go again!). The problem with sowing “wild oats” is that they almost always produce a distasteful crop we have to harvest and eat! Note Galatians 6:7-8 on this point, *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life.”*

When we choose to “sow our wild oats” now and “become a Christian” later, there is always the possibility that sin becomes so ingrained in our lives that we can’t shake free. Esau apparently had that problem, *“when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears,”* Hebrews 12:17. Then too, no one is promised a tomorrow to repent and become a Christian, *“Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts,”* Hebrews 3:15.

You may not have grown up on a farm like me, and you may not know how to hitch a cart to horse either, but you can do the *first* things *first!* Keep your spiritual horses and carts in the right order, OK? It just won’t work if you get the wrong one in front. (11-23-11)

**Hospital Reflective Observations**

(As a preacher for about thirty years, I’ve spent considerable time in hospitals- as a patient, and with friends, family, and brethren. While writing this particular article, I am “the night shift” in an Austin, TX, ICU with a friend who had five bypasses of vessels around his heart earlier today. But, it’s about midnight; he’s had a full dose of pain meds, and is doing well according to all of his monitors, his nurse, and his snoring.)

Some experiences are purely for entertainment purposes, and “fun” is the only real object. But most of the rest of our encounters hold at least the possibility for lessons to be learned, through reflective observation, that can enrich and benefit future occasions. Even hospitals contain significant opportunities to learn things about life and the human experience of it.

Hospitals are places of paradoxes and contrasts. There are births that bring the giddy excitement of new beginnings, and there are deaths- both as sweet releases from the pain and agonies of physical burdens of life itself, and the traumatic taking of it all too soon which seemingly rips the hearts out of families and friends. In between the beginnings and the ends experienced at hospitals, there you also witness the full range of human emotion. Everything from the nervous anticipation of good news, to the worried dread for expected bad news, and all points in between, are typically in full view. Excuse the expressions, but hospitals are indeed a “slice of life,” and of death.

But aside from the paradoxes of these realizations and finalities, hospitals also tend to bring out the best, and worst, of people. Staff members can be incredibly caring, generous, gracious, and tender; and patients and their worried families can be terribly inconsiderate, rude, demanding, and self-centered. And of course, all of those attitudes and roles can sometimes be reversed! These things are to be expected since some people are at their best when things are at their worst, and some people are at their worst when things are not the best. All in all, hospitals provide tangible demonstrations of who we really are- inside, the person beyond whatever façade we typically put forth on a normal day-to-day basis. Here’s how….

**Hospitals** (meaning more specifically the situations and circumstances which occur in them) **provide opportunities for true empathy.** “Sympathy” is basically feel sorry “for” someone, whereas “empathy” entails being so open and receptive to what they are feeling or experiencing that you feel and experience it with them. Perhaps such is what is described in 1Samuel 18:1, where it says *“the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as himself.”*

**Hospitals provide opportunities for true compassion.** Born of empathy, “compassion” motivates the possessor to act in order to alleviate whatever circumstance evoked the empathetic emotions in the first place. In other words, compassion helps, at least as much as possible, to improve the condition of others. In the parable of “The Good Samaritan” Jesus relayed in Luke 10:30-37, both the priest and the Levite saw the pitiful condition of the man who had been beaten, robbed, and left to die, and perhaps had sympathy for him, but had no empathy with or compassion for him, and thus passed by without rendering any aid. But the Samaritan, upon seeing this man’s pitiful condition, empathized with him, and felt a compassion for him that prompted both immediate and sustained care for him.

**Hospitals provide opportunities for true kindness.** In hospitals, for the most part, people are just nicer to one another, more polite, more gracious, and more *human*. Even complete strangers exchange looks and simple words of greetings and encouragement full of good emotions and thoughts based in hope and well wishes. While this is probably due to the commonality of pain and suffering (physical and/or emotional), wouldn’t it be great if we always felt about and treated one another everywhere the way we do in hospitals? Consider 1Peter 3:8-9 in these regards, *“To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind-hearted, and humble in spirit, not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.”*

There are, however, a couple of parting points to add to these things. One, surely we can do a better job of manifesting the best of who we are *outside* of hospitals and *all the time.* And two, churches are supposed to be *hospitals for the spirit* of man- performing *spiritual healing* just as hospitals heal the body. Let’s remember that purpose and function accordingly. (7-8-14)

***“My House Shall Be Called a House of….”***

When Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem and began to drive out the merchants and money-changers, He said, *“It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer;’ but you are making it a robber’s den,”* Matthew 21:13. What would the Savior say today upon walking into modern structures claiming to be houses of God? Would He consider them *houses of* ***prayer****,* or something else? Would He likewise call them *“robber’s dens”* because they house those using “religion” as a place of hiding while taking others’ money? **Or would He just call them a:**

***“House of******Players,****”* due to their emphasis on athletic teams and sports-related activities? In 1Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul used athletics as an example to teach the importance of: *obeying the rules,* v.24; *self-control,* v.25; and *avoiding disqualification,* vv.26-27; but he did so to teach spiritual lessons, not to authorize church sporting events or athletic programs.

***“House of******Payers,****”* since those in charge always seem to be asking for more money? There are two issues here requiring attention: 1) the authorized *collection* of funds; and, 2) the authorized *expenditure* of funds. 1Corinthians 16:1-2 authorizes only free-will collections on *“the first day of every week”-* not “tithing,” or asking for money every time there is an assembly. Secondly, churches typically need more and more money because they have more and more programs to support, which are usually not authorized by the N.T. in the first place. Obviously, there are expenditures associated with securing a place to meet for worship and study, but beyond this, what else does the N.T. authorize? The N.T. church used collected funds to support needy saints *locally* and *elsewhere,* Acts 4:32-35; Romans 15:25-27; and to financially support those preaching and teaching the gospel *locally* or *elsewhere,* 1Corinthians 9:12-13. That’s it- period. If churches today would collect and spend money the way the N.T. authorizes, perhaps less would be needed.

***“House of******Programmers,****”* as there is a seemingly endless supply of new ones? (This house is often a duplex with the *House of Pay!*) 1Timothy 3:15 records, *“I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of truth.”* Paul was giving Timothy inspired instructions on how churches could and should be the purveyorsof God’s word. Read Timothy- both letters to him, and the rest of the N.T. to see if the “programs” which seem oh so “necessary” to us, were a part of God’s plan for the church. If they are not found in God’s word, they’re not only unnecessary; they are probably also a violation of God’s will.

***“House of******Pantomimes,****”* because the people inside are pretending to be something they’re not? Paul, again, stated it pretty clearly, *“But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith,”* 1Timothy 1:5. Churches filled with people honestly endeavoring to possess and further develop these qualities aren’t “playing church,” nor are they hypocritically attempting to “keep up appearances” of piety while living sinful lives, cf. 2Timothy 3:1-7. They are, instead, the very opposite of such- true Christians sincerely striving to please God above all else.

***“House of******Pluralism,****”* because the notion that there is one *body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism,* and *one God* (Ephesians 4:4-6) has become foreign to them? “Pluralism” exists when people are together in some association, but each maintains his own traditions, beliefs, and interests; such is clearly not the Lord’s way for “His” house, cf. Philippians 2:1-2. And yet, hungry for memberships at all costs, many churches have cast aside the truth of God’s word for what will be acceptable to or popular with the masses. Thus, they stand for nothing and bow to everything.

Why not clean house, and return God’s house to being one of ***prayer****,* rather than one of ***players, payers, programmers, pantomimes,***and ***pluralism?***If we don’t, He will, Matthew 15:13. (3-18-14)

**How Do You *Feel, Think,* and *Regard* the Bible?**

An unknown (at least to me) writer penned these words regarding **The Bible:**  "This Book is the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding; its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe, practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's character. Here paradise is restored, heaven opened, and the gates of hell disclosed. Christ is its grand subject, our good its design, and the glory of God its end. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet. Read it slowly, frequently, prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasure. Follow its precepts and it will lead you to Calvary, to the empty tomb, to a resurrected life in Christ; yes, to glory itself, for eternity.” Regarding these things, please carefully consider the following….

**How do you feel about the Bible?** Do you hold it in high regard, as did David? His attitude toward God’s words was that *“They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them, Thy servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward,”* Psalms 19:10-11. Think seriously about your attitude and feelings toward the Bible. Do you respect and revere it, or regard it as something to be considered only if it doesn’t contradict either what you already believe, or want to do?

**How do you think about the Bible?** Do you understand it to be the *inspired* (which literally means *God breathed*) Word of God? *“All Scripture is inspired by God…”* 2Timothy 3:16a. Do realize that the Spirit of God gave to those men who wrote it the very *words* needed to convey the essential thoughts of God to mankind for his guidance through life to eternity in heaven, 1Corinthians 2:13? Again, earnestly consider your own thoughts toward the Bible. Do you really comprehend the gravity of the Book you hold in hands- that it contains everything your Creator and Sustainer knew you needed to know to be able to navigate life in a way that allows you to spend eternity in heaven with Him?

**How do you regard the Bible?**  Our regard for God’s Word is determined by how we *feel* and *think* about it. In this case, our “regard” refers to how we treat and use the Word based on our emotions and thoughts about it. Does your regard for the Bible allow you to “pick and choose” which parts you like and use, or demand that you accept and employ it all? Does your regard allow you to *“exceed what is written”* (cf. 1Corinthians 4:6), or require you to neither *“add to… nor take away from”* it (cf. Revelation 22:18-19)? Does your regard allow you to *“distort the gospel of Christ”* (cf. Galatians 1:7) for your own purposes and desires, or require you to honestly and fairly endeavor *“to learn what is pleasing to God”* (Ephesians 5:10)?

The answers to these questions are hugely important. Please consider them carefully- as if the eternal destiny of your soul depends upon them…. because it does! (5-3-16)

**How to Keep Yourself Spiritually Illiterate**

For the literate person, the ability to read and write is typically learned so gradually while younger, that it is largely taken for granted. The literates, therefore, can’t imagine what it’s like to not be able to read or write because they can’t really remember not being able to do so. But think about it for a moment, what if you couldn’t read or write? How dramatically different would your life be? Oh sure, you could still communicate verbally, but in our technology-dominate and information-driven world of today, how severely would your life be limited? Illiteracy, if uncorrected, is obviously a problem that greatly hinders one’s opportunities for success in life. But…

***Spiritual*** **illiteracy**, like the regular type, also greatly hinders one’s opportunities for success in life. However, *spiritual* illiteracy, if uncorrected, is a problem that also leads to everlasting torment. Please consider two passages in this regard. Ephesians 3:3-5, *“that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. And by referring to this,* ***when you read you can understand*** *my insight into the mystery of Christ…”.* 2Thessalonians 1:7-9, *“…when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution* ***to those who do not know God*** *and* ***to those who do not obey the gospel*** *of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”* From these verses, two things become abundantly clear relative to our topic: 1) Spiritual enlightenment is dependent upon our willingness to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ by reading it for ourselves: and, 2) Those unwilling to come to the knowledge of God, and obedience to His gospel, will be eternally lost.

So, if it is your intent to forfeit the eternal destiny of heaven by remaining spiritually illiterate, here are a few tips to help accomplish that goal:

**Don’t learn the order of the books of the Bible.** This way, you’ll have difficulty looking up passages for yourself *to see whether the things are so* that someone else told you about the text, Acts 17:11. Thus, your faith will always be dependent upon someone else’s understanding of, and accuracy with, the Scriptures.

**Don’t learn the basic division between the Testaments.**  This way, you’ll never really understand that the “Old” Testament, while inspired and important, was given to those of the nation of Israel living **before** the death of Christ, or that the “New” Testament became God’s law for everyone **after** that point, Hebrews 8:13; 9:1-17. Thus, you’ll never be able to *“handle accurately the word of truth,”* 2Timothy 2:15.

**Tell yourself that the Bible is too big and confusing for you to understand.** This way, you’ll feel much better about leaving any real understanding and application of it to “the experts.” Question: How many “theologians” did Jesus select to *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature,”* Mark 16:15? But, if you tell yourself that the Bible is too big and confusing for you to understand, one thing is certain: you will never try to do so. And thus, you will remain spiritually illiterate regardless of the number of experts consulted.

**Tell yourself that no one really understands the Bible anyway.** This way, at least you’ll feel better *now* about refusing to read and study a book that God inspired and provided to lead you through life to heaven, 2Timothy 3:16-17; Romans 10:17. And, don’t bother yourself with the fact that saying “no one really understands the Bible anyway” indicts God as being unable to provide understandable instructions to man whom He created, and wants to save.

**Convince yourself that you don’t really have time to study and learn the Bible.** This way, all the time spent on social media, watching television, recreation, relaxing, and doing all the other more desirable things won’t seem like such a waste by comparison. None of those things will teach you how to live in such a way as to be welcomed into heaven after death, but at least you’ll have “fun” while you’re here, Luke 16:19-31!

**Refuse to attend the readily available and free multiple classes that are offered at your local church each week that are specifically designed and delivered to help you understand God’s Word.** This way, you can continue to do a lot with that extra two hours each week besides reading and studying the Word of God together with those who want to learn, understand, and live it, Acts 20:32. After all, isn’t *spiritual* ignorance “bliss” also? (5-6-14)

**How to Keep Yourself Spiritually Immature**

(a follow-up article to “How to Keep Yourself Spiritually Illiterate”)

Spiritual *illiteracy* and *immaturity* are certainly related, but not identical. While spiritual *illiteracy* is a cause of spiritual *immaturity,* it is not the only one. What else can one do to keep themselves spiritually immature?

**Be too busy with work, recreation, relaxation, or other activities to attend worship and bible classes *regularly*.** Obviously, it helps greatly with spiritual illiteracy and immaturity to occupy yourself with as many other discretionary activities as possible to avoid as many opportunities as possible to increase your knowledge of God and His word, Matthew 6:19-34.

**Be too busy with work, recreation, relaxation, or other activities to spend your discretionary time with brethren who may encourage you, or whom you may encourage, *outside of worship or bible class*.** This way, you won’t be bothered with “other people’s problems,” and can devote all of your worry time toward your own selfish pity party, which helps dramatically with spiritual immaturity (because this is the way a *spiritual* two-year old acts), Hebrews 12:1-17.

**In the times you do attend worship services or bible study, insist on being *spoon-fed* all the spiritual nutrition you consume.** Never make any effort to follow along in text, and never take any notes about things you can go back over later, or study more on your own. And, never make any preparations beforehand for bible class to be able to contribute to the discussion, or ask or answer any questions beyond the obvious ones, 2Timothy 2:15 and 2Peter 3:14-16.

**Be unwilling to consume anything but spiritual *baby food* (the *sweet* and *easily-digestible* kind)*.*** Refuse to eat (spiritually speaking) anything that doesn’t taste or feel familiar, you know, like everything you’ve always consumed previously. This will rule out trying anything new or more challenging. And don’t forget to insist on “sound-bite” solutions to every biblical passage, question, or application- even the difficult ones. This will also keep you in the *“milk”* rather than the *“meat”* of the word, Hebrews 5:11 – 6:2.

**Refuse to exercise your *spiritual muscles* so that they can grow and become strong.** After all, if you were to become spiritually *strong,* it could mean that others might become dependent on you, or you might be called upon to do some “heavy lifting” in the kingdom. No, spiritually immature is the way to go to avoid responsibilities and keep everyone’s attention focused on you. So, by all means, refuse to grow in the ways 2Peter 1:5-7 describe, and for the reasons 2Peter 2:8-11 outline.

**Keep yourself perpetually *spiritually sick* through constant exposure to, and indulgence in, sinful activities.** Refuse the treatments the Scriptures (and those who teach them) provide, and instead spend most of your time with those already completely infected with sin. They will help to insure that the spiritual weakness of your immaturity develops into a full-blown case of sin so that spiritual death can ensue, Romans 6:12-16 and 2Timothy 2:21-26.

**Convince yourself that *spiritual growth* and development really isn’t necessary.**  After all, you’ve done what is necessary to become a *“child of God”-* isn’t that enough? Never mind the obvious comparisons between *physical* and *spiritual* organisms- that those who don’t grow out of infancy die. No, go right ahead and convince yourself that growth and development really aren’t necessary to spiritual survival. To help assure you of this fallacy, completely ignore 2Peter 3:17-18 and Ephesians 4:11-16.

See? Remaining *spiritually immature* is actually pretty simple and easy. We just have to keep doing many of the same things we’re already doing! *“Him we proclaim, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone* *mature* *in Christ,”* Colossians 1:28 (ESV). (5-13-14)

**The Humpty-Dumpty Problem**

I don’t like Humpty-Dumpty. There are a number of reasons for this: 1) I have no idea who or what a “Humpty-Dumpty” was, or was supposed to be; 2) I don’t know why he was sitting on the wall in the first place; 3) I don’t know what caused his great fall; and, 4) I don’t how the king’s horses were supposed to put him together again, or why the king’s men couldn’t do so. But I have suspicions about that last part….

I suspect that the king’s horses couldn’t put Humpty together again because hooves are not conducive to such things, but also that his men couldn’t do so because **they couldn’t find all the pieces!** After all, have you ever tried to put some broken thing back together without having all the pieces with which to work? And yet, **such is usually what we ask God to do with our broken lives!**

There is a song in our hymnal that I really like, and would like you to consider. The first verse reads, **“Bring Christ your broken life, so marred by sin, He will create anew, make whole again; your empty wasted years He will restore, and your iniquities remember no more.”** The second verse continues with, **“Bring Him your every care if great or small- whatever troubles you- O bring it all! Bring Him the haunting fears, the nameless dread, thy heart He will relieve, and lift up thy head.”** (“Bring Christ Your Broken Life” by T.O. Chisholm; Hymns for Worship; #322). What a wonderful sentiment and promise! What encouragement this song brings to the broken-hearted and downtrodden! But, there are a couple of caveats that should also be realized.

**Christ promises to *“make whole again”* our spiritual lives, but not necessarily our physical ones.** I fear that, all too often, we would prefer Christ to solve the physical problems of our lives more than we’d like Him to “fix” our spiritual issue of the guilt of sin. Think about it this way: When you pray, is your prayer dominated by physical or spiritual concerns? It is certainly proper to beseech the Father regarding matters that are purely physical in nature (see Matthew 6:11), but didn’t Jesus teach in Matthew 6:25-33 that these are to be at least secondary concerns to spiritual matters? More than preferring *“to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord”* (2Corinthians 5:8), we seem to want God to make our earthly sojourn “heaven on earth.” This He did not promise to do, and such is surely “walking by sight” rather than *“walking by faith,”* 2Corinthians 5:7.

But even more to the point of our title, **Christ cannot- or perhaps better *will not, “make whole again”* our spiritual lives if we only give Him *some* of the pieces.** Even the song mentioned above emphasizes this point with the line, “O bring it all!” We typically want God “to put our lives or selves back together again” without giving Him all of the pieces. We withhold portions of our hearts, our minds, our bodies, or even our spirits. It is grossly unfair to expect God to **“make whole again”** our lives that we’ve broken by sin without giving Him “all” of us. All the king’s horses and men couldn’t put Humpty back together again without his head (mind), heart (emotions/desires), body (strength), and spirit (soul), and neither will God, even if He can do so, cf. Mark 12:30.

So, in coming to Christ and desiring to have Him put the broken pieces of your life back together again, consider two questions. Firstly, do you really only desire the *physical* aspects of your life (financial, family, health, etc.) to be what **you** want them to be, or are you truly more concerned with your spiritual health and well-being? And secondly, are you willing to give Christ “all” of you- heart, mind, body, and soul that He might make them whole again, or, are you hiding or withholding pieces and parts but still expecting the same result?

God is obviously much better at “putting the pieces” of our Humpty-Dumpty broken lives back together again than all the king’s horses and men were, but we have to give Him all the pieces! (8-13-13)

**Hungry, But For What?**

Have you ever stood staring blankly into an open refrigerator or pantry because you were hungry, but didn’t know exactly for what? Most of us have, on many occasions. There is a longing, but we’re unsure exactly with what to fill it. We all also have a comparable *spiritual hunger….*

Call it a ***spiritual appetite***or ***hunger****.* Like standing at the open refrigerator or pantry, many of us stand at the open door of life longing for *something* that will fill an empty space within us- something that will meet a particular desire for which not just anything will do. Unfortunately, not knowing exactly what this *hunger* is, or understanding what it takes to appease it, many seek to satiate it with the wrong things.

For instance, some seek to gratify this void with ***earthly pleasures****. “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source* ***your pleasures*** *that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on* ***your pleasures****,”* James 4:1-3. Material *pleasures* will never fulfill a *spiritual hunger.*

Others of us attempt to meet this *spiritual hunger* with ***earthly things****. “For many walk, of whom I have often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is their shame, who set their mind on* ***earthly things****,”* Philippians 3:18-19. Our innate *spiritual hunger* cannot be satisfied with *earthly things.*

The reason that *material things* and *earthly pleasures* cannot appease our hunger is simple: It is a *spiritual* hunger- a desire to believe in, pursue, and serve something bigger than ourselves. Earthly things and material pleasures will never be able to quench this *spiritual hunger.* The Athenians well represent this failure. They were *“very religious in all aspects,”* and were even *seeking* and *groping* for God, but being *ignorant* of Him, had resorted to idolatry of all sorts, cf. Acts 17:22-31.

So, with what should we *feed* our *need* and *hunger* for God? Two passages seem to address the problem specifically:

*“Therefore, putting aside all malice and all guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babes,* ***long for the pure milk of the word****, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation,”* 1Peter 2:1-2. Just like our *physical* hunger that causes us to search for just the right food to “hit the spot,” our *spiritual* hunger needs to be placated with the right *food-* the *word of God!* Only it contains the nutrients our spiritual bodies need. The *pure milk* of God’s word does a *spiritual body good!*

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst* ***after righteousness****, for they shall be filled,”* Matthew 5:6. Just *feeding* on the word of God is not sufficient alone. *Knowing* the Book is an *academic process* of understanding God’s will. But being *hungry for* and *feeding on* God’s word does not fully quench the *hunger* of man’s soul. We must also *hunger and thirst* to put this knowledge of God’s word into practice by doing the *right* things- being and doing *righteous* things that are *“pleasing to the Lord”* (cf. Ephesians 5:10) instead of our own carnal appetites.

What about it? Are you *hungering* and *thirsting* for God’s word and righteousness? Or, are you destined to starve your soul to eternal death by feeding it only earthly things and pleasures? *“Keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth,”* Colossians 3:1-2. (1-14-16)

**The *Hurt,* The *Healing,* The *Healthy,* and The *Hypocrite***

Are there hypocrites in the church? “Yes”- in virtually all of them, if by “church” local congregations are intended; but “no” if by “church” the universal body of Christ is meant. And at least at times, I may be one of those hypocrites- no one is immune from hypocritical thoughts, words, or actions (cf. 1Corinthians 10:12). Why is this?

The membership of local congregations is determined by men, and is therefore subject to mistakes. A person may be *included* in a local fellowship thatis unworthy of that association. Such was the case in 1Corinthians 5. Then too, a person may be *excluded* from a local fellowship that God accepts and approves. There is a biblical example of such in 3John 9-10.

But by contrast, universal church (all the saved of all time) membership is determined and governed by God, and He makes no such mistakes. God sees all, knows all, and has perfect knowledge of all. Therefore, no one is *included* who should be excluded, and none is *excluded* who should be included. Obviously, local churches should strive to have their list match God’s as much as possible, but often fail in this regard- sometimes miserably.

However, there are other considerations that must be part of our understanding in these matters. Essentially, four spiritual classifications of people exist in local church fellowships:

The ***Hurt*** are people who have been injured by Satan and sin. They’ve had their spiritual lives battered and bruised by the consequences of ungodliness, Galatians 6:7-8. Jesus described them as being *sick,* Matthew 9:12; and further stated that they were the very ones He was sent to help. (1Cor.11:30)

The ***Healing*** are those who have been *hurt* by sin, but after coming to the *Great Physician*, are getting better. Since everyone of an accountable age has sinned (Romans 3:23), and have thus become *hurt,* healing is essential. If it does not occur, spiritual death is inevitable. But as with our physical maladies, healing is often a slow and painful process. *Spiritual* rehabilitation can also be a difficult process with many “ups” and “downs” included.

The ***Healthy***, in this context at least, are not those who have never been *hurt* by sin*,* but those who have gone through the *healing* process sufficiently to become *healthy* and *whole* again. These *“from weakness were* (are, PCS) *made strong”* through faith in Jesus Christ, Hebrews 11:34.

The ***Hypocrite*** falls into one of two sub-classes: those who say/pretend, they have no sin, 1John 1:8; and, those who are themselves guilty of the very thing they condemn in others, Matthew 7:1-5. The Greek term *hupokrinomai,* from which the term *hypocrite* is derived, means “to impersonate” or “play a part…to pretend.”

Thus, the *hypocrite* is **not** the member of a local church who becomes *hurt* by falling back into sin like the man of Galatians 6:1.

**Nor** is he the church member who is involved in spiritual rehabilitation from sin and is experiencing “ups” and “downs” in that process, like Paul described in Romans 7:15-25.

The *hypocrite* **is** the church member who self-righteously pretends to have no sins, like the Pharisee of Luke 18:11-12; or the church member who condemns others for things of which he is guilty himself, as in Romans 2:17-24.

Now that we hopefully have the distinctions between these four classifications clearly fixed in our minds, let’s make some applications:

* The local church **is** the place for those ***hurt*** by Satan and sin. It should be a safe *haven* of protection for them.
* The local church **is** the place for those ***healing*** through the process of spiritual rehabilitation.
* And the local church **is** the place for the ***healthy*** to assist the ***hurt*** and the ***healing*** back to health, cf. Acts 20:35; Romans 15:1ff; 1Thessalonians 5:14; *et al*.
* But, the local church **is not** the place for ***hypocrites!***  They, like Simon in Acts 8:21, *“have no part of portion in this matter, for your* (their, PCS) *heart is not right before God.”* And they, like the adulterer in 1Corinthians 5:13, the faithful should *“Remove…from among yourselves.”*

So why doesn’t this happen? Why are there hypocrites in virtually every local church? Remember where we began this article. Local church memberships are determined by fallible men, not an all-seeing and all-knowing God. Then too, hypocrites are, by definition, *pretenders.* Their pretense/show of Christianity is often good enough to fool other men (but certainly does not fool God!).

The presence of hypocrites in local churches is an unfortunate, but perhaps inevitable by-product of the membership being determined by imperfect men. But, do not miss this: Please do not mistake the ***hurt,*** the ***healing,*** or the humble ***healthy*** for the ***hypocrites-*** there are vast differences between them! Now, unless you’re denying your failures, or self-righteously condemning others for things you practice yourself, the local church **is** the place for you. Trust me, you’ll fit right with the others who are *hurt, healing,* or humbly *healthy* and trying to help others become the same! (8-9-12)

**Hyphenated People**

In writing, hyphens are often used to *combine* (*compound*) or *divide* words. Interestingly enough, they work pretty much the same way in people. Though we use them in an effort to *combine* two names or descriptions into one, they often wind up being more divisive than anything else. For instance…

**In marriage, names are sometimes hyphenated.** Presumably, this is done to allow the retaining and incorporation of the wife’s family name. Sometimes, the husband even adopts this new hyphenated last name also as a show of support and solidarity. Thus, rather than being the Jones family, the new couple becomes the Smith-Jones family. In time, Mr. and Mrs. Smith-Jones produce offspring, also duly saddled with the double moniker, Smith-Jones. But here’s where this plan goes off the rails. What if little Johnny Smith-Jones grows up and decides to marry Susie Jones-Smith (whose parents had the same idea)? Is their forth-coming little bundle of joy to be Billy Smith-Jones-Jones-Smith? Let alone the possibility that little Billy grows up to marry a quadruple-hyphenated girl!

Besides the potential mess illustrated above, is there actually anything biblically wrong with hyphenated marriages? Perhaps not, but the Bible does say that a man *“shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh,”* Genesis 2:23; Matthew 19:4-5. While these passages admittedly say nothing of name sharing directly, they do command that the couple become *“one flesh.”* Surely such includes the sexual union, but it is much more. *“One flesh”* means that they become one *couple,* rather than two separate individuals trying to retain their former individuality while trying to be *one,* cf. Ephesians 5:28-32. If they are going to share a life, and be *one* couple, shouldn’t they also share *one* name?

**Nationalities are increasingly hyphenated.** As in marriage, this has become more popular in recent years. Many are not content with being an “American,” but feel the need to put some other country before it with a hyphen between, as in “Xxxxxxx-American.” This is often done despite the fact that neither they, nor any ancestor they can identify, ever resided in the other country. While it may be just an effort of taking pride in heritages by *combining* them, this insistence on a hyphenated nationality can also *divide* the country by emphasizing our differences rather than uniting under a common flag. It actually highlights, as did marriage, the problem of *split allegiances.*

Yes, America is a “land of immigrants,” and “the melting pot of the world.” But, one of the things that previously made this country great was that immigrants wanted to be, first and foremost, “Americans.” They were willing to leave their country of origin, endure tremendous hardships to get here, then learn a new language and new customs, and start over by adopting a new nationality. They wanted to be “Americans,” not a hyphenated hybrid of such. Biblically and otherwise, names are important because they both describe relationships and reflect allegiances, cf.1Peter 2:9-10. But perhaps most importantly,

**Religious Affiliations are all-too-often hyphenated.** Few are content, it seems, with being just a “Christian,” opting instead for “*insert denominational name of choice*-Christian.” The problem is, no denominational names were used to describe and delineate disciples in the New Testament. They were just “Christians”- so no hyphens were needed, *“…and the disciples were first called Christians…”* Acts 11:26. In fact, Paul condemned the idea of Christians trying to maintain any sort of dual allegiance (with Christ and *any* man) in 1Corinthians 1:12-13, *“…each one of you is saying, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas,’ and ‘I of Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”* Although no hyphens were literally used then, the practice denounced is the same as what some are doing now- *dividing* the body of Christ and failing to be of *“the same mind”* and *“the same judgment,”* 1Corinthians 1:10! Why would anyone do such a thing? Misplaced loyalties and split allegiances are again the problem, just as was the case with *marriage* and *nationality.* We cannot be hyphenated Christians. Anything hyphenated with Christ(ian) is too much, and fails to maintain the sole loyalty and allegiance demanded, Matthew 4:10; Acts 5:29!

*Words* must sometimes be combined or divided by a hyphen for good reasons, but hyphens do far more to divide, rather than combine, *people.*  (7-22-14)

**“I Think I Need a New Shovel”**

The front of our lot has about a ten-foot high bank that runs the length of the street frontage. While the bank is sloped enough to mow lengthwise, it is fairly steep. At the bottom of the slope there is a curb. Since there is a considerable grade that runs upward from the curb to the level ground above, runoff is a problem. But the main issue is that the grass (and weeds) and dirt are always spilling over the curb and clogging up the drainage gutter. So, at several times a year, I have to cut/edge and shovel off the excess dirt, and the grass that seemingly grows faster there than anywhere else. I hate this task. It’s hot, dirty, and hard work; and that dreaded curb seems to be a mile long.

To make the job at least a little easier, several years ago I bought a shovel specifically to use for this task. It’s a fairly large square shovel with a long heavy-duty handle. Since the sides of the shovel were sloped outward, it didn’t work very well. It kept hanging up on and digging into the bank as I slid it down the length of the curb to clean off the cut grass and dirt. So, I took the shovel out to the shop and slightly heated one side of it with a torch. Then I laid it on the anvil, and reshaped the edge with a hammer until if formed a 90-degree angle. Feeling pleased with that improvement, I opted for another one. I also heated the tang (hollow part of the shovel blade where the handle attaches) and carefully bent it to one side. This modification would allow the shovel to be more comfortably used from the gutter, instead of having to keep one foot up on the curb or bank. With these improvements, the shovel worked well for several years. But this year, a new problem arose.

While cleaning that dreaded and seemingly mile-long curb yet again, my modified shovel kept getting tired, and I would have to let it rest for several minutes at a time to keep it from overheating! I guess it’s gotten old, weak, and just doesn’t work very well anymore. Maybe it’s time to replace it- “I think I need a new shovel.”

Do we use this same kind of obviously flawed logic with regard to the **spiritual** “tools” God has given us? Reasoning that is so lacking in self-awareness as to be unwilling to consider that the real culprit might not be the “tool” but the “operator?” While it is true that my curb shovel has, over the years of use, become kind of dull and dented in a few places, it’s nothing that a little care and maintenance wouldn’t solve. So, please consider that…

A ***new bible****,* even an electronic one, will “work” no better than the old one unless the “operator” uses it enough to become proficient with it. 2Timothy 2:15, *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”*

A ***new church***will likely soon be discovered to have many of the same “problems” as the old one unless the “goer” becomes actively invested and involved enough to help solve them. Philippians 2:12-13,16, *“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure… holding fast the word of life...”*

A ***new bible class program***probably won’t be any “better” than the old one unless it has “prepared” teachers and “regular” students who desire to learn. 2Timothy 3:14-15, *“You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them; and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”*

Tools do sometimes need modification and maintenance to function properly, or even better. But, no “tool” works without a dedicated, prepared, and proficient “operator.” This surely includes the ***spiritual***tools God has given us- like the Bible, local congregations, and bible classes. Sometimes it is the “operator” instead of the “tool” that is dull, dented, and thus, doesn’t work well. The “shovel” may indeed need sharpening, but the “operator” still has to be willing and able to “work” for things to get done right and well. (4-30-14)

**“I Will Not Leave You As Orphans”**

Words are vehicles of thought. They are transporters of ideas from one mind to another. Sometimes, a single word conveys a whole truckload of considerations, or elicits almost an excess of emotions. In other cases, four or five words strung together, carefully chosen, deliver a mental picture so elaborate, vibrant, and pregnant with meaning that it seems to defy the recipient’s ability to plumb the depths of them all in concert. Emphasis added to an individual word in delivery of the string provides various nuances of understanding that are as important as a master’s delicately placed brushstrokes from a mixed palate of colors to a fine masterpiece. It allows one that is willing to look and listen carefully the ability to “see” and “hear” on a completely different level- to drink the collection in fully and have his thirst for understanding satiated. Jesus, the Master, made a simple statement to His disciples in John 14:18 that well-illustrates these points….

***I* will not leave you as orphans.** Emphasizing “I” is an affirmation of personal commitment. Jesus is providing assurance to His disciples based upon everything they have come to know about Him- and much more than even they understand (see also John 14:9-11).

**I *will* not leave you as orphans.** “Will,” when used as a verb, indicates not only the *capability* or *sufficiency* to perform the stated action, but also the *desire* and *determination* to do so. Obviously, when the Son of God says, *“I will…”* it is a powerful statement of *personal determination* that promises the *surety* of the action being performed!

**I will *not* leave you as orphans.** “Not” changes the construction of the sentence from a *positive* to a *negative* affirmation. It in no way diminishes the surety of the described action, but it does shift the focus and emphasize that it won’t be performed rather than asserting that it will be done. We commonly turn *positive statements* into *negative affirmations* to make a stronger emphasis. Jesus is apparently doing the same thing here.

**I will not *leave* you as orphans.** “Leave” here means to *abandon* or *disregard.* He has told the disciples that He must *“go to prepare a place for you,”* cf. 14:3, but here affirms that His absence from them is not without *regard* and *comfort.*  In the previous verses, He has promised to send *“another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is, the Spirit of truth,* cf. vv.16-17. As Jesus had *guided* and *comforted* them, so also would the Spirit.

**I will not leave *you* as orphans.** “You” is here the plural pronoun for *the disciples-* specifically, the twelve who have been with Him from the beginning (cf. Acts 1:21-26 where Matthias in chosen as the replacement of Judas). Jesus’ words of promise and assurance are *personal* to these men.

**I will not leave you *as* orphans.** “As” is a word of comparison. The comparison is intended to further explain and highlight that although Jesus *is* leaving the disciples, He is *not* abandoning them.

**I will not leave you as *orphans*.** “Orphans” is, obviously, the completion of the comparison phrase *“as orphans.”* At this time, there were no government agencies or benevolent humanitarian institutions committed to the care of orphans. Those abandoned by their parents- either by choice or by death, were left to largely fin for themselves in a state of abject poverty and little regard from the community. This final dark term completes the portrait of words Jesus is painting with this one sentence. Though He is *leaving* them, the disciples would *not* be *abandoned* or *left alone* to face the task before them *as* *orphans.*

Each word of the sentence Jesus uttered to His disciples was important. Each one provided a stroke of color which, when emphasized individually, gives depth of meaning to the overall picture being displayed. If this is doubted, read each of the boldface sentences above aloud, emphasizing each of the italicized/underlined words. This causes us to contemplate each emphasized word’s contribution to the overall thought being presented. The point of all of this is to highlight the importance of really understanding what it is that we are reading when we study the biblical text. Even a simple statement of assurance becomes fraught with meaning when we truly understand each word’s importance within it. The Bible is inspired by God- each and every word of it, 1Corinthians 2:13. Don’t take a single word of it for granted! Read them all. Understand them all. Live them all, for each is from God and intended to provide you with *“life and godliness through true knowledge,”* 2Peter 1:3. (12-1-15)

**If-Then Statements**

“If-Then” statements are exactly what the name implies. They are statements wherein a truth is expressed in conditional terms. In algebra, an example of an “If-Then” statement would be, “If D is between C and E, then CD + DE = CE.” Computer programming also uses “If-Then” statements extensively. If a certain condition is met, then the program proceeds in one direction; if the condition is not met, then the program does nothing, looks for other conditions, and/or proceeds in an alternate direction. Years ago, when working for a motorhome production company in Nacogdoches, I used “If-Then” electrical relays (though they weren’t really called such) to control the functions of the coach, as well as the computers which controlled the engine, transmission, and systems on the unit. “If-Then” statements are everywhere!

The New Testament also utilizes “If-Then” statements. Consider carefully the words of Jesus in John 8:31, *“Jesus was therefore saying to those Jews who had believed in Him, ‘****If*** *you abide in My word,* ***then*** *are you truly disciples of Mine…’”* Notice a few key parts of the conditional truth which He expresses. The Jews to whom Jesus spoke already believed, but were not made disciples by their belief alone. How do we know this? If their belief alone produced discipleship, why would Jesus make it conditional to the yet unmet requirement of *“abiding in My word”?* Such makes no sense if believing is all that is necessary to true discipleship.

The “If-Then” statement of Jesus above is well-illustrated in John 12:42-43, where Jewish rulers *“believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.”* In both cases, people believed in Jesus, and yet were not disciples because they failed to act on their belief. In other words, they did not meet the condition(s) of Jesus’ “If-Then” statement.

But let’s return to the text of John 8 for additional considerations. In v.32, Jesus completes the sentence which He began with the “If-Then” statement of v.31. Let’s put it all together to be sure we get the picture, *“****If*** *you abide in My word,* ***then*** *you are truly disciples of Mine;* ***and*** *you shall know the truth,* ***and*** *the truth shall make you free.”* Here we see two additional statements added which are both dependant on the previously stated condition. Both statements are thus made likewise provisional on the previous condition being met. In other words, **if** one is willing to *“abide in My* (Jesus’) *word,”* **then** and only then, will he be a true disciple through knowing the truth, and thus be made free by the truth. So, grammatically and spiritually speaking, the three results of *being a disciple, knowing the truth,* and *being made free* by the truth, are all conditional upon one being willing to *abide,* or *live, within* Jesus’ words. Simply put, **if** we aren’t willing to obey Jesus’ words in our lives, **then** we will not be His disciples; we will not come to know the truth; and we will not be made free by the truth. Thus, the only truth which saves is truth which is both *known* and *lived.*

Now we have the basics of “If-Then” statements down, consider also these other New Testament examples: *“But* ***if*** *you do not forgive others,* ***then*** *your Father will not forgive your transgressions,”* Matthew 6:15; *“****If*** *My kingdom were of this world,* ***then*** *My servants would be fighting…but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm,”* John 18:36; *“for* ***if*** *righteousness comes through the Law* (“of Moses” is the context, PCS), ***then*** *Christ died needlessly,”* Galatians 2:21; *“****if*** *anyone is not willing to work,* ***then*** *he is not to eat either,”* 2Thessalonians 3:10; *“But* ***If*** *you are without discipline…****then*** *you are illegitimate children and not sons,”* Hebrews 12:8.

Obviously, “If-Then” statements are not only prevalent in most facets of our lives, they are vitally important to our lives, and our salvation. Please consider these things carefully, won’t you? (6-26-12)

**Winning the Imperishable Wreath or Being Disqualified**

Before I was old enough to have better sense, a Jr. High coach talked me into running track. After only one additional year of maturation, I decided that much running should involve chasing a ball, or at least hitting one so someone else had to run after it! But, since I said “yes” when asked, and both ran and jumped fairly well (then!), the 100 yard hurdles became my assigned specialty. I use the term “specialty” very loosely because, as I remember, the little country school I attended might have had one or two broken and discarded hurdles with which to train, such was about the extent of it! Nonetheless, the day of the district meet arrived, and I lined up with the rest of the lads who had doubtless also been duped into competing. The gun sounded and I was off like a flash- OK, at least a spark. I ran and jumped and ran and jumped and…you get the point- until the finish line was crossed. Though my friends cheered my apparent win of this particular heat race, something was wrong. None of the judges came up to me to secure my name and school affiliation. So, I stood there aimlessly celebrating my feat until I heard one of them say, “Lane #4 (or whatever it was) is disqualified.” It seems that although I cleared all the hurdles cleanly, and finished ahead of all the other skulls full of mush, I had accidently landed on the lane marker when completing one of the jumps. “But it was an accident,” I thought- I didn’t mean to step on the line, nor did I gain any advantage by it. Nonetheless, my day (and track career) was done. I couldn’t win that fifteen-cent blue ribbon everyone else seemed to crave…which didn’t really bother me much at all.

All of that reminiscing was to introduce this: Paul wrote to the Corinthians about competing *“according to the rules”* in 1Corinthians 9:24ff. The Corinthian brethren were well aware of the illustrations of running and boxing that Paul used since the Isthmian Games were held near there every two years. These contests were the ancient forerunners of our modern Olympics. But Paul has a couple of spiritual applications from these events for the Corinthians that we might also do well to consider.

In vv.24-25a, he focuses on the principle that in order to win, one must compete “according to the rules”*-* a lesson the introductory story of my disqualification also well illustrates. But his point is that the practice of Christianity has “rules” which must be likewise obeyed in order to receive the ultimate prize of salvation. Desire, intent, and effort are certainly necessary, but are of themselves insufficient. One must also *“Run in such a way that you may win,”* v.24b. He further states that competing for the spiritual reward requires that one *“exercises self-control in all things,”* v.25a. Believing that you can win, or even that you have won (again, like me in my race), is not the same thing as obeying the rules, nor are they substitutes for it.

In v.25b, Paul highlights the importance of the point of the illustration by saying that in the games, a *“perishable wreath”* is the prize. But he quickly adds that the Christian race is for the *“imperishable”* prize of eternal life. This “race” isn’t for the accolades of friends, the personal “thrill of victory” over temporal opponents, a fifteen-cent ribbon, or even for a woven wreath of olive branches that will surely dry and deteriorate overnight. Instead, the prize for running according to (God’s) rules is eternal life. Therefore, one must run this race with the precise purpose of eternal life, v.26!

In v.27, Paul also adds a significant application to the illustrations- that of *disqualification.* Many people have been taught that once a person is “saved,” they can never be “eternally lost.” Aside from the fact that 26 of the 27 books of the New Testament refute this doctrine, it just doesn’t coincide with Paul’s inspired words here. If the “prize” of running the Christian “race” is eternal life, and it surely is, then why is he emphasizing the importance of *“self-control”* and running *“in such a way”* (according to God’s rules rather than our own) *“that you might win”?* Additionally, if a person is “once saved always saved,” why is Paul so concerned with and making every effort to keep from being *“disqualified”?* The Christian “race” surely can be won- obviously with God’s help and grace, and the *imperishable* prize of eternal life attained- but one must run *in such a way* as God determines lest he be *disqualified!*  (4-30-13)

**The Importance of Words**

The English language (which we don’t speak here in America, and especially not here in Texas where either “Amurhican” or “Texican” is the native tongue) is difficult, complex, cumbersome and frustrating, and yet can be wonderfully precise if one really knows how to use it. Although I work at the task, I fear my efforts often fall woefully short.

We are told that a high percentage of our communication is “non-verbal.” This supposedly refers to body language such as hand gestures, overall posture and facial expressions, rather than “texting” or “tweeting.” But words are still the primary “vehicles of thought” in any language, or form of that language. English (and other languages as well), properly understood and utilized, can convey messages with amazing specificity. For instance, we might use “infer” and “imply” synonymously, but we would be wrong to do so. To “imply” something is to *suggest it* without specifically stating it. But to “infer” is to *conclude* something that has not been specifically stated. These two are actually on opposite ends of the same process. You “imply” something, and from your words I “infer” a conclusion- all without anything being specifically stated!

The uncanny power of words is not accidental. The first man did not have to grunt and gesture with non-opposable-thumbed hands for centuries while evolving. He was spoken to immediately and intelligently by His Creator, and responded with an intellectual prowess invested within him by that Creator (Genesis 1:27-28ff). And both used words! Words were as much a gift from God as the ability to creatively produce and perceptively receive them.

But these words were not just a part of God’s creative gift to Adam so that he could talk to his wife (yes, that began there in the Garden also ladies). God wanted a way to be able to communicate His will to man, and man needed to be able to express himself to God, cf. Genesis 2:16-17,23.

Initially, and for hundreds of years, God spoke to the heads, or *patriarchs*, of families through dreams and visions, or even directly, to reveal His wishes to man. This is what is commonly called the *Patriarchal Period* of biblical history. Then beginning at Mt. Sinai, Jehovah used codified words to communicate His Law to Israel. He gave those laws through His prophet, Moses. Therefore, that dispensation is referred to as the *Mosaical Period* because God communicated His laws primarily through Moses, though other prophets were also utilized. Hebrews 1:1 described these periods this way, *“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways…”*

Then, in the first century (A.D.), God began to reveal His laws to all mankind through Christ, *“in these last days has spoken to us in His son…”* Hebrews 1:2. Therefore, and logically, this is referred to as the *Christian Period.*  But God didn’t speak to man just through Christ, He also utilized the Holy Spirit to reveal His will to mankind. In fact, the word “inspired” is from the Greek *theopneustos,* which is a compound word derived from *theos* (God) + *pneo* (breath). Thus literally, “inspired” means “God-breathed” in the New Testament.

From these things, a couple of points need to be made. The *inspiration* of the New Testament was very specific in that the words were carefully guarded by the Holy Spirit to ensure that they conveyed the thoughts of God to the minds of men. Note 1Corinthians 2:12-13 on this point, *“Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those* (meaning, *words*) *taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.”*  As such,the **words of the Bible matter because they were specifically chosen to reveal God’s will to man!**  Therefore, we shouldn’t alter them (Gal.1:6-8); add to or subtract from them (Rev.22:18-19); or ignore them (Heb.2:2-4); because they will be the words by which we are judged when life is over (John 12:48).

Biblical words and their meanings matter because eternity hangs in the balance. Read and study your New Testament like your spiritual life depends on it! (1-18-12)

**Are You “Indoctrinated”?**

Some who have heard and/or use the phrase “drink the Kool-Aid” may not be old enough to know the source of it. In November of 1978, a man by the name of Jim Jones commanded his Peoples Temple cult of followers to consume a flavored drink (it may not have actually been Kool-Aid) which was laced with potassium cyanide. Approximately 918 people died. There are differences of opinion as to whether this was murder (by the people not knowing what was in the drink), or suicide (obviously, that they did know what was in it). From this incident in Guyana, the phrase “Drink the Kool-Aid” came to be used to refer to the blind, unthinking, uncritical, and unquestioning acceptance/following of a person or idea.

Unfortunately, the word “indoctrinate” has come to mean much the same thing as “drinking the Kool-Aid” – to cause one to accept and/or follow blindly without question or independent thought. But, the first definition of “indoctrinate” is “to instruct especially in fundamentals or rudiments; to teach” (Webster’s New Collegiate; 1981). So really, “indoctrinate” just means to teach someone thoroughly in the fundamentals of a particular discipline. Of course, the meaning intended by the user must always be considered- even if the user doesn’t know the correct meaning of the words he’s using!

But here’s my point: What if the “indoctrination” being performed is *“on the words of faith and of the sound doctrine”* of the Word of God (1Timothy 4:6)? The word “doctrine” is used in Scripture to refer to “teaching”- both the uninspired *doctrines of men* (Matthew 15:9), and the inspired *doctrine of God* (Titus 2:10). Could not one be logically and profitably (in the eternal sense) *“indoctrinated”* in the fundamental principles and rudimentary teachings of the Bible? Of course they could, but does becoming an “indoctrinated” Bible-Believer necessarily mean that one “drank the Kool-Aid,” and quit thinking and reasoning logically and critically? Not at all, unless they decided to believe and follow it blindly and without considering the evidence of inspiration it contains. (12-13-11)

**A Funny Thing (or two) About Instructions**

When the boys were still “little,” Donna and I bought some big and complicated toy for them- I don’t even recall what it was. But I do remember that it had about twelve pages of instructions detailing how to assemble this monstrosity. These instructions were printed in eight or nine languages, **none of which was English!** Now I know a little Greek and even less Hebrew from my bible studies, but neither of these languages was discernable from the weird characters and squiggly marks all over that wad of crumpled papers. So, I did what every self-respecting, red-blooded, macho-man does: I threw the instructions away, looked at the picture on the box, and assembled the thing the way I thought it should go. And when I got finished, there were only a couple of unused pieces left, it worked, and no one died playing with/on it!

However, this little story is not typical of “instructions”- usually you have to follow them to receive the benefit desired. For instance, if some friend of yours gives you instructions to get to his house, you have to follow them if you want to get there. If you decide you want to turn left where he said to turn right, you’re never going to make it. Such sounds simple enough to be axiomatic.

But how often we fail to apply the same reasonable logic to God’s instructions! We want to “come to God **in my own way**,” or “worship God **in my own way**,” or “serve God **in my own way**” instead of the way He instructed. That makes about as much sense as turning left when the instructions said to turn right. I suppose the problem is that of failing to view God’s Word as “instruction”- but that is exactly what it is! Note a couple of passages in this connection.

*“Grace and peace be multiplied to you the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has* ***granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness through the true knowledge of Him*** *who called us by His own glory and excellence.”* (2Peter 1:2-3) This doesn’t mean that God’s Word tells you what make or color of car to buy. But it does mean that He has given us the “instructions” for traveling the road of life leading to heaven- if we will just read and follow them!

*“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,* ***instructing*** *us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age…”* (Titus 2:11-12) This passage makes it clear that the “grace of God” which brings salvation is in the form of “instructions.” So, to receive God’s grace in salvation, His “instructions” must be followed.

All of which sounds simple enough. The “road” of life that leads to heaven must be traveled according to the instructions God gave us in His Word, the Bible. Jesus said it wasn’t the easiest path, or the one most widely used, Matthew 7:13-14. Therefore, we can’t go “our own way” and expect to reach the intended destination. Furthermore, when we find we’ve taken a “wrong turn” in life (consider the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-24), we have do a U-turn called “repentance” and get back to traveling the right road in the right direction, Revelation 2:5. Instructions are only beneficial when followed. So don’t “throw away” or otherwise disregard God’s instructions- you can’t put life together properly, or get to heaven without them! (6-1-16)

**Instrumental Music in Worship? What’s the *Real* Issue?**

Instrumental music (“i.m.” afterwards) has been a part of mainline denominational worship for only a little over 100 years. So? History tells us that i.m. **was not** part of Christian worship from its inception for about the next 1900 years. “Why not- what changed?” thus becomes the appropriate question. Let’s see if we can provide a clear answer…

**The Inception of I.M. in “Christian” Worship.** The American and Chambers Encyclopedia says that i.m. was first introduced into “Christian” worship by the Roman Catholic Pope Vitalian in 666 A.D. Two facts need to be understood about this: 1) it was a *departure* from what the early church practiced, which was guided by the Holy Spirit through the apostles; and, 2) even though i.m. was introduced into “Christian” worship in 666 A.D., it was neither generally accepted nor practiced until much later (about the turn of the twentieth century). But let’s dig a little deeper.

**Early Denominational Leader’s/Founder’s Views on I.M.** Let’s begin with **Martin Luther** (1483-1546, Lutherans) who said, “An organ in the worship of God is an ensign of Baal.” (Baal was an ancient Canaanite false god, so he’s equating i.m. with idolatry.) **John Calvin** (1509-1564, Presbyterians) added, “Musical instruments in the celebration of praise to God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense and the restoration of other shadows of the Law.” **Charles Spurgeon** (18-34-1892, Baptists) echoed, “I’d as soon as pray to God with machinery as to sing to God with machinery.” And finally, **John Wesley** (1703-1791, Methodists) coyly remarked, “I have no objection to instruments of much in our chapels provided they are neither seen nor heard.” Since all of these denominations now commonly utilize i.m. in their worship services, “What changed?” is not only *the* question, it is a *fair* question.

**What Changed that Allowed I.M. to be a Part of Nineteenth Century “Christian” Worship when It Wasn’t from the First Century Until Then?**

* Did God change His mind about i.m.? It is readily admitted that i.m. was used in *Jewish* worship, as Psalm 150 and several other Old Testament passages clearly indicate. But read your New Testament, which is Christ’s law for the Christian, cf Luke 16:16. The New Testament is distinctly devoid of i.m. being commanded, suggested, allowed, or used in Christian worship. Jesus said nothing of i.m. The inspired writers of the New Testament said nothing of Christians using i.m. in worship (and they were guided into *“all truth”* by the Holy Spirit, cf. John 14:26; 16:13). In fact, there are nine New Testament passages that speak of Christians praising and worshipping God in song: Matthew 26:30; Acts 16:25; Romans 15:9; 1Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12; Hebrews 13:15; and James 5:13. There are **no** New Testament passages that command i.m., or demonstrate that Christians, operating under the guidance of the Holy Spirit or the men inspired to preach and write for Him, used i.m. Since i.m. *was* a prevalent part of Jewish worship under the Old Testament, why is it so conspicuously *absent* in Christian worship of the New Testament? If God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit had wanted i.m. to be a part of Christian worship, don’t you think They would have said so in the New Testament? But They didn’t- instead, They specified Christians *singing* praises to God, and encouragement and admonition to each other, Colossians 3:16. So again we ask, “What changed that allowed i.m. to be a part of nineteenth century “Christian” worship when it wasn’t from the first century until then?” One thing changed…
* Men no longer required the authority of the New Testament as a guide of faith and practice. Simply put: Beginning in about the nineteenth century, so-called “Christians” no longer required *Book, Chapter,* and *Verse* New Testament authority for what they *believed,* or how they *worshipped.* Instead, “It doesn’t really matter what you believe (or practice) as long as you’re honest and sincere” became the prevailing mentality. Men rejected God’s revelation for their own desires, and their *“god”* became *“their appetite,”* Philippians 3:19. **I.M. thus became part of so-called “Christian” worship because men wanted it, not because God authorized it.**

It’s really very simple: New Testament Christians *believe* and *practice* what the New Testament teaches, and avoid those things not revealed in it. We can’t decide for God how we will worship and honor Him- He gets to do that because He is God! Jesus asked in Luke 6:46, *“And why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”*  Please, read and follow your New Testament. It’s not difficult, if we really want to please God instead of ourselves. (4-21-15)

**Is America a “Christian” Nation?**

First, the disclaimer: this is NOT a political article. It is hopefully a thought-provoking introspection of national beliefs and values, and therefore, identity, from a distinctly spiritual perspective. I could be wrong, but I think the term “Christian Nation” is typically used to describe America (by Americans) based upon the notion that either: a) the country was founded upon “Christian” principles and beliefs; or, b) “Christianity” is its most popular religious persuasion- that more people identify themselves as Christians than any other religious affiliation. The merits or fallacies of either of these ideas will not be debated here. Instead, it seems more spiritually profitable to examine what “Christian Nation” actually means, so let’s give that a whirl instead…

Shouldn’t a “Christian Nation” ***believe in* Christ?** Of course! But what does it mean to *believe in* Christ? Does it mean that one believes Jesus Christ existed as a historical figure, or does it imply something more than just acquiescing to the reality of His presence in Palestine in the early part of the first century? Even the demons *believed in* the reality of Jesus Christ, and trembled at His presence, because they understood Him to be the incarnate (in the flesh) Son of God, cf. James 2:19 and Matthew 8:28-29. There were several men who lived roughly about the same time as Jesus who claimed to be “the Messiah” (cf. Matthew 24:24). In fact, Acts 5:36-37 records that Theudas was *“claiming to be somebody”* before he was slain and his followers dispersed, and that Judas of Galilee *“drew away some people after him”* prior to likewise perishing and his followers scattering. These were men who also claimed to be the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, but nothing came of them for a simple reason: they were imposters. However, Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, but His death and subsequent resurrection proved Him to be the Son of God, Romans 1:4, and altered the course of human history for eternity! Now, as a “Christian Nation,” do we ***really believe in*** Christ as the Son of God and Savior of the world, or, are we just acknowledging the historical reality of His existence at a certain time and place?

Shouldn’t a “Christian Nation” **follow Christ?** Again, of course! Jesus Himself said ***believing in***Him also necessitated ***obedience to***Him*,* John 3:36. Thus, the name “Christian” cannot apply to one who merely acknowledges the physical and historical reality of a person called “Christ,” or even to one who just recognizes His deity- it requires *discipleship* (*following* for the purpose of *emulation*), Matthew 10:37-39! It therefore follows that for a nation to be “Christian,” at least the majority of its citizenry not only *believes in* but also *obeys* and *follows* Jesus Christ and His gospel, cf. John 1:12; 14:21. Is such really true of the majority of America? Or, are we “Christian” in name only? Please consider Romans 16:25-27 in this regard.

Shouldn’t a “Christian Nation” **be members of Christ’s church and actively practice the religion founded by Him?** Once again, of course! Jesus built and reigns over but *“one body/church,”* cp. Matthew 16:18 and Ephesians 4:4; 1:22-23. However, there are many churches built and ruled by men. The difference between them is simple: Christ’s church is founded by Jesus Christ and follows His law- the New Testament, while men’s churches are founded by and follow rules and bylaws written by men. While most of our society today touts and celebrates our religious multiplicity and diversity with a “the more the merrier” or “to each his own” approach toward churches, Jesus denounced those who would teach their own doctrines and practice their own traditions as opposed to the word of God, Matthew 15:6-9. This is very simple, either we *believe in, obey,* and *follow* Jesus Christ- and thus are *active members* in *His church*, or we don’t, Luke 6:46. Is America a nation that does this? For America to be a “Christian Nation,” wouldn’t at least 51% of the population need to be active members of the church that was founded by, and is ruled by, Christ?

If America is to be a “Christian Nation,” don’t you think it is high time we *believe in* Christ enough to actually *follow* Him as individuals and collectively in His church? Our nation’s ills are first and foremost **spiritual** rather than political, and their solutions must likewise begin with us turning back to God through His Son, Jesus Christ! (3-31-15)

**Is the Truth Enough for You?**

The Savior of the world uttered these words, *“If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,”* John 8:31-32. It is worthy of note that Jesus spoke these words to *“Jews who had believed in Him.”*  There are a few salient points from these things that need to be understood:

* *Believing in* Jesus is obviously not the same as *abiding in* His word, being *His disciple, knowing the truth,* or being *made free* by it.
* This is so because the conditional word *“if”* is used. Thus, *being* *disciples, knowing the truth,* and *being made free by the truth,* are all dependent upon a willingness to meet the condition of *abiding in the truth.* Such a conclusion is not opinion, but the simple grammatical requirements of the spiritual truth Jesus spoke.

Now, what does all of this mean? It means exactly what Jesus said despite modern thinking and teaching to the contrary. One **cannot** be a *disciple* (follower) of Jesus merely by *believing in* Him (that He is the Son of God)- even the demons do more than this, James 2:19, *“You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons believe, and shudder.”* Furthermore, it also means that one **cannot** *know the truth* **or** be *saved by it* **unless** one is willing to *abide in the Words of Jesus.*  Jesus went on to explain these things further in John 15:1-10 where *abiding in Him* and *abiding in His love* were inseparably linked to *keeping His commandments.*  Thus, receiving the salvation lovingly offered by Jesus and becoming a disciple of His requires more than just *belief-* it also requires *obedience.* Such is well illustrated in John 12:42, *“Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue.”*

But let’s take these things in a slightly different direction now. ***If*** you *believe in* Jesus, **and** *abide in His word*, and thus **become** a *disciple* and **are** *made free,* is **that enough for you?** In other words, is that *really* what you want? Think about it. Is *discipleship* really what you want from Jesus? It has its own set of requirements:

* Loving Jesus more, and putting Him before even your own family, Luke 14:26;
* Self-denial, Matthew 16:24a; and,
* Following Jesus, even if it costs you your life, Matthew 16:24b-25.

Likewise, is the *freedom from sin* and its *consequences* enough for you? This is what His sacrifice, His word, and His body (the church) are all about- but is this *really* what you want? Or, are you looking for and desiring other things from Him, His word, and His church? Like, for instance:

* The ability to *accept* Him on any terms that are agreeable to you regardless of what He says? Luke 6:46-49
* The ability to worship Him anyway you please regardless of what He says? John 4:23-24
* The ability to feel good about yourself and the way you choose to live regardless of what He says? John 12:48
* The solving of all your *earthly* problems and ills so that life is “heaven on earth”? Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus died to provide salvation, Romans 5:9-9. His word was given to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to provide salvation, Romans 1:16-17. His church was founded to be the *foundation* and *support* of truth to the provision of salvation, 1Timothy 3:15. Is this enough for you? It is if you understand that sin and its consequences are the biggest and most important problem we face in this life. More than any academic, political, societal, familial, or even health-related issue, the guilt of sin and the subsequent need of salvation is man’s most important endeavor. Jesus is the way, and provides the solution, if we will but believe, obey, and follow. (2-24-15)

**“It’s All in Your Head”**

The human mind can be a strange place. There’s stuff in there that we’ll never figure out. I am truly amazed at the extreme intelligence of some folks, and equally befuddled at the complete lack of common sense in others. I suppose that means I’m somewhere in the middle- most folks are. We mediocre-minded masses may not be the sharpest knives in the drawer, but we are smarter than a box of hammers! Admittedly, I typically swim in the shallow end of the pool of thought.

But whether we’re blazingly brilliant or downright dim, **what** **counts in life is more often determined by attitude rather than I.Q.** To illustrate, consider three responses to a typical question: “How are you today?” The first fellow says, “I’m finer than a frog hair split in two.” Not to doubt the veracity of his statement, but he was laying in a hospital bed in his living room dying of cancer at the time. You tell me: If that was his attitude in that situation, what kind of a day was he going to have? You bet it was going to be a good one, and he was going to enjoy every minute of it!

The second fellow answers the question with “Not quite as good as I look.” Now this man is admitting that he has difficulties of some sort, but you have to admire his style! Self-confidence is good and even necessary at times, as long as it’s not overdone. I know this man well- arrogance or overconfidence is not part of his character, and never has been. He was just teasing the questioner. But again, there is a point to be made. We all have problems, but those who get up each day and present themselves to the world, their brethren, and their God in the best way possible are going to have a better day than the one who sees nothing but obstacles, and thus allows circumstances to overcome him. Proverbs 26:13-16 describes *“the sluggard”* as one who sees only problems (real or imagined), and therefore just *turns* *as a door on its hinges in his bed*.

The third fellow answers the question with “Better than I deserve, but not quite as well as I had hoped.” He too is mostly joking. However, there is a lesson or three in these words too. This responder readily admits the grace of God has allowed him to do “better than” he deserved. He evidently understands that if he was “doing” only as well as he deserved, it would not be “good.” There is an honest consideration in such that we all need to admit. But he also concedes that his mortal side longs for more. Perhaps this is only human, but is probably all *too human* for one who desires to become a *“partaker of the divine nature”* (2Peter 1:4). The temporal, finite part of us always wants to feel better, have more, etc. Nonetheless, contentment must also be a part of our Christian character. *“But godliness is actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment.”* (1Timothy 6:6; see also vv.7-8ff)

“It’s all in your head” is true if: “head” includes “heart,” and we’re talking about attitude. W. Clement Stone (1902-2002) was truly a “rags to riches” story. His father died when he was three, and left the family deep in debt. Stone began selling newspapers at age six, and quickly became an innovator. By sixteen, he was selling insurance from office to office in Detroit. In 1919 (at the ripe old age of seventeen), he formed the Combined Insurance Company, which after years of growth and mergers, was eventually sold for $2.56 billion. Throughout his life, Stone was said to have given $275 million to charity. This information is to establish a basis for two quotes from Mr. Stone. First, **“There is little difference in people…the little difference is attitude. The big difference is whether it is positive or negative.”** And secondly, despite writing self-help books himself, Stone said, **“The Bible is the world’s greatest self-help book.”** Despite his great success and wealth, Mr. Stone realized that there was much more to life than these (Luke 12:15b). It truly is “all in your head” if biblical attitudes are there! Considering all of this, “How are you today?” (5-18-11)

**“It’s My Fault”**

How long has it been since you’ve heard those words? They’re rarely spoken anymore. Everyone has someone else to blame, or some mitigating circumstance that somehow removes culpability. But when it comes to sin, there is no one else to blame- “it is my fault.” Here’s why.

1Corinthians 10:12-13 reads, *“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able; but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.”*

This passage clearly places the responsibility for my sin squarely upon me! Let’s break it down to see how.

* **When it comes to sin, no one is bullet-proof.** Everyone is susceptible. That’s what verse 12 said: whoever *“thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”* Being overcome by temptation and sinning is not just a possibility, it is a probability. This doesn’t mean we *have to sin,* just that we *do sin.* I do, and you do too, and the sooner we admit it, the sooner we can begin to overcome them.
* **When it comes to sin, I’m not a *special case*, and neither are you.** Our society is plagued by “special case logic.” “My situation” is supposedly different, and therefore the rules that apply to everyone else somehow don’t apply to “me”! But that’s not what God said, nor how He looks at my sin, or yours. Note the passage again, *“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man…”* Get that: I am not a “special case” when it comes to sin, and neither are you! We need to stop excusing ourselves and take responsibility for our sins.
* **When it comes to sin, I have to trust the faithfulness of God.** Our passage clearly said that God *will not allow me to be tempted beyond what I am able* to withstand. God knows me better than I know myself. He knows what I can successfully withstand, and what I cannot bear. So when He says He won’t let me be tempted beyond what I can stand, I need to trust Him- and stop making excuses! “I just couldn’t help myself” is a lie told to feel better about failure. And by the way, with all due credit to Flip Wilson, “The Devil didn’t make me do it” either. I chose to either be ignorant of God’s will, or I chose to disregard God’s will for what I wantedto do, period. We must understand that we have the power to say “No” to temptation, and thereby overcome it. “I can’t” is a lie because God said “You can.”
* **When it comes to sin, there is always a “right” thing to do.** Sometimes we say, “I took the lesser of two evils because that’s all I could do.” Our passage says I’m lying to myself and others if that is what I think. There is always a “right” thing to do because God never leaves us with nothing but “wrong” choices. It said that God would *“with the temptation provide a way of escape also…”*  We tend to think of a *way of escape* as an “easy way out,” but that is not the meaning here. Looking for, finding, and doing the “right” thing in the face of temptation may indeed be the most difficult, gut-wrenching thing you’ve ever done in your life. But based on the faithful promise of God, the “right” thing is always available to me, and to you. It may be harder than the wrong thing, but it is there none the less- for all of us.

 Peter wrote in part, *“for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved.”* (2Peter 2:19) You and I have a choice: we can keep on denying, excusing, justifying, or otherwise mitigating our sins and responsibility for them, or we can overcome them by accepting responsibility and doing better! (9-14-10)

**“It’s Still Made of Wood…”**

When we lived in Jacksonville, Texas, we had a huge native Pecan tree in our front yard. We loved that tree and the shade it provided- the squirrels did too, though certainly for additional reasons. Unfortunately, old age and several successive years of drought took their toll, and it began to slowly die from the top down. Hopes that it might recover after ample rains finally replenished the water table soon faded as more and more of its upper reaches gradually lost leaves and then limbs. When the two largest and longest branches that remained relatively healthy were the ones extending over our living room, I was finally forced to the decision to take it down.

Lying sprawled across the lawn, the giant seemed even bigger…. and it was- 32 inches across the stump at waist high. But the good news was that it would supply our fireplace for a long time! For anyone who has ever split firewood, a block that is wider (32 inches) than it is long (I cut ours about 22 to 24 inches) is awfully hard to handle. But it wasn’t just the size that made these particular blocks difficult to split into smaller and more manageable pieces. Over the years of its lifetime, many lower limbs had been trimmed away, and the outer bark (and several inches of tree!) had grown over them- which makes the wood much harder to split. Then too, it appeared that the tree had endured a hard life. The grain was gnarled, twisted, and just plain mangled and matted. Splitting a single block took all that a gas-powered hydraulic splitter, two or three additional hand-driven log wedges, and a fellow with a maul that has split firewood all his life could muster. Each of the massive blocks took me over an hour of intense labor to get down to fireplace-ready size…and yielded as many as 32 sticks of good-sized pieces! My good wife, upon seeing my sweat-soaked clothes and completely exhausted expression, and patiently listening to and noting as I explained and pointed out how this was the most gnarly, twisted, and difficult firewood I had ever split, simply replied, “Well, it’s still made of wood, so burn it.”

Though perhaps less than sympathetic to the difficulties on my labor, she was right- no matter how much we loved the tree, or how difficult it was to get down and processed, in the end it was still just firewood destined for the fireplace. From this, a couple of lessons emerged…

***Physical* *things,* no matter how much we love and become attached to them, are destined for the fire.** *“…. and the earth and its works will be burned up,”* 2Peter 3:10. While this passage obviously references the end of time, ALL physical things have a limited lifespan. Many *perish with using,* and others simply reach the limits of their existence. The lesson is not one of disposability as much as priority. Through destruction- by “natural disasters” or whether *“moth or rust destroys”* or *“thieves break in and steal”* (cf. Matthew 6:19), we are forced to prioritize what’s really important- *physical* *things* matter little and are but temporary, while *spiritual things* are supreme and eternally important, Matthew 6:20.

**Therefore, our labors toward the attainment and preservation of *physical things* are in vain.** The rich fool had grand plans to *“tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods”* so that he might have *“many goods laid up for many years to come”* and could then take his *ease* to *“eat, drink, and be merry,”* Luke 12:18-19. But there was a problem with permanence regarding these physical things- not even life itself will last, *“You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?”* Luke 12:20. Our efforts toward preserving physical things- whether possessions or life itself, all come to naught, regardless of our efforts to the contrary. While this is discouraging to some who fail to realize that *“not even when one has an abundance, does his life consist in his possessions”* (Luke 12:15), it allows everyone the opportunity to see the advantages of being *“rich toward God”* rather than *laying up “treasure for himself,”* Luke 12:21.

**All lives are valuable because they’re all made of souls that are precious to God, no matter how hardened, twisted, gnarly, and mangled they’ve been made by “life.”** That Pecan tree, while beautiful and majestic on the outside, was horribly scarred on the inside. Life can be, and often is, the same. Its difficulties can also leave us hardened, twisted, gnarled, and mangled on the inside regardless of the foliage, flowers, or fruit we portend on the façade. But the true beauty of these things is that although others may disregard, discount, and discard us because of a perceived lack of value to them, God is different. He created us, gave us life, and endowed us with an eternal soul- a precious and valued commodity immune to depreciation or decay. Though our souls can be lost or damaged, they can always be regained and repaired by the restorative power of Jesus Christ, Luke 19:10; Acts 4:12. As long as we are still residents of this world by the *breath of life* (cf. James 2:26), our souls can be reclaimed and refitted for glory.

It’s not too late. We CAN change our perspectives, priorities, and purpose. *“Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work,”* 2Timothy 2:21. Otherwise and in a much less admirable way, like that Pecan tree, we’ll just wind up being burned, *“If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned,”* John 15:6. (9-13-17)

**Jesus is “The Door,” Not “The Escalator”**

In John 10:9, Jesus said, *“I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved…”*  He did not say He was “the escalator.” He didn’t choose “the door” metaphor over “the escalator” because escalators were unknown to His primary audience. There are substantial differences between the two. Please consider….

* **Jesus is *“the door.”***He is the only access to salvation. There is no other way, but through Him. Peter put it this way in Acts 4:12, *“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved.”* Modern concepts of spiritual Pluralism (the acceptance of all religious beliefs as equally valid) are a false doctrine according to the Scriptures. Pluralism is comforting because it removes personal responsibility and accountability to decide what is true, and what is false about religion- “just pick one that suits you” is the result. Jesus is *“the”* one and only *“door”* to salvation.
* **Doors provide access, but require activity.** Jesus, as “the door,” provides access to all who are willing to *“enter.”* Notice our text again regarding this point, *“if anyone enters through Me….”* The responsibility for *entering* is ours. In John 6:45, Jesus further explains that *hearing* (the gospel), *learning* (the gospel), and *coming* (by belief and obedience to the gospel) is required to *enter* (salvation) through Him. He also emphasizes this point in Luke 11:9-10, *“And I say to you, ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; and he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks it shall be opened.”* Jesus is *“the door,”* but we have to *seek, find,* and *knock* upon it, and then be willing to *enter* thereby. Mere acquiescence does not equate to activity.
* **Doors are *exclusive* too.** All doors serve two distinct purposes: to both *provide* and *prevent* access- otherwise it would be an *opening* without a door! Thus, the same *door* that provides *access* to those willing to *seek, find,* and *enter* also *exclude* those unwilling to do the same. Think about Noah’s ark for a moment. God specified that its construction include one door. All who believed God about the coming destruction, obediently prepared for it, and entered by this door were saved from the flood. But once they were safely inside, *“the Lord closed it* (the door) *behind him* (Noah),” Genesis 7:16. God’s *closing of the door* behind Noah wasn’t to keep the floodwaters out- it was to prevent access to everyone else who refused to believe, prepare, and obey! Think about that. Jesus is *“the door”* who *provides* *access* to salvation to those willing to *believe* and *obey* Him, but He is also *“the door”* who *prevents access* to everyone else. Doors are always hinged for a reason!

Far too many people don’t want Jesus to be *the* *door,* but an *escalator.* They don’t want *access* to salvation that requires anything more of them than acquiescence. They want Jesus to be an *escalator-* preferably one-way, that they just step on and He takes them all the way to heaven. But Jesus is *the door* that has to be *found, knocked upon,* and *entered* by us to gain access to eternal life. And one more thing, remember *the door* has hinges that allow it to be opened for *exit* as well as *entrance* (see Matthew 22:11-13ff). Jesus said what He meant and meant what He said when He presented Himself as *“the door.”* We need to listen, understand, and obey. (2-23-16)

**The Pivot Point of Human History**

From the spiritual perspective, the cross of Jesus is the pivot point of human history- everything prior looks forward to it in anticipation, and everything since looks back in appreciation. Please notice the Word of God in these regards…

Ephesians 1:4, *“just as He* (God) *chose us* (Christians) *in Him* (Christ) ***before the foundation of the world,*** *that we should be holy and blameless before Him.”* Before the creation of the world, or man on it, God had a plan for saving the souls of men through Jesus Christ, cf. Matthew 25:34.

Genesis 3:15, *“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed;* ***He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise Him on the heel.”***God spoke these words to Satan after he deceived Eve into sin. The *seed of the woman* to whom He refers is Jesus Christ. Satan *bruised Him on the heel* through the death on the cross, but it was this same event that dealt the deathblow *to the head* of Satan (signaling his ultimate defeat), cf. Romans 16:20.

Genesis 12:3, *“And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And* ***in you******all families of the earth shall be blessed.”*** God promised Abraham that through one of his descendants everyone throughout the world would be blessed. That *blessing* came through presence and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, cf. Galatians 3:26-29.

Deuteronomy 18:18-19, *“I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you*, *and I will put My words in his mouth,* ***and he shall speak to them all that I command him.*** *And it shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him.”* God spoke these words to Moses concerning the coming of *“the Prophet,”* Jesus Christ, cf. Acts 3:19-26.

2Samuel 7:16, *“And* ***your house*** *and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever****; your throne shall be established forever.”*** God spoke these words to David, the second king of Israel. But, He spoke of the *spiritual* throne and kingdom of Jesus Christ, as a descendant of David, rather than of a *physical* reign and rule, cf. Matthew 1:1,6,16; 27:11; John 19:19; Revelation 19:16.

Throughout the periods of Israel’s *united* and *divided* kingdom, all the prophets- *major* and *minor,* kept looking f**orward** to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. But after His crucifixion on the cross for the remission of the sins of mankind, the apostles, prophets, and writers of the New Testament kept pointing **back**to His sacrifice on the cross…

Acts 2:22-24, *“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know- this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God,* ***you nailed to a cross*** *by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.”*  It was through this sacrifice that Jesus ***“bore our sins in His body on the cross,*** *that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed,”* 1Peter 2:24. Space limitations will not permit the quotation of numerous NT passages here to further emphasizing this point, but please see 1Corinthians 1:17-18; Galatians 6:14; and Ephesians 2:16.

Now, here’s the point: If the prophets and inspired writers of the Old Testament all looked *forward* to Jesus, and the New Testament apostles, prophets, and writers all looked *back* to Him and the salvation attained through His cross, **shouldn’t these things be given our utmost attention as the spiritual pivot point of all human history?**  Hebrews 9:26 says that His sacrifice came *“at the consummation of the ages...”*- surely this makes His life and sacrifice for our sins the most significant event of all time!

On **March 22nd – 25th**, at the **Southside Church of Christ** (602 Henderson, across from Subway), **brother Jared Rogers** of Mount Pleasant, TX will be delivering a special series of lessons particularly dealing with the *life, teaching, sacrifice,* and *salvation* of Jesus. Services Sunday will be at 9:30 and 10:20 AM, and 6 PM, and on Monday through Wednesday at 7:00 PM. We’d love to have you join us to consider in detail this momentous Man and event. Your eternal destiny depends upon your understanding of Jesus Christ, and the salvation He offers. Won’t you please come? *“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given among men, by which we must be saved,”* Acts 4:12. (3-17-15)

**“Just a Little Off”**

Before you respond to the title, “No,” this is not an article about my mental state- though it may be a good description of the same! Instead, this is a piece about the dangers of being “just a little off” in our religion. Many “play” at religion the same way they “play” at horseshoes: with the notion that “close” is good enough to be successful. You’ve probably heard the old expression, “Close is good enough in horseshoes and hand grenades,” but does it really apply to our faith, and the practice of it?

Let me illustrate the problem of being “just a little off” this way: What if, while I was typing this article, one of my hands was just one key position off on the keyboard? The phrase “just a little off” would have instead read, “judy s liyylr ogg”! Get the picture? “Just a little off” can make all the difference in the world, and in the next world too.

A biblical example of being “just a little off” is found in Leviticus 10:1. Two priestly sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, found that “being just a little off” religiously can be very costly. God specified that fire for the burning of incense should come from the altar, cf.16:10. But, our text says they utilized *“strange fire”* to make their offering. Evidently, their fire did not come from the altar as God had commanded (it is also probable that they weren’t supposed to be the one(s) making the offering in the first place). Perhaps they reasoned that “fire was fire,” and that being “just a little off” wouldn’t matter in the worship service to the Lord. If so, THEY WERE WRONG! The next verse says that *“fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.”*  Obviously, being “just a little off” wasn’t “close enough” for God!

Are we then really comfortable with the notion that “as long as you’re honest and sincere” being “just a little off” is good enough in our worship today? In John 4:23-24, Jesus indicated that worship must not only be *“in spirit”*- that is, with the right emotion and intention, but that it must also be *“in truth”-* or, according to the dictates of truth as revealed by God. We must worship God as He says, and are not at liberty to perform some act that is convenient for us, or to our liking, call it “worship,” and presume that He will accept it. Instead, we had better be sure that our efforts to worship our great God come from Book, Chapter, and Verse authority, rather than our own desires and tastes. In worship, being “just a little off” is still “off”- and wrong, even when well intended.

Let’s back this up a little further. If “just a little off” isn’t close enough in our worship- even when sincerely given, then is it somehow sufficient for salvation? Can we do “most” of what God says is necessary to be saved, and still be acceptable to Him? Is “close” good enough for salvation? Note the words of Jesus in these passages regarding God’s requirements for salvation: John 8:24, *“for unless you* ***believe*** *that I am He, you will die in your sins;”* Luke 13:3, *“unless you* ***repent****, you shall all likewise perish;”* John 3:5, *“unless one is* ***born of water*** *and* ***the Spirit****, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”* **Belief** is a change of mind (intellect) and heart (affection) that leads to **repentance**, which is a change of direction of and in life. **Baptism** is being *“born again”* as a *“new creature”* (2Corinthians 5:17) in Christ.

If we just believe, but do not repent, we’ve changed our minds without really changing our lives. We’re *close,* but “just a little off”! If we come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, and we allow that knowledge to truly change the course and direction of our lives, we’ve changed our minds and our lives, but have not changed our *Father* by being *born again* through baptism, cp. John 8:44 🡪 Galatians 3:26-29. Again, we’re close, but “just a little off.” Now, you tell me: which one of these commanded actions can we omit, or be “just a little off” on, and still be “close enough” to be acceptable with God?

Please carefully consider 1John 2:3-5, *“And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected…”* (9-18-12)

**“Just Be Thankful…”**

We’ve all heard it, and most of us have said it. Being thankful is always the right thing to do, but the admonition to “***Just*** be thankful” is often advice given to someone who has suffered some heartbreak, disappointment, or accident. It is then that a kind soul who means well, and intends to provide a dose of needed perspective, says, “Just be thankful that…” and then adds some worse alternative which didn’t happen.

As I was driving to Tyler to haul home a broken down vehicle that had just been released from the repair shop the day before (and had both an engine and front axle rebuilt in the recent past also), my frustrations begin to mount. Self “pity party” lines rolled and wrapped through my mind. With four drivers in the family operating mostly older vehicles with high mileage, it seems we always have a vehicle (or three!) needing repair. Then it hit me: On the scale of personal difficulties and tragedies, a broken down vehicle has to be near the bottom of the problem list, if even on it at all. I was immediately both ashamed of my frustration and thankful for ***my*** problem(s). Others are being forced to combat diseases trying to kill their children, or struggling to understand why a loved one died far too prematurely, or trying to repair their lives after some personal tragedy- but I was despairing over a fourteen year old vehicle breaking down! So I said it, first to myself, and then out loud to family members: “Just be thankful that a broken down old car isour biggest problem!” Perspective is a wonderfully cheering and immensely liberating thing.

So, “Just be thankful” if:

* Your car is broken, because that means you have one, and it can probably be repaired, if not replaced. This is one of those problems that *time* or *money* or the combination of the two can fix. While you may not have the *money* now, in *time,* you can have it. There are a lot more serious problems that these two *fixers* can’t resolve- so, “Just be thankful…”
* Your parents, children, or family members are driving you crazy, because that means you still have them. I can’t imagine how difficult it must be to have lost an immediate family member prematurely and tragically- but many can because they’re still dealing with the aftermath. So, “Just be thankful…”
* Your bills are piling up, because that probably means you’ve lived sufficiently well enough to enjoy credit, and the things and activities it can buy, but for which repayment is required. And if you’re electricity bill is out of control, you can always simply have the power company remove the meter. People survived for centuries without electricity. See? Things can always be worse- so, “Just be thankful…”
* Your aches, pains, and physical difficulties seemingly require your constant attention, because that means no one has yet “thrown dirt in your face” (buried you). Our physical bodies were never meant to last forever, and will surely break down eventually. But, while there is breath, there is hope. In physical terms, this means there is “life” still be lived- do your best to make the most of and enjoy it. In spiritual terms, while there is breath means there is the opportunity to get right with God, and thus become prepared for the “life” that is to come. So, “Just be thankful…”
* You realize you’ve made a mess of your life, because that means you’ve taken the first step toward straightening things out- with God’s grace and help of course. In Luke 15, the prodigal son’s first step toward reconciliation with his father was realizing and admitting his mistakes, *“I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight,”* v.18. We can never make a “mess” God can’t clean up, if we will realize and admit our mistakes, and return to Him in true repentance. If you’ve come to realize that you’re living in the pigsty of sin, you’ve started in the right direction and now have the opportunity to do, and be, better. So, “Just be thankful…”

Even in disappointment, heartbreak, and tragedy, there are always things for which we can, and should be, thankful. Therefore, *“in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus,”* 1Thessalonians 5:18. (7-5-13)

**Just Imagine**

Take an imaginary, but-all-too-real, journey with me. Imagine that we’re all assembled at church services on Sunday morning. It is that time just before the first prayer or song leader (or announcement maker) rises and moves to the front of the auditorium to start the service. You know- that time when the noisy clamoring of cheerful greetings and polite inquiries fill the building because we’re all really glad to see one another on such a beautiful Lord’s Day. And then suddenly, in just that moment that the crowd falls silent in preparation for the beginning worship, the projector flashes to life all on its own. The image on the screen is much clearer and brighter than normal, and….

A picture of Ashley Adams (this “Ashley Adams” is completely fictitious, as are all of the characters which follow in our imaginary story) dissolves onto the screen. Everyone oohs and aahs over the picture-perfect portrait displayed. But then something very different and dreadful happens- actual photos begin to flash on the screen one by one of every sin Ashley ever committed. Every trite or catty thought, every smug or careless or unkind or hateful word, every secret sexual lust and sin- pictures that capture every sinful thought and word and deed, begin to parade across the projector screen before our eyes! Hundreds of photos seamlessly chronicle every iniquity, every poor choice, every thoughtless word, every lustful emotion, and every sinful moment of her life. We sit in stunned disbelief and shocked silence as these images flicker before us. Everyone, even those who have been victims of her sometimes-sharp tongue, feel so sorry for poor Ashley! Despite heroic efforts by several of the men to shut down the projector, nothing seems to work. Since it is mounted on the ceiling, and appears to be divinely powered and directed, there’s really nothing that can be done to stop this deeply painful recitation of Ashley’s “other” life. She sits in horrified embarrassment, sobbing uncontrollably as everyone sees all the ugliness that she has so adeptly kept hidden under the shiny façade of her “Christian” life for years. But then it gets worse, much worse.

When Ashley’s train-wreck of shame finally concludes with her most recent displays of depravity, the screen goes momentarily blank. Everyone sighs deeply; grateful the tragically painful presentation appears to be over. An aghast hush creeps through the audience, which is inexplicably larger than normal. Those sitting around Ashley try to console her, but everyone else just sits silently- wondering what to do next. Then, slowly, another image begins to appear on the screen. It seems like several minutes, but isn’t more than a few seconds until Ben Baker’s visage gradually comes into focus on the projector screen. The spectacle of sin begins again, chronicling every single iniquity of Brother Baker’s life, beginning with his teenage years and progressively moving forward through to just last week, starts to unfold- slide by stunning slide. If the images of the young and beautiful, but sometimes a little “wild,” Ashley shocked the audience, there are no words adequate to describe our utter dismay at the decadent degradation now displaying on the screen of one of our longtime Elder’s life! Surely this couldn’t get worse, but it did…

Gradually, after Brother Baker’s “show” ended and Cade Conner’s started, it began to dawn on us: This display of depravity is going through the church directory in alphabetical order! Now, shock and horror turns to dread as one by one we realize that this “show” is eventually going to put our own “secret sins” up on the screen for everyone to see. Just imagine!

Now, this story, and the characters in it, is completely fictitious. But, realize that a similar scenario is depicted in 1Corinthians 14:22-25. In fact, this passage was the “inspiration” (excuse the pun!) of the story. However, neither the plausibility nor the possibility of such actually occurring today is really the point. What is? There are a few I’d like you to consider with me briefly.

1. God already knows our “secret sins.” However adept we may be at “hiding” our sins from others, He knows not only our actions, but also the innermost thoughts and desires of our hearts, Hebrews 4:12-13.
2. We all have sins for which we need forgiveness. While we certainly may have sinned against others, and need seek their forgiveness, every sin we commit is against God and demands His forgiveness first and foremost, 2Samuel 11; 12:12-13.
3. Perhaps most importantly, there are no sins too big or too numerous for God’s grace, 1Timothy 1:14. He has promised Christians that if we will confess our sins to Him, and repent of them, He will *“cleanse us from* ***all*** *unrighteousness,”* 1John 1:6-10.

All of which should cause us to better understand His **grace**, **mercy**, and **love**; and to be so very thankful for His willingness to ***remember our sins no more****,* Hebrews 8:12! (11-5-13)

**Knowledge and Life**

The words of mere men, though uninspired, may cause us to be awakened to the truth and meaning of those words which are divinely inspired.  Men of mental prowess, who have great commitment to study biblical Truth, can help bring us to better understanding of what God would have us to be.  The Hebrews writer seems to speak to that potential in Hebrews 6:12-13, *“And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”*  Similarly, the Apostle Paul often encouraged brethren to hold in high regard those who labored for, and led them, cf. Phil.2:29; 1Cor.16:18; 1Thess.5:12-13.

However, not all men of understanding are equally adept at applying scripture to their own lives. Solomon was declared to be the wisest man of his generation, and yet oft failed to adequately apply his wisdom to the obedience of God’s Word.  In this way, we all likely fall short.  Which of us does not know more divine Truth than we live?  Still yet, there is much that can be learned from those *who “receive the word with great eagerness, examining the scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so.”*  (Acts 17:11, spoken of the Bereans)

With these few thoughts in mind, please consider carefully the quote below.  It was the prayer of John Baillie, a Scottish theologian and professor at the famed Edinburgh University. There he sought to influence young men’s minds toward awareness of the omnipresence of God in their lives.  Mr. Baillie also wrote “A Dairy of Private Prayer” (1936) which came to be regarded as a devotional classic.  But some have suggested that his most important contribution to theology in general was his teaching, writing, and lecturing on the relationship between the knowledge of God and man’s spiritual and moral experience– that is, and surely over-simplified, doing what we know to be right.  I think you’ll see evidence of that conviction in his words:

**“Teach me, O God, to use all the circumstances of my life today that they may bring forth in me the fruits of holiness rather than the fruits of sin. Let me use disappointment as material for patience; Let me use success as material for thankfulness; Let me use suspense as material for perseverance; Let me use danger as material for courage; Let me use reproach as material for longsuffering; Let me use praise as material for humility; Let me use pleasures as material for temperance; Let me use pains as material for endurance.”**

What a wonderful petition!  That in all of life’s circumstances, whatever they may be– whether pleasant or tragic, we allow the Lord of the Universe to use them to teach us to be godly. Life is to be a journey of learning, but not learning for mere knowledge’s sake.  Learning is useless without application in one’s life.  In the sense of divine knowledge which is not applied, it is sinful– James 4:17, *“Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.”*

When our minds and hearts are filled with the knowledge of divine text, we can then interpret all of life’s situations and circumstances through that prism of understanding, so that we act and react according to God’s will for us.  Thus, when we, armed with the knowledge of God’s word, meet the circumstances of daily life, we understand them to be opportunities to grow in wisdom through living godly.  Such is the essence of having the *“senses trained to discern good and evil,”* Hebrews 5:14.

So, how are you doing?  Life “got you down?”  Not if your mind is filled with the knowledge of God’s word, your heart is filled with the desire to *“learn what is pleasing to Him”* (Eph.5:10), and your body is willing to be *“led by the Spirit of God”* (Rom.8:14).  Then, each of life’s obstacles– and they come in “good” and “bad” forms as evidenced by Mr. Baillie’s prayer, is an opportunity to learn more and do more toward the ultimate goal of heaven!  Don’t get “down”- get busy learning and doing! (6-8-11)

**Lack of Faith Leads to Sin**

We know that the *“wages of sin”* is eternal death, Rom.6:23; and that all of an accountable age *have* and *do* sin, cf. Rom.3:23 and 1John 1:8. So, the question simply becomes, “Why?” From Hebrews 11:6, we see that true, biblical “faith” is constituted of 3 essential elements:

* *Knowledge* in the mind- we must mentally conclude, accept, and *“believe that He is;”*
* *Trust* in the heart- we must *trust* that He will *reward* our faith eternally; and,
* *Obedience* with the body- and therefore in the life.

Without this kind of “faith,” we can neither *“please Him,”* nor will He reward us with eternal life instead of the eternal death we deserve. These things unmistakably demonstrate the essentiality of true “faith” in our lives, cf. 2Corinthians 5:7ff. But, we are also forced to another conclusion regarding the link between faith and sin…

**We sin because we lack faith.** The deficiency is manifested in several ways:

* Lack of **knowledge** (of God and/or His Word), Acts 17:22-23. The Athenians “worshipped” false gods because their “faith” lacked knowledge of the one true God, His nature, His ways, and His requirements.
* We know, but choose to **ignore**, Rom.1:18-23. Even though they *“knew God,”* those described chose to *“suppress the truth in unrighteousness”* or *“honor Him as God.”* This is nothing more than stubborn rebellion.
* We know and believe, but **doubt** and **fear**, Eve, Gen.3:1-13; and Peter, Matt.14:28-31. Eve knew and correctly restated God’s requirements, but allowed Satan to get her to question God’s character and motives. This doubt damaged her faith, and caused her to sin. Peter’s *walking on the water* was going fine until he looked at the *wind* instead of keeping his eyes on Jesus- the source of his strength!Then he began to doubt and be afraid,and started to sink.
* We know, believe, but lack **desire**, John 12:42. Many of the Jewish leaders *believed* in Jesus, but their desire to *please men* was greater than their desire to *please God-* and they, therefore, were unwilling to *confess* their faith in, and live for, Him.
* We know, believe, and desire, but lack **strength**, Mark 9:24. The father of boy who was *violently oppressed* by an evil spirit confessed a measure of *belief/faith* in Jesus, but also admitted that his faith lacked *strength* necessary to overcome the trials of his present situation. His plea for Jesus to *“help me in my unbelief”* is not contradictory to his faith, but does acknowledge the sad reality of the presence of detracting and debilitating *unbelief!*

If we’re really honest when looking into the *mirror of God’s word* (cf. James 1:22-25), we can *see ourselves* in all of the examples above…. at least at various times of our lives. There are times when our own faith’s power to overcome sin is hampered, if not crippled, by: not knowing what God expects and desires, or how to accomplish it; our own stubborn refusal to accept, believe, and do what God says instead of what we want; doubts and fears when faced with extremely challenging situations; and weakness that prevents our faith from enabling us to overcome temptation to be all that God expects and requires. Basically, when it comes to our own faith in comparison to these examples, we’ve all ***been there*** and ***done that***in similar situations, and for the same reasons!

Faith, like so many other things, grows incrementally and progressively. Obstacles, and failures to overcome them, are at least a reality if not an essential part of the process for us. A lack of knowledge, a spirit of rebellion, doubts and fears, or a lack of desire or knowledge challenges our faith, and we stumble and fall into sin. But the issue, at that point, is not what our faith *lacks,* but what it *contains,* and what we are will to *add* to it (see 2Peter 1:5-11). After falling, are willing to abandon our faith completely, or will we get busy strengthening it with knowledge, rooting out our rebellion by completely submitting to His will, and adding necessary zeal to our desire to please God? Consider carefully Luke 15:11-24. Think about it, please, and then do the right thing(s)! (11-28-16)

**Let’s Make Thanksgiving a Year ‘Round Event!**

I don’t mean the baked/roasted/smoked/fried turkey part. Nor do I mean the spending time with family-who-live-far-away part. I’m not even talking about the deer hunting or watching football part. And I definitely don’t mean the shopping part. Our waistlines, nerves, and bank accounts couldn’t stand these things on a year ‘round basis! But I do mean the part about being more cognizant and appreciative of our blessings on a daily and year ‘round basis….

Notice briefly a few occasions when Jesus, the Son of God and Savior of the world, offered thanks to the Father:

* Matthew 15:36. Before performing the extraordinary miracle of feeding 4000 (besides women and children) men with seven loaves and few fish, He paused and gave thanks.
* John 11:41. When they removed the stone covering the tomb of His resurrected friend Lazarus, He thanked the Father for having heard and granted His prayer.
* Matthew 26:27. While instituting the Lord’s Supper- in which the emblems of unleavened bread and fruit of the vine would represent His body and blood offered on the cross for our sins, He gave thanks.

Now let’s think about these three events which occasioned thankfulness from Jesus. In the first instance, we should realize that Jesus did not need the loaves and fishes to be able to feed the multitude. Even Satan admitted that He could turn *stones* into bread (Matthew 4:3). Certainly the *creative power* that produced the Universe and all in it (Colossians 1:16) did not need a “starter kit” to perform this great miracle! And yet, we see in His humble example the epitome of gratitude. Surely we can be thankful **year ‘round** for all the physical provisions God graciously gives to us when we are so completely dependent upon Him- *“and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness,”* Acts 14:17.

Second, Jesus was thankful to the Father for hearing His prayer and raising Lazarus. I’m not suggesting by this example that we should pray for God to raise our departed friends. I am suggesting that we should express our gratitude when we pray for Him to heal our sick relatives and friends and they recover. Certainly, God’s ways and the reasons for them are far above our ability to comprehend, and sometimes our prayers for healing are not granted. But, when the Lord of heaven does answer our prayers favorably, we certainly should not be remiss in offering our thankfulness to Him. Ten leprous men petitioned Jesus to heal them in Luke 17:11-19. He instructed them to go show themselves to the priest as the Law required for their readmission to society. On the way, they were healed, but only one of them returned to thank Him. Be thankful **year ‘round** for the protection and restored lives of those still with us.

Third, we saw Jesus giving thanks for the emblems that represent our salvation- the *body* and *blood* of a crucified Savior. The previous examples manifested His thankful spirit for *physical provisions of food*, and for the *sparing/restoration of physical life,* but by comparison, this one is the basis of our *spiritual sustenance* and *salvation!* The weekly reminder of the unleavened bread and fruit of the vine allows us the occasion to be thankful for the price paid for our *spiritual existence* *in fellowship with God*. We need that reminder every week, and should be eternally grateful for both the sacrifice that made such possible, and for the opportunity to express our thanks for it.

“Thanksgiving” should be a daily exercise partaken year ‘round. From our daily provisions of *physical* food and health, to our *spiritual* food and health, we should be ever grateful to God on a daily and year ‘round basis! Have a grateful and thankful holiday, and be mindful of your blessings every day. (11-24-15)

**No One Likes Being Called a “Liar”!**

It just seems like such an inflammatory thing to say. Even a fellow who already knows he is “loose with the truth” is likely to be ready to fight when and if he’s confronted with his own reality. Why is this? Perhaps it is because “honesty” has been so generally regarded as a sure sign of a “good person.” So if someone is called out as a liar, he is necessarily also being singled out as a “bad person”- and he’s not likely to appreciate it. Possibly such is to be expected, since as Daniel Webster once put it, “Falsehoods not only disagree with truths, but usually quarrel among themselves.”

I’m not sure “honesty” is as highly regarded as it once was. In academia, it is said that “In the honor system the professors have the honor and the students have the system.” And in business, dishonesty seems to be “norm” rather than the exception. A Washington merchant inadvertently illustrated the point with a sign in his window which read: “You can fool some of the people some of the time, and, generally speaking, that’s enough to allow for profit.” While lying may be almost an expected practice in our society today, still no one likes be called a “liar.”

 “Ok, so what?” Take a good, hard (and honest!) look at 1John 2:4: *“The one who says, “﻿I have come to ﻿know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a ﻿liar, and ﻿the truth is not in him…”*

The Word of God, and therefore God Himself, is calling us *“a liar”* if we claim to be Christians and yet don’t *“keep His commandments”!*  Like all liars, we probably don’t like it, and we may even deny it or otherwise object and want to fight about it, but remember the admonition of Romans 3:4, *“….let God be found true, though every man be found a liar....”* God is true and we are not, if we claim to be God’s children, and yet do not follow the instructions of our Father.

While we do not and cannot “earn” our salvation, because nothing we can do in service to God equates in value to what we receive from Him (and that’s called “grace”), neither will His grace be applied to those who refuse to do what He says. Notice a couple of passages in this regard: Ephesians 2:8-9, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not a result of works that no one should boast.”* But we cannot simply stop here without considering the next verse also, which says, “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”* (Ephesians 2:10) And James 2:24 adds, *“You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.”* The point is that if our “works” don’t match our “words,” then not only are we outside of God’s promised grace- which is the means of our salvation, He also says that we are “liars”!

We may not like it, but our dissatisfaction with God’s Word doesn’t change the truthfulness of it. After all, remember that it is His grace by which we are saved, and therefore He sets the required actions that are necessary to receive it. *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior; Jesus Christ; who gave Himself up for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.”* (Titus 2:11-14) It is those who accept and obey the *instructions* of God’s grace who receive the benefits of it. (5-19-10)

**Life Lessons**

Last week a fine young man asked me for some help with “homework” for one of his college medical classes. He had to get a “complete medical history” for someone with a chronic illness- and he picked me. I try not to think of myself as a “Cancer Survivor,” but the reality is that in May of 2004 I was diagnosed with Stage 4 T-Cell Lymphoma. Through the love and prayers of many, the dogged determination of my lovingly devoted one, chemo, and certainly the graciousness of God, I’ve been in remission since the fall of that same year. Despite being a preacher, I rarely speak publicly about that time of my life. It’s not that “it’s too painful to remember” or anything like that, I just don’t want to detract from God’s words with my experiences when I preach. Still, there are times when it somehow seems appropriate to share a few of the lessons cancer and chemo taught me. Strangely, God’s word had been telling me the same things for years, but perhaps I wasn’t quite listening- maybe you will. So, cancer and chemo reminded me that:

**Physical life is not what’s really important.** I cringe when someone says something like “Your health is the most important thing.” No it isn’t. And if that is what they learned from being seriously ill, then they still don’t get it. Being faced with your own mortality should make you understand that “this life” is not the most important thing. It can’t be when compared to eternity. I feel sorry for people who don’t believe in life after death as the Bible teaches. They have to try to cram all of what they call “living” into a few years of earthly existence- and usually make themselves and everyone around them miserable in the process. But understanding that “this life” is not only not all there is, but also that it is not even the best part of us, is essential information to emancipated living. God said, *“but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven…for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”* (Matthew 6:20-21) As long as we make “this life” our priority, we will never really learn how to live it.

**You’re not really “ready to die” unless you’re OK with dying today.** Living in such a way as to be “ready to die” is a noble goal. But the reality is that even those who think that’s what they’re doing probably aren’t. Most of us epitomize the old song line by wishing to be *“too old to die young.”*  We’d love to be able to say, like Paul, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith”* when our time comes, but never dream of saying it today! Death is something we prepare for doing when we finally get tired of living- sometime way, way, way on down the line. We really don’t get to choose, but what if you could? If the option was somehow given you to either depart this life today to be with God forever in heaven, or live out the rest of your days on earth and then take your chances at judgment, which would you pick? “He who hesitates is lost.” From one who’s been there, if you’re not OK with dying today, then you really haven’t really learned how to live.

**Death is not the enemy.** Death only becomes a bad thing when Satan and sin have controlled the life. We hear Revelation 13:14 at funerals, but never seem to apply it ourselves: *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.”*  Take that personally. Your death will be a “good thing” **if** you are *“in the Lord.”*  Only when one lives subject to Satan and sin is death a true tragedy. But for those who live subject to Christ and righteousness, death is “graduation day.” It is the *“rest from their labors”* of which John wrote. It is the doorway to eternal reward and happiness. Death is only the enemy of those who have invested everything in physical, rather than spiritual, life.

Folks who know of both my profession and illness are occasionally interested in my perspectives on cancer / chemo / surviving. I usually tell them that cancer and chemo were extremely difficult *physically,* but easy *spiritually*. When you look in the mirror and see “death warmed over,” it is easy to be spiritual. The real challenge is living with your own mortality in mind when you’re physically healthy! I hope these “life lessons” will help you to be spiritually healthy regardless of your physical condition. (9-22-10)

**Longing for the Word**

The *“living and abiding word of God”* is that *imperishable seed* from which Christians are conceived, gestate, and *born again,* 1Peter 1:23. Thus, it is *“obedience to the truth”* through which one’s soul becomes *“purified,”* or cleansed from sin, 1Peter 1:22. But in chapter two, the metaphor changes from the *seed* of conception and birth to the *pure milk* from which the *newborn babe* in Christ continues to grow and mature. However…

Effort is again required on our part. Even nutrient-rich *“pure milk of the word”* cannot work its wonders without being consumed! And, as all parents know, it is pretty much impossible to feed a baby that doesn’t *want* to eat, or doesn’t *like* the taste of the *milk.*  Is that where we are now? Is that where you are now? Perpetual spiritual infancy cannot be maintained any more than can perpetual physical infancy. In either case, children who will not *drink/eat* are doomed to infant mortality.

1Peter 2:1-3 provides important keys to developing the proper *taste* for the *milk* that is essential to early spiritual childhood development and maturity:

* There must be a *cleansing of the palate,* v.1. It’s hard to develop a taste for *“the pure milk of the word”* if we’re still chowing down on the *meat of worldliness!* So, we need to put *“aside all malice and guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.”*
* There must also be a *taste for sweetness,* v.3. If our spiritual tongues and digestive tracts are accustomed to eating the *hot peppers* and *pungent spices* of the world- like *bitterness, scorn, hot-temperedness,* or general *sourness* of disposition,then the *sweet taste* of the *kindness of Jesus* and His word may not be desirable. In such a case, a sampling of the *kindness* of Jesus from Titus 3:4-7 should help revive our taste buds and sweet tooth.
* But from v.2, there has to be recognition of the long-term spiritual health benefits. After cleansing the palate of worldliness, and reviving our taste for the sweet kindness of Jesus, we must also come to an understanding of the eternal benefits of *the pure milk of the word.* By understanding its potential to provide us with the essential nutrients that we *“may grow in respect to salvation,”* we come to *“long for the pure milk of the word”!*

Now, here’s the point of these things. Have we become too *finicky?* Are we unwilling to eat if the *pure milk* is not prepared and delivered exactly as we desire? If the sermon is too long or too short, or has too many scriptures or not enough, or has an accompanying PowerPointor doesn’t, or if the PowerPoint is too bland or too fancy, or the bible class is too deep or too shallow, or the auditorium is too hot or too cold, etc. etc. etc., do we just decide we’re not hungry and refuse to eat? Is the problem really with any of these things, or with us? Certainly, the above litany can all be contributing factors to poor appetites at a designated mealtime, but none of them should turn our spiritual stomachs against the *milk* of God’s word! Maybe, just maybe, the problem is with our *taste* for the spiritual nutrition of God’s word.

Think about it: How many different ways is the *milk of God’s word* made available to us? Everyone one of us has free access to all we want. We can drink if for ourselves from the *pitcher* (the Bible)- but we rarely do so. We can drink it from countless *glasses/bottles* of articles, outlines, and videos delivered free of charge to us via bulletins, websites, live-stream, and email- but sip only minimally and occasionally. Congregations of the Lord’s people go to great lengths and expenses to provide studied, articulate, and capable men to preach, teach, and pour *cartons* and *cases* of it in the most conducive and appetizing ways possible multiple times a week- but we imbibe only when there’s not something else we’d rather do. What’s really the problem here? Are we really just too busy or too finicky to eat? Do we not like the taste of *pure milk?* Or, are we already satiated on worldly fare?

Perhaps we need to increase our appetites by: 1) cleansing our palates; 2) reviving our taste buds; and, 3) realize the eternal benefits of *longing* for the *pure milk of the word.* (10-28-14)

**Looking For and Seeing the “Good”**

I’m not a “sunshine” and “rainbows” kind of guy, at least not typically. But in the face of such dim realities such as the current state of the Texas Gulf Coast (the Houston area is getting a lot of focus due to its massive population, but the devastating effects of the storm reach from Louisiana to Corpus Christi- roughly 325+ miles of coastline, and inland for hundreds of miles also in some areas), “sunshine” and “rainbows” are the things many want to see the most. While sunshine and rainbows are God’s department, perhaps there are a few other positives available for us to “see” in this time of devastation and destruction...

**We see people understanding that “stuff” doesn’t really matter.**  Yes, I know that many of our most valued possessions are keepsakes and photos and the like- but these are just physical triggers of precious memories. Though we may be heartbroken at the loss of these things, the memories remain just as precious without them. The rest of the physical possessions can be replaced, at least over time. Homes can be rebuilt; furniture can be replaced; autos can be repaired or replaced; stores can be replenished- these are not what is really important. So, through the storm we “see” the wisdom of Jesus’ words, *“but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,”* Matthew 6:20-21.

**We see people doing what they can.** Human beings are so full of potential- potential for good, potential for love, potential for self-sacrifice. However, for many of us, the potential is rarely realized… at least until there is a “slap-you-in-the-face-to-wake-you-up” opportunity. Then we are reminded not so much of what *should be done,* but of what *I can do.* Thus, we see people with little sharing with those who have nothing. We see people with much, giving generously and abundantly. We see people doing what they can, rather than finding excuses for doing nothing. We “see” the eternal testimony of Mary, who was praised by the Lord for having *“done what she could…”* Mark14:8-9, and are inspired by others doing likewise, and stimulated by their examples.

**We see people remembering that people are people.** Race doesn’t matter when the winds and rains have brought floods. Pictures of a black man carrying two white children through waist deep water, a white man carrying an Asian woman and her baby to solid (if not dry) ground, an Indian woman and Filipino and Hispanic men struggling to carry a wheel-chair bound elderly white woman to safety, and a human chain of 20+ people braving chest-high rushing water to rescue an elderly white man from his stranded vehicle all prove one thing: when it comes right down to it, we’re all just people, and race doesn’t matter one bit. Each and every life matters. All the First Responders, the Cajun Navy, the Waco Navy, and every boat owner that put themselves in danger didn’t care one whit what color someone’s skin was- their lives were in peril. We see people loving people as God loves them, completely and sacrificially. Through the storm, we “see” people remembering we are made in the image of a God who *“shows no partiality,”* Galatians 2:6.

**We see people everywhere praying and looking to God.** Please understand that the original world God created for man was *good-* in fact it was a *garden paradise* where every need of his body and heart were provided, cf. Genesis 1:31; 2:9ff. There were no hurricanes, tornadoes, or floods upon the earth until the corrupting influence of Satan introduced sin into the world. Thus, these so-called “natural disasters” were neither the intention nor product of God’s creation, but resulted from Satan’s handiwork, and have been an ever-present plague on humanity since. Satan uses these things to get us to blame God, and turn from Him. But alas, we see the opposite effect. We “see” people turning to God, realizing that He is the ultimate source of all good things, and the very hope of salvation. *“Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow,”* James 1:16-17.

So, while we turn to God in faith and prayer, and do what we can to help those in need, perhaps we can also take a moment to look for and focus upon the “good”- even in this time of peril and destruction. May God bless and keep you all! (8-30-17)

**Is “The Church Losing Its Young People,” or**

**Are “Young People Leaving the Church”?**

Though the unresolved results of the title question are the same, the solutions sought to “fix” the problem are very different based upon which scenario is perceived to be more accurate. If "the church is losing its young people," then typical solutions proposed are to change the church to make it more attractive to the target group. But, if "young people are leaving the church," we need to change the hearts and minds of young people regarding the place and purpose of the church as God intended it. Let’s reason through a few things in these regards…

**God the Father, the *planner* of the church, has not changed.** *“Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow.”* His plan for the church, which was formed *“before the foundation of the world,”* has not changed, Ephesians 1:3-4.

**Jesus, the *spiritual husband* of the church, has not changed.** Hebrews 13:8 declares, *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever.”* If the spiritual Bridegroom has not, does not, and will not change, the only time His spiritual bride, the church, should change is when it fails to be in subjection to His will and thus displeases Him, cf. Ephesians 5:24.

**The New Testament, the *basis* and operating *law* of the church, has not changed.** Note 1Peter 1:22-25 on this point, *“for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God. For, ‘All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the word of the Lord abides forever.’ And this is the word which was preached to you.”* In fact, the churches of Galatia were warned, *“But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed,”* Galatians 1:8.

And yet, despite the fact that neither God nor His plan for the church has changed, despite the fact that neither Jesus nor His expectations and desires for the church has changed, and despite the fact that neither the gospel nor its requirements of the church has changed, **the church must now change to keep from losing its young people?**  Friends and brethren, something is wrong with this picture!

It is readily admitted that **anytime** and in **any way** that the church fails to meet God’s plans, Christ’s expectations, or the gospel’s requirements, **it should and must repent and change back into conformity** with God’s word**.** But is that really the problem with which we are currently faced regarding young people? Or is it that **man’s** (young and old) *plans, expectations,* and *requirements* of the “church” have changed?

In her book, Generation Me, Jean Twenge suggests that Millennials and younger Gen. X’ers (generally, “Millennials” are born 1982-2004, aka “Gen.Y,” and “Gen. X’ers” are those born 1965-early 1980’s) are *confident* and *tolerant,* but with a sense of *entitlement,* and are *narcissistic* (self-absorbed). The Pew Research Center added that, as adults, Millennials are “detached from institutions and networked with friends.” Thus generally, Millennials are less likely than previous generations to practice organized religion, and more likely to be skeptical of religious institutions. Surely there are reasons for these assessments! But the abuses of denominationalism in its panting after more members, and the “do or become whatever it takes” to attract and keep young people is not the answer. Changing God’s plans, Christ’s expectations, or the gospel’s requirements may indeed “attract” and even “keep” more young people, but it is not to God, Christ, and the gospel that they are being drawn and attached! Placating selfish and self-absorbed desires doesn’t really work for a simple reason: Such does not save anyone’s soul.

“Yes,” of course we need to do all that we can to save the souls of everyone- including but not limited to “young people.” But instead of moving away from God’s plan, Christ’s expectations, and the gospel’s requirements, we must endeavor to show the proper ***place* and *value* of the church** through obedience to God, Christ, and the gospel, rather than our own or anyone else’s desires for it. Remember the ancient but wise words of God’s prophet Jeremiah, *“I know, O Lord, that a man’s way is not in himself; nor is it in man who walks to direct his steps.* (Jeremiah 10:23) Rather than altering the church in an effort to meet man’s ever-changing wants and desires, let’s see if we can’t change men’s hearts and minds (young and old alike) into conformity with God’s- then the church will be just fine. (5-19-15)

**Love and Trust**

Love and trust are the basis of all deep and personal relationships we humans sustain. Whether in marriage, family, or just the kind of friendship that is as close as family, love and trust are the foundational components of the relationship. If **love** “makes the world go ‘round,” then **trust** allows us the security of being able to depend on its sustained revolutions. Obviously then, trust is just as vital as love to every significant relationship we sustain- perhaps even more so. Think about it….

Many people marry for “love,” and hope trust develops in the relationship. That’s backwards for a simple reason: **You** can decide and commit to loving someone whether they reciprocate it or not; but, **trust** demands their involvement in that they have to be *trustworthy* for you to believe and hope in them. Trust should, therefore, precede even love in the development of a relationship, because it is more dependent on the other person. Put in other words: You can decide to and learn to love someone whom you trust, but you cannot decide and learn to trust someone who is untrustworthy just because you love him/her- at least not without detrimental consequences. As a society, if we would consider marrying people we trust, and then choose and decide to love them, it would work out a lot better than trying to trust people just because we love them. But, the importance of trust and love in relationships is not limited to marriage. Trying to be close personal friends with someone you can’t or don’t trust likewise has disastrous consequences attached. And certainly, there are innumerable family relationships that are ruined because lies have destroyed the ability to trust, though love is still abundantly present. All of which proves that although love may indeed “make the world go ‘round,” **trust** has to be the axis on which it hangs and spins!

Now, all of that was somewhat of a foundational introduction to get to this: **“Any close and personal relationship we hope to sustain with God must be founded and operated on the same basis of trust and love.”**  Though God certainly loved us when we were *untrustworthy* and *unlovable,* cf. Romans 5:8, our efforts to have a relationship with Him are founded in His eminent **trustworthiness** and magnanimous **love** for us. However, if God loved us but was not worthy of our trust, He wouldn’t be a *good* God, and we couldn’t depend on Him. Thankfully, such is not the case. Titus 1:2 and Hebrews 6:18 tells us that God *“cannot lie,”* and that in fact, it is *“impossible”* for Him to do so. Not only is it impossible for God to lie to us, He is utterly dependable with regard to every aspect of His love and provision for us- He wants and does nothing but what is best for us. He has given us *“all things that pertain to life and godliness”* to enable us to escape *“the corruption that is in the world,”* 2Peter 1:3-4. He disciplines us *“for our good, that we may share His holiness,”* Hebrews 12:10. And, He even provides for our physical needs and wants by doing *“good”* and giving us *“rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness,”* Acts 14:17. All of which is lasting testimony to not only His **love** for us, but also to His complete **trustworthiness!**

But alas, relationships have two sides. What about our part of this “personal relationship” with God that is supposed to characterize our Christianity? Just saying that we “love God” isn’t any more sufficient grounds for this relationship than it was for any of the others we’ve considered. There has to be **trust** here also for a sustainable and pleasing relationship to exist. So, the big question becomes: **“Can God trust you?”** Do you lie to God? Are you dependable and worthy of His trust? Certainly, none of us can hope to reciprocate God’s love and trustworthiness in equal measure- and I’m not even remotely suggesting such. But, the truth remains that if we desire a “close and personal relationship” with God, we must give diligence to fulfilling, as best we can, our responsibilities to the foundations of such a bond. This means we must not only love, but endeavor to be lovable- *“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him,”* John 15:23. It also means that we must not only trust, but strive to be trustworthy- *“be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life,”* Revelation 2:10 (KJV). Think about these things, and please make whatever changes are needed in your relationship with God. He’s already doing His part! (2-7-17)

**Loving the Word**

Let’s start with a confession: Last week’s article on “Love and Trust” was at least somewhat foundational and preparatory for this one (and next week’s too). We needed to be aware of the importance of love and trust to any relationship we sustain before considering this question: **“What is the single most important factor in determining whether one is *lost* or *saved?”***

Obviously, **“sin”** is the *cause* for anyone being lost- but that is not exactly the point of the question. Surely everyone sins, or at least has sinned, Romans 3:23; and sin separates us from God both here and eternally, Isaiah 59:1-2. But, it is also obvious that not everyone who has sinned will be eternally lost. After providing examples of sinful behaviors that prevent one from *“inherit(ing) the kingdom of God,”* 1Corithians 6:11 continues, *“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 Christ, and in the Spirit of our God.”*  “Sin,” therefore, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, is not the single most important factor determining whether one is lost or saved.

**“Jesus Christ”** must be the answer. Actually, it isn’t. Don’t get me wrong- **no one** can be saved without the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, Ephesian 1:7! But, Jesus loved and sacrificed Himself for everyone, Romans 8:32. However, *everyone* won’t be saved, Matthew 7:13-14. So, neither is He the real determining factor between salvation and condemnation.

Then surely the answer must be, **“Truth!”** The word of God must be the most important factor in determining whether one is lost or saved. After all, “The truth shall set you free!” Actually, quoting only half of John 8:32 has given many folks a false impression. Jesus’ whole sentence is, *“If you* ***abide*** *in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall* ***know*** *the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”* So then, the truth itself doesn’t set anyone “free” apart from his or her *knowledge of* and *obedience to* it. The truth cannot be the determining factor because the gospel is given *“to every one,”* Romans 1:16, but not everyone will be saved by it, cf. John 12:48.

And while we’re at it, no **“church”** is the determining factor as to whether one is saved or lost either. Of course it’s true that churches either teach Truth by *“handling accurately the word of truth,”* 2Timothy 2:15; or, they espouse as *“their doctrines the precepts of men,”* Matthew 15:9. But this, alone, does not determine whether or not anyone is saved or lost. Churches, through their faithful or unfaithful teaching, may well *influence* whether souls are saved or lost, but are not the single most important determining factor.

So, if it is not *sin, Jesus Christ, Truth,* or even a/the *church,* what is the single most important factor in determining whether one is saved or lost? Note carefully the specific reason 2Thessalonians 2:10 provides as to why *“those who perish”* will be lost: *“because they did not receive* ***the love of truth*** *so as to be saved.”*Please understand why this is the answer to our question. “Sin” condemns everyone *because all sin,* Romans 5:12; but we don’t have to live *in* sin, or even *with* its consequences, vv.21 – 6:23. Through “Jesus Christ,” God’s grace providesthe *instructions* for all men to be saved, Titus 2:11-14; but *instructions* only benefit those who follow them. “Truth” indeed saves, but only when it is *known* and *obeyed,* John 8:31-32. The “church” doesn’t *save* anyone; it is the *product/result* of people being saved, Acts 2:41,47. But, we overcome *sin* through *Jesus Christ* when we *know* and *obey* the Truth, and are thus added to the *church* (the body of the saved). What is at the beginning of this string? What determines whether or not we progress all the way to salvation? Listen again to Paul’s words to the Thessalonians regarding those who perish: *“because they did not receive* ***the love of truth*** *so as to be saved.”*

As we indicated last week, any deep and personal human relationship must have love and trust as its foundation. We cannot build a relationship with God without these same elements. But how do we manifest *love* and *trust* to God, and have confidence in our relationship with Him? *“And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments,”* 1John 2:3. It is not enough to just *say* we love God, Matthew 7:21; we must ***love His word* enough to obey it.**

**Failing to *love the truth so as to be saved”***is the single most important factor in determining our salvation, or condemnation. Do you love truth enough *read* it, *study* it, and *understand* and *obey* it? Or, are you just giving “lip service” to your love for God and His word? Think carefully- your soul hangs in the balance. (2-14-17)

**Loyalty Lost**

No one needs to be told that ours has become a “dog eat dog” and “what have you done for me lately” world. One casualty (or culprit?) of this trend has been the loss of loyalty. What we may not realize is how this loss of loyalty has affected our physical and spiritual relationships.

**The loss of loyalty is seen in the workplace.** Employees forget how they were given a start in the business, trained in a profession when they had no skills, and supported beyond their value to the company while they learned and became productive. So, they move on to “bigger and better” jobs with no real thought to loyalty. Employers overlook the dedication and commitment of an employee to go “above and beyond” the minimum requirements of his job description. Or, they ignore the years of dedicated service and let someone go to prevent having to pay retirement benefits. Or perhaps they fail to appreciate and reciprocate how well their business was represented at work and in the community by their employees. The loss of loyalty is the culprit.

**The loss of loyalty is seen in marriages.** Matrimonial vows that once promised dedication and loyalty “until death parts us” have instead become “as long as love shall last”- no real commitment or statement of loyalty in that, is there? So, marriages last until the “fun” of *being* married gives way to the “work” of *staying* married. As soon as the marriage is “no longer working **for me**,” I’m unwilling (if I ever really was) to strive to make it work **for us**. Then, the lawyers are called, and any promises of loyalty that were stated or otherwise implied previously are soon dismissed and forgotten. The loss of loyalty is at least part of the problem.

**The loss of loyalty is seen in local church membership.** Christians have the right to chose with which body of believers they desire to work and worship- at least provided there are multiple options available of those working and worshipping *“in spirit and truth,”* John 4:23. In addition to “faithfulness to God” issues, congregations have personalities just like the people that comprise them. Both the “faithfulness” of a congregation and its overall personality should be considered in making that decision of with whom to “cast your lot” in fellowship. But, surely all of the specified obligations that Christians have to “one another” (about 100 in the NT) demand a high degree of loyalty that shouldn’t be easily dismissed, or thoughtlessly traded for a presumed “better deal” down the road. In areas where there are multiple “faithful” churches, there is typically also an abundance of Christians without any real sense of “loyalty” to any one of those congregations. Christians lacking congregational loyalty are thus constantly moving to presumed “greener pastures.” They are the reason preachers and shepherds talk about “sheep rotation.” It is typically much easier to just go somewhere else than it is to remain loyal and help plant, fertilize, and water the grass where you currently congregate. The loss of loyalty is at least part of the problem.

**The loss of loyalty is seen in our relationship to God.**  As long as God is blessing me in the ways that I think He should, I am happy and content, and willing to give Him at least a modicum of my devotion and praise. But, should something- or several somethings, turn more or less tragic in my life, then it is just no longer “worth it” for me to serve God. Sound familiar? Most preachers/Elders have seen or heard it, and many of us have felt or said it! While there are many instances of people remaining loyal to God in and through difficult circumstances (Joseph, Genesis 39:9; Job, Job 2:10), and there are several examples of people becoming disloyal to God in trying circumstances (Saul, 1Samuel 15; Balaam, Number 22-25; 2Peter 2:15), **there is never one instance of God being disloyal to anyone!** The Scriptures consistently and unanimously affirm God’s loyalty and faithfulness in good times and bad. Hebrew 13:5 promises, *“I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.”* But sadly, often we do not reciprocate His loyalty. Far too often, my loyalty to Him fails in the most trivial of ways, while His remains constant in the most difficult of times. The loss of ***my*** loyalty is the problem.

The Bible doesn’t use the word “loyalty” often- there is only one OT passage that uses it all (Nehemiah 13:14 in NASB, none in KJV). But this does not mean that the concept of “loyalty” is scarce in the Bible- it’s just that a different word is used to describe it. “Faithfulness” is that word, and there is a tremendous amount said about faithfulness in the text. So whether “loyalty” or “faithfulness” is used, do you now see how important it is to our *physical* and *spiritual* relationships? (10-14-14)

**“Mad-Dog Fighting Mean”**

One of my favorite western movies is “The Outlaw Josey Wales.” And “no,” it is not the most godly, or family-oriented, movie out there. But as with most westerns, the good guys win in the end. There are several memorable lines in the movie, but one line in particular includes the title of this article. It occurs near the end of the movie, right before the big gun battle scene. The main character, Josey Wales, is giving a pep-talk to his ragtag band of old men and women who are about to fight a bunch of trained, but lawless soldiers. The “good guys” are preparing a small house to be a fort, and getting all their assigned duties from Josey. Knowing they would be facing seemingly insurmountable odds, Wales begins to tell his friends that when the bad guys start breaking through their defenses, and it looks like it’s all about to end badly, he snarls and growls (paraphrased), **“Then you gotta get mean- mad-dog fighting mean!”**

Certainly, I’ll be the first to admit that this is an unusual way to begin an article, but it seems to me that even this crude and graphic language has a good spiritual application. I think we sometimes need to adopt the mentality Josey was urging of his cohorts. Sometimes, we too face seemingly insurmountable odds in our “fight” against Satan and sin. But all too often, we don’t get **“mad-dog fighting mean”** in our struggle with the forces of evil- either the *internal* or the *external* ones. Instead, we roll over and play dead (just to keep with the whole “dog” metaphor going)! We don’t get our dander up and fight “like you’ve never fought before” as Josey further urged his comrades. Instead, we give up and run away with our proverbial tales between our legs….**and Satan wins!** And if we do it often enough, we’ll forget how to fight the passions and pride of sin altogether, and subsequently make pacifist’s pact with the Devil. Such was predicted in 1Timothy 4:1, *“But the Spirit explicitly says that in the latter times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron,”*.

But if we “resist” sin as God commands, it will mean more than just saying “no”. Resisting might mean going on the *offensive* in the fight. Think about it: the Devil is depicted in 1Peter 5:8 as a *“roaring lion”*. Now, if you’re locked in a struggle to the death with a lion, you’re not going to be able to talk your way out, negotiate your way out, or “play-dead” your way out. There is but one way out. You’re going to have to get “mad-dog fighting mean” and fight your way out!

Make no mistake about it: the *roaring lion* and his *“rulers….powers… and world-forces of this darkness”* (cf. Ephesians 6:12) are not playing tidily winks here- they mean to kill your soul! While we play around with their sinful influences thinking them relatively harmless because, after all, “they won’t affect me,” they’re playing for “keeps” eternally. Remember, “forever” is *forever.* You and I had better realize that we are in the **immortal** “fight of, and for, our lives”- and get ***mad-dog fighting*** mean in it!

I know that 2Corinthians 10:3 says, *“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh.”* I’ll be one of the first to say that we do not, or should not, endeavor to use *“carnal weapons”* in our struggle against Satan and sin. **But**, please do not make the mistake of forgetting that we are at war! Or at least we’re supposed to be at war. Note that the verses following in 2Corinthians 10 speak of *“the weapons of our warfare…are divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.”* When these words were inspired and written, war was not a “push button” computer screen affair. War was then hand-to-hand combat. It is one thing to sit miles away and watch the destruction of an enemy in an innocuous way, it is entirely something else to shove an eighteen to twenty-four inch (typical Roman sword length at the time) piece of metal through him, withdraw it as he collapses, and move on to the next target as quickly as possible. But such was then the nature of war! These are the images portrayed by these verses when they speak of the “destruction of fortresses” because it was what was involved. In such a struggle, passivity gets you nothing but killed! The survivors of this kind of struggle, just like in “Josey Wales”, had better get **mad-dog fighting mean** or they will lose much more than their lives….they’ll lose their souls!

Please don’t misunderstand my point. I’m not suggesting that Christians must become angry, violent, or aggressive people in their day-to-day interactions of life with other people. Certainly not! I am saying that we must take on a soldier’s mentality of aggressively fighting for our spiritual lives in our struggle against sin *within* ourselves, and against the forces of Satan *without.*  Sin and Satan’s fortresses are between you and the heavenly reward. “Mad-dogs” that are “fighting mean” destroy whatever stands in their way. What are you going to do? (6-2-10)

**Making It Plain**

I try to take Mondays off to get away from computers, books, and the office to work on things around the house, and in my backyard shop. So it’s not unusual for local hardware store and parts house folks to see me in my “work clothes” rather than my Sunday best. In fact, most of those merchants likely wouldn’t recognize me in a suit and tie- they’re accustomed to seeing me in a tee-shirt, jeans, boots, ball cap, and covered in sweat, grease, and grime. One even asked me the other day who sprayed me with water. I explained that the “water” on me was self-inflicted, and came from the inside instead of the outside.

It was on one such occasion recently that I received what I consider to be one of the highest compliments. After making my purchase at the auto parts store and heading for the door, the lady behind the counter stopped me to say that she enjoyed reading the articles in the paper each week. She graciously added that I made the subjects addressed plain and simple. What a wonderful compliment! Thanks again, Faye.

There is likely a very good reason for the simplicity and plainness of these articles- I typically swim in the shallow end of the pool of thought! Besides, what good is biblical teaching if it addresses subjects that are irrelevant to the audience, or does so in words that are not understandable- you know, “preacher speak”? “Plainness” ought to be the objective of everyone who seeks to teach others the Word of God. Granted, there are biblical subjects that are difficult, require much study to comprehend, and even more work to make their difficulty more easily understandable. So, I consider it a great compliment when someone tells me that what I write or teach is “plain and simple.” And if they say I’ve helped to make the more difficult subjects easier to understand, well, that is a compliment of the highest order to me!

But here’s a secret: While there are many difficult passages and thoughts in the Bible, the basics of what we need to know and do to be saved are really quite simple, and easily discernable. For example, check out 1Corinthians 15:3-8. In these six verses, Paul gives the essence of the gospel: **1)** that **Jesus died for our sins** according to the Scriptures [according to God’s plan, and as it was prophesied to occur]; **2)** that **He was buried**; **3)** that **He was raised on the third day** according to the Scriptures [same as before]; and, **4)** that **He appeared** **to many eyewitnesses** making the evidence of His resurrection irrefutable. That’s so simple you’d have to have help to miss it- you just can’t miss that by yourself!

How one should respond to the gospel is really just as simple. For instance, if you read through the book of Acts, and pay particular attention to the sermons that are recorded there, they will mirror what Paul said in 1Corinthians 15. And the people who accepted this gospel of Jesus Christ were told to respond in very clear and simple ways. **One without faith** was told to ***“believe in the Lord Jesus”***in Acts 16:31, and then he was baptized the very same hour of the night. **Those who had already acknowledged belief in Jesus** were told to ***“repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”***in Acts 2:38. And **one who had already come to believe in Jesus Christ**, and **was penitent of his past sins**, was simply told to *“****Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name”***in Acts 22:16. None of which is complex, or difficult to comprehend or accomplish, if we truly want to be pleasing to God, and are willing to do what He says. Read through Acts and you’ll see these simple steps repeated over and over again.

It really is just that plain and simple. In fact, Jesus Himself summarized it well in the Great Commission. As He was about to ascend into heaven, He gave the final instructions given to His apostles before departing. He said, *“Go into all the world and preach* ***the gospel*** *to all creation. He who has* ***believed*** *and has* ***been baptized*** *will be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”* (Mark 16:15-16) Now isn’t that plain and simple enough? (7-28-11)

**Man’s Worst Sin?**

It’s an ambitious question for an article of this size and scope. But in this day of extrapolations to the nth degree of everything, and seemingly endless “worst-case” scenarios, perhaps it is worthy of our consideration. Even the lawyer in Matthew 22:36 asked Jesus, *“which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”*  Should we then assume that man’s *greatest sin* is a violation of God’s *greatest commandment?* Perhaps so, since Jesus answered the question with *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and will all your soul, and with all your mind.”* Such has a myriad of general applications, the failure of which could certainly be “sinful.”

But by what criterion would we judge one sin of man worse than all the others? First, we must know that sin is, by biblical definition, “missing the mark” of God’s word, 1John 3:4. It is failing to do what God says. Second, we have to realize that any sin can cause us to lose our souls. God dispels our human concept of “big” vs. “little” sins in Matthew 5:21-22 when Jesus stated that one who issinfully angry with his brotheris viewed no differently at judgment than one who has committed murder. So when it comes to *eternal consequences,* any sin of which we will not repent has the capacity to cost us our souls (see also 1John 1:5 – 2:11). Can one sin then be worse than another?

Some sins affect more than just you. Consider our previous example. You can be sinfully angry with your brother and no one, including him, might even know, let alone be affected by it. However, if your anger caused you to harm him, or take his life, obviously he (and his family) is adversely affected. Your sin has now affected another. In fact, it could have detrimental effects on both the lives and eternal destinies of several others. Surely this sin must be judged “worse” than one which influences no one but you. Jesus made this application clear in Matthew 18:5-7.

So, perhaps man’s worst sin is the one which is the most detrimental to the most people. Is it mass murder? Or perhaps actively opposing Christ and His teachings? Maybe, but let’s think a little closer to possible realities for you and me, who are ideally not mass murderers or the anti-Christ! Note carefully James 4:17, *“Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.”*  Now a question: Is it God’s will for Christians to tell others about salvation in Jesus Christ? Sure. *“And the things you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men,* ***who will be able to teach others also.”*** (2Timothy 2:2) Also, the *“bearing much fruit”* required in John 15:8 as proof of true discipleship means bringing others to Christ through sharing the gospel. True followers of Jesus thus take on His purpose to *“seek and save”* the lost, Luke 19:10. When Christians who know this is the “right thing to do” fail to do so, isn’t it sinful? Read James 4:17 above again.

It gets worse: How many people do we come in contact with each day that are lost in sin, without God in their lives, and thus have no hope of eternal salvation? Doesn’t our selfish negligence of failing to share Jesus’ simple plan of salvation- *“He who believes and is baptized shall be saved”* (Mark 16:16a), constitute a detrimental effect on the lives of not only them, but also those whom they could in turn influence for truth and righteousness? It sure seems to meet the “worst sin” criteria as being the one which is the most detrimental to the most people! Is this then “man’s worst sin”? I don’t know, but it has to rank up there pretty close, don’t you think?

Consider one final point from 2Peter 3:9. The text reads, *“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”* The “promise” of which the verse speaks is the destruction of the world and eternal judgment. But here’s my question: Who is the antecedent of the pronoun *“you”* in the verse? The verse says that the Lord, because He doesn’t want anyone to perish, is patient toward *“you”-* so who is the “you”? This second epistle of Peter is written to Christians, 2Peter 1:1-4ff. Thus, the verse is not saying that the Lord is being patient with the sinners; it is saying He is being patient with the saints! He is being patient with the saints that they might start doing what mature Christians are supposed to do: tell others of salvation in Jesus, and thereby spiritually reproduce! He is urging His own to stop committing what is perhaps man’s worst sin: **not sharing the gospel.** Wouldn’t this be the equivalent of failing to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind like Jesus told the lawyer? Think about it carefully please, souls are at stake. (10-26-10)

**Medal, Metal, and Mettle**

Medals are awards that typically, and somewhat ironically, are made of soft metals- perhaps even cheap metals that are then plated over with a shiny metal or coating substance. This is ironic because the ***mettle*** (courage, bravery, determination, spirit, grit, resolve, guts) that is required to achieve a ***medal*** worth having is often not made of a truly representative ***metal***.

Our society likes to be rewarded. We like trophies and medals. What we don’t like quite so much is the hard work, self-discipline, and dedication (*i.e.* “mettle”) it takes to make the reward of a trophy or medal truly meaningful. Instead, we prefer to “pay our money” and get a “participation award”- which likely means that we paid more in dollars than we participated with devotion. Such “medals” (trophies/awards) are meaningless and should be made of unpolished lead.

Heaven is a spiritual place composed of spiritual things given as an eternal reward to the souls of spiritual people. As such, *streets of gold* and *gates of pearl* (see Revelation 21:18-21) are images meant to convey the splendors of this eternal reward, rather than literal representations. So, while the rewards of heaven are *spiritual* rather than *physical,* they are nonetheless real, and abiding in the presence of God for eternity is certainly the foremost among them, cf. John 14:1-3; Revelation 21:3-4!

Paul spoke of the eternal reward of heaven as *“the crown of righteousness”* in 2Timothy 4:8. This is the eternal crowning “medal” of heaven. There are some interesting contrasts between it and the “trophies” of this life:

* This “medal” is not a “pay your money and receive a participation trophy” kind of thing. Anyone who knows anything about the life of Paul knows this. This “medal” cannot be bought with money. *“But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ,”* Philippians 3:7. Simply “cutting a check for weekly/annual dues” won’t attain this honor, and neither will just “making the meetings.”
* This “medal” is actually worth far more than anything and everything sacrificed to attain it. Note again Paul’s words to the brethren on this point, *“But more than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ,”* Philippians 3:8.
* This “medal” is forged not with common “metals” of most, but with the “mettle” of the ***knowledge***(of Jesus through His word), ***spiritual regeneration***(through faith and rebirth by baptism), ***suffering in fellowship***(as a Christian), and becoming ***dead to sin and the things of this life*** (as was Christ). Paul, again, highlights these “mettles” from his own life to the brethren in Philippi, *“and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,”* Philippians 3:9-10.
* This “medal” is a “lifetime achievement award” whose benefits exceed the lifetime- *“the resurrection from the dead,”* Philippians 3:11. While the reward is eternal, its criteria is very much in the here and now.

 All of this brings us back to the passage where we began, 2Timothy 4:8 and the *“crown of righteousness.”* The context says that this “medal” is given to those with the “mettle” of *self-sacrifice, spiritual combat, perseverance,* and *mission accomplishment.* Note the previous two verses in these regards, *“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith,”* 2Timothy 4:6-7. Will you be able to say the same at the end of your life? Will you receive the same “medal”? No, unless your “mettle” now is of the same kind as his. (5-30-17)

**Meditation**

Before you think I’ve finally flipped my lid completely, and realizing that I am far too old with knees that have had way too much sports in the past to sit cross-legged on the floor chanting anything, such is not the kind of meditation to which the title refers. Instead, the “meditation” to which I refer is simply **concentrated contemplation**. It doesn’t require special clothes or postures, or humming or chanting anything- but it might require practice.

Our day-to-day lives are so filled with information and entertainment that real concentrated contemplation is difficult. Oh, I know we can focus intently on a task at hand on the job, or we can even become totally engrossed with some recreational hobby or video game, but can we just sit quietly and think? Are we able to focus our attention completely on conscious contemplation for more than a few minutes? Are we able to keep our minds fixated on a particular topic of thought for an extended period- like half an hour? Or, has the constantly changing images of television led us into a short attention span epidemic? Don’t get ahead of me here. This is not an anti-television rant. I actually watch a good deal of television, and there are still worthwhile programs available. For example, a large portion of my television viewing time is devoted to watching baseball. But, have you ever noticed how many different camera switches (from differing angles) occur in the twenty or so seconds between pitches? It’s amazing to contemplate…. if you can still concentrate long enough to do so!

All of which got me to thinking about how our subconscious training toward short attention span has affected our spiritual growth and development. For me, I noticed that a few areas seemed to be the most affected. So, focus your attention as best you can, and “meditate” on them with me for a few minutes to see if you have the same challenges. After all, identifying the problem is part of the solution.

**It’s hard for me to concentrate my contemplations in** ***prayer*.** My mind wanders, especially in private prayer. First, I don’t dedicate the right, or enough, time for it. I try to squeeze it in before I drift off to sleep, or before answering the next email, or even worse, before the commercial break ends! The Savior dedicated time to be in prayerful communion with His Father. He went off somewhere alone and spent hours, if not all night, pouring His heart out in divine communication. Perhaps if we would devote sufficient and appropriate time to prayer, our prayerful meditations would be better and more productive- and we’d get better at it! *“Devote yourselves to prayer….”* Colossians 4:2.

**It’s hard for me to concentrate my contemplations in *worship.*** It is far too easy to be thinking about my sermon introduction, or adding some pertinent passage to a point in it, while we are singing praises to God. Then, my mouth sings the mostly right words- and even does so “on pitch” occasionally, and my mind is concentrating, but on the wrong thing! Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are supposed to be sung first and foremost from the *heart,* Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16. But if I’m thinking about my sermon, or what’s for lunch, there is no true praise being given to God, there is no uplift to my spirit through singing, and there is little encouragement being given to my brethren. If such is true during the song service, how much more are the detrimental effects of this lack of concentration manifested during the memorial of Christ’s body and blood?

**It’s hard for me to concentrate my contemplations on spiritual matters *generally* as much as I could and should.** It is so easy, in our technology-based world, to have constant inputs from television, radio, computers, laptops, iPods, iPads, and iWhatever-is-the-latest techno gadget, that true quiet time alone is lost. We can fill our every waking moment with news, entertainment, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to the extent that we are never really alone and quiet. These things necessarily occupy our minds, and can effectively eliminate the possibility of meditating on spiritual matters. So, when you’re driving or mowing or doing whatever puts you alone and not having to be fully mentally occupied, try turning off the gadgets and spend some quality time concentrating your contemplations on godly things. You’ll be amazed how you’ll think of biblical passages or books you want to read (Acts 17:11), or realize the spiritual needs of others that you might help (Hebrews 10:24), or even discover great spiritual topics that are worthy of your meditation (Philippians 4:8). Give yourself some time to tune out the world, and just be still and meditate on spiritual things. But beware- it’s addictive! (7-23-13)

**Men and Women are Just Different**

Don’t give me that “Well, duhhh!” look- I’m not talking about physical anatomies here. Instead, I have reference to how they were created, and therefore, how they operate.

The man, Adam, was created from the dust of the ground, Genesis 2:7. He was and is, therefore, elemental. He’s basic, fundamental, and rudimentary in a lot of ways. Men are generally uncomplicated.

The woman, Eve, was not created from such simple sources. She was fashioned (wow, what an appropriate word) instead from the rib of the man, Genesis 2:21-22. She was and is, therefore, much more complex. As men are generally uncomplicated, women are, again generally, much more complicated. Though God was the ultimate *Source* of both of their origins, men and women were created from very different materials. As a result of both the materials used to create them, and certainly the purposes God had for each of them, men and women are very different in *form* and *function.*

The man was created first, and such is apparently important, as evidenced in 1Timothy 2:11-13 and 1Corinthians 11:7-9. But lest we males begin to get all “high and mighty” about our position as dictated by creative order, let’s also remember that it was the man who was deemed incomplete “alone” (before Eve was created), Genesis 2:18! Therefore, Eve/woman was formed as the “crown jewel” of all of God’s creation. Only after her creation did God look upon all He had made and declare that it was *“very good”* Genesis 1:31.

All of that was to get to this: these differences in the creation of men and women may help to explain something about each one’s thought processes. Men, being the relatively uncomplicated beings we are, think pretty simply and pragmatically. Perhaps this is an oversimplification, but bear with me anyway, please. And women, generally being the more complex creatures of the species, think in more complicated ways. Even how we express ourselves bears these things out. Men typically say, “I think that…” But women are more prone to say, “I feel that…” Men’s thoughts are more basic and fundamental because they usually come stripped of the complications of emotion. Whereas women’s thoughts are complicated with emotions- in fact, women’s thoughts often stem from their emotions. Such is not meant as a slight to either sex- it’s just the way God made us.

It’s a good thing that God made men and women the way He did too! A man’s thoughts and decisions often need the tempering influence of the emotions of a woman lest they become tyrannical and dictatorial. And a woman’s emotions often need tempering with the pragmatism of a man lest they become so complicated with feelings that clarity is lost, and decisions become overly difficult. Before you accuse me of sexism, hear me out.

Ephesians 5:22-31,33 outlines the primary duties of husbands to their wives, and wives to their husbands. Have you ever wondered why husbands are told to *“love your wives”* and wives are told to *“be subject to your husbands”?*  Why aren’t the wives told to *“love their husbands”?*  Could it be so because, being women, they’re already good at the emotional aspects of marriage? On the other hand, *“subjection”* is a mental thing. It is deciding to willingly submit yourself to another’s decisions. Conversely, the husbands in Ephesians 5 are told to *“love their wives.”* Why aren’t they told be pragmatic in their headship of the family? Again, could it be because they are already that way, but need to temper their decisions with love? Think carefully about it, won’t you?

Now here’s the real beauty of all of this: **God created men and women to be more together than either of them could ever be apart.** Such is the true splendor of becoming *“one flesh”* in marriage, Genesis 2:22-24. Marriage “done right” means not only each partner realizing and fulfilling their proper roles within the relationship, but also recognizing the magnificence of God’s purpose for us in marriage- that **each “half” makes the other “whole.”** Marriage done right is a foretaste of heaven on earth. And, marriage done wrong is a foretaste of hell on earth. God didn’t make us the way He did, and marriage for us the way He did, to make us miserable, but happy. Such is achieved by recognizing the distinctions in how men and women were made, and how those differences are designed to make us “whole” together. By the way, my lovely bride and I have making each other “whole” for 26 years as of July 5th, and I am constantly thankful for her. (6-29-11)

**Modern Man’s Three BIG Problems**

The key to problem-solving is always correct problem-identification and clear problem-understanding! In the absence of these two key components, we wind up attempting to solve ancillary symptoms rather addressing than the true casual issue. Modern man’s BIG three problems are not jobs, healthcare, and taxes- in any order. Neither are they racism, police brutality, or North Korea. Instead, they are…

**Not believing in the God of the Bible.** One of the major purposes of the Bible is to further reveal God to mankind. We can discern the *power* and the *goodness* of God from the creation itself, Romans 1:20, but the Scriptures reveal the *mind* of God- at least those portions of His thoughts and ways that He chose to reveal to us, 1Corinthians 2:10-13. But, modern man has sought to reinvent God in his own image and according to his own desires instead of believing in the God of the Bible. How so? Modern man has chosen to ignore much of what God reveals about Himself through the inspired text. For instance, the attributes of God that are deemed favorable to man- such as His *love, mercy, grace,* and capacity for *physical provision* and *spiritual forgiveness* are readily accepted, while the *righteousness, justice, wrath,* and *vengeance* of God toward those who rebel against Him and refuse to do His will are conveniently minimized to the point of being overshadowed, if not ignored completely. Passages such as Romans 2:4-10 speak not only of the *kindness, forbearance,* and *patience* of God (v.4), but also of the *wrath, judgment, indignation, tribulation,* and *distress* He promises for those who are *“selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth,”* vv.5,8,9. Thus, modern man’s one-sided view of God yields a very distorted perspective of Him as being unwilling to punish disobedience, which in turn produces a very dangerous false sense of security, cf. 2Peter 3:3-13. Additionally, modern man’s fascination with and dedication to **pantheism** (that God is *in* and *is* everything, and that everything is God) and **pluralism** (basically, the notion that most if not all religious belief systems are of equal authority, relevance, and value) clearly contradict the Bible, Ephesians 4:4-6.

**Not believing in the Savior of the Bible.** Modern man has sought to reinvent Jesus Christ according to his own desires instead of believing in the Christ of the Bible. How so? The modern concept of Jesus is that of a Savior who *loves* and *accepts* everyone as they are- without reservation or qualification. This, too, is a false perspective. Although the Bible certainly presents Jesus as a Savior who *loves* and *sacrificed* Himself for all of mankind, cf. Revelation 1:5, it does not follow that such equals *unconditional acceptance* of us- *i.e.* without our repentance and transformation. Jesus died to save us *from,* not *in,* our sins. The Savior demanded that His disciples: *deny* themselves and *follow* Him (Matthew 16:24) and *keep His commandments* rather than just professing their *love* for Him (John 14:15) and *claiming* to be His (Luke 6:46). Jesus demanded *repentance* and *obedience* to the gospel**because** He loved us and wanted us to be saved *from* our sins. But the modern view of Jesus as one who loves, accepts, and saves everyone without qualification or reservation is just not the Savior of the Bible. *“And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has been truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked,”* 1John 2:3-6.

**Not believing in the Church of the Bible.** Modern man has sought to reinvent the church according to his own desires instead of believing in the one in the Bible. The church, as presented in the Bible is a *collectivity* of individuals: who believe and obey the gospel, cf. Mark 16:16; Acts 2:41,47; who stand *for* and *upon* the Truth, 1Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 3:10; who worship in *spirit* and in *truth,* John 4:23-24; and who continue to *grow in* and *teach* the Truth, Ephesians 4:11-16. But modern man has sought to redefine and reinvent the church for which Jesus died as a center for *social activities,* a place of *academic learning* and *daycare,* and an organization to meet the *physical* needs of man and society. Friends, the church of the Bible is: *God’s household,* Ephesians 2:19; built upon the *foundation of the apostles* and *prophets* of God with Jesus Christ as the *cornerstone,* v.20; a *holy temple,* v.21; and a *dwelling of God,* v.22. Man, whether ancient or modern, has no right to turn it into anything else, or less!

If we fail to believe in the God of the Bible, the Savior of the Bible, or the Church of the Bible, we do so at the peril of our souls, Hebrews 10:26-31. To boil all of this down, modern man has a SIN problem- and until we correctly identify this problem, and clearly understand its cause and consequence, our symptoms will remain. (1-27-15)

**Modern Prophets**

There are good reasons that the Bible warns of *latter day prophets,* but they may not be just the ones you suspect. If we believe the Bible’s claims of authority and completeness, (see John 12:48; Ephesians 3:3-5; 2Timothy 3:16-17; *et al*), then exactly what would a “modern” prophet tell us? If he “reveals” something different from the Bible, then either he or the Scripture is not true. If he “reveals” only what the Scripture has already said, he is not really a “prophet.”

I have no problem with anyone reading, understanding, and teaching the Word of God- that’s what we’re all supposed to do. *“And the things which you have heard from me* (*i.e.* the Apostle Paul) *in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”*  (2Timothy 2:2). What I do have a big problem with is someone denying and contradicting the Word of God to promote themselves, or some pet theory or doctrine. It is far too easy for such a prognosticator to justify their claims with “God told me this.” How do I know God told you? How am I able to verify that you are truly speaking some new revealed truth? I don’t really consider myself either a skeptic or a cynic, but when the Word of God clearly says *“But even though we* (*i.e.* inspired writers of the N.T.), *or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which has been preached, let him be accursed”* (Galatians 1:8), then I’m going to believe God’s Word over some man/woman who contradicts it!

There are a few things we must realize with regard to modern day prophets. One, the Bible plainly gave the means to discern true vs. false prophets- *“When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.”* (Deuteronomy 18:22) Two, it is always our responsibility to test the words of men by the Word of God, Matthew 7:15-27; 1John 4:1-3. And three, every so-called “prophet” who tries to convince you that God has given them some revelation in addition to or instead of the **Bible is trying to avoid something that is in the Bible-** and they want your money too! 2Peter 2:2-3, *“And many will follow their* (*i.e.* false prophets) *sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words…”*  Whatever point or doctrine they desire to propagate cannot be found in God’s Word. If it could be, what need would we have of them? We would just read God’s Word and get what we need. But if they can convince us that they have something else from God, then they have a niche market. Would Harold Camping have followers if everyone just understood and believed Matthew 24:44? God’s Word tells us all that we need to know to become *“partakers of the divine nature,”* 2Peter 1:3-4.

If God gave us a standard, codified law, then we can eventually understand and either obey or disobey it. Penalties result if we choose to disobey, and rewards are graciously given for obedience. It may take considerable effort to come to that understanding, and legitimate differences of interpretation can be honorably debated, and the intent decided. But if “the law” keeps changing on the basis of “new revelations,” then the law really wasn’t adequate to begin with, was it? (cf. Hebrews 7:18-19) Such is neither the character nor nature of Christ’s Law. *“But the one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.”* (James 1:25) Since 1Peter 1:22-25 tells us that Christ’s Law, which *“purifies your souls”* will *“abide forever,”* we really don’t need any modern prophets, do we? Just read, understand, and obey it, and God will take care of the rest!

One parting word of caution concerning modern prophets also seems to be in order. To me, the great danger of “end-time” prophecies that fail to materialize is that they promote the kind of false security of which 2Peter 3:1-4 warns. Despite the claims of “special revelation” false prophets, the truth of God’s Word still abides concerning the inevitable end of all things, see 2Peter 3:8-13. Read, understand, and live the Book. (5-25-11)

**Modulation or Transformation?**

Have you ever thought, said, or heard it said, “So N. So is such a good man, he really only needs to be baptized- he wouldn’t have to change much of anything about his life.” I’ve been guilty of thinking that about some people. But unfortunately, this type of reasoning tends to either be derived from or contribute to some false notions about baptism…

**Baptism is not a “certification” from God.** It is not God putting His *seal* on a “good man” so that he can be accepted into Christianity. It is a *“wash(ing) away”* of the sins of a penitent believer that enables fellowship with God, Acts 22:16. Note that Saul of Tarsus, who formerly persecuted the church, had already: 1) seen the Lord; 2) had conversation with Him; 3) obeyed Him by going into Damascus as instructed; and, 4) had been fasting and praying for three days, cf. Acts 9:3-18. And yet, despite all of this, the guilt of his previous sinful life remained until he, in faith, was baptized. This wasn’t an act by which *certification* from God was achieved, it was obedience to a command that enabled fellowship with Him by removing the guilt of sin.

**Baptism is not a “stamp of approval” from men.** Baptism has never been “an outward sign of an inward grace” meant to demonstrate to others that “God has for Christ’s sake pardoned my sins.” Those concepts and words are simply not in the New Testament. Instead, baptism is a personal response by an individual to the gospel, *“But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike,”* Acts 8:12. Baptism is not to gain the approval or acceptance of others, it is being *“born again”* of *“water and the Spirit”* that enables one to *“enter into the kingdom of God,”* John 3:3,5. In fact, the Ethiopian was baptized beside the roadway and without public fanfare or approval of any kind upon his confession of faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, Acts 8:26-39. You see, baptism is neither for nor with the approval of the church, it an individual’s *“appeal to God for a good conscience,”* 1Peter 3:21.

**Baptism is not “joining the church.”** Some folks seem to think and speak of “joining the church” as one would “join” the Booster Club, Lions Club, or P.T.O. (with no disrespect to any of those organizations intended), and that baptism is the *initiation rite.* The church is neither a service nor social club to be joined- it is *“His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all,”* Ephesians 1:22-23, and *“the kingdom of His beloved Son”* into which one is *“transferred”* by God when meeting the requirements of His gospel. These requirements also include *“having been buried with Him* (Christ) *in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead,”* Colossians 1:13; and 2:12a. On the day of Pentecost, *“those who had received his word were baptized,”* and *“the Lord added”* to the church those who were being saved, Acts 2:41,47. It is true that once one has met God’s requirements for salvation in Christ, he can *“associate”* in fellowship with a local body of believers, as in Acts 9:18b,26. But if you’ll note the text carefully, Ananias privately baptized Paul in Damascus, v.19, then he returned to Jerusalem to be a part of the local fellowship there, vv.26ff. This surely doesn’t fit the common practice today of being baptized to “join the church” (local body).

What has all of this to do with “modulation” and “transformation”? ***Modulation***is simply *altering* something- often *slightly,* whereas ***transformation***is the *complete* *converting* of one thing into something else. “Good people” are not merely ***slightly altered***by baptism to become Christians. “Sinners” are ***transformed/converted***to “saints” by *hearing* the Word of God, *believing* in Jesus Christ, *repenting* of their former course of life, *confessing* their faith in Christ, and being *baptized* into Christ for the remission of their sins! After providing a catalog of the Corinthians former sins, Paul wrote, *“but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God,”* 1Corinthians 6:11.

Even “good moral people” will be completely **transformed** into something they’ve never been before by complete submission and obedience to God- Christians, Romans 12:1-2! (11-11-14)

**“A Month of Sundays”**

“A month of Sundays” is an old expression that typically was used to mean “a long time”- as in, “I haven’t seen you in a month of Sundays!” But like many such expressions, the true meaning is not exactly like, and is sometimes just the opposite of, what was intended. For instance, have you ever tried to “shoot fish in a barrel”? The water deflects the bullet and splashes so much that you can’t even see the fish after the first shot, let alone hit one! So too it is with “a month of Sundays”- though perhaps used to mean a “long time,” it actually can be a very short one- at least from one perspective. Please consider…

Sunday rolls around once every week, obviously. Therefore, it would take 30 or 31 weeks of real time to make “a month of Sundays”! If we pursue the math further, it would then also take seven years to produce “a year of Sundays”. That sure sounds like a long time!

But let’s turn this around a little, and look at it from a different perspective. If you attend religious services “every Sunday,” how much actual time are you devoting to worshipping God, encouraging your brethren, and learning from God’s word? A person 21 years old will have will have had 3 years total of spiritual devotion, but **only** ***if*** he has attended **every Sunday,** and **spent all day at it** for all 21 years of his life! What if, on the other hand, he has only committed **one hour** to his weekly devotion, or has only made **half** of the Sundays? The numbers drop dramatically, and it obviously takes a lot longer to make a “month” or “year” of Sundays, doesn’t it?

Let’s make one more comparison while we’re at it. The average school age child spends roughly seven hours per day at school for 175 days per year for a total of 1,225 hours per year. When we multiply those 1,225 hours of instruction by twelve years of education, we get 14,700 total hours needed to graduate (obviously these are very general numbers given just for comparison purposes). If we “study” the Bible for one hour per week every Sunday morning, do you know how long it will take to equal the “graduation level” of 14,700 hours of public education? It would take **287 years**!

That’s enough math- now let’s get the rubber to the road, so to speak. If we **only** spend one hour per week studying our Bibles at the Sunday morning service, we can’t live long enough to match the equivalent (in instruction time) of a high school education. That “month of Sundays” doesn’t sound like much of a long time anymore, does it? Is there any wonder that many who claim to be Christians are at best “remedial,” if not “illiterate,” in real knowledge of God’s word?

Actually, we’re being generous with the “one hour per week” estimate of instruction from the Bible in most congregations for the Sunday morning service. I don’t know of any congregation that consistently has hour-long sermons anymore, and such isn’t the point either. Instead, the point is that if we believe attending a religious service (even every Sunday morning) and receiving one hour of instruction (even if such really happened) is going to be sufficient for us to be mature Christians who know *“the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation”* (2Timothy 3:15), we are sadly mistaken- if not self-deluded.

Some of us are proud of ourselves when we “attend church” almost every Sunday morning. Don’t misunderstand, that’s a great start. But please don’t place on “the preacher” the burden to pour into your heart and mind what you need to know to reach heaven in one 30 or 40-minute sermon once a week for 300+ years! Instead, why not give true *“****diligence*** *to present(ing) yourself to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth,”* 2Timothy 2:15.

The noble-minded Bereans had it right. They: *“received the word with great eagerness”­-* the right **attitude;** *“examining the Scriptures daily”*- the right **practice**; *“to see whether these things were so”-* the right **purpose**, Acts 17:11. The rewards for that kind of commitment to really understanding and living God’s word are truly “out of this world”! (2-26-13)

**What’s in a Name?**

Everything is in a name, if that name is **“Jesus Christ”**! Why? Consider Acts 4:12, *“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved.”*  Think about some of the implications of this passage…

When the Holy Spirit inspired (which literally means “God-breathed,” see v.8) Peter to say there was *“no other name…by which we must be saved,”* please realize all the names this eliminates from being able to produce salvation.

It eliminates the name **“Abraham”**- thus Jews could no longer rely on physical ancestry to Him for their salvation. John made this clear from the beginning of his ministry in Luke 3:8, *“Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.”*  To be saved eternally, Israelites must obey Jesus.

It also eliminates the name **“Mohammed”** from being able to procure eternal salvation. Whatever good this man accomplished, or whatever good is accomplished in or through his name, the pardoning of sins is not among those accomplishments.

It also eliminates the name “**Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi”** (aka “Mahatma Gandhi”) from being able to save souls from eternal damnation. There is no doubt or debate that this man did a tremendous amount for Hindus and Muslims in India and South Africa, and for all men in a sense. But, all the good that he accomplished was for this life, for no soul is saved in the name of “Gandhi.”

It also eliminates the name **“Confucius”** (“Kong Qiu”) from being able to provide eternal security. Confucius lived between 551 and 479 B.C. His philosophy championed strong family loyalty- even to the point of ancestor worship, and eminent respect of children for their parents and wives for their husbands. He is perhaps the most oft-quoted philosopher of all time, and no doubt had many good and morally profitable teachings, but did not and cannot “save” anyone.

It also eliminates the name **“Rasputin”** (Grigori Yefimovech Rasputin, 1860-1916), the Russian Orthodox Christian “mystic” philosopher. He was thought by some to have greatly influenced the Russian Emperor (Nicholas II) and his wife and son (Alexei), and therefore nation, as a physic and faith healer. Others consider(ed) him to be a religious charlatan. Whatever the opinion of his talents and abilities, they did not include the salvation of men’s souls!

It also eliminates the name **“Nietzsche”** (Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, 1844-1900) the German philosopher famous for “the death of God” argument; and the name **“Nostradamus”** (Michel de Nostredame, 1503-1566), the French pharmacist (then called “apothecary”) who published volumes of prophecies which some claim predicted many modern events. However popular or unpopular these philosophers and “prophets” may have been in their times, or in ours, does not make their names powerful enough to produce the salvation of men’s souls. The same can obviously be said for any philosopher, scientist, or proclaimed “prophet” save *“the Prophet”* (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15,18; John 6:14), Jesus Christ.

But, this also eliminates **“Joseph Smith”** (the proclaimed “prophet” of The Book of Mormon), **“Mary Baker Eddy”** (the prophet and founder of the Christian Scientist), **“L. Ron Hubbard”** (Lafayette Ronald Hubbard, the “prophet” and founder of the Church of Scientology and Dianetics), **“Martin Luther”** (from which the Lutherans derive their name), **“John Calvin”** (who put forth the doctrines of predestination which became “Calvinism”), **“John Wesley”** and **“Charles Wesley”** (Anglican clerics whose foundational doctrines came to be Wesleyanism), **“Charles Spurgeon”** (aka “The Prince of Preachers,” 1834-1892), and **“Thomas Campbell”** or **“Alexander Campbell”** (this son and father, who, along with others such as **Barton W. Stone,** sought to “restore” the church back to the N.T. pattern, rather than to simply “reform” it). None of these names, whatever their contributions to or detractions from the gospel, are *“the name”* through which salvation comes! Why?

It’s actually very simple. None of them died on the cross and was raised from the dead, Acts 4:10! And, none of them became *“the very Corner Stone”* of our salvation and association with God in the Church, Acts 4:11. Therefore, being baptized in their name(s) accomplishes nothing, Matthew 28:19; *“observing all”* that they command likewise does not produce salvation, Matthew 28:20; and, their words are not those by which all will be judged, John 12:48. Don’t follow any *man,* follow *“****the man, Christ Jesus****, who gave Himself as a ransom for all,”* 1Timothy 2:5-6. (11-13-12)

**Modern-Day Nebuchadnezzar?**

It is often said that those who fail to study and learn from history are doomed to repeat it. I make no claims to being a student of, let alone a teacher of, history. Most of the history with which I am more than casually acquainted specifically relates to *biblical* history. It is from this vantage point that I’d like you to take a moment or three to consider the Babylonian leader Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar met the combined forces of the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco and the remaining but rapidly crumbling Assyrian army at Carchemish in the spring of 605 B.C. and soundly defeated them. In the ensuing rout, the Babylonian general pursued the fleeing Egyptian army southward through Hamath, and perhaps down the Mediterranean seacoast into Judah. He would have presumably chased them all the way to Egypt and destroyed them, but apparently somewhere near or in Judah, he received word that his father, Nabopolassar had died. Thus, he gave up the pursuit to return to Babylon and assume the throne. But before departing Judah, Nebuchadnezzar *“came to Jerusalem and besieged it,”* and took Daniel and many of the *choice* Hebrew young men with him as captives back to Babylon in 605 B.C., cf. Daniel 1. Thus began Nebuchadnezzar’s admittedly checkered *biblical* history. It would include two more *deportations* of captives from Judah (597 B.C. at the close of the reign of Jehoiachin, 2Kings 24:8-16; and another in 586 B.C. when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, 2Kings 24:17 – 25:21). But there are some salient points from these things, and a few others, that we need to consider….

1. **God raised up Nebuchadnezzar to humble His people, Judah, and bring them to repentance.** In Daniel 1:2 it states, *“And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah, into his* (Nebuchadnezzar’s) *hand….”*  Furthermore, in providing Nebuchadnezzar with the important meaning of his dream, God’s prophet Daniel explained, *“You, O king, are the king of kings, to* ***whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory****; and wherever the sons of men dwell, or the beasts of the field, or the birds of the sky,* ***He has given them into your hand*** *and* ***has caused you to rule over them all****….”* Daniel 2:37-38. Nebuchadnezzar was certainly not a believer in God at this point, nor was he seeking to do God’s will, but God raised him up and empowered him to accomplish His own purposes. Indeed, it is God who *“changes the times and epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings…”* Daniel 2:20!
2. **God then humbled Nebuchadnezzar because of his arrogance.** After Daniel told him of the importance of his dream, and it explained it, and after Nebuchadnezzar had further witnessed the power of God through His protection of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-neggo (cf. Daniel 3), Nebuchadnezzar became a believer *of sorts* in the God of Israel, Daniel 3:29 – 4:3. But the glory and power God bestowed upon Nebuchadnezzar went to his head, and he later proclaimed, *“Is this not Babylon the great,* ***which I myself have built*** *as a royal residence* ***by the might of my power*** *and* ***for the glory of my majesty****?”* Daniel 4:30. While these words were *“still in his mouth,”* Nebuchadnezzar *“was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until his hair had grown as eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws,”* Daniel 4:31,33. In short, he was made as a beast of the field- eating grass, living entirely outside, and was completely unkempt. Indeed, *“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling”* (Proverbs 16:18) was dramatically demonstrated to and through Nebuchadnezzar!
3. **But Nebuchadnezzar came to true belief in God, and repented.**  At the end of the period God appointed for his humbling, Nebuchadnezzar says that he *“raised his eyes toward heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What hast Thou done?’… Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride,”* Daniel 4:34-35,37. He got it loud and clear- God establishes thrones and dominions among men from His throne in heaven and His dominion over all the earth!

Now, from these things, let’s draw some relevant conclusions:

* It is God, not men, who makes kings and rulers. He is in control.
* God will humble even those whom He has empowered when they forget Him and honor themselves.
* Anyone who repents and honors God can be forgiven and restored, cf. Daniel 4:36.

The applications?

1. *“First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth,”* 1Timothy 2:1-4.
2. *“Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities*. *For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves,”* Romans 13:1-2.
3. *“Great and marvelous are Thy works, O Lord God, the Almighty; righteous and true are Thy ways, Thou King of the nations. Who will not fear, O Lord; and glorify Thy name? For Thou alone art holy; for all the nations will come and worship before Thee, for Thy righteous acts have been revealed,”* Revelation 15:3-4.

I don’t know whom might be a modern-day Nebuchadnezzar sent by God to humble either this country, or all people of the earth. But I do know that it wouldn’t be the first time such has occurred- history teaches us as much. Please, think on these things, and humble yourself and repent as necessary before the God of Eternity! (1-31-17)

**Nets, Boats, Water Pots, Etc.**

Think about this list: nets, a boat, homes and families, farms, a job, a water pot, homeland/country, and personal freedom/safety. What do all of these things have in common? They were all *“left”* in the pursuit of truth, salvation, and a right relationship with God.

In this pursuit of spiritual interests: Peter and Andrew left their *nets* (tools of trade), Matthew 4:18-20; James and John left their *boat* (fishing business), Matthew 4:21-22; the twelve disciples left their *homes* and *families,* Matthew 19:27,29, and *farms,* Mark 10:29; Levi left a lucrative job (collecting taxes), Luke 5:27-28; the woman at the well left her water pot (immediate task), John 4:28; Abraham left his home, country, and family, Acts 7:3-4; and Paul left his personal freedom and safety, 2Corinthians 11:23-33. All of which begs two important questions. 1) What have you *left* to follow Jesus? And, 2) What are you willing to *leave* to continue to follow Him?

In answer to the first question, “What have you left to follow Jesus”, many of us are extremely blessed in that we didn’t have to *leave* our families or jobs to become Christians. We were born into families that were believers, or were perhaps led to Christ by a boss or co-worker. We were likewise not required to *leave* our country, or even our personal freedom and safety. All we really had to leave were our sinful ways and habits- and these were actually hurting us anyway, Proverbs 13:15 (KJV).

But the second question- “What are you willing to leave to continue to follow Jesus?” is an entirely different matter. Jesus told a rich young ruler that he needed to *"go and sell your possessions and give to the poor….and follow Me,”* Matthew 19:21. Jesus knew this man’s heart, and because He loved him (Mark 10:21), told him what he needed, but did not want to hear. This story well-illustrates the principle that Jesus had previously relayed in Matthew 6:21, *“for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”*  The conclusion of the story is that instead of following Jesus as invited, the young man *“went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property,”* Matthew 19:22. The “owning” of the property wasn’t necessarily the problem. It was his *trusting in* and *valuing* the property more than he did a right relationship with Jesus that was problematic. But what about it- would Jesus say the same thing to us? And more importantly, would we feel and act the way this young man did, or more resemble the saints mentioned in Hebrews 10:34? That’s a tough question! How can we know the answer?

Since Jesus also said, *“He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much”* (Luke 16:10), perhaps there are smaller *indicators* that will help us to know how we would react to such a requirement (and whether or not it is necessary for us!). **Do we currently set aside our pursuit of spiritual things and a right relationship with Him for more selfish pursuits?** Do we routinely set aside assembling with the saints to commemorate His death, worship, and learn more of His will for: recreational pursuits; time with our families; choosing to work; or other non-spiritual activities? There is certainly nothing wrong with any of these, unless we ***prefer*** and ***choose*** them over spending time worshiping and commemorating Jesus with His brethren. Isn’t that what *“forsaking our own assembling together”* means, cf. Hebrews 10:25?

There are times for all of us when “missing” services is required by *an ox in the ditch/well*, cf. Luke 14:5. But, it is another matter entirely to lead that ox into the ditch, or push him into the well ourselves, and then to build a fence around him so he can’t get out to provide ourselves with a continual “excuse”! And yet, isn’t that exactly what we do when we willingly commit ourselves to activities that we know will require us to *forsake the assembly?*  “Having to” miss worship is one thing- “volunteering” or “choosing” to do so is another matter entirely. If we “choose” to play, work, or visit instead of worship, are we really any different from those who *“paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business”* instead of attending the *“wedding feast for his son”* offered by the king in Matthew 22:5? Such sure sounds like our hearts are not in the right place. So the question remains: What are you willing to *leave* to pursue spiritual things and a right relationship with Jesus Christ? (1-29-13)

**The New Year’s Resolution**

This is the time we typically “resolve”to do some things better next year. If you’re like a lot of us, most of the resolutions from last year are available again this year since our “resolve” didn’t last!

For most of us, New Year’s resolutions typically fall into three categories: ***Self***(losing weight and/or taking better care of self); ***Externals***(doing a better job of managing time, money, and other resources); and ***Relationships***(being a better spouse, parent, child, etc.). These can easily be translated into the spiritual realm. For instance, we can resolve to lose the extra weightof sin that so easily encumbers us,Hebrews 12:1-2. Or we can vow to do a better job of auditing and allocating our spiritual resources, Philippians 3:8 and Matthew 6:19-21. And we can also be more concerned and attentive to our spiritual relations, Luke 14:26 and 1John 3:1.

But what if we made one “spiritual” resolution this year, and really kept it? What would, or should it be? What one resolution could be made to insure spiritual health and well-being if it were kept? I suppose several biblically sound answers could be given to this question, but please consider carefully this one.

If I had to pick one resolution to insure spiritual health and well-being, it would be four simple words of Jesus in Matthew 6:33, ***“Seek first His kingdom…”*** Let’s break this down a bit to be sure we understand exactly what is being said.

Jesus did **not** say, *“****Look occasionally*** *for His kingdom”-* He said *“****Seek*** *first His kingdom.”*  The word translated as *“seek”* is the Greek term zeteo, and means “to seek (in order to find out) by thinking, reasoning, inquiring into” and “to seek in order to find.” This kind of “seeking” isn’t a casual glance from time to time as convenience allows. It is a hungering quest of mind and body to find and enter His kingdom (Matthew 5:6).

**Neither** did Jesus say *“Seek* ***also*** *His kingdom”-* He said *“Seek* ***first*** *His kingdom.”*  This kind of “seeking” is not done in addition to everything else we have to do, or when we have time. It implies priority. It must take precedence over all else. It is not just showing up somewhere for something called “worship” and getting a check mark by your name, which then entitles you to spend the rest of the week on your own pursuits however you please. No one ever truly finds the kingdom of God that way (cf. Matthew 13:13-b15).

Jesus also did **not** say *“Seek first* ***your own*** *kingdom”-* He said *“Seek first* ***His*** *kingdom.”*  Please understand a vital principle: We cannot be both “selfish” and “Christian”- we can be one or the other, but not both. Christianity is not like the burger joint; you cannot “have it your way”- not even Jesus did, cf. Philippians 2:5-8; John 6:38. It is so easy to assume that this life is ours to do with as we please, but it isn’t. We have been *“bought with a price”-* the very blood of Jesus. Therefore, it’s not **my** kingdom, I must seek His. I’m not the king, He is.

Finally, notice that Jesus did **not** say *“Seek first* ***God****”-* He said *“Seek first His* ***kingdom****.”* Someone might ask, *“*But isn’t that the same thing?” Actually, it isn’t. God can be discerned just by looking at the wonders of His physical creation (cf. Romans 1:18-20). We can perceive the existence of God, and even something of His attributes, by just looking at what He created. But seeking His spiritual kingdom requires immersion into His words of spiritual revelation- the Bible. Jesus said in John 3:3 that *“unless one is born again, he cannot* ***see*** *the kingdom of God.”* Faith, as the basis for all that follows in our obedience to God, comes from but one source: *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing comes by the word of Christ.”* (Romans 10:17) Seeking God’s kingdom means that we seek His reign over us. It is a lifetime commitment of submission to His will.

Now if we resolve to *“Seek first His kingdom”* by truly “seeking” it rather than just giving it a casual glance from time to time; by making this seeking the true priority of our lives; by seeking “His” kingdom rather than “our” own; and by seeking His “kingdom” from an attitude of submissive obedience, wouldn’t that insure our spiritual health and well being? Jesus said it would, and I believe He knew what He was talking about! (12-29-10)

**What is “Non-Denominational”?**

To understand the *non* version, we first need to comprehend *denominational.* To *denominate* simply means “to give a name to.” This sounds easy enough to understand, and even harmless. But think about it a little further, and perhaps a little deeper also…

Why do we need *to give a name to* (and thus *denominate*)the church? “To show the differences between them” might be the answer commonly given, but again, let’s think this through compared to what God says about it. Ephesians 4:4reads, *“There is one body,”* and the *body* is *the church,* Ephesians 1:22-23. If the church is *one body* as the Scripture says, why should it be *denominated,* that is,have *differences* and wear *names* to delineate them?

“Well, the different denominationsdon’t all believe the same things.” True. But what does God’s word say about this? *“Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment,”* 1Corinthians 1:10. Furthermore, Ephesians 4:3-6 says there is *“ one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all”* just as it said that there is *one body.* So…

How does **one** *Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism,* and *God* produce ***many*** *denominated bodies?*  The answer is simple, but perhaps hard to admit: **One** *Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism,* and *God* **doesn’t** produce many denominated bodies- following the thoughts and **words of** **men** **does**, see Matthew 15:1-9. God’s Word does not produce division, delineation, or denominating- **not** following God’s Word produces them. The only way we can all *believe, think,* and *speak* the same things is to rid ourselves of denominational creeds, catechisms, disciplines, and manuals by returning to the Bible alone as our only guide of faith and practice. Adherence to *denominational* (remember what the word means!) *doctrines,* and *associations* based on them, must be abandoned for the *“simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ”* through adherence to the *pure, living,* and *abiding word of God,* 2Corinthians 11:3 and 1Peter 1:22-23.

Now that we have some concept of *denominational,* what does *non-denominational* mean? It doesn’t mean the acceptance of all denominational members with their denominational doctrines and practices intact. That’s *inter-denominational*. Still yet, many groups who claim to be *non-denominational* are more accurately *inter-denominational* because they endeavor to meld together various beliefs and practices of denominationalism, rather than demanding Bible authority for every belief and practice.

*Non-denominational,* therefore, means:

* The rejection of any and all *denominational creeds, catechisms, disciplines,* or *manuals* coupled with an appeal to God’s Word alone as authority for every belief, doctrine, and practice, cf. 1Peter 4:11.
* The rejection of any and all *denominational associations, boards,* and *governing bodies* of multiple congregations since the New Testament only authorizes *congregational leadership,* cf. 1Peter 5:1-3. No organization *larger than* a local congregation and its leadership is ever mentioned, Acts 14:23. Beyond this, the only “headquarters” is in *heaven,* and “main officer” is *Christ,* Ephesians 1:22-23*.* Obviously, this makes each local congregation *autonomous* (self-governed) with the Bible as its only law and bylaw.
* The rejection of any and all forms of *denominational worship* and the practice of only means and methods of worship that are found in the New Testament, John 4:23-24.
* The rejection of any and all *denominational programs, ministries,* and *works-* those not found in, and therefore authorized by, the New Testament. Instead, non-denominational churches will limit themselves to doing the work God prescribes in the New Testament, in the ways and through the means He authorizes, 2John 6-9.
* The rejection of any and all *denominational names* and *distinctions* not found in the New Testament*,* cf. Acts 11:26. The *disciples* were simply called *“Christians”-* wearing only the name of Christ, rather than that of any other man or man-made organization (see also Romans 16:16; 1Corinthians 1:2 where *“churches of Christ”* and *“church of God”* were used in the *collective* or *congregational* sense).

If we will believe and do *what* God says, *when* God says, *how* God says, we won’t be any kind of hyphenated Christians (Denominational Name of Choice-Christian), we will simply be faithful “Christians.” At that, friend, is MORE than enough! (9-27-16)

**The Non-Sensical Things We Say (and Believe)**

Whether it’s searching for a misplaced wallet, purse, or phone, or playing the “in which box is it found” game after a move, we’ve probably all uttered the phrase, “I found it in the *last* place I looked.” Really? Why would we possibly continue to look in more places after we’ve found the item? Exactly who continues to look for a lost or misplaced item in *more* places after it’s been found? Don’t we *always* find an item in the “last” place we look? Another non-sensical thing we say is admittedly a personal pet peeve of mine: the *“hot* water heater.” If the water is “hot,” why does it need a device to heat it? Wouldn’t the mechanism actually be better described as a “*cold* water heater”? Folks, it’s a “water heater,” not a *“hot* water heater.” But our non-sensical speech is unfortunately not limited to the realm of the mundane- it has invaded our religious speech as well….

Here are a few examples of the non-sensical *spiritual* (I use the term loosely) things we say:

* **“It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re honest and sincere.”** Really? In what other area of life would this same reasoning apply? When else would my *honest* and *sincere* beliefs circumvent truth? If I honestly and sincerely believe I am immune to electrocution would it change the outcome of me grabbing “live” wires? Of course it matters what you believe (and practice)! The New Testament is replete with warnings regarding *false teachers* and *false doctrine,* cf. Matthew 24:24; 1John 4:1; *e.g.* Why, if it doesn’t really matter what you believe as long as you’re honest and sincere?
* **“We’re all just taking different roads to the same place.”** The non-sensical nature of this statement is that it assumes the *differing roads* lead to the *same place.* Jesus made it abundantly clear that He was the *one-and-only way* to heaven, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me,”* John 14:6. This statement necessarily excludes any and all *other* roads or ways. Please read Ephesians 4:4-6 and understand that there are no “different roads” that lead to heaven. There is but one.
* **“We just understand that passage/verse differently.”** Truth is neither relative nor subject to our understanding. It is still “truth” whether we understand it correctly or not. Furthermore, differing viewpoints don’t necessarily mean that either one is correct. You may *understand* a passage that I *misunderstand,* or vice-versa, or we may both *misunderstand* it; but we do not *understand* it differently. Truth is still true whether either of us understands and interprets it correctly or not. It is true because it came from God (1Corinthians 2:6-13) who does not and cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18), not because we understand it. The truth of God’s Word is *objective* rather than *subjective,* and is therefore not *relative* to our understanding or application of it.
* **“Once we’re saved, we can never be lost.”** Again, in what other area of life would such a statement be accurate? “Once we’re right, we can never be wrong?” “Once we’ve said something true, we can never say anything false?” “Once we’re on the right road, we can never make a wrong turn?” The premise is non-sensical and unscriptural. With the possible exception of the letter to Philemon, every NT book has warnings against *falling away* or becoming *lost* after being saved, or examples of such occurring. Here are only a few of the passages, Matthew 13:20-21; John 15:5-6; Acts 8:12-23; Romans 11:20-22; 1Corinthians 10:12; Galatians 5:1-4; Hebrews 3:12-15; and James 5:19-20. Since we’re created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and by sin we become separated from Him (Isaiah 59:1-2), we’ve already been “safe” and then “separated/spiritually dead”- why would we possibly assume that it couldn’t happen again?

Yes, we say things in life that just don’t make any sense- some of us more than others, but let’s be sure that in spiritual matters, we *“speak, as it were, the utterances of God,”* 1Peter 4:11! (7-19-16)

**The Non-Sensical Things We Say (and Believe), Part 2**

In a previous article similarly titled, we highlighted, surprisingly enough, some non-sensical but commonly uttered phrases such as *“hot* water heater” and “I found it in the *last* place I looked.” But we also extrapolated our consideration of ill-logical phraseology to spiritual dialog as well- such as, “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re honest and sincere,” and “We’re all just taking different roads to the same place,” and “We just understand that passage/verse differently,” and finally, “Once we’re saved, we can never be lost.” In each case, we used the Bible to show how these expressions are non-sensical, unscriptural, and utterly false. Upon further reflection, there are a few more popular “spiritual” (to use the term loosely) catchphrases that need to be added to our list for consideration (and expulsion!)….

**“What this means to me.”** This phrase often precedes a well-meant effort to explain a biblical passage or verse in a class or discussion, but it is just wrong to the core. As is, “I understand this to mean….” and all related variations. Read carefully the following verses, *“But know this first of all,* ***that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation,*** *for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God,”* 2Peter 1:20-21. The truth of God’s Word is **NOT** relative to your, my, or anyone else’s “interpretation” or “understanding”- it is **true** whether we understand it or not. None of us has the right to “interpret” truth relative to our own biases, prejudices, and limitations. It is not “my personal truth”- nor is it yours. If we arrive at the proper understanding of a verse or passage, it means the same thing “to/for me” that it does to/for everyone, for the gospel *“is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,”* Romans 1:16.

**“Just follow your heart.”** This sounds good and pleasing- probably because it makes you the standard of what is right and wrong. You’re not. Neither am I. Again, note what the Bible actually says on this matter. *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders,”* Matthew 15:19. Someone retorts, “But my heart is pure, honest, and good.” Great! If that it is true, then it is a heart shaped by and following the Word of God. But many of us who claim to have a “good heart” do so despite living blatantly sinful lives. Please take time to read 1John 3 where the common myth of “having a good heart” despite living a sin-filled life is debunked. Here’s just a snippet to make the point, *“Little children, let no one deceive you, the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; but the one who practices sin is of the devil,”* 1John 3:7-8. Our hearts are simply neither the standard by which right and wrong is determined, nor the one by which we will be judged, John 12:48; 2Corinthians 5:10.

**“I have to do what is right for me.”** There are a couple of issues with this otherwise assuring nod-worthy statement. Firstly, as has been pointed out above, what is “right for me” is “right for everyone” spiritually. “Right” and “wrong” are not personal to “me” or “you,” because God *“is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him,”* Acts 10:34-35. Secondly, and I could be wrong about this part, but “I have to do what is right for me” is often not so much about doing what is “right” as it about “for me.” We live in a “me first” selfish society where “my” needs, wants, and desires are thought to be “right” just because they are “mine.” In Philippians 3:18-19, worshipping the god of “me”is shown to be idolatry, *“For many walk, of whom I have often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their mind on earthly things.”* The real “right for me” way is clearly shown in Philippians 2:1-4ff. Please read it.

If you’re following closely, you’ve likely noticed a common thread in the above statements: they’re all about “me”- *my* thoughts, *my* heart, and *my* interests. But *my* thoughts are not God’s, Isaiah 55:8-9; *my* heart is not His standard, John 8:47; and *my* interests do not determine His “right,” 1Peter 3:17; and the same is true for *you.*  Please: read these passages; think on these things; and allow God’s Word to be the only standard in your life! (8-2-16)

**Not Being Ashamed**

We’ve likely all heard or said, “There’s no shame in …” Shame can be a good- though perhaps temporarily painful, and helpful motivation (cf. 2Corinthians 7:8-13). But if taken to extremes, it can also be devastating and debilitating (cf. 2Corinthians 2:6-8). These negative consequences of shame have led to some seeking to eliminate it altogether. But this also eliminates the potential benefits of shame. However, if we’re not careful, there are a few things of which we can become ashamed that we shouldn’t…

**God as our Creator.** *“By faith we understand that worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible,”* Hebrews 11:3. Please, never be ashamed of your faith in God as our Creator. Evolution’s “Big Bang” is a theory that seeks to explain away the divine creative power of God. But it is a theory that contradicts known and accepted scientific laws (Biogenesis and Second Law of Thermodynamics), and seeks to explain the *Effect* of the known world and universe with an inadequate *Cause. “For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God,”* Hebrews 3:4, is still true.

**Christ as our Savior.** To admit the need of a savior is to admit the guilt of sin, and to admit the inability to take away this guilt ourselves. While there is and should be shame associated with sin, needing a savior to expiate it for us is a boat in which we all sit (cf. Romans 1:18 – 3:23). However, these things should never lead us to be ashamed of claiming Jesus Christ as our Savior! He is *“the power of God and the wisdom of God,”* 1Corinthians 1:24. Jesus made it clear to His disciples that even in the face of persecution, those who are ashamed of and deny Him before men, will themselves be denied at judgment, cf. Matthew 10:24-33. Don’t be a “closet Christian” who is ashamed of your Savior. Instead, proudly declare your allegiance to Him, and encourage others to join you!

**The Gospel.** Paul, by the inspiration of the Spirit of course, wrote to the Romans to explain why he was eager to preach in Rome*, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed…”* Romans 1:16-17. We must understand that *the gospel* contains *God’s power* to *save*. If anyone is to be saved, it will be *by* and *through* the gospel, cf. 2Thessalonians 2:14. But notice that the gospel also contains ***the righteousness of God****.* This is critical for a very basic reason: man cannot determine or be saved by his own righteousness, cp. Jeremiah 10:23 and Romans 3:10-28. So, we need the gospel to tell us how to *become saved* and *righteous* before God. And yet, many have become ashamed of the gospel, and have thus sought to change it to fit their own desires. This would be fine **if** we were going to be judged by *our own gospel* rather than God’s- but such is not going to happen, Romans 2:16. Never be ashamed of the gospel that saves and makes righteous! Instead, *preach* it when it is popular, and when it isn’t; use it faithfully to *reprove, rebuke,* and *exhort* with *great patience* and *instruction* that as many as possible can be saved by it, cf. 2Timothy 4:2!

**The Church.** In *a* universal sense, the church is made up of all the saved of all time. Locally, *a* church is made up, hopefully, of individuals who share a common: *belief* (in Jesus Christ as God’s Son); *birth* (by baptism for remission of sins); and who have banded themselves together in *fellowship* (jointly participating in the worship and work of God’s people) in a given locale. Unfortunately, we can and sometimes do become ashamed of either of these applications of “church.” If our shame is of the *universal* church, we may turn *“aside to follow Satan”* (as in 1Timothy 5:15), or to anything and everything else- which only leads to eternal destruction (as in 2Timothy 4:2-4). If our shame is of the *local* church, we may just *turn aside* in the sense of *becoming useless* (cp. Romans 3:12). We may still attend occasionally, but we’re no longer really *involved-* in the work of God or His church. Don’t be ashamed of the church Jesus died to establish, or of a church that is striving to please Him by obedience to His will!

If you happen to be ashamed of God, Jesus Christ, the Gospel, or the/a Church, there’s no use in wallowing in it. The cure for shame that is rightfully earned is always repentance (a change of *mind* that leads to a change in *course/direction*), and simply busying ourselves with doing the right things as determined by God. The great news is this: **Obedience to God dispels any and all shame, 1John 3:21-24!** (4-14-15)

**Not Speaking Evil of the Dead**

We’ve all heard the cautionary rebuke, “Don’t speak evil of the dead.” Such is probably good advice for a number of reasons: 1) we rarely have sufficient information to issue even a “fair” judgment of their life, cf. 1Samuel 16:7 and 1Corinthians 2:11; 2) we certainly don’t have the prerogative to judge their afterlife (eternal destiny), Romans 14:10-12; and, 3) we really shouldn’t be “speaking evil” of anyone, living or dead, Ephesians 4:29-32. But…

There have been a couple of (shall we say) “high profile” deaths recently, which got me to thinking about how we react to death. Perhaps because we’ve heard “Don’t speak evil of the dead” so often, some of us seem to swing the pendulum dramatically the other way. Maybe there are a couple of things with which we need to come to grips.

**Unless part of the righteous alive at the return of Christ** (cf. 1Thessalonians 4:17ff)**, everyone will die**. God made this reality clear from the beginning, *“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return,”* Genesis 3:19. So, while death is often unexpected at the time, or even tragic in its circumstance, it is a part of life that comes to everyone. Without question, it comes all-too violently and tragically at times. And just as surely, it often comes *too soon-* before the deceased has prepared for eternity; or *too late*- after the deceased has done irreparable damage and destruction to others. But none of these realities of death change the fact that everyone dies, and needs to prepare for the judgment which follows,Hebrews 9:27.

**But, when we live contrary to God’s will, and allow ourselves to become enslaved to the evils of this life, no matter what form they take, death is likely to come a whole lot sooner and more tragically than it ought.** While such deaths surely may sadden us, they should neither shock nor surprise us, *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life,”* Galatians 6:7-8. The proverbial writer long ago penned, *“the way of transgressors is hard”* (Proverbs 29:6), and it’s still true.

**Not everyone will go to heaven.** This isn’t me “judging” anyone- it’s what Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14, *“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.”*  The tendency, it seems, of “not speaking evil of the dead” has evolved into “assuming that anyone/everyone who dies is going to heaven” because we liked, loved, admired, or envied them. Such is simply not the case, as Jesus’ words clearly demonstrate. Our assessments of others- living or dead, does not determine their eternal destiny. God does that. So, while “speaking evil of the dead” is deemed improper, it is no more so than “speaking good of evil people” just because they died. *“Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and clever in their own sight,”* Isaiah 5:20-21. “Sinners” don’t become “saints” just because they died.

**Being rich, famous, talented, or making people laugh is NOT the criterion by which our lives will be judged.**  *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven,”* Matthew 7:21. There were surely many rich, famous, and talented people in Jesus’ day who either *rejected* Him and His gospel, or never got outside of themselves long enough to *listen, understand,* and *obey* Him. Whether then, or now, or in whatever future remains, those who *“do not know God and… who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus… these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power,”* 2Thessalonians 1:8-9.

I hope these things are not considered to be “speaking evil of the dead,” for such surely was not my intention. However, having a biblically based perspective of life and/or death should never be considered “evil” either. (8-12-14)

**“Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep…”**

Do you remember the prayer little children used to be taught to recite at bedtime? “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. God bless…(insert a list typically beginning with Mommy and Daddy and proceeding through siblings, grandparents, friends, and winding up with Snowball the cat or Freddy the frog)”. Think about this little prayer for moment. Is the thought of “dying before I wake” really the one you want your child to have before you try to get them to sleep? Good luck with that!

However, from a more adult perspective, there are some very good “grown-up” considerations that can be gleaned from this well meaning but perhaps ill-conceived “child’s” prayer.

**The prayer recognizes the brevity of this life.** Scripture certainly teaches this lesson: James 4:13-14, *“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.”*  Most of us have had all-too-vivid reminders of this lesson. A family member or close friend is here one day, and everything seems fine- then suddenly, he’s gone. The transient nature of life has examples all around us, and yet some of us never really learn the lesson. What’s the lesson? Each day could be ***my*** last upon the earth, and each night when ***I*** pillow ***my*** head, ***I*** really could “die before ***I*** wake”!

While it may not be the best thing to burden a four-year old with such thoughts (let them think about God blessing relatives and pets- even the slimy ones), this is a great lesson for us bigger folks. We need to be reminded that life is short, and that each day or night could be our last. However, the more important question is this: Are we OK with this day or night being our last, if it should turn out that way?

A lot of people give lip serviceto the notion of “living each day as if it could be your last.” And that’s OK, I suppose. But until we are really OK with dying “today,” such is just lip service, or a poor excuse for selfishly pursuing our own desires to the exclusion of responsibilities. This leads us to the other “big person” consideration from this little prayer.

**The prayer emphasizes trusting God.**  The potentially sleep-depriving “If I die before I wake” is offset somewhat by “I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Though we might question the age-appropriateness of the lesson for a child, the point is “spot on” for grown-ups! When we hesitate or equivocate at the question, “Are you ready to die ***today***?” (in spiritual terms, of course), it is usually due to one of two reasons: 1) We know we are not ready, and thus *“our heart condemns us,”* 1John 3:18-21; or, 2) We don’t really trust God. Our head knows all the right things to think (and say) about our own mortality, but our heart still doubts because we do not fully trust Him. Let me illustrate.

One of the great blessings of Stage 4 T-Cell Lymphoma was that of being forced to face mortality up close and personal. Getting to the point of truly being OK with dying “today” was a big step. But looking at a young wife and two young sons knowing that my God and my family (spiritual and physical) would take care of them if today were *“the time of my departure”* (2Timothy 4:6) was liberating. It was also important developmentally because it required a level of trust I probably would not have otherwise achieved. I hope you can achieve that trust without cancer and chemo!

Whether you recited that “little” prayer or not, have you learned the “big” lessons of recognizing and accepting the brevity of this life, and truly trusting God with not only your eternal destiny, but with the care of those left behind? (12-11-12)

**“Oh Be Careful Little Eyes….”**

When I was just a toddler, our family attended the old Church of Christ on the corner of Mound Street and Starr Avenue in Nacogdoches. For decades, toddlers went to what was commonly referred to as “Little Class” with **Sister Ruby Johnson**. “Mrs. Ruby,” as the children all knew her, had a special love for and way with the youngest of the church’s bible class students. I know she had many second-generation students, and may have even had some third-generation ones also. She has such a wonderful spiritual legacy of young lives positively influenced for the cause of Christ. To this day, when I visit that congregation (now “Stallings Drive”), Mrs. Ruby still gets a big hug every time!

One of the songs we sang in Mrs. Ruby’s Little Class was “Oh Be Careful Little Eyes.” It went something like, “Oh be careful little ***eyes*** what you ***see***, for the Father up above is looking down in love, oh be careful little ***eyes*** what you ***see***.” The second and third verses repeated with “ears/hear” and “mouth/say” inserted for “eyes/see.” Of course, there were hand gestures that coincided with the words also. It was, and is, a wonderful diminutive ditty for the pint-sized, but contains a magnificent mantra for the man-sized too!

Self-control is one of the so-called “Christian graces” of 2Peter 1:6, and is also part of the “fruit of the Spirit” highlighted in Galatians 5:23. It is what “Oh Be Careful Little Eyes” is really all about. The term “self-control” is self-explanatory, and needs no definitions from Greek or English for us to comprehend. Understanding “self-control” is obviously not the difficult part- implementing it is another matter! But that little song has it right: if we can just control our eyes, ears, and mouths, the rest pretty much follows.

Think about the importance of self-control with regard to our **eyes- what we see**. Jesus said that *“The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light,”* Matthew 6:22-23. He also said the inverse is true, *“But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.”* It’s no wonder that Job declared, *“I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?”* (Job 31:1) Job evidently understood the warning verbalized by Jesus much later in Matthew 5:28 that *“everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.”* To understand the full ramifications of Jesus’ words, also consider 1Corinthians 6:9 and Hebrews 13:4, which both indicate that those guilty of such will miss heaven. “Oh be careful little (and big) eyes what you see”- Matthew 13:13-17!

Self-control, or the lack of it, also manifests itself with regard to our **ears- what we hear**. Certainly, one cannot always control that which is seen or heard, but such inadvertent or accidental “hearing” or “seeing” is not really the point. King David likely “accidently” first saw Bathsheba bathing herself, but this wasn’t the real problem. His continual looking, inquiring after her, and sending for her became the problem(s)! So too it is with hearing: it is not the *unintentional* hearing of something that we shouldn’t that typically gets us into to trouble. Instead, it is the deliberate listening to gossip (1Timothy 5:13), the filth of dirty jokes and entertainment (Ephesians 5:3-4), and other things to which a child of God has no business listening to that causes problems. “Oh be careful little (and big) ears what you hear”- Romans 10:17!

Perhaps nowhere is self-control more difficult, or more needed, than in regard to our **tongues- what we say.** James has much to say about both the power and danger of the tongue: *“But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison,”* James 3:8ff. Self-control in regard to the tongue sounds hopeless. However, it is important to realize that James is not saying the tongue is uncontrollable. He writes of the inability to *“tame”* it. “Taming” something implies that it can be trusted to do what one wants without constraint or compulsion. In this sense, our tongues can never be fully trusted and tamed. We must always maintain a “tight rein” on the tongue to “make” (rather than trust) it to behave. You know this already- as soon as you “loosen the reins” on your own tongue, the betrayal inevitably occurs. “Oh be careful little (and big) mouths what you say”- Matthew 12:36!

It seems this “little class” song surely has some “big” meanings! (12-4-12)

**Can “One Thing” Keep You From Heaven?**

According to Jesus, “one thing” certainly ***can***keep you from heaven. How else are we to understand the story told in all three of the synopticgospels regarding the rich young ruler?

The only way to get the *rich young ruler* designation for this individual from the story recounted in Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; and Luke 18:18-23 is to combine the accounts of it. Matthew 19:20,21 tells us he was *young;* and Luke 18:18,23 tells us he was both a *ruler* and *rich*.

The story itself is simple and sad. This rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked what he could do to inherit eternal life. Please note that he asked, and was subsequently told by the Savior, what he could **“do”** to inherit eternal life. Apparently neither this young mannor Jesus were subscribers of the modern denominational (and false) concept that salvation is completely divorced from works.

When he was given “the basics” of obedience by Jesus, he indicated compliance to these requirements had been his practice since youth. Then, knowing his heart, Jesus told him, *“One thing thou lack…”* It seems that not only was this young fellow rich, he loved and trusted in his wealth rather than God. Jesus told him what he needed, but did not want, to hear. The sad epitaph to this story is that *“at these words his face fell, and he went away grieved…”* Apparently he was unwilling to do “the one thing” he lacked to ensure *“treasure in heaven.”*

Please note the rich young ruler*’s positive advantages* (from the Mark 10 account). He had **the right *approach/attitude-***he came to Jesus and knelt before Him, v.17a. He had **the right *desire-***he wanted to inherit eternal life, v.17b. He asked **the right *question-***“What must I do?” v.17c. He had **the right *preparation-***obedience to God’s word so far as he knew it, vv.19-20. He even got **the right** (probably would be better worded, “an extremely advantageous”) **emotional response from the Savior-** *“And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him…”* v.21a. He certainly also got **the right answer to his query-** he was told “the one thing” his obedience lacked, v.21b. And yet, despite all of these positive advantages, *“at these words, his face fell, and he went away grieved, for he was one who owned much property.”* v.22. Again, he was unwilling, his previous understanding and dedication notwithstanding, to do the “one thing” his obedience lacked to be complete.

While we likely shake our heads in lamenting derision at this young man’s reaction to Jesus’ saving words, are we being a bit hypocritical here? Consider this: Do **you** lack **“just one thing”** to be completely acceptable to and approved by God? I’m quite sure my list of lacking things is considerably longer than just one! How about yours? Are there things to which you’re still clinging that are part of the “old man of sin/flesh” that was supposed to have been crucified in your obedience to Jesus? Have some of the sins of your youth followed and stayed with you into adulthood? Are there some “sacred cows” of idolatry or carnal thinking and practices which you are unwilling to surrender? Are there worldly habits to which you have clung to rather than carving them out of your life? Have you withheld some part of yourself rather than whole-heartedly committing to love God *“with all your heart* (emotional commitment)*, and with all your soul* (spiritual commitment)*, and with all your mind* (mental commitment)*, and with all your strength* (physical/resource commitment),*”* (Mark12:30? I’m quite sure my list is considerably longer than one, what about yours?

But whether there are “one” or “one hundred” things you lack, there are three critical questions to consider. **Do you know what you lack?** You can’t do what you “lack” if you won’t listen to the Master’s requirements. Look deeply and honestly into the *perfect mirror* of the New Testament, James 1:23-27. **What are you doing about your list of lacking things?** Waiting and hoping to *feel* or *experience* something spectacular is no substitute for doing what Christ says, Luke 6:46-49. **What are you willing to do about your list?** It seems apparent to me that this rich young ruler really expected only praise and acceptance from Jesus. His request appears to have been for approval rather than information. I fear far too often far too many expect Jesus to “accept me as I am” instead of being willing to “become what He wants.” Are you willing to truly become a disciple (follower) of Jesus so that you may inherit the eternal life, or will you too *“go away grieved”?* (6-5-12)

**The Ultimate Opportunist**

We typically have several mental pictures of Satan. The Bible depicts him in various ways: the *Serpent* of Genesis 3; the *Roaring Lion* of 1Peter 5:8; the *Dragon* of Revelation; the *Wolf* of John 10:12; and of course, the *Devil,* and many other proper names and descriptions. If Satan would just appear to us in these visibly obvious forms, he would be so much easier to identify and avoid! But he doesn’t- he’s much more subtle than that, cf. 2Corinthians 11:3.

Even when Satan does announce his presence in overt ways, his approach is typically understated and shrewd, rather than bold and brash. There is, however, one characteristic of *Beelzebul* (Matthew 12:24) that is often overlooked in our assessments of his nature: Satan is an ***opportunist.*** Note Luke 4:13 in this regard, *“And when the devil had finished every temptation* (of Jesus, PCS)*, he departed from Him* ***until an opportune time****.”* After three ‘swings and misses’ wherein he attempted to derail Jesus by getting Him to submit to his will rather than God’s, Satan retreated and waited for an *opportune* time to try again. This is exactly what an *opportunist* does, because it is easier. An opportunist is not always lazy, but he is definitely willing to wait for the times and circumstances when his intended victim is the most susceptible and vulnerable.

Think about it: when did Satan *first* attempt to entice Jesus to sin? The previous event in the chronology of Jesus’ life was His baptism, Luke 3:21-22. This marked the beginning of His public ministry, Luke 3:23. Obviously, Jesus’ baptism is not completely analogous to our own, but there is a comparative point to be made from it. When we are baptized into Christ (cf. Galatians 3:26-27), we are *born again* as *new creatures/babes,* John 3:3-5; 2Corinthians 5:17. Spiritual *babies* are vulnerable. They have not yet matured to the point of having good resistance to the inducements of sin. They have likewise not fully developed the ability to *“have their senses trained to discern good and evil”* (Hebrew 5:14). It is often then that Satan pounces in an effort to regain what He has lost to Christ- our souls! He is an opportunistic predator, and as such, seeks out the *new,* the *weak,* and the *vulnerable* precisely because they are easier to “catch!”

Let’s take this a step further with a question for your consideration: When was the *“opportune time”* for which Satan waited to entice Jesus **again?** While he certainly doesn’t quit trying to *indirectly* influence those who would follow Jesus, the next *direct* attempt in the record of the gospels seems to be Luke 22:3, *“And Satan entered into Judas…”* John 13:2 chronicles the same effort as, *“And during the* (last, PCS) *supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas… to betray Him…”* I find it interesting that Satan’s most targeted efforts to thwart Jesus from His saving purposes were at the very beginning and very end of His public ministry. We already extrapolated a reason for the initial salvo, but such also begs the question: Why at the end?

Perhaps the answer again has to do with Satan’s opportunistic tendencies. Having been initially unsuccessful at tempting Him, Satan sought to undermine Jesus’ efforts to save mankind from eternal damnation by attacking, again, when He was vulnerable. If Satan could make Jesus’ sacrificial death for our sins so agonizingly horrible that He would succumb to the temptation to avoid it altogether, he could still win.

There can be no doubt that Jesus’ moment of greatest temptation was on that night of His betrayal. Luke records His words of petition then as, *“Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me...”* Luke 22:42. The *“cup”* to which Jesus referred was the suffering of the cross, and it definitely was a temptation to Him- *“And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground”* (Luke 22:44). The human side of Jesus did not want to die in agony any more than would you or I. But alas (and thankfully), even in His hour of greatest vulnerability, Jesus did not surrender to Satan’s efforts!

What have we learned? **If Satan was opportunistic enough to tempt the very Son of God at His perceived points of greatest vulnerability, he will certainly do the same to us!** *“But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world,”* 1Peter 5:9. How? Do what Jesus did when He was tempted: 1) turn to God’s word for answers, Matthew 4:4,6,10; and, 2) turn to God in prayer for strength to overcome, Luke 22:42! (8-15-12)

**“Original Intent”**

“Original Intent” is a phrase utilized mostly in matters of law. It has to do with trying to discover what the *originator* of the law, or whatever (usually written) document is under consideration, *intended* with the words utilized. Obviously, *original intent* has much to do with hermeneutics– the study of interpretations of written texts, and especially *biblical hermeneutics*. We all need to correctly interpret**God’s *original intent!***

When the Pharisees sought to *“test”* Jesus (in the early part of Matthew 19) by asking Him about “divorce,” He immediately took them back to the Garden of Eden- to the very *origins* of man. He answered their question, which was obviously meant only to entrap Him, by returning to God’s ***original intent****,* or ***purpose***, for man in the area of marriage. Simply put, the plan was **“one man, one woman, for life.”** God hasn’t changed His mind. Yes, there were *allowances* made through and under the Law of Moses, *“because of the hardness of your hearts”* (v.8), as Jesus admitted. However, He quickly added, *“but* ***from the beginning****, it has not been this way.”* To make it even clearer, Jesus says in v.19, *“whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another commits adultery.”*  Thus, Jesus turned them back to God’s original intent for the man in regard to the institution of marriage.

While we can discern much about the subject *divorce* by simply looking at God’s *original intent****,*** the benefits aren’t limited to that one subject. We can learn a lot about ourselves in several areas by examining God’s *original intent* for us.

For instance, when God created man, it didn’t take long for Him to conclude, *“It is not good for man to be alone.”* (Genesis 2:18) But why was, and is, this true? While most men look forward to and enjoy being “alone” with a rifle, shotgun, or fishing pole in their hands from time to time, or even sitting alone on a tractor all day occasionally, we also really like going home to find our “Eve”! There is nothing like coming home from a day of solitary pursuits, to the warm embrace of your life’s love! Now why is this? Quite simply, because such was God’s *original intent* for us in the way we were created. It is *“not good for man to be alone”* because that’s not the way God made us to live. We were not meant to be solitary creatures- some males of the animal kingdom may have been, but man was not. Bless our “Y” chromosomal hearts, man’s ***physical needs***are very basic: food, the fulfillment of natural (sexual) desires God gave us, and sleep. But, we also have a fundamental ***emotional* need** of **companionship**. Note that God, when meeting this need, did not provide Adam with *Steve,* but *Eve.* Buddies and male friends are all well and good, but God’s *original intent* for man in the area of true companionship was a woman! She meets needs and provides opportunities for man that no other man can- and I’m not talking about sex, I’m talking about companionship! God gave Adam someone with whom to share his hopes, dreams, joys, triumphs, fears, and tragedies in ways that no other man could accomplish. And it is no different now- God’s *original intent* for man is still fulfilled in a *female lifelong companion,* otherwise but elegantly called “wife” in all that the term implies. This was God’s *original intent* for man (and woman).

But there is another basic need of man that becomes apparent from an examination of *original intent* as discerned from Eden. Notice Genesis 2:15, *“Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.”*  Have you ever wondered why Adam had to *“cultivate and keep”* God’s garden paradise? Jehovah had the omnipotence to speak *light* into existence before there was a sun to produce it. He also spoke the world into existence with nothing on which to hang it, and formed lifeless dirt into humanity- the point is **He did not need** **Adam to do His gardening for Him!** So, why was Adam required to *dress and keep* the garden? Because it was part of God’s *original intent* for man*,* and as such a part of man’s created nature to have something to do. That is, man was created with a need to *work.* God did not intend for Adam to just lie around enjoying the fruit of the Garden with nothing to do all day! Why not? Because God didn’t create man to be happy that way, that’s why. Oh sure, most men enjoy laying around watching football or just being “lazy” *sometimes,* but most of us wind up working harder on our “days off” than otherwise- even if we are just *playing!* God created us to work, and we’re not happy for long when there’s nothing to do. Think about it. How often is some level of depression in men related to simply not having a “job” to do, or some project on which to work each day? God’s *original intent* for man in this regard was to work- for man to busy himself toward accomplishing something positive, especially to the support of his family. The New Testament also bears out this truth, *“…let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, that he may have something to share with him who has need.”* (Eph.4:28).

The bottom line is this: God at looked the man He created and knew that it was not good for him to: 1) be alone; or, 2) have nothing to do. Thus, it was God’s *original intent* for man both to ***have***, and ***provide for***, a wife (and family). He needs her for companionship, but he also needs to be busy providing for her. We may over time and with much effort suppress these needs even to the point of convincing ourselves otherwise, but such is not the way God made us, nor the way He intended us to live. “Original intent” can teach us a lot about ourselves, if we will listen to and learn from God who made us. (8-3-10)

**"Outcome-Based" Religion**

Many years ago and where we lived at the time, there was a movement within the school system toward what was termed “outcome-based education.”  As I understood it then, and please pardon what I’m sure is a vast over-simplification, the idea was that “education” was best accomplished when the “right” answer was achieved, regardless of how it was achieved.  Certainly the notion did not allow or excuse cheating, but instead encouraged “free thinking” over formulas and “creativeness” over the memorization of tried and true methods.  In short, as long as you got the right answer eventually, it really didn’t matter how you did so, or how many times you got the wrong answer first (and by the way, there really weren’t any “wrong” answers, just ones that weren’t “as correct”).  Having long-time educators in both my and my wife’s family, this just didn’t seem quite right to me.  I had always thought that it did matter how you got there, and that “getting there” with the least amount of mistakes was important too.  This article isn’t about the school system, or the debatable value of current or past methodology.  But it dawns on me now that many people approach religion, or more specifically, Christianity, with the same type of outcome-based reasoning.

They evaluate and determine what to do or not do based on what they perceive the outcome will be.  Such doesn’t sound too bad on the surface.  There even seem to be some passages that support the idea.  Note for instance, 1Timothy 1:3-5:  *“As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith. But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”* Paul seems to be saying that the “value” of the teaching can be determined by what it produces– fruitless discussions and speculations, or love, a good conscience, and sincere faith.  Indeed, Jesus likewise emphasized at least part of this principle when He said, *“You will know them by their fruits,”* Matthew 7:16.  But is this really the same as determining what we will or won’t do religiously by what we think the “outcome” might be?  I don’t think so.  Please consider the following.

Noah preached to his generation to warn them against the coming flood of destruction.  If “outcome-based” thinking had been involved, he likely would have never made the effort– after all, only eight out of an estimated three billion in the world at that time listened.  But wasn’t it the “right” thing for Noah to do anyway?

Conversely, Jonah did not want to go and preach to Nineveh because he feared the “outcome.”  He even stated in Jonah 4:2 that he knew God would save the Ninevites if they repented, and he wanted them killed.  He tried to forestall God’s plan to save them by fleeing in the opposite direction. But God made him go preach anyway, because it was the “right” thing to do– regardless of the outcome, cf. Jonah 4:11.

But “outcome-based” notions don’t just affect decisions regarding preaching or not preaching.  We make decisions every day as Christians that affect not only ourselves, but also others.  **If we decide to act or not act because of what we think the outcome may be, are we not putting ourselves in God’s place?** He instructs us regarding “right” things to do– regardless of whatever “outcome” we either fear they may have, or that they in reality do have, and we must do them because He says they’re “right”!  Hopefully one passage will suffice to drive this point home.  Consider 1Peter 2:18-20,  *“Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.”*  There are times when doing the “right” thing, as determined by God, has immediate detrimental effects on us personally.  But it is still the “right” thing to do regardless of the short-term consequence, or outcome.  We must determine our activities by what God says is “right”- not by the outcome produced by our actions- whether they are real or imagined.  (5-31-16)

**Oxen, Mangers, and Life**

I appreciate simple things. Simple, yet effective statements included. I even like well-thought out and well-stated bumper stickers and t-shirts. Admittedly, it is sometimes challenging to say something well in simple ways and with few words, especially for us preachers! But the “Preacher” of Proverbs had it down pat. Obviously, the short, sage, pithy, and profound statements found in this great Old Testament book originate with God, so they are slices of divine perspective- not just some sound bite “funny” from a t-shirt or bumper sticker. Such makes the book Proverbs not just a “book of wisdom,” but a “book of ***divine*** wisdom.”

Since many of the people to whom Jesus often spoke were farmers, and the predominant culture was agrarian, He often used agricultural terms and illustrations. The proverbial preacher also utilized these farm-based illustrations to teach us about life and godliness. Growing up on a farm and being the son of a retired Vocational Agriculture teacher (33 years), I especially appreciate these short, profound truths that provide us with many simple, yet effective lessons of and for life. But probably my favorite of all the proverbs is found in 14:4, ***“Where no oxen are, the manger is clean, but much increase comes by the strength of the ox.”*** This passage is brimming with pertinent points. Please consider a few of them with me.

**You don’t have to do it all yourself in life**. A single man cannot pull a plow, but a single man can feed and care for a single ox (or multiple oxen) who can pull a plow! So often in life, “success” is not determined by brute strength, but by the ability to think, reason, work intelligently. The ox can pull the plow, but cannot keep the manger clean for himself. Take care of the details for your spouse, boss, or workers that they cannot handle, or are not best suited to handle, themselves so that their “strengths” can be more efficiently and appropriately utilized.

**Somebody has to do the “dirty” work.** Cleaning out stalls or barns is not pleasant work. It is typically hot and always smelly work. Oxen are not particularly “clean” animals. There is nothing pleasant or enjoyable about mucking mangers. But mucking mangers and stalls from time to time is a whole lot easier than pulling a plow six days a week! There are a lot of “dirty” tasks in life that are neither pleasant nor enjoyable, but must be done nonetheless. Putting them off or refusing to do them altogether usually has catastrophic results. Never become too big or too good to do the “dirty” work that has to be done. Manger mucking is good for everyone from time to time. It keeps our humility and perspective in shape!

**You can have “muck-free” mangers, but only if you don’t have oxen.** You can live a monastic life alone on a mountain somewhere, but you won’t accomplish anything of value for yourself or anyone else that way. Life is “dirty” and “messy.” It is filled with challenges, obstacles, and difficulties. The only way to avoid these is to avoid really living. People have problems. People in families have problems. You can avoid these by never having a family of your own. But in so doing you miss one of the greatest joys of life. People in churches have problems too. You can avoid these by never being part of a church family. But in so doing you again miss one of the greatest joys of life. You can isolate yourself from family and church problems, but such is selfish and accomplishes nothing for yourself or anyone else. *“Much increase comes by the strength of the ox.”* Families and church families have tremendous potentials of strength for those willing to “muck the manger” from time to time by dealing with the problems that just go with people.

See what I mean? There are very profound lessons of life and godliness that come from simple, agrarian truths presented in God’s book of wisdom. And you don’t have to “raised on a farm” to see them either! (11-10-15)

**Parents, Children, and Discipline**

Last Monday I was out in the shop repairing a damaged headlight, and had the radio on while I worked. The stations are pretty limited in a metal building, so the radio was tuned to one of only a couple of stations that would come in clearly. I wasn’t really listening, but the “host” caught my attention when he began to give parenting advice. Since the Bible also has good deal to say about this subject, my interested was piqued. He quoted unnamed studies that sought to quantify the harm done to children when their parents yell at them. But the logic fascinated me. Apparently, parents that forgo corporal punishment have a difficult time getting their children to respect and obey them. And since, according to the host, “time out” and “sending them to their room” often have little effect on their behavior, parents have increasingly resorted to yelling at their children. Evidently, the only “teeth” manifested in efforts to discipline their children are shown when yelling! The best that I could follow the point of the piece, the results of the study were that “yelling” might be just as detrimental to the psyche of a child as spanking. Go figure.

 Don’t get me wrong- yelling is certainly not a good form of discipline. But, the lengths to which our *evolved* society will go to avoid the “wise counsel” of God on this subject is truly amazing. The book of Proverbs is replete with divinely inspired parenting guidance. It includes corporal punishment (13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 29:15-17), but contains so much more, cf. 1:8 – 7:27! What emerges from this and other biblical texts on effective discipline (training) is that it must include three elements: 1) **education** so that they know the right things; 2) **encouragement** so that they understand why these are the right things; and 3) **enforcement** so that the right things are obeyed. While the *punitive* aspect is vital to insure that non-compliance has unpleasant consequences, without the *instructive* and *inspiring* aspects, “discipline” soon becomes manipulative and tyrannical. No one is encouraging you to “beat” or “abuse” your children- such would surely violate Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21; and the overall purpose of godly discipline. But remember, discipline without corrective and punitive measures is just advice!

Surely we understand these principles from everyday life. Who wants to live in a society without lawsthat *specify* and *encourage* right conduct, and law-enforcementthat *punishes* violators?Not me- such would be chaos! But sadly, chaos is exactly what exists in far too many homes where “enlightened” parents refuse to educate, encourage, and enforce discipline. Teachers are leaving schools in droves because they cannot teach children who have not been properly disciplined at home to be respectful and obedient.

But the strongest case that corrective/punitive measures are to be included in discipline comes from God’s treatment of His “children.” While the Old Testament certainly contains “rules” by which God’s children were ***educated*** in what was “right” and “wrong,” and it contains a multitude of examples wherein God ***encouraged*** them to understand and obey “for their own good” (as in Deuteronomy 6:3), it also is filled with examples of His **enforcement**of His laws through punitive measures (see 1Corinthains 10:1-11)! Did God not “love” His children? Wasn’t He afraid punishment would damage their psyche, or His relationship with them? Did He avoid punishment because He wanted His children to *love* rather than *fear* Him? Hebrews 12:5-11 makes it crystal clear that God *disciplines,* including *punitively,* His children precisely ***because*** He loves and wants the best for them!

There should be no doubt that *love* is a better motivator than *fear.* 1Corinthians 13:13 says that love is even greater than *faith* and *hope*. But, our “perfect Parent,” God the Father, also utilizes punitive discipline, and the fear of it, to help enforce right conduct until love and respect can develop and grow as we mature. Why else does He tell us of the horrors of hell in Mark 9:42-48, or of His past punishment of *angels, cities,* and the *whole world* in 2Peter 2:4-6?

Should children “fear” their parents? Not unless and until they violate the training their parents have instilled through education and encouragement- then they should fear the punitive results of their own conduct their parents **lovingly** but **consistently** employ! But this is just the example and instruction of the Creator of the Universe. Obviously our evolved and enlightened society surely knows better…. and continues to reap the unfortunate and disastrous results of it everyday! (3-5-13)

**A Parent’s Love**

From time to time, I have the opportunity to study with a young couple who want to get married, regarding what God intended and requires marriage to be (actually, it’s mandatory if I perform the wedding). In trying to underscore the importance of true love and maturity to the relationship, I’ve often utilized statements along these lines: “A young man doesn’t really understand what true love, maturity, and the awesome responsibility of family ‘headship’ is all about until he has a child. Prior to that point, he’s lived a selfish life. He cried to get what he wanted when he was little, perhaps pouted or became angry to get it when he was older, and bullied, talked, or cajoled his way into getting it as a young man. He may even marry for purely selfish reasons! Other people in his life enabled him to remain selfish by mostly playing along or giving in to his wants. They could have said “No,” and refused to continue to placate his demands **because they weren’t dependent upon him**. But once he becomes a father, everything usually (and certainly should!) change. That little screaming, cooing life that faintly resembles him is different- it **is completely dependent** upon him in ways that his parents, siblings, friends, girlfriend, and/or wife never were! This new life that came from him therefore melts his selfish heart, and hopefully matures his mind and conduct.”

It is probably about this same time, and for the same reason (the birth of his child), that a young man begins to truly comprehend God’s love for us. He begins to understand how God ***invested*** some of Himself in mankind from Genesis 1:27, *“And God created man in His own image…”* when he sees his own characteristics reflected in his child. He begins to understand his own ***complete dependence*** on His heavenly Father (from Romans 5:6, *“For while we were still helpless…”*) when he’s trying to comfort his own crying child in the middle of the night. He begins to understand ***true love***(from Romans 5:8, *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us…”*)when his own heart wants to break at the least hurt of his child. And He begins to understand ***true sacrifice*** (from Romans 5:10, *“For while we were yet enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son…”*)when all of his selfish desires and pursuits are willingly sacrificed for the slightest benefit of his child.

While this young man may have “known” about these things previously on some level, through this life-changing bundle of joy, he now “understands” a whole lot more about how God thinks, feels, and acts toward us.

The human birth of Jesus was necessitated by one thing: Man’s need of salvation from sin. Romans 6:23 tells us that the just penalty for sin is death. Unless all men were to die for their own sins, a Perfect Man would have to die in their stead. Being sinless, His death could then atone for other’s sins since He would have none of His own needing atonement (cf.Hebrews 9:7,11-14). But by intrinsic nature, “God” cannot die- He is eternal. Therefore, in order to atone for man’s sins, God had to assume human form. This He did by being born of a virgin (of divine, rather than human, progeny), *“Jesus of Nazareth.”*  Then *“the fullness of Deity…was in bodily form”* (Colossians 2:9)- and this *human form* of the very Son of God could atone for man’s sins through death. Simply put: **the *birth* of Jesus is important because it allowed Him to *die* for our sins.**

But unless we’re really sharp and studious of the Word, we may not really appreciate **God’s** *investment of Himself* in human form, or our *complete dependence* on **Him**, or the *true love* **He** has for us, or the true nature of **His** *sacrifice*; that is, until we have children of our own in which **we** have *invested ourselves*, who are (at least initially) so *completely dependent* upon **us**, who **we** *love so completely*, and for whom **we** are willing to *sacrifice our very lives* to save. Now do you get the picture? (12-20-11)

**The *Partnership* that Produces Salvation**

Man cannot save himself. No one in the biblical record ever did so. But acknowledging such does not negate the fact that man has, throughout time, participated in his own salvation. Man has always participated in his own salvation by *partnering* with God. This partnership is otherwise known as *fellowship*, or *covenant relationship*. These may sound like complicated spiritual terms, but their meaning is quite simple: Man does what God says, and as a result of his faithful obedience, God graciously saves him. Let’s look at an example to help us see this vital concept.

Noah was born some 1056 years after the Creation. Given the facts that men lived for centuries prior to the Great Deluge, and that their procreative powers also lasted for centuries (the *Patriarchs* prior to the Flood were between 65 and 500 years old when fathering children!), it is easy to see how *“men began to multiply on the face of the land”* as Genesis 6:1 records. However, with this tremendous population explosion also came the multiplication of wickedness on the earth- *“Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was on evil continually.”* (v.5) The wickedness of man produced regret in the mind of God, and He decided to destroy mankind, vv.6-7. *“But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord”* because he was *“a righteous man, blameless in his time;* ***Noah walked with God****.”* (vv.8-9) Note that Noah had “partnered” with God by living in such a way as to be in fellowship with God. So, despite God’s decision to destroy the world, He saved Noah and his family. But here’s an important question: ***How* did God save Noah?**  Did He just miraculously pick up Noah and his family, hold them in His almighty hand, and blow everyone else off the planet before returning them safely onto the ground? Hardly!

God saved Noah by giving him information. Specifically, He gave him instructions which, **if followed**, would save Noah and his family from the coming judgment of destruction, vv.14-21. Notice specifically from these verses, the reason God gives for saving Noah, *“I will establish* (or *confirm*) *My covenant with you…”* Noah, in faith, did *“all that God had commanded him,”* v.22. As a result of Noah’s faithful obedience to the requirements of God’s instructions, he was saved by God’s grace. The *partnership,* or *covenant,* between Noah and God allowed both to participate in his salvation. Again, we must answer an important question: Would God have graciously saved Noah had he failed to follow the instructions given him? The answer is an obvious “no.”

Given these things, why do so many today assume that God will save them completely by His grace with no mixture of their faithful obedience to His instructions? Man’s salvation, then and now, is achieved by the *partnership* of God’s abundant grace with man’s faithful obedience- *“For by grace you have been saved through faith…”* (Ephesians 2:8). Grace is God’s part, and obedient faith is man’s part. When the question was asked in James 2:14, *“What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?”,*  the answer was given in v.17, *“Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”* If Noah’s faith had been insufficient to cause him to obey the instructions God gave him, he would have died in the Flood like everyone else!

That was Noah, what about us? 1Peter 3:20 utilizes the faithful obedience of Noah, and the part it played in his salvation, to introduce the point of v.21, *“And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you- not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience…”*  Just like Noah was saved *by God’s grace* in partnershipwith *his obedient faith,* we too are saved in the same way. Noah was told by God to do several things that he and his family might be saved, Hebrews 11:7. He was told to build an ark, gather and store food and provisions in it, and get in when God told him to do so! These commands he faithfully obeyed in order to receive God’s gracious salvation. It’s not really different for us. We, too, face a coming judgment of destruction. God graciously tells us how to avoid it, *“He that believes and is baptized shall be saved,”* Mark 16:16. How can we expect to be saved if we don’t do what God tells us to do in order to avoid it? (10-11-11)

Is Man *Passive* or *Active* in Salvation?

“Passive” means that we are not the primary one acting in an event, even though we are present and may participate to some lesser degree. Perhaps this is an over-simplification, but it is the difference between being “active” and being “acted upon.”

Many believe that man is entirely “passive” in regard to his own salvation- that he is “acted upon” by God, and has very little, if any, “active” responsibility himself. Let’s see if this is how God saved Noah in the very first case of salvation. Please consider the Word of God with me:

* The world was exceedingly wicked, and God decided to *“blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land…”* Genesis 6:5-7. So far, so good. What’s next?
* *“But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord,”* Genesis 6:8. The word translated *“favor”* is also accurately rendered as *“grace”* in some versions. What was it about Noah that set him apart from the rest of the wicked world in the eyes of God?
* *“Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time*; *Noah walked with God,”* Genesis 6:9. It certainly appears that God’s grace was manifested toward Noah because of his righteous obedience to God, in which case Noah was certainly not “passive.” OK, so what did God’s grace do for Noah?
* *“Then God said to Noah, ‘The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth.”* The first thing God’s grace did for Noah was to warn him of the coming destruction of the flood. OK, what else did God’s grace do for Noah?
* *“Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood….”* (God’s grace then gave very specific instructions on exactly how to make the ark),Genesis 6:14-16. So, the second thing God’s manifested grace did for Noah was to tell him how to prepare for the coming destruction. What else did God’s grace do for Noah?
* *“But I will establish my covenant with you….”* (God’s grace also gave additional specific instructions regarding *who* and *what* Noah should take with him into the ark- his family, animals, and provisions), Genesis 6:17-21. So, how did Noah respond to God’s manifested grace?
* *“Thus Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did,”* Genesis 6:22 (see also Genesis 7:5).
* Then came the rain, and the ensuing flood, *“And all flesh that moved on the earth perished, birds and cattle and beasts and every swarming thing that swarms upon the earth, and all mankind; of all that was on the dry land, all in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life, died,”* Genesis 7:21-22.

Now, let’s recap. Was Noah saved by “grace”? Absolutely! God’s grace warned him of the coming destruction, and told him how to be saved from it. Does Noah’s salvation by grace mean that he was entirely “passive” in regard to it? Having a trusting faith that was willing to: **believe** God regarding *“things not yet seen”* (cf. Hebrews 11:7; i.e. *rain,* Genesis 2:5-6); **obey** God by gathering enough gopher wood to build an ark 450 feet x 75 feet x 45 feet, furnish it with a year’s provisions for yourself, your family, and representative animals of the earth; and then to **enter and stay in that ark** for a year certainly does not sound “passive,” does it? God surely saved Noah by grace, but such did not exclude Noah’s **active obedience** in the process. Noah did not “earn” salvation by his works, but he certainly did have to obey God’s commands in order to be saved by His grace.

In response to these things, we might be prone to say, “But that was *prior* to Christ- we are saved differently today.” Are we? Let’s consider what the apostle Paul wrote, by the inspiration of God, about grace and salvation some 30 years after the death of Jesus, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,* ***instructing us*** *to* ***deny ungodliness******and worldly desires*** *and to* ***live sensibly, righteously****, and* ***godly******in the present age****, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds,”* Titus 2:11-14. We are saved by God’s grace just like Noah: it warns us of a coming destruction of judgment, and tells us what to do in order to be saved from it! *“…the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through by water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you…”* 1Peter 3:20-21. Salvation is not simply not “passive”- in fact, as we’ve learned from Noah, it never has been. (2-11-14)

**Patient Faith versus Dead Faith**

There is a huge difference between being *patient* and being *dead*, obviously. This is true physically and spiritually- which is equally apparent. In our last article, the importance of “patient faith,” and trusting God and His ways, was emphasized through the story of Abraham and Sarah. Eventually, as we learned, they stopped trying “help” God (through *adoption* and *surrogacy*) fulfill His promise to give them a son. Instead, Abraham and Sarah finally learned to patiently trust and obey God. He then, in turn, blessed them with Isaac, the son He had promised. But…

Being “patiently faithful” and trusting in God did not mean that Abraham and Sarah just sat down and waited for God to fulfill His promise of “giving” them a child! While there is no need to be crass or crude, Romans 4:18-21 makes it clear that although Abraham’s body was *“as good as dead,”* his faith was very much alive and well. *“In hope against hope he believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And without becoming weak in faith, he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able to perform.”*  Simply put, Isaac was not born by immaculate conception. However, Isaac’s conception is not really the point.

The point is that while Abraham and Sarah’s faith became “patiently obedient,” such does not mean that they did nothing and just waited for God to act in their behalf. They were, instead, faithfully obedient to God’s promise and each other in the matter. All of which also illustrates the principle so plainly taught in James 2:17, *“Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”* If their faith had not led them to be active participants, God would have never blessed their efforts with the child, Isaac. Surely we can see the implications of these things in regard to the “blessing” of salvation. Is salvation a “gift” from God? Absolutely, *“For by grace have you been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast,”* Ephesians 2:8-9. But please also consider this question: Was Isaac a “gift” from God? Again, the answer is “absolutely,” cf. Genesis 15:2,4 and Romans 4:17. However, we must acknowledge that the “gift” of Isaac by God did not preclude Abraham’s active participation in order to receive it. If we can see this with Abraham’s faith in receiving God’s gift of Isaac, why can’t we see it in regard to our faith requiring active participation in order to receive God’s gift of salvation? Especially when this is one of the points being made in Romans 4?

However, there is another application of these things that needs to be made. As we now understand that God’s grace combines with our active and obedient faith to provide salvation, we must also comprehend that just arriving at the point of salvation from sin is not the end of the matter. After becoming saved by grace and faith, we do not then just patiently await Christ’s return while doing nothing. Surely this “dead faith” of the sort described in James 2:14-26, and does not result in eternal salvation, vv.24,26. In fact, James uses Abraham to illustrate this point in v.23, *“and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God.”*  Having now understood that Abraham’s faith was rewarded with the gift of Isaac only when he acted in accordance with God’s will, can we not also see that the same is true for us in our continued walk of faith? We are not assured of salvation just by an initial act of obedience, but by continual acting in faith according to God’s word, *“Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?”,* v.21.

What’s the bottom line? None of us will be eternally saved by God’s grace without faith. But this faith that saves by God’s grace is also active and obedient while patiently waiting for God to carry out His purposes through us. (2-25-14)

***Peculiar* People**

If speaking of present humanity, some of us are just... well, “odd.” From hairdos that look like they were created with a blender (that perhaps had the remains of a fruit smoothie still in it), to poking holes in all sorts of weird body parts, to looking like we fell face-first into a box of fishhooks, some of us these days are just odd. But such is not exactly what Peter meant in 1Peter 2:9 when he wrote, *“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a* ***peculiar*** *people…”*  Was he implying that Christians are supposed to be “weird,” or “odd”? I’d have to say the answer is both “No” and “Yes.” Let me explain.

The Greek word the King James translators rendered as *“peculiar”* actually means “a possession; one’s own property.” More recent translations reflect this definition with *“a people for God’s own possession”.* The *peculiarity* of Christians is that they belong especially to God. I know what you’re thinking, “But doesn’t *everyone* belong to God?” In the absolute sense of being His creation, yes, of course they do. However, Peter is talking about Christians as being separate from the world. Everyone belongs to God *by right of creation-* but we have no choice or activity in that. Christians, on the other hand, choose to belong to God *by special commitment* and *covenant.* This makes Christians different in that they belong to God in an additional and special sense. This makes them *peculiarly* His by their choice and covenant.

But Christians, by their choice of and covenant with God to be His people, are also “different” from others in additional ways.

Christians **think differently** from the world. Worldly people think selfishly- “It’s my life, I’ll live it any way I please as long as it lasts.” This mindset is described in Titus 1:15, *“… to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their consciences are defiled.”*  But Christians tend to think more selflessly- “God paid for my sins with the sacrifice of His dear Son, so I need to live for him.” Thus, God’s people have a different mindset- one that is *“…transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”* (Romans 12:2)

Christians also **feel differently** from the world. Worldly people love things that are carnal and temporary- like possessions and physical life, 1John 2:15, *“For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.”*  Christians, by contrast, love things that are spiritual and eternal- like the Word of God (1Peter 1:23; 2:2), worshipping God (John 4:23-24), their brethren (1Peter 1:22), and everlasting life (Luke 1:77; Hebrews 5:9).

And finally, Christians **act differently** from the world. Because worldly people *think* and *feel* carnally, they also *live* carnally. They live only to please themselves, *“and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”* (Romans 8:8) But Christians live differently- Paul expressed it this way in Galatians 5:24 *“Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”* Christians strive to please not themselves, but God, *“Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves…For even Christ did not please Himself…”* (Romans 15;1,3)

Christians aren’t to be different from everyone else just for the sake of being different. But being *“a people for God’s own possession”* requires that they think, feel, and live differently through their obedience to His word- *“so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God…”* Colossians 1:10. Being “different” like this is the best way to live now, and the only way to live eternally. (10-5-11)

**People Say…. But God Says….**

*“If any may speak, let him speak as the oracles of God…”* 1Peter 4:11 (KJV). This should be the desire of every Christian, and especially every preacher and teacher of God’s word. Unfortunately, many who claim to speak for God say things that are contrary to His Word. This is not a new problem- Jesus confronted it also, *“But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as their doctrine the precepts of men,”* Matthew 15:9. Notice some current examples:

People say, “There are many faiths, and all have their place.” But God says, *“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord,* ***one faith****, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”* Ephesians 4:4

People say, “We’re saved by faith only.” But God says, *“You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only…. For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”* James 2:24,26

People say, “Baptism is important, but not essential.” But God says, *“And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you- not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience- through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,”* 1Peter 3:21.

People say, “Once you’re saved, you’re always saved.” But God says, *“Take care, brethren, let there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, while it is still called ‘Today,’ lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”*  Hebrews 3:12-13

People say, “It doesn’t matter what you believe and practice, as long as you’re sincere.” But God says, *“Not every one who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven.”*  Matthew 7:21

People say, “Women preachers are acceptable.” But God says, *“But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.”* 1Timothy 2:12

People say, “It’s OK, it’s just a ‘little’ lie.” But God says, *“Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.”* Ephesians 4:25

People say, “It’s the thought that counts.” But God says, *“Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.”* James 4:17

People say, “It’s just bible class/worship.” But God says, *“and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.”* Hebrews 10:24-25

People say, “It’s just church.” But God says, *“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood.”*  Acts 20:28

People say, “It’s my life to live any way that I choose.” But God says, *“Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing to be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then lust us pursue peace and the building up of one another.”* Roman 14:16-19

People say, “Health, family, and happiness- these are the most important things.” But God says, *“For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man given in exchange for his soul?”* Matthew 16:25-26

People say a lot of things, but it’s what God says that counts. *“He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges Him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day,”* John 12:48. Look the passages up and read them for yourselves, but please stop listening to what *people* say, and starting listening to ***God.*** (12-22-14)

**People vs. Things**

Many years ago- I’ve long since forgotten the source and exact words, a preacher provided the audience with a self-test for determining where their *treasure* and *heart* were really located. The test was based on Matthew 6:19-21 and went something like this: **“Do you love *people* and use *things* to help them?** Or, **do you love *things* and use *people* to get them?”** I found this to be a very insightful way of self-determining the *spirituality* or *carnality* of the heart. While we would all like to think the best of ourselves, let us remember that we generally judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their actions. Though we would all like to think that we *love people* and *use things* as God directed, our actions often reveal a different reality about our affections.

I recently had a “moment of self-discovery” that reminded me what should have been my true priorities all along. Though the details are relatively unimportant for our purposes here, I got so wrapped up in “things” that I thought ought to be done and doing them, that I neglected some “people” that needed my help and attention. The “things” I thought needed doing were good and noble enough all right, but should not have been given priority over people who needed my encouragement. You see, this people vs. things problem can affect us all at times- which is why we must constantly *examine ourselves* (2Corinthians 13:5) with regard to our intentions and actions.

All of this reminds me of Martha in Luke 10. As Jesus and His disciples travelled along toward to Jerusalem, they came to *“a certain village”* (John 11:1 identifies it as Bethany) which was the home of Martha and her sister Mary. Martha welcomed the Lord and His disciples into her home, v.38. Mary situated herself at Jesus’ feet and was evidently thoroughly engrossed with what He was teaching those assembled, v.39. *“But Martha was distracted with all her preparations,”* v.40. That was me: *distracted with things in preparation.*  Martha apparently became so frustrated with all there seemingly was to do, and with the lack of assistance that she was getting from her sister, that she finally complained to the Lord in the latter part of v.40. But note carefully the Lord’s response in v.41, *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many* ***things****....”*  Did you get that? Martha was worried and bothered about “things” instead the “person”- Jesus, the Christ! Mary, on the other hand, had singularly devoted her attention to “person” and was relatively unconcerned about all those “things” which had consumed her sister. Jesus settled the matter by saying, *“Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”* I had become a Martha, overly concerned with “things,” instead of a Mary who lovingly devoted herself to the “person” and words of Jesus Christ.

For those of you who, like me, are sometimes more like Martha than we’d like to admit, “things” do still have to get done at times. But let’s remember to never put these “things” before “people,” or the things that are of greater spiritual importance.

There is one additional point I’d like to make from Jesus’ words in this text. Note that Jesus also told Martha that though she was *“worried and bothered about many things;* ***only one thing is necessary…”*** (v.42a). I may be wrong about this, but I don’t think the *“one thing”* Jesus mentioned had anything to do with how many dishes of food Martha was preparing. The *“one thing”* that was *“necessary”* was a reference to what Mary had been doing- *feeding* on the Word of God. Martha had been concerned with the physical food she thought she needed to provide for Jesus, and He is saying that the spiritual *food* He had been providing Mary and the others was much more important. He had been giving them *“the bread of God…come down from heaven,* (that) *gives life to the world”* John 6:33-35. Please join me in striving to keep the *spiritual* always ahead of the *physical*, OK?(9-27-11)

**Perception and Reality**

(Note: Please excuse this departure from the more spiritually *educational* type of articles normally provided for one that is more personal and editorial. We’ll get back to teaching next time. –PCS)

It’s been a busy week. A couple of weeks ago my mother fell and broke her *other* hip- she broke the first one last September. She’d already been through surgery to repair it and had been moved to rehab when Donna and I arrived in East Texas. We came to supply some much-needed relief to my worn-out sisters who had been providing stellar care for Mom, and Dad, who by her absence was alone. Both parents were somewhat confused and disoriented by the sudden separation (after 66+ years of marriage!), and needed familiar faces to help calm and reassure them. But now, in the pre-dawn light of our hotel room, as we make our way back to Indianapolis, reflections of the week creep into my waking mind….

I’ve often heard it said, “Perception **is** reality.” This is patently not true. Perception only becomes a self-imposed reality when we close our eyes/minds to learning additional truth. Then, and only then, does perception become **a** reality for us. Open-minded individuals, eager for and receptive to additional truth (which means they are still learning, growing, and progressing in understanding) have a constantly evolving reality. What has this to do with my 84 and 93 year old parents? Glad you asked!

My mother spent her early years in the deep sand flats of Camp Tonkawa in East Texas…. in the 1930’s. So, it was very touching and yet tremendously refreshing, to hear her effusive praise of a young (late teens to early twenties, I’d guess) black male who answered her call late in the night to help her to the restroom. It was, she readily admitted, an awkward situation for them both. They could not have been more opposite in many ways. He was young, black, and male with what looked to her like “worms” in his hair that was tied up in a spikey bunch on top of his head. He also had what appeared to be a “nail” through his ear from top to bottom. But she was old, white, and female, with the wispy remains of ivory hair tied back in a single ponytail. But there they were, together, in the middle of the night. In telling us of the event, she spoke multiple times of how kind, gentle, and polite he was in doing what had to be done with great grace, care, and concern. Whatever “perceptions” either of them had of the other going in, were quickly erased by the growth of their “reality” through understanding (and compassion).

Then there’s Dad, who was left “on his own” at the assisted living facility. “Alone” is definitely a relative term. I had to shoo four female staff members away from their doting, hugging, and “loving” on him in his room so he would eat his lunch- they even call him “Daddy Buck” like his grand and great grandchildren! It is truly pitiful…. in a most pleasantly pleasing way. But it’s not just the staff there that seemed to have had their realities changed by evolving perceptions….

I arrived at the assisted living and found Dad had left his room to join “the ladies” at the dining table for their evening meal. It wasn’t hard to locate them. Due to near complete deafness, Dad speaks quite loudly. So, I just followed the sound to find him at the head of the table (at their insistence I was told) with six proverbial “little old ladies”…. and “ladies” they surely were. As I approached, they were all seated at the table, encircled by a collection of walkers, wheelchairs, and walking sticks and canes, but were graciously excited to have me join them as they visited and waited for their food. But after the trays were placed before them, they paused, and interrupted Dad’s loud story to say, “Joe Buck, say the prayer for us so we can eat.” Then they bowed as he offered thanks to the Heavenly Father for their “reasonable portion of health” and His “love, mercy, and care” of them all, as well as expressing gratitude for their food. It was a touching moment, but it wasn’t over with the “Amen.” One of the ladies, seated by Dad but looking directly at me, and speaking in a voice low enough that only I could hear, said, “If any prayers reach heaven, *his* surely do.” She further explained how much they all loved, enjoyed, appreciated, and had been impacted by the godly example of my parents. Surely, her “reality” had been influenced by new “perceptions” gained at the assisted living facility in the twilight of her years.

We may indeed live in a society that seeks and likes to *“call evil good, and good evil”* and *“substitute darkness for light and light for darkness”* as well as *“bitter sweet, and sweet for better”-* which results in becoming *“wise in their own eyes, and clever in their own sight”* (Isaiah 5:20), but unless we open our eyes and minds to real TRUTH from God’s word, our *perception* will become our own self-imposed *reality.* However, I’m extremely grateful for some octogenarians and one 93 year old who continue to learn and grow in, and influence others for, truth and righteousness! (8-5-17)

**Perpetual Infancy**

The birth of a child is a blessed event. It brings such joy and happiness- and responsibility. As parents, perhaps for the first time in our lives, we learn what it means to give unconditional love. Probably also for the first time in our lives, we feel the awesome responsibility of what it means to have someone else be completely and totally dependent upon us. This tremendous onus causes some parents to become obsessively compulsive about matters of nutrition, cleanliness, health, and general care of the child. The doctors are barraged with phone calls, visits, and questions about every tendency and trait of the child- whether real or imagined. Constant comparisons are made to other children with regard to growth-chart percentiles, and other developmental abilities. In short, anything and everything is tried or done that could possibly provide any advantage for growth and development for this new “bundle of joy!” But let’s think about some of these things in a spiritual connotation.

Being *“born again”* (cf. John 3:3,5) on the basis of faith and through the waters of baptism is the process by which one becomes a *“new creature”* (2Corinthians 5:17), or *“newborn babe”* (1Peter 2:2), in Christ. In many ways, *spiritual* growth and development parallels its *physical* counterpart. *Spiritual* growth requires attention to nutrition, cf. 1Peter 2:1-2; rest, Philippians 4:6-7; cleanliness, 2Peter 2:20; and exercise, 2Peter 1:5-8. These things are a lesson unto themselves, but are not here the direct focus of our attention.

What happens when a *physical* child doesn’t grow, develop, and mature according the normal order? There is immediate concern, investigation as to the preventative cause, and corrective and additional assistive steps are implemented. But what happens when a ***spiritual babe* in Christ** does not grow, develop, and mature? Is there a parallel level of concern, investigation, and assistance given? Sadly, such is usually not the case. **Spiritual** family members (fellow church members), parents (those who taught and brought them forth by the gospel), and grandparents (church leaders) are typically not nearly as concerned about growth, development, and maturity as physical parents, despite the eternal consequences which are implied by the deficiency. Thus, “Maybe he will grow eventually” becomes the sad response to the situation. Why does this lamentable circumstance exist?

Perhaps there is one overlooked or unrealized key truth to these matters: **We fail to recognize that one cannot continue to live in a state of perpetual infancy.** As a physical child that, for whatever reason, fails to grow will die, so too will a spiritual child that fails to develop beyond infancy perish. One just cannot remain a babe, or child, perpetually- *physically* or *spiritually!* How we fail to grasp this point in the spiritual realm while so clearly comprehending it in the physical one is unfathomable. Doesn’t the Parable of the Sower clearly teach this lesson in Matthew 13:21? The *young plant* that sprouted in the *rocky soil* had *“no firm root in himself,* ***but is only temporary****, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word,* ***immediately he falls away****.”* Having *“no firm root”* is surely an indication of a lack of growth and development that seals its fate. But please remember, this part of the parable is not about dying “plants”- but dying Christians who fail to grow and mature!

Let’s extrapolate these things to one more point: Churches composed of perpetual spiritual infants will suffer the same tragic fate as its individual members. Why is this so? It is the *spiritually mature* who *reproduce!* Spiritual infants are not sufficiently developed, obviously, to reproduce. Thus, churches will not, and in fact, cannot, survive in a state of perpetual infancy. A congregation that does not *grow, develop, mature,* and *reproduce* will die.

I fear that we, generally speaking, have become all too comfortable with the notion of perpetual spiritual infancy. If so, whether sooner or later, spiritual death is inevitable. The good news is, however, that it doesn’t *have* to be this way- we *can,* and *must* **think** and **do** better! So, let’s take seriously the task of *raising* and *rearing* babes in Christ to spiritual maturity for their ultimate good, and the long-term good of the Cause of Christ! (1-15-13)

**The Person in the Mirror**

I have said it so often, others have begun quoting me back to me- but I still believe that “The greatest power of the human mind is the ability to justify self” is absolutely true. We can always find a way to justify doing what we really want to do- even if we profess it to be wrong in most “other cases.” The underlying cause of this ability often has to do with self-perception. We just see ourselves differently than we really are. Our self-perception is, therefore, skewed.

Because of this distorted view, we tend to think we’re the exception to the rule(s)- that they somehow just don’t apply to us. James 1:23-24 addresses this point: *“For if any one is a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he had immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.”* The Greek word here translated into our English word “forgotten” does often mean “to forget” (as in Matthew 16:5 where the disciples “forgot” to buy bread). But it also can mean to “neglect” or “no longer care for” (as in Hebrews 13:16 where Christians are urged not to “neglect” doing good and sharing). Is James therefore saying that the person he is describing is simply absent-minded, or that he chooses to ignore what he saw when looking in the mirror? Given our human tendency to justify ourselves, I think James is saying that this person chose to “neglect” or “no longer care for” the accurate reflection of the mirror. Then, after walking away from the truth-telling mirror, he simply chooses to accept the image that he prefers of himself. But let’s take this a step or two further.

We must also realize that the truth-telling mirror to which James refers is the word of God. The context (of vv.23-24) demands this understanding. Back in v.18 he spoke of *“the word of truth,”* and again in v.21, *“the word implanted”.* More immediately to our passage, v.22 sets the stage for our verses this way, *“But prove yourselves* ***doers of the word****, and not merely hearers* ***who delude themselves****.”* Two points are very clear from this verse: 1) the word of God is the mirror which gives us an accurate representation of ourselves, if we will look at and listen to it; and, 2) if we **don’t** **do** what that word says, we are merely deluding ourselves about who and what we think we are. Sure, we can choose to ignore what this *window-to-our-soul* mirror tells us for our own preferred view of ourselves, but the real problem is that God doesn’t judge us by our own standards. Jesus said, *“He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him;* ***the word*** *I spoke is what will judge him at the last day.”* (John 12:48)

To really have a clear view of ourselves, we must look into God’s word to see what He expects of us, and act accordingly. Please consider carefully 1John 2:3-5 on this point, *“And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has been truly perfected.”*  Although we may profess great love for God and His Son, such is not enough unless it motivates us to obedience. Jesus said, *“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”* (John 14:15)

If we say we love Jesus, and don’t do what He commanded, it sounds like we might be just the person in the mirror of whom James was speaking. Pray for “divine sight”- the ability to see yourself the way God does. Next, open your New Testament and read it so that you can see yourself accurately. Then, get busy becoming the person He expects you to be- a lovingly obedient child! (10-26-11)

**Perspective**

Then future President Ronald Reagan, while on the campaign trail in 1980, famously said, “A **recession** is when your next door neighbor loses ***his*** job. A **depression** is when you lose ***your*** job. And a **recovery** is when Mr. Carter loses his job!” It was a great line, and President Carter did subsequently lose his job to Mr. Reagan. But I didn’t bring up this quote to write about politics, but ***perspective***. Our perspective often changes when we’re on the “receiving end” of some misfortune or mishap. What we might deem “unfortunate” if it happens to someone else suddenly becomes “tragic” if it happens to us!

The same principle of perspective can be seen in our view of “sin.” If someone else commits the offense, it may be deemed “reprehensible” or “unforgiveable” to us. But if we are guilty of the same thing, it somehow magically becomes only a “mistake,” or an “error in judgment.” We may then question whether it’s really even a sin at all, “given the circumstances” (meaning that we are otherwise now the guilty one).

Issues of perspective are not limited to us as individuals either. They can be observed in our attitudes toward our families. A youngster can be deemed “spoiled, rebellious, disruptive, lacking discipline, etc.” if it belongs to someone else, but if or when our child does the same thing(s), he or she suddenly becomes “cute, full of personality, active, etc.” Often, the only real difference in the children is to whom they belong. As the old saying goes, “It’s different when the shoe is on the other foot!”

Unfortunately, these differences in perspective influence more than just our attitudes. As a result of this skewedperspective, we become judgmental and harsh toward others, despite being tolerant and patient with ourselves and our families (perhaps even to a fault). But our judgment cannot help but be influenced, even unduly so, by our perspective.

Perhaps this is why Jesus dealt with perspective before dealing with judgment in the Sermon on the Mount. Notice His words in Matthew 6:22, *“The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore the eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light.”* Our metaphorical “eye” should be focused on the divine perspective. When it is, our *“whole body will be full of light”-* of which Jesus is the true source (cf. John 1:9). Then we will “see” things as God sees them, and our judgments will be in keeping with His. Obviously, the inverse is true also. When our “eye” lacks the divine perspective, our judgments will tend toward more worldly estimations and conclusions.

So after first dealing with perspective, Jesus then addressed “judging” in Matthew 7:3-4, *“And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye?”*  The Lord is not saying that we shouldn’t issue any judgments at all, for then we could not fulfill His command of the next verse, *“You hypocrite,* ***first*** *take the log out of your own eye, and* ***then*** *you will see clearly* ***to take the speck your of your brother’s eye.”*** Hypocritical judgments, made from worldly motives and without the benefit of divine perspective, are being condemned. The Savior further emphasized this very point in John 7:24, *“Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.”*  He expects, even commands, us to help one another “see” our sins for the very reason we’ve highlighted: **While it is relatively easy to the see the sins of others, it is often difficult to see our own.** Having the right (divine) perspective will allow us to clearly see both. Hopefully, it will also allow us to feel the same way about our own sins as we do those of others. After all, in the end we are all dependent upon the grace and mercy of God *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”* Romans 3:23.

It truly is amazing what a little perspective can do for us- especially so when it is ***divine*** perspective! (2-8-11)

**Peter and the Rooster**

This is not a children’s story spin-off about a precocious little rabbit. Instead, it is hopefully a serious look at how God causes events to happen in our lives that bring our sins to the forefront of our awareness.

In Luke’s account of the events leading up to the crucifixion, Peter has with fervor vowed his dedication to Jesus with the statement, *“Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!”* (22:33). Jesus, knowing future events, answered Peter’s boldness with surety, *“I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me.”* (v.34) You know the Lord and the story well enough to know that the events of that night and early morning unfolded just as Jesus, rather than Peter, predicted. He knew Peter better than Peter knew himself! But, the Lord’s *omniscient* power to predict the future, or look into the hearts of men is not really the point under consideration now.

Rather than concentrate on Peter’s failure, look instead at the events that brought his sin to his consciousness. After Peter had denied knowing Jesus for the fateful third time, Luke 22:60 says, *“And* ***immediately****,* ***while he was still speaking****, a cock crowed.”*  Roosters crow every morning. Peter had undoubtedly heard this familiar sound most of the mornings of his life. This rooster was not special, nor was his particular crowing significantly distinct from the sounds his fellow roosters made to be noticeably different. There is no indication that anyone else paid any particular attention to the clarion call of daybreak made by the rooster. And, perhaps it would have even gone unnoticed by Peter also except for one thing- Luke 22:61 records that after the rooster crowed, *“And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord…”* While much probably has been, and could be, said about what kind of *“look”* the Lord gave Peter, how Peter must have felt at meeting the gaze of the Lord whom he had denied, and what effects the moment had on the rest of Peter’s life and the Cause of Christ, the point that motivates this article is the fact that *the look* to place. Would Peter have come to the same conclusion(s) about his failure if the rooster had crowed, **but he had not made eye contact with Jesus?** There is probably no real way to answer that question conclusively. So what’s the point then?

Many brethren seem to operate under the notion that God gave us His Word to convict us of sin and guide us to forgiveness through commands and instructions we are to obey. I too, agree with this assessment. But, is that all that God does to convict us of our sins? Is God so benign and inactive in our lives that the Word alone is all there is to bring us to consciousness of sins? Jesus said in John 16:8 that the Holy Spirit would, *“when He comes, … convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment.”*  Was, or is, that only accomplished through the inspired words of the sacred text? In Luke’s account, Jesus had told Peter not only that he would sin, but when and how it would be done. But those words weren’t all that Jesus did for Peter to make him aware of his sin. **Jesus also looked at Peter!** In combination with the words he had been told, this look laid bare the full consciousness of sin to Peter’s heart. It wasn’t just the “words” of Jesus that made Peter aware of his sin, there was also this tiny tidbit of ***an event*** which pricked his conscience and caused him to remember the words Jesus had spoken.

I don’t know about you, and hence I seek only to speak for myself, but there are so many times in my life that something happens to cause me to *“remember the word of the Lord”* and thus be convicted of my sin- kind of like Peter. Often, if not most often, what happens is something that, without the presence of sin, would be as innocuous as a rooster’s crow in the early morning. But since sin is present, the little event takes on new meaning…it convicts me of my sin by reminding me of what the Book says! It makes me aware of my sin. The event itself could be anything from a simple sentence uttered by someone with no knowledge of my sin; it could be a phone call from someone asking an unrelated Bible question that reminds me who and what I’m supposed to be; it could be a witnessed act of kindness that causes me to contemplate my own short-comings in that area (or a dissimilar one); it could someone else’s sin which is perceived to be *worse* or *less worse* than mine but nonetheless causes me to examine myself; it could be practically anything- even as simple as “a look” not unlike the one Peter saw from the Lord. But time and time again, these otherwise uneventful and unnoticed circumstances occur which cause me to be convicted of sin. **And I thank God for them!** By them I am forced to come to grips with my failures. I need to be able to see the wrong in the things I think, say, and do as well those that are left un-thought, unsaid, and undone that should have been. Thus, the presence of these events which cause me to recognize my sin **is a good thing**. In fact, it is absolutely necessary that I be confronted with my sins! Otherwise, how could I possibly acknowledge them to my Lord, beg His forgiveness, and strive with even more diligence to be faithful to Him and His Cause?

It is often said, and likely almost as often misapplied, that “God works in mysterious ways.” Still yet, are there little things that happen in your life that, if you have a heart willing to acknowledge shortcomings, would convict you of sin and thereby give you opportunity to repent, be forgiven, and do better? Likely so, if you’ll pay attention and be ever ready to say, “I was wrong.” Thank God for the opportunities given to each of us, in His word, and through the little events of our lives, that allow us the chance to grow and do better in our service to Him, our families, our brethren, and our fellowman. (5-14-10)

**Physical and Spiritual Consequences**

Have you ever wondered what would happen if our *spiritual* mistakes had *physical* consequences? Since God’s laws and discipline is *“for our good, that we may share His holiness”* (Hebrews 12:10b), some sins certainly **do** have physical consequences, but not all of them do. But what if they all did? Not anything huge, just an uncomfortable “thump on the head” or “zap” electric shock to the fingertips? We’re tempted to think that could be a “good” deterrent- that it would help me not to sin if there was an immediate physical consequence to my poor choices and bad activities. Or, on the flipside, we might also think it would be easier to make good spiritual choices if there were an immediate physical benefit attached. However, if we think this through, there are “good” reasons that this is a “bad” idea- besides a head full of knots and charred fingertips….

**It’s Pavlovian.** Pavlov “trained” a dog to respond to conditions by ringing a bell just before food was dispensed. Eventually, each time the dog heard a bell ring he would begin to salivate. While this was a positively induced “conditioned response,” there can be negative ones as well. If you rub a puppy’s nose in his urine, spank his bottom, and put him outside every time he pees on the floor, he soon becomes “conditioned” to behave differently. (Please don’t tell me this is not the way to “house-train” a dog- it’s just an example.) If our spiritual choices are just a conditioned response, we’re no more than “spiritual dogs” (with apologies to canines), cf. Matthew 7:6; 2Peter 2:22; Revelation 22:15.

**It’s Quid Pro Quo.** The phrase “quid pro quo” is derived from New Latin (first known use was 1582), and translates as “something for something.” Basically, it’s the same as the old “You scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours” idea. But is this really how we want to operate with God? After the Babylonian captivity and return to Judea, some of the Israelites seemed to base their spiritual choices on this method. God addressed their thought processes through His prophet Malachi (3:14), *“You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts?’”*  When we think this way, it is pretty well certain that: 1) we’re not nearly as “faithful” as we think, cf. Malachi 3:1-13; and, 2) God has already blessed us so abundantly we can never “catch up” or “equal” His graciousness and magnanimity, Malachi 3:10.

**It’s Immature.** Children want what they want **now.**  At least part of what makes them “children” is the unwillingness to put off the perceived present benefits associated with “instant gratification” for future blessings. If the only reason we make “good” choices is for this kind of “instant gratification” reward, or to avoid the immediate negative consequences, we are spiritually immature, 1Corinthians 3:1-3. On the other hand, if we are able to realize that even “good” choices may have immediate negative consequences *now,* but hold the key to *future* benefits of unfathomable proportions (heaven), and still make the right choices, then we are on the right track to spiritual maturity, cf. Hebrews 11:32-40!

As parents, we want our children to learn to make “good” choices and do “the right thing,” not because there is some immediate benefit to doing so, or because there is an immediate negative consequence for failure. We want our children to learn to make “good” choices and do “the right thing” because these things are “good” and “right”- regardless of the immediate consequences. Guess what? We learned this from God. This is exactly why He wants us to be “good” and do “right” too! He wants us to obey Him not from any direct connection to immediate consequence, but because we love Him, John 14:15; because we want to please Him, Ephesians 5:10; and because we want to “be” good rather than just receiving the rewards of good “behavior,” Romans 12:2. Now let’s see if we can “grow up” and serve God, rather than ourselves. (12-17-13)

**Planters, Precipitants, Pruners, Pickers, and Performers?**

Jesus and the New Testament writers often used agricultural illustrations to teach lessons of duty and reward: the Sower in Matthew 13:3ff; the Vine and Branches in John 15:1-8; and the Hard-Working and Patient Farmer in 2Timothy 2:6 and James 5:7 serve as just a few examples. The agrarian-based society of the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry provided fertile fields for planting the *seed* through these kinds of analogies. But we probably need to consider more closely some of the **specific jobs** included in these illustrations, and what they should mean to us…

**Planters**. The *seed* is the word of God, Luke 8:11. When it was *planted* in our hearts, if they were the *good soil* (honest and soft), it *germinated* and *gestated* long enough to break through into an obedient Christian. This fledging plant was then *watered,* and if it stayed relatively free of the disease of sin for a while, it grew into a mature plant. Now, what does a *mature* plant do? It *bears fruit* of course! It may produce copious amounts of *foliage* and *flowers* while still growing, but mature plants *bear fruit,* John 15:8*.* Why is this so important for us to understand? *Flowers* and *foliage* are pretty to look at, but what’s inside the *fruit?* More seed! It’s called the parable of *“the sower”* (cf. Matthew 13:18) rather than *the soils* for a reason- we’re supposed to be *sowers* or *planters* rather than *soil-testers!* How did the *seed* get *beside the road, in the rocky ground,* and *among the thorns?* The *sower* sowed it in those places too because he was *sower* rather than a *soil-tester!*  Folks, we’ll never enjoy a *harvest* if we content ourselves with just lazily eating the *seed-* it has to also be sown. Are you a *planter?*

**Precipitants.** For *seed* to germinate and grow into a mature *plant,* somebody has to water it. Paul made this clear in 1Corinthians 3:6, *“I planted, Apollos watered….”* Apollos was the *precipitant* (the *agent* that provides *precipitation*). This doesn’t mean that Apollos provided the Corinthians water baptism (cf. Acts 18:1-11), but it does mean that Apollos provided the continuing *nutrition* needed for these young Christian *plants* to grow toward maturity. Every Christian needs to grow (cf. 2Peter 3:18), and thus needs *precipitation.*  More mature *precipitants* can and should be great assets to them by providing continuing education in, and continuing edification with, the word of God. Barnabas was evidently also a great *waterer,* Acts 4:36! Are you a *precipitant?*

**Pruners.** In John 15:1-8, Jesus presents a word-picture of not only who *He* is, but also of *our* necessary relationship to Him and what it entails. He is *the vine,* and we are *the branches.* To *bear fruit,* the *branch* must first be on *the vine,* orattached to Him, v.4. However, we must also be aware that: 1) *branches* that are **unproductive** are *taken away/removed* from Him*,* v.2a; and, 2) those that are **productive** get *pruned* so they can bear even more fruit, v.2b. For those less acquainted with agriculture and horticulture, *pruning* does not mean to throw dried plums. Instead, it means to *cut off* or *cut back* parts for better shaping, strength, and productivity. This *pruning* occurs when we are *reproved, rebuked,* and *admonished* with the word, 2Timothy 3:16. The word of God is the *pruning instrument* (cf. Hebrews 4:12), but it usually requires someone proficient to wield it to achieve the full and greatest effect. Thus, we *admonish one another* with and through the word, as God commanded, to be more productive. Are you willing to *prune?*

**Pickers.** Jesus told His disciples, *“Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest?’ Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes, and look on the fields, that are white for harvest,”* John 4:35. The point is that there was an *immediate need* for *reapers.* We’re mixing metaphors- *reapers* are for grain, but *fruit* has *pickers*,but in either case, the kingdom still has an urgent need for *pickers!* These are NOT pluckers of stringed instruments, but *harvesters* of souls in which the *seed* has been *planted,* and have been well *precipitated* (watered) to the point of being *harvested* for the Lord. Are a *picker?*

But what isn’t mentioned in the text is **Performers.** *Planters, precipitators, pruners,* and *pickers* are using the Word of God as *seed, life-giving water,* a *pruning hook,* and the *reaping instrument* of souls.But *performers* use it, to the degree that they do so at all, as a *tool for self-promotion.* And yet, *performing* is all some want do- sing or dance or whatever puts them in the spotlight. The *vineyard of the Lord* doesn’t need *performers.*  If it did the New Testament would include instructions for solos, praise dancing, plays and dramatic presentations. But it does need those willing to *plant* the seed, *water, prune,* and *harvest.* Let’s be *planters, precipitants, pruners,* and *pickers* instead of *performers!* (8-30-16)

**Playing Mind Games**

We all likely play “mind games” from time to time. Some obviously do so more than others. At times, we use these mental tactics on other people, perhaps to gain an edge over or influence them in some way. However, most of our mind gaming efforts are expended on ourselves, and for the same reasons. We play these games on ourselves in an effort to manipulate or influence our own thinking to do something that we want, or to excuse or justify what we’ve already done. What do I mean? See if these examples sound familiar…

The **“Is It *Really* Wrong?”** Game. We actually already know the answer to this question, we just don’t want to accept the answer. So, we play this mind game and pose the question anyway hoping for some way to excuse or justify the activity because it is what we *want* to do. The subtle serpent Satan got Eve to play this game in Genesis 3:4-6, *“The serpent said to the woman, ‘You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.”* Thus, through playing this particular mind game, Eve did what she already knew, and had previously stated, was wrong.

The **“It Isn’t A Big Deal”** Game. We usually play this game after playing “Is It *Really* Wrong?” game and realizing that the answer is still “yes.” So, rather than just admitting defeat and accepting that we shouldn’t do what we *want* to do, we advance to this game. Notice that this one admits the activity is wrong (and therefore shouldn’t be done), but seeks to justify the activity anyway by claiming that this particular “wrong” activity is somehow “less wrong” than other “wrong” activities. Notice that 1John 3:4 doesn’t use (or allow) this method of classifying sin, *“Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.”*

The **“It Won’t Hurt Anything Just This One Time**” Game. This game is also usually engaged after the previous two have been played and lost. The desired activity is still desired despite the previous defeats, so we move on to this game. Notice the progression: the activity is admitted to not only be “wrong,” but also to have harmful consequences; but, the object of this game is to justify the wrong activity anyway by claiming that its harmful consequences only ensue after repeated offenses. Uzzah probably would not agree with that conclusion, 2Samuel 6:6-7 (his life was taken because of a single offense); neither does James 2:10, *“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.”*

The **“It’s Not Hurting Anyone Else”** Game. There is progression, or more precisely, digression, again. Now we’re admitting that the desired activity is wrong, and that it has harmful consequences, but are still clinging to the desired activity anyway by claiming that it is only harmful to me, and therefore does not affect anyone else. While there may be some “private” sins that don’t affect anyone else, such is not really the point. The “private” rather than “public” consequences of a sinful activity do not make it any less sinful, or consequential, for the player personally. There is no real “win” when playing this game, Romans 6:16, *“Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves to the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness.”*

The **“It’s Not Really Who I Am”** Game. This particular game claims that a “win,” which means going ahead and doing/justifying the desired activity despite admitting that it is wrong, contradicts the outcome. In other words, it claims that committing sin doesn’t really make one a sinner. 1John 3:7-8, *“Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil.”*

The **“I Can Quit Anytime I Want**” Game. Note that playing this game concedes defeat in all the previous ones. It admits the desired activity is wrong, has harmful personal consequences, and that it makes the participant a sinner destined for destruction. But, playing it bolsters the notion that desire is all that is necessary to stopping a sinful activity and altering our future course. Millions of addicts would strongly disagree, and so does the Bible, Matthew 27:3-5. Judas “tried to quit” on his betrayal of Jesus, but found out that it was too late, and that the events he had set in motion couldn’t be undone.

The **“I’ll Straighten Up Later”** Game (aka, the **“Wild Oats Game**”). This one is very much akin to the previous game. It is based on the premise that each person has some allowed quota of sin before “growing up.” Galatians 6:7-8 proves this premise to be completely false, *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life.”*

The **“I’ve Already Gone This Far”** Game. The idea behind this game seems to be that “If one sin can condemn me, I might as well go ahead and get my monies’ worth while I’m at it.” There are many problems here, but perhaps the main one is that the more “wrong” turns we make, the harder it is to get back to the “right” road. By playing this game, we surrender to defeat. What if Paul had played this particular mind game? But he didn’t- and so he wrote, *“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life,”* 1Timothy 1:15-16.

The **“It’s Too Late For Me Anyway”** Game. This is the ultimate surrender mind game we play with ourselves. It admits total defeat and is unwilling to even continue the struggle against sin. But again, IT’S BASED ON A FALSE PREMISE! If a denier of the deity of Jesus and persecutor of the church can repent and become a preacher of righteousness, so can you. 1Corinthians 15:9-10 says so, *“For I am the least of apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.”*

Don’t play mind games- defeat is the only outcome, and your soul is at stake. Read the Word, study the Word, understand the Word, and live the Word; and “yes,” YOU CAN DO IT! It does take effort, but no “games” are required. (2-28-17)

**The Power of God to Save**

When God promised a son to Abraham and Sarah, they were already old. But they had some faith, so they believed and waited- for a while anyway. However, they eventually decided to “help” God fulfill His promise. They first purposed to adopt the eldest son born in their household (the son of a servant) so that he could become the promised heir. God said this wasn’t the way. So they again waited, at least until Sarah decided she might be the problem, and gave her handmaid to Abraham as a wife so that the heir could be born through her. God reiterated His promise that Abraham and **Sarah** would have a son. So again, they waited. Then, as promised, Isaac was born, and the nation that was to come from the aged couple had its beginning. What has any of this to do with “The Power of God to Save”?

God said His “power to save” was invested in the gospel. The apostle Paul wrote, *“For I am not ashamed of* ***the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation****….”* Romans 1:16. Perhaps the *impatient faith* of Abraham and Sarah has some modern equivalents in this regard. Do we really believe and trust God’s word regarding the real power of salvation enough to just keep preaching and teaching the gospel? Or do we instead, like Abraham and Sarah, doubt just enough to be enticed to “help” God accomplish His purposes through our own means and methods? Have we forgotten where God invested His power to save? Is our faith truly strong enough to just obey God and trust Him for the rest?

If our faith is insufficient or impatient, we will turn to and emphasize other means and methods (rather than preaching and teaching the gospel) in feeble attempts to bring the lost to salvation. For instance, we might adopt the *fellowship* plan of using food and fun to “help” God save the lost: “We’ll attract them with what they want, and then give them what they need later.” Or, we might attempt to meet the *physical* needs of the lost in order “help” God save their souls: “We’ll help them find a spouse, or educate or entertain their children, then we can teach them the truth.” Or, we might be tempted to use a *business model* to sell salvation to potential lost customers to “help” God: “In the business world, we do it this way, and it works there- it ought to work to save the lost too.” Or, we might *modernize worship* so that it appeals to more people in order to “help” God save the lost: “People today want modern music, drama, theatrical lighting, and a worship performance that uplifts their spirits- let’s give them what they want to get them here, then we can teach them the gospel.” Or, (please fill in the blank).

There are a couple of obvious problems with the solutions proposed above. 1) God didn’t provide any of these “solutions” in the Bible. They all come from well-meaning men who had the best of intentions, but who also had *impatient faith* that lacked trust in God’s word. 2) God said the power of salvation was in **“the gospel”** rather than in any of these means or methods, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation….”* Romans 1:16.

So, what is the solution? The world is full of souls- including yours and mine, which need the salvation Jesus offers. There is but one real solution, *“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction,”* 2Timothy 4:2. We must return to the Word! We must preach it, we must teach it, and we must exemplify it by living it. The gospel is God’s power to save! We must *“give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching,”* 1Timothy 4:15. While reading the Scriptures in public places is great, Paul was talking about the *public place* of worship! If the lost are to be saved, our sermons must be filled with *“God’s power to save,”* rather than being crammed with sacrosanct rhetoric, hypothesized theology, humorous anecdotes, pop-psychology, and the testimonies of celebrities. Let’s start trusting God instead of impatiently trying to “help” him with our ideas and methods. Please, read the Bible, study the Bible, preach the Bible, teach the Bible, and live the Bible- **it is still God’s power to save!** (2-20-14)

**The “Foolish” Power of Preaching**

Preachers are somewhat like mother-in-laws in that both are often the butt of jokes. Such just seems to “go with the job” in both cases. Any preacher who doesn’t understand and accept this, or who has a thin skin, won’t last very long. For instance, did you hear the one about the embarrassed wife who tried to explain to the minister why her husband walked out during the sermon? “It wasn’t that he didn’t agree with what you were saying,” she said sheepishly, “He just sleep walks.” Fortunately, most preachers have a pretty good sense of humor and thus take the kidding well.

But when God spoke of *“the* ***foolishness*** *of the message preached”* (1Corinthians 1:21ff), He was speaking of man’s estimation of “preaching” God’s Word in comparison to man’s view of his own self-proclaimed wisdom. God was not saying preaching was “foolish” Himself, but that man viewed it that way. In what man therefore viewed as “foolish,” God chose to invest the very power of salvation. *“For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.”* (1Corinthians 1:18) Preachers who are worth anything understand this very well, and would be still *“preaching the word in season and out of season”* whether they spoke to an audience of two or two-hundred, and whether they were getting paid to do so or not!

Sure, there are preachers who preach for wrong reasons. Paul warned Timothy of them, *“For some men…have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions.”* (1Timothy 1:6-7) He also wrote that some preach *“from envy and strife”* and *“selfish ambition”* (Philippians 1:15,17). Preaching that is done to advance or benefit “self” is not only wrongly motivated, it will be corrupted to be popular and acceptable to the masses. It will be designed and delivered in such a way as to make salvation “cheap” (cp. Luke 14:26-35), and people to feel comfortable in their sin. It will make salvation a “quick and easy” proposition that is a “one time for all time” deal rather than a lifetime commitment of faithful obedience to God. It will also “accept people as they are” instead of endeavoring to make them *“partakers of the divine nature”* (2Peter 1:4). Paul warned of these things too, *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accord with their own desires; and will turn aside from the truth…”*

Herein lays the real danger of preaching that is selfishly motivated: not only does it destroy the faithfulness of the messenger, but because of the corruption of the message, it is impotent to affect salvation in its hearers. The gospel is *“the power of God for salvation”* (Romans 1:16) **only** when it is preached in purity of content and motivation. Notice again Paul’s inspired words to Timothy on this point, *“But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”* (1Timothy 1:5) So, do you want the “whole truth and nothing but the truth” in your preaching, or do you just want to be made to feel good and comfortable in a sinful condition?

If Truth is something you desire from preaching, we invite you to a special series of lessons at the **Southside Church of Christ** (602 Henderson St. Jacksonville) this coming Sunday through Wednesday (Feb.27th – Mar.2nd). **Brother David Smitherman** (Corpus Christi, Texas) will be preaching the Wordin simplicity and purity, with love and zeal, and in a sincere desire for its saving power to be manifested in everyone who truly desires the Truth. We will meet on **Sunday at 9:30** and **10:20 AM**, and **6:00 PM**. Our services **Monday through Wednesday** will be at **7:30 PM**. We certainly hope you will join us for what promises to be a spiritual feast! (3-1-11)

**The Power of the Word**

Think about it: God spoke light into existence on the **first** of the six days of creation (yes, these were twenty-four hour days rather than eons or millennia, Genesis 1:5,8,13,19,23,31; Exodus 20:11); but the *“greater”* and *“lesser lights”* were not created until the **fourth** day, Genesis 1:14-19. So, what was the source of the light created on day one until the sun was created on day four? The “source” was surely the power of God manifested through His ***Word****,*cf. John 1:1ff! What magnificent power was manifested through the **Word** of God- sufficient to speak into existence ample light to illumine the world!

The power of God’s word to transform a *“formless and void”* sphere into an inhabitable planet that provides creation’s every essential, and even esthetic, need is not the only example of its abilities to create or convert. When the prophet Jonah was sent to great and exceedingly wicked city of Nineveh, his message from God was simply and direct, *“Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown,”* Jonah 3:4. While I’m fairly certain this wasn’t the sum total of God’s word to the Ninevites that Jonah proclaimed, the power of whatever was said is obvious, *“Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them…”* cf. vv.5-9. The word of God transformed these exceedingly violent and wicked Assyrians into penitent believers- so much so that *“God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it,”* v.10!

Other examples of the transforming power of God’s word- such as Israel being turned from idolatry during the reign of the boy-king Josiah, or the great persecutor of the church, Saul of Tarsus, being converted into an ardent proclaimer of the gospel, the apostle Paul, could be given. But hopefully, the point has been sufficiently made: **God’s word is extremely powerful, and has great transforming abilities!**

I’m not suggesting that Jacksonville is a “great and exceedingly wicked city” like Nineveh- but it does need the transforming power of the gospel. Everyone everywhere needs it! The apostle Paul declared it to be *“the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”* in Romans 1:16. Nothing has changed in that regard. If one is going to be saved, it will be by obedience to the gospel, 1Peter 1:22. And, if people are to be saved by God’s power through the gospel, it necessarily follows that it must be preached- simply, plainly, and fully. Consider Romans 10 on this point, *“How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? …So then faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ,”* vv.14,17.

To these ends, Brother **Kris Emerson** (of Beaumont, TX) will be preaching the gospel in love, power, and enthusiasm at the **Southside Church of Christ, Sunday, February 10th**, through **Wednesday, February 13th**. Kris will speak *“words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household”* (Acts 11:14) in their full and powerful saving grace with all dignity and love. Won’t you come and hear the gospel? It is God’s power to save by the blood of Jesus Christ!

Service times are as follows: Sunday, 9:30 and 10:20 AM, and 6:00 PM; Monday through Wednesday evenings at 7:00 PM. We are located at 602 Henderson Street (directly across from Payless Shoes and Subway Sandwiches on South Jackson St.) You will be welcomed warmly, and treated with the utmost respect and dignity. Nothing will be said or done to in any way embarrass or offend anyone. **Won’t you please join us in this spiritual feast upon God’s word?** (2-5-13)

**Practice May Not Make Us Perfect…**

**But it usually makes us proficient- especially when practicing sin.** The word “practice,” like many words, can be used as either a noun or a verb. As a noun, “practice” refers to an activity that is repeated until it becomes a habit. As a verb, it refers to the repeated rehearsal for the activity itself. Thus, sin can become our “practice” (noun) if we “practice” (verb) it diligently and consistently.

In Ephesians 2:1-2, Paul included himself when he described some who *“walked according to the course of this world”* and *“lived in the lusts of our minds, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind”* to such an extent that they became *“by nature children of wrath.”* Becoming *“by nature children of wrath”* clearly does not refer to a genetic predisposition to sin, or some otherwise inherited sinful nature, because he emphasizes *personal activity* and *indulgence* as being the cause. So, there are sinful choices being made and practiced. What is being highlighted in the text is the principle that repeated indulgence of *fleshly desires* through *sinful practices* changes our habitude (*native* or *essential character*). We do not become sinners by being born that way, cf. Ezekiel 18:20ff; we become sinners when we chose and “practice” the *“works of the flesh”* over the *“fruit of the Spirit,”* Galatians 5:16-26.

The more often that we make the choice to “practice” (verb) sin, the easier and faster it becomes our “practice” (noun). Just like any other activity, repetition leads to proficiency. Whether turning a double play on the baseball diamond, or baking a cake in the kitchen, repetition makes us better at performing the activity. It is no different with sin. By repetition, we learn what “works” best for us. We learn how to better hide the activity from those we know will disapprove. We learn how to better salve our consciences with excuses and justifications. And, we learn how to better mitigate any concerns of spiritual conscience, and minimize the physical consequences that may accompany the sinful practice(s). Thus we become proficient at sin by practice. And since we typically enjoy and indulge in the activities at which we become proficient, sin becomes easier, and therefore also becomes more and more the “practice” (noun) of our lives.

But thankfully, the same principles of practice apply in the other direction too. Just as we become more proficient at sin by practice, so too we can become more proficient at righteousness by practice! When we first decide by faith and repentance to live godly rather than sinful lives, the “practice” of righteousness is decidedly difficult. Like a baby learning to walk, there are many falls, bumps, and bruises along the way. 1John 1:8-10 makes it clear that sinful mistakes are just simply part of the process of learning to *“walk by faith”* (2Corinthians 5:7). But just like practicing sin, practicing righteousness leads to proficiency, and proficiency makes our *walk of faith* easier. There is no trick to it, and there are no short cuts. It just takes “practice”- diligent, repetitive, consistent, and concerted practice. The good news is that anyone can do it. If we genuinely want to *please God* by turning from the *“unfruitful deeds of darkness”* (Ephesians 5:10-11), are willing to study and learn the *playbook* (Ephesians 3:3-5)*,* and are willing to really dedicate ourselves through diligent “practice” (Ephesians 4:11-16), then we can *“walk no longer as the Gentiles walk”* and *“be renewed in the spirit of your mind”* and *“put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth”* (Ephesians 4:17, 23,24).

1John 3:4-10, *“Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. And you know that He appeared to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious; anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.”* Our “practices” (verb) determine our “practice” (noun). (5-21-14)

**The Expressions of Prayer**

The ability to pour out our hearts to the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe knowing that He not only hears, but also is genuinely concerned with and amenable to our pleas, is such a tremendous blessing. It truly boggles the human mind to think of such intimate conversation with Almighty God! Jesus well knew and longed for this fellowship with the Father during the time of His sojourn upon the earth. He often slipped away from the thronging multitudes, and even His own disciples, to spend precious hours in holy communication. It is no wonder that Christians are urged to *“pray without ceasing,”* 1Thessalonians 5:17! We have this supreme privilege due to divine paternity, *“For you have no received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’,”* Romans 8:15. However…

For some of us, prayer is little more than a recitation of our felt needs and desires to a *Celestial Santa Clause* “God”- the heavenly ATM of physical blessings we presume to deserve because of an assumed spiritual relationship with Him (which, by the way, exists entirely upon our own terms). While there is certainly nothing wrong with petitioning the Father with our heart-felt desires (cf. Romans 10:1), and we are even encouraged to do so by God Himself (Philippians 4:6), it is also true that such entreaties must be based upon a right relationship with Him, cf. 1Peter 3:12, and offered in genuine faith, cf. James 1:6.

But let’s think beyond the benefits of prayer that are associated with God’s gracious granting of our petitions. Consider the practice itself. Understand that the act of pious prayingis a beautiful expression of other essential elements of Christianity:

* **Prayer is an Expression of Faith.**  It must be- why else would we pray at all? Unless we *“believe that He is,”* Hebrews 11:6, there is no reason to pray, as there would be no one to hear our pleas. But the one who truly has *“the conviction of things not seen,”* Hebrews 11:1, pours out his souls’ deepest groans and longings to the God he knows not only exists, but hears his prayers. Otherwise, we pray only to ourselves, cp. Luke 18:11. The act of praying is an expression of faith!
* **Prayer is an Expression of Trust.** Any prayer that includes *“Thy will* *be done, on earth as it is in heaven,”* as Jesus said that it should in Matthew 6:10, is an expression of absolute trust in God. Such a caveat in our petitions necessarily implies that, regardless of the nature or extent of our human desires, God’s divine will is preferred in this and all matters, and will be submissively accepted. Paul *“entreated the Lord three times”* that his *“thorn in the flesh”* might be removed, but when God replied that such was not best, he *“most gladly”* accepted this answer and was *“well content”* with it, cf. 2Corinthians 12:8-10. Praying in this way is an expression of trust!
* **Prayer is an Expression of Hope.** Prayers can and should be offered that express gratitude, thanksgiving, and praise- and our public and private ones should consist of these much more than they do. In them we should praise God for who He is, and what He has done. But our pleas, entreaties, and petitions must also be based in hope. This is not a *carnal* “I sure *hope* so, but kind of *doubt* it” kind of hope, but is, instead, *biblical* hope. True, biblical, hope is based on promises from a God for whom *“it is impossible to lie,”* and therefore is *“an anchor of the soul…both sure and steadfast,”* that provides *“full assurance…until the end,”* cf. Hebrews 6:18,19,11. Armed with hope that is based in God, provides stability through the storms of life, and allows calm confidence with regard to the end of all things and beyond, one prays. Prays in thanksgiving; prays in confidence; and prays in anticipation- all in hope. Praying is an expression of hope!

Now come the questions. Is your *faith* strongor weak? Do you really *trust* God- with all of life’s challenges, as well as eternity? Is your *hope* based in spiritual and heavenly or physical and fleshly things? Prayer will not only help you to recognize deficiencies in these areas, it will correct, build, and strengthen you in them. The simple act (and practice) of praying not only expresses your faith, trust, and hope in God, it builds them! God doesn’t want and require us to pray to bolster His ego by abjectly manifesting our dependence upon Him. He wants us to pray because of the benefits we gain from it! (6-13-17)

**Praying for Salvation**

Can one simply pray for salvation and receive it? Is reciting “the sinner’s prayer” what God requires of us for salvation? As always, the answers are to be found not by making sweeping declarations, but by examining what the Bible actually says. What I, or any man, thinks, preaches, or teaches carries no weight whatsoever unless the Word of God confirms it. So, let’s take a look….

There is no New Testament passage that instructs an alien sinner to simply pray for salvation, but there are four important examples that need to be considered- and each one has a vital lesson to be learned.

The first occurs in Acts 2, on the occasion of the first gospel preaching done publically after Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. The crowd on Pentecost, through the sermon by Peter and the other apostles, became convicted of their sin(s) of having crucified Jesus. They asked, *“Men and brethren, what shall we do?”* They didn’t ask what to *feel,* or even *experience,* but what to ***do****,* understanding that salvation required activity on their part. Were they told to say “the sinner’s prayer,” or “accept Jesus into their hearts”? No, they were told to *“Repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins…”* Acts 2:38.

Secondly, consider Simon in Acts 8. He was definitely told to *“pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart might be forgiven you”* in the last part of v.22. But there are a couple of vital considerations here also. In the first part of the verse, he was told to *“repent of this wickedness of yours and pray....”.*  So, praying wasn’t the only thing required. However, it should also be noted that Simon had already been saved by belief and baptism, just like the rest of the Samaritans, vv.12-13. Peter’s command for him to pray for forgiveness was **as a fallen Christian** coming back to Christ, not a sinner coming to Christ for the first time.

The third important example related to “praying for salvation” is found in Acts 10. It is obvious that Cornelius was a *“devout man, and who feared God...and prayed to God continually,”* v.2. For what was he praying? While we are not told specifically, the object of his petitions becomes apparent from the response of God to them. In v.4 he was told by God’s messenger, *“Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.”*  Then he was told to send for Peter. Why? Cornelius was *devout, benevolent,* and *prayerful* already- wasn’t this enough for salvation? Evidently not, for when Peter arrived, the text says, *“He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ,”* v.48. Cornelius, a believer, was evidently praying for salvation (undoubtedly among other things also), so God sent Peter to him that he might obey that which was still lacking: his baptism in Jesus Christ.

And finally, Saul of Tarsus is the fourth of our examples. Saul had been a persecutor of Jesus and the church, Acts 9:1-2,5. Then Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, vv.3-5. But note carefully the words of Jesus to him in v.6, *“but arise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you* ***must*** *do.”*Having this great personal experience with the King of kings, and even conversing with Him directly, did not fulfill Saul’s spiritual need with regard to salvation. So, he got up and went into Damascus as instructed, and spent three days and nights *fasting* and ***praying****,* vv.9,11. Did this praying remit his sins and provide salvation? When God’s messenger Ananias arrived to tell Saul *what he must do,* what did he instruct? Notice the testimony of Paul (the Greek equivalent of “Saul”) on this point from Acts 22:16 when he recounts what God’s messenger told him, *“And now why do you delay? Arise, and* ***be baptized****, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”* Ananias did not tell Paul to *pray* for salvation- he told him to be ***baptized*** for salvation. Though Paul had seen and conversed with the Lord personally, and now, as a believer in Jesus, had spent three days fasting and praying, he was told to be baptized to *“wash away his sins.”*

I realize that many today are told to “Pray the *Sinner’s Prayer”* or “Accept/Invite Jesus into your heart” to be saved, I just can’t find anyone in the New Testament who was told to do that. What I do find is that in every case of conversion in the book of Acts, three things occurred each time to produce salvation: 1) the gospel was preached; 2) the respondents believed; and 3) they were baptized for the remission of sins. Read it for yourself and see if this is not true, then please obey Jesus’ words given in the Great Commission of Mark 16:15-16. (6-25-13)

**Preacher’s and Pastor’s Patience Progresses to Problems with Pews and Parking**

First, please understand the difference between “preacher” and “pastor,” for although one man can wear both of these hats, the terms are not synonymous. “Preacher” comes from the Greek word ***kerusso****,* and simply refers to one who functions as a “herald” or “proclaimer”- thus, John the Baptist and Noah were both “preachers,” cf. John 1:6-8; 2Peter 2:5. However, neither of these men were “pastors” as the term is used in the New Testament. “Pastor” is translated from the Greek (Greek was the original language of the New Testament) word ***poimen****,* and refers generally to “a shepherd.” But, the term is also specifically used of an office in the church which is synonymous with *Elders, Overseers,* and *Bishops* (see Acts 20:17,28 where all four terms are used to describe to the same office).

Additionally, there are specific qualifications given for Pastors/Elders/Bishops/Overseers in 1Timothy 3 and Titus 1 that not all “preachers” meet. For instance, though Paul was certainly a preacher (cf. 1Timothy 2:7), he was not a Pastor because, having never been married, he could not meet the qualification of being *“the husband of one wife,”* 1Timothy 3:2. With these things out of the way, let’s get to the point.

**Preachers and Pastors need** **patience**. Patience is listed in Galatians 5:22ff as being part of the *“fruit of the Spirit”* every Christian should possess, but perhaps these two roles of preaching and pastoring require even more than a normal amount. Why is this so? Consider that preaching and pastoring are well-illustrated with two bible examples: 1) raising crops or livestock; and 2) raising children.

Preaching the word is obviously compared to “sowing seed” in Luke 8:5ff and 1Corinthians 3:6-7; and Jesus compared His efforts to teach the Word of God to that of a *shepherd* providing for *sheep* in Mark 6:34. If you have any doubt that much patience is needed in these agrarian pursuits, then you’ve never lived that life, and you’re evidently unfamiliar with James 5:7, *“…Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and the late rains.”*  Now here’s the point: preaching the word of God and/or pastoring His flock (at least doing them right) requires the same great patience as preparing soil, planting seed, watering and tending the plant as it grows,and continuing to feed and protect it until it matures and bears fruit just like its farming counterpart. And, anyone who has ever raised livestock can tell you of the patience likewise required in that endeavor (cf. 1Peter 2:25a).

Preaching and/or pastoring is also compared to having and raising children, cf.1Corinthians 4:15; Galatians 4:19; 1Timothy 1:2. It requires the same kind of love, sacrifice, and dedication, as well as lots and lots of patience. Important “life lessons” must be patiently repeated over and over again. Mistakes that are made must be treated with generous amounts of love, compassion, empathy, and patience- since they possibly will be repeated a couple of times before being overcome. Often, we have to try to “be happy while you wait” (which was my wife’s great definition of “patience” she often repeated to our boys when they were little) while those lessons taught in the formative years seem to lay dormant before finally springing forth in the understanding and application of maturity. Undoubtedly, raising “spiritual” children is a lot like raising “physical” children in that both require tremendous amounts of patience! Paul wrote to Timothy on this point, *“And the Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach,* ***patient*** *when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition; if perhaps God will grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth…”* (2Timothy 2:24-25)

“So, where does the part about ‘Pews and Parking’ from the title come into play?” Preachers and Pastors who have and manifest the kind and amount of patience the Lord requires of them in their roles may progress into trouble having sufficient “pews” and “parking” to accommodate the people in their congregations (enough “P’s” yet?). But, the inverse is also true: Preachers and Pastors who lack the kind and amount of patience the Lord requires of them in their roles will probably have plenty room in the pews and parking lots of their congregations! (9-18-12)

**Preaching and Teaching the Word**

A couple of men from here at Southside get together each Tuesday morning for breakfast with Bro. J.C. Balch (you’re welcome to join us at Beverly’s Cafe, 7:30!). As Bro. J.C. is on the plus side of ninety years old, we enjoy his stories from yesteryear.

The last time we met, he told us about some of his early work experiences in Austin where he substituted for the “PBX” (private branch exchange) telephone operator. This experience was considered valuable by the military when he enlisted (WWII). But what struck me as funny was what he was told by the officer making the work assignments for incoming personnel. After stating that they already had several coming that were specifically trained in military communications systems, he told J.C., “We don’t have time to train you, so we’ll just put you in charge!” So, due to his lack of training, J.C. was made the corporal in charge of the trained men!

This reminds me of the cliché, “Those who can’t do, coach”- with apologies to coaches who can usually “out play” their charges with knowledge and experience even if their talent and abilities have diminished due to age. Such things are usually said or written by “Monday morning” or “armchair coaches” who have never had any “training” at coaching, and probably can’t play either! Believe it or not, the New Testament addresses these issues of training and teaching in the spiritual realm in a couple of passages.

**James 3:1 states, *“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.”*** James is not in any way diminishing the role, responsibilities, or need for bible teachers. In fact, he is doing just the opposite, by indicating that those who do teach should have adequate preparation for the task in knowledge, experience, and wisdom. There are always some who want the supposed “prestige” of being a teacher without having first done the necessary work to educate themselves. Paul mentioned this to Timothy by way of warning, *“…wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions,”* 1Timothy 1:7. This leads us to our next point.

**There is always a need for bible teachers- both public and private, *“who because of practice have trained their senses to discern good and evil,”* Hebrews 5:14.**  Such does not require a degree in theology, or even formal training, but it does demand dedicated commitment to, and understanding of, the basic principles and purpose of the Scriptures. In Acts 8, Christians driven from their homes by persecution *“went about preaching the word,”* v.4. These were not apostles (they stayed in Jerusalem, v.1), or even trained evangelists, but they were Christians of deep faith who earnestly desired salvation for others- and were willing to work for and toward that goal. Consider Matthew 5:13-16, the *salt* and *light* passage. It was not spoken or written to the preachers and pastors, but to those with the most power to teach by daily contact with, and example to, the world! But again, this leads us to another (and final) point.

**Preachers and Pastors should know how, and be active in, teaching- *“preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort with great patience and instruction”*** 2Timothy 4:2.The reason for Paul’s admonition to Timothy is also given in the next verse, *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth…”* Simply put, those primarily responsible for the *public* proclamation of God’s word, *i.e.* preachers and pastors (see also 1Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9ff) should be capable *private* teachers also. As in other aspects of Christian duty, they should, in fact, set the example for others to follow in this regard, 1Peter 3:3! Perhaps all too often, preachers and pastors view their roles as being pulpit-oriented; and such is surely part of their responsibilities as the passages above indicate. But, given that they are supposed to be men of knowledge, wisdom, experience, and ability, shouldn’t they also be leading the way in the more *private* work of personal evangelism?

Kitchen tables and coffee tables are just as effective as pulpits in teaching the gospel- probably more so. Let’s use them all to tell others of the wonderful salvation offered by Jesus Christ whether we are preachers, pastors, or just Christians with genuine love and concern for the souls of others. (2-20-13)

**I Finally Got ‘Around To’ an Article on “Procrastination”!**

“Procrastination” is a subject about which I know a considerable amount- in fact, at times I am quite accomplished at it. So, let me share a few things I’ve noted by experience….

Procrastination, occasionally defined as “the art of putting off until later what should be done now,” is a very effective tool of Satan. He uses it to poke and prod us to put off, delay, and eventually forget altogether what we know is the “right thing” to do. Sometimes, this is a simple good deed of benevolence or kindness. But he also uses it to demotivate us from assembling with the saints for worship and study when it is well within our power to do so. Additionally, and perhaps most significantly, he uses it to get us to postpone our repentance and obedience to God.

Satan uses several *forms/types* of procrastination to prevent (that IS the ultimate goal) our spiritual repentance, obedience, and service:

* Soon Procrastination- “I’ll change/do it soon, it just can’t right now.”
* Date Procrastination- “I’ll change/do it at the end of the week/month/year/decade/etc.”
* Event Procrastination- “I’ll change/do it when after I finish school, finish college, get a job, marry and settle down, have a family, get my kids through school, get through this difficult time at work, become financially secure, retire, etc.”
* Indefinite Procrastination- “I’ll change/do it eventually; I’m just not ready now.”

God’s word is always sufficient. So, there are several passages that, directly or indirectly, address ALL of these forms of procrastination. Here are a couple of them:

* Hebrews 3:12-15, *“Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end; while it said, ‘Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.”*
* James 4:13-17, *“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.’ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.”*

Note that in the passages above, several principles are emphasized that hit us procrastinators pretty squarely:

* Sin is *deceitful.* The longer we put off repentance and obedience, the easier it is to keep doing so, cf. 1Timothy 4:1-3.
* Sin has a *hardening* effect. The longer we procrastinate, the more obstinate and rebellious we become, and the less likely we are to ever repent, cf. Acts 24:24-27.
* Life is *brief* and *uncertain.* None of is promised the next breath- let alone the next minute, hour, day, year, or decade, cf. Psalm 90:1-12.
* Knowledge brings responsibility. If know we are wrong and need to change, “now” is the time. The present is not only all we have, it is all we are promised, cf. Luke 12:47.

If you put off mowing the lawn or taking out the trash, I’m not sure God really cares (unless you’re a child whose parent(s) told you to do so, see Ephesians 6:1-3!). But, if you’re an adult who is putting of spiritual duties such as obedience and repentance, please understand that procrastination is not only dangerous, it can be deadly to your soul. Do the “right” things NOW! (6-14-16)

**Pure, Simple, Devotion to Christ**

In 2Corinthians 11:3, the apostle Paul expresses his concerns over the potential apostasy of the Corinthian church this way, *“But I am afraid, lest as the serpent beguiled Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.”* A couple of major points become evident even from a cursory reading of this passage. For one, apostasy is a real possibility. It can happen, even to entire churches. Satan can lead whole congregations from safety in Christ to perdition with him if they are not careful. Secondly, notice that one of the means Satan utilizes to entice believers into defection is to complicate things- to make our devotion to God/Christ seem more complex and difficult than it really is. By the inspiration of God, Paul said devotion to Christ should be *simple* and *pure.* Do you find your Christianity and its devotion becoming increasingly complex? Watch out, Satan may have you targeted!

In the latter part of the first century, even as the New Testament was being written, Satan enticed men to apostasy through a doctrine called Gnosticism. Gnosticism is a great example of people being led away from *pure and simple devotion to Christ* because, well, Gnosticism is even difficult to define. Essentially, Gnosticism said that true “enlightenment,” and hence spiritual acceptance with God, came through knowledge, but that such knowledge was difficult to attain and only for a select few. That sounds exactly like the kind of thing about which Paul warned the Corinthians! In fact, many Christians of the late first and early second centuries were led astray by Satan through this apostasy. Certainly Christianity wasn’t supposed to be either mysterious or complex, and it certainly wasn’t for just a select few!

Becoming a Christian isn’t complicated either, nor does it require that some intricate set of rituals be followed to completion. Jesus stated the matter very plainly in the Great Commission, *“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever* ***believes*** *and is* ***baptized*** *shall be saved; but whoever does not believe shall be condemned.”* (Mark 16:15-16, ESV)

**To *believe* is to have faith.** Belief/faith is not some “better felt than told” mystical experience for a lucky few. For everyone, it is the simple product of *“hearing the word of God”* (Romans 10:17), and accepting it as such. Faith is coming to the realization that *“He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him”* (Hebrews 11:6) in your mind, in your heart, and in your life. We can’t have faith unless we read and keep God’s words- it’s just that simple. Jesus said, *“Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”* (Luke 6:46) That’s plain enough for anyone.

***Baptism,* the other half of Jesus’ plan of salvation, isn’t complicated either.** The apostle Peter said, *“baptism now saves you- not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience- through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,”* 1Peter 3:21. He is emphasizing that immersion in water (New Testament baptism) is not about getting *physical dirt* off of your body, but getting the *spiritual removal of the stains of sin from the soul and conscience.* Saul of Tarsus had seen and spoken with Jesus personally, and had apparently been praying for three days when God’s prophet Ananias said to him, *“And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”* (Acts 9:1-19; 22:3-16)His personal interview with Jesus didn’t save him- neither did spending three days fasting and praying. But at this point, Saul *believed* in Jesus, and therefore all he yet needed was to be baptized *“for the remission of sins”* (Acts 2:38). So that’s what Ananias told him to do: to be *“baptized and wash away his sins.”* Wasn’t that exactly what Jesus said was necessary for salvation in the Great Commission- *belief* and *baptism*? Sure it was, *pure and simple.*

Now friends, that’s not difficult to comprehend or do. In fact, it’s about as uncomplicated as it could be. Why would we want to unnecessarily complicate God’s straightforward plan of salvation? Just obey it. And remember not to let Satan lead you away from *“the purity and simplicity of devotion to Christ”!*  (10-13-10)

**The Purpose of Law**

Perhaps oversimplified (and yet still accurate), the purpose of “law” and its administration is to keep us *physically* safe and secure, cf. Romans 13:1-7. It is not the law’s purpose to make us “happy,” “healthy,” or “wealthy”- only through *physical* security to provide the opportunity to pursue those things for ourselves if such is our desire. But, when the law seeks purview into other areas, it quickly runs amuck. For instance, when the law becomes interested in carving out niches for this or that special interest group, to provide them with peculiar advantages more than *physical* safety and security, it necessarily begins to infringe on the provision of *physical* safety and security for other members of its citizenry. Though these things are true, they are not brought to our attention here for political or citizenship purposes….

Instead, please consider that **God’s law** has a slightly different, but very much related purpose. The purpose of God’s law is and its administration is to keep us ***spiritually*** safe and secure. But, as in the illustration above, this specific purpose has a few other implications:

God’s law was not given **to make us “happy.”** Don’t misunderstand, those properly using God’s law for its intended purpose can be and ought to be “happy” (cf. Genesis 4:4-7), but *physical happiness* wasn’t its objective. In fact, Jesus warned that obedience to God’s will could: *separate family members* from one another- because some would believe and obey while others would not, Matthew 10:34-37; *bring persecution* upon those willing to believe and obey, Matthew 10:24-31; and even *cause death* for those willing to believe and obey it, Matthew 10:21-22. The purpose was *spiritual* safety and security.

God’s law was not given **to make us “wealthy.”** It’s strange that the modern promoters of “health and wealth” Christianity never seem to get around to the passages like: Matthew 6:19-21 where *treasures* are supposed to be *“in heaven”* and not comprised of things that can be *stolen* or *destroyed;* or Matthew 8:20 where even the *“Son of Man has* (had) *no where to lay His head;”* or Matthew 19:27-30 where, in answer to Peter’s question about what the disciples might receive since they had *“left everything”* to follow Him, Jesus referred only to *spiritual* and *eternal* rewards. In fact, Jesus told a man who loved and apparently trusted in his wealth and possessions to *“sell your possessions and give to the poor”* that he might instead have *“treasure in heaven,”* cf. Matthew 19:16-22. The purpose of God’s law is not to make us wealthy, but to provide *spiritual* safety and security.

God’s law was not given **to make us “healthy.”** Again, there is no doubt or argument that believing and obeying God’s law is always the best course to pursue, but doing so may not make us “healthy” or necessarily provide us with a long life. Since the early days of Christianity, being faithful and true to God’s law has cost Christians their lives, cf. Acts 7:59-60; Acts 12:1-4; Revelation 2:13. It is true that not every Christian winds up with a list of life-shortening persecutions like those of the apostle Paul cf. 2Corinthians 11:23-28, but it is also true that each should be ready to die rather than sacrifice his faith, Matthew 10:38-39. The saints in Smyrna were urged to be *“faithful unto death”* (meaning, even if they kill you for it) that God would give them *“the crown of life”* (the eternal reward of heaven). God’s law wasn’t given to provide us with the *physical* security of good health and long life- its purpose was to provide *spiritual* safety and security.

**“So what’s the *good* news?”** This: Though the law of God- which for us today is the New Testament in your Bible, was neither designed nor delivered to provide us with *physical* happiness, wealth, or health, it **was** designed and delivered to provide ***spiritual* safety** and **security** for **eternity**! *“And now I commend you to God and to the* ***word of His grace****, which is able to* ***build you up*** *and to* ***give you the inheritance*** *among all those who are sanctified,”* Acts 20:32. Please, let’s use God’s law for its intended purpose and stop expecting it to make our existence here some sort of “heaven on earth.” And remember, *“the law is good, if one uses it lawfully,”* 1Timothy 1:8. (5-12-15)

**Put Away Childish Things**

Our culture is obsessed with youth. We go to great lengths to *look* young- or at least younger than we are. We also often go to equally great lengths to *act* younger than we are. Whether this is in an effort to *appear* (or *stay*) young, or we’re just unwilling to grow up isn’t really clear. Paul addressed the *maturation* process in 1Corinthians 13:11 with clear terms, ***“When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.”***Everyone legitimately expects *childish* thoughts, words, and activities from a child. However, it appears that our culture has become increasingly tolerant of *childish* thoughts, words, and actions from those certainly *old enough* to know, and do, better. Unfortunately, these *cultural tendencies* have a habit of bleeding over into the church…

Obviously, there is a *time element* involved with spiritual growth and development, just as there is with physical maturation. *Newly born again* Christians are going to think, speak, and act *immaturely.*  While this fact does not excuse sin, it is a legitimate explanation. The problem is that, just like in society as a whole, some in the church seem to make every effort to remain immature and refuse to *grow up!*  Equally troubling is the toleration of this tendency among those spiritually *old enough* to *know better.* Hebrews 5:11-12 speaks to these issues, *“For by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”* The writer further adds that the *spiritually mature “have their senses trained to discern good and evil,”* Hebrew 5:14. Surely, a *lack of discernment* between *good* and *evil* is a telltale sign of spiritual immaturity.

Let’s look to another text that addresses the link between *spiritual maturity* and *putting away childish things.* 1Peter 4:3, *“For the* ***time already past is sufficient*** *for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of* ***sensuality****,* ***lusts****,* ***drunkenness****,* ***carousals****,* ***drinking parties*** *and* ***abominable idolatries****.”* First, notice the *time element*. The time *already past* is said to be *sufficient*. In other words, enough *time* has passed to have *grown out* of these types of thought processes and activities. Second, examine carefully the thought processes and activities themselves.

**Sensuality** and **Lusts**. *Sensuality* is being led and controlled by the *senses* and *lust* (both *sexual* and *inordinate/excessive non-sexual desires*) rather than deliberate and mature *thoughts.* The *“lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world,”* 1John 2:16. Animals are led and controlled by their *senses* rather than thoughtful consideration of a moral code provided by their Creator. Such is as it should be. And immature humans are equally driven by their senses, since they are yet incapable of higher thoughts and motivations. But *mature Christians* are supposed to have *“trained their senses to* ***discern good and evil****”* (Hebrews 5:14) instead of being those *“whose god is their appetite,”* Philippians 3:19. The spiritually mature *put away childish* thoughts and motivations, choosing to be *“led by”* and to *“walk by the Spirit”* rather than carrying out *“the desire of the flesh,”* cf. Galatians 5:16-25.

**Drunkenness, Carousals,** and **Drinking Parties.** Here Peter addresses different kinds and levels of alcohol consumption. The Bible universally and clearly condemns *drunkenness,* cf. Ephesians 5:18, *et al.* But we also need to notice the rest of what Peter includes in 1Peter 4:3. ***Carousal***is translated from the Greek word *komos,* which is a *letting go* or *letting loose*. Thus, the exact motivation some give for drinking is condemned. ***Drinking parties***is translated from the Greek word *potus,* and refers to *banqueting,* or *drinking bouts/contests.* So again, the very reason some give for drinking- to be *social*, is condemned by God’s Word as being part of that which should be *left behind* as *immature* and a *desire of the ungodly.*

The long and short is that we need to **grow up spiritually,** and *“put away childish things”* such as these! Additionally, those who presume themselves *spiritually mature* ought to stop tolerating and excusing these activities (and others like them), and help *train up* more immature Christians to be able to *“discern good and evil.”* (9-29-15)

**Questions and Answers**

The apostle Paul wrote this admonition to the brethren at Thessalonica, *“But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good,”* 1Thessalonians 5:21. Our word *examine* is translated from *dokimazo,* which is derived from a word that means much more than just *to look at closely.* It denotes *tested in battle,* and therefore refers to a process by which something or someone is *proven* as *reliable, trustworthy,* or *worthy.* It is particularly used of metals that have been *tested* or *proven* to be *genuine* or *pure,* cf. 1Chronicles 28:18; 29:4. Thus, Paul is urging his brethren to *test* or *prove* all things, and then to *hold fast* only to that which is *proven* as *worthy,* or *good.*

We live in an age when many things are perhaps *questioned,* but few are *examined* or *proven.*  Some seem to think it noble or cavalier to *question* everything, and surely it is, but only if done for the proper purpose of *proving* and *holding fast* to that which is *good*. However, to merely *question* indiscriminately without really desiring to find what is *worthy,* or refuse to then be willing to *cling* or *hold fast* to it once it has been *proven*, is neither noble nor wise. Surely such is at least a part of what Paul had in mind when he wrote Timothy to *“instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines… which give rise to mere speculation rather than the furthering of God’s provision which is by faith,”* 1Timothy 1:4. To *question, examine,* and *prove* everything is honest, pure, and good. But to merely *question* for the sake of questioning produces only doubt and despair. And so it is, as least as I see it, with many today who seem to question everything and answer nothing. They seem to be in love with merely *questioning everything,* rather than using it as a necessary process of *examination* and *proving* in order to find what is *good,* and then *holding fast* to it. Thus, they are left in the quagmire of doubt to *hold fast* only to their *questions,* and have no *good* answers to which to cling to and stand on to and move forward.

Just as troubling is the apparent tendency of *holding fast* to that which hasn’t been thoroughly *examined* or *proven.* Indeed, such is *blind faith.* Attempts to justify such a position by pointing out the abundance of *false information* miss the point. While copious amounts of misinformationare certainly not only available, but vying for our attention and acceptance, Paul placed the responsibility upon us to *examine* and *prove* **before** *holding fast* (or disseminating). To cling to that which has **not** been *examined* and *proven* is just as fatal to the conscientious determination of *good* as it is to merely *question* **without** the real intent and purpose of finding and clinging to that which is *proven* true and reliable. Both leave us only in the ignorant darkness of doubt and despair instead of in the illumination of truth, knowledge, faith, and hope, John 1:4-5; 8:12,31-32.

Perhaps an example will help to make these things more clear. Acts 17:10 says the Bereans were *“more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received**the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily,**to see whether these things were so.”*Did you get that? The Bereans were *noble-minded* because: they had the right **attitude**of *receiving* the word with *great eagerness;* they had the right *activity* of *examining the Scriptures;* had the right **frequency**of doing so *daily;* and, they had the right **purpose**of doing the right *things* in the right *ways* at the right *times* for the right *reason!* The result? *“Many of them therefore* ***believed****...”* Acts 17:11. Because they *questioned* for the right reason or purpose, and they *examined* in the right way, they were blessed with the right *result:* something *proven* that they could *believe* in, *hold fast* to, and be *saved* by*-* the *word* salvation through Jesus Christ!

Yes, absolutely, *question* or *carefully examine* everything. But do so to for the right reason of *proving* and *finding* what is *good,* and then *hold fast* to and *stand firm* on it! This is *walking in the light as He is in the light,* 1John 1:7. Don’t just question everything to be questioning everything, and don’t refuse to *hold fast* to that which is *proven “good”* by proper *examination.* Such is only *sitting in darkness,* and never proves or accomplishes anything *good*. (11-15-16)

**Raising Godly Children**

“Yes,” that is an ambitious title. And “no” this one article does not contain everything we need to know to accomplish the objective. I always begin such topics with a disclaimer: I am not a psychologist, child-rearing expert, or certified counselor- I am a thirty-year preacher of God’s Word. While I don’t have “all the answers,” God’s Word does. I simply try to share what I’ve learned from it on the subject. That being said, this article will only scratch the surface of the topic, but will hopefully inspire you to look further into the only “Operator’s Manual” the Creator gave us for having, loving, and raising children.

Every godly parent hopes to be able to instill principles in their children that will insure eternal destiny for them. Unfortunately, the first inclination is often to seek advice from uninspired sources. It amazes me that folks who claim to believe in God will read every book written on raising children **except** the one written by the God who gave them the children in the first place! When 2Peter 1:3 says that *“divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness,”* why do we assume that raising children is somehow excluded? Do we really think that God is not wise enough to instruct us in this area also? Do we really think that so-called “experts” know more about child-rearing than the Creator of the Universe?

Adding further to the problem, many Christian parents think that raising godly children necessitates attending a large church with lots of other “good” children; or having their children heavily involved in church-related activities and programs; or attending a church with an effective Youth Minister. A survey published in Pulpit Helps years ago (I’ve long since forgotten the source) analyzed the faithfulness of “church-goers” and found that it was **not** a product of the size of the congregation attended; or the number of church-sponsored classes and special programs offered; or the effectiveness of the Youth Minister in the local congregation. Instead, the analysis revealed some very interesting statistics.

* When both parents were faithful and active church members, **93%** of their children remained faithful.
* When only one parent was a faithful and active church member, the number dropped by twenty points to **73%**.
* When parents were only “reasonably active” (defined in the survey as attending church services, but otherwise uninvolved) the kids remained faithful only **53%** of the time.
* And when parents only attended church services infrequently, the children were faithful a mere **6%** of the time.

What does this mean? First of all, it means that the typical things most Christian parents think are important to raising godly children really are not the most important factors. Instead, **the most critical factor to raising godly children is the faithfulness and dedication of the parents themselves.** **Put another way, the greatest influence on children’s spiritual well-being is the spiritual well-being of their parents.** Did we really need survey statistics to learn this? Apparently. If you really want your children to grow up to be spiritual productive members of the Kingdom, be spiritual productive parents in the Kingdom! Children learn, value, and practice what they see valued and practiced by their parents. “Do as I say, not as I do” has never worked, and it never will.

The command of God is clear. Ephesians 6:4, *“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger;* ***but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”***Dads, this is your responsibility- not your wife’s, or the church’s- yours. And the best first step to being the spiritual leader and provider for your family God requires of you is to be a faithful and dedicated Christian yourself. You cannot teach what you do not know. And if you attempt to teach to your family what you do not value and practice yourself, you will fail. Give it some thought, won’t you? The eternal destiny of you and your family hangs in the balance! (4-13-11)

**Raising Godly Children- Example Alone is Not Enough**

I’m not big on “series” articles because it’s difficult to string them together in a cohesive way. Nonetheless, I do want to follow up on a point or two that were mentioned in last week’s edition. We previously tried to get the point across that the first step to “raising godly and dedicated children” was to be a godly and dedicated parent- fathers in particular are given this responsibility in Ephesians 6:4. But as with most things in life, example alone is usually not enough. Jesus didn’t just live a godly life, He taught by proclamation also. He didn’t just do the right things Himself and hope that others would follow his example- He **educated** and **encouraged** people to do the right things also. It’s the same with raising godly children.

First, let’s consider the matter of “educating” your children spiritually. This means teaching them about God, His Word, and His Church. As was intimated last week, you cannot teach what you do not know. And, if you try to teach what you do not value and practice yourself, you will fail. While we are not under the Law of Moses today (the Old Testament, cf. Romans 7:1-4), there are many lessons from it which can be very helpful in understanding God, and what He expects of His people. Take, for instance, Deuteronomy 6 on the importance and methods of teaching your children to respect and obey God. In the first six verses of this chapter, God emphasizes being wholly committed to Him in both *heart* (love) and *life* (obedience). But notice carefully what follows in vv.7-9, *“and* ***you shall teach them***(*i.e.* the words of God) ***diligently*** *to your sons and shall* ***talk of them when you sit in your house*** *and* ***when you walk by the way*** *and* ***when you lie down******and when you rise up****. And you shall bind them as a sign* ***on your hand*** *and they shall be as frontals* ***on your forehead****. And you* ***shall write them on the doorposts of your house*** *and* ***on your gates****.”*  Get the picture? Raising godly children includes, but takes more than just the right example of vv.1-6. It also requires diligent, persistent, and constant education. But example and education aren’t all there is to the matter either. *Encouragement* is also important.

I am amazed when people think and say such things as, “I don’t want to force God (or the Bible, religion, or religious conviction) on my children; I want them to make up their own minds about such things.” It’s funny how these same people don’t mind “forcing” tooth-brushing, bathing, healthy eating habits and trips to the doctor or the dentist on their children when these things have only to do with the ***physical*** aspects of this life. But when it comes to the ***spiritual***aspects of the child’s eternal well-being, they all of a sudden now become entirely passive. “Oh consistency, thou art a jewel!”

Recently, a friend of mine spoke about being taken to church services when he was a child. He said he had two choices: 1) he could go to church ***with a whipping***; or 2) he could go to church ***without* *a whipping***- the choice was his, but either way, **he was going!** Why? His parents understood their responsibilities, and also knew that he wasn’t yet mature enough to make such decisions “for himself”- just like he wasn’t mature enough to decide whether or not to bathe, brush his teeth, or have chocolate cake for supper! By the way, my friend has been a very faithful and capable gospel preacher for many years now. The point of which is this: We have to ***encourage***our children toward godliness in the same ways we *encourage* them toward other healthy habits. They may resist in the same way that most kids resist good hygiene and other healthy habits at first, but it is best for them in the long run.

Remember the keys to raising godly children: ***Example, Education,*** and ***Encouragement.***  While these will not eliminate the free moral agency of your children- they may still chose ungodliness over godliness, this at least points them in the right direction. (4-19-11)

**Raising Godly Children- The Biggest Mistake**

Our last two articles have been about this important topic. As previously mentioned, I really don’t like doing “series” pieces in this format because it is difficult to maintain cohesion without a lot of repetition. Nonetheless, there was one more major aspect with which I felt compelled to deal. But this will be the last installment on this matter for now. However, I do plan to present a series of lessons on this topic very soon during our Sunday morning services which will be much more detailed than what we’ve covered here. So, what is the biggest mistake parents make when trying to raise (godly) children?

In my opinion, and I’ve already told you I’m not a certified counselor or psychologist- just a preacher trying understand and teach what God gives us, the biggest mistake parents commit in raising children is making them the center, or central focal point, of the family. I know- when we become parents it changes our world forever. These blessed babies instantly capture our hearts because they emanate from us, and are completely dependent upon us. Such is natural and right- at least at first. But as children begin to grow and develop, our job becomes more than just meeting their **physical**needs. Children have **emotional** needs too. Soon it becomes apparent that we must learn to distinguish their ***needs***from their ***wants****.* This is true *physically* and *emotionally.* A child that has become the focal point of the family will soon dominate every aspect of it with not just their needs, but their wants.

Think of the problem this way: Which came first- the “family” or the “child”? While it is unfortunately true that many “families” are formed because of a pregnancy, God’s order that a husband and a wife make a baby- not the other way around, Hebrews 13:4; Titus 2:4-5. If we get this backwards, we’ve started out wrong. While this situation is not insurmountable, diligence must be given to get back to God’s way of doing things. **The point is that the husband/wife relationship *created*, and must *sustain*, the parent/child relationship, not the inverse.** Many parents have difficulty learning to properly raise their children because they did not learn to be husbands and wives first.

But let’s get back to the “needs” vs. “wants” matter as it relates to both physical and emotional issues. Children who are made the focal point of the family with regard to both their needs and wants, whether physical or emotional, soon become addicted to attention because they’ve become accustomed to being overdosed with it. To illustrate, please read the next paragraph carefully.

“Children need **food**. But they don’t need a lot of it. If you persist in giving a child more **food** than he or she needs, that child will become dependent upon continuing to receive excessive amounts of **food**. If you continue to feed that dependency, it will grow into an obsession that will function as a powerful, driving force in that child’s life. The child’s sense of well being will lean increasingly on the notion that in order to feel secure, he/she must have constant access to **food**. Eventually, the child will become a **food** addict, and the condition will hang like a stone around the child’s neck, encumbering the growth of self-esteem.”

Now go back and reread the paragraph above, but this time, substitute the word **“attention”** for the word **“food”** as you do so. Get the picture? We can easily overdose our children on “attention” by repeatedly giving in to their “wants” (Proverbs 30:15-17). Such is ultimately detrimental to the child. Do children have both physical and emotional needs that we as loving parents must meet? Absolutely! But can they be encouraged to be selfish and manipulative by well-meaning parents making them and their “wants” the focal point of the family? Absolutely! Children are by definition, immature. They are thus incapable of dictating what is proper and best for the family as a whole. That’s the parents’ job. Don’t surrender control of the family to the children’s “wants” or “needs.” There was a family before the children came along, and hopefully, there will be one after they’re moved out. **The husband and wife relationship must be made the central focal point of the family for it to succeed.** After all, they’re the ones who created, and must maintain the family. Keep things in the right order according to God’s Word, and things always work out better. (4-26-11)

**Real Repentance**

Repentance is a requirement of salvation, Luke 13:3,5. Some folks say that it is the most difficult of all the obligations God has specified. They may be right. But as with most things God requires of us, repentance becomes more problematic when we: 1) don’t really understand exactly what it is; and/or, 2) go about it wrongly. Hopefully, what follows will help in both regards.

Getting an accurate definition of repentance is vital. Repentance is not simply changing your mind- as such does not address the activity. Likewise, repentance is not just changing your activity- for such does not necessarily address the mind. From these things, it would seem that repentance is a “change of mind that leads to a change of activity/action.” While this is a pretty good basic definition, perhaps one additional element would help. Think about **repentance** as **“a change of mind that leads to a change of activity/action and results in a change of allegiance”** (see Romans 6:16-18). With hopefully a better understanding of *what* repentance is, let’s consider a few examples of how we typically fail to do it right, and thus make it more difficult.

1. We propose ***timed repentance.*** We tell ourselves, others, and even God that we will “straighten up” at some future date on the calendar, or after some event occurs in our lives. This is the notion behind spiritual resolutions tied to January 1st. The other form this one takes is that “I’ll straighten out my life after \_\_\_\_ (I: get out of college; or get married; or have children; or get settled in my career; or become successful; or etc.).” This one also often incorporates the “wild oats” logic- that is, “Have fun now, repent or straighten up later.” This surely can’t be true repentance because although it acknowledges the propriety of doing God’s will in the mind, it rebelliously delays obedience to God’s will until later and substitutes instead “my” will now. Our **activity** hasn’t really changed at all.
2. We attempt ***conditional repentance****.* We try to “strike a deal” with God- such as, “Lord, if you will do this/that for me, then I will quit \_\_\_\_\_.” God is not Monty Hall (for you younger folks, he was the famous host of the long-running TV game show, “Let’s Make a Deal”)! I suppose we think that in this arrangement, to which God never agreed, by the way, if God doesn’t come through with “His end of the deal,” then we are freed from our obligation to repent. This is not repentance because the **mind** has not really changed- we’re just offering to restrict our activities on a conditional basis contingent upon God fulfilling our wishes.
3. We practice ***reluctant repentance.*** In this scenario, we understand the need for repentance in our minds, at least for eternal self-preservation, if nothing else, and we curtail our activities to bring them more into compliance to God’s will, but we’re not really happy about it. It usually goes something like, “I’d really like to \_\_\_\_ (fill in worldly activity of choice), but I can’t because I’m a Christian (sigh).” In this case, we may indeed be doing the “right” things, and even refusing to participate in the “wrong” ones, but our heart is certainly not in it! Our mind understands, and our activities are in compliance, but our **allegiance** has not really changed.

Obviously, none of these situations constitutes the true and necessary repentance that God requires. True biblical repentance, on the other hand:

1. Is motivated by **sorrow for sin**. It is not being sorry “I got caught,” but genuine distress for having disappointed God, 2Corinthians 7:9. Our **minds** are changed because we understand that we have failed to carry out *“the will of God.”*
2. Is **without regret.** There is no reluctance or regret in changing our activities to come into compliance with God’s word because our true desire is to please Him rather than ourselves, 2Corinthians 7:10. Our **activities** are thus changed, not because we “have to,” but because we “want to” be pleasing and useful to God. Now our **allegiance** has necessarily changed also, 2Corinthians 7:11-12.

So, have you truly repented so that your *mind, activity,* and *allegiance* have changed? Or, are you just going through the motions of putting on some outward show of feigned contrition, cf. Matthew 3:8? (1-29-13)

**“Be Reasonable!”**

Most people don’t want to be considered “unreasonable.” In fact, some will even compromise or abandon the principles upon which they base their reason just because someone else accuses them of being unreasonable. Do we really understand what it means to be “reasonable” in the first place?

Generally, being “reasonable” means to think, and therefore act, in a *rational* way. One who has used his intellect to come to a logical conclusion, and then acts accordingly, is usually thought to be “reasonable.” This means the inverse is also true: one who fails to use rational thought processes, and then acts accordingly, is being “unreasonable”- and usually suffers for it!

There are at least a couple of important aspects of these things that we need to consider. “Reasonable” actions come from reason- not impulse. When we react impulsively to a situation without taking the time to “think it through,” we typically wind up acting unreasonably. We are then allowing the quicker but shallower aspects of our desires to cut off opportunity for slower but deeper deliberate thought by acting immediately. Sometimes, we even admit as much by saying, “I’m going to go ahead and do this now before I have time to think about it.” But conversely, God wants us to take the time to allow our intellect to override our impulsive desires before we act or react, for such is the “reasonable” course. For instance, the Lord’s brother wrote that we should be *“quick to hear”* but *“slow to speak and slow to anger,”* James 1:1. If we stop long enough to really listen and think, we can keep our emotions in check, and perhaps keep our feet out of our mouths also!

Now that we have the principle down, let’s make a few applications of using rational thoughts to produce reasonable decisions and actions (these are largely unrelated otherwise).

Is it *reasonable* to conclude that the intellect, order, and intricacy of the world just happened accidently by chance, or is that just what we want to believe? The simple principle of Cause and Effect is highlighted in Hebrews 3:4 this way, *“For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.”* No one “reasonably” looks at a house and concludes that it is the result of a mindless accident of chance- that some existent materials exploded and a house resulted. And yet, many seem to desire to believe that such is the origin of our world and life on it. Surely it is more “reasonable” to believe that the eternal intellect and power of God created the life and order of all things.

Is it *reasonable* to continually violate one’s own conscience, or do we allow our impulses and desires to override and suppress our thought processes? The very idea of “violating one’s conscience” necessarily implies an admission that what we are doing is “wrong” rather than “right”- at least as far as we understand them. So, why do we continually do that which contradicts our own understanding and thought processes? Surely such is “unreasonable” behavior! Note 1John 3:21-22 in this regard, *“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.”*

Is it *reasonable* to expect God to judge us on the basis of our emotional attachment to Him alone, or is that just what we want to believe? There is no doubt or argument that God desires and expects us to love Him, but is it reasonable to conclude that this is all that He expects? Was that all He did for us- just love us? Or, did He also act in our best interest? He not only loved us, He provided a way to save us through Jesus Christ, cf. Roman 5:8; John 3:16. But is it reasonable to conclude that all we have to do is love Him in order to be saved eternally? What did Jesus say? Note His words on this point in John 14:15, *“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”* And also, John 14:23, *“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him…”*

In 2Thessalonians 3:2, Paul asked the Thessalonians to pray that he and those with him might *“be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men,* (KJV). Perhaps we should also pray that we might **be *reasonable*** rather than ***unreasonable* men.** I do! (9-3-13)

**Can We Be Both *Reasonable* and *Unwavering?***

Yes. In fact, such is expected. Note James 3:17, *“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle,* ***reasonable****, full of mercy and good fruits,* ***unwavering****, without hypocrisy.”*  However, it seems that in our current culture, and even in our spiritual mindset, the *wise* traits of being both *reasonable* and *unwavering* have become polar opposites. We seem to have reached a point in our thinking that to be *reasonable,* we can no longer have firm/*unwavering* convictions about anything. Such is patently not true! And here’s why….

1. The notion that one can’t be both *reasonable* and *unwavering* (firm in convictions) is based on the false premise that “truth” is relative. It isn’t. Facts are facts and truth is truth. Our choice is to either accept the truth and stand *unwaveringly* on it, or reject it for a preferred falsehood. Romans 1:18-23 well illustrates both this choice, and its incumbent results. Notice that in this text: *truth* was *suppressed,* v.18; that such was done contrary to *evidence,* v.19; that truth could be *clearly seen* and *understood,* v.20a; and that rejection of such a *known* truth rendered one *without excuse,* vv.20b-21. God’s Word is truth, and we must stand *unwaveringly* on and in it! To do otherwise makes us *fools,* v.23, and brings His *wrath* upon us, v.18.
2. But, being *reasonable* is not in opposition to these things. In James 3:17, *wisdom* is shown to include being both *unwavering* **and** *reasonable.* Perhaps a little word study will be enlightening. *Adiakritos* (pronounced *ad·ee·****ak****·ree·tos*) is the Greek word translated into our word *“unwavering.”* Among other things, it means “without uncertainty*.*”The idea seems to be that those who *wise* (according to God) are *certain* of the veracity of truth, and are thus willing to stand on and in it, and to do so *unwaveringly.* However, another trait of being *wise* in God’s estimation, according to the same verse (James 3:17), is to be *reasonable.* This word is translated from the Greek term, *eupeithes* (pronounced *yoo·pi·****thace***), and is defined as “easily obeying, compliant.” As used here, the idea is that one who is *reasonable* is open to and easily converted to/by previously unknown truth. Thus, a *wise* person is one who, among other traits from James 3:17 that are not within the purview of this article, is **both** *unwavering* in his convictions and application of the truth he knows, **and** open to new or additional truth that he hasn’t yet discovered. Thus, *unwavering* and *reasonable* are not mutually exclusive!
3. As an illustration of being both *unwavering* and *reasonable,* consider Apollos in Acts 18:24-28. He was: *mighty in the Scriptures,* v.24; *instructed in the way of the Lord* and *fervent is spirit,* v.25a; which led him to *teach accurately the things concerning Jesus,* v.25b; but, he was *acquainted only with the baptism of John* (which had, by that time, been superseded by *baptism in the name of Jesus,* cf. Acts 19:4-5). He was *unwavering* in his convictions, and preached them *accurately* (v.25), even though his understanding was incomplete. However, because he was also *reasonable* (as per the definition above- *easily obedient* and *compliant*), he was also: open to additional truth presented to him by Priscilla and Aquila, v.26; and immediately received, was converted to/by this additional truth, and began proclaiming it, vv.27-28!

What’s the bottom line? If we are to be *wise* in God’s estimation rather than our own, we must be *unwavering* with regard to the truth we know, and yet *reasonable* enough to be open to and easily converted to additional and previously unknown truth when it is proven to be so! Face a couple of facts in these regards. Firstly, God expects us to be *wise* enough to practice what we know to be true. *“Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin,”* James 4:17. We need to be *unwavering* in our commitment to obey the truth we know to be truth. Secondly, none of us knows ALL of God’s truth. Therefore, we must be *reasonable* enough to recognize our deficiency, and be open to and easily convertible by and to additional truth. And thirdly, Paul said that he *“had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth,”* Acts 26:9. This was so because “the truth” he thought he knew was false- that Jesus wasn’t the Christ. But, because he was *reasonable* enough to be open to truth that could be proven valid- that Jesus **was** the Christ, he *“did not prove to be disobedient”* to it, but was immediately and completely converted to it, Acts 26:19, and became an *unwavering* proclaimer and example of it, Acts 26:20. Let’s be *unwavering* in our convictions, and yet *reasonable* in our openness to and reception of additional truth. That is wise! (1-24-17)

**The Reasons Matter**

Have you ever said, or had said to you, something along the lines of, “I pray for \_\_\_\_\_ all the time, but never seem to get it.”? Even when the petition is made in the full assurance of faith that God has the ability to grant the request, it often just doesn’t come to fruition for us. In light of the promises made by God in such passages such as Matthew 7:7-11, why is this? While there may be several answers (such as, I’m asking God to *do something for me* that I ought to be *doing myself,* or at least *doing my part* to achieve, or asking for something that is not according to His will {*i.e.* what is ultimately right or best}), the short one is “The reason matters.”

“The reason matters” relates not only to the request itself, but also why you/we desire it. For example, do you pray for patience constantly without really sensing any improvement in that area of your life? If so, then perhaps you should back up and ask yourself a searching question: “Why do I want God to give me patience?” If the answer is “So ***my*** life will be easier” or “less stressful,” or some other selfishly motivated reason, such could be well be the reason that particular request hasn’t been granted. If, on the other hand, the answer was, “So I can be a better servant of God, and more beneficial to others in becoming the same,” do you suppose that such a motivation would garner a different response from the Father?

Note an example of exactly the point I’m trying to make from 1Kings 3. Solomon was given the opportunity to ask for anything he wanted of God. His decision is manifested in the prayer of vv.6-9, the crux of which is found in v.9a, *“So give Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people to discern between good and evil.”*  Solomon didn’t ask for wisdom so he could be “the wisest man on the planet”- that would have been selfish. Instead, he: acknowledged the past *loving-kindness* God had shown his father, David, v.6; acknowledged his *unworthiness* to be king due his youth and inexperience, v.7; acknowledged the *enormity* of the task before him to rule the great people of God, v.8; and then asked for the *ability* to perform God’s will in the best manner possible to carry out the task God had laid before him. In other words, he asked for the ability to serve God and God’s people in a way that would glorify the Father, rather than himself! Now, is that a different premise from which most of your unanswered prayers are formed?

In James 4:1-4, the Lord’s brother first identifies wrong *pleasure sources* as being the cause of *“quarrels and conflicts among you,”* v.1. I really don’t think James is addressing, in this verse, conflicts ***between******people*** as much as conflicts ***within******the individual****;* which seems to be borne out by the *internal* sinful motivations of *“lust…envy”* which produce the *outward* sins of *“murder…fight(ing)…quarrel(ling)”* mentioned in v.3 (see also Romans 7:14-23, where Paul likewise addresses this *conflict within*). Additionally, the Greek preposition *en,* which most all of the major translations render here as *“****among*** *you”* in v.1, can just as accurately be translated as *“****in*** *you,”-* which strengthens the notion of *internal* rather than *external* conflict. But, let’s not lose the point: wrong pleasure sources existed, which, in turn, prevented their petitions from being granted by God. Note v.3 specifically on this, *“You ask and do not receive,* ***because you ask with wrong motives****, so that you may spend it on your pleasures”-* and their *pleasures* were, as previously noted, wrongly sourced!

So, if your prayerful requests aren’t being granted, it could be that you are asking: **1) for wrong things**, or at least asking for things God knows you don’t need, and/or that aren’t best; or, **2) with wrong motives**. If the objects of your requests are selfish, or even selfishly motivated, it seems pretty clear that those requests are going to be denied by the Father. But, if your requests are for the purpose of making you a better servant, and therefore enable you to bring glory to God rather than yourself, well, that’s a completely different matter! Before you pull out “your list” of prayer requests the next time, remember the words of Solomon and James, and the humble and selfless motivations they exemplify. (9-25-12)

**Is “Religion” a *Bad* Word?**

In answer to the title question: “Yes, apparently to some, ‘religion’ has become a bad word.” We hear it all the time, “I’m *spiritual,* but not *religious.”* Regardless of what they may mean by “spiritual,” it’s fairly apparent that what they mean by “not religious” is **anti-church.** In many ways, who can blame them for feeling this way? In the main, *religion* has become impotent to produce true *spirituality* because:

* It is too busy seeking to occupy and entertain us through secular and carnal means,
* It has become a money grab business and tax shelter;
* It is trying to be a “one-stop-shop” for everything from child care and education to youth and adult social and recreational center; and,
* It has been the source of, or provided cover for, hideous scandals, unthinkable atrocities, and very “unchristian” attitudes and activities.

It’s no wonder that many folks want nothing to do with “religion”! It has, at least in the form that most see it, become divisive, corrupt, and secular if not downright carnal. This devolution is the result of ***man’s***wisdom and ways being substituted for the truth of ***God’s*** Word. We shouldn’t be surprised since such an apostasy was actually predicted in multiple New Testament passages, cf. 1Timothy 4:1-3; 2Timothy 3:1-5; 4:3.

But let’s take a closer look at “religion.” In the New Testament, “religion” (or a form of it, such as *religious*) is most often translated from the Greek word, *threskia,* which refers to *religious worship, ceremonies, discipline* (Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon). *Threskia* is a derivative of *threskos,* which is *“fearing or worshipping God”* and includes the idea of being *fearful* and even *trembling* (IBID)*.*  Thus, what the New Testament calls “religion” is very different from the pageantry of paganism modern man sees parading as such. God says *religion* is the *trembling* and *fearful worship* of Him that puts into *practice* (the *discipline* part of the definition) what He says, James 1:26-27. But “religion” today is mostly man worshipping himself: his own thoughts, desires, and emotions, Philippians 3:18-19; and then expecting God to accept and approve them. Modern “religion” has, in the main, become man-centered rather than God-centered.

The good news is that it doesn’t have to be this way. The church can (and I believe does still) exist in non-denominational form, and can practice “true religion” in both worship and discipline. It’s actually quite simple to accomplish. To practice *“pure and undefiled religion,”* Christians (and the Church) only need the *pure* and *undefiled* Word of God, Galatians 1:6-8 and 1Peter 1:22-23. So, get rid of every catechism, manual, or discipline written by man and use only the New Testament as the standard for doctrine and worship. Then, eliminate every church “office” that can’t be found in the N.T., install those that you do find, and demand that they function according to the dictates and patterns therein. Next, understand that what you think or how you feel doesn’t equate to, let alone exceed, what God has said, 1Peter 4:11. Then, do *what* God says, *when* God says, *how* God says- both in and out of worship, Luke 6:46; John 14:15. Finally, realize that “worship” is about Him rather ourselves- *“For an hour is coming, and now is, when true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers,”* John 4:23.

When Christians worship in this way, and live as they ought, “religion” can and will have a much better connotation than it does now. Perhaps then, it won’t be such a *bad* word to society any longer, and may actually be something they desire and seek instead of avoiding. (9-21-16)

**“Lord, Please Remove…”**

I suppose it’s natural for us to want *smooth paths* in life. In fact, Hebrews 12:13 commands that we *“make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”* But sometimes, if not most of the time, we beseech our Father to *remove* objects that we perceive as *obstacles* from our way that may indeed be beneficial- if not necessary, to our spiritual growth and development. For example, please consider the following….

**Example #1, Numbers 21:4-9.** The fledgling nation of Israel, having been freed from Egyptian bondage and having received the Law of God at Mt. Sinai, journeyed toward the promised land of Canaan. But their murmuring and complaining, both against God and Moses, prompted God to send *“fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died*.*”* The people quickly confessed their sins to Moses, and begged that he intercede on their behalf before God that *“He might remove the serpents from us.”* Moses did as they asked, but then an interesting thing happened. God did not *remove* the serpents, but instead, provided a *cure* for snakebites! He did so in the form of a *bronze serpent-* formed and erected on a standard in the camp so that whoever was bitten- if they had sufficient faith to look upon it, would be healed, cf. Numbers 21:8-9. What’s the point? They asked that God **remove the *physical* consequence of their sins**; instead, He **provided a *cure* that required their active participation**. Interestingly enough, Jesus used this event as an example to show the requirements of saving faith in John 3:14-15, right before John 3:16!

**Example #2, 2Corinthians 12:7-10.** The apostle Paul said that *“because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations,”* a *“thorn in the flesh”* was given to *“keep me from exalting myself!”* While many have speculated as to the exact nature of this *thorny* *“messenger of Satan,”* the context seems to identify it with the *weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions,* and *difficulties* of v.10. If these are not *“the thorn,”* then I have no idea what it was. Fortunately, identifying the correct specifies of *the thorn* is not essential to the point of the passage, or our use of it here. Rather, the point is that Paul earnestly entreated God three times that this *physical impediment-* whatever it was, might be removed. But note carefully the Lord’s response to these requests, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”*  Paul asked that God **remove his physical hardships or impediments**;but instead, **God provided the necessary grace and power for him to overcome them.**

**Example #3, Luke 22:42.** On the night of His betrayal, Jesus prayed fervently three times (cf. Matthew 26:44), *“remove this cup from Me; yet not My will but Thine be done.”* None of us wants to die. And even understanding and admitting the inevitability of death (as per Hebrews 9:27), certainly everyone would want to avoid the horrors and pain of death that awaited Jesus, and that He sought to avoid through His ardent entreaties to the Father. The *“cup”* to which He referred was not just death, it was the most painful, agonizing, and degrading death then perpetrated- death *on a cross.* Whether death in general, or the pain and agony associated with it, we too often cry out to the Father, “Let this cup pass from me!” For reasons beyond mere death itself, Jesus had to die, horribly, painfully, and shamefully on a cross. Though He prayed that His *“cup”* might be removed, and strengthened by His Father for the daunting task ahead, ultimately He resolved to drink it, as record in John 18:11, *“…the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?”* Jesus asked God to **remove His *cup* of pain, anguish, shame, and death**; but instead, **God provided the strength, resolve, and power to face and endure it.**

The Israelites prayed that God *remove the consequences* of their sin- God provided a cure. Paul prayed that God *remove the hardships/impediments* from his life- God provided grace and power. Jesus prayed that God *remove the agony of death-* God provided strength and resolve. Are there things you are asking God to *remove* from your life for which He is providing a cure that requires your faith and obedience, or for which He is providing the requisite grace, power, strength, and resolve to overcome instead? The point isn’t that we shouldn’t be entreating the Father to *remove* these things from our lives- we absolutely should do so, just as did the Israelites, Paul, and Jesus. But, we should also be receptive to God’s provision of help to overcome should His reply require such instead of removal. It may not be easy, and indeed, it may be the most difficult thing you’ve ever faced, or even imagined. But if it is God’s will, He will provide the means necessary to overcome, so move forward with resolute courage and confidence! (3-28-17)

***Requirements* of Repentance**

Some folks say that repentance is “the hardest command of God to obey.” Perhaps this is so, but why? The answer is actually pretty simple: Repentance requires us to change our *minds, hearts,* and *lives.*  Not so easy? I said the answer was **simple**- I didn’t say it was easy!

Let’s begin with a clear picture of exactly what repentance *is,* and *isn’t.* Repentance is, as implied above, a change of mind and heart that leads to a change of course or direction. More graphically, it is deciding that you are going the wrong direction in life, making a U-turn, and then being happy about the change. Take these elements one at a time for a little more clarification.

**The Decision.** For anyone to truly repent, a change of mind has to take place. A bank robber may stop robbing for a while because he fears the police are on to him. He hasn’t repented though he has changed his behavior. There was no change of **mind** regarding the sinfulness of his activity, nor was there a change of heart (emotions or desires) either, just a fear of being caught. So, his behavioral change isn’t true repentance, it’s just a temporary modification that will inevitably revert back to its former state.

**The Change.** True repentance also requires a change of activity, course, or direction in life. To borrow from the same illustration of our bank robber, imagine that he reaches the conclusion that what he has been doing is just not right. He’s taking by force what belongs to others, and breaking both God’s and man’s laws by so doing. But, because he’s also unwilling to “work for a living,” he continues to rob banks anyway. He’s changed his mind regarding the rightness/wrongness of his activity, but has not changed his behavior. This can’t be repentance either- the end result of his life is exactly as it was; he just has a guilty conscience about it now!

**The Emotion.** Let’s go back our bank robber one last time. He changes his mind about the course of his life, and as a result, stops robbing banks and gets a job (as a security expert for the banking industry!). But, though he changed his mind and life, he isn’t happy about it. In fact, he’s miserable and misses the “excitement” of his former life, as well as the luxuries it provided him. Has he repented? He isn’t robbing banks anymore, and doesn’t intend to do so again, but he sure longs for his previous path. He’s *doing* the rightthings in his life, and even *thinking* and *saying* the rightthings in his job, but he doesn’t **feel** the right things! How long do you suppose he’ll stick to the “strait and narrow” way?

Do you see now why repentance requires a change of **mind, activity,** and **emotion**? Just modifying one of the three requirements doesn’t result in lasting change. Again, the reason is simple: In modifying one part of himself, he failed to change all of himself. Repentance, to be effective, must change everything about us- our **minds** (decision-making processes), our **activities** (the overall course and direction of our lives), and our **hearts** (how we feel about this new direction relative to our past). Now, lest you think I’m pulling all of this out of my hat, note what the Bible says on the subject.

**Matthew 3:8-9**. Hypocritical Jewish leaders came with the multitudes of believers to be baptized by John. These leaders were *doing* the right thing, but their **minds** were not right in this matter. Therefore, John told them they needed to *“bring forth fruits in keeping with your repentance.”* How does this indicate their repentance was incomplete in regard to their thinking? Consider the next verse, *“and do not* ***suppose*** *that…. ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for….”* Their supposition- their thinking, was wrong. Just being baptized wasn’t going to change their minds- but their minds would surely have to be changed for them to truly repent!

**Acts 2:37-38**. Those who had crucified Jesus as an imposter, once they became convinced that He was indeed the Christ, asked, *“Brethren, what shall we do?”* Their mindshad already been changed by the apostles’ sermon, but what remained? They needed to change their **course** and **direction** in life- they needed to go from being persecutors of Christ to being His disciples. So, they were told to *repent* and *be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ!*

**2Corinthians 7:10**. Paul wrote, *“the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance* ***without regret,*** *leading to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death.”*  When the mind and life have been changed, the heart must follow for true repentance to occur, for Jesus said, *“for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,”* Matthew 6:21.

Now, have you truly repented by changing your **mind**, your **course**, and your **desires**? Or, are you still fighting the battle with sin by attempting to change only **part** of yourself? Such is surely a losing battle! (9-18-13)

**Repentance, Weakness, and Rebellion**

Since everyone has sinned (Romans 3:23), and even those committed to Christ continue to sin to some degree (1John 1:8), repentance is pretty much a constant need. On the simplest level, “repentance” is “change.” In Matthew 3:2, John the Baptist told his audiences to *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* He was telling them they needed to change.

A little more specifically, repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of activity, course, and direction, cf. 2Corinthians 12:21. Through the process of salvation, repentance also leads one to a change of *allegiance*. One changes, or switches, “teams” by moving from *“the domain of darkness…to the kingdom of His beloved Son,”* (Colossians 1:13).

After one is on the Lord’s side, the need for repentance is still present, because sin is not completely eliminated from our lives. Christians do not forget how to sin, and God does not overlook or excuse sin just because the perpetrator belongs to Him, cf. Acts 8:12-13, 20-24. After all, isn’t wrong still “wrong” even when your child does it? 1John 3:4 indicates that sin is “sin” for everyone. Thus, the need for repentance is an ever-present part of everyone’s life.

Given these things, why don’t we all just repent and do our part to make things right (Matthew 3:8) when we sin? The answer to this one is simple: Repentance is hard. Why? A couple of reasons should be readily apparent: 1) we don’t really like to admit that we’re wrong (which requires a change of mind); and, 2) we don’t really like to amend our lives (which would obviously require a change of activity, course, and direction). So, what do we do instead? We retreat to the “weakness” defense.

The “weakness” defense is claiming that our lack of repentance, evidenced by habitual sin (committing the same sin, or sins, over and over), is due to “weakness” rather than a refusal to repent. There is no doubt that some sins we commit, even repetitively, are due to weakness- either in knowledge or strength, which come with maturity. But if we have been Christians long enough to be *meat-eaters* (cf. Hebrews 5:12-14), and are still defending our lack of repentance by claiming “weakness,” the problem is likely rebellion instead.

It soon becomes all too easy to attribute our repetitive sins to “weakness,” and make prayerful requests for God to forgive them on that basis, without really making any effort at all to repent. However, we must remember that forgiveness of sins is linked to repentance, instead of perpetual weakness. Consider two passages from Acts on this point: *“Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord,”* 3:19; and, *“Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you,”* 8:22.

Is weakness a very real cause of sin? Absolutely. Is it also true that many of us are all too content with feigned “weakness” because we enjoy sin and don’t really want to change (repent)? Positively, and that makes us “rebellious”- not weak, *“for there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers…”* Titus 1:9.

Repentance isn’t easy, but it is required, Luke 13:3,5. We can’t keep deceiving ourselves into thinking that perpetual weakness is a pardonable excuse for sin. At some point, we have to own up to the fact that we’re actually rebelling against God through our continued knowledgeable disobedience of His will. We *could* do better, if we just *would*. Unfortunately, “I just couldn’t help myself” is a lie we tell ourselves, others, and even God in an effort to absolve our failures to do what we know is right. The truth is that we usually *know* better, and can *do* better, but just *choose not to* *do* better, cf. 1Corinthians 10:13. So, let’s decide to stop hiding behind purported weaknesses, and do the “right” things. Otherwise, we may well be just making a *“provision for the flesh in regard to its lust”* (Romans 13:14), and that sounds an awful lot like “rebellion!” (9-26-12)

**The “Roots” of Evil**

I am well aware that 1Timothy 6:10 says *“the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil.”* But evil has more than one root, and therefore the love of money is not the only tuber that can tap into our hearts to grow sinful fruits in our lives. In fact, there are many such “roots.” Passages like Galatians 5:19-21 give a pretty good list of some of the others. These we must pull out of, or chop off from, our hearts to produce lives filled with “the fruit of the Spirit.” However, I have become convinced that **selfishness** is a root of evil that yields a bountiful harvest of sinful attitudes and activities. It can and will destroy every relationship we seek to maintain- husband/wife, parent/child, work/business, friendships, and certainly our spiritual relationship with God and His people. But this isn’t just my opinion.

James 4:1-4 makes it pretty clear that the evil root of selfish desire causes multiple problems for us. He begins with the question, *“What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?”* He then answers the question with a question: *“Is not the source* ***your pleasures*** *that wage war in your members?”* When our own selfish pleasures take precedence in our lives, our relationship with our brethren will undoubtedly suffer. But James goes further in the next verse, *“You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot attain; so you fight and quarrel.”* See how pervasive the evil root of selfishness can be? Verse 3 adds that our selfish desires prevent God from being able to grant our petitions- because His blessings would just be used *“on* ***your*** *pleasures.”*  Finally, James adds that such a selfish attitude constitutes *“friendship with the world”* (because the world is selfishly motivated), the end result of which is that we become *“an enemy of God.”* What a cornucopia of sinful fruits come from this evil root of selfishness!

So what’s the solution? Philippians 2:1-4 provides several. First, be in *“fellowship”* with the Spirit rather than with the world, v.1. That is, strive to be like God, Jesus, and the Spirit by being “selfless,” instead of being “selfish” like Satan and the world. Second, v.2 says to be *“of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on purpose”* with those who are “godly” rather than those who are “godless.” Not only should we be in fellowship with God, we should be in fellowship with God’s people. “Fellowship” means “joint participation.” We should thus be “jointly participating” with God’s people (rather than the world) in *mind* by studying God’s word together*,* in *heart* by having ours knit together with theirs in loving good and godly things*,* and in *activity* by practicing our faith together*.*  Finally, v.3 commands that we *“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit”*. How do we obey such a command? Again, answers are provided in the text: (1) *“with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself;”* (2) *“do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others;”* and (3) *“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus…”*  Now, if we *regard others as more important than ourselves,* if we *look out for the interests of others rather than just our own*, and if we *pattern our attitude and activities after the selfless example of Jesus,* wouldn’t that pull the evil root of selfishness up, well…by the roots? It surely would!

Folks, if we eliminate the “roots” of our sinful behaviors, I think we’ll find that they “die on the vine” so to speak. Sorry for all the corny puns, but please consider carefully what the word of God says on the subject of selfishness. I am convinced that we cannot be both “selfish” and “Christian” at the same time, so these things are important. (1-4-11)

**A Sad Story**

Imagine that you have a new and well-bred (which means “very expensive”) puppy. Aside from the financial investment you’ve made in him, he quickly captures your heart, as puppies are prone to do, and becomes very dear to you. You spend a lot of time training him to be the perfect hunting companion, and/ or member of the family.

Living in East Texas, you know that if you don’t immunize him regularly for heart worms, he is sure to contract them, and die a slow and horrible death. So, you dutifully take him to the vet at scheduled intervals, and pay the fees to have him immunized because you love him. He subsequently grows into the “best friend” you hoped he would be from the beginning.

Then, after a few years, you discover that he has contracted heart worms and will not be able to survive. In addition to being heart-broken, you are also very confused, and more than a little angry. “How could this have happened?” you protest. “I took him to the vet, paid for the immunizations, and did exactly what I was told!” You question your vet, and he confesses that the other dogs he vaccinated about the same time as yours also are infected. He is very sorry, but the vaccines he received from the manufacturer were bad. In fact, they were worthless- little more than water. What a tragedy! You did everything you could to protect this now precious possession, but lost him anyway. What a sad story! Unfortunately, it is a mostly true story that happened to a friend of mine a few years ago.

But now imagine that this “beloved companion/possession” is not a dog, **but your soul.** You “got saved” (immunized against eternal damnation) by doing exactly what you were told by the “Doctor” of divinity. You “went to church” every Sunday (morning at least), and tried to live according to the doctrines of your denomination. Eventually, you died and stood before the judgment throne of God. Then you heard those eternally tragic words, *“Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”* (Matthew 7:23) “How can this be?” you protest, “I ‘got saved’ by doing what the preacher/Dr. told me to do. I ‘went to church’ nearly every Sunday, and tried (mostly at least) to live the way my church said that I should. Where did I possibly go wrong?”

Then the Righteous Judge simply replies, *“Not every one who says to Me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven”* (Matthew 7:21). You further plead your case, “But Lord, I did everything I was told to do.” Apparently, so did those folks in Matthew 7:22. But the Righteous Judge just restates His eternal decision, *“I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”*  How could this happen?

Before you say that judgment won’t be that way- that “as long as you’re honest and sincere in your belief, that’s all that really matters,” reread Matthew 7:21-23. It does and will happen just this way for many people- Jesus said so in these verses. Additionally, note that Jesus doubts neither the honesty nor the sincerity of the ones condemned; He just says they didn’t do the will of God. And their souls were/are just as lost as the beloved dog’s life- both are the victims of “bad vaccinations.”

You and I probably don’t have the knowledge of chemicals and medicine to avoid impotent vaccinations- and thankfully, the need for such is very rare. But we do have the extreme need to *“examine everything carefully, hold fast to that which is good”* as 1Thessalonians 5:21 admonishes. Also, Paul warned the Corinthians (and us!) *“not to exceed what is written”* in1Corinthians 4:6. The bottom line is that the responsibility for your soul’s salvation **is yours.** Don’t depend on others who may be honestly mistaken, or deliberately deceiving. Read and study the Book for yourself. And by all means, **do what it says** since eternity is at stake. At judgment, God will be *“dealing out retribution to those* ***who do not know God*** *and* ***those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.****”,* 2Thessalonians 1:8. Please don’t trust your eternal destiny to any person, including me! Be absolutely sure that everything you believe and practice has a Book, Chapter, and Verse solidly behind it! Such is the only sure way to avoid “a sad story” ending to your eternity. (11-1-11)

**Saints and Sinners**

A “saint” is not a long-dead godly person who performed miracles while they were alive. The Bible nowhere defines or uses the term that way. Instead, a “saint” is a Christian, whether alive or dead- one who is *“sanctified”* (*set apart* from the world, PCS) *in Christ,”* 1Corinthians 1:2. Contrastingly, everyone is a “sinner” in the sense of having violated the law of God- so says Romans 3:23. But the New Testament also uses the term “sinner” to describe those who are supposedly the antithesis of God’s people. I say “supposedly” because the line between “saint” and “sinner” is not always as distinct as it ought to be. 1John 3:10 says it should be *“obvious.”*  The blurring of this line of distinction is not due to the “sinners” becoming more “saintly” either!

Jesus made it very clear that He expects those who claim to be His people to *feel* and *live* differently from those of the world. Note two quick examples from Luke 6.

*“And if you* ***love those who love you****, what credit is that to you?* ***For even sinners love those who love them.”***(v.32) Loving those who don’t love youis evidence of being a child of God according to Matthew 5:45. Of what then, is *loving only those who love you* evidence? Don’t let the title you give yourself fool you- God isn’t deceived. If we refuse to love those who don’t love us, we’re more “sinner” than “saint”! If you want to be numbered among God’s people, love differently, more, and better than the sinners by loving those who don’t love you.

*“And if you* ***do good to those who do good to you****, what credit is that to you?* ***For even the sinners do the same thing.”***(v.33) It’s not just important to *feel* the right way about those who don’t reciprocate those emotions, it’s also vital to *do* the right things to/for them, even if they do the wrong things to you. Jesus spoke to this very point in the Sermon on the Mount, *“But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.”* (Luke 6:35) Thinking and feeling the right way about “sinners” is essential to being a “saint” primarily because without the right mindset, the right activity will never follow! Unless we *love* and *live* better than “the sinners” we are not really “saints” at all!

So, what happens when a supposed “saint” *loves* and *lives* no better than “the sinners”? To be blunt, since he has decided to “play for the other team,” his brethren should make it clear to him that he’s switched sides by withdrawing their fellowship from him. That is what both the Thessalonian and the Corinthian churches were told to do with their unrepentant *sinful* saints, cf. 2Thessalonians 3:6-14 and 1Corinthians 5:1-13. Why this course? Hopefully, the drastic disciplinary action will cause him to repent and return to living the way saints should so *“that his spirit may be saved in the day of our Lord Jesus,”* 1Corinthians 5:5b.

But there are additional reasons to withdraw fellowship from saints who live like sinners. Such people have a very detrimental effect on other members of the church who are trying to do the right thing(s). Paul warned the Corinthians of this danger with the rhetorical question, *“Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?”* (see 1Corinthians 5:6).

Also, saints who live like sinners actually become a dangerous deterrent to the spread of the gospel. In Romans 2:23-24, Paul is addressing the supposed “people of God” who were, in fact, sinners, with these stinging words, *“You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For ‘the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles (*or *sinners, PCS*) *because of you,’ just as it is written.”*  Not only do saints who live like sinners miss heaven themselves, they cause others to miss it as well through their hypocritical example!

Please remember Jesus’ words from Matthew 5:20, *“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven”.* The *“Scribes and Pharisees”* were actually supposed to be God’s people, but lived more like sinners than saints, cf. Matthew 23. Please heed the Savior’s warning. (12-7-11)

**Satan’s Greatest Weapon**

Satan is shown in scripture to be as “sneaky” as a snake (Genesis 3), and as ferocious as a lion (1Peter 5:8). But it seems to me that his subtlety is more dangerous than his ferocity- after all, most would head in the opposite direction fast if they heard a lion roar! Surely some would react the same upon seeing a snake, but Eve didn’t, did she? She was instead intrigued by his reasoning and logic, no matter how illogical and contradictory to God’s words it was. Such seems to be Satan’s greatest weapon: his ability to use lies and craftiness to get people to believe things that directly and blatantly contradict God’s word.

I know of no greater example of Satan’s ability to get people to believe notions that plainly contradict God than the oft-quoted mantra, *“It doesn’t really matter what you believe about God/Bible, as long as you’re honest and sincere- after all, we’re all just taking different roads to the same place.”* I just have to say it- **that is the biggest load of ‘poop’ Satan ever peddled!** And I dare say it will cause more souls to be gained by the Serpent of Old than anything else he has ever said or done! Consider how ludicrous such a notion really is, please.

First, if “it doesn’t really matter what you believe,” then why did God go to all the trouble of giving us the inspired revelation and commanding us to read, study, and obey it? But He did just that. Please note these quotations from God’s word, *“that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight to the mystery of Christ…to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,”* (Ephesians 3:3,4,6); *“So faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* (Romans 10:17); *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”* (2Timothy 2:15); *“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”* (2Timothy 3:16-17) Friends, these passages make absolutely no sense whatsoever if, as some say, “it doesn’t really matter what you believe.” Of course it matters what you believe, what you practice, and what you teach!

Second, there is the “honest and sincere” part. Common sense must surely prevail here. Can a man be “honesty and sincerely” wrong? Sure he can. If he gets out on Highway 69 and heads south “honestly and sincerely” believing it will take him to Dallas, will it? Of course not! Poor old Jacob “honestly and sincerely” believed (for 22 years) that his son Joseph was dead- so much so that he *“refused to be comforted”* in his grief. Did Jacob’s *honest and sincere* belief that Joseph was dead make it so? Of course not! Joseph was alive and well and the second in command of Egypt, cf. Genesis 37:31-36; 42:36; 45:26-28. Likewise, if we are “dead wrong” about what God says it takes to be pleasing and acceptable to Him, it won’t matter how honestly and sincerely we believed whatever lie Satan told us. Isn’t that the lesson from Eve’s interaction with the Serpent? She and her husband were rejected from fellowship with God because she believed a lie- however honestly and sincerely she believed it!

Third, remember the Bible is given by God as a roadmap to heaven. We can get “honestly and sincerely” lost if we don’t follow its directions correctly, cf. Titus 2:11-15! Jesus often indicated there was but *“one way”* to get to heaven. Please carefully consider His words, *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.”* (Matthew 7:21); and *“I have come as light into the world, that everyone who believes in Me may not remain in darkness. And if anyone hears My sayings, and does not keep them, I do not judge him….the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day.”* (John 12:46-48). The “one way” is knowing and doing what Jesus says. This surely means that there are a lot of “wrong roads” out there, despite the honesty and sincerity of their travelers.

Friends, read your Bible. Know your Bible. Obey your Bible. And don’t listen to Satan or his emissaries who tell you “it doesn’t really matter what you believe, as long as you are honest and sincere.” It does matter. In fact, it matters for all of eternity. (10-20-10)

**The *Seed*, the *Plant*, and the *Fruit***

Preachers are often teased, most good-naturedly so, about the length of our sermons. To such jesting I typically reply with something along the lines of, “Sermonettes just make Christianettes!” (Remember, it’s usually dangerous to trade verbal barbs with a man who makes his living talking.) All of which is in good fun. But the truth about the Truth is that “the proof is in the pudding,” so to speak. Let me see if I can make sense of this apparent nonsense….

When Jesus, in Matthew 7:16, said of false teachers, *“You shall know them by their fruits,”* what did He mean? Wasn’t He saying that the “product” would manifest the quality of the “plant” which produced it, as further explained in v.17, *“…every good tree bears good fruit; but the rotten tree bears bad fruit.”*? So, the principle of knowing the *plant* by the *fruit* is, in essence, the same as the “proof is in the pudding”- the overall quality is determined by the end result, either “good” or “bad.”

The apostle Paul utilized this same analogy, though not with the same words, in 1Timothy 1:3-7. There, he lists some of the “bad fruits” which are produced by defective/diseased plants (teachers) as: occupation with *myths* and *endless genealogies, speculation, fruitless discussions,* and *confident assertions* made without the benefit of actual knowledge. On the other hand, the “produce” of proper plants (teachers) is: *love from a pure heart,* a *good conscience,* and a *sincere faith.* So, the quality of the seed and the plant can be easily discerned by looking at their progeny.

Now the big question: What does your “fruit” say about the “seed” and “plant” from which you came, spiritually speaking? Are you producing the *“fruit of the Spirit”* of *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”*  in your life as Paul described in Galatians 1:22-23? If not, the problem could well be either the “seed” or the “plant” from which you came! In Galatians 1:7, we see that the Galatians had allowed some among them to *“distort the gospel of Christ.”* They had listened to a “diseased plant” which had altered “the seed.” They were, as a result, producing “bad fruit” (cf.3:1ff; 4:9ff; 5:1ff) from *“a different gospel,”* v.6.

If the Galatians, though initially germinated from the “good seed” of the word of God, could become diseased plants producing bad fruit, thereby *“deserting Him”* (1:6), and becoming *“severed from Christ”* and *“fallen from grace”* (5:4), then rest assured that the same can happen to you and me! Uncorrupted “seed” germinates and grows into spiritually healthy “plants” producing “good fruit.” But, corrupted “seed” can also germinate and grow into diseased and defective “plants” which produce “bad fruits.” Make no mistake about it, Jesus said such would be *“cut down, and thrown into the fire,”* Matthew 7:19.

These things demonstrate the unmistakable connection between good seed, good plants, good fruits, and good results- as well as the inverse. So, given the eternal importance of these things, how do you know if the “seed” is good? As we’ve already seen, you can wait sufficient time to allow for “fruit” to be borne, and judge the seed and the plant by that which they ultimately produce. Or, you can **get out your Bible and read and study for yourself** to see if you have been born of *“good seed”* (see the parable in Matthew 13:24ff), if you are being fedand wateredby good and faithful *“vine-growers”* (see the parable in Matthew 21:33ff); and if you are producing “good fruit”!

Here at **Southside Church of Christ** (602 Henderson, Jacksonville TX), we’re hosting a special series of lessons beginning this Sunday morning, **September 9th**, through Wednesday evening, **September 12th**. **Bro. Harold Hancock** (of Lufkin, TX) will be opening up the Word of God and endeavoring to preach the simple, undiluted, and undistorted Truth from it. We’d like nothing better than for you to bring your Bible, open it up, and *“search the Scriptures…to see whether these things are so”* (Acts 17:11) with us. We want nothing more than to be a “good plant” born of “good seed” which produces “good fruit” for the Master. If that’s your desire also, please come join us **Sunday at 9:30, 10:20 AM, and 6:00 PM**, and **Monday through Wednesday at 7:00 PM**. You will be treated as honored guests and with the utmost courtesy. (9-4-12)

**Seeing the Love of God**

*“No one has beheld God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us,”* 1John 4:12. The word *“perfected”* is translated from the Greek word *teleioo,* and can be defined as “to bring to the end (goal) purposed” (Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon; def.3). So? While we cannot “see” God, His love is brought to its intended goal when we, as Christians made so through obedience to Christ, love one another. This *manifestation* of God we can, and certainly *should,* see! But *brotherly love* is not the only way to “see” the *unseen* and indeed *invisible* (cf. Colossians 1:15) God…

**We also can “see” the love of God through:**

* **His Creation.** We can discern the *existence* of God through His creation, cf. Romans 1:18-20. This *natural revelation* is abundantly visible through our own bodies, and the world/universe around us. But God could have created a utilitarian world in monochrome- one that would have sustained us *physically* without the beauteous wonders with which He infused it. However, note carefully the description of the Garden paradise He fashioned for man, *“And out of the ground the Lord God caused to grown every tree that is* ***pleasing to the sight*** *and good for food,”* Genesis 2:9. Through the creation of a world that not only sustains us, but also is esthetically pleasing and awe-inspiring, we “see” the love of God!
* **His Salvation through Jesus Christ.** There is no more visible manifestation of the love of God than the salvation afforded mankind through Jesus. Such was the eternal disposition of God for mankind. The plan of saving mankind through Him was present before the world was formed, before man was created, and before the need for salvation from sin existed, cf. Ephesians 1:3-4. And then, *“when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons,”* Galatians 4:4-5. Thus Paul writes, *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,”* Romans 5:8. The word translated as *“demonstrates”* can also mean to *show, prove, establish*, or *exhibit* (IBID, def.3a). Through the plan and its fruition to save mankind from our sins by the sacrifice of His own Son, God’s love is both *proven* and *shown* to be beyond comparison!
* **His Provision of the Word.** What a dark and dreadful world it would be without the loving provision of God’s word to guide and illumine us! I’ve often said that I feel sorry for those who don’t believe the Bible to be God’s infallible guide. What a tremendous burden it must be to have no finite rules for determining right and wrong, good and evil, and worthy and unworthy! These folks have to establish such things on their own with no help from any higher authority. What a pitifully burdened and woefully tiring existence it must be in such darkness for those who reject the loving provision of *“the living and abiding word of God,”* 1Peter 1:22-25!
* **His Provision of the Church.** God’s love is manifested for us through the *brethren* He provided to (from Romans 12:9-16): *love us genuinely;* help us *abhor evil* and *cleave to good;* be *devoted to us in brotherly love;* give us examples of *fervency in spirit* and *service to the Lord;* help us *rejoice in hope* and *persevere in tribulation;* be *devoted in prayer* for us; *contribute to our needs; practice hospitality* to/for us; and *rejoice with us* in good times and *weep with us* in times of tragedy. What a wonderful provision of God’s love to provide us with the very best people of the world to help, guide, and sustain us!
* **His Patience, Forbearance, and Longsuffering.** I’ve had the privilege of knowing and being associated with some of the most patient, forbearing, longsuffering, and forgiving people on the planet. But in these regards, none of them compare to God. Indeed, these supreme attributes of our loving God are the only reason that this evil world remains, cf. 2Peter 2:9. Likewise, *“the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience”* is a very visible manifestation of His loving kindness that *“leads you to repentance,”* Romans 2:4. Or at least it is supposed to do so! It boggles my mind to consider the patient forbearance God has shown me. What about you?

It is true that we cannot see God, but His loving provisions for us are hard not to see! As one of my preaching mentors, Dean Bullock, used to say, “You’d have to have help to miss that- you just can’t miss it by yourself!” *“But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear,”* Matthew 13:16. (4-11-17)

**Self-Control Must Begin in the Heart**

We usually *work on* “self-control,” as the old-timers would say, “on the hind leg” of the problem. Anyone who has ever dealt with cows or horses knows that to gain control of the animal, grabbing the *hind leg* won’t work- and will probably get you hurt. And yet, such is usually the approach we typically take regarding “self-control.” We grab the *hind leg* of the problem: the activity/behavior…

We’re going to stop being late, procrastinating, over-eating, smoking, drinking, cursing, using drugs, watching pornography, whatever. So, we employ various means and mechanisms in an effort to control *the behavior.* But herein lies what should be an obvious problem: “Self” is constituted of more than just our *behavior.*  Thus, “self-control” must involve more than just behavioral modification.Don’t get me wrong- behavior is *part* of who we are, and it definitely needs controlling. Notice 1John 3:7-8a, *“Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil…”*  However, merely modifying or stopping a behavior, though tremendously important, is not all there is to “self-control.”

Behavior is but the outward manifestation of who we are inwardly. Jesus put it this way, *“The good man out of the treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart,”* Luke 6:45. We often erroneously believe that we have “good hearts” despite living sin-filled lives. But this just isn’t so. Our behavior **is** the *outward manifestation* of the *inward content* of our hearts. So, if we want to change our behavior, we must first change our hearts.

The “heart,” as the Bible speaks of it, is made up of three parts: ***intellect/thought***(Matthew 9:4; Mark 2:6,8)*,* ***emotion/feelings***(2Corinthians 2:4; 1Peter 1:22)*,* and ***will/desire/purpose***(Romans 10:1; 2Corinthians 9:7)*.* If we genuinely desire to gain control of our*selves,* we must start here- on the inside and at the core of who we are, and then our behavior will follow. So, to have “self-control,” we must first learn to **control our:**

**Minds.** Our decisions of *right* and *wrong* and *good* and *evil* must be controlled and brought into subjection to God’s Word. The proverbial writer penned of man, *“As he thinks within himself, so he is,”* Proverbs 23:7a. If we are to *behave* in good and godly ways, we must first allow God to determine what is *good* and *godly!*  Then, we must focus and fill our minds on those things God says are *true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent,* and *praise-worthy,* Philippians 4:8. We can’t expect to behave in good and godly ways while allowing Satan, those who are his, or even ourselves (cf. Jeremiah 10:23) to determine and dictate our thoughts. We must, instead, *“be transformed by the renewing our mind(s)”* so that we both learn and practice what is *“good and acceptable and perfect”* to God,cf. Romans 12:1-2.

**Emotions**. “I can’t help the way I feel” is often a lie we tell ourselves to feel better about the *ungodly* emotions we’re experiencing. Jonah was angry when he had no right to be, Jonah 4:1-11. Likewise, God told Cain that his anger was misplaced, and that he should *“do well”* (by being obedient, PCS) and his *“countenance”* (facial expression as a manifestation of emotion) would be *“lifted up,”* Genesis 4:6-7. Think about it this way: If we can’t control our emotions, why is the New Testament replete with admonitions to *love another* and other ways we are commanded to *feel* about each other, cf. Colossians 3:12. We must first *think* (Philippians 2:3-4) and then *feel* (Colossians 3:12) properly about each other in order to then *treat* one another properly, Colossians 3:13.

**Will/Desire/Purpose.** In James 4, we learn that **wrong *purposes***(*“wishes,”* v.4), **wrong *“motives***” (to satisfy *your* desires rather than God’s, v.3), and **wrong *desires***(*“lust”* and *“envy,”* v.2a), lead to **wrong actions** (*quarrels, conflicts, murder,* v.2b), with the result of winding up the ***“enemy of God,”***v.4. Please understand that it was the wrong *purposes, motives,* and *desires* of the heart led to the wrong *actions* of the body!

If we are to learn “self-control,” we must control all parts of “self.” This must begin with our *hearts* (made up of *thought, emotions,* and *will*), and then the activities of the body will follow. God doesn’t want just your *activities* to be right- He wants your *heart* to be right, cf. Matthew 9:10-13! (10-19-16)

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If we are to learn “self-control,” we must control all parts of “self.” This must begin with our *hearts* (made up of *thought, emotions,* and *will*), and then the activities of the body will follow. God doesn’t want just your *activities* to be right- He wants your *heart* to be right, cf. Matthew 15:10-20! (2-26-17)

**Self-Deception: Six Lies We Tell Ourselves about Sin**

The results of being spiritually deceived are the same whether Satan, Someone Else, or Self is the source of the deception. But, being *self-deceived* is probably the most dangerous because it tends to be the most pervasive, and the hardest to correct. We can become complicit in our own deception regarding many things, but let’s consider six lies we tell ourselves about sin…

**“It’s not *that* bad.”** The effort to *classify* sin is one of the first steps, and therefore the “entry level,” for self-deception regarding it. We begin to deceive ourselves by relegating some sins to the “not *so* bad” category- after all, “It’s not like I killed someone, I just…” Two things need to be realized: 1) Sin = Sin, 1John 3:4, *“Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.”* And, 2) N.T. lists that contain sins such as *idolatry, adultery,* and *homosexuality* also include *covetousness, reviling* (abusive, especially with language)*,* and *swindling* (cheating) in those that prevent the attainment of heaven, 1Corinthians 6:9-10. Apparently, God doesn’t use the same system of taxonomy that we do.

**“It doesn’t hurt *anyone but me.”*** With this second lie, we admit that the thought or deed is “sinful,” but still seek to deceive ourselves by assuming its effect is just personal. No matter how secret the sin, or innocuous its effects may seem- personally or otherwise, sin NEVER affects just you! It affects God who gave His son to pardon you, John 3:16; and it affects Jesus the Christ who gave His life on the cross purchase your redemption from sin, 1Cor.15:3; Gal.1:4. Think of each and every one of your sins as driving additional nails into the hands and feet of the Savior, and the heart of His Father as He watches, and then ask yourself, “Is *this* sin really worth that?” None of them are, and we need to stop deceiving ourselves into thinking our sins occur in a vacuum.

**“It’s only this *one time.”*** Even if this were true, and it rarely is, once is still enough. I understand that 1John 3:7-10 speaks of the *“practice”* of *righteousness* and *sin,* but remember that one sin committed one time also caused the apostle Peter to pronounce Simon as being *“in the gall bitterness and the bondage of iniquity,”* Acts 8:12-23! This third lie we tell ourselves is an attempt to convince ourselves that “one time won’t matter.” The O.T. examples of Cain (Genesis 4:3-15), Uzzah (2Samuel 6:1-7), and Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-2) all demonstrate the fallacy of the “just one time” lie.

**“One time *more* then I’ll quit.”** Notice the *progressive* nature of these self-deceptions. Each time a previous lie is shown to be so, and even admitted to be false, we stubbornly and foolishly tell ourselves another one to keep up the deception. This demonstrates the **real** problem: we simply want to sin, and are willing to keep lying to ourselves (and others) to feel better about the fact that our hearts are not right, James 4:1-4; and our lusts/desires are getting the better of us, James 1:14. The “one *more* time” lie just furthers that narrative with another layer of self-deception.

 **“I’m in control- I can quit *anytime.”*** Sin, like drugs, is addictive, pervasive, and destructive. And just like a narcotic, it gives the user a false sense of control or security until it has gained complete mastery and domination. Paul addressed this aspect of sin in Romans 6:12-13, *“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.”* The fifth lie with which we attempt to deceive ourselves about sin is “I’m in control- I can quit anytime I want.” While this IS technically and theoretically true, the reality is often very different. Typically, with this particular lie, we’re just *making another provision* for our *flesh in regard to its lust,* Romans 13:14.

**“God still loves and *will forgive me.”*** It is true that God always loves us, Romans 8:35ff. But it does not follow that God will continue to forgive sins of which we are unwilling to repent, Luke 13:3. God loves and promises to save us *from* sin, not *in* it! This sixth lie represents a complete surrender of ourselves to sin. At this point we’ve given up and given in so totally that we no longer even attempt to excuse or mitigate our sin. Now we’re not even trying- sin has mastered us and Satan is in control of our lives…. and it all started with one “little” sin, and one “little” lie to ourselves about it! Folks, it doesn’t have to be this way, 1Corinthians 15:34. (6-14-15)

**Self-Diagnosis**

I miss non-computerized engines and automobiles. My old diesel “Big Truck” (as it was affectionately known before I wrecked it) wouldn’t run over sixty-two miles per hour unless going down a big hill out of gear (it was in gear and only going about 40 mph when wrecked). But if you had a mind to, you could crank the window down, turn off the key, pull it from the ignition and throw it out that open window and that truck would still run that same sixty-two miles per hour because there wasn’t an “electronic” anything on it! It had no computer, and only mechanical sensors that made it easy to work on and repair- aside from the size and weight of the parts!

By contrast, now even the key you put in the ignition switch has a programmable computer chip in it, which is why they’re so big and cost so much to replace! New vehicles, big or small, now have at least one on board computer, and seemingly countless sensors for everything from O2 (oxygen) to CPS (crankshaft position sensor) to OSS (transmission output speed sensor) and ISS (transmission input speed sensor) to etc. etc. etc.! All of this electronic gadgetry means that newer vehicles: 1) are very efficient and do amazing things automatically that we never even know happens; and 2) can be extremely hard for us old shade-tree mechanics, who don’t have computer diagnostic equipment, to repair! Those of us who knew how to use feeler gauges to set the points, and a timing light to advance or retard the ignition timing to make an engine “purr,” are just about out of luck now.

But as frustrating as all of this “electronic stuff” on current vehicles can be, it also has another advantage that older ones never had- they can diagnose themselves! That OBD (on board diagnostic [computer]) can provide a tremendous amount of information about what is going on with the various systems on the vehicle…if you have the electronic scanning computer to plug into the vehicle’s OBD to retrieve the information! Fortunately, some vehicles will flash alphanumeric codes (instead of the mileage display on Jeep/Chrysler, for instance) that provide significant information without having to attach them to an outside scanning/diagnostic computer. This is tremendously helpful, if you know how to retrieve and read the codes!

Believe it or not, all of this “mechanical” complaining and information has a spiritual point. Our modern “computerized” vehicles have incredible abilities for self-diagnosis **if** you know where to look, and how to retrieve the information. **So does the soul!**  Several New Testament passages emphasize the importance of “self-diagnosis.” 1Corinthians 11:28 says *“But let a man examine himself…”* 2Corinthians 13:5 adds that we should *“Test yourselves…”* and Galatians 6:4 adds that *“each one should examine his own work….”*  But like these newer vehicles, just understanding the ***benefit***of self-examination or self-diagnosis is not the same thing as knowing ***where to look*** and ***how to retrieve*** and ***“read”*** the information! God didn’t provide us with an OBD (on board diagnostic), but He did give a “tool” that we can plug into to see what’s wrong and how to fix it. It’s called the New Testament.

Notice carefully the language of James 1:23-25, *“For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.”* Merely glancing or looking at the Bible from time to time is like noticing those diagnostic codes without committing them to memory or writing them down. Soon they are forgotten or ignored without making any corrections. That “Check Engine” light is on your instrument cluster for a reason, and ignoring it usually has consequences that become more costly with time. Ignoring the flashing “Check Soul” light on our spirits by not “checking the code” and making the necessary repairs/corrections has eternal consequences that far outweigh any earthly cost. On the soul, “checking the code” means we look deeply into *“the mirror”* of God’s Word to see ourselves as He sees us, and thus self-diagnose the problem(s). Then, we make the make the necessary repairs/corrections to be able work as He intended, and avoid the spiritual junkyard of hell! (5-13-14)

**Self-Imprisonment in the Bondage of Iniquity**

Acts 8 contains a fascinating account of the *conversion* of a magician in the city Samaria named Simon. For a long time, Simon had *astonished* the people with his seemingly supernatural abilities in the art of trickery. So great was his prowess that the people hailed him as *“the Great Power of God,”* vv.9-11. However, when the people saw the true miracles Philip was performing, and heard his gospel message of salvation through Jesus Christ, they *believed* and were *baptized-* doing exactly what Jesus had specified was necessary for salvation in the Great Commission (cf. Mark 16:15-16). Even Simon, the magician, when he witnessed these true miracles, was convinced, convicted, and converted to Christ, vv.12-13. The biblical record is clear: Simon *believed* and was *baptized,* just like the other Samaritans. Thus, he was saved not by the miracles he witnessed, but because he believed the gospel, and obeyed it by being baptized. Next, the story takes an interesting and important turn.

When Simon saw that the apostles (Peter and John who had come done from Jerusalem to assist Philip, vv.14-16) could *impart* the miraculous abilities provided by the Holy Spirit to others, Simon requested to *buy into the franchise,* vv.17-19! He wanted to the ability to bestow miraculous abilities upon others, and offered to pay the apostles for it. Apparently his motives were not pure in this regard. Note the response from Peter, *“May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!”* v.20. But Peter wasn’t finished with his rebuke. Carefully consider the rest of what the inspired apostle said to this *believing, baptized Christian.*

***“You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God,”* v.21.** This *believing, baptized,* and thus “saved” Christian had a heart that was not right before God. But does this mean that he became “lost” after having been previously “saved”? Let’s keep reading.

***“Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you,”* v.22.** What Simon thought in his *heart*, and *intended to do* in practice, was called *“wickedness.”* Does that sound like he was still in a “saved” condition? If so, why was he also commanded to *“repent”* (a change *of mind* that produces a change *in activity*) in order to be *“forgiven”?* If Simon was, as many believe, “once saved, always saved,” what need was there for *repentance* and *forgiveness?*

***“For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity,”* v.23.** This statement by an inspired apostle of Jesus Christ should remove all doubt with regard to Simon’s spiritual condition. Though he had been previously *released* from the *bonds of sin* by belief and baptism in Jesus Christ, by this sin he had once again *imprisoned himself* in the *“bondage of iniquity.”* Given the inspired record of Luke (who wrote Acts) of the inspired apostle Peter’s assessment of Simon’s *condition,* as well as the course of action *prescribed,* there is just no way around it. Though Simon had been previously *saved* by obedience to the gospel, he then became *lost* by sinful thoughts and intentions! This conclusion is supported by a myriad of other N.T. passages- though for the sake of space, here are just a few, Romans 11:20-22; Galatians 5:1-4.13; 6:-12; Hebrews 3:12; James 5:19-20; 2Peter 2:20-21; Revelation 2:4-7.

Does this mean that there is no security for the child of God? Of course not, but the security offered is dependent upon continued dedication of heart (emotion, thought, and will) and body (activity) to God. Note 2Peter 1:4-9 in this regard. **If** we *add* these “graces” to our faith, and continue to grow it, **then** we are being *“diligent to make certain His calling and choosing you;* ***for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble;*** *for* ***in this way*** *the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you,”* 2Peter 1:10-11!

*No one* or *no thing* can separate us from *“the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord,”* Romans 8:31-39. However, we must also realize that it is our responsibility to stay ***“in Christ Jesus our Lord,”***and to ***“keep yourselves in the love of God,”***Jude 20-21. Simon failed in this regard, and **re-imprisoned himself** in ***the bondage of iniquity.*** The good news is that by *confession, repentance,* and *prayer for forgiveness,* he didn’t stay there, cf. Acts 8:24! Please understand that though we become “saved” by belief and obedience to the gospel, we can *“fall from your own steadfastness”* (2Peter 3:17) and self-imprison ourselves in the bondage of iniquity all over again, just like Simon. (10-25-16)

**“Settling” to Resolve a Conflict of Conscience**

Though it is not exactly how the dictionary defines it, we sometimes use the word **“settle”** as a verb meaning ***to resolve by lowering standards****.* Unfortunately, perhaps the most common usage of the word in this way has to do with choosing a mate.

For example, let’s say we have certain ideals and standards (whatever they may be- the specifics of which are not really the point at this time) that we think are important in a spouse. But after a few years of unsuccessful searching, we begin to lower those standards, or wind up abandoning them altogether to marry someone who… well, to put it bluntly, would say “yes” to us. In the process of making that decision, we created a conflict in our conscience because we knew we were doing something that we didn’t think was completely right. Unfortunately, we chose to “settle” this conflict of conscience by compromising the standards. The standards were lowered or abandoned because it was just plain easier. Instead of continuing to search for “Mr. / Mrs. Right,” we settled for “Mr. / Mrs. Right Now.” (Please understand, this is not a personal example- I married young because I didn’t want Donna to get old enough to realize that she could do a lot better than me!)

From that hypothetical example, which I fear happens all too often, let’s make some spiritual applications on this matter of “settling” conflicts of conscience by compromising the standards:

**“I know this is not right, but it is the *lesser of evils.”***In this scenario, we’re again attempting to salve our conflicted conscience by compromising the standard. We admit that both potential choices are “evil,” but propose to “settle” the matter by choosing the one which is less evil. Why not instead continue to pray and search for the “right” option? The Holy Spirit says there always is one, *“but with the temptation* (God) *will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.”* (1Corinthians 10:13b. This means that God will never leave us with nothing but “wrong” choices- there will always be a “right” thing to do! So don’t “settle” such a conflict of conscience by choosing the “lesser of evils,” continue to look for, find, and then take the “right” path!

**“I am *this* (denomination), but my spouse is *this* (denomination), so we just go *there* (a 3rd denomination).”** What did that resolve? Instead for searching for and finding the “right” thing to do (see the previous paragraph and passage again), both parties compromised their conscience by lowering their standards- they “settled”! So, they both wind up attending a church with which they do not agree doctrinally rather than searching for, finding, and taking the “right” option based on the standard of God’s word, Ephesians 4:4-6.

**“We can’t really understand the Bible anyway.”** What is often behind such a statement as this is a conflict of conscience caused by a lack of understanding. Because one has not put forth the effort to study and understand the Bible, and is not willing to do so, the resulting conflict of conscience is “settled” by, again, lowering the standard- saying it (the Bible) can’t be understood. Think: Why would the Creator provide us with a book which illuminates the path to heaven in words that we cannot understand? To suggest that God did this is nigh unto, if not altogether, blasphemy! Listen to the Word of the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul, *“that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery* (meaning, *the previously unrevealed*- PCS)*, as I wrote before in brief. And by referring to this,* ***when you read you can understand*** *my insight into the mystery of Christ,”* Ephesians 3:3-4. Don’t “settle” the conflict(s) of your conscience by retreating to “you can’t understand the Bible anyway”- do the “right” thing like Ezra. He *“set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances…”* Ezra 7:10. And you can do it too, if you won’t “settle”!

Conflicts of conscience are never “settled” by compromising the standard. Search for, find, and do the “right” thing! (4-10-12)

**Sheep or Cattle?**

I was raised on a farm, and my dad was a high school Vocational Agriculture teacher for 30+ years. Thus, I was fortunate to be blessed with experiences growing up that a lot of preachers didn’t get. Such doesn’t make me better, just a little different in the way I look at and approach things sometimes- which may help to explain this article.

East Texas is cow country. The terrain, climate, and native vegetation are well-suited to cattle production. But this being “cow country” isn’t just about native vegetation, it also has a lot to do with the natives themselves! Growing up in the agricultural production environment of northern Nacogdoches county, it didn’t take me long to notice and adopt the native bias ***for* cattle** and ***against* sheep!** Around these parts, beef is king and mutton is disdained- but that’s speaking both “agri” and “culturally” instead of **spiritually.**

Biblically, sheep are the farm animal chosen to represent “the flock” of God, Matthew 25:32ff; *et al*. And as much as we like cattle around here, remember there are other even less-attractive barnyard critters that could have been selected to represent Christians, cf. Matthew 7:6 (hogs) and 2Peter 2:16 (a dumb donkey)! So, as much as we East-Texans might prefer cattle, the Lord evidently thought sheep were better representatives of what Christians ought to be. Have you ever wondered why?

**Sheep are *led,* cattle are *driven.*** It’s not done around here much anymore, but we’ve all seen the iconic cattle drives where hoopin’ and hollerin’ cowboys herd cattle the way they want them to go with ropes and bullwhips and horses. ButJohn 10:27 depicts a very different image, *“My sheep hear My voice…. and they follow Me.”*We need to remember this when attempting to bring people to Christ- you must *lead* (persuade to follow, cf. Acts 19:8) rather than *drive* them!

**Sheep follow *the shepherd*, cattle follow *the feed sack*.**  Sheep are shy and finicky creatures. They won’t follow just anyone. Notice also John 10:4-5 on this point, *“When he puts forth all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. And a stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.”*  Cows, on the other hand, will follow anyone with a feed sack or hay bale! The people “following” Jesus in John 6:26 were cattle, not sheep! Of them, Jesus said, *“you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled.”* Yep, there are still a bunch of these feedbag-chasing rawhides around whose primary interest in God seems to be filling their bellies with either food or fun, cf. Philippians 3:19.

**Sheep have to be *led,* cattle can be *stampeded*.**  John 10:1-5ff also speaks of the *“fold of the sheep.”* Since this is cow country, a *“sheep fold”* is something with which we may not be familiar. Individual shepherds would, in the time and place of Jesus, lead their flock to pasturage and water during the day, but would bring their sheep into a common “fold” or pen at night for safekeeping. There was only one *“door”* (gate) of the fold, which would be guarded to prevent theft, or loss due to predators. Then the next morning, each shepherd would come to the door and call his sheep, and they, recognizing his voice, would come out of the fold and follow him, while all the other sheep remained in the pen until their shepherd called them. It really is a beautiful and fitting image of Christians’ relationship with the Chief Shepherd, Jesus. Cattle, on the other hand, can be stampeded by anyone who makes enough noise to spook them into running, often to their own and others’ destruction- which is not a pretty picture, but it, too, is spiritually accurate, cf. 2Peter 2!

Most of the people I know around East Texas love beef and would have to be half-starved to death to lap a lip over mutton. But when it comes to things spiritual, we better all be “sheep-loving” and “Shepherd-following” wooly-buggers instead of cows! (7-10-12)

**Side Effects: Unintended Consequences**

Among other things, we live in the *prescription* age. There are prescriptions, pills, and potions for just about any ailment imaginable. It would be somewhat funny if it were not sad to hear some of the required legalese at the end of prescription drug commercials on television. Some of “side effects experienced in some users” are much worse than the problem being treated with the “cure” being advertised! But the problem of *side effects,* or *unintended consequences,* is unfortunately not limited to medications…

There are also *side effects* and *unintended consequences* in other aspects of our lives. Our thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions often have *side effects* that we didn’t foresee, or necessarily intend. Please consider a few such possible *unintended consequences.*

* Setting aside worship and bible study occasions in favor of other *morally acceptable* activities teaches our children that these activities are of at least equal, if not greater, importance than these devotions to God. We’ve all heard that “actions speak louder than words.” There is likely no area in which this is more accurate than when we allow other activities- no matter how *moral* and *wholesome* they may otherwise be, to take the place of congregating with our brethren for worship and bible study. We can tell our children how much we love God, and how devoted we are and they should be to doing the “right” and “godly” things, but our own activity choices in this area speak much louder (and more truthfully) than our words. Jesus soundly rebuked Peter for *setting his mind* on *man’s interests* instead of *God’s,* Matthew 16:23. Such may not be the intention for our decisions to *set aside* worship and bible study for other activities, but it is a side effect.
* Sin is habit-forming. When we knowingly sin, which for most of us is most of the time, our intentions are not to become outright “sinners.” Instead, we either convince ourselves that the activity is “not really *that* bad,” or, that its consequences are somehow mitigated if we only do it “just this one time.” Both these conclusions are false. Sin is always sinful. 1John 5:17 tells us that *“All unrighteousness is sin,”* therefore all sin is also unrighteousness. The Bible contains several lists of sins that include what we might call *minor sins* like *strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger,* and *disputes* right along with *immorality, idolatry,* and *sorcery,* cf. Galatians 5:19-21. Likewise, though “just this one time” may be our intention with regard to a particular sin, it rarely happens that way. Sin, even one, is deceitful and pervasive. *Once* easily becomes *just once more*. *Just once more* easily becomes *I can quit anytime I want.* Soon, our *habitude* (attitude and habit) easily becomes our *practice.* And, *“the one who practices sin is of the devil,”* 1John 3:8. Our intention may have been to *just have a little fun,* but the side effects of sin drug us into something much bigger, and deeper.
* Even activities that are right and proper can have the side effect of unintended consequences. Paul wrote both the Corinthians and Romans regarding activities that, in and of themselves, were spiritually acceptable (like eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol, cf. Romans 14 and 1Corinthians 8,9). But he also warned of the unintended consequences of a *weaker brother* (in context, one *without specific knowledge* in the matter, cf. 1Corinthians 8:7-8) being led to *violate his own conscience* by the example of another Christian participating in the activity, see 1Corinthians 8:9-11. He concludes that the otherwise acceptable activity has the unintended consequence of *“sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak,”* and thus, *“you sin against Christ,”* 1Corinthians 8:12. Such may not have been the intention, but it was the side effect.

Just like with medications, our thoughts, attitudes, and actions can have devastating side effects. The fact that these side effects were unintended consequences doesn’t really help us or those otherwise affected. Therefore, let’s all heed Paul’s example when he said of himself, *“I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified,”* 1Corinthians 9:27. (1-26-16)

**A Simple Plan**

The Apostle Paul feared the church in Corinth would be *“led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.”* He feared that, *“as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness”* (2Corintians 11:3), their minds would also be corrupted into apostasy. He had previously said of and to them, *“but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God.”* (1Corinthians 6:11) But now he is concerned that they might be *“led astray”* from *simple* and *pure* devotion to Christ.

Two things become readily apparent from these things: 1) the threat of apostasy is very real for the child of God; Satan does not stop working on us when we become devoted to Christ; the comforting doctrine of “once saved- always saved” doesn’t seem to be giving much comfort to Paul concerning his beloved brethren in Corinth; and 2) *“simplicity and purity”* should characterize our devotion to God. It is this last one that I would like us to think about further just now.

Our *“devotion to Christ”* is supposed to be, if Satan hasn’t *led our minds astray from it,* characterized by both *“simplicity”* and *“purity.”* With regard to the *simplicity* of it, let’s take the Lord’s Supper for example. On the night in Jesus was betrayed, He instituted a simple, sweet memorial which His followers were to utilize to commemorate His sacrifice by the partaking of unleavened bread and fruit of the vine. The bread was to be unleavened since “leaven” (yeast) is often symbolic of sin in the biblical text (cf. 1Cor.5:6-8). This bread symbolizes the “body” of Jesus, 1Cor.11:23-24 which was obviously free from sin, 1Pet.2:22. And the fruit of the vine likewise symbolizes His *“blood of the covenant…shed on behalf of many for forgiveness of sins.”* (Matt.26:28) He intended for His disciples to utilize this simple memorial, and the partaking of these emblems, on the first day of each week (Acts 20:7) to commemorate His sacrifice for our sins. We don’t have to rise with the sun to do so, nor do we have to dim the lights or play special music or add anything else to make this simple memorial more special. The giving of thanks for the emblems, what they represent, and entreating the Father’s blessing upon them is sufficient if we will partake *“in remembrance of Me”* as He commanded in 1Cor.11:25. It’s just that simple and pure. We don’t have to “dress it up” or allow ourselves to be *“led astray”* by Satan into defiling its purity with complications.

But the *simplicity* facet is not only for our partaking of the Lord’s Supper. It should also apply to all aspects of our devotion- whether public or private. We shouldn’t feel the need to “dress up” or complicate any aspect of our worship, beliefs, or practices beyond what the Scriptures require. God tells us what He wants, and we should and must content ourselves with what He has said in all areas of faith and practice. Just read, understand, and live what the Gospel (the New Testament) teaches- no more, and certainly no less. Now isn’t that a “simple” plan?

The other characteristic of our devotion to Christ that Paul emphasizes is that of *purity. Purity* refers to that which is undiluted or uncontaminated. So the question soon becomes, “Undiluted or uncontaminated with what?” Jesus addressed this point in a couple of passages from Matthew: *“This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.”* (15:8-9) *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven.”* (7:21)The point should be clear: “pure” devotion is that which is “undiluted” and “uncontaminated” with the thoughts, desires, and teachings of men instead of coming “purely” from the Word of God. Again, just read, understand, and live what the Gospel teaches- no more, and certainly no less. Not only is it a simple and pure plan, it is God’s plan for saving us. (3-29-11)

**Simplified Salvation**

The apostle Paul wrote regarding *the revelation* (*i.e.* the gospel), *“…when you read you can understand…”* Ephesians 3:4. Could it be that so many don’t *understand* the gospel’s message of salvation because they don’t read it? See if this simplified version helps.

**Why do we need salvation?** Romans 3:23, *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*

**What is sin?** 1John 3:4, *“Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.”*  And, 1John 5:17a, *“All unrighteousness is sin…”*

**God wants us to be saved.** 1Timothy 2:3-4, *“This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*

**So, He sacrificed His Son to save us.** Romans 5:10, *“For while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.”* Christ’s blood paid the penalty for our sins.Ephesians 1:7, *“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace…”*

**And He gave us the gospel.** Romans 1:16, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also the Greek.”*

**The gospel tells us what to do to receive this salvation:**

* We must ***hear*** (*listen to* and *learn*). Romans 10:17, *“So faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”*  We cannot *believe* and *follow* what we will not *hear* and *heed.*
* We must ***believe*** (have *faith in*) in Jesus Christ, that He is the Son of God. John 8:24, *“I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins.”*
* We must ***repent*** (change) our hearts, minds, and conduct. Luke 13:3, *“I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”*
* We must ***confess*** (affirm) our belief in Jesus as the Christ. 1John 4:15, *“Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.”*
* We must be **baptized** (immersed) to contact the saving blood of Jesus and have our sins remitted. Romans 6:3-4, *“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”*
* We must **live according to the instructions of the gospel**. Titus 2:11-14, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.”*

Now who can’t understand and follow this simple plan of God for saving and allowing us to spend eternity with Him in heaven? It really is just that simple! (1-6-15)

**Sin & Repentance**

Some think the hardest three words in the English language to say are, “I love you.” This is simply not true anymore, if it ever was before. Many people can say those three words all too easily and not really mean them. The three words that seem to have become the hardest for people these days to say are, “I was wrong.” Even when forced by circumstances, most equivocate and attempt to justify themselves with statements like “I made an error in judgment” or “It wasn’t the best decision I could have made under the circumstances.” But if they are not pushed into unavoidable accountability, most will adeptly shift the responsibility of their own wrong doing to anyone or anything other than themselves. You hardly ever hear anyone say, “I was wrong” anymore, especially if there is any way out of it. Why is this? Didn’t there used to be something admirable about being willing to admit that you had been wrong? Not to glorify the wrongness of it, but to at least take responsibility for the error. And wasn’t it generally understood that such an admission was also an implied commitment and desire to do better in the future? Now it seems these three words are viewed as an admission of intellectual weakness- that you couldn’t come up with a clever way out of the admission of guilt!

Shifting the blame or denying responsibility isn’t anything new. In the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve’s sin, Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the Serpent, and he (as the old joke goes) didn’t have a leg to stand on! The first king of Israel, when confronted with his sin by God’s prophet Samuel, tried to blame the people and even God, cf. 1Samuel 15:15-21. Even when forced to an admission of his own guilt, Saul still waffled and said, *“I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord and your words,* ***because I feared the people and listened to their voice.”*** (v.24) He was God’s appointed leader. He was the king, but he still blamed his subjects for his own sin even in his confession of it. So it has been- so it is today: even when guilt is tacitly admitted, there is always some “justifying” excuse attached to it. “I was wrong” has apparently become the hardest three-word phrase in the English language to utter.

There are two points I’d like you to consider regarding these things. First of all, we must understand the importance of accountability. The apostle Paul wrote, *“For we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according what he has done, whether good or bad.”* (2Corinthians 5:10) This accountability is to God, not other men. It is final, eternal, and unavoidable. It cannot be shifted to someone else, or otherwise justified or excused. Everyone will face it, and face up to their activity or inactivity regarding God’s word, PERIOD.

Secondly, full acceptance of responsibility for our sin (confession) and a turning from it (repentance) expunges the record of God. God promises that if we admit our wrongs and turn from them, *“I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”* (Hebrews 8:12) Consider also, *“Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;”* Acts 3:19. But we cannot *“turn”* from our sins in repentance unless we first take responsibility for them. Shifting the blame for them or otherwise trying to justify or excuse them won’t cut it. We have to understand, accept, and say “I was wrong” to God, and to those whom we’ve wronged when others are involved. Then, we have to prove the sincerity of our confession by turning from the wrong and doing right.

How many relationships with God, spouses, families, friends, co-workers, and certainly brethren could be repaired if we would just accept responsibility for our sins without equivocation, say “I was wrong,” and then prove that we mean it by doing better? Not to mention how many souls could be spared from eternal judgment by the same? (3-23-11)

**Speaking *Where, When,* and *How* the Bible Speaks**

The first part of 1Peter 4:11 reads, *“Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God…”* Though the preceding verse and the rest of this one focuses on *stewardship-* employing the *special gift(s)* given by God to be used to the benefit of others and to His glory, the portion quoted emphasizes **the need for authority** in our speech…

The *speaking* referenced here is not casual conversation (which is covered in Ephesians 4:29ff), but speech that is *spiritual* in nature and content. Therefore, speech that pertains to spiritual matters should be *true to the Book,* so to speak. These things should go without saying, but how often do “spiritual discussions” actually reference a *book, chapter,* and *verse* anymore? Many people talk about spiritual matters and what **they**think, feel, or believe, but when pressed, will quickly admit that they have very little actual Bible knowledge. How can we have any real spiritual convictions about God, life, and eternity without knowledge of God’s word? Those willing to speak of *their own minds* instead of relying on *the revelation of God’s mind* to us in the Scriptures (cf. 1Corinthians 2:6-16) are certainly NOT speaking***where*** the Bible speaks.

We must also speak ***when*** the Bible speaks. If God’s Word says something is a sin, or even an *abomination* (utterly vile and disgusting) to Him, we should be willing to stand up and *“speak, as it were, the utterances of God”* on the matter without compromise or apology.God’s word is not silent about pre-marital or extra-marital sex, divorce for any reason, homosexuality, pornography, lying, stealing, cheating, gossip, slander, hypocrisy, and a whole litany of other sins. Why are so many who claim to *speak for* and *follow* Him having such a hard time simply quoting what God has said on these matters? Entire denominations (and their leaders and preachers) have become *silent* on matters about which God has clearly spoken! Why?

* Because it isn’t popular to do so? “Truth” is determined by God’s word, not by what is popular, John 17:17.
* Because they fear offending individuals or groups? Jesus was not partial to any individual or group with the truth, Luke 20:21; we shouldn’t be either, Acts 10:34-35.
* Because they fear governmental reprisals? When “the government” told the Apostles not to preach the truth of Jesus anymore, they simply replied, *“We must obey God rather than men,”* Acts 5:29.

Those *speaking for God* must *“stand and speak to the people in the temple the* ***whole*** *message of life,”* Acts 5:17- not just those portions that are *popular, give no offense,* and are *acceptable to the government.* To do less is to fail to speak ***when*** the Bible speaks.

We should likewise speak ***how*** the Bible speaks. Motivated by compassion, Jesus saw the multitude as *“sheep without a shepherd”* and *“began to teach them many things,”* Mark 6:34. Speaking *where* and *when* the Bible speaks is not a license to ignore *how* the Bible speaks. We should speak *“the truth in love,”* Ephesians 4:15, and in keeping with God’s desire for *“all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,”* 1Timothy 2:4. It is easy to use the Bible to tell someone else they’re wrong. It is another matter entirely to desire them to be right enough to tell them they’re wrong in a way that encourages them to become right. It is just as important to *“exhort with great patience and instruction”* as it is to *“reprove”* and *“rebuke”* when speaking where the Bible speaks, cf. 2Timothy 4:2. Colossians 4:5-6 dictates that our *“speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person.”* Jesus’ speech was described as *“gracious,”* Luke 4:22, but not at the expense of *“truth”* when He provided three examples to demonstrate the sinfulness of His audience,Luke 4:23-27. Neither *truth* nor *graciousness* will suffer if we speak *how* Jesus spoke and the Bible speaks.

Let’s resolve to *get back to the Book* and speak *where, when,* and *how* the Bible speaks. There really is no viable substitute for it! What I, you, or anyone else *thinks* or *feels* is impotent to save souls, but the gospel *“is the power of God for salvation,”* Romans 1:16. Never be afraid or ashamed to say *what* God has said *when* and *how* He has said it. You surely can’t go wrong when doing so! (7-21-15)

**Spiritual Amnesia**

“Spiritual amnesia” is not a condition limited to the seasoned/mature Christian population- younger and less mature Christians can also suffer its effects. This spiritual forgetfulness can have some positive benefits, as well as some negative liabilities depending on the **application**.

On the positive side, having spiritual memory issues can be a good thing, especially when it comes to the ability to forget past failures and move forward toward future successes. Paul wrote to the Philippians regarding this very point, *“…forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus,”* Philippians 3:13-14. The great apostle would be the first to tell us (and he did so) that he had a lot in his past that he had to overcome. He was ever aware of his past rejection of Christ and persecution of the church, cf. 1Timothy 1:15 (he considered himself the *foremost* of sinners). So how could he both *forget* what lay behind and *remember* the magnitude of his past sins?

Paul **never forgot** that he had committed those sins, and even allowed them to motivate him to greater fidelity and service. But what he **did forget** was the guilt of those sins. He accepted the forgiveness of Christ, and was therefore able to forgive himself. Note 1Timothy 1:16 on this point, *“And yet for this reason, I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost* (sinner) *Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.”* He put into practice what we often fail to do: forgive ourselves by accepting the forgiveness of Christ when we meet His terms, and then **forgetting** the guilt of our sin!

But, there are also some negative aspects of “spiritual amnesia.” Consider the following carefully.

**Hebrews 12:5-6**, *“and having* ***forgotten*** *the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.”*  We sometimes forget that having God as our spiritual Father means that we occasionally need a good *scourging!* No one enjoys this kind of discipline from God, but if we **forget** that He does it for our good and because He loves us, we might either *regard it lightly* or *faint-* or rebel against it and Him, and quit even trying to do what it is right.

**James 1:23-24**, *“For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately* ***forgotten*** *what kind of person he was.”* There are a couple of things we need to understand from this passage to get the point. The *mirror* is God’s word- it shows us our *natural face*, which is a reflection of our faults. But if we look into this *mirror* and then *go away* from it and ***forget***what we saw without making any corrections, we are just “hearers” rather than “doers” of God’s will. Remember, it is the “doers” of the word who are blessed of God, cf. v.25!

**2Peter 1:9**, *“For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins.”* Again, a few things must be brought into clear view to “see” Peter’s point. The *qualities* he has been urging to be added to our initial faith are listed in vv.5-7. They must be *increased* and *grown* to produce *usefulness, fruitfulness,* and *true knowledge,* v.8. When we fail to add these qualities to our faith, Peter says that we become *blind* or *short-sighted.* This means that we will not be able to really “see” the truth any longer, and/or that we will not be able to *see past* the earthly and temporary things of this life to the spiritual and eternal goal of heaven. He also says it will cause memory loss with regard to our *purification.* Peter has specifically mentioned a couple of things that produce this purification: *obedience* to the word (1Peter 1:22), and *baptism* (1Peter 3:21). The point is that if we fail to grow and mature as Christians, we will **forget** that baptism is a *birth* that is supposed to be followed by growth, maturity, usefulness, fruitfulness, and true knowledge! Then, we will become apathetic, complacent, and may even quit!

While “spiritual amnesia” can be beneficial with regard to our former (forgiven) sins, it can also be very detrimental to our overall growth and development in the Cause of Christ and the pursuit of heaven! (3-19-13)

**Spiritual Anarchy**

I grew up (to the extent that I have) in the country. The closest kid, not related to me, with which to play was either a goat, or a couple of miles away by bicycle or horseback. I had a brother and sisters, but they were all older. So much of my interaction with other children came at the little country school I attended. As children invariably do, we would get together on the playground, and someone would suggest that we play a game. It was usually some sort of made-up game with rules that were likewise invented and added as we went along. So, the rules were always ill-conceived and inadequate to give any real structure to the game, which was OK since we were just kids playing. But then, and it usually didn’t take too long, as it became apparent to everyone that the rules of the game were not thought-out too well (and often designed to give the author some definite advantage), someone would suggest that we just play the game “with no rules”- which soon ended the game.

This little story illustrates a fundamental principle of human behavior: Any cooperative effort requires some form of rules to provide structure, and shape interaction toward the goal. In other words, **we humans require rules to function constructively.** This need comes from our creation. We were created by a God of order and design, not confusion and chaos (1Cor.14:33). He designed and constructed the Universe to operate on the basis of laws which provide order and harmonious interaction. He created man the same way- with a need for operating principles, or laws.

Throughout man’s history, his own efforts to generate these operating principles have often resulted in really bad laws, kind of like those playground game rules, cf. Jeremiah 10:23. And this tendency invariably produces cries to “play without any rules,” just as it did on the playground- which is anarchy. Technically, anarchy is the absence of viable law, and therefore results in the absence of any system of organization. But God didn’t create the Universe, or man, to operate that way. The Psalmist says that the ways of man are *“ordered by the Lord,”* 37:23.

And yet, despite our obvious *need* of the order and organization that laws provide, and despite our demonstrated *lack of ability* to effectively produce them ourselves (The Inquisition for example), we keep trending closer and closer to spiritual anarchy. We, in the religious world of today, seem to be distancing ourselves from the very concept of spiritual “law.” The notion that there is a “right” way to think soundly, to act morally, and to worship spiritually as determined by authority of God’s Word, is rapidly being replaced with “I think” and “we feel” reasoning. The road to complete spiritual anarchy is paved with such logic substituted for biblical authority.

If we hope to please God rather than just humoring our own humanity, we must realize that the God of order and design *ordered* and *designed* spiritual laws for our ultimate good. We can “play” at religion by believing, teaching, and doing the things we “think” and “feel”- and thus worship ourselves; or, we can order and arrange ourselves according to God’s laws- and worship Him. But we can’t do both. Instead of abandoning the Law of God for our own thoughts and wishes, we must test every doctrine, belief, and practice with, *“What is written in the Law?”* (cf. Luke 10:26). Then, we must do “what is written in the Law!” Spiritual anarchy produces only the chaos of eternal destruction. But obedience to the law of God produces exactly what He ordered and designed: eternal life, James 1:22-27. (2-28-12)

**Spiritual “Brush”**

Over the years I’ve actually enjoyed cutting brush and clearing land. It’s typically hard hot work, but everything just looks so much better after you’re done. And since three sides of our lot have a mostly bamboo border, I usually have plenty of opportunities to hone my skills! But I must confess that while I don’t really mind running the chainsaw, if the brush has to be loaded on a trailer and hauled away, well, did I mention I don’t really mind running the chainsaw? Unfortunately, although Donna is great at many things, she’s lousy at loading and hauling brush!

As with most things in life, there are lessons to be learned from brush cutting/loading. I was reminded of a couple of them recently because there was no one around to load on the trailer all the brush I had cut!

**Lesson #1: If you care about keeping things spiritually “clean” in your life, there are going to be times when you have to do some “spiritual pruning.”** Like physical brush cutting, sometimes the spiritual kind just requires a quick snip or two here and there with shears, cf. John 15:2; but other times, you have to get the machete or ax involved, cf. Matthew 3:10. And occasionally, you have to fire up the chainsaw and really go to work! The level of effort required, and the seriousness of the tools involved, are usually determined by how *long* and how *far* we’ve let the briars and brambles of sin invade our lives. Consistent attention and diligence toward “nipping sin in the bud” eliminates most of the need for major hacking and clearing later.

**Lesson #2:** **Spiritual “chainsaws,” like their physical counterparts, once fired up and put to work, can often cut more than we can clean up!** Once all the pruning and cutting is done, there is still a mess to clean up in order to put things right. This too is often hard work- perhaps even harder at times than identifying the problems, or our initial efforts to deal with them. Still yet, If we just “wade in and start hacking,” two things usually result: 1) we wind up cutting more than we intended, and some “good” parts get damaged or destroyed, cp. Romans 14 (especially vv.16-21); and unless we’re careful, 2) we almost always wind up making a bigger mess than we intended, or can clean up, cf. Galatians 6:1-5.

**Lesson #3: When loading brush, keeping the wind at your back means you get a lot less dirt in your face!**  “Keeping the wind at your back” while cleaning and loading up spiritual brush means having the God-breathed wind of inspiration behind you! God’s word not only tells us what’s good and what’s “brush,” Galatians 5:16-26, it also provides instructions on how to go about dealing with the bad: don’t *deny* but do *confess* your sins to God, 1John 1:8-9; and, *repent* (change, turn from) and *pray* for forgiveness, Acts 8:21-22. These inspired (literally *God* + *wind* or *breath*) methods for loading and hauling away the spiritual brush in our lives as Christians keeps additional dirt out of our face because we have the very *wind* of God’s inspiration behind us! But trying to deal with our sins in some other *uninspired* way just means we have another face full of dirt coming. Doing things God’s way always works better, just like loading brush with the wind at your back.

Additionally, sometimes we’re called upon to help others with their spiritual brush. Here, too, we need the wind of God’s inspiration squarely behind us. Jesus tells us how to go about it in Matthew 18:15-17. *“If your brother sins,”* v.15a, is not the same as his doing something you don’t like or wouldn’t do. Be sure “sin,” as determined by the inspiration of God, is involved before you fire up your chainsaw! *“Go and reprove him in private,”* v.15b, is not the same as telling everyone else but him what he has done wrong- go to him with the matter. *“If he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you,”* v.16, does not mean to turn this into a “witch hunt.” Remember, the point is to save his soul by having multiple witnesses confirm his need of salvation- not to destroy him. *“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church,”* v.17a, is the next to last step- not the first one. Nonetheless, the church has a part to play in dealing with spiritual brush that individuals refuse to clean up, v.17b. The only way to keep from getting additional “dirt” in your face when dealing with the “brush” of sin- yours or someone else’s, is to keep the *wind* of God’s inspiration behind you! Think on these things, won’t you? (7-2-13)

**Spiritual Buffets**

I enjoy eating, and if it isn’t immodest to say so, I’m good at it! But I don’t like (and consequently don’t eat) some foods- regardless of how beneficial they might be for me. I love buffets. They provide me the opportunity to get as much as I want of what I want- typically the meat dishes, and I don’t have to put anything on my plate (OK, “plates”!) of what I don’t like or want at the time- usually the vegetables or desserts. What a deal! Apparently, other folks appreciate buffets also, given their popularity. And why not? Everyone gets what they want, and as much of it as they want. There’s a great variety of different meats, vegetables, breads, and desserts, and plenty of each! So, what’s the down side to that? Well, for one thing, buffets *allow,* if not *encourage,* us to: 1) easily avoid foods we *should* be eating in favor of those we prefer; and, 2) eat way more than is good for us of foods that we *shouldn’t* be eating except in moderation. So….

Think about these things relative to *spiritual* buffets. Modern religion seems to have adopted “the buffet” approach. They seek to provide “something for everyone” and “as much as you want of what you like,” without having to consume (or do) anything for which you don’t care. There is no doubt or argument that such an appeal will attract a crowd, but is this really the best approach to producing healthy and mature Christians that are capable of reproducing themselves spiritually (which should be the goal)?

We need to understand a couple of things:

* **The gospel is *“the power of God for salvation,”* Romans 1:16, not the church.** The church is the *product* of salvation not the *cause* of it. The church didn’t die on the cross for the sins of the world- Jesus did that, Revelation 1:5. Nor did the church *reveal* the mind of God by the process of *inspiration* to produce the gospel that tells of Christ’s saving blood and how to contact it- the Holy Spirit did that, 1Corinthians 2:6-16. Which is why the aged apostle Paul instructed the younger preacher Timothy to *“preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction,”* 2Timothy 4:2. Therefore…
* **The church’s role is to be the *“pillar and support of truth,”* 1Timothy 3:15, not to emphasize or eliminate parts of the truth to make it more palatable to the masses**. We don’t get to “pick and choose” which parts of the gospel we like and will take as if we’re on a *spiritual* buffet line. And churches that encourage or allow such ought to stop! The gospel is *only* God’s power to save *when* it is preached and practiced in its *entirety*. Selectively *taking* the parts we like and are willing to practice, and *omitting* the parts that “don’t suit our tastes,” makes the gospel impotent to produce its intended result of salvation. In fact, a spiritual curse is placed upon those doing such things in Galatians 1:6-9!
* **The church’s responsibility is to *provide* and *promote* the preaching and teaching of the truth of the gospel- all of it, not to gain and increase memberships, 1Corinthians 1:10-25.** Paul predicted a time when people *“will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accord with their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths,”* 2Timothy 4:3-4. These verses immediately follow his admonition to *“preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.”* Friends, the time of which Paul spoke is here and now. The church is derelict in its primary role when it seeks to provide “something for everyone” and to cater to the “likes and dislikes” of as many as possible. ALL need salvation, Romans 3:23; 6:23; and the gospel- in its entirety, is the *“power of God to save”!* Providing some sort of spiritual buffet of *a little of this* and a *little of that* to satiate the palates of those seeking anything and everything other than the salvation of their souls is simply providing spiritual ptomaine poisoning!

I like food buffets, despite their potential for harm if I don’t use them responsibly. But, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is NOT a buffet from which we are at liberty to pick and choose, OR to gorge ourselves on the “sweets” (of blessings and benefits) and ignore the “meat” (of responsibility). Let’s allow *the gospel* be *God’s power to save* by *preaching, teaching,* and *living* it all. Let’s expect and demand that *preachers* and *teachers* speak “the whole truth.” And let’s be a church that *provides* and *promotes* these things instead anything more or less because souls are at stake! (8-4-15)

**Spiritual Children**

This article is not about child rearing, per se. The *spiritual* condition of your *physical* children is not its focus. Instead, please consider *spiritual children* in the light of 1Corinthians 4:15 where Paul wrote, *“For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers;* ***for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.”*** This is precisely the meaning intended.

Having *physical* children changes us. Perhaps for the first time in our lives, we learn what *true, selfless love* is really all about. Up to that point, we’ve probably lived mostly for ourselves. But that little “bundle of joy” hopefully brings about major changes in our minds with regard to how we think, our hearts with regard to how we feel, and our lives with regard to how we conduct ourselves. Such is natural and good, because if we haven’t done so yet, these changes force us to *grow up* or *mature.*  But this is in the *physical* realm- what about *spiritual children?*

Having *spiritual children,* in the sense of which Paul wrote to the Corinthians, instead of *forcing* us to grow up *spiritually,* is most often the ***result*** of spiritual maturity. Think about the comparison. In the *physical* (purely biological) realm, the life-cycle typically is as follows: 1) Seed Implantation; 2) Conception; 3) Gestation; 4) Birth; 5) Growth/Development; 6) Maturity; 7) Reproduction; 8) Parental Care of Offspring; and finally, 9) Death. But some how, in the *spiritual* realm, we tend to associate *maturity* simply with chronology since birth, rather than with reproduction and the parental care given to *spiritual offspring.*  The reason for this is very simple. Most Christians never become *spiritual parents* becausethey never *reproduce* themselves *spiritually!*

Without this *spiritual maturity* (either *from* or *because of* having *spiritual children*), we don’t get that all-so-important **change of mind** with regard to how we think in *spiritual terms*. We don’t get that vital **change of heart** with regard to how we feel in *spiritual terms.*  And, we don’t get that imperative **change of life** with regard to how we live and conduct ourselves in *spiritual terms.* Basically, we never really “grow up” spiritually! Paul also addressed this issue to the Corinthians, *“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual* ***men****, but…. as to* ***babes in Christ,”*** 1Corinthians 3:1ff**.** Even a casual read of 1Corinthians leaves us with the indelible impression that most, if not all, of their “problems” were directly tied to their selfish spiritual immaturity.

Please think this through. How many current congregational/church problems would be resolved if the membership were, at least in part, *spiritual parents* (had *spiritual children* in the congregation)? Wouldn’t we be more *tolerant* and *understanding* of the mistakes children typically make if they were **our** *spiritual children,* or the *spiritual children* of family members*,* 1Thessalonians 5:14*?* Wouldn’t we be more *careful* with regard to what we (and others) say about church leadership or other family members when the immature ears of **our** *spiritual children* were listening, 1Thessalonians 5:12-13? Wouldn’t we be more *concerned* with how we treat one another in front of **our** *spiritual children,* 1Thessalonians 5:15? Wouldn’t we be more *diligent* with regard to the growth and development opportunities within the congregation if it included **our** *spiritual children,* Hebrews 12:14-17?

I’m not suggesting that having “babes in Christ” in the congregation will solve every problem that arises in a local fellowship. I am suggesting that: 1) spiritual maturity is not the mere product of years of wearing out pew cushions, but should instead be associated with the maturity necessary to *produce* and *rear spiritual children;*  2) *reproducing ourselves spiritually* helps us to become *selflessly mature* rather than remaining *selfishly immature;* and, 3) when congregations are comprised of significant numbers of *spiritual parents*, many of the problems arising from *spiritual immaturity* (most congregational problems) aren’t allowed to fester and destroy the faith of their spiritual children.

There is one more point that deserves consideration. When *physical* parents have two children, the overall population will remain static because they’ve simply *replaced* themselves. The same is true in the *spiritual* realm if we convert only our “two” physical children. Furthermore, if we content ourselves to be *spiritually* barren, the kingdom of God on earth is on a path of diminishing returns that nears extinction with each passing generation. (12-10-13)

**Spiritual “Do-Nuts”**

The title is not suggestive of some sort of “religious” circular dough that has been deep-fried and sprinkled or glazed with sugar, though there are probably points to be made along those lines also. Instead, the “do-nut” under consideration is the type done with a motorized vehicle- the kind where the front wheels barely move in a tight circle and the back wheels are spinning and squealing in a larger smoking or dirt-slinging circle around the outside. These “do-nuts” have definite comparisons to some “spiritual” pursuits today…

**The *Purpose* of Do-Nuts.** Any teenager, or adult acting like one, does a “do-nut” for one or more of a couple of reasons: 1) To show off or gain attention seems to be a primary purpose; 2) to exhibit power, which is closely tied to the previous; and/or, 3) to leave circular black marks on the pavement, or deep groves in the dirt, in tribute to purposes 1 and 2.

The spiritually immature do “religious do-nuts” for the same reasons. Some activities are perhaps “performed” under the guise of benefiting others, but are really just efforts to gain attention for oneself. A couple of NT examples should help to clarify. In Matthew 6:1, Jesus warned His disciples against doing spiritual do-nuts when He said, *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.”* He then went on to provide three specific examples: *giving alms* to be seen by others, vv.2-4; *praying* to be seen (or heard) by others, vv.5-15; and *fasting* to be seen by others, vv.16-18.

However, the activities done *“to be noticed”* by others are not limited to *giving, praying,* or how we *present* ourselves. In the church at Corinth, certain spiritual gifts were more highly sought than others because they were apparently deemed to bring greater prestige to the possessor, see 1Corinthians 14:1-4ff. So, Paul had to remind them that the purpose of all spiritual gifts was to edify *the body* (in this case, the local church), vv.12,26, rather than *self,* v.4.

Now, whether we’re *giving of our means* (by contribution in the assembly, or by charity out of the assembly), *praying, showcasing ourselves* as godly people, or even *leading the assembly* in some facet of worship or bible study, if our purpose is to bring attention to ourselves, we’re immature and just doing “spiritual do-nuts”!

**The *Results* of Do-Nuts.** We’re not heading into gluttony or obesity here because the subject is still the do-nuts you “do” instead of those you “eat.” But if you think about it, there are some interesting similarities between do-nuts done in a parking lot or on a dirt road, and those done in spiritual terms. In either setting, doing do-nuts:

1. Makes a lot of noise and throws a lot of dust in the air, but accomplishes nothing in practical terms. Thus, they’re all about the “show,” or at least “showing off.” They are the polar opposites of *poor in spirit* and *pure in heart,* Matthew 5:3,8.
2. Get you nowhere. You’re literally “spinning in circles,” and the only places such will get you is dizzy or in trouble, or both. This was Jesus’ primary point in Matthew 6:1-18. Whatever notoriety or acclaim is gained from those willing to watch and applaud is all the do-nut doer will get because God is neither served by nor approves of such. As Jesus said, *“they have their reward in full,”* vv.2,5,16.
3. Is destructive. *Physically,* doing do-nuts ruins the tires, and is tremendously hard on drivetrains. Doing *spiritual* do-nuts (as described above) fractures fellowships, destroys credibility, and turns what is supposed to be “worship” into “performance art” or a “talent show.” “Worship” is supposed to be the “engine/drivetrain” that moves us closer to God and heaven. Don’t waste it doing do-nuts.

“Doing do-nuts” can be a lot of fun *physically* or *spiritually*, if you’re immature and selfish enough to relish excessive noise, dirt in the air, destruction, and showing off instead of moving forward to the destination. (7-29-14)

**Spiritual Incarceration’s One Exit: Emancipation through Execution**

Have you ever been in such a painful predicament that death seemed like the only hope of relief? Elijah once expressed a similar sentiment in 1Kings 19:4, *“It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life….”.* The prophet came to this point of utter exasperation for reasons he proffered in v.10, *“the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”* Elijah viewed his situation as hopeless, and apparently preferred that the Lord take his life instead of his enemies doing so. But, as is the case with most things we humans see as hopeless, he was wrong. The Lord tells him that it is not nearly as bad as he thinks- that are yet 7,000 in Israel who do not worship the idol Baal (v.17), and also gives him a set of instructions telling to him to basically get up and get busy (vv.15-17). There are apparent lessons for all of us in this story, but let’s get back to our original question, “Have you ever been in such a painful predicament that death seemed like the only hope of relief?”

I’ve been close to this situation- close enough that I was actually OK with dying **“today**” if such was the Lord’s will. Obviously, it is not a pleasant place to be *physically,* but it is *spiritually* liberating. Once you reach the point of actually relinquishing the stranglehold we try to maintain on physical life, and trust God completely with your physical and spiritual existence, you become free not only from the constraints of “life” that death holds over you, but you are also released from the shackles of sin to which the fear of death holds the key (cf. Hebrews 2:15 and Romans 8:15).

I’m not at all suggesting that salvation is *achieved* through such a mental and spiritual epiphany alone- just that it is *realized* in a way that perhaps did not fully dawn on us at the initial point of our surrender to belief in Christ and our rebirth in Him through baptism. In this regard at least, it seems suppose matures and comes to full fruition as does our faith and trust- at the sunset of life, or at we at least perceive to be our end. It is then that “salvation” becomes a matter of complete faith and trust in God in a way that it has never been previously.

But for salvation, or even this more complete realization of it, to mature into complete faith and trust, it must have a birth- a beginning. Often this point of origin takes root in utter despair and the recognition of our complete dependence upon God. The prodigal son of Luke 15 did not *“come to his senses”* until his wallowing in the muck and mire of immorality had exhausted all his resources and completely enslaved him. Such is the nature of sin. It *incarcerates* us in our own selfish desires. Emancipation from this enslavement to sin involves execution. In fact, execution is the only exit to spiritual incarceration. Let me explain with the help of Romans 6.

Paul wrote that when we use our bodies (and lives) for selfish and sinful purposes, we become *“slaves to impurity and lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness,”* v.19. This pervasive nature of sin entangles us to the point that we thus become *“slaves to sin,”* v.20. From this incarceration we cannot free ourselves, but there are things we must do to allow God to extricate us. Note some earlier verses in chapter six which outline them. We must become *dead to sin,* v.2. How? We *die* to sin by being *“baptized into Christ Jesus”* and being thus *“baptized into His death,”* v.3; but this *death* is not just Christ’s- it must necessarily be ours also. Note carefully vv.6-7, *“knowing this, that our old self was* ***crucified*** *with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin; for he who died is freed from sin.”* Through baptism, we *die* with and are *buried* with Christ so that we might be freed from sin. We are emancipated from spiritual incarceration through execution- the crucifixion of our selfishly sinful selves that we might be resurrected to a new and free life in Jesus!

Physical death can be a relief from suffering, but only if the soul has already been freed from its imprisonment in sin through the execution (by crucifixion) of our *old self* of sin. Now, are you ready to die physically **“today”** because you have *put to death* your *man of sin?* Or, are you still clinging helplessly and hopelessly to physical life because it is all that you have? (8-6-13)

**Spiritual Laziness**

The book of Proverbs has much to say about complacency (cf. 6:6-11; 24:30-34; 26:13-16; *e.g.*); and there are likewise N.T. passages dealing with the subjectboth *indirectly* and *directly*, Ephesians 4:28; 6:5-9; 2Thessalonians 3:6-12. Laziness, or *slothfulness,* is typically easy to spot and generally disdained- though probably not nearly so much so in the last several years when “entitlement” has become more the mindset of many. However, the aversion to good, hard, honest work usually has other manifestations besides just wanting to get paid and supported for doing little or nothing. This mentality also affects our ***spiritual*** willingness to work. Consider carefully these examples:

**Some don’t want to “work” to be saved.** Though it is certainly true that we cannot “earn” our salvation by piling up invoices of meritorious works, Ephesians 2:8-9, this does **not** mean that there is nothing to be done on our part in order to receive it. *“And why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not* ***do*** *what I say?”*  These are the words of Jesus in Luke 6:46. In giving the Great Commission, Jesus also said, *“He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved….”* Mark 16:16. The crucifiers of Jesus, after becoming believers in Him, asked, *“Brethren, what shall we* ***do****?”* They were **not** told to “Just believe and accept Jesus,” or to just “feel” or “experience” anything. They were told to **do** something, *“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins…”* Acts 2:37-38. Indeed, *“faith without works is useless”* and *“dead,”* James 2:20,26. Spiritual laziness doesn’t accomplish salvation. Likewise,

**Some don’t want to “work” to remain saved.** “Once saved, always saved” may be popular, but it is just not what the New Testament teaches. Please note that Peter warned against *falling away, “You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness,”* 2Peter.3:17. Hebrews 3:12 adds, *“Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God.”*  The very thing that many say cannot happen (*i.e. falling away/losing salvation/falling from grace*) is further stated to have occurred to some of the brethren in Galatia, *“You have been severed from Christ….you have fallen from grace,”* Galatians 5:4. Salvation, once attained by faith and obedience to the gospel, must be maintained with diligent and consistent effort. There is just no other way to accurately understand James 5:19-20 and Philippians 2:12-16. But,

**Some don’t want to “work” to grow and mature as Christians either.** Our conversion to Christ by faith and baptism is not the end, it is a beginning from which we are supposed to grow, mature, and bear fruit to the Lord, 2Peter 3:18; John 15:1-2. But this process of maturation takes a lot of diligent effort! While others can help to *“water”* the new plant (cf. 1Corinthians 3:6-8a), *“each will receive his own reward according to* ***his own labor****,”* v.8b! To mix metaphors, Christians that only consume what they are bottle and spoon-fed usually become spiritually lazy and remain perpetually immature, cf. Hebrews 5:11 – 6:2. To illustrate this point, if you do not already know what the passages that are referenced but not quoted in this article say, did you look them up *“to see whether these things were so,”* Acts 17:11? All too often, spiritually lazy Christians attend a couple of one-hour services a month when it is convenient to them, rarely open a Bible while there, and never seriously study it otherwise, and yet claim to be *“holding fast the word of life,”* Philippians 2:16. Congregations provide multiple services to educate and edify each week that are poorly attended by their own members. Capable bible class teachers diligently prepare lessons that are left in the pews or classrooms unconsidered even by many who do attend them. Christian parents who say they want their children to become Christians rarely bring them to bible class, or study the Bible at home with them. Why? **Spiritual laziness** is surely the problem (or at least one of them).

What is the solution? *“But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. And we desire that each* ***one of you show the same diligence*** *so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end,* ***that you may not be sluggish****, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises,”* Hebrews 6:11-12. (6-24-14)

**Spiritual Math Quiz**

This quiz has only one problem to solve: **Bible + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ = Christian.**

Since most people prefer “multiple choice” to “fill in the blank” questions, here are some possible answers: **A) Creed; B) Grace**; **C)** **Faith**; or, **D)** **Obedience**. Please take a moment to think about your answer before reading further.

**A) Creed.** Creeds are man-authored documents meant as statements of faith that wind up dividing potential bible-believers along denominational lines. For instance, if one who seeks to adhere to the Bible *plus* the Catechism, he becomes a Catholic. Likewise, if he takes the Bible *plus* the Manual, he becomes a Baptist; and if he takes the Bible but *adds* the Discipline, he winds up a Methodist, etc. But, and this is vitally important, the Bible *alone* will not make one a member of a denomination- it takes the Bible *plus* devotion to a man-authored creed to make a denominational member, cf. Matthew 15:1-9.

**B) Grace.** The grace of God (somewhat simplistically, but adequate for our purposes here, defined as “unmerited favor/good will”) is absolutely essential to becoming a Christian. But note Titus 2:11, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,”*. Are *“all men”* saved? If the Bible *plus* God’s grace is all that it takes to become a Christian, then the answer would have to be “yes.” But notice that the sentence in Titus 2:11 regarding *“the grace of God”* continued in the following verses, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,* ***instructing us*** *to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age…”* The *grace of God* that *brought salvation* did so in the form of ***instructions*** (and the *redemptive sacrifice* of Jesus, v.14)! Instructions are only beneficial if they are followed. So, the Bible *plus* God’s grace *alone* does not a Christian make. If the Bible- given by inspiration to man, plus grace- given by God to man, equals salvation as a Christian, then man has no input or participation in his own salvation. But this “God only” salvation completely contradicts what Jesus had to say about the matter in Matthew 25:31-46!

**C) Faith.** The faith of man is absolutely essential to becoming a Christian. Not only is it the foundation of our *conviction* and *hope,* Hebrews 11:1, and *“without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him,”* Hebrews 11:6. However, this is very different from “faith only” salvation. The only place in the N.T. that the words “faith” and “only” appear together is James 2:24 (KJV) *“Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”* In fact, Jesus said that even faith was itself a work, John 6:28-29. Therefore, it is impossible for salvation to be *by faith alone with no mixture of works whatsoever* because faith is itself a work. “Faith only” no more equals salvation than did “God only” salvation. The Bible *plus* faith is where one begins to become a Christian, but is surely not all there is to the matter.

**D) Obedience.** Finally, here is the correct answer. How so? Man’s obedience does not nullify God’s grace, because as we saw from Titus 2:11-12, the *grace* of God *brought salvation* to manin the form of *instructions,* and *instructions* are only beneficial when *obeyed.* Neither does man’s obedience negate faith, for as we saw from Hebrews 11:6, in order for man’s *faith* to *be pleasing* to God, and thus be *rewarded* by Him, it must lead him to *seek* God. How does man *by faith* seek God? Listen closely to Jesus’ words from Matthew 7:21, *“Not every one who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven;* ***but he who does the will of My Father,*** *who is in heaven.”*

So, the **Bible** (God’s instructions by grace) + **Obedience** (man’s faith in action) = **Christian** (those saved by Christ). In some ways, this is a simple restatement of 1John 2:3, *“And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.”*  (8-6-14)

**Spiritual Neutrality**

When it comes to spirituality, some people are kind of like Switzerland- trying to be “neutral.” Switzerland’s neutrality has historically been more about money than anything else. In WWII, they simply wanted to be “on friendly terms” with, and therefore able “to do business” with, both sides. Most attempts at spiritual neutrality have the same motivation!

What is meant by “spiritual neutrality”? “Neutrality” is the effort to “sit on the fence” instead of picking a side in which to invest complete allegiance and devotion. “Spiritual neutrality,” at least as the term is being used here, is pretty much the same thing as it related to the great conflict of life between good and evil- God and Satan, cf. Ephesians 6:10-12. Although most people *want* to think of themselves, and be thought of, as being *on God’s side,* and few are boldly arrogant enough to openly declare themselves as allied with Satan and opposed to God, many wind up at least attempting to sit on the neutrality fence. How so?

Attempts at spiritual neutrality usually look something like this. We partition an hour or so of our busy schedules Sunday morning for God (at least once or twice a month), and show up “at His place” to sing (or at least listen to others do so), pray (or at least bow our heads and put on our best pious faces), and listen to a message from His word (or at least act like we’re paying attention). Then, when the final “Amen” is said, we hit the door eager to pursue “our” desires for the rest of the week. After all, we’ve “put God first,” right? “Putting God first” for an hour each week is not exactly what Jesus had in mind according to Matthew 6:33. But thinking and acting in this way is surely an attempt at spiritual neutrality.

Christianity, or being “on God/Christ’s side,” requires commitment- complete commitment. According to Jesus, it requires our whole *hearts,* our entire *souls,* our complete *minds,* and our total *strength,* Mark 12:30. Additionally, He says it requires that we *“love your neighbor as yourself,”* v.31. But, if we adopt a minimum input attitude, and thus give only enough of ourselves to “stay in the good graces” of some local church fellowship, we are attempting spiritual neutrality. We don’t want to be openly and completely allied with Satan, and yet neither are we willing to be completely committed to Christ. We want just enough of Christ to keep us from hell, but just enough of self, Satan, and sin to keep us from being ostracized by the world (you know, just enough to still have “fun”). So, we try to maintain a sort of “dual citizenship” with God and the world that allows us to do “business” with both sides.

However, there is a huge problem with this notion and intent. Jesus said that spiritual neutrality is impossible, *“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters,”* Matthew 12:30. In the great conflict between good and evil there is no “middle ground,” and no “fence” between to straddle. You’re either in *“the kingdom of His beloved Son,”* or *“the domain of darkness,”* Colossians 1:13; you’re either *“of God,”* or part of *“the world* (that) *lies in the power of the evil one,”* 1John 5:19. It’s one or the other, and 1John 3:10 says the distinction is clear, *“By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious; anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.”*

Spiritual neutrality just is not an option. And those attempting it wind up making themselves the enemy of God. *“You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God,”* James 4:4! But it doesn’t have to be this way. You can be wholly committed to God, and completely opposed to Satan. After all, we know which side “wins” in the end, Revelation 20:10. (9-21-16)

**How About Some Spiritual Resolutions?**

We typically make resolutions this time of year to “do/be better” in the year ahead. These pledges are usually not too hard to come up with since the same ones we made last year are again available! So, we renew our commitments to **take better care of** **ourselves** by *losing weight/bad habits, eating better, sleeping more,* and *exercising* (at least *some*). We also promise to **do a better job with the** **externals**- managing our *time, money,* and *other resources* more profitably. And then too, we declare that we’re going to work on **improving our** **relationships**. In the New Year we’re going to be better *parents, children, spouses, bosses, employees,* and *friends.* This all sounds, and actually is, good- if we’re really serious about changing this time around. But the track record of the past doesn’t bode well for us. Have you thought about making (and keeping!) some spiritual resolutions instead, or at least in addition to these others?

**Will you commit to losing the extra weight of *sin* this year?** Hebrews 12:1 talks about *“running with endurance”* the spiritual race that is before us. Running any race with a lot of *extra baggage* attached is almost, if not altogether, impossible. This same verse also urges us to *“lay aside every weight, and the sin which clings so closely,”* (English Standard Version)*.* We simply can’t run this race successfully while carrying about a *“body of sin.”* Free yourself from all the “extra weight of sin*”* (Roman 6:3-6) this year.

**Will you resolve to auditing and allocating your resources differently this year?**  Saul of Tarsus (aka Paul) likely was either already a member of, or was being groomed to be a member of, the Jewish Sanhedrin counsel. This was a very powerful and likely profitable position. But when he became convinced of the deity of Jesus Christ, he immediately turned his back on the all the amenities that his former position afforded him. In speaking of this, he said, *"But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ,”* (Philippians 3:7-8). I am certainly not suggesting that you “give up” your possessions to me, or the church (I/we are interested in your soul’s salvation, not your money) - but I am suggesting that we must all keep these physical things in the proper perspective. Jesus said to *“lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven....for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,”* Matthew 6:19-21. Make sure heaven is your primary “bank account” this next year.

**Will you pledge to improve your spiritual *relationships* this year?** 1John 3:1 speaks of the blessed privilege Christians have *“that we should be called children of God.”*  Have you neglected your *spiritual Parent?* Do you *speak to Him* often in prayer? Do you regularly *seek counsel and wisdom* in His Word(s)? Do you *go and spend time with Him* each week to show how much you love and care for Him? Will you work at improving your relationship with Him this year? And what about His other children- your siblings, are you going to do a better job of being *“devoted to one another in brotherly love”* and in giving *“preference to one another in honor”* from Romans 12:10? Give preference to your “spiritual relationships” this year.

See? It doesn’t have to be a long list of resolutions to accomplish some pretty major improvements in your life. What about it? Are you just going to resolve the same old things this year as you did last year? Or, will you instead resolve and follow through with a few simple commitments that will completely change your life here, and hereafter? (12-28-16)

**Spiritual Sluggards**

As the New Year begins, self-evaluation and enthusiasm for self-improvement is typically at an annual high. There is usually a whole host of things about ourselves we determine to improve. On this list are often at least a couple of items pertaining to our level of interest and activity. In other words, there’s something (or several) at which we resolve to do a better job of cultivating interest and improving activity. So, we vow to either get up earlier or get off the couch more often to accomplish this resolved commitment. Such things got me to thinking about the “sluggard” of Proverbs, and the excuses he put forth for his lack of interest and activity.

*“Sluggard”* is not a common word in our current vernacular, but it is often found in the book of Proverbs. However, it is not a hard word to define- it simply means plain old *“****lazy****.”* There are some thirteen references to “the sluggard” in this book of wisdom, depending of course on the translation. Most of them refer to his lack of initiative and industry in making a living for himself and his family, and warnings of the incumbent results of such. But let’s see if we can use the words of one of the primary texts dealing with the subject relative to more spiritual matters. It seems to me that most of us tend to get more “lazy” with regard to our *spiritual* obligations than perhaps we do with our *physical* responsibilities. To that end, let’s take another look at Proverbs 26:13-16.

There are four key attributes of a sluggard given in the text.

1. The sluggard ***imagines obstacles****,* v.13. He says, *“There is a lion in the road! A lion is in the open square!”* A *real* lion might be an obstacle, cf. 1Peter 5:8, but not to a *real* man of God, cf. Daniel 6:16-24! But *real* obstacles are not so much a problem for the spiritual sluggard as the *imagined* ones. When we find ourselves *inventing* reasons not to do what we know we ought to and can do, we’ve surely become a spiritual sluggard!
2. The sluggard ***goes nowhere****,* v.14. *“Like the door turns on its hinges, so does the sluggard on his bed.”* Think about the metaphor employed. A *door* may be opened and shut a hundred times a day, but never goes anywhere! Of course, the application made of the image is that of a sluggard *turning in his bed*, but never getting out of it. However, think further. Spiritual sluggards may give the appearance of a lot of activity, but in reality, they never make any real progress. And as a result, they remain spiritual infants (who never get up, grow, mature, learn to walk, run, and work for the Lord), 1Corinthians 3:1-3 🡪 9:24-27.
3. The sluggard ***starves because he ‘wearies’ of feeding himself,*** v.15. He *“buries his hand in the dish; he is weary of bringing it to his mouth again.”* Here is one who evidently, and likely through no effort on his part, has ample nutrition before him, but is too lazy to even feed himself! I fear this hits too close to home for many spiritual sluggards in regard to *feeding* themselves from the *milk* and *meat* of the Word of God. They are willing to eat if the preacher or bible class teacher will “spoon-feed” them, but rarely feed themselves by studying on their own, and may even complain and not eat if what they are “spoon-fed” is too *hot, cold, much, little*, or *etc. etc. etc.* Thus, they starve to spiritual death because they are too lazy to even feed themselves, despite the ample availability of nutrition, cf. Hebrew 5:11 – 6:8.
4. The sluggard ***thinks he knows it all,*** v.16, he *“is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can give a discreet answer.”*  Though he *imagines all possible obstacles* to progress, *goes nowhere himself* because he can never seem to get up and get going, and *starves himself* because he is too lazy to avail himself of available nutrition, he still *knows more about everything than everyone!*  James implies that we should be wary of those who *tell* us how smart they are, cf. 1:19,26; 2:3ff,12,14,16,18; 3:1-12, rather than simply *demonstrating* true wisdom through their actions, cf.1:27; 2:15-17,20-26; 3:13.

As we begin a new year, let’s make sure to include (and follow through on) the spiritual resolution to abandon spiritual laziness and truly *“abound in the work of the Lord,”* 1Corinthians 15:58! (1-2-13)

**Splitting Firewood and Personal Evangelism?**

I love the sound, aroma, and warmth of a nice fire. But such requires work- lots of work. For me, this means felling the tree, sawing it up, loading it on the trailer, and hauling it back to the house. But this isn’t the end, as it still has to be split into pieces that can be easily stacked, and eventually put into the fireplace. I’ve labored at these tasks most of my life to be able to enjoy the soothing, crackling warmth of a fire. I should probably mention that I’ve never owned a hydraulic wood splitter- though I have borrowed one occasionally for especially big jobs. Instead, I usually split firewood the old-fashioned way: with wedges and a splitting maul. Recently, it occurred to me that there are some lessons to be learned from splitting firewood this way that might be comparatively beneficial to breaking open the sometimes-tough exteriors of people, and *laying bare* their hearts, with the power of the gospel. So, think with me for a moment about splitting wood and personal evangelism…

**You have to “read” the wood, noting the season cracks where it wants to split, and the knots where it doesn’t, and plan your strategy accordingly.** Most blocks of wood show you where they will, and won’t, split. People are kind of the same, if we’re careful enough to look and listen closely. They will show you the cracks in the tough “bark” and “wood” they keep around their hearts- like life circumstances for which they just don’t have an answer. Kindly showing them that God’s word contains those answers is a well-driven wedge that can break through those tough exteriors. And conversely, they will often show the “knots” which you’d better not try to split- the approaches to areas that are, for them and at the time, off limits. These are usually topics on which they’re just not ready to hear what the Bible has to say, at least not yet. Simply put: every block of wood, and every person, is different. The approach and effort that worked on the previous one may be all wrong for the next. Consider Colossians 4:5-6 on this point, *“Conduct yourself with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how to respond to each person.”*

**You don’t have to be especially “strong” to split wood with a maul- just accurate and consistent.** Over the years, I’ve tried to show several young folks how to split firewood by hand. To them, it looks easy, and even “fun”- at least until they’ve tried it. The first mistake they make is thinking you have swing hard. So, they rear back and take a mighty hack- and usually miss the mark, if not the block of wood, altogether. After some basic instruction on the mechanics of stance and swing, I try to impress upon them that placement is much more important than velocity- that hitting the right spot is more important than swinging hard. Hitting the same spot multiple times moderately is much more productive than hitting several different spots very hard. In my experience, the same is true in personal evangelism. If we can “hit” the right spot, the one they’ve shown us (as in the previous paragraph), precisely multiple times with the right passage(s), they’re much more likely to “open up” their hearts to God. This works much better than “hammering” them all over the place with blow after blow. Remember, we’re supposed to be *“handling* ***accurately*** *the word of truth,”* not beating folks bloody with it, 2Timothy 2:15.

**Using a really “sharp” ax doesn’t work well for splitting wood- it often sinks in too deep and gets stuck, making the job harder than it has to be.** If felling a “big tree” is the goal, then sure, the sharper the ax (or chain saw!) the better. But splitting mauls are “blunt” for a reason. You just want them to “break through” the hard surface and use their natural size and weight to work for you. The maul is designed and built to split, not cut. A really “sharp” ax sinks in too deeply and gets stuck- often resulting in nothing more than a broken handle and lost opportunities. For the purposes of our illustration, this means keeping things simple, especially initially. Complex topics requiring “sharpness” to deliver or discern are not the best place to begin in personal evangelism. The wonderful thing about the gospel is that its “power to save” can be wielded in the simplest of terms. Paul summed it up in two sentences in 1Corinthians 15:3-5. Points of topical interest are important starting places (cf. Acts 8:30-35), but never forget that the real “power” is the gospel, not your own “sharpness,” 1Corinthians 2:1-5. Give these things some thought, won’t you? (11-18-14)

**Spring Brings Blooms and Lessons**

If you haven’t noticed the extraordinary amount of tissues being used lately (due to pollen/allergies), or the beauty of the Bradford Pear and Red Bud trees beginning to display their bouquets, Spring is upon us. Soil is being turned and tilled for delicate green promises of future goodness. Seeds are being meticulously pushed into what is hoped to be fertile soil. And we’ve had some of those warm, sunny afternoons that make a man think about dusting off his fishing rod, and perhaps buying some “sure thing” lures. You know, the ones that are probably designed more to catch men than fish!

The signs are everywhere, at least to those who long and look for them, for the “renewal” of Spring. Oh sure, we will still have some of those cold fronts that blow through with annoying turbulence as winter fights its inevitable surrender. But as the earliest signs of Spring clarion its coming, there are spiritual lessons to be discerned. The people of Jesus’ day claimed to be able to discern signs and thereby predict the weather. He referenced this in Matthew 16:1-2 to teach them of more important things, *“When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?”*  His point was that those claiming such abilities in regard to purely physical things ought to have more spiritual understanding- perhaps we should also.

When we begin to observe the first hints of Spring, we prepare and plant to have a summer of bountiful harvest. But these things take preparation, planting, tending, and patience to achieve. So too, our “planting” and “harvesting” for the Lord requires the same elements of dedication.

**We have to *“till”* the soil of the hearts of men by living before them lives worthy of emulation.** In other words, we strive to prepare their hearts for the word of God by first “showing” them its fruits in our own lives. After all, if we aren’t willing to practice what we preach, or if what we preach is impotent to produce a bountiful harvest in our lives, why should they listen to us when we tell them about the wondrous power of God’s word? Jesus put it this way: *“Let your lights shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:16) I know I’m “mixing metaphors” (seed, fruit, and harvest vs. shining lights), but hope you get the point.

**But just “tilling the soil” has limited value unless “seed” is actually planted.**  The *“seed”* is the Word of God, cf. Luke 8:11b. God’s power to save is certainly enhanced by godly lives that demonstrate it, but the true power resides in the *“seed”* itself- not in the *foliage* and *flowers* it produces. **This means we must teach people the gospel.** We can’t just give them a good example to admire as one might a flower. We have to put the *“seed”* in their hearts so that it can produce a harvest of salvation in their lives too. It is the *“word* ***implanted*** *which is able to save your* *souls”* (James 1:21b), not someone else’s godly example.

**As all farmers and gardeners know, patience is also required.** When we have properly “tilled” the soil of someone’s heart with a good example, and when we have *“implanted the good seed of the Word of God”* in their hearts, what remains to be done is “tending” and “time.” We have to continue to be concerned about their souls enough to stay involved, and be patient enough to wait for power of the seed to break through the hardened crusts of sin- which often takes time. *“Be patient, therefore, brethren…. Behold the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains.”* (James 5:7)

The changing of the seasons and other wonders of our physical creation can teach us much about our spiritual duties and relationship to God, if we are *longing* and *looking* for the “signs”! (3-25-15)

**Reflections of Spring**

It was simply a gorgeous day- I was “off” work and had vowed not to even turn “on” a computer. Time was right to catch-up on some outside chores at home, and what a beautiful day for it. The birds were flitting around in such a seemingly joyful way that they couldn’t help but sing. The difficulties of winter were finally over. Flowers were exploding into cascading blossoms that filled the air with a sweet but tangy fragrance. It seemed that you could almost see buds bursting forth into unfurling leaves. The soil was again soft, moist, warm, and rich with life. After buying a battery for the lawnmower, there was no doubt about it, Spring was officially in full bloom.

It doesn’t normally take much more than an hour to mow our fairly large yard, but on this occasion I was in no real hurry. The Spring grasses (and weeds!) were thick and wet, and the remaining wild winter rye stems were tough, so I was just easing along on the mower so it would cut smoother. Besides, I was also towing a six-foot steel roller weighted with a couple of pieces of railroad iron to help it flatten out all those gopher mounds and mole runs while I mowed. So, I had plenty of time to enjoy the beauties of God’s creation that were on display all around me.

Mowing has always been good sermon or article thinking time for me. It doesn’t require a lot of concentration to go around in circles that get one width smaller with each pass! So the mind naturally wanders- and if I can get it to wander in the right direction, reflections on God and His creation inevitably sprout. On this particular day, the challenge was not to elicit those types of thoughts, but to limit them- it was just that kind of day! Perhaps they will help you also.

**Spring reflects the *goodness of God.*** Romans 1:20 tells us that God’s *“invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made…”*  God’s *eternal power* is evident within the complexity and symbiotic (interdependent and mutually beneficial relationship) nature of the creation- none of which “just happened by chance.” The eternal power of God made it happen! But, if you think about it, God could have created a monochrome world of varying shades of gray that was capable of sustaining a utilitarian existence for us- but He didn’t. Instead, He gave us a world that not only met all of our essential needs for life, but also exceeded even our wildest imaginations of wondrous beauty and phenomenally intense color. The *goodness* of God’s *divine nature* didn’t just provide us with a world to keep us alive. He gave us a world in which we could really enjoy living by exceeding our aesthetic desires also. Spring manifests the *goodness* of God’s *divine nature!*

**Spring delivers a *witness of God.*** In Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas performed a miracle of healing at Lystra. The pagan people there were so impressed that they began to worship them- giving them names of Greek gods. To refute this and give proper glory to God for the sign, Paul responded with these words, *“And in the generations gone by He* (God) *permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness,”* vv.16-17vv.16-17. The warm rains and sunshine of Spring fuel the *fruitful seasons* of Summer and Fall. These are also evidence of God’s love and provision for all of His creation. They serve as a yearly *witness* to all who look, listen, and learn of God’s enduring endowment to the world.

**Spring *promises the renewal of* *resurrection.*** A couple of years of relative drought have taken their toll on many of the trees here in East Texas. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was trying to figure out the best way to remove a huge Elm tree that had fallen prey to the dry conditions. I sure hated to lose the towering tree, and procrastinated and put off the job. Now it is covered with budding leaves! Spring has amazing powers of resurrection. Though the tree was not truly “dead”- every visible shred of evidence indicated that it was. So too it is with our “death”- it is in reality just a peaceful slumber in which we await the great resurrection through which we will spring to eternal life, cf. John 5:28-29 and 1Corinthains 15. As I marveled at everything “coming to life” again after winter’s slumber, I could not help but reflect on the *renewal of life* at that great day of resurrection! Spring is truly a beautiful witness of God and His goodness if we take time to notice and consider it. (4-19-16)

**The Squirrel’s Fatal Folly**

I haven’t squirrel hunted in years- many years. But I did kill one the other day. It was really more his fault than mine (if I do say so myself!). I was driving east on Myrtle Street. I saw him clearly- he was a big rascal, and even had what appeared to be a huge pecan in his mouth. He darted out in front of my car, but had plenty of time to make it on across the street. But when he saw the car, he froze momentarily. Even after stopping, he still had plenty of time to reach the safety of the roadside. It was the indecision that cost him. Right before he went under the car, he must have changed directions a half a dozen times! Any decision he had made and stuck with would have saved his life. But the indecision and vacillation cost him much more than just his prize pecan!

Sometimes we humans don’t appear much smarter than that squirrel- and for the same reasons. Hesitation, indecision, and vacillation can cost us too. In Genesis 19, Abraham’s nephew Lot, when warned by the angels to take his family and flee from the coming destruction of the wicked city Sodom, was only spared by the *“compassion of the Lord”*. The text says of Lot, *“But he hesitated.”* (v.6) His hesitation almost cost him everything. He had the clear command from God regarding what he should do, but apparently lacked the resolve to be **decisively obedient**.

1Kings 18:21 records an occasion when God’s prophet, Elijah, rebuked Israel for their attempts to serve both God and the Canaanite idol, Baal. He said, *“How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.”* The sad epitaph ensues, *“But the people did not answer him a word.”*  They were so indecisive and ‘wishy-washy’ that they couldn’t, or wouldn’t, even answer the charge.

In addition to these Old Testament examples, the New Testament also has its condemnations of such inabilities. The church at Laodicea was reproached: *“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”* (Revelation 3:15-16) I don’t really mean to be overly graphic, but to put it in plain language, the Lord said that those who can’t seem to make up their minds to be fully committed to Him and His cause “aren’t worth spit,” and would be thus expelled from His Body. The epistle of James refers to this hesitant indecision and vacillation as being *“double-minded”* (1:8; 4:8), and similarly condemns it.

The squirrel’s inability to see the “right” path, make a clear decision to take it, and then faithfully follow through, cost him his life. The same inabilities in humans can cost much more- it can cost us our souls. After the apostle Paul had discussed *righteousness, self-control,* and *the judgment to come* with the wicked Roman Governor, Felix became frightened by these truths, but replied, *“Go away for the present, and when I find time, I will summon you.”* (Acts 24:25). There is no record in the Bible or history that Felix ever obeyed the truth Paul had presented him. Apparently, he was pretty “squirrely”! What about you? *“Therefore, the one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.”* James 4:17 (11-10-10)

**“Study Long, Study Wrong”?**

I remember hearing the admonition, “Study long, study wrong” in a couple of different instances: friends urging me to answer some question in a school class when I was taking too long for their level of patience; and, buddies egging me on to action while I contemplated some (surely juvenile) dare. Perhaps the adage is a derivative of “He who hesitates is lost”- who knows? Regardless of origin, **is “study long, study wrong” actually true?**

**“Yes” in regard to studying the writings and philosophies of men.** Such is probably what the wise man had in mind when he wrote, *“Beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body,”* Ecclesiastes 12:12. By contrast, in the previous two verses he emphasized writing *“words of truth correctly,”* and implied that truly *“wise words of men…are given by one Shepherd.”*  There is just no substitute for the Word of God. In prayer to His Father, Jesus said, *“Thy word is truth,”* John 17:17 (KJV). But, “studying long” the writings and philosophies of men surely leads to *“mere speculation rather than furthering God’s provision which is by faith,”* 1Timothy 1:4, and a *“morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words”* in *“men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth,”* 1Timothy 6:4-5. In this way, “study long, study wrong” is accurate.

**“Yes” in regard to contemplating disobedience to God’s will.** Even when we already know what God expects, sometimes we hesitate. Typically, the delay comes while we contemplate doing something other than what we know God requires. In such cases, knowledge is not the problem- desire is. Our minds know what the “right” thing is, but our hearts “study long” in search of a way to circumvent obedience, or to excuse disobedience. Because we do not *want* to do what God says, we “study long” for reasons to placate the conscious into disobedience. Elijah addressed this issue to God’s people in 1Kings 18:21, *“How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him…”*  Or, as James 4:17 puts it, *“Therefore, to the one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.”*  When we “study long” for ways or reasons to do something other than what God commands, we surely “study wrong!”

**“No” in regard to Bible study.** In the Psalms alone, there are some nineteen admonitions to *“meditate”* on God, His law, His ways, His glory, and ourselves in relation to these things. Clearly, we cannot spend *too much* time or effort in studying God’s Word, or in contemplation of it. The reasons are obvious. *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ,”* Romans 10:17.In benediction to the Ephesian elders, Paul said, *“I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified,”* Acts 20:32. Reading the Word regularly produces familiarity- which is good, but the ability to truly comprehend and *“handle accurately”*  it in application comes only with *diligent* study and contemplation of its truths, 2Timothy 2:15; Acts 17:11. So, “study long, study wrong” is indisputably not accurate relative to our efforts to learn and understand the Bible.

**“No” in regard to hasty decisions made without due consideration.** If we’ve ever said (or thought), “I better go ahead and do this before I have time to think about it,” we’ve probably been blessed with ample opportunities to regret the choice that was made. Society urges, “Follow your heart”- which, unfortunately, often means to give in to your impulsive desires without really thinking through the consequences. There is a reason Paul wrote, *“Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understanding what the will of the Lord is,”* Ephesians 5:15-17. The human heart (the seat of *emotions,* rather than the blood pump) can be impulsive and overrule the logic and rationale of the mind, if allowed to do so. For this reason, we are urged to *“Watch over the heart with all diligence, for from it flow the issues of life,”* Proverbs 4:23. “Study long, study wrong” definitely does not apply to making hasty and impulsive decisions.

It is certainly appropriate to discriminate between the time spent studying the words of men as opposed to the words of God, and a there is surely a time to act quickly and decisively upon what we know to be true from God’s word. But, giving ample and due consideration to God’s word, and to being judicially contemplative rather than impulsive in decision-making is absolutely wise. “Study long, study wrong”? It all depends on the application! (9-16-14)

**Subjective Salvation**

One of the most spiritually destructive tools Satan ever devised, and developed into the thoughts and vernacular of men, was the notion that “It doesn’t really matter what you believe or practice as long as you’re honest and sincere.” I’m sorry to be so blunt, **but of course it matters what you believe, and what you practice!** If it doesn’t, why did God go to all the trouble of inspiring men to write the New Testament? If it doesn’t, why is the New Testament so replete with warnings to, and corrections of, Christians? If it really doesn’t, why did Jude urge us to *“contend earnestly for the faith”* (v.3); why did Paul warn Timothy about the perversion of truth (1Timothy1:6-7; *et al*); and why did Peter spend an entire chapter to help us recognize, identify, and combat false prophets (2Peter 2)?

None of that makes any sense at all if “it doesn’t really matter what you believe and practice as long as you’re honest and sincere.” Honesty and sincerity do not change the wrongness and impotence of either beliefs or practices. A person who honestly and sincerely believes that heading south on highway 69 will get him from Jacksonville to Dallas will never make it there. And a person who honestly and sincerely takes the wrong spiritual road does not arrive in heaven either.

But the underlying culprit in Satan’s destructive deception is the concept of ***subjective salvation***. Since the word “salvation” is pretty clear as to its meaning, let’s concentrate for a moment on the “subjective” part of this pair of terms. “Subjective” refers to an impression or conclusion that is based on someone’s feelings and opinions, rather than on facts and evidence. It is, therefore, necessarily *biased*. “Objective” means pretty much the opposite- that the conclusion or result is based solely on facts and evidence rather than personal feelings and opinions. Therefore, it is necessarily *unbiased.*

Now we’re ready for the question: Is one’s salvation *subjective* or *objective?* That is, is salvation based on the *feelings* and *opinions* of the individual, or is there an external and impartial determining factor? There is no doubt or argument that being saved should make us “feel” certain things and ways, but the crux of the issue is whether or not those feelings are themselves the evidence of salvation.

Let’s go first to biblical history for input. The patriarch Jacob was led by his sons to believe that Joseph, his favorite son, had been killed by wild beasts, cf. Genesis 37:18-33. The deception worked in spite of the fact that Joseph was not at all dead. But Jacob was so convinced of Joseph’s death that *“he refused to be comforted. And he said, ‘Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son’.”* Jacob believed with all his heart (honestly and sincerely was absolutely convinced) that Joseph was dead, and continued to believe so for twenty-two years (cp. Genesis 37:34-35 > 45:26-28). But Joseph was, in fact, alive and well. Jacob was honest and sincere in his beliefs- but he was honestly and sincerely wrong! Though he believed with all of his heart that Joseph was dead, the truth was that he was second-in-command over all of Egypt! This is *subjectivism* plain and simple*.* Jacob’s feelings and flawed impressions led him to believe something that was simply not true, and he thus lived accordingly for years before learning the *objective* truth: Joseph was alive.

So is salvation subjective? Let’s allow the Bible to speak for itself: *“And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.”* (1John 2:3); *“Little children, let no one deceive you, the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil….By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious; anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.”* (1John 3:7-8,10). Through obedience to the Spirit-inspired words of the New Testament, we *“are being led by the Spirit of God…”* and *“The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ…”* (Romans 8:14,16-17). Friends, that is *objective salvation* based on the impartial evidence of obedience in our lives to the Word of God, not *subjective salvation* based on the *biased* feelings of our emotions. Give it some thought, won’t you? It makes a difference eternally. (1-31-12)

***“Talk, Talk, Talk”***

Dr. Stephen R. Covey, famed author of and lecturer on “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,” said, **“You cannot talk yourself out of problems you behave yourself into.”** (Emphasis added, PCS). While I believe Dr. Covey was entirely correct in the “bigger picture view” of personal accountability and growth, the truth of his statement sure doesn’t seem to alter the *modus operandi* for a lot of us! Attempting to “talk our way out of problems” is the standard operating procedure for a world of people who believe saying “I’m sorry” will fix anything and everything. This view is somewhat infantile and very naïve. Proffering an apology and/or a list of excuses meant to either justify our actions, or negate culpability for them, simply does not correct behavioral issues. What we say may mitigate some consequences of our actions in a few cases, but does nothing to correct the underlying problem. While the acknowledgment of responsibility coupled with a sincere apology is absolutely the right starting point, the real solution is changed behavior- not an endless stream of apologies and excuses.

There are a few examples that will well illustrate the principle that we cannot talk ourselves out of problems that have a behavioral cause.

**Broken Promises in Relationships-** We can apologize and attempt to justify or excuse ourselves all we want, but our relationships with friends, children, or even co-workers, bosses, or employees are often irreparably damaged when we fail, or repeatedly fail, to keep our word.

**Broken Trust in Marriage-** One of the most heart-rending questions I have been asked had to do with how to rebuild trust in a marriage once it had been broken by infidelity. Even the truly penitent, who want nothing more than to “go back” to where they were in their marriage before the offence, have to understand that trust cannot be rebuilt with mere words of promise or apology- it takes patient and consistent trustworthy actions.

**Broken Fellowship with Brethren-** While godly brethren are usually eager to forgive and reinstate into fellowship an erring brother or sister who sincerely confesses fault and seeks forgiveness- and rightfully so, the worthiness of that clemency is necessarily proven over time by his continued fruits (actions) of repentance.

But aside from these relational issues, the most important application of the principle that we cannot ***talk***our way out of problems our ***behavior***has caused concerns our salvation- our relationship with God that has been severed by sin (cf. Isaiah 55:8-9). John the Baptist didn’t tell wayward Jews what to ***say*** to return to favor with God, he told them what they needed to ***do****- “Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with your repentance; and do not say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’”* Matthew 3:8-9. On the day of Pentecost, those convicted of having killed the Messiah didn’t ask what to ***say***, but what to ***do*** to be forgiven of their guilt of sin. They asked, *“Brethren, what shall we do?”* in Acts 2:37, and were told to, *“Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins…”* in v.38. Saul of Tarsus, that feared persecutor of the early church, when he became aware that he was fighting against rather than for God, was not told what to *say,* but what to *do.* He had spent three days *saying* prayersthrough which heundoubtedly sought guidance and forgiveness, but when the Lord’s prophet Ananias came, he simply told him what he needed to ***do***- *“And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord,”* Acts 22:16.

None of these examples are given to minimize the importance of confessing sin, or saying, “I’m sorry for my sin”- either to others, or to God. These are certainly good and proper initial steps. But they are provided to further emphasize the point that problems or situations caused by ***behavior*** (in this case, “sin”) have solutions that involve more than just *talk*- they require **action.** Biblical, saving faith is not accomplished with *words,* but *actions,* James 2:14-17. True understanding and wisdom is not demonstrated by what we *say,* but what we *do,* James 3:13. And *“pure and undefiled religion”* is not the result of our *words,* but the *practice* of God’s Word, James 1:26-27! Now, are you trying to ***talk*** your way out of the rightful consequences of your **behavior,** or are you willing rebuild proper relationships with God and others by consistently and faithfully ***doing*** the right things? (8-23-13)

***Talking Back* to God**

In the time, place, and circumstance in which I grew up, *talking back* (aka, *back-talking*) to one’s parents, or any other adult for that matter, just wasn’t done… at least not without swiftly-rendered and soon-regretted consequences. *Murmuring* or *grumbling* something in return after a parent (again, or *any other adult*) meted out a punishment, prohibition, or prescribed course of action to be taken was considered to be one of the highest insults and lowest forms of “lack of respect for your elders.” It was NEVER considered “cute,” or regarded as a social or mental disorder deserving compassion and treatment (at least not of the *medical* variety). Because of this prevailing attitude and uniform “treatment” of such violations, almost all children quickly learned that “Yes Sir” and “Yes Ma’am” were not just the right reply *words,* they were the right response *attitude.*

However, this regard for adults did not necessarily transfer to the higher forms of respect for authority. The same individuals who learned and practiced respect for and to their elders as children did not always manifest the same toward the laws of God as adults. Then as now, men who learned not to *talk back* to their parents, were willing to *talk back* to God. Such is, by no means, a new phenomenon…

Isaiah warned against such, *“Woe to one who quarrels with his Maker- an earthenware vessel among the vessels of the earth! Will the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you doing?’ Or the thing you are making say, ‘He has no hands?’ Woe to him who says to a father, ‘What are you begetting?’ Or to a woman, ‘To what are you giving birth?’”* Isaiah 45:9-10.

Job boldly said he wanted to *“argue with God”* and *“argue my ways before Him”* when speaking to his friends,Job 13:3,15; but quickly changed his tune when actually presented with the opportunity by the Almighty, *“Then the Lord answered Job and said, ‘Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it.’ Then Job answered the Lord and said, ‘Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to Thee? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; even twice, and I will add no more,’”* Job 40:3-5.

Surely we can see the folly of such, and discern the wisdom of Proverbs 21:30, *“There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord.”* Consider the question of Romans 9:20 *personally,* *“…who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?”* I’m afraid that is sometimes just what we do…

**When we become Yeahbutters.** When we either are confronted with what already know, or become more recently informed of some portion of what God’s Word says that contradicts our desires or actions, and yet reply, “Yeah, but….” it doesn’t matter what follows. Such is just a flimsy excuse proffered in a feeble attempt to justify NOT doing what God says. Whenever we seek to do something *other* than what God said, we are, in essence, talking back to God, cp. Isaiah 40:8.

**When we become Butwhatabouters.** As *Yeahbutters* usually want to do *less* than what God’s word requires, *Butwhatabouters* often want to do *more* than God’s Word provides (or allows). Though we seldom realize it at the time, we are in essence declaring that we know more, or better, than God does when we seek to *“exceed what is written,”* cf. 1Corinthians 4:6. Again, when we endeavor to use *“the wisdom of the world”* in this way, we forget that God has made such *“foolishness,”* cf. 1Corinthians 3:18-20.

Whenever you are tempted to *talk back* to God because His way does not coincide with your wants and desires, remember 1Peter 5:6-7, *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you.”*  Talking back to parents (the ones who made us) is never a good thing, but how much more problematic it is to do so to Him who made all things! (10-18-17)

**Taunting**

When it comes to watching television, I watch mostly sports, old movies, and some science or nature programing- but sports probably gets the lion’s share of my TV-viewing time. This is probably because I enjoyed playing sports as a youngster. The school I attended growing up was too small (and poor!) for football, but I played just about everything else that was offered. Thus, basketball and baseball were mainstays. Nonetheless, I enjoy watching baseball, basketball, and football (especially college).

There is, however, one thing that really frustrates me (besides commercials, which I avoid like the plague!): why do athletes at seemingly every level now feel the need to ***taunt*** the opposition? Back when sports were supposed to teach something besides “winning” and “making more money,” sportsmanship, teamwork, integrity, respect, and fair-play were lessons that were always emphasized in and through the games and practices. And so, the image of a safety standing over a downed receiver after a “big hit,” or power forward mouthing off and gesturing to one on whom he has just “dunked,” or a tailback or wide-out doing some sort of “touchdown dance celebration,” is just plain repulsive. These things are all about self-aggrandizement, and undermine the very definition of the word “sportsmanship.” At least some seem to agree, since this kind of behavior occasionally draws a penalty or technical foul.

Glorying in the defeat of an enemy, which is really what “taunting” is all about, is not just repulsive to me, it is distasteful to God. Job understood this. Consider his words recorded in Job 31:29-30, *“Have I rejoiced at the extinction of my enemy, or exulted when evil befell him? No, I have not allowed my mouth* ***to sin…****”* Job seems to comprehend that God does not delight in the demise of the ungodly (cf. Ezekiel 18:23,32), and that neither should we rejoice in the humbling, or catastrophic demise of our enemies. Jonah, however, did not get this point.

God had sent Jonah to preach to Nineveh, the great city of the Assyrians. The Assyrians were fierce and brutal people whom Jonah considered to be *an,* if not *the,* enemy. And yet, God knew the Assyrians also had souls which needed saving, cf. John 4:10-11. So, Jonah was sent to preach to them- but he didn’t want to, and tried to flee to avoid it. Even after he was “convinced” (by a God-sent storm and great fish) to preach to the Ninevites, and they responded in repentance and obedience, Jonah still wasn’t happy. In fact, he was just plain mad about it, cf. Jonah 4:1ff. He even went outside of the city, built himself a shelter, and sat down under it to wait *“until he could see what would happen in the city,”* 4:5b. He was still hoping God would destroy them after all, and then he could “taunt” (rejoice over the demise of) his perceived enemies!

There are some athletes, certainly in the minority, who congratulate their opponent on a good tackle, or a nice shot, or a great play, and then line up and go again. They seem to understand that it is, after all, only a game, and that there are “bigger” issues at stake than personal glory or success. What refreshing sportsmanship, and I applaud them for their attitude and conduct! But I can’t help but wonder, when the “wrong” lessons are instead being learned and exhibited in sports, if they are influencing our cultural mindset with regard to how we treat perceived enemies and opponents? After all, sports are just sports (or at least are supposed to be), but life is life. If we can’t figure out how to properly treat one another when we “play,” how will we possibly do so in real-world, real-life situations? Are we really that different from old Jonah?

Jesus crystalized this required godly attitude in Matthew 5:44, *“love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”* If we have a real enemy (besides Satan, cf. Ephesians 6:11-12), or even a perceived one, wouldn’t Jesus’ words require us to at least treat them with respect, and genuinely desire “good” for them? And if we do this, are they really still an “enemy”- at least from our perspective? If we can’t love and treat well those who don’t love and treat us well, we can’t be children of God, Matthew 5:45-48. Obviously, these things are much more important than “good sportsmanship” in an athletic contest, but, if you can’t enjoy the game without abusing and debasing your opponent, please take up Solitaire! (11-20-12)

**Thankfulness and Contentment**

Donna and I were watching an old movie together on a rainy day once when an advertisement came on for a major department store. At the end of the commercial, I noted that they would open at 8 PM on Thanksgiving Day. I asked Donna when they would close if they opened that late. She said they probably wouldn’t close- that they would likely be open all night heading into the follow day’s shopping frenzy. Then it hit us: Isn’t it amazing that we spend a few hours being “thankful” for what we have, then we can’t wait to finish up our “Thanksgiving” so we can rush out, compete (and sometimes fight, from what I understand), and run ourselves crazy in a feeding frenzy of shopping to get more stuff? Does this seem at least somewhat ironic, if not downright hypocritical to anyone else? (And just for the record, we tend to avoid crowds {except at church services!} - especially the piranha-type ones on “Big Sale” days.)

True thankfulness is linked in the Scriptures to contentment. There are a couple of N.T. passages that emphasize the importance of ***contentment****-* being satisfied (and happy) with what God has given us, see Philippians 4:11-13 and 1Timothy 6:6-8. It is **not** coincidental that both of these passages are preceded in their contexts by verses that emphasize the importance of ***thanksgiving****-* obviously, being appreciative to God in prayer*.*  Please note Philippians 4:6, *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication* ***with thanksgiving*** *let your requests be made known to God,”* and also, 1Timothy 2:1, *“First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and* ***thanksgivings****, be made on behalf of all men…”.*  The point is that unless we are **first** *thankful* for what we have, we will never enjoy the true blessing of *contentment.*  And, if we don’t, we may continue “going through the motion” of being thankful, but will never reach contentment, which is really at least part of the point.

Please don’t misunderstand. I’m not suggesting that looking forward to and going shopping after Turkey-Day festivities is wrong, I’m just wanting us to stop and think for a moment or two about a couple of significant questions. “Are you/I really ‘thankful’ for the blessings God gives us?” And, “Have we learned the lessons of ‘contentment’ that deepen our thankfulness into true appreciation and trust?”

If you’re not sure whether or not you are truly thankful for and content with God’s blessings, consider 1Timothy 6:8 ***personally,*** *“And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.”*  What if *“food”* meant simply *something to eat,* instead of “turkey with all the trimmings” and every kind of side dish and dessert imaginable? And, what if *“covering”* meant *clothes on your back* and/or *a roof over your head*, instead of a new “thanksgiving outfit” and a $100,000 home furnished to the hilt? Would you still be “content” then? Could you be “thankful” then? Are these fair questions? Perhaps not, but they are questions we probably all would do well to soberly consider.

Think one step further with me. Matthew 6:33 says that if we *“seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,”* that all these things (food, drink, covering) *“will be added to you.”*  Do we really believe that? Do we really trust God enough to do what He said- to have Him and spiritual matters truly as the first and primary focus of our lives? Or, do we instead spend most of our time, energy, efforts, and concern on providing these essentials for ourselves? Even to the point that we push aside spiritual matters because we’re “too busy” with the material pursuits? Such surely isn’t trust, faith, contentment, or thankfulness.

God has surely blessed most of us far beyond our *needs* even to our *wants,* if not our *luxuries.* Let’s be content with whatever He has given us to the point of being truly thankful by putting Him first in our lives. (11-16-16)

**The Triumph of Good over Evil**

God is certainly in control of human events and history to the degree that He chooses. The Scriptures indicate that there were times when He chose to intervene, such as the Tower of Babel, Genesis 11:1-9; and times when He chose not to intervene, such as the (then) *“generation gone by”* when *“He permitted all the nations to go their own ways,”* Acts 14:16. For humans living in these times- whether *past* or *present*, it can be difficult to know whether God is *controlling* or *allowing* things to unfold as they do to paint the eventual picture of history. The tragic events in Paris a few days ago, and many others like them, remind us that most of what occurs on the timeline of human history is beyond our capability to comprehend, much less control. But God is in control, and whether He choses to dictate or allow certain events- regardless of how we view them, **good triumphs over evil!**

**Good triumphs over evil *now.*** It is not the “human spirit” that makes such possible. It is the “divine spirit” within humanity that allows good to triumph over evil. No individual, or group of them, is made “better” by allowing the spirit of evil to dominate their thoughts, emotions, intentions, or actions. It is only through allowing the goodness of God to be manifested in our thoughts, emotions, intentions, and actions that good triumphs over evil **now**. Think about it:

* Doesn’t faith triumph over disbelief **now**? One who believes in nothing has nothing for which to live. How can such a life be considered “triumphant” in any way?
* Doesn’t hope triumph over despair **now**? One who hopes in nothing has nothing for which to live. A hopeless existence is a miserable one!
* Doesn’t love triumph over hate **now**? One who loves nothing has nothing for which to live. A life without love, and dominated by hate, surely must be the epitome of hell on earth!

Can we not see that having *faith* in God, *hope* in the future He promises, and *love* for His ways is the only way to have any meaning in life **now**? This is what is meant by 1Corinthians 13:13, *“But* ***now*** *abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest is love.”* The triumph of good over evil **now** is dependent upon our ability to have and practice true *faith,* to have and live by true *hope,* and to have and manifest true *love* according to God’s definitions and expectations of them.

Additionally, can we not see that atheism- whether espoused openly or practiced covertly (by simply not truly believing and faithfully following the God of the Bible), is responsible for the horrors of the world in which we **now** live? Many have said it many times in many ways- evil only triumphs over good when those who presume themselves “good” allow it by not being truly good! When we redefine “good” as being less than what God calls “good,” evil will predominate **now** despite the inherent potency of good to prevail. *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,”* Romans 12:21.

**Good triumphs over evil *eternally.*** The overriding message of the last book of the Bible, Revelation, is that in the end, **good triumphs over evil**. Satan, as the author of evil, is cast into the everlasting fires of torment along with those who believe and follow him, Revelation 20:10; 21:8. While Jesus- the Lamb of God and Savior of the world, gathers unto God and the eternal glories of heaven those who believe and follow Him, Revelation 21:1-7. So, even if the mass of humanity allows evil to triumph over good **now**- by choosing evil, in all its forms and degrees, over the purity of good as defined by God, ultimately good will triumph over evil **eternally**!

Given these things, the paramount questions become obvious. Will you choose and practice good over evil **now** that faith, hope, and love may prevail in your life? Or, will you choose evil and allow it to prevail to produce disbelief, despair, and hate? The triumph of good over evil **now** is dependent upon and must begin with you and me. God has determined and dictated which will prevail **eternally** between good and evil- both for you and me as individuals, as well as overall for everyone and everything. Make no mistake about it- good **will** triumph over evil eternally. Which will it be for you **now**? *“Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you nor forsake you,”* Deuteronomy 31:6! (12-4-15)

**The Compromise of Theistic Evolution**

The evolutionary mantra seems to be that no matter how far-fetched a theory might be, if you proclaim it loud and long enough, people will believe it. They began attracting youngsters with fascinating tales of dinosaurs that lived millions of years ago, and the evolutionary time-table for the age of the earth has ballooned exponentially since. The question many fail to ask is: “Why does the age of the earth keep increasing in evolutionary models?” The answer is simple. Timeis the only variable in the hypothesis. They start with **matter**, which despite their claims to the contrary, they must believe to be eternal (it had to come from somewhere, and could not create itself), and add **energy** (again from some source), to arrive at **life**. Then that single-celled life supposedly evolved into all living things now present. The only factor that placates the ridiculousness of this theory is **time**. They seem to think that if you just add enough time, anything is possible.

But the real problem I would like to address is that Creationists (those who believe in the Genesis account of creation) are being influenced by purported scientific data that says earth has been around for billions of years (13.7 currently). Though the Bible is not given to us for chronological purposes, there are some very credible and logical calculations made from it which indicate that the earth is 6015 years old (creation in 4004 B.C. {Julian calendar} + 2011 years since). [If you’re interested in these calculations see James Ussher’s work, *Annals;* p.17; and *The Chronology of the Old Testament*, by Dr. Floyd Nolan Jones, pp.26-29.] The stark contrast between the biblical and scientific numbers for the age of the planet has caused many Bible-believers to be conflicted. School and science says one thing, and the Word of God says something very different- which are they to believe? Don’t let Romans 3:4 escape you, *“Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar”!*

So, how does the Christian deal with these conflicts? Some have retreated to the apostate position of compromising their belief in the biblical account with supposed scientific data. Specifically, the compromise is called “Theistic Evolution.” Perhaps oversimplified, “Theistic Evolution” states that: either God provided the “spark” which ignited the Big Bang, and then evolution proceeded from there; or that God created rudimentary life, and then allowed it to evolve over billions of years during the “Creation Period” of Genesis 1 & 2. Essential to this last theory is the concept of “Time Gaps” between the stated “days of creation” in the Genesis account. These “Time Gaps” would allow for billions of years to occur between each of the days of creation. The problem with the first theory is that it completely dismisses the biblical account. And the problem with the second theory is that it fails to notice a couple of key pieces of evidence from the Bible. If you look carefully at Genesis 1, you will notice that after each of the “days” of creation, it says *“there was evening and morning,”* cf. vv.5,8,13,19,23,31. At the conclusion of each of these creation events, the days are numbered one through six. Question: What sense does it make to specify *“evening and morning,”* and to number the “days” if billions of years elapsed between them? None. Furthermore, the whole “Time Gap” theory is completely dispelled in Exodus 20:11, *“For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”* Now what sense did it make for God to command a day of rest on the seventh day of the week for Jews to commemorate the six-day creation of the world if, in fact, it took billions of years to accomplish? Absolutely none!

Christian, don’t retreat into the apostate compromise of “Theistic Evolution”- believe God and His word. Also understand two things very clearly. First, the scientists who perform these dating tests take some very large “leaps of faith” in the assumptions they make to calculate the evolutionary model numbers for the age of the planet. And second, if God can speak light into existence three days before creating the sun (cf. Gen.1:3-5 > 14-19), and if He can create from dust a **mature** man (and He did both), then He can also create a **mature** earth! God said in 1Corinthians 1:19, *“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.”* (5-11-11)

**Being Saved Like the Thief on the Cross**

There were three crosses on Golgotha’s hill just before the Jewish feasts of Unleavened Bread and Passover in 33 A.D.- the cross of ***Redemption****,* the cross of ***Rebellion****,* and the cross of ***Repentance****.*  On the cross of *Redemption* was crucified the Son of God, whose death was the propitiatory sacrifice for all of mankind. Beside Him was the cross of *Rebellion* on which hung a robber who railed and mocked Jesus even as they both suffered the agonies of death. But on the other side of Christ was a man who, though also a robber (Mark 15:27 NASV, Romans did not typically crucify petty thieves; the word probably indicates violence, cp. Luke 10:30), turned his cross into one of repentance. When his cohort in crime castigated Jesus, he defended the Messiah while confessing his sin, *“Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong,”* Luke 23:41. And then his heart of repentance was manifested when he turned to Jesus and said, *“Jesus, remember me when you come in Your kingdom!”* Where and when this thief had come to knowledge of and subsequent faith in Jesus and His kingdom is not specified- but he obviously possessed them both. Thus, his knowledge, faith, confession, and repentance prompted Jesus to utter those blessed words, *“Today you shall be with me in Paradise.”*

Many today hang their hopes of salvation on this wonderful example of repentance. They want to be saved “just like the thief on the cross.” By this they usually mean without baptism, or any other “work” of salvation. But there is a problem with this desire- actually a few of them. Please consider the following.

**1. Jurisdiction.** The “thief on the cross” lived under the jurisdiction of the Law given at Mt. Sinai- the Law of Moses. It was God’s law for the Jewish people only (Exodus 20:2,22; 24:1-18) from that time until Christ’s Law (the Gospel) became effective after His death, Romans 7:1-7; Colossians 2:14. **This law of God did not require baptism,** thus Jesus did not require baptism of him for salvation.

**2. Chronology.** During His life, Jesus had taught the essentiality of baptism for salvation, cf. John 3:3-5. This, like all other parts of His Law- the gospel, were taught in *preparation* for the time they would become *of force.* But, He did not issue the *command* requiring everyone to *believe* andbe *baptized* until **after** His death, burial, and resurrection, Mark 16:9-16. The Hebrews writer makes it clear that Jesus’ law, His *testament*, became effective only after His death, Heb.9:16-17ff. Therefore, Christ’s command for all to believe and be baptized for salvation did not become “law” until the inception of His kingdom and law **after** His death (on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2). Thus**,** the thief on the cross died roughly fifty days **before** Christ’s law requiring baptism became effective.

**3. Elements.** Most everyone who wants to be saved “just like the thief on the cross,” in addition to not being aware of the two points above, have not considered exactly what all was entailed in this man’s salvation. He had ***knowledge*** of who and what Jesus was, otherwise he would not have appealed to Him for salvation, John 8:24. He had ***faith*** (which is always based on knowledge from God, cf. Romans 10:17) that Jesus had the ability to provide his petition otherwise he would not have appealed to Him, Hebrew 11:6. He ***confessed*** his own sin and the rightfulness of his punishment, as well as Jesus’ future position as *King,* otherwise he would not have appealed to Him, Romans 10:9-10. He ***defended*** Jesus to others in obviously difficult circumstances, Matthew 10:32-33. But, and don’t overlook this one, he also was ***literally*** and ***agonizingly crucified for his sins!***

Under Christ’s law, the *crucifixion of the flesh* is accomplished by putting to death our *“old self”* by being *“buried with Christ”* through baptism that we might rise to walk a resurrected life, Romans 6:3-7. This method, and not to put too fine a point on it, is much better than being nailed to cross, hung up in the sun for all the world to see and ridicule, and having your legs broken after several hours of horrific pain so that you suffocated to death! Now, are you sure you still want to be saved “like the thief on the cross”? Or, wouldn’t you rather just believe and be baptized like Christ commanded? (6-11-13)

**Think, Act, and *Then* Feel**

The experience of “getting the cart before the horse” has taught us that there is often a proper if not essential order to things that must be observed to fully benefit from them. This is true with regard to how the constituent elements of our *physical* being work in concert to determine our conduct. Think about the following carefully, please….

Do your ***feelings*** dictate your actions, and then your thoughts have to try to rationalize what has already been done?

Do your ***actions*** simply *react* to stimuli without really thinking or feeling anything- at least until afterwards? Or,

Do your ***thoughts*** determine your actions, and your feelings then emanate from them?

Obviously, we all function in all of these various ways from time to time. There are occasions when we react *emotionally* without really thinking through the consequences. There are other times when we simply act *impulsively* without any real emotional or intellectual incentive. But hopefully, there are also times when we act only after *deliberate consideration.*  While we may not be able to completely divorce our thought processes from *emotional* influences- nor should we necessarily, it is important that our heads come first in the “chain of command” to determine our actions rather than our hearts. Why is this true?

Hearts, and the emotions that come from them, are fickle things. They often vacillate widely from one extreme to the other, usually from temporary and external influences. “Following ones’ heart” thus often becomes a very winding road with many switchbacks and complete course changes. To illustrate this point, think of small children. One moment they’re crying almost uncontrollably, and the next they’re giggling equally uncontrollably. Why? They are immature, and are thus easily influenced by temporary and external motivations. This is exactly how they should function since they are, after all, children. But as we mature, the intellect is supposed to gradually take over the controlling influence of our activities from our emotions. Cognitive and reasoning skills should begin to override purely emotional decisions, which are really reactions rather than decisions anyway. This process is called “maturation,” or more simply, “growing up.”

These things have specific application value in our spiritual growth and development. Consider Jesus’ words of Matthew 5:39, *“But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.”*  First, please understand that a *“slap”* is an insult, not an attack on personal safety. But more importantly, who is able to fulfill Jesus command? Is it the person whose emotions dictate their reaction to a personal affront, or the one whose deliberate thought considers the ultimate good of all concerned before reacting? The first is a purely emotional reaction born of spiritual immaturity that will likely return *“evil for evil,”* see v.38; while the latter is a thoughtful reaction born of spiritual maturity which provides testimony to the offender and glory to God, see vv.40-48.

Look at another application from James 1:19, *“This you know, my beloved brethren. But let every one be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”* If we are spiritually immature, we might be inclined to react to this verse with, “I can’t do that- it’s just not who I am; I just say what’s in my heart, and if others don’t like it, that’s just tough.” But again, let’s think this verse through a bit before discounting it as an impossible goal. First, God says, *“be quick to hear.”* This involves a readiness to not only listen, but to hear and consider. Such implies thoughtful consideration of what is heard, rather than an immediate emotional reaction to it. Second, God says to be, *“slow to speak.”* This hesitancy to instantaneously respond to what has been heard gives the brain, which typically functions a little slower and more cautiously than the heart, time to process and digest what has been said so that an intelligent (rather than emotional) and productive response can be given. And third, God says to be, *“slow to anger.”*  While anger might indeed be the righteous response to what has been *heard,* such should only come *slowly* after careful deliberation has been given to not only what was actually said, but also to what actually should be said in response. Thus, the *emotion* should follow the *thought* and the *action,* rather than precede them.

If we can learn to put our emotions **after** thoughtful consideration and appropriate action, we will be a lot more pleasing and productive in the kingdom because we will have spiritually “grown up.” We’ll feel better too because the right “horse” (of our intellect) will be pulling the cart of our activities instead of them being pushed by the “mule” of our emotions! (3-12-14)

**Thinking, Feeling, and Doing Right**

We humans have three major *physical* parts: the *“thinking”* part (intellect); the *“feeling”* part (emotion); and the *“doing”* part (body). [I’m excepting the *spiritual* part, the soul, for the purposes of this particular article.] We usually refer to them as the mind, the heart, and the body. The New Testament recognizes these distinctions, but sometimes also utilizes the “heart” as the seat of the intellect, Mark 2:8 *“And immediately Jesus, perceiving in His spirit that they were reasoning**that way within themselves, said to them, ‘Why are you* ***reasoning about these things in your hearts?’”*** Jesus here said they “reasoned” in their “hearts”- rather than in/with their “minds.” However, in other places the emotional and intellectual seats are kept distinct from one another, Phil.2:7, *“And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”* By listing the heart and the mind separately the distinction between them can be discerned. Now that we have that out of the way, the main point is still that we are made of three distinct parts: the **mind**, the **heart**, and the **body**- so far so good.

The trouble comes in when we use the wrong part for the wrong thing. For instance, some people (usually men) are accused of “thinking” with their bodies. That is, their physical desires take over their “thinking.” This is not good. Our minds are supposed to do our thinking- not our bodies, or any particular part of them. When the physical part of who we are dominates our thoughts and actions rather than intellect, problems are sure to result. Our bodies are supposed to *influence* our thoughts and actions, not take them over. Our stomach growls so the mind thinks, “It’s time to eat.” This is normal, natural, and necessary. But if the stomach takes over the thought processes we become gluttonously addicted to food.

Likewise, if our emotions dominate our thinking we are also sure to make mistakes. For instance, how many of us have trusted someone with our hearts that our heads said not to trust? And how did that work out for you? Me too! The problem was we were thinking with the wrong part. We let our feelings and emotions overrule our intellect. But at the same time, it must be noted that if our “thinking” is not influenced by our emotions, we become cold, calculating, and tyrannical. Just like our mind has to listen to our body while not being dominated by it, we have to listen to our heart without being overcome by emotion in our thinking. Otherwise, we might become an “emotional basket case.”

What’s the point? There are a couple of points to be discerned from these things. First, we need to use the appropriate part to do our thinking. We can’t think properly with our bodies or our hearts- we have to use our heads. Second, God wants “all” of who we are to understand, love, and obey Him. We can’t use just our heads, for then devotion to Him will only become merely academic (the problem in Athens, Acts 17:19-23). We can’t just use our hearts, for then our feelings will likely lead us away from rather toward God (the problem of Paul’s Hebrew countrymen highlighted in Rom.10:2-3). And we can’t just use our bodies, for then we wind up devoted to ourselves rather than to God (which makes us God’s enemy as in Phil.3:18-19).

Instead we must *believe* with our minds based on evidence that God is, Heb.11:6a. And we must *trust* with our hearts that God will reward those who *obey* Him with their bodies, Heb.11:6b. Folks, that is exactly how Heb.11:6 defines “faith”- *belief* in the mind, *trust* in the heart, and *obedience* with the body. That kind of faith surely saves. Are you using your *mind, heart,* and *body* in faith to the salvation of your *soul* (that *spiritual* part we didn’t really discuss, but that we all know exists)? We have to use the right part for the right thing to get to where God wants us to be you know! (4-8-11)

**Three-Fronted War**

Those recognizing the sovereignty of, and pledging allegiance to, the God of the Universe are sometimes biblically described in military terms, such as a *“soldier,”* *“armor,”* and *“war/warfare.”*  In keeping with the analogy, they’re urged to take up a soldier’s mantra and methods. For instance:

* 2Timothy 2:3-4, *“Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.”*
* Ephesians 6:10, *“Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.”*
* 2Corinthians 10:3-4, *“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.*

However, understand that this particular *war* is composed of at least **three distinct battlefronts…**

***Personal-* the Battle for Self.** Each Christian soldiermust first wage spiritual war for his own soul. Paul described this fight in Romans 7:13-24. Note a few excerpts from this text, *“For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate…. for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good the good that that I wish, I do not do; but I do practice the very evil that I do not wish.”* Every Christian soldier feels this way at times. We feel as if we’re losing on this most-important front. But remember two critical things: 1) as long as you feel this way, you haven’t lost yet- you’re still fighting and haven’t surrendered; and, 2) you’re not alone- Jesus is fighting with you and for you, Romans 7:24-25! You also have battle buddies in your own local church company ready to step into the fray with you at a moment’s notice, cf. Galatians 6:1-2, if you’ll call for backup and let them know you’re in trouble and need help. So, armyourself according to Ephesians 6:11-17, and then *“…be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might,”* Ephesians 6:10. Your soul is worth the fight!

***Kingdom-* the Battle for Church.** Each Christian *soldier* must also wage spiritual war for the souls of his company- the local church of which he is a member. In attitude and activity he must *“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; and give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord,”* Romans 12:10-11. He does *“nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind”* he regards his fellow-soldiers *“as more important than himself,”* and doesn’t merely look out for his *“own personal interests, but also for the interests of others,”* Philippians 2:3-4. His kindred spirit and fellowship with his fellow soldiers leads him to answer the age-old question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” with a resounding, “Yes, with every fiber of my being and all the strength I can muster because I love him!” Hear two passages regarding these things. *“We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren,”* 1John 3:16. And, *“See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal,”* Hebrews 12:15-16. The souls of your fellow-soldiers are worth the fight!

***Dominion-* the Battle for Souls.** And finally, each Christian soldier must wage spiritual war for the souls of others. Beyond our own souls, and those of our fellow-soldiers, the souls of others- even those actively fighting for the opposition forces, are just as valuable. This is why the *“blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords”* said, *“love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you,”* cf. 1Timothy 6:15; Matthew 5:44. Assuredly, this is the most difficult of all battlefronts. It is one thing to wage spiritual warfare, even to the death, for our own or the souls of our fellow soldiers, but it is quite another to be willing to love enough fight and lay down our lives for the souls of those actively opposed to us! But isn’t this exactly the legacy let us by our Lord? To borrow from His words in Matthew 16:26, what will we give in exchange for the souls of others? Are we willing to love sufficiently to battle for their souls? True soldiers of the cross do just that because the souls of others are worth the fight!

So, fight *“the good fight”* for the souls of others, finish *“the course”* you began as soldier yourself, and keep *“the faith”* by helping your fellow-soldiers to final victory, cf. 2Timothy 4:7. It is a three-fronted battle, but through God’s mighty power you can and must win! (5-9-17)

**“Time”**

There are many characteristics and attributes that make a clear distinction between “man” and “beast”.  Obviously, and perhaps most importantly, “man” was created *“in the image of God,”* Genesis 1:26, and thus possesses qualities that separate him from the animal kingdom.  And from that same passage, it should also be noted that man was given *“dominion”* to *“rule over”* all the animals that God placed upon the earth He had fashioned.  But one of the often-overlooked distinctions between humans and the lower forms of life God created is the concept of “time.”

Certainly many animals have a sense of the changing seasons.  And they respond according to their instilled natures by making various preparations accordingly.  Some build shelters, others fly or migrate to different climes as a natural response to the passing of time and the changing seasons.  But what animals lack, in comparison to humans, is the ability to appreciate time– to gauge it, to calculate it year by year, decade by decade, century by century.  They do not possess the ability to truly “redeem the time” as Paul commanded of the Ephesians (cf.5:16) by using it to combat “evil” and prepare for eternity.  Animals only know how to prepare for the coming season, not eternity.  They have no concept of time in that way.  Indeed, “eternity” is a difficult concept for us humans.  When everything in our world seems to be so bound and controlled by time, we have problems comprehending a “timeless” existence.

But thankfully, we don’t have to fully grasp “eternity” to prepare for it.  So how do we prepare for a timeless existence?  Through the proper use of our given time, of course!   Please note these points and passages in that connection:

* **James 4:13-14**  *“Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.”*  Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.”   The point?  **We must understand that “time” is not guaranteed.**  Therefore the time we have is “now” and must be used wisely.  Maybe in this sense at least, we should be more like the animals by not worrying so much about “tomorrow”- cf. Matthew 6:25-26.
* **Acts 24:25-25**  *“But as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said, “Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you.”*  We often say that we will do certain things, “When I find the time.”  **Time is really not “found” at all– it is appropriated.**  We all have the same amount of time: 24 hours every day that we continue to live.  We just appropriate it differently.  When we become too much like the animals, we expend all our time just living.  There ceases to be a higher purpose to our existence beyond survival and carnality.
* **Galatians 4:4**   *“But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law…”*  There is a *“fullness”* of time that is determined by God.  It is He who determines what the “right time” (cf. Romans 5:6) is for death, or for any other happening.  **We do not know what the “right time” is for our life, or lives, to end– but God does.**  Whether the cessation of time for each of us as individuals, or collectively at “the end of all things,”  God alone has the right of determination.  But we do know this: it will be neither too soon nor too late– it will be the “right time.”  We must therefore be ever prepared.
* **Galatians 6:9**  *“Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.”  We typically lose heart in our doing good when we think it isn’t “paying enough.”* **The due time of reaping our rewards is not now.  It is when “time” is no more.** We live in an “instant gratification” world.  Thus we sometimes become impatient God.  We don’t understand why seemingly “bad things” to happening to us “good people.”  God never promised that this life and time was either fair or rewarding.  “This life” is not about “this life”- it’s about the rewards of the “next life.”  So don’t *lose heart* in your *doing of good* when we feel you’re not being rewarded in a *timely* fashion.  The time of reward is not yet *“due.”*

If we’ll read and understand what God tells us about “time,” we’ll be much happier and productive in our *“time upon the earth,”* and will be rewarded with a *timeless* future in heaven with God that is far beyond our present comprehension. (11-1-10)

**Tithing in the New Testament**

There are many Old Testament passages that command and/or exemplify tithing. Some, such as Gen.14:18-20, predated the giving of the Law of Moses- but were superseded by it.

Overwhelmingly, most O.T. references to tithing were given to the nation of Israel through the Law of Moses. This Law was given only to the Israelites, cf. Ex.20:1-2ff, and was never intended for anyone but Israel. However, this Law system was made obsolete by the cross of Christ, Heb.8:6-13; 9:1-17; 10:1-10; Col.2:13-17. It, like the *patriarchal* laws given to Abraham and those living prior to the Law of Moses, was superseded by God’s next law system- the *“will of Christ,”* the New Testament. Given that the New Testament is God’s law for all people since the cross of Christ, we need to see what it has to say about tithing to get to the heart of the matter.

There are a few passages which mention *tithing* in the New Testament: Matthew 23:23 (and the parallel in Luke 11:4); Luke 18:1; and Hebrews 7:8-9. But carefully note these passages:

* Matthew 23:23 (Luke 11:4) and Luke 18:1 were statements by Jesus either to or about Jews who were still living under the Law of Moses because they were still prior to His crucifixion.
* And Hebrews 7:8-9 is referencing a time under the *Patriarchal* period (prior to the Law of Moses) in order to show the authority and efficacy of Christ’s priesthood, not tithing.

That’s it. That’s all the New Testament has to say about the Old Testament command and practice relative to tithing. **So, is it acceptable for a New Testament Christian to *tithe* (give a tenth of his income to the Lord)? Absolutely! Is it required? Not by any New Testament command, example, or approved apostolic example.**  For instance, note carefully that the New Testament passages that deal with *giving* fail to mention tithing:

* Acts 2:44-47; 4:32 – 5:11 Wouldn’t this have been a great place to include a command to *tithe*? But it isn’t here. In fact, note carefully 5:4 where Peter specifically states that this was a *free-will* offering both before and after the property was sold.
* Acts 11:28-30 Wouldn’t this have been a great place to include a command to *tithe*? But it isn’t here. Again, note the specifics of v.29, *“in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution….”* Individual abilities and consciences dictated here- not a command to tithe.
* Romans 15:25-27 Wouldn’t this have been a great place to include a command to *tithe*? But it isn’t here. However, it should be noted that the contribution wasfor *“the saints”*. This, along with all the other passages, indicates that the monies collected by churches should only be distributed to those who are Christians. While we as individuals should be benevolent to those in need regardless of their spiritual condition, see Luke 10:25-37, no New Testament passage authorizes the Church to function benevolently to anyone but Christians.
* 1Corinthians 9:1-18 Wouldn’t this have been a great place to include a command to *tithe*? But it isn’t here.
* 1Corinthians 16:1-2 Wouldn’t this have been a great place to include a command to *tithe*? But it isn’t here.
* 2Corinthians 8:1-24 Wouldn’t this have been a great place to include a command to *tithe*? But it isn’t here. In point of fact, Paul specifically states in v.8, *“I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also.”*
* 2Corinthians 9:1-15 Wouldn’t this have been a great place to include a command to *tithe*? But it isn’t here. Instead, note the words that are used: *“Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly* ***or under compulsion****; for God loves a cheerful giver.”*

Perhaps a couple of other New Testament scriptures could be given which relate in some way to money and the collection of it by the Church. However, none of them mention tithing as a command or binding principle. The big question thus becomes, “If God expected Christians to *tithe,* why didn’t He say so somewhere in the New Testament?” Good question. Intellectually honest folks know the answer.

These things should not be taken as liberty from giving back to God a portion of that with which He has blessed us. **Christians with income should feel responsible to contribute to their local congregation to help carry on its work of preaching, teaching, and help Christians who are truly unable to help themselves, (please see 1Cor.16:1-2; 2Cor.8-9; Gal.6:10; Eph.4:28; 2Thess.3:6-15; 1Tim.5:3-16).** But, *tithing* cannot be bound as a command of God in the New Testament upon Christians today- it’s just not there. (10-22-10)

**Is Tolerance a Modern Virtue, or a Fatal Flaw?**

Our society, in general, has become very *tolerant*- perhaps too much so. Generally, “tolerance”is *an attitude of sympathy or indulgence toward opposing views.*  It necessarily also includes *patience, forbearance, endurance,* and *longsuffering.*  The New Testament certainly requires all who would be godly to be patient, kind, and *tolerant* of views and practices they do not share*,* cf. Romans 14:1 – 15:3. But possessing and cultivating a spirit of forbearance is something very different from encouraging and allowing the lines between “right” and “wrong” to be altered!

Some 750 years before the time of Christ, God’s prophet Isaiah pronounced a *woe* (curse) upon those who would *“call evil good and, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and clever in their own sight.”* (Isaiah 5:20-21) Being tolerant and forbearing with someone who may have differing opinions regarding matters of indifference with God, as Romans 14-15 is discussing, is a far cry from calling something God said was “evil,” “good.” Folks attempting to be godly (literally*, god-like*; meaning we try to *think*, *feel*, and *act* like God) are expected to be tolerant of indifferent matters of personal judgments, but are neither required nor allowed to *tolerate* sin.

The church at Corinth was condemned because it *tolerated* sin. Paul said *“that someone has his father’s wife”-* obviously indicating a sexually immoral association, v.1. Evidently the church there had become very broad-minded and tolerant in their views of what God had called “evil.” They were also charged with *arrogance* regarding this situation, v.2. Perhaps this means they were foolishly proud of their “tolerance.” He said they should have *“mourned instead”* for the sin, and *“removed* (the guilty man) *from your midst.”* On down in the text, he added, *“I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler…”* v.11, but to instead, *“remove the wicked man from among yourselves”* v.13. Now, does that sound “tolerant” to you? Me neither!

Furthermore, the church at Thyatira was specifically condemned for its *tolerance* of one who claimed to speak for God, but had led others into *immorality, idolatry,* and *adultery,* Revelation 2:20ff. Remember, Jesus said in Matthew 7:16a, *“You shall know them* (false prophets) *by their fruits.”* If someone claims to speak for God, and yet their teaching/doctrine leads to practices that God calls “sin”- such as sexual immorality, idolatry, and adultery, then surely they should **not** be tolerated! God said He would *“cast her* (the false teacher in this case) *upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation…And will kill her children with pestilence…”* Revelation 2:22-23. If we want to be godly, which is again, *god-like,* we cannot tolerate what God refuses to tolerate!

Our society has coerced well-meaning and good-intentioned people into *tolerating*, then *accepting*, and ultimately even *legitimizing* sexual immoralities that God calls “evil.” As society in general has become more tolerant of these sinful practices- such as fornication, adultery, and homosexuality, churches have been influenced to become increasingly more tolerant of them also. Folks, as Peter said in Acts 5:29, *“we must obey God rather than men”!* God-like people are patient, kind, forbearing, long-suffering, toward all; and even tolerant of judgments and practices that differ from their own- provided they are not sinful. But God’s people will not, and cannot, tolerate teaching and practices that God calls “evil”- at least not and remain God’s people! That’s not being unkind or judgmental, it is simply “speaking where God has spoken,” 1Peter 4:11. (4-3-12)

**Tomorrow**

Consider this quote from Marion Mitchell Morrison (1971): “Tomorrow is the most important thing in life. Comes into us at midnight very clean. It’s perfect when it arrives and puts itself in our hands. It hopes we’ve learned something from yesterday.” There is a lot of truth in those words. They are engraved on his headstone. Though Mr. Morrison’s words, they are not the ones he suggested for his epithet, which if used would have instead read, “Feo, Fuerto y Formal”- which he said meant “ugly, strong and dignified”. By the way, you probably know Marion Mitchell Morrison better by his stage name, John Wayne.

The “Duke” (so nicknamed as a child by a local fireman whom he passed on the way to school each day- it was actually “Little Duke” then, as he never went anywhere without his huge Airedale Terrier, “Duke”) was both wrong and right about “tomorrow”- as many of us are about many things in life.

He was right when he spoke of the *perfection* of tomorrow. Each one does arrive as “today” in the form of a perfect blank canvas; one on which we sling our own mundane and selfish dirt of the day, or paint a masterpiece of service to others and devotion to God. Each tomorrow arrives as “today” fresh, clean, and empty, awaiting our decisions on how to utilize it.

And Duke was also right about the hopes of tomorrow. Hope does, or it at least can, spring eternal with each new tomorrow. The trouble and trials of today and yesterday have not sullied tomorrow, unless we allow or cause them to do so. Jesus said not to do that, *“Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own,”* Matthew 6:34. Each new day has the hope of improvement as a result of the experiences of being another day older, which is supposed to make us wiser and therefore better able to spend this tomorrow that has now become “today.” God expects us to manifest improvement with each tomorrow He grants, *“As a result, we are no longer children…. but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ,”* Ephesians 4:14-15.

But the Duke was wrong about at least one thing in his quote. “Tomorrow” is not the most important thing in life. It can’t be, if we live right. With no disrespect meant to Mr. Wayne, God said in James 4;13-14, *“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.”*  The point is that **none is promised tomorrow** (see the parable Jesus taught on this point in Luke 12:16-21). The uncertainty of tomorrow even existing necessarily means that if it is made “the most important thing in life,” then it is certain that “today” is not being properly spent! Consider Hebrews 3:13, *“But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called, ‘Today,’ lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”* Today is what we have, and we need to use it to *“…lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven…”* rather than spending it to pursue only things that are temporal, finite, and destined to destruction, cf. Matthew 6:19-21.

Another famous fellow once sang, “If tomorrow never comes.” It’s a great consideration. If “tomorrow” never comes, are you comfortable with your standing before God “today”? Think about it carefully, because as good and hopeful as “tomorrow” can be, it may not come for you, me, or any of us. Don’t plan to fill your tomorrow(s) with what can and should be done today! (3-1-16)

**“Tools”**

I’ve bought, borrowed, owned, loaned, used, sold, and given away literally tons of tools in my lifetime. There are a few lessons I’ve learned over the years regarding them that might be useful…

* Tools don’t work well **when** **they’re the wrong tools for the job.** Anyone who has ever attempted to remove a Metric (millimeter-sized) nut with a S.A.E (inch-sized) wrench knows this. With rare exceptions, the nut is rounded off and has to be removed with a cutting torch- leaving an even bigger mess with which to deal.
* Tools don’t work well **when** **used contrary to their designed purpose.** Pipe wrenches are awful for driving nails, but are the perfect tool for holding or twisting a pipe to install a fitting.
* Tools don’t work well **when they’re not specific enough.** So-called “multipurpose” tools usually work only moderately well at general applications, and perform poorly at specific ones. For instance, an adjustable wrench works pretty well for fasteners that are exposed in an open location, but they have such a big head (due to the adjustable mechanism) that they are pretty much useless in tighter spaces and specific applications. This is why there are so many tools in the chest. You may be able to accomplish many simple tasks with a hammer, adjustable wrench, and pliers, but these are vastly insufficient for removing and rebuilding an engine!
* Tools don’t work well **when used in an application where the load is too big or too small.** I’ve bent and broken many wrenches, sockets, ratchets, and extensions over the years through the use of a “cheater” pipe (slid over the end of the wrench or ratchet handle to extend them and thereby greatly increase the torque applied). Then too, at times I’ve become very frustrated when using a tool that was too big and heavy for the job because I lacked the proper smaller one.

But this article wasn’t written for DIY purposes, or to justify buying bigger toolboxes and more tools to fill them. **Everything stated above about “tools” also applies to the Word of God, and verses or passages within it.** Think through this with me for a moment….

* Bible verses/passages don’t work well **when they’re the wrong “tool” for the job.** The New Testament gospel message wasn’t given as platform for espousing pet theories, *“strange doctrines,”* or *“myths and endless genealogies,”* or anything else that gives rise *“to speculation rather than the furthering God’s provision which is by faith,”* 1Timothy 2:3-4. Instead, it’s “job” is clearly defined in the next verse, *“But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith,”* 1Timothy 2:5. If we’re using the New Testament for any other purpose(s), we’ve got the wrong job for the tool!
* Bible verses/passages don’t work well **when used contrary to their designed purpose.** For example, the “Parable of the Talents” in Matthew 25:14-30, and v.27 specifically, is about *spiritual* productivity and preparedness for judgment, not church finances and the use of the treasury.
* Bible verses/passages don’t work well **when they’re not specific enough.** The reason we have been given a New Testament consisting of 27 books instead of just John 3:16 and Matthew 7:1 is simple. Though these are great and useful verses, they aren’t specific enough to provide us with everything we need to know and use in our walk of faith. Just as an adjustable wrench and a pair of pliers, useful as they may be in general applications, are insufficient to accomplish specific and formidable tasks, two verses aren’t going to get you or anyone else to heaven. If they could, God would have given us just those two!
* Bible verses/passages don’t work well **when used in an application where the load is too big or too small.** Almost all of the parables taught by Jesus had one main, and usually fairly specific, point to the primary audience- which was the one to whom it was originally spoken. This point is typically fairly obvious if we go back and read the context preceding the parable. We do great disservice to Jesus and the Text when we attempt to make points and applications of these parables beyond His purpose, and often wind up missing the singular point He was making!

The Bible generally, and the New Testament specifically, is a “tool chest” that provides just the right “tool” for every situation in life, 2Timothy 3:16-17. Find and use the right “tool” for each specific “job,” and you will do well and accomplish much for the Lord. (4-26-16)

**“Traditional” versus “Contemporary”**

In the last decade or so, a struggle has emerged amongst religious folks between “traditionalists” (those favoring the “older” or more “traditional” ways) and “contemporists” (yeah, I made it up, but it means those favoring the “newer” or more “contemporary” ways). The conflict usually centers on the methods of worship, but extends also to other areas of church function and fellowship. However, since worship seems to be at the center, we’ll concentrate our efforts there for now.

“Traditionalists” typically favor, as our previous definition suggests, “the way we’ve always done it,” with the “it” referring to worship. Conversely, “contemporists” tend to favor a shift to “newer” and more “innovative” means of worship. Not at all surprisingly, the sides on this conflict often align along age lines- the “older” folks preferring “old ways” and resisting change, and the “younger” people pushing for the “newer” or “more exciting” and “innovative” course. So, the tug of war begins with worship being the flag tied in the middle of rope on which both groups tug… and unfortunately, the flag of worship, as well as both parties, usually wind up getting dragged through the mud.

As should always be the solution-finding method, let’s return to the Scriptures to get a better understanding of the problem(s) and find the proper course.

In Matthew 15:1ff, some “traditionalists” confronted Jesus. The issue was not worship per se, but did involve an objection against His disciples, who were not following the “traditional” ways, v.2. So, how did Jesus resolve the issue? Firstly, He pointed out that to have any value, a “tradition” must be based in, rather than being a transgression of, *“the commandment of God,”* v.3. Secondly, He illustrated the point previously made by demonstrating, again from Scripture, other ways in which their allegiance to “traditions” had led them to violate and invalidate *“the word of God,”* vv.4-6. Thirdly, and as a consequence of the former points, He showed by the Scriptures that they had, through their devotions to “traditions” not founded in authority of God’s word, become hypocrites who worshipped *vainly* and taught as *“doctrines the precepts of men,”* vv.7-9. What are the take-away conclusions from these things? **1)** “Traditions” and the “traditional ways” are only of value if “the way we’ve always done it” is completely authorized by God’s Word. **2)** Any and every “tradition” taught, practiced, or emphasized as *“doctrine”* that originates with men rather than God makes one a transgressor, and potentially a hypocrite also. And, **3)** Such “traditionalists” are *“blind guides”* that will be *“uprooted”* by God, vv.13-14. But, these things do not necessarily make winners of the “contemporists” either…

Consider Acts 17:16ff. Paul had the opportunity to address some Athenians who seemed to love and favor anything *“new,”* v.21. This proclivity had led them to innovate “new” means, methods, and objects of worship, vv.22-23. However, these “innovations” were obviously idolatrous, v.16. They were based in mythology and philosophy rather than Scripture, v.18a. Their “worship” had become so far removed from it that Jesus was a *“strange deity,”* and *“the resurrection”* appears to have been a *“new teaching”* to them, vv.18-20. Additionally, the God of the Bible was at best an *“Unknown”* deity to them, v.23. What are the take-away conclusions from these things? **1)** “New” is not necessarily “better” any more than “old” is necessarily “right”- each must stand or fall by whether or not it is authorized by God. **2)** While “new” ways and means can be a *restoration* to the will of God, only when apostasy has previously occurred, cf. Revelation 2:4-5. And, **3)** Such “contemporists” can be easily led astray by their affinity for the endless allure of novelty.

“Traditional vs. Contemporary?” is the wrong question with regard to worship. The right one is, **“Is it Scriptural?”** Jesus said, *“But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father* ***in spirit*** *and* ***truth;*** *for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers,”* John 4:23. If we cannot find “our” worship in the New Testament, it matters little whether it is otherwise “traditional” or “contemporary,” for it is not “Scriptural.” Please, read your New Testament and worship in *“spirit and truth”* as it dictates. Let’s let God determine what worships and pleases Him, OK? (8-26-14)

**Transgender Part 1: Realities and Results**

Transgenderism is not real, but the hurt and harm being done by the myth and its proponents are VERY real. Please consider that **Transgenderism:**

**Denies basic Biology/Physiology.** Each of us is born with a set of two genetic chromosomes, one coming from each parent. Females have only “XX” chromosomes (homogametic), and therefore can only contribute an “X” to the new offspring. But males have an “X” and a “Y” chromosome (heterogametic), and thus contribute either an “X” or a “Y” to the resultant offspring. Thus, the sex/gender of the offspring is determined by the father’s contribution to the child (if only Henry VIII had known this!). If the father contributes an “X” to the mother’s “X,” then the child is female (XX). Conversely, if the father contributes a “Y” to the mother’s “X,” then the child is male (XY). What have these things to do with Transgenderism? Everything. It means that at birth and throughout life, we are either “male” or “female.” We can cross-dress, have so-called “sex-change surgeries,” take whatever hormone shots or pills we like, and “present” ourselves as the opposite sex all we like, but none of these things will alter our gender because it is chromosomally determined at conception and doesn’t change. This is not opinion, it’s just basic biology, genetics, and the physiology of human life. Are there exceptions to the basic “XX” or “XY” gender chromosomal makeup? Sure. But these are genetic mutations or malformations. Furthermore, such mutations are not the basis for the overwhelming majority’s motivation for Transgenderism. Instead, such “choices” are made based on subjective *feelings* or *desires* rather being dictated by biological genetic malformation.

**Denies Scripture/God.** Humanity was created on the sixth day as *“male and female,”* Genesis 1:27. Being thus equipped, they were instructed to *“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth…”* Genesis 1:28. Then, in a concluding statement, we are told that *“God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good,”* Genesis 1:31. Don’t overlook the obvious link between these statements. While reproduction isn’t the only purpose for human sexuality (see 1Corinthians 7:1-5), neither Transgenderism nor Homosexuality are capable of fulfilling this original divine directive, and thus cannot be “good” for they fail to achieve God’s purposes for having two distinct genders in the first place. To put it another way, if God intended for humanity to have third or fourth or *ad infinitum* genders, He would have not only created them originally, but He would have given them the ability to reproduce and further propagate the species. But He didn’t- precisely because the genders He created were *“good”* in that they completely fulfilled **His** purposes for humanity in these regards. What purposes humanity has for itself in these matters is a different issue. Now, either we believe God and His Word on this, or we must reject God and His Word for our own feelings and opinions. But don’t be confused about two key related points: 1) We can’t have it both ways, Joshua 24:15; and, 2) conclusions have consequences, 2Thessalonians 2:9-12.

**Enforces a False/Fantasy Existence.** Because Transgenderism is not real, it forces adherents into a false existence made up of their fantasies. Please take a step back and take an objective look at the “requirements” that are forced upon subscribers of Transgenderism:

* Dress differently than your physiology;
* Act differently than your physiology;
* Refer to yourself differently than your physiology (and require others to do so also); and,
* Reject all the “norms” of your physiology.

While efforts are certainly underway to deny and destroy all gender-based realities, and allow everyone to create their own “virtual” world of existence based on whatever gender (or lack thereof in some cases) they choose, please consider all of the narratives that have to be altered from their natural state in order to create and maintain a false fantasy of who “who I really am.” Such is certainly neither normal nor natural.

**Enforces Selfishness.** To adopt Transgenderism on a personal level, extreme selfishness is enforced. There has to be a separate gender classification for just for me. Everyone has to use special terms and pronouns just to refer to me. Special bathrooms have to be created and appropriately labeled just for me (or I must be allowed to utilize whichever one I choose). I must be allowed to dictate my own rules of general conduct in the workplace and society as a whole. Special laws must be enacted to allow and protect my choices. And perhaps most importantly, no one can be allowed to question- let alone criticize, any choices that I make in any of the above areas. Surely we can see that such is selfishness gone to seed. Subjective narcissism, rather than objective physiology, is the root cause of Transgenderism. Selfish desires for a fantasy existence apart from realities, or the attention of others by being “different,” or both, motivate it. But Transgenderism is not the result of anyone being “born” or “trapped” in the opposite gender’s body. “Feelings” to this end are delusional.

**Denies Hope/Happiness through Healthy Physical Relationships.** Apart from spiritual enlightenment and fulfillment through a relationship with God, physical relationships are a huge source of human happiness. We love our families, and receive much help, hope, and happiness through being part of healthy familial relationships. God said, *“It is not good for man to be alone,”* Genesis 1:18a, and it isn’t good for *woman to be alone* either, Genesis 1:18b. From this divinely arranged union, “family” resulted, Genesis 4:1-2,25-26; 5:1ff. God created us as not only *social* but also *familial,* and provided marriage as a means of enabling and furthering human happiness through “family.” Indeed, marriage and the children born to it (*i.e.* “family”) occasion much joy and are the bedrock of human society- but only when we “do” them according to God’s expressed intentions. Transgenderism does not and cannot provide such hope and happiness. Its “relationships” must be contrived and expedited with false suppositions and the accouterments of misrepresentations, surgeries, and injected/ingested hormones in efforts to deny reality. In so doing, it also destroys not only the basis on which society is built, but also its own hope for happy and fulfilling physical relationships. There is a reason “Transgender” adult adherents are 22 times more likely to attempt suicide (30 percent in youth), and it isn’t societal disapproval or rejection because the majority of society has accepted, if not championed, them. It is, instead, that the “virtual” lifestyle they have chosen and created for themselves doesn’t provide the hope and happiness they desired. To borrow from James 4:1-3, they have sought *pleasure* from the wrong *source-* one which does not, and cannot, provide it.

**Denies Hope/Happiness through Fulfilling Spiritual Relationships.** Even in the absence of fulfilling and healthy familial relationships, spiritual relationships with God and His people provide great hope and happiness. Physical families, even when such relationships are possible and present, do not always provide hope and happiness. In fact, sometimes the opposites of despair and abject unhappiness are the result. But even in such cases, hope and happiness can be obtained through spiritual relationships with God and His family. Brethren in Christ can become even greater comforts, supports, and sources of happy and fulfilling relationships for us than our physical families. And certainly, we can always count on God to love and see the value in us, unless, of course, we deliberately reject Him and His Word for our own selfish ideas and pursuits. Then, though He still loves and values us, He will not maintain fellowship with us- nor will His people, John 12:48; 1John 1:6-7; 2Thessalonians 3:6,14. You see, Christianity is inherently *selfless,* while Transgenderism is inherently *selfish.* The two are simply incompatible. Transgenderism, because of its selfish nature and its conflict with both the nature and Law of Christianity, isolates itself from the blessings and benefits of a fulfilling spiritual relationship with God and His people. This is the sad resulting reality of Transgenderism.

Though “Transgenderism” is a myth based in the selfish creation of a “virtual world” of fantasy and self and societal delusion, such does not prevent it from having very real, damaging, and even damning effects- both now and for eternity. The God who created, loves, and values us desires none of those things for us, cf. 2Samuel 14:14; Ezekiel 18:23,32. (8-8-17)

**Transgender Part 2: Going Forward**

In the previous article on this subject (“Transgender Part 1: Realities and Results”), the notion was put forth that “Transgenderism is not real, but the hurt and harm being done by the myth and its proponents are VERY real.” Though the statement is true, there is an important addendum to it: Gender Dysphoria is ALSO real.

Gender Dysphoria is a psychological disorder (according to the American Psychiatric Association) in which a person *senses* or *feels* that their gender identity may not align with their biological sex, and therefore experiences emotional distress as a result. In turn, these *senses, feelings,* and *emotional distress* may lead them to act or present themselves as the gender opposite to their actual physiology. People that think or feel they are someone or something (“Trans-Species”- where people think they are a different species in a human body) other than who/what they are suffer under a delusion, and deserve sympathy and help. The human mind, despite its immense power, can be a fragile thing- sometimes easily influenced by external forces. Children and adolescents are especially vulnerable, and can be induced or predisposed to think and feel in hurtful and harmful ways about themselves... even contrary to reality. The reality regarding gender is clear, *“But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female,”* Mark 10:6.

**Given these things, how should we see, feel, and treat those with Gender Dysphoria?**

**With Compassion.** Regardless of how they see, think, or feel about themselves, those with Gender Dysphoria are human beings, and as such, deserve compassion from their fellowman. Jesus once stepped off a boat and saw a multitude of people that were like *“sheep without a shepherd”* (without proper guidance, and in danger of perishing), and *“He felt compassion for them…”* Mark 6:34a. However they got to the position of being *lost sheep,* His feelings toward them led Him to provide what they needed- guidance in truth, *“and He began to teach them many things,”* Mark 6:34b. Just because Transgenderism is not real, doesn’t mean that Gender Dysphoria (with its feelings and fears) isn’t real. Those with it, regardless of how it was acquired, deserve to be treated with compassion, sympathy, and respect as human beings rather than being despised, ridiculed, and dismissed. Please read and consider carefully Matthew 9:10-13. Does your attitude and activity toward those with Gender Dysphoria more closely resemble that of the Pharisees, or Jesus?

**As Individuals.** It is easy to see “Transgenderism” as a hurtful delusion, for such it is. It is not always as easy to see someone with Gender Dysphoria issues as an individual- but we must do just that. Each person has his/her own set of history and current circumstances. While we are not the product of our environments, our past and present are often at least a great *influence* on who we are, and who we become. But if we see and deal only with the abstract group of the “Transgendered,” we may well miss or dismiss the individual with Gender Dysphoria who deserves our compassion and needs our help. There was a great crowd of people- surely some who followed, and some who came out to see Jesus in and around the city of Jericho. No doubt He was well aware of their presence and needs, but such did not prevent Him from seeing, paying special attention to, and helping one individual named *“Zaccheus.”* The results were transformational,Luke 19:1-10.

**With Grace.**  I’ve often said and written, “It is easy to tell someone that they’re *wrong,* especially if you don’t care whether or not they become *right.”* But if on the other hand, you do care if someone becomes *right,* then great care should be taken how you tell him or her they’re *wrong.*  Being dismissive by saying nothing, becoming complicit by “accepting” or applauding or championing, or being harsh or cruel or unloving in attitude or action doesn’t do anything to help them overcome the fears and delusions of their disorder. Remember (and practice!) the admonition of Colossians 4:5-6, *“Conduct yourself with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how to respond to each person.”*

**With Consistency.** It is grossly hypocritical and patently unfair to ridicule and condemn “Transgenderism” (and homosexuality) while giving only “a wink and nod” disapproval to pre-marital and extra-marital fornication, cf. 1Corinthians 6:9-11. While Truth is truth regardless of who speaks it, and sin is sin regardless of who commits it, the unequal treatment of these subjects, or outright hypocrisy regarding them, does little to nothing to further the understanding and accepting of Truth to the elimination of sin. If *“the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles”* because we who suppose ourselves *knowledgeable of God’s laws, teachers of the immature, guides to the blind,* and *lights to those in darkness,* fail to understand, practice, and teach it consistently ourselves, may God help us, cf. Romans 2:17-24! However, we must understand that Truth, on this or any other eternal matter, is not *relative* to anyone’s feelings one way or the other, or *subject* to approval by the majority. It is Truth because God expressed it, or it false because it contradicts what God has expressed, period. Practices do not cease to be “sinful” because society devolves to acceptance of them. Thus, the truth of God’s Word must be consistently understood, practiced, and taught.

**With Empathy rather than Acceptance.** To think, feel, and act in the ways that God commands toward others neither means nor requires the “acceptance” of sin. To love, regard, and be compassionate and empathetic toward individuals likewise doesn’t require the “acceptance” of their beliefs as “true,” their feelings as “valid” (for justification), or their practices as “right.” We will all stand before our Creator and be judged and *“recompensed for the things through the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad,”* 2Corinthians 5:10. But we don’t get to decide what is “good” and “bad” for ourselves- God’s Word does that, John 12:48. Ignoring, suppressing, or rebelling against the Truth doesn’t change this- for “Transgenderism” or anything else. But please, never forget that God’s Word is intended and given to save us from the consequences of sin by graciously instructing us in the ways of righteousness and godliness. For it to accomplish this goal, we must understand and obey It. *“These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you,”* Titus 2:11-14. (8-15-17)

**Trust: the Emancipation of Faith**

(For those who may not know, I was diagnosed with Stage 4 T-Cell Lymphoma in May of 2004, but by the grace of God, modern medicine, and the loving support of my families- both physical and spiritual, I’m obviously still hanging around.)

One of the advantages of having been forced to face your own mortality is the perspective it provides. The platitude, "Live each day as if it could be your last- because one day it will be," has only limited effects and benefits toward providing real impetus for changes in perspective and focus. This is especially true in spiritual matters.

As long as death is a known but “distant” reality, contemplating its consequences is pretty much a theoretical rather than a practical endeavor. But, when one is faced with the very real possibility of dying “soon,” if not "today," the practical implications of such dominate the thoughts and perspective in a way that is difficult to achieve otherwise. Facing mortality in an “up close and personal way” inevitably changes the perspective, and subsequently the focus, of what was previously thought of as “life.” Simply put: **We think differently about our spiritual life when our physical one has a good chance of ending** ***today***. There are many emotions that surely come with and through this process. But, the real changes in perspective, focus, and activity come when we are truly "OK" with dying **TODAY**, if such should be. This “comfort level” with death is truly a liberating epiphany, but how do we get to such a life-changing perspective short of receiving a mortal diagnosis?

The ability to think and live comfortably with the “reality of death- even today” is the growth of a part of faith that we don't think or talk about as much as we should. We emphasize the **knowledge** of faith which is its foundation, Romans 10:17, *“So faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* We also underscore the **obedience** of faith which is its effect, James 2:14-26, *“…Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead….”.* But what we typically ignore, or at least fail to accentuate as much as we should, is the **trust** of faith that is its present benefit. In 2Corinthians 1:8-10, note that Paul spoke of his *afflictions* and *excessive burdens* that were ultimately relieved by his ***trust***in God. *“For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves* ***in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God*** *who raises the dead….He on whom we have set our hope.”*

This **trust** aspect of faith not only pertains to eternal salvation once death has occurred, but also provides present peace and confidence that whatever family and unfinished physical details we leave behind will be graciously cared for and provided for by God and His children. It is this trust aspect of faith that enables our emancipation from the physical constraints of life, and allows our spiritual life to truly develop, grow, and flourish. If our “faith” is only comprised of the *knowledge* and *obedience* components, but lacks this *trust* element, we will live only in the imprisonment of our fear and dread of death. But true “faith” in Jesus delivers *“those who through the fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives,”* Hebrews 2:15. Perhaps this is the primary reason so many of us cling to physical life so tenaciously that we are consumed by its preservation and affairs. Unfortunately, such also renders us incapable of saying (and living) Paul’s words of Colossians 3:1-3, *“If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”*

True biblical faith has *knowledge* as its base and *obedience* as its effect, but must also have *trust* as its current benefit to enable us to live lives that are truly emancipated and spiritual. Think about it, won’t you? And don’t wait for a mortal diagnosis to begin! (1-21-14)

**Trusting God Regarding the Past, Present, and Future**

Trust is an essential element of faith, along with knowledge and obedience (Hebrews 11:6,1). But do even those of us who claim to have faith really trust God?

**Do we really trust God regarding the *Past?*** Hebrews 11:3 tells us about the creation of the world, *“By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.”* Does your faith allow you to trust God in this regard? Do you really *“understand”* what is being said here? What we see and know as the Universe didn’t just happen as a result of an explosion. The *“worlds”* that we see were created out of things that we cannot see. They were not assembled from known elements, but by the eternal power of Divine speech. Romans 1:20 reinforces the same point, *“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made…”* This means that we ought to discern the divine power and eternal nature of God by just looking at the created world(s) around us. Now, do you really trust God regarding the past, or have years of evolutionary theory led you to trust “science” more than God?

**Do we really trust God regarding the *Present?*** It would seem easier to trust God about the present because we live in the present- we ostensibly don’t need “faith” to see the present. But I would suggest the here and now requires a greater faith than either the past or the future. Think about it this way: we are to *“live by faith”* (Hebrews 10:38; *et al*). *Living by faith* is actually a greater test than having faith regarding the past, or the future. We don’t (or at least shouldn’t) live in the past, cf. Philippians 3:13-14; or the future, James 4:13-16. But we must live, and live *by faith,* in the present. James 4:17, *“Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.”* Do we trust God regarding how we are supposed to live? If we trust God and His Word regarding the past, do we trust Him and the Bible enough to live as He dictates in the present? I know human weakness comes into play here- believe me, I know that from personal experience. Knowing what God expects and not doing it because of weakness is one thing; but deliberately deciding to forgo God’s Word for what we want is rebellion. If we’re prone to think or say, “I know the Bible says this, but I think/feel….” then we really don’t trust God regarding the present, do we? In such cases, we trust our own thoughts and emotions more than we do God’s. We also manifest a lack of trust in God regarding the present when we consult every kind of “expert” on the difficult decisions of life but refuse to consult God’s word, let alone follow it.

**Do we really trust God regarding the *Future?***  Almost everyone has heard the sentiment expressed by preachers and songwriters that we should “live every day as if it were your last,” or to “live like you were dying.” The idea seems to be that we should live ready to die. These are great sentiments. But until we’re really OK with dying **today**, those are just sentiments! If we really trust God with our futures, these are not just sentiments, they are our reality. Why are so many of us afraid to die? I understand the natural fear of the unknown- after all, we’ve never died before. And I understand folks being afraid of death if they know they are unprepared to meet their Maker. But why is it that professed believers fear death, and cling to every last breath like their “life” depends on it? (see John 3:36; 14:1-4) Don’t we trust God? He said, *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord….that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them”* (Revelation 14:13), but we still fear death like there is no tomorrow! Why, if we trust God regarding our future?

The bottom line is this: If we trust God regarding His wisdom and power which was manifested **in the past** through the creation of the world(s), then we should trust Him **in the present** by living lives of faithful obedience. Then, we can trust Him regarding **our future** when this life is finished, whenever that may be. Now, isn’t that simple? The question is: Do you really trust God regarding the past, the present, and the future? We really can’t have one without the other two. (7-13-11)

**Trusting God**

Trust is a necessary part of human existence. The person who trusts no one is miserable because God created us with a need to trust others both emotionally and socially. But ideally, “trusting” has responsibilities on both sides- the object of our trust must be *trustworthy*, and we must be willing to be *vulnerable* enough to trust. That’s right, trust requires some degree of vulnerability because trust, well-founded or ill-founded, is an opening up of oneself to another. Trust is not perfect knowledge, in fact, by definition it can’t be, and it requires some surrendering of personal control. Therefore, the requirements of trust are the object being *trustworthy,* and us being *trusting.*

When it comes to trusting God, there can be no question of Him being worthy of our trust. Every plan of His for man, and every action ever taken by Him for man, was and is for our good. The degree of His love for us is without question, *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Roman 5:8). Therefore, the New Testament emphasizes God’s faithfulness, and hence His *trustworthiness,* repeatedly by reminding us that *“God is faithful”-* 1Corinthians 1:9; 10:13; 2Corinthians 1:18.

So the problematic part of this *trust* relationship between God and man is definitely on our side of the equation. For instance:

**We don’t trust God’s promise to *physically* care for us if we trulyput him first in our lives**. We often set aside worship, Bible study, and other acts of spiritual devotion and service because “I had to work.” Note carefully Jesus’ promise of Matthew 6:30-33, *“But if God so clothes the ﻿﻿grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? ﻿You of little faith! Do not ﻿worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for ﻿﻿your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But ﻿seek first ﻿His kingdom and His righteousness, and ﻿﻿all these things will be ﻿added to you.”* We often salve our consciences with, “Well, I’ve got to provide for my family!” Do you really trust God’s promise? Please read the passage again. I understand (and surely so does God) that our jobs may at times require us to be at work instead of worship or Bible study, but can we really say we trust God’s promise to provide for us when we choose to work instead of putting Him first?

**We also don’t trust God with the welfare of our families.** I really should have added this point to last week’s article on the “Life Lessons” cancer and chemo taught me. So please allow me to return to that time once more. Facing stage 4 cancer was, to say the least, tough. But facing it with early teenage and pre-teen sons was a whole different matter. What would become of those precious boys? Sure, I had (and have!) a great, strong Christian wife- and they subsequently a wonderful mother who would do all for them possible. But who would teach them to be godly men? Who would teach them the life lessons they would need to become fine Christian men, husbands, and fathers? Who would help them with their cars, their girlfriends, their etc. etc. etc.? While ravaged physically by the disease and treatments, these things caused an emotional meltdown for me one day. Then in the midst of all my tears it hit me- God would provide a way for all of those necessary things to be provided if I were not here. And the unnecessary ones didn’t matter anyway. I just needed to trust God and stop worrying! After that realization, I was ashamed of my lack of faith and trust. But afterwards, I was “free” to face whatever was ahead with calm assurance. If I died at 39, that was “OK”- and my boys would be fine too because God would make it so. He would use my family and my spiritual brethren to take care of everything those two boys needed. Trusting God with the welfare of my family in my absence was incredibly emancipating!

Remember the opening sentence: **“Trust is a necessary part of human existence.”** How true that becomes when facing the end of our earthly existence. I truly don’t understand how anyone could face death without trusting God. Are you trusting God with your “way” here in this life by *“seeking first His kingdom and righteousness”*? Are you trusting God with your eternal destiny after this life is over for you by being and living as a Christian now? Are you trusting God with all that you will leave behind when you die? He really is able to handle it all you know...if we’ll just trust Him. (10-6-10)

**Trusting the Word**

The last two editions have been on “Love and Trust” as the foundation of any human relationship, and “Loving the Word” as the single most important factor in determining our eternal destiny, respectively. In this concluding article of this trio, let’s consider the essentiality of “Trusting the Word.”

What does it mean to “trust the Word”? The meaning of “trust” can be seen through some of its synonyms, like ***conviction****,* ***dependence****,* ***reliance****,* and ***confidence***. So, are your ***convictions***based on the Word of God (book, chapter, and verse), or someone else’s faith, Colossians 3:18? Do you ***depend***on the Word of God to guide your steps in life, or on the wisdom of men, 1Corinthians 1:20? Do you ***rely*** on the Word of God in times of doubt and trouble, or on your own understanding, Proverbs 3:5? Is your ***confidence***of an eternal reward based in the Word of God, or your own emotions, 1John 2:3-6? Now let’s ask the question again, “Do you really ‘trust the Word,’ or is that just lip service, Matthew 15:8-9?”

However, there is another set of applications regarding “trusting the Word” that we really need to consider. “Do we really ‘trust the Word’ enough to be willing to: base our *convictions* on it **exclusively**; to *depend* on it rather than men’s wisdom **in doctrine**; to *rely* on it **in times of congregational trouble**; and to have *confidence* in it **to attract and save men’s souls**?” Let’s consider these individually for a moment.

**“Do we really ‘trust the Word’ enough to base our convictions on it *exclusively*?”** Or, do we tend to rely instead on the faith of our family or friends to tell us what to believe, and where to “go to church”? If we *really* trust the Word to be *“inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work”* (2Timothy 2:16-17), on *what* or *who* else do we need to base our convictions? Trust the Word, Matthew 10:37!

**“Do we really ‘trust the Word’ enough to depend on it *rather than men’s wisdom in doctrine?”*** If we can’t determine what we should believe, teach, and practice doctrinally without input from some man, publication of men, college, or denominational headquarters, we really don’t “trust the Word” at all. The Bible was written to be read, understood, and followed, Ephesians 3:3-5, and through these, to provide entrance to eternal life. Therefore, my or your understanding of it shouldn’t require some sort of “clergy” or “headquarters” explanation. Surely the God who created man *“of the dust”* and gave him life can communicate with him in language that he can understand. Trust the Word, 1Corinthians 2:10-13!

**“Do we really ‘trust the Word’ enough to rely on it *in times of congregational trouble?”*** Or, do we look for help from any and every other source? Let’s be clear, “congregational troubles” almost always come from failures to trust and follow God’s Word in the first place- and can only be cleared up by reversing course and *“Remember(ing) therefore from where you have fallen, and repent(ing) and do(ing) the deeds you did at the first….”* Revelation 2:5. But all too often, when problems pop up, we want to call this preacher or that one, or resort to some other human source for advice. Instead, *knees* and *noses* are the key- get on your knees *in prayer to the Father*, and put you nose *in His Book.* Trust God and the Word, 1Peter 2:1-3!

**“Do we really ‘trust the Word’ enough to have confidence in it *to attract and save men’s souls?”*** Or, will we succumb to the egotistical urges of our humanity to want to “help” God by “dressing up” the gospel so it will appeal to the fickle and those otherwise uninterested in it? Will we trust its power to save, or feel the need to adorn it with food and entertainment? Will we *“preach the word,*” or file off its “rough edges” to make it more appealing and palatable to the masses? Will we trust *“the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified,”* Acts 20:32; or put our confidence in various “programs” and devices it never mentions to draw men to God and save their souls? Trust the Word, Romans 1:16!

Love and trust are the foundations of every relationship we humans sustain. They are also the basis of our relationship with God. Do you love and trust Him enough to also love and trust His Word? (2-21-17)

**Truth and Texting**

As most of my family, brethren, and friends have learned, I don’t “do” texting unless it is by email. If you want to send me a “text” message, it had better be via email if you expect a response- otherwise, just call me….I talk much faster and easier than I type anyway. To illustrate my bias, a few years back, when I went in to get a new cell phone to replace the one I had crushed while working, I told the young slick salesman at the phone store that I didn’t need a phone to take pictures- my wife had a camera. I further explained that I didn’t need a phone to “surf the net” or do “texting” because I had a computer. I finally, and somewhat proudly, stated that I simply needed a phone to talk, rather than perform all those other functions. He flatly replied, “Yes Sir, the ‘senior models’ are right over there.” That did it- I am officially “old” now….as if there was any discernable doubt previously!

But “texting” is more than a passing fad I’m afraid. It seems to be here to stay. As a preacher, I really don’t have anything scriptural against texting- unless it’s being done during the sermon or while I am trying to have a conversation with you. Then, it’s just plain rude and disrespectful. Therefore, I must confess a somewhat sadistic glee at reading a piece poking fun at texters and their addiction which had a biblical flavor (Jamie Quatro; Reader’s Digest; May 2010). It was based on the premise “If God had texted the Ten Commandments to Moses,” (then they might have looked like this):

1. nol b4 me. srsly.
2. dnt wrshp pix/idols
3. no omg’s
4. no work on w/end (sat 4 now; sun L8r
5. pos ok – ur m&d r cool
6. dnt kill ppl
7. :-X only w/ m8
8. dnt steal
9. dnt lie re: bf
10. dnt ogle ur bf’s m8. or ox. or dnkey. myob.”

If you don’t have a clue what all of that means, then you’re officially “old” too- but certainly not alone! Hey, that’s OK- “old” is good if you do it right. For translation help to decipher them, either ask a teenager, or look to Exodus 20 for the Ten Commandments in their “biblical” form. Then see if you can match them up to those listed, and phonetically abbreviated, above.

There is, however, one of these “texting Ten Commandments” that I want to pursue a little further. Number 3 is “no omg’s”- which stands for “No ‘Oh my God’s!’” This phrase has become the standard response of many to anything they’re told (or texted) which seems amazing, incredible, surprising, or to which they don’t know how else to respond. The original version of this command is *“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not ﻿﻿leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.”* (Exodus 20:7)

To “take the name of the Lord God in vain” certainly includes attaching His name to other “curse” words, but is not limited to it. The word “vain” basically means “empty.” Part of what is being prohibited by this command is using God’s name in a flippant, thoughtless, or empty manner. Doesn’t the phrase “Oh my God!”, as so commonly used by the young and not so young today, fit precisely what God Himself forbids with this commandment? Sure it does! And lest you think I’m making too much of this- that those so using the phrase “Don’t mean anything by it,” **isn’t that really the point?** **They are using God’s name without really meaning anything by it. Such is exactly what God is condemning.** And though we may not take it seriously, He does. Note again the latter part of the verse in Exodus 20:7, *“...for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.”*

It certainly sounds like God is paying attention to our words- whether spoken, or sent electronically by “text,” even (and especially) when we aren’t! Consider also in this connection the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:36, *“But I tell you that every ﻿﻿careless word that people ﻿speak, they shall give an accounting for it in ﻿the day of judgment.”* Surely the warning applies equally to *“careless words”* whether they are spoken or texted!

So, for how many “omg”s (again, “Oh my God”s for us non-texters) will you or your children have to *“give account”* in the Day of Judgment? Texting itself is not the problem, but it certainly has highlighted and exacerbated it. Please think seriously about these matters, and make the necessary changes in the words you and your children speak…. or text. (5-26-10)

**The Truth that Saves**

**Is:**

**Written**. Through men He inspired, God wrote it down for you. *“If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things I write to you are the Lord’s commandment,”* 1Corinthians 14:37. Nature, or *general revelation,* can teach you that God is real and powerful (cf. Romans 1:18-20), but only His codified *specific revelation* contains the power to save you. *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek,”* Romans 1:16.  Therefore, the truth that saves is not achieved by communing with nature, but by communing with God through His Word. It is not found in your heart, your thoughts, or your experiences. It is found within His inspired, written, codified Word, 2Timothy 2:14-17.

**Preserved.**  What sense would it make for an all-powerful God to invest His power to save mankind in a gospel, and then allow it to be lost, or corrupted to the point of impotence? None. And He didn’t. *“Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God,”* 1Peter 1:22. Sure, we can *“distort the gospel of Christ”* until it becomes a *“different gospel”* in order to *“disturb”* others, but there is a curse attached to such purposes and activities (cf. Galatians 1:6-9). However, the *“pure milk of the word”* still exists, and still provides to *“salvation,”* 1Peter 2:1-2.

**Read.** Through inspiration, God provided mankind with truth that saves, and through His power, He preserved it for all generations. But this eternal, saving truth does not save unilaterally- we must do our part. We must *desire* truth enough to *seek* and *find* it (Matthew 7:7-8), and we must *love* truth (2Thessalonians 2:10) enough to *read* it- *“that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,”* Ephesians 3:3-4.

**Understood.**  Simply reading the truth, though an essential step in the right direction, is not sufficient for salvation. We can read it as a curiosity, or an obligation. We can even read it in lieu of sleeping pills each night. But unless we’re reading God’s word like the *noble-minded* Bereans did, it probably won’t provide us with any answers, or do us any good. The Bereans *“received the word”* (right activity) *“with great eagerness”* (right attitude) *“examining the Scriptures”* (right method/activity) *“daily”* (right frequency) *“to see whether these things were so”* (right purpose), Acts 17:11. In other words, they were seeking to *understand* the truth. As a result of these things, *“Man of them therefore believed…”* Acts 17:12 (right *result*). It still works the same way.

**Accepted.** Even truth that is understood can be rejected (cf. Romans 1:18-23). And, for truth to legitimately be accepted, it must be first *read,* and then *understood,* obviously. But only when we *read* and *understand* dowe have the opportunity to *accept* truth. In both Acts 7:54a and Acts 2:37a, the audience understood the truth to such a degree that it *pricked* or *pierced* their hearts. Stephen’s audience *rejected* the truth he gave them, and killed him for it, Acts 7:51b-60. The apostles’ audience *accepted* it, Acts 2:41. When we read (or hear) and understand the truth, we *accept* it if we’re honest, or we reject it if we are dishonest.

**Applied through Obedience.**  What a tragic waste it is for God to have *invested* His saving power in the *truth* of the gospel, and *preserved* it throughout the generations, only to have man, who so desperately needs its provision, to be too busy to *read* it, to be too biased to *understand* it, or too *arrogant* to accept it. But it is perhaps even more tragic when we admit and *accept* it as truth, but are too *stubbornly rebellious* to simply obey it. *“Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free’,”* John 8:31-32. Please don’t waste the truth God provided and preserved to save you- *read* it, *understand* it, *accept* it, and *obey* it. (10-18-16)

**“Spiritual Tunnel Vision”**

What is commonly called “Tunnel Vision” is more specifically “Kalnienk Vision.” The condition refers to a restriction of one’s field of vision, but with the retention of central vision; *i.e.* as if looking *through a tunnel*. Though it can have many different causes, the most common culprit is the consistent restriction of the field of vision, which causes the eyes to be “trained” to only focus on the specific area in which one is looking. For instance, if you looked through a periscope for long periods of time, or wore a welding helmet, diving mask, or something else that only allowed you to see the area or objects immediately in front of you, tunnel vision could easily occur. The result would be that you would only be able to “see” those things at which you specifically looked or directed your attention. It is a dangerous condition *physically*, but can be *spiritually* devastating.

As is the case with the *physical* impairment, *spiritual* Tunnel Vision is most often self-inflicted. We repetitively and consistently focus our attention on a specific passage, interpretation, or doctrine until we lose the ability to see anything else. This is especially dangerous because it becomes self-perpetuating. A certain passage that we think contains a cherished belief is so much the focus of our attention that we get to the point that we will not even consider other passages that clearly contradict our interpretation of the one upon which we’ve become affixed. “Spiritual Tunnel Vision” has occurred! Let’s consider some examples.

**John 3:16** is a beautiful and powerful passage that highlights both God’s tremendous love for man, as well as man’s obligation to believe in order to attain eternal life. But for some, this passage has come to be a proof-text for salvation by “faith only.” Has intense focus on this verse clouded our ability to see its context? Can we no longer see that in v.5 Jesus also required one to be baptized (*“born of water and the Spirit”*)? Can we no longer see that v.36 enjoined obedience to our belief in order to attain eternal life? Do we no longer see the example immediately preceding v.16 in the text? It references the O.T. story of fiery serpents being sent by God among the Israelites as punishment for their complaining in the wilderness (see Numbers 21:4-9). The people who were bitten by the serpents had to look upon the replica that God commanded Moses to erect on a standard in the midst of the camp or die. They couldn’t just “believe” and “accept” that God would heal them, they had to meet His requirement of obedience by going to and looking upon the serpent. Additionally, have we become so intently focused upon John 3:16 that we no longer can see James 2:24, *“You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.”* This passage doesn’t teach that one is saved by “works alone” any more than John 3:16 teaches that one is saved by “faith alone.” But we cannot become so specifically focused on either one that the other can no longer be seen. Both passages are inspired by the Holy Spirit, and neither is more important than the other!

**Romans 8:38-39** is likewise a tremendously comforting passage which teaches the love and protection God manifests toward His children. But does it say that “once we are saved, we are always saved”? The passage makes it very clear that nothing can separate the saved from the love God has for them. But does that mean they will necessarily inherit the blessings of eternal salvation unconditionally? Can a loving parent not disown and disinherit a rebellious child? Of course they can! But will our loving Father do that to His unloving and disobedient children? Don’t fall prey to spiritual tunnel vision! Note these passages: *“keep yourselves in the love of God”* (Jude 21); *“be on your guard lest, being carried away by unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness”* (2Peter 3:17); *“Take care, brethren, lest there be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God”* (Hebrews 3:12). Have we become so focused on a passage that we think teaches a comforting doctrine that we can no longer see that every book of the N.T. (except one, Philemon) contains warnings specifically designed to prevent the very thing that supposedly cannot happen- losing salvation once it has been gained?

Please, read your New Testament- all of it; and don’t become so focused on what you may want it to say that you cannot see what it does say. I do not have all the answers, nor do I claim to have them- but, I do know that we cannot give any one passage an interpretation that clearly contradicts another. We have to take it all, and keep it all together to “see clearly” what God would have us to believe and obey. (3-21-17)

**The Two Most Important Questions in Life**

There are many important questions in life. “Where will I go to school?” “What will I do for a living?” “Who will I marry?” “Where will we live?” “Will we have any children?” “How many children will we have?” “How are we going to afford to raise all these children?” “Which of all of these children will select my nursing home (and pay for it!)?” Etc. Etc. Etc. But as important as these questions may be, two are even more vital…

***“What shall I do to obtain eternal life?”*** A young ruler of the Jews posed this question to Jesus in Luke 18:18 (also recorded in Matthew and Mark). Jesus responded, *“…if you wish to enter into life,* ***keep the commandments****,”* Matthew 19:17. Apparently, Jesus wasn’t aware of the modern doctrine that says man cannot “do” anything to be saved- that salvation is completely an operation of God without any mixture of man’s “works” whatsoever. Both the question asked and the answer given sound simple enough. The young man wanted eternal salvation, and assumed that there was something he needed to **do** to obtain it- hence, his question. Jesus told him to **obey** **the commandments** given by God. Simple.

It is true that this man was living under the Law of Moses, which remained *“valid”* until the Law of Jesus Christ became *“in force”* after His death (Hebrews 9:15-17), but the principle of faith and obedience to God’s law has always been the requirement for man’s salvation. Noah and his family **believed** God about the coming destruction of the flood, and **obeyed** God by building and entering the ark to be saved from the destruction, Hebrews 11:6-7. Noah lived and died long before the Law of Moses was given to Jews at Mt. Sinai, but **faith** and **obedience** were requirements of salvation both *before* and *under* the Law of Moses. What about after the Law of Moses- were the principal requirements for salvation any different then?

After the death and ascension of Jesus, when His law (the gospel) became effective and replaced the Law of Moses, the crowd gathered around His apostles became convinced that they had killed the Son of God sent to save them, Acts 2:22-23,36. In the next verse, Acts 2:37, they asked, *“Brethren, what shall we* ***do****?”* They’re asking the same question that the young ruler asked Jesus earlier! They obviously already believed Jesus was the Christ, or there would have been no reason to ask the question. But even after believing in Jesus, they still asked, *“What shall we* ***do****?”* Note that they did **not** ask: “What shall we ***feel****?”* or “What shall we ***experience****?”*  They asked what they needed to **do,** and were told, *“****Repent****, and let each of you* ***be baptized*** *in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins,”* Acts 2:38. Because they already *believed* in Jesus, they were told to **do** two things in obedience: *repent,* and *be baptized*. **Faith/belief** plus **obedience** equals **salvation**. Simple. So, *before, during,* and *after* the Law of Moses, salvation’s requirements were simply *believe* God, and *obey* God.

So, what’s the second of the two most important questions in life? ***“What does the Scripture say?”*** (Romans 4:3). Perhaps you saw this one coming after all the passages were quoted or referenced above, but if not, let me explain. How do we know about God’s requirements of salvation? He tells us in the Scriptures, Mark 16:15-16. How do we know about acceptable worship? He tells us in the Scriptures, John 4:23. How do we know how the church is to be organized? He tells us in the Scriptures, Titus 1:5-9. How do we know about the work the church is expected to do? He tells us in the Scriptures, Ephesians 4:11-16; 1Timothy 3:15. How do we know who will and will not go to heaven? He tells us in the Scriptures, 1Corinthians 6:9-11. How do we know what our duties are in marriage? He tells us in the Scriptures, Ephesians 5:22-32. How do we know what our duties are as parents, children, employees, and employers? He tells us in the Scriptures, Ephesians 6:1-9. How do we know what it takes to grow, mature, and be productive as Christians that we might share eternity with Him? He tells us in the Scriptures, 2Peter 1:5-11. So, *“What does the Scripture say?”* should be our response to every question and situation in life!

Now do you understand why these two questions are the most important ones in life? Neither our initial salvation, nor any step of our walk of faith as a Christian, is left to be determined our own feelings, thoughts, or desires. We must *listen to, have faith in,* and *obey God’s Word*. It’s just that simple. So, read your New Testament, as it is the Law of Christ for us today, and do what it says. (10-7-14)

**“Why Doesn’t God Answer My Prayer?”**

When God answers a prayer favorably, it builds faith in the petitioner exponentially. But when God answers a prayer unfavorably, the petitioner often surrenders his faith completely. Why, do you suppose? Is our faith in God actually dependent upon Him doing everything we ask? Such is not supposed to be the foundation of our faith! Romans 10:17 says, *“So faith comes from hearing, and by the word of Christ.”* The Gospel of Jesus Christ is supposed to be the source of our faith- not whether He fulfills our every request. Did your parents give you everything you wanted when you were a child? Did you doubt their love and provision for you because they said “No” to some of your requests? Would it have been in your best interest for them to grant every immature and short-sighted demand you made? So why should our faith in God falter when He refuses some of our appeals? It shouldn’t- but it often does.

But let’s take this a step further and ask, “Why doesn’t God answer my prayer?” There can be several answers to that question:

**God may not be “listening” to you.**  Notice 1Peter 3:12, *“For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer, but* ***the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”***The Proverbial writer put it a little differently, but to the same point, *“He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination.”* (Proverbs 28:9) The point is that we cannot expect God to hear and answer our every request if we have no regard for Him and His law. Some live with complete disregard of God until some tragedy arises, then they want to pray. Don’t get me wrong, we certainly should pray to the Almighty during times of difficulty, but if that is the only time we care enough about God to pray, these Scriptures offer no guarantee of His hearing, let alone answering, our prayer.

**You have to ask *“in faith.”*** When James spoke of the importance of *asking God for wisdom,* he added this stipulation: *“But let him ask* ***in faith*** *without any doubting, for the one who doubts… let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord.”* (James 1:6-7). The “faith” of which James writes is in God, and His power and His willingness to provide all that we truly need. We cannot pray, as many have, “God, if there is a God….” To expect an answer to our prayers, we must be completely convinced in mind and heart that God exists, and will judge us eternally, *“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”* (Hebrews 11:6).

**You have to ask for “right” things.** Praying “in faith” surely must also include the understanding that God will not give us what is against His will, or is not in our best interest. Why would God do for us that which is against His will? It is an act of parental love for God to refuse to grant our requests- however righteous we are, and however sincerely we make them, if they are contrary to His perfect will, or not in our best interest. Surely we realize that our time-limited perspectives and physically-dominated requests are not always in harmony with God’s eternal wisdom and spiritual judgment. Notice 1John 5:14, *“And this is the confidence we have before Him, that, if we ask anything* ***according to His will****, He hears us.”*

**You have to also ask with the “right” motives.**  Listen carefully to James 4:3, *“You ask and do not receive,* ***because you ask with wrong motives****, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.”*  This point seems to go right along with the previous one. We have to ask for “right” things for the “right” reasons. So what are “right” reasons? Read the prayer the Lord taught the disciples in Matthew 6:9-13, then answer this: “How of many ‘things’ for which the Lord taught the disciples to pray were physical vs. spiritual?” Now think about your prayers. Is the content more *physically* or *spiritually* oriented? The point is simple. **We ought to be praying for things that will help us carry out God’s will, not asking God for things to help us carry out our will.**

Answered prayer is an amazingly powerful boost to our faith. But when God says “No” or “Not now,” there is a reason. Let’s trust His judgment in these matters, OK? (8-31-11)

**“Understanding” the Bible Differently**

Many times, when engaged in a religious discussion, I have been told, “We just understand the Bible differently.” My response is always pretty much the same, “No, we don’t *‘understand’* it differently- you may *‘understand’* it, and I may *‘misunderstand’* it, or vice versa, but we do not *‘understand’* it differently.” The response I usually get next is a blank look of shock and disbelief. The reason for this is that people in general have either been led to believe, or have come to the erroneous conclusion on their own, that we are free to interpret and practice the Word of God anyway we please. Such is patently not true!

Biblical truth is not relative. No fact is relative. By definition, a “fact” cannot be relative. What this means is that facts are true whether we “understand” and correctly apply them or not. The laws of gravity were true and controlling our world long before Sir Isaac Newton first began to understand and explain them. If some statement is relative, it is not a “fact,” but a theory or opinion. The “fact” is that God’s Word is “truth”- *“Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth”* (John 17:17); and, *“…let God be found true, though every man be found a liar…”* (Romans 3:4). Therefore, it cannot be *‘understood differently’!*  It is either ‘understood,’ or ‘misunderstood.’ Allow me to further illustrate.

If a map is accurate, I can follow it and get to my intended destination. But if I fail to properly read, understand, and follow that map, will I still arrive at the right place? **Of course not- I’ll wind up lost!** God’s word is a graciously given “map” which leads to heaven. Jesus said, *“he who hears My words, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”* (John 5:24) But if I fail to read, understand, and follow the “map” of God’s word, I cannot get to heaven! The map didn’t fail- it was still true and accurate. I just didn’t correctly understand and follow it.

There is, however, one point of this illustration that needs clarification. With our modern system of roads, there are usually several different ways to get to an intended objective. This is **not** so with God’s *divine map.* Jesus again said, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.”* (John 14:6) Peter later added, *“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved.”* (Acts 4:12) Thus, the “divine map” of God’s word gives but one *“way”* to get to heaven- the road of hearing and following the words of Jesus! If we fail to “hear” (correctly understand) them, or if we fail to “follow” them, He says we will not attain eternal reward. *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven.”* (Matthew 7:21) We cannot “do” God’s will if we fail to properly understand it. And if we “understand it differently,” one (or both) of us doesn’t really understand it at all!

Over and over in the Gospels, Jesus pleaded with His audiences to *“Hear and understand.”* (Matthew 15:10; *et al*) In the Parable of the Sower, He said the *“good soil”* was *“the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit…”* (Matthew 13:23). Folks, we can’t “understand” the Bible differently. Instead, we must study, search, and examine it carefully to come the real meaning, instead of just settling for how we want to “understand” it. Only then can we become united with God, and one another. But as long as we continue to believe we can “understand God’s word differently,” we will never be united with each other, or Him. The Truth is **not** relative- it is truth, and as such, must be properly understood and obeyed to yield its intended fruit of salvation. (2-16-11)

**The** ***Unity* Problem**

It should be abundantly clear that the Lord intended His people to be united- ***“that they may all be one…”***John 17:21. To that end, He gave us a platform to accomplish that unity: *“There is* ***one body*** *and* ***one Spirit****, just as you were also called in* ***one hope*** *of your calling;* ***one Lord****,* ***one faith****,* ***one baptism****,* ***one God*** *and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”* (Ephesians 4:4-6). But if He intended for us to be united, and gave us the necessary foundation to accomplish it, why are we so divided? Check the yellow pages under “Churches” for evidence of our divisiveness.

To say, “We’re all just taking different roads to the same place” is just not true. Jesus said there is but “one way/road”- not many different ones, cf. John 14:6; Matthew 7:13-14. It has always been interesting to me that most who claim the “different roads to the same place” mantra are making an attempt at unity, but obviously don’t believe in the “one body” or “one baptism” or “one faith” concepts stated in Ephesians 4 necessary to produce it. So, let’s spend a moment attempting to really understand how and why these “ones” should unite us as God’s people the way He intended.

There being *“one God”* should provide us with *unity in* ***worship***, John 4:23; but we (‘religious’ folks in general) have decided that we should all be able to worship in “our own way,” so we are divided. There being *“one Lord”* should provide us with *unity in* ***authority***, Matthew 28:18; but we have decided that “other authorities” (doctrines of men) are equally viable, and thus ought to be considered, so we are divided. There being *“one faith”* should provide us with *unity in* ***message***, Romans 1:16; 5:1-2; but we have decided that we need to “cater/mold the message” to this group or that mindset, so we are divided. There being *“one baptism”* should provide us with *unity in* ***birth***, John 3:3-5; Galatians 3:26-29; but we have decided that “baptism is important, but not essential,” and that it can be sprinkling or pouring water on anyone, rather than being the immersion of penitent believers, so we are divided. There being *“one Spirit”* should provide us with *unity in* ***vocation****,* Romans 8:2,7,12-14; but we have decided that the Spirit leads this person in “this” direction, and that person in “that” direction, so we are divided. There being *“one hope”* should provide us with *unity in* ***purpose***, Colossians 1:3-8; but we have decided that only some should hope for heaven, while others must be content to hope for some form of a perfected earth, so we are divided.

Get the picture? God provided us with everything we needed to be united as His people in *worship, authority, message, birth, vocation,* and *purpose.*  But we, in our own “wisdom,” turned aside from these things, and are thus divided rather than united. What makes correcting this division more difficult is the misguided notions we have about how to go about it.

Ecumenicism (uniting differing religious groups through compromise and blending) is not the answer to religious division. The reason should be obvious: ecumenicism requires the compromise of beliefs and convictions regarding the truth. We cannot become united on the basis of compromise- we must become united on the basis of conviction that the Word of God is the only standard; and that as such, it must be the standard for everyone. Men writing doctrines and dogmas that outline how to be a member of this denomination or that one don’t unite- they divide, obviously. As such, all such writings of men have to be abandoned for a *“thus says the Lord”* with a book, chapter, and verse following. Unity can only be achieved by the correct understanding and application of the Truth- not the compromise of conviction and the forfeiture of faith. Otherwise, we will never be united, and will thus never be pleasing to God. *“If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God…”* 1Peter 4:11. (2-14-12)

**Uniting Believers: What Will It Take?**

In last week’s article, we established that God wants His people united- and that we are not. Though we all claim to believe in the same God, the same Savior, and the same Spirit- who are all “One” by the way (John 17:11,21,23), we are divided into various denominations and sects. Given these things, how do we get back to where we’re supposed to be? How do we become again the “one body” (cf. Ephesians 4:4) God created and intended?

While I’ve never portended to have “all” the answers, in this case, I have at least considered the question. Therefore, it seems to me that there are some fundamental principles which must be observed and obeyed if we are to ever become united.

First, **we must believe that the Bible is God’s Word.**  You say most of us already believe that? Really? While most everyone agrees that it is *“impossible for God to lie”* (Hebrews 6:18), they apparently do not believe all that He said either. For instance, some doubt what He said about a literal six days of creation. They have succumbed to *Darwinian* pressure and have retreated to Theistic Evolution’s supposed blending of science and faith. Theistic Evolution says that although God did indeed create the things Genesis says He did, He did so with gaps of perhaps millions of years between these six “days.” Is that what God said in Exodus 20:11? What sense did it make for Jews to commemorate and keep the seventh day as a Sabbath if there were millions of years between each of the six days of creation? You see, “we” don’t all really believe the Bible is God’s Word! And if we can’t even agree on how we got here from God’s Word, how will we ever agree on how to be united here from God’s Word?

But the Bible ***is*** God’s Word, cf. 2Timothy 3:16-17; and He is directly responsible for its contents, 1Corinthians 2:10-13. We’ve already seen that men’s words divide us, so surely we can see that only God’s Word can unite us. Thus, to become “one,” we must cast aside all the doctrines and dogmas of men, and believe and use the Bible alone as our standard of faith and practice.

Second, **we must eliminate *relativism* and *subjectivism* from the process of understanding and applying God’s Word.**  In the context of biblical interpretation (and therefore application), “relativism” is the notion that Truth is not absolute, and is thus always *relative* to some particular frame of reference, such as current culture and/or moralities. Such could lead one to conclude, regarding some point of doctrine, “That may be true (right or wrong) for you, but is not necessarily true for me.” Thus, we’ve made God’s Word *relative* to ourselves, cp.1Corinthians 10:13a.

*Subjectivism* is akin to *relativism* in its effect. *Subjectivism* says that Truth is *subject* to my own interpretation of it. This is patently not true! While the *application* of Truth is *subject* to my interpretation of it- I can’t apply it correctly if I don’t understand it correctly; the Truth itself is not *subject* to my understanding of it. It’s still true whether I correctly understand and apply it or not, cp. Matthew 22:29!

These two notions of *relativism* and *subjectivism* combine to produce a major hindrance to unity: the idea that we can “understand” the Bible differently, and therefore apply it differently, and still be pleasing to God. This simply is not true. One may *understand,* and another may *misunderstand;* or, both may *misunderstand,* but two cannot *understand* the Truth differently. Why? Because truth is neither *relative* nor *subjective!* 1Corinthians 14:37 (KJV), *“For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.”*

Finally, and as a conclusion of the previous two points, **we must decide that Truth matters- and act accordingly.** The notion that Truth is somehow secondary to science (man’s knowledge) and society (man’s wisdom) is absolutely counterproductive to unity. As long as we believe and espouse that “It doesn’t really matter what you believe as long as you’re honest and sincere,” then true unity is impossible- not to mention salvation. This logic and reasoning makes impotent the very thing that can unite us: God’s Word. We’ve replaced the credibility and power of God’s Word with our own knowledge and wisdom. Surely we can all see that such just cannot (Jeremiah 10:23), and thus will not, work. True unity must be firmly founded on, and only on, God’s Word! (2-21-12)

**Unity**

“If you tie two cats’ tails together, and drop them over opposite sides of the clothesline, you may have ***unison***, but you surely won’t have ***unity!****”* Although I’ve never seen or done this, visualizing the chaos and caterwauling that would result provides insight to “unison” and “unity.” Unfortunately, “unison” is often what we have instead of “unity” in our churches. Despite having a “tie” that binds us together, true “unity” often does not really exist. So, we act and treat one another about the same as we imagine our illustrative cats would, and the fur flies- and unbelievers have a more difficult time understanding why they should become Christians, cf. John 17:21.

These things beg two important questions: 1) How do we become united; and, 2) how do we stay united? Let’s take them one at a time.

How do believers ***become*** united with one another in Christ? Let’s see what the Bible says about the first “church” fellowship in Acts 2. How did they become “united”? They had a:

***-Common Birth/Salvation***. *“So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls,”* v.41. How could any group of individuals hope to have true unity if there was not a common *entrance* into the relationship they claim to share? They were all previously “united” under the bondage of sin, v.36; and they were all told to do same thing in order to receive the forgiveness of their sins, *“Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins…”* v.38. So, they shared a common *birth* into Christ by repentance and baptism (see also 1Corinthians 12:13).

***-Common Devotion/Worship****. “And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, and to the breaking of bread and to prayer,”* v.42. For these new Christians to be *“continually devoting themselves”* to the *“apostles’ teaching,”* they had to come together in an assembly. Thus, the *devotions* mentioned in this verse seem to indicate the acts of worship through which they were united- *apostles’ teaching* (hearing the Word)*, fellowship* (it means *joint participation*)*, breaking bread* (communion)*,* and *prayer* (public/congregational). Simply put: They not only shared a *common birth* by belief, repentance, and baptism, they shared a *common devotion of worship* based on the instructions of the apostles. They were all *born* the same way, and they all *worshipped* the same way- as God said.

***-Common Emotion/Feelings****.**“And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe…”* v.43. Proper and mutual emotion in religion is not derived from contrived worship performances; it is achieved by being *family* (of the same *birth*), and being *joined together in mutual devotion* (of worship) to God. Then, because we are *family,* and *worship together* the same Father in the same way, our hearts are blended together in common emotion for Him and one another. This kind of emotion will result from doing the right things in the right ways *together.*

***-Common Effort/Work****.**“And all those who had believed were together….”* vv.44-47. Their common *birth, worship,* and *emotion* also led to a fellowship of *selfless service.* Each stopped being so caught up with self, and began working together for God’s purposes and helping each other. As a result, they worked together, ate together, studied together, and praised together. Basically, they became united!

How do believers ***stay*** united in fellowship with one another in Christ? Note what Paul wrote to the brethren at Philippi on the subject, *“by being of the* ***same mind****, maintaining the* ***same love****, united* ***in spirit****, intent on* ***one purpose****,”* Philippians 2:2. To stay “united” with other believers in fellowship, our *minds, hearts,* and *souls* must come together in the ***single*** ***intent*** ofpleasing God, v.13. How is such accomplished? Look again to the text: 1) *“do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit,”* v.3a; 2) *“but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself,”* v.3b; 3) *“do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others,”* v.4; and, 4) take on the *attitude* and *activity* of Christ Jesus, vv.5-8. While other things, such as having the same “platform” of unity are involved (see Ephesians 4:4-6), the key to achieving and maintaining unity is simple: Read the Bible, and do *what* it says, *when* it says, *how* it says. To become truly united, we must put away our own egos, ideas, and desires and come together on a *“thus sayeth the Lord!”*  (4-4-14)

**Waiting for God**

“Waiting for God” was the name of a British sitcom airing on Public Television from 1990 through 1994. The show was set in a retirement home and featured an unmarried couple of spirited “pensioners” who lived next-door to each other, and constantly gave the management of the facility fits. The title was surely a sarcastic swipe at their present lot in life- “Waiting for God” was about all they had left to do, but it surely didn’t keep them from wreaking havoc on staff and fellow residents alike! This article is certainly not about the show, but the title got me to thinking about the trouble we often get into while **impatiently** *waiting for God…*

**Abraham and Sarah.** Abram was seventy-five years old (and Sarai was sixty-five) when God promised him that his family would become a *great nation,* cf. Genesis 12:2; 17:17. As the years dragged on, and God’s promise was yet unfulfilled, Abram and Sarai grew impatient. So, after what surely must have seemed like an eternity of waiting, Abram’s first attempt to *help God out* was to suggest that Eliezer, the eldest servant born in his house, could become his heir. But God rejected this plan, *“This man will not be your heir; but one from who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir,”* Genesis 15:3-4. About ten years pass. Now Sarai- bless her heart, tires of waiting on God, but has an idea to help Him. God said that the heir would come from Abram, but didn’t exactlysay that he would come from *her* body. So she proposes that Abram take her handmaid, Hagar, to wife and bear children through her. Abram consents to the plan, and a son, Ishmael, is born. But God rejects this plan, and although He promises to multiply Ishmael’s descendants, He implores Abram to *“Walk before Me, and be blameless,”* cf. Genesis 16; 17:2. Finally, after twenty-five years of *waiting on God,* multiple attempts to circumvent God’s plan, and even serious doubts that it would ever be fulfilled (see Genesis 17:17-19 and 18:11-15), Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah, Genesis 21:1-3 ... just as God promised. Though they didn’t like it, and even tried to *help God out,* eventually Abraham and Sarah had enough faith to “wait for God,” and were blessed- both with an heir and with the inheritance of faith, Romans 4:18-22!

**King Saul.** The Philistines, the archenemies of God’s people at the time, had assembled 30,000 chariots, 6,000 horsemen, and *“people like the sand which is on the seashore in abundance”* for war. God’s appointed king for Israel, Saul, had 3,000 men, cf. 1Samuel 13:1-5. As Saul waited the appointed seven days that Samuel, God’s prophet, had specified in which he would come and offer sacrifices and tell Saul what the Lord wanted him to do, his army *trembled* and began to dessert and *scatter,* cp. 1Samuel 10:8; 13:6-7. Saul decided that he could wait no longer, and sacrificed the *burnt* and *peace offerings* himself- which was a violation of God’s Law. Then, *“as soon as he finished offering the burnt offering, that behold, Samuel came,”* 1Samuel 13:10. Though Saul went out to greet him as if nothing was wrong, Samuel immediately said, *“What have you done?”* Saul tried to explain why he *forced himself* to make the sacrifice, 1Samuel 13:11-12. But Samuel wasn’t buying his excuses, and replied, *“You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, for now the Lord would have established your kingdom forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure,”* 1Samuel 13:13-14. Saul could have had it all, if he had only been patient and waited for God a few more hours! Instead, he lost it all- the kingdom was taken from him and he was replaced with a *man after God’s own heart,* David.

So, what’s the *take-away* from “waiting for God”? There are a couple salient points we need to get:

* God can tell time and read a calendar, but is eternal- so His perspective of “time” is more than a little different than ours. Everything in our world seems to be bound by time. But God is Master of the Universe, and is not so bound, cf. 2Peter 3:8-13.
* God never does anything *too soon* or *too late.*  Consider that *“when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son”* (Galatians 4:4). He was *“the testimony borne at the proper time”* (1Timothy 2:6). God knew exactly when *“the consummation of the ages”* was (Hebrews 9:26), and acted precisely then. Remember, God doesn’t operate on our schedule; we must operate on His. So, *“wait on the Lord…”* Psalm 27:14; 37:34; Proverbs 20:22!

Therefore, stop trying to “help God out” in fulfilling His purposes for and through you, and be faithfully patient as you trust and obey. It took twenty-five years for Abraham and Sarah to learn this lesson- how long will it take you? And from King Saul, never give up on God- He will always do exactly *what* He said, *when* He said. Don’t fret; don’t fear; and don’t think you have to *force yourself* to violate God’s Law because He isn’t acting in your life when *you think* He should! Be patient. Trust Him. Be faithfully obedient. He’ll take care of the rest. (9-6-17)

***Walking Circumspectly:* Squirrels, Snakes, and Boards**

Ephesians 5:15 (KJV), *“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise…”*  I’m not a big fan of the King James Version of the Bible. My preference away from it has more to do with antiquated language than perceived inaccuracies of translation. But in this particular verse (and a few others also, though for different reasons), I actually prefer the KJV to the more modern-language versions because it uses the word ***circumspectly****.* None of the other major translations utilize this particular word; instead, they generally use words that convey the idea of “walking *carefully”*- which is OK, but not as good as it could be. Let me explain further.

***Circumspectly***is translated from two differing Greek terms: ***blepo****,* means *to look* or *discern with the eye;* and ***akribos****,* means *diligently, exactly,* or *accurately.* So, the literal meaning of *circumspectly* is that of ***looking carefully*** in order to be ***fully aware of your circumstances***. In more simple terms, it means to pay attention where you’re stepping, which in this case, refers to our *walk* of life. Perhaps an illustration will help.

There is nothing that will ruin a good squirrel hunt quicker than for someone in the group to see a snake, or hear one rattle. The reason this ruins the hunt is simple: instead of looking up into the trees where the squirrels are, everyone is now watching the ground where the snakes are! The squirrel hunters are now hunting snakes instead of squirrels, **but they’re *walking circumspectly!***Every step, after seeing a snake, hearing one rattle, or even just hearing that someone nearby has seen one, will be taken only after a thorough examination the landing area.

If we further understand that Satan is *“that old serpent”* (Revelation 12:9) who *“beguiled Eve through his subtlety”* (2Corinthians 11:3), then need for *walking circumspectly* is readily apparent. Satan has filled the pathway of life with many dangers. Therefore, for one desiring to please God in his walk of faith, every step must be carefully taken only after a diligent examination of the area into which he’s stepping. To do otherwise, as our verse in Ephesians 5:15 indicated, is *“foolish”* indeed. The problem is that Satan often pays closer attention to our steps than do we.

There once was a sticky note stuck on the bottom of my computer screen on which I jotted a phrase, the source of which has been forgotten. The phrase was this: “falling through the cracks of my attention.” When building a floor, cracks (spaces) are put between the boards for a number of reasons, one of which is to cover more area with fewer boards. But this “stretching” of the wood also means an increased opportunity for things to fall through the cracks, or gaps, between the boards. Now think about our lives as that floor. We keep stretching the boards of our attention farther and farther apart in order to cover more area. But this also increases the opportunity for more and more things to “fall through the cracks of our attention.” Businessmen sometimes say that “the Devil is in the details” of their deals, but this preacher says “The Devil is also in the cracks between the boards of our attention!”

The less attention we pay to the steps we take on the boards of life on which we tread, the greater the opportunity Satan has to “bite” us. And the more we try to stretch the boards of our attention by creating bigger cracks between them, the less *“circumspectly”* we will walk! That is *“unwise”* indeed. Folks, *“walk circumspectly”* and give heed to Ephesians 5:17, *“So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is”-* there’s a Snake out there you know! (8-23-16)

**Walking Together**

The Old Testament prophet Amos was a *herdsman* and a *dresser of sycamore figs* (not like our figs, but a fig-like fruit that had to be pinched or bruised to ripen), Amos 7:14. He stepped out of the obscurity of his agrarian way of life to preach a much-needed message of reform to God’s people about 755 years before Christ. Obviously, speaking for God to an apostate people was not something for which his sheep and sycamore trees had prepared him, or was it? Amos was the perfect “man for the job” to deliver a no-nonsense message of repentance or destruction that Israel sorely needed. Their so-called prophets had become *ear-ticklers* who spoke only the soothing words they wanted to hear. So, God calls Amos to leave his sheep and trees to become what some have called “the first great reformer.” His message from God was largely one of coming destruction because Israel (used of both the northern 10 tribes of Judah and the 2 southern tribes of Israel combined) no longer ***walked with God.***

Take time to re-read the book of Amos this week. You may be somewhat taken aback at its straightforward approach. This is not a *sympathetic, compassionate, loving* plea the farmer-turned-prophet delivers for God to Israel. It is a *stern* rebuke, in no uncertain terms, of apostasy from the standpoint of the *justice* and *righteousness* of God*.* Israel has not *walked with God* by abiding in the light of His will. But God has commissioned Amos, and he is *agreed* and *walking with God* by delivering this message of rebuke and judgment to come. Therefore, the prophet asks, *“Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?”* (NKJV, Amos 3:3). The *herdsman farmer* didn’t agree or *walk with* the preachers of the day, but he did *agree* and *walk with* God, and this made him the right man of the job! So, what does it take to *“walk with God”?*

***Walking with God* takes,** as clearly pointed out by Amos, ***agreement with God.*** This seems simple enough to appear axiomatic, but we must take it at face value that we cannot *disagree* with God and still *walk with* Him. *“And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth,”* 1John 1:5-6. How is it, then, that many today claim to *walk with God* and yet *disagree with* Him about what is and isn’t moral and right? Can we really *walk with God* while saying that His word is outdated, or somehow no longer applies? Obviously, God does not agreewith this conclusion! *“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever,”* Isaiah 40:8. So, we cannot consider what God calls “evil” as being acceptable or “good” (or vice versa) and *walk with God*, Isaiah 5:20-21. We can’t *walk with God* **while** *disagreeing with His will!*

***Walking with God takes,*** given the above, ***knowledge of God’s word.*** Again, this may be somewhat of an oversimplification, but we have to *agree with God* rather than expecting Him to *agree with us.* We neither created the world, nor ordained the laws by which it operates- God did. He is the *Creator* and we are the *created,* not the other way around. So, for *agreement* to exist, we must *learn* and *acquiesce* to His will/word rather than expecting Him to *learn* and *adapt* to our conclusions and will! We cannot, therefore, *remake* God in our image, or *rewrite* His laws to suit our tastes. Such is precisely what Romans 1:16-23 calls suppressing *“the truth in unrighteousness,”* becoming *“futile in their speculations,”* and being *“fools”* while *“professing to be wise”!*  So, if we plan to *walk with God,* we had better get busy *“trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord”* (Ephesians 5:10) instead of attempting to rewrite the Bible and reorganize Christianity to suit our own purposes, and then expecting Him to be pleased.

***Walking with God takes*** (are you ready for this?) ***walking.*** You’re thinking, “Uncanny mastery of the obvious,” right? But please understand that we don’t *walk with God* by just *agreeing* with Him and *knowing his Will* (course/direction), we have to also be *actively obedient* (walking)*.* Jesus said it differently, but made the same point in Luke 6:46, *“Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”* Christianity isn’t about just *knowing God’s will* and *agreeing with Him,* but also ***doing*** *His will!*  Noah *“found favor in the eyes of the Lord”* because he *“was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God,”* Genesis 6:8-9!

Now, when God says *fornication, idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, theft, covetousness, drunkenness, slander,* and *swindling* will keep one from heaven (1Corinthians 6:9-10), are you going to *“walk together”* with God, or not? What Amos would say? (7-15-14)

**Was Jesus “Blessed” by God?**

When most people talk about being “blessed” by God, to what type of “blessings” are they referring? Many of us are extremely blessed by Him beyond *daily bread, clothes,* and *shelter* (cf. Matthew 6:24-34; 1Timothy 6:7-8), and the *“rains from heaven and fruitful seasons”* satisfy our *“hearts with food and gladness,”* Acts 14:17. He deserves all the praise, honor, and glory we can give for these things! But, have you ever thought about our title question, “Was **Jesus** *blessed”* by God? Think about it for a moment: Was Jesus *blessed* by God with most of the things we typically consider to be our greatest “blessings”?

**The blessing of *family.***We often consider our families to be great blessings from God, and indeed they can be just that. But, Jesus also had *earthly* parents, and siblings (Matthew 12:55-56). Were they “blessings” from God when they apparently wanted Him to miraculously “fix” a shortage of wine at a wedding feast (John 2:3-4)? Were they a “blessing” from God when, even after seeing Him perform many miracles, they did not *“believe in Him”* (John 7:5), and even thought He might have *“lost His senses,”* (Mark 3:21)? He had no wife to love and comfort Him. He had no children to enjoy, or grandchildren on whom to dote. Was Jesus “blessed” with family? He was “blessed” with some *family,* but it was His ***spiritual*** *family* that He considered a greater blessing! *“For whoever shall do the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother,”* Matthew 12:50.  *Physical* families can be a “blessing” or a “curse,” but ***spiritual***families are always a true blessing from God!

**The blessing of *prosperity/comfort.***  God blesses most of us far beyond our *necessities* (of *food, shelter,* and *clothing*), even to our *luxury.* And of course, we should be thankful for all of these things, and give God the glory for them. But again, was Jesus “blessed” in these ways and with these things? Consider His words from Matthew 8:20, *“The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”*  Although He traveled constantly for “work,” and labored almost nonstop day and night, He didn’t even have two-day’s worth of common laborer wages “on him” to pay the tax in Capernaum, Matthew 17:24-27. He wasn’t “blessed” with a comfortable home, a pantry full of food, an ample bank account and savings for retirement, or the newest model of transportation (He even had to *borrow* a donkey for a special occasion, cf. Matthew 21:2-3). Though perpetually poor, He considered the *eternal treasure* and *kingdom of heaven* to be of greater value than any *earthly* “blessing,”cf. Matthew 6:19-20; 12:44-46! *Physical* prosperity and comfort can be a “blessing” or a “curse,” but the ***spiritual*** wealth of a sound relationship with God in His kingdom is indeed of *“surpassing value,”* Philippians 3:8-11!

What’s the point of all of this? That we shouldn’t count and be thankful for our *physical* blessings? Absolutely not! The point is that we should **always** place greater value and priority on the ***spiritual***blessings we receive from God. Please consider the following:

* Would you consider yourself “blessed” by God if you didn’t have a family? Or, if you had one who had no regard for God and His kingdom? Would you consider yourself “blessed” if your family was *unsupportive* of your commitment to Christ and thought you had *lost your senses,* or *disowned* you for believing and obeying God?
* Would you consider yourself “blessed” by God if you only had *daily bread,* the *clothes on your back,* and *no address* to call “home”?

The truly “blessed” by God are: *poor in spirit, mourners, gentle, hungry/thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart,* and *peacemakers,* who are sometimes *persecuted* and *reviled* for their spiritual commitment to God, Matthew 5:3-11! In these ways and with these “blessings,” you can truly *“Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great…”* (Matthew 5:12) regardless of what *physical* “blessings” you do or do not have. (12-22-15)

**Washing Windows**

Washing the windows is a job no one really likes- unless you own a professional glass cleaning business, and are well paid to do it! But for most of us, window washing is a “have to” rather than a “want to” task. There are, however, some viable reasons for our less-than-enthusiastic attitude toward the job.

For one thing, window washing is a lot of trouble. It’s not usually just spraying some ammonia on the glass and wiping it off with a paper towel, which is why we don’t mind cleaning mirrors nearly as much as washing windows! Instead, it involves: removing all the screens; chipping off the dirt-dauber balls of concrete they manage to cement to the window frames despite the screens; dragging out the tangled, “Gordian knot” mess otherwise known as a water hose; fetching or borrowing a ladder, because you can never reach the top of the window without it; finding that handy-dandy soap-dispensing squeegee/brush combo apparatus that worked so well on that late night TV commercial (and cleaning the dirt-dauber nest out of its inlet too); and spending the better part of the day trying to figure out how to keep the soapy water from bouncing back off the window corners into your eyes. Then, there is also the troubling task of trying to figure out which screen went on which window, and constantly telling yourself, “I know it came off of *one* of these windows!” All of which is endured only to go back inside the house and discover streaks on every window! Then, and only then, your wife/husband hands you the phone number of a professional windowing cleaning service (insert exhausted, heavy sigh here).

It occurs to me that cleaning our windows is somewhat like cleaning our lives, in that:

* Nobody really likes to do it, but it has to be done, or we suffer the consequences of a dirty and restricted view of things- not to mention the eternal consequences;
* None of the “gadgets” really work- or even make the job any easier, and can make it even more difficult;
* The actual tools required are simple and readily available, it’s the work that is hard;
* The more often you do it, the less dirt there is to clean, and the easier the job becomes; and,
* No matter how diligent you are in your cleaning, there are still going to be a few streaks and spots that you missed.

Now, these things aren’t written to depress you, or to discourage you from the task of cleaning your life, for such is surely God’s will! *“Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful for the Master, prepared for every good work,”* 2Timothy 2:21. Instead, it is hoped that these simple comparisons between washing windows and cleaning your life manifest:

**1) The importance of the task.** It is, after all, a command of God, *“Therefore, having these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God,”* 2Corinthians 7:1. Therefore, failing to *“wash”* (Acts 22:16; 1Corinthians 6:11) and *“cleanse”* (James 4:8) our lives leaves us dirty and unfit for God’s company either now, or eternally.

**2) The benefit of regular effort.** Your *eyes* are said to be the *windows* of your soul. Having *windows* that are *“clean”* changes your whole perspective of life. Unfortunately, the inverse is also true, just as Jesus said in Matthew 6:23, *“But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”*  And finally,

**3) The necessity of God’s grace.** No one has the power to completely *cleanse* his life- Jesus has to do that by the gracious gift of His blood, Ephesians 1:7. *“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,”* 1John 1:8-9.

The point is simple: Just like washing windows, cleaning your life requires some diligence, but the *view* afterwards is well worth the effort! (9-10-13)

**“We just can’t…**

**Run and hide from an *omnipresent* God.”** Just ask Jonah (Jonah 1-4). God told Jonah to go and urge the great city of Nineveh to repent to avoid complete destruction for their exceeding wickedness. But Jonah viewed the Assyrians, of which Nineveh was the capital city, as Israel’s enemy. So, he attempted to “run and hide” from God’s requirements. Obviously, that didn’t work for a very simple reason: God is everywhere, Psalms 139:7-12. We simply cannot “run and hide” from the God who is everywhere, or from His requirements of us, Luke 11:30.

**Fight an *omnipotent* God.”** Just ask Pharaoh (Exodus 7-12). The Egyptian king had enslaved and greatly mistreated God’s people. God sent His deliverer, Moses, to Pharaoh with a straightforward command, *“Let My people go.”* But Pharaoh refused to comply, and tried to fight against the God of heaven. Ten plagues later, when even Pharaoh’s own firstborn son was dead, he relented. But even after Israel left Egypt, Pharaoh changed his mind again, and pursued them. That didn’t work too well either, as God destroyed the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, Exodus 14. We simply cannot “fight” the all-powerful God.

**Outsmart an *omniscient* God.”** Just ask the Christians in Rome. God, through Paul’s inspired letter to them, explained that the *ungodly* and *unrighteous world* sought to *“suppress the truth,”* Romans 1:18. To do so, they had to ignore the obvious- the *eternal power* and the *divine nature* of God that was clearly evident within the creation, and themselves, vv.19-20. So, though wise in their own eyes, they became foolish enough to reject the very existence of God, vv.21-22. This led to rampant idolatry, v.23, all sorts of depravity, vv.24-31, and the ultimate rejection of God’s word, v.32. However, since everyone will be judged by the Word, John 12:48, they simply could not “outsmart” the all-knowing God- nor can we.

**Outlast an *eternal* God.”** In conflicts between men, it is not always the smartest or the strongest that wins- sometimes the ultimate winner is simply the one who outlasts his opponent. Will this tactic work with God? Hardly. Physical man is a mortal and finite being. From his very beginning, everything about him is marked and governed by time. Psalm 90:10 says that our days will be about 70 or 80 years. But God, who is immortal and infinite, is neither marked nor governed by time, vv.1-2. No, we simply cannot hope to overcome by “outlasting” the eternal God.

**“But neither can we…**

**Exhaust His ability to love.”** We typically “love” for selfish reasons- because there is some perceived value in this person to us. But God’s love *establishes* a value rather than *requiring* one. Note Romans 5:8 to illustrate, *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that* ***while we were sinners****, Christ died for us.”* The point is that while we were *sinners* (or *“enemies,”* v.10), and therefore contained no inherent value to God, His love ***established*** sufficient value in us for Him to be willing to sacrifice His Son to save us. Such love is simply inexhaustible. We can, however, miss the benefits of that love by failing to appropriate its sacrifice. We do so by refusing to obey the gospel. But nonetheless, the very essence of God is love, 1John 4:8-10. Therefore, it cannot be exhausted, for then the eternal God would cease to exist.

**Exceed His power to save.”** No matter how far we have strayed into sin and depravity- perhaps because of the above mentioned futile attempts to oppose and reject God, we cannot exceed His power to save, Romans 5:20. God has invested His power to save in the gospel, 1:16. If we will: in faith turn to Christ, 10:10; confess Him as Lord of our lives (which necessarily includes repentance), 10:9; and be buried with Him in baptism, 6:3-4; then any and all sins, no matter how heinous or depraved, can and will be forgiven, 6:5-7. Just ask Saul of Tarsus, cf. 1Timothy 1:13-14.

It makes no sense whatsoever to oppose and reject an *omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient,* and *eternal* God. But, why would we **want** **to** oppose and reject a God whose love for us inexhaustible, and His ability to save us we are unable to exceed? So instead of opposing and rejecting Him, why not reciprocate His love by trusting and obeying Him? (1-14-14)

**What God Hasn’t Said**

Some folks seem to take their cues in religion from what God hasn’t said. Apparently, almost anything can be a part of a fellowship and church work or worship if “God didn’t say not to do it.” Let’s think about that logic and reason for a moment.

When giving Noah instructions for building an ark through which he and his family could be saved from the coming destruction of those who were unwilling to obey God, the Lord **didn’t forbid** him from using pine, oak, cedar, maple, sycamore, cypress, etc. Instead, God just told Noah what type of wood he **could use**, and that automatically eliminated the rest, Gen.6:14ff. God was silent on these other kinds of wood because He specified the type of wood He wanted Noah to use.

Likewise, when God specified through Moses that priests had to come from the tribe of Levi, Deut.33:8-11, He didn’t have to forbid the tribes of Rueben, Simeon, Issachar, Dan, Naphtali, Judah, etc. All the other tribes were necessarily excluded when God specified Levi as the priestly tribe, cf. Heb.7:14. God was silent on these other tribes because He had specified the tribe He wanted to serve as priests.

As priests, Nadab and Abihu were to keep fire burning on the altar of the Lord continuously, Lev.6:12-13; and fire used for other sacrifices and offerings was to be taken from this altar, Lev.16:12. So, they were killed by God when they *“offered strange fire before the Lord, which He* ***had not commanded*** *them,”* Lev.10:1-2.Did God need to say, “Don’t use fire from here, or here, or there”? Not at all- when He told the priests from where the fire needed to come, every other place and source was automatically eliminated. God was silent on “other fire” because He had specified the fire He wanted to be used.

Now, let’s make a specific application of these things (though the same principles should guide all other applications also!). Most religions of today use instruments of music to praise God in worship. If asked why they choose to worship in this way, the answer is often, “God didn’t say not to use it.” Can’t we see that God didn’t tell Noah “not to use cedar,” or tell Israel “not to make priests from the tribe of Rueben,” or tell Nadab and Abihu “not to use fire from some other source” either? But God does tell us what “instruments” to use to praise Him in Ephesians 5:19, *“****speaking*** *to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody* ***with your heart*** *to the Lord;”.*  The ***voice***and the ***heart***were the instruments specified-not the violin and harp.

The objection usually raised to this is, “But they used instrumental music to praise God in the Old Testament!” They sure did, but please answer this question: “**Why** did they use instrumental music in the Old Testament to praise God?” 2Chronicles 29:25 provides the answer, *“He stationed the Levites in the house of Lord with cymbals, with harps, and lyres, according to the command of David and of Gad the king’s seer, and of Nathan the prophet;* ***for the command was from the Lord*** *through His prophets.”*  God specified instrumental music for Jews under the Law of Moses in the Old Testament. We are Christians under the Law of Christ in the New Testament. Where is God’s specification of instruments of music besides the voice and the heart in the New Testament?

“But weren’t the first Christians Jews?” Absolutely, and yet any reputable historian or bible encyclopedia will tell you that mechanical music was not a part of Christian worship until late in the seventh century A.D. when Pope Vitalian decreed it as an acceptable form of worship. Overwhelmingly, instrumental music in worship was rejected by all the major Protestant denominations (and their leaders such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, and John Wesley) until the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But more importantly, why did Jewish Christians, who were accustomed to using mechanical instruments to worship God under the Old Testament Law, suddenly abandon the use of them in Christian worship? Again, the answer is simple: “Neither God, Jesus, nor the Holy Spirit (or men inspired by Them) authorized the use of mechanical instruments in the New Testament for Christian worship.” There was no need to say (or write), “Don’t use *this* or *that* mechanical instrument” because God had specified the voices and hearts of Christians singing praises to Him. There are at least nine N.T. passages that specify ***singing***praises to God, Matthew 26:30; Acts 16:25; Romans 15:9; 1Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12 and 13:15; and James 5:13. But, though mechanical instruments were readily available, and had been a part of Jewish worship, there is not one N.T. passage that species using one (or several) for Christian worship. Apparently, early Christians understood that the *silence of God* did not authorize this, or any other practice. Does it really make that much difference? Ask Nadab and Abihu. Please study, reflect, and think on these things carefully. (5-29-13)

***“What is Truth?”***

I seriously doubt that Pilate meant the question he asked Jesus, shortly before surrendering Him to the Jews for crucifixion, to be anything other than rhetorical. But even if the Roman Governor was not really looking for a reply, it is a question that currently needs to be asked and answered.

Please carefully consider this statement: “While ‘truth’ can be **discerned** by men, and they can **decide** to follow or reject it, they never **determine** it- God does that.” This statement goes against the grain of modern religion. Men today meet in conventions, councils, and synods in efforts to “determine” rather than to “discern” truth- and in fact, have been doing so for hundreds of years. These efforts will always be futile for a number of important reasons we would do well to consider.

**Truth is eternal, Isaiah 40:8**. *“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”*  While man, like *grass* and *flowers*, is a finite creature, the truth of God’s word remains firmly infinite throughout our generations. This means “truth” doesn’t change, evolve, or need updating to “keep up” with man. It is man that must conform to God’s word, not the other way around, Romans 12:2.

**Truth is divine, John 14:6**. Jesus said He was *“the truth.”* Not only is He the embodiment of “truth” (John 1:14), He, as God, is the *Author* of it, John 8:31-32. Therefore, men neither **determine** nor **dictate** “truth,” they just **discern** it, or fail to do so, and **decide** to obey it, or fail to do so.

There are also a couple of conclusions implied from these things that we cannot escape.

**Truth is not relativeto *time****.* It is not relativeto time, or the occupants of any time period. God determines the “right” of righteousness and the “sin” of sinfulness. We can’t decide to *“call evil good, and good evil”* (Isaiah 5:20) because we think the changes of time dictate such. God, in every generation, has demanded that man simply believe and obey Him. This was true of Noah, Abraham, Israel, and Peter, as well as Paul, and it is true for us also, James 2:14-26.

**Truth is not relative to man’s *understanding* of it (or lack thereof)*.*** 2Thessalonians 1:8 makes this clear when it states that *“retribution”* will be forthcoming to *“those who do not* ***know God*** *and to those who do not* ***obey the gospel*** *of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* The next verse adds that *“these* (the *unknowing* and the *disobedient* from the previous verse) *will pay the penalty of eternal destruction….”.*  Just like in civil matters, ignorance of the laws of God does not excuse violation of them, cf. Acts 17:30. Also understand that two men do not “understand the truth differently.” One may “understand” and one may “misunderstand,” or both may “misunderstand,” but both do not “understand” it differently. This is so because truth is not relative to our understanding of it. It remains “truth” whether we understand and apply it correctly or not.

**Truth is not relative to man’s *acceptance* of it (or lack thereof)*.***  The truth remains “the truth” whether men of any time period accept it or not. It doesn’t change because men of a certain time period, mindset, or morality reject and refuse to obey it. Therefore, efforts to *modernize* the truth of God’s word by making it “less offensive” to our current sensibilities, mindset, and morality, or to make it “more acceptable” to the masses, is fatally flawed. There is a simple reason for this- truth that is distorted (see Galatian 1:6-10) no longer saves. Note Jesus’ words of truth on this point, *“If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,”* John 8:31b-32.

Pilate asked the right question, *“What is truth?”* (John 18:38), even if he didn’t really expect or desire an answer. In fact, Jesus had already answered the question before it was asked. He had just said, *“My kingdom is not of this world,”* v.36. Since the kingdom of Christ is not ***of this world****,* neither does ***this world***determine “the truth” on which that kingdom stands. Thus, we humans neither ***determine*** nor ***dictate*** “truth.” We need to, instead, confine ourselves to **discerning** and **deciding** to obey the truth that God has already determined and dictated! (1-7-14)

**What Saves Us?**

In Acts 2:37, when confronted with the truth that Jesus was indeed the Christ, and the realization of their sins came full-force upon them, the assembled audience asked the most important question anyone can ask regarding salvation, *“What shall we do?”* Note they didn’t ask “What shall we believe?” or “What shall we feel?” or even “What shall we experience?” No, they asked, “What shall we **do**?” Even these yet unpardoned murderers of the Messiah understood that salvation required activity on their part.

The response came quickly and concisely from Peter, *“Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins…”* v.38. Note again, they were not told what to think, feel, or experience; they were told what to do to be saved. Given even this small amount of information, how anyone can say that man does not, and cannot, do anything to attain salvation is simply amazing. Read the text for yourself. These people were lost because of sin; they desired to be saved from the eternal consequence of their sins; they asked what they needed to do to attain forgiveness; and were told what to do to be forgiven. As one of my old preaching mentors used to say, “You have to have help to miss that- you can’t miss it by yourself!”

Does that mean baptism “alone” saves us? Of course not! The verse itself includes repentance as being required. Please, please, please understand this vital point: **The N.T. does not say that anything alone saves us-** not “baptism alone,” not “repentance alone,” not “confession alone,” not “grace alone,” and not “faith alone” (though at least these two words do appear together in the text- but it instead says *“You see that a man is justified by works, and* ***not*** *by faith alone.”* James 2:26). Nothing “alone” saves us- not even “the blood of Jesus alone” saves us. Think about it: if the blood of Jesus “alone” saved us, then everyone would be saved because it was shed for the sins of everyone, right? But not everyone will be saved. Jesus made this very plain in Matthew 7:21, *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who* ***does*** *the will of My Father, who is in heaven.”*

Look, the N.T. says that all of the above mentioned items save us: baptism, 1Peter 3:21; repentance, Acts 3:19; confession, Matthew 10:32; grace, Ephesians 2:8; faith, Romans 5:1; and blood, Ephesians 1:7. However, none of them “alone” saves us- it is the concerted combination of them all that orchestrates salvation.

But if you’re insistent on looking for “one thing” that will produce deliverance from sin, I suppose it would have to be the Gospel, *“for it is the power of God for salvation,”* Romans 1:16. Even here, however, activity is required on our part. The power of the gospel doesn’t work by osmosis! Jesus said, *“you shall* ***know*** *the truth, and the truth shall make you free,”* John 8:32; and by inspiration, Peter added, *“Since you have in* ***obedience*** *to the truth purified your souls…”* 1Peter 1:22. The power of the gospel to save is dependent upon our study and knowledge of it, and our willingness to humbly submit ourselves to it in obedience. If we don’t know it- we can’t obey it. If we know it, but don’t obey it, it won’t save us in our disobedience. It really is as simple as that!

If you want to know the gospel, and understand how all of those above-mentioned items work together to produce salvation, then please come to the Southside Church of Christ (602 Henderson St., Jacksonville) this coming Sunday (9:30 AM & 6:PM) and Monday through Wednesday at 7:00 PM where **Bro. Jacob Hudgins** of Garland, TX will be presenting a special series of gospel lessons. We’d love to have you come join us in studying God’s word together. After all, the gospel really is what saves us by telling what God has done to provide for our salvation, and telling us what we must do to attain it (cf. Titus 2:11-12). (3-13-12)

***“What Sort of People Ought You to Be“?***

The question of our title is admittedly lifted from its context in 2Peter 3:11. The sentence from which this questioning phrase is taken is not really even a question as much as it is a rhetorical statement. But the purloined part is exactly what I’d like us to consider, so please forgive the poaching. Think about the query posed, *“What sort of people ought you to be?”* Though Peter surely meant it to be both personally instructional and introspective, consider it relative to **your children**. Let’s rephrase it as, “What sort of people ought ***your children*** to be?”

It’s all too easy to give overly simplistic and platitudinous answers to this kind of question, such as, “I want my children to be *good Christians*”- though we may not be really sure how to define a “good” Christian vs. a “bad” one. The end productof our child-rearing efforts should be Christ-like adults. If we don’t have this goal firmly fixed in ***our*** minds as we lead and direct them when they’re young, it is very difficult for ***them*** to become “the sort of people they ought to be” as adults. To that end, think with me about a few core-principles and values that will help them to be children that we can proud of now, and adults that God will be proud to claim later. Obviously, even the best parenting efforts can be undone by rebellious adult offspring, cf. Hosea 7:13-15, but surely we can make every effort to help our little ones to be:

***Cooperative* rather than *Competitive*.** We have turned the world into such a *competitive* place that each one thinks that he has to “get ahead” of everyone else. In the process we’ve forgotten how to *cooperate* with one another*- “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor,”* Ecclesiastes 4:9. Children who are taught to be excessively competitive tend to put down and demean others to illustrate their own presumed superiority rather than encouraging and helping them in a spirit of cooperation and mutual accomplishment, cf. Hebrews 12:12-13. Unless we steer them differently, they will lack basic **compassion** and tend to be overly **critical** of others and their perceived short-comings (where would they possibly learn that?). It’s no surprise therefore, that employers are constantly searching for applicants who can “work well with others”!

***Humble* rather than *Haughty*.** Perhaps these are linked to, or even stem from, the previous pair. *Cooperation* requires *humility* (biblically, *humility* refers to *regarding others as more important than self,* cf. Philippians 2:3), but an overly *competitive* nature often belies *selfishness,* and promotes arrogance and haughtiness. It seems that currently, our competitive natures not only demand that we defeat our competitors, but that we also demean and belittle them and arrogantly tout ourselves in the process. Is this really the *“sort of people we ought to be”?*

**Helpful rather than Harmful.**  Some people will “go out of their way” to help others, and some will “go out of their way” to harm others. These traits don’t just “show-up” in adults. Instead, they are instilled by the education, example, and encouragement of their parents in people when they are children, either positively or negatively. Children are *taught* to be abusive or assistive toward others and their property, and both are the result of underlying attitudes. Abusive behaviors often stem from failures to be taught proper respect for others and their property. A generation (or two?) has been so overdosed on self-respect and positive self-images that perhaps many have become “self-centered,” and have thus lost the proper regard for others.

**Demure rather than Demanding.**  “Demure” is not a common word in most of our vocabularies. It is an adjective that basically refers to being modest. “Modesty” is often (correctly) associated with clothing, but has just as much to do with our attitudes and how we conduct ourselves. The demure or modest person doesn’t demand everyone’s attention, nor expect everyone to bow to his/her wishes. Like all the other negative traits covered, we teach our children, or encourage or allow them, to become demanding of their own way and our attention. Proverbs 30:31a warned of the outcome of such, *“The leech has two daughters, ‘Give,’ ‘Give.’”*  We can teach our children to be demure or demanding- but we will reap the harvest of the seed we sow.

Surely there are other attributes that will, if taught and encouraged in our children, help them grow into Christ-like adults. If we want our children to be mature, independent, kind, trustworthy, gracious, and loving people, we have to teach them to be the same kind of children. (4-16-13)

**What Will You Give in Exchange for Your Soul?**

*“For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”* Matthew 16:26

The Lord’s point, if I understand it correctly, is that there is no *physical* thing with which a man may *buy back* his *forfeited* soul. However, the context also makes it clear that the *spiritual* personal purchase price (in addition to the obvious sacrifice of Jesus, v.21) of one’s soul is *self-denial, self-sacrifice,* and *true discipleship,* v.24. However, let’s consider the Lord’s words from a slightly different perspective to see if it will help us come to a better understanding of these things.

While there is indeed no *physical* thing that a man ***can***give in exchange to ***purchase*** his soul, there are several *physical* things that we ***do***give in exchange to ***forfeit*** them (cf. Hebrews 3:12ff).

**We exchange *material needs and desires*** for our souls. In Luke 14:16ff, Jesus told a parable where the offer of salvation is compared to *“a big dinner”* to which many had been invited. Notice that the first invitee *exchanged* the invitation (for the salvation of his soul) for the *need* he felt to *look at land* he had purchased, v.18. How often the *needs* we feel for *material* things (possessions) are *exchanged* for our soul’s salvation! Jesus warned against this in Luke 12:15, *“Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.”*  It is so easy to become wrapped up in the pursuit ofthe *material things* of life- things *moths* and *rust destroy* or that *thieves steal* (Matthew 6:19-20), that we wind up *exchanging* the *priceless value* and *eternal permanence* of our souls for them.

**We exchange *business pursuits*** for our souls. Back in the parable of Luke 14:16ff, the second invitee *exchanged* the invitation to his soul’s salvation for the opportunity to *try out ten oxen* he had recently purchased. So, his *new tractor* (important in an agrarian-based society) came before his soul. The Scriptures certainly teach that we should be *industrious* rather than *lazy* when it comes to providing for *ourselves* (1Thessalonians 4:11-12), *our families* (1Timothy 5:8), and even *others* (Ephesians 4:28). But, the Bible also teaches that we have to keep our priorities straight, and always *“seek first His kingdom, and His righteousness; and all these things will be added to you,”* Matthew 6:33. “Work” is a *physical* necessity, but not to the exclusion of the *spiritual needs* of our souls! Don’t exchange *“the bread which comes down out of heaven”* to feed and save your soul for the *“manna in the wilderness”* of this world, cf. John 6:48-51.

**We exchange *family connections*** for our souls. Look one more time to Jesus’ parable in Luke 14:16ff. The final invitee to the feast excused himself from the benefits of attending because he had *“married a wife,”* v.20. Marriage is certainly honorable (Hebrews 13:4), and our families certainly deserve our love, respect, and attention (Ephesians 5:22-32; 6:4). But, even they cannot be allowed to take precedence in our lives over our God and our souls. Jesus plainly said that *“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me,”* Matthew 10:37. And yet, how many people have *exchanged* their souls for the love of their families? How many precious souls are forfeited for “family ties”? Some forfeit their souls by following a spouse away from God and into sin. Some forfeit their souls by rejecting the truth they know for the family they love who are unwilling to abide in it. We are supposed to love, respect, and obey our families, but never more so than we do God, for in so doing we *exchange our souls* for family connections.

There is truly nothing that we *can* give in *exchange for our souls* in the sense of buying them back- Jesus alone is that redemptive purchase price, 1John 2:2; 4:10. But there are many things, including the *“passing pleasures of sin,”* Hebrews 11:25, that we *may* and *do* give in *exchange for our souls* in the sense of forfeiting them. Your soul is the most precious thing you will ever possess. Jesus died to *buy it back* (redeem it) from sin. Don’t make that sacrifice *worthless* by *exchanging anything* for your soul! (6-13-14)

**What Will *You* Give Up for Heaven?**

Modern religion seeks to attract people with a “come as you are” approach, which is correct- Jesus *invited* and *welcomed* everyone to come to Him too, Matthew 9:10-13. The problem is not with the “come as you are” invitation, it is with the “stay as you are” allowance and acceptance. Christianity is supposed to change people, rather than allow them to remain as they are and make them feel good about living sinful lives. Think about it…

Although Jesus invited and welcomed *everyone* regardless of past or present station in life (physical or spiritual), He encouraged ***no one*** to **remain in his or her sins.** Sinners of every stripe- harlots, cheats, liars, murderers, and the hypocritically self-righteous as well as the sincerely religious were all invited and welcomed, but were then taught what they would have to change to be saved. Consider His words to the adulterous woman, *“… from now on sin no more,”* John 8:11; or what He said to the rich young ruler in Luke 18:22, *“One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess, and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”* Jesus and His gospel *changed* and *transformed* people, rather than merely enabling them to continue living sinful lives with the “blessing” of God. Note the emphasis the Savior placed on *repentance* (a change/turning *from sin* and *to righteousness*) just from Luke’s account of His teaching, Luke 5:32; 10:13; 11:32; 13:3-5; 15:7-10; 24:47. Jesus invited and taught *everyone* without partiality or prejudice,but accepted and saved *no one* who was unwilling to turn from sin and obey Him.

After the same manner, churches claiming to follow and worship God should certainly adopt the “come as you are” **invitation** and **welcome** of Jesus, but should also maintain the ***“sin no more”*** and ***“follow Me”*** requirements of continued fellowship with Him. Churches that accept and maintain fellowship with those who refuse to repent and obey Jesus do themselves, the sinful individuals, and Him an injustice. Furthermore, they encourage a false sense of fellowship and eternal security that Jesus never promised. Consider 1John 1:6-7, *“If we say we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.”* The cleansing power of Jesus’ blood is promised to those who obey Him, not to those who merely desire fellowship with Him and His people.

With these things in mind, let’s go back to the rich young ruler for a moment. Why was he told to *sell his possessions* and *give to the poor* in order to have *treasure in heaven?* Jesus, knowing the contents of this man’s heart, understood that he loved his possessions more than God. Thus, the Savior told him he would have to *change.* Note that Jesus further instructed him to, upon completion of his dispossession, *“come, follow Me,”* Matthew 19:21. The truth of Jesus’ assessment and the necessity of the commanded dispossession of the wealth is manifested by the next verse, *“But when the young man heard this statement,* ***he went away*** *grieved; for he was one who owned much property.”*  He did not obey Jesus by selling and dispersing his property, and thus did not go with and follow Him. He was unwilling to *change-* he wanted *fellowship* with God and *“treasure in heaven”* **without** having to truly put Jesus first by obedience to His will.

Friends, just like this young man, we simply cannot have it both ways! If we really want fellowship with Jesus now and eternal life with Him later, we must be willing to *change* our love and devotions and follow Him in obedience to His will. Now, what is it that **you** are unwilling to *change* or *give up* for Christ? Family? Read Matthew 10:34-37. Worldly friendships/associations? Read James 4:4. Financial wealth? Read Matthew 6:19-34. Sinful habits? Read Colossians 3:1-11. Lustful desires and sinful sexual gratification? Read 1Thessalonians 4:1-8. A spouse to whom you do not have a right? Read Matthew 19:1-9. Your “life”? Read Matthew 10:38-39. It is easy to see the rich young ruler’s failure, but what about our own? While the love of wealth may not be the thing preventing us from following and obeying Jesus, we likely have other things to which we cling that do prevent our devotion to and fellowship with Him. Do we really think Jesus would fail to notice or mention them to us? Or allow us to “keep” them **and** follow Him? *“God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him,”* Acts 10:34-35. (8-11-15)

**“What’s *Your* Name?”**

And that’s the way she says it- with a drawn out and heavy emphasis on ***“your.”*** She says it when I do something out of character, especially if it’s something she thinks is good, gracious, or extra nice, like eating vegetables, letting her have the TV remote, or watching some cooking or home-decorating show with her, instead of retreating to the bedroom to see the ballgame. Then she pretends not to recognize me and asks, “What’s ***your*** name?” It’s OK, I deserve it…and then some.

But there is another side to this brief saga. When I do something that nearly 29 years of marriage have taught her to expect from me, she says, “I ***know*** your name!” This is usually pretty much the inverse of the previous things mentioned: the not-so-good, not-very-gracious, or the certainly- not-extra-nice things, like burping loudly after eating way too much of a meal consisting entirely of meat smothered with gravy, hogging the remote, or refusing to attend a play or some other “artsy” event with her. Then she portends to ***know*** my name because I am being consistent to the character my previous actions have led her to expect from me.

Both sides of these exchanges are all in good fun, and we typically get a good laugh from them. She’s a great lady who tries hard to take care of me in spite of my bad habits and poor tendencies, and I love her dearly for it. But, there is a spiritual point to these things….

It’s generally assumed that last names evolved to distinguish people with the same first names. These last names were often derived from a person’s occupation. Thus, John the blacksmith became John Smith. As Christians, we take on the name of Christ- our *avocation* (one’s *passionate endeavor*)as opposed to our vocation (one’s job), when we become spiritually united with Him through faith and baptism, Galatians 3:26-27; Ephesians 5:22-33. So, our conduct and character ought to be consistent with our name, right?

I can’t help but wonder if the Father above ever looks down at me and says, “What’s ***your*** name?” because my actions are surprisingly, and in a good way, out of character? This could only occur if I had previously consistently conducted myself in a way that was inconsistent with the name “Christian” that I professed to wear. Certainly, God knows anything and everything He chooses to know (cf. Genesis 11:5; 18:21; 22:12), so I’m certainly not doubting or disputing His omniscience. I’m just supposing “what if” to make a point. God, like my wife, could easily ask me, “What’s ***your*** name?” when I’m doing what is good if such is actually out of character for me!

Conversely, but to the same point, God could also say, “I ***know*** your name!” if I continue to act as I always have, despite the fact that I know better, and that such activity is contrary to the name “Christian” I profess to wear. This is also known as rebellion, or *“sinning willfully,”* and has its own particular set of consequences,cf. Hebrew 10:26-31.

Now, what would God say about ***your*** name in light of the consistency of your character and conduct? *“Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous; just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil….By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious; any one who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother,”* 1John 3:7,8,10. “What’s ***your***name?” or “I ***know*** your name!” - which is it for you? (4-3-14)

**Are You *Underwhelmed, Overwhelmed,* or Just *Whelmed?***

Many years ago, a friend of mine and I went to another church to hear a visiting preacher they had brought in to speak for about a week’s worth of services. After the sermon and services were over, and we were back in the privacy of the car, I wryly asked, “Well, what did you think of the sermon?” I’ll never forget his matter-of-fact reply, “I was underwhelmed,” he said. I expected some sort of answer like that, which is why I waited until we were in the car to ask, but I didn’t expect that particular one! “Underwhelmed” was a word that I had never heard, but immediately added to my vocabulary because it so appropriately fit. I too had been *underwhelmed* by the lesson! Though nothing said was overtly unscriptural, the points being made lacked real relevancy, and were produced with a blustering passion and zeal which was therefore misguided, and thus fell flat. James and I were both *underwhelmed.* But this got me to thinking…

Have you ever been ***underwhelmed*** with regard to some spiritually-oriented expectation? Perhaps becoming a “Christian” wasn’t exactly what you expected. Naaman certainly wasn’t a “Christian,” but surely was *underwhelmed* when Elisha didn’t even come out of the house to heal his leprosy, let alone make a grand spectacle of it, but instead just sent word by a messenger for him to go dip in the Jordan, 2Kings 5:9ff. We too can be *underwhelmed* if we’re expecting some bright-light experience or some extravagant ceremony to achieve salvation. Jesus, like Elisha, kept becoming “clean” simple, *“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved…”*  Mark 16:16. Salvation is a spiritual cleansing of the soul, not a carnal gratification for our egos. If you’re *underwhelmed* with Christianity, you’re probably doing it wrong; and likely for the wrong reasons. You’ve probably made it about you, rather than Christ. *“I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led away from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ,”* 2Corinthians 11:3.

Have you ever been ***overwhelmed****,* or at least felt that way, at the notion of becoming or being a Christian? Becoming a Christian should be an *overwhelming* experience, at least in the strictest sense of the word. It should completely engulf you. But you shouldn’t be exasperated by becoming one, or by trying to remain one. There is no doubt that living a Christian life is challenging, and can be quite difficult at times. Read Romans 7:15-24 and realize that even Paul sometimes shared that perspective. But again, if you’re *overwhelmed* at the prospects of living a Christian life, then you’re probably doing it wrong. You’re probably trying to do it on your own: without appropriating the power of prayer, cf. James 1:2-5; without taking full advantage of the education, edification, and encouragement of fellow Christians in the local church, Ephesians 4:11-16; and without realizing that *“it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure,”* Philippians 2:13. God does not want you to *“exasperate”* (or *overwhelm*) our children (Colossians 3:21), and He doesn’t do that you either- at least not if you live as He directs.

We’ve covered being both *under* and *overwhelmed,* but have you ever been truly ***whelmed****?* Yes, that’s a real word. It means: “to engulf or submerge in water” (Encarta Dictionary). Ah, we’re back to baptism since biblical baptism is an immersion in water! If this is doubted, just check Colossians 2:12 again, and ask yourself this question: Do you “bury” someone by sprinkling or pouring a little dirt on him, or do you *submerge* and *engulf* him with dirt? Biblical baptism is a “burial” through which we become *“dead to sin,”* and are then “resurrected” to a new life (and thus are *“born again”*) when we come up out of the water, Romans 6:3-4. If you haven’t been biblically baptized for the remission of your sins (Acts 2:38), you still have them.

Friend, being properly ***whelmed***by having your sins *“washed away”* through faith and baptism (Acts 22:16) will go a long way toward keeping you from being either ***under*** or ***overwhelmed*** in your walk of faith! Please read your Bible and think about it. (5-18-12)

**“Whew, It’s Finally Over!”**

Is that the way you feel about “the holidays” and all the other stuff that seems to go with them? Is it a relief for you too when everything returns to its normal levels of chaos rather than the hyper-chaos of the last few weeks? Don’t get me wrong, it’s great to see and have opportunities to be with family, but it’s also good to get back to more normal routines. After three family gatherings and various other celebrations, and officiating at both a funeral and a wedding, I’m glad to be back in the office working on “normal” stuff.

All of which got me to thinking (a dangerous situation, I know), wasn’t modern technology supposed to make our lives easier and simpler? Wasn’t it supposed to give us more time to spend with our families, and more time for relaxing and recreating? Instead, these advances seem to have complicated our lives further. For instance, a friend of mine had to take his cell phone over to his mother’s the other day to charge it up because the battery was dead, and the electricity was off at his house. Her power was off too, but she had an automatic generator!

I’m not against technology- my goodness I’m writing this article on a computer with two big screens while my Bible software program is running and I exchange emails with multiple church members, and as my favorite music is streaming through the speakers over the internet! I’m just saying that some of these devices that are supposed to make our lives easier sometimes wind up taking a lot of time and attention to keep running. “Yes,” I remember when there was a rotary-dial phone in the house that worked whether the electricity was on or not. And “no” I don’t want to go back to that time because I also remember that it was connected to a “party line” that you often had to wait several minutes to be able to use. (Young readers can ask the old folks what “rotary phones” and “party lines” are!) Technology, no doubt, has made many aspects of our lives unquestionably better. My “beef” is instead with the lack of wisdom we employ in utilizing the benefits of technology.

If we use the “time-saving” advantages of technology to just cram more into our over-crowded schedules, which inevitably require even more technology to accommodate, then pretty soon virtually everything we do will require computer chips and the internet….wait, that’s about where we are now! Consider instead some words of wisdom from the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul, ***“…make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.”***(1Thessalonians 4:11-12) In most of our thought processes, the words ***“ambition”***and ***“quiet life”*** never intersect. In fact, for many of us, the concepts of “ambition” and a “quiet life” seem diametrically opposed to one another. And yet, Paul urged the brethren in Thessalonica to have as their ***“ambition”***(from a Greek word meaning “to strive earnestly, make it one’s aim”) a ***“quiet life”***(meaning in part, “to rest, cease from labor….not running hither and thither”)!

Based on the hectic nature of our schedules, and the wisdom of God expressed through Paul, some of us may need to re-evaluate our “ambitions” in life. While the holidays were all too busy for my liking, the time I enjoyed the most involved a complete absence of technology. Donna (my “Babydoll” of 25 years), Austin (our 20 year old son who was home from college), Logan (our younger son, a senior at JHS), and I spent an afternoon out on our land south of town. We “killed” a whole slew of paper plates and drink cans with a wide variety of firearms, but then settled down around a campfire. We cooked chili dogs with all the “fixins.” But the best part was just spending several hours outside, around a campfire, laughing and talking. **It was the highlight of my holiday**- just being together and enjoying simple times and things**.** Despite all the earlier gunfire, it was a “quiet time”- the kind for which perhaps more of us ought to “aim” given God’s words to the Thessalonians…. and us. What’s your “ambition” for you and your family? Think about it. (1-12-11)

**We, the Athenians…**

While the apostle Paul waited for Silas and Timothy at Athens, he had time to notice *“the city full of idols,”* Acts 17:16ff. After he engaged some of the resident *debaters* (the *Epicurean* and *Stoic* philosophers)*,* they disdainfully called him a *scrap monger* or *scavenger-* which is the literal translation of the term rendered as *“idle babbler”* in v.18, and further described him as a *“proclaimer of strange deities,”* because he spoke of Jesus resurrected. The background of this assessment is that the Athenians worshipped, among all their other idols, dead men defied. But of this particular *deity-* the resurrected Christ, they had never heard. Their interest was, sadly, more curiosity than a search for truth and salvation.

But I fear we today have much more in common with the Athenians than we’d prefer to admit. For instance, like the Epicurean philosophy, the studied pursuit of life’s pleasures seems to have become our main objective in life, and even our go-to response to life’s sorrows and difficulties. “Go do or buy something- you’ll feel better!” is often the prescription. Even in our “spiritual” pursuits, the relative value of any purposed doctrine or religion is weighed by “how it makes me feel.” However…

The thing we seem to have most in common with the ancient Athenians is our willingness to “worship” a god of our own making. Like our arrogant brethren of the past, we boast in our “knowledge” and “spirituality” while displaying our ignorance through the worship of an otherwise *unknown god,* cf. vv.18-23. How is it that we, like the Athenians, *“worship in ignorance”?*

We have the sublime opportunity to love, serve, worship, and obey the great "I Am" - the *Creator, Sustainer,* and *Sovereign* of the Universe, but instead, we pay idolatrous tribute to:

* **"The god *of Convenience."*** This is the god we serve when it's not too difficult, troublesome, or tiring to do so. Those of the prophet Malachi’s day served this god. They said, *“My, how tiresome it is”* (to properly worship and serve God), Malachi 1:13. And we have become their brethren, along with the Athenians, when we only worship and serve God when we’re not too tired from our own pursuits, or too busy with them. We, like the Hebrew Christians of the first century, *have need of endurance, so when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised,”* Hebrews 10:36. We often claim that “God comes first in my life,” but the reality is that He only comes first when we’ve nothing better to do.
* **"The god *of Subjection."*** This is the god we believe as long as His way agrees with mine. But the moment His word or will is at crosses purposes with mine, it is He who is either subjected, or relegated to the bin of the irrelevant, out of date, or lacking enlightenment. Get this: There is no real subjection as long as there is agreement. If we only “subject” ourselves to God (or elders, or spouses, or parents, or government) when we agree with Him- or perhaps better, when He agrees with us, there is no real subjection at all. But when His way contradicts “my way,” and I accept, prefer, and take His way, true submission is found. Remember, *“the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God, for it does not subject itself to the Law of God, for it is not even able to do so,”* Romans 8:7.
* **"The god *of Provision."*** This is the god we praise as long as He gives us what we think we need or want. He is a close cousin to the *god of subjection.* We are so very willing to praise Him in song, prayer, and on social media for the wonderful blessings He bestows- as long as those “blessings” include happy and healthy families, all of the latest technologies, styles, and “conveniences,” and we can thus enjoy “all that life has to offer.” But what if those “blessings” ONLY included, *“food and covering”-* would we be *“content”* with these, cf. 1Timothy 6:8? Would we be just as grateful and full of praise for His provision of these necessities, or are we just pining for the *god of provision?* Job, even after losing his *oxen, donkeys, sheep, servants,* and *children, “fell to the ground and worshipped… Blessed be the name of the Lord,”* Job 1:13-22.
* **“The god *of Compromise.”*** This is the god we consult and celebrate when the God of the Bible puts us at odds with the thoughts, ideas, and ways of the world. When “science” or modern concepts and determinations of morality contradict the thoughts,ways, and words of God, we discard the sacred in favor of the secular, and bow before the god of Compromise. Rejecting the notion that *“as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts”* (Isaiah 55:9), we seek to rationalize the Word of God, and thereby subject it to the thoughts and ways of men instead of vice versa. As Joshua told the fledgling nation of Israel long ago, we must *“choose for yourselves today whom you will serve”* (Joshua 24:15), for we surely cannot serve both the god of Compromise and the God heaven! Either God is true and every man who contradicts Him is a liar, or man is his own god and has no need of Jehovah.

So which “god” do you, or will you, serve? The god(s) of *Convenience, Subjection, Provision,* or *Compromise?* Or the God of the Universe? The idolatrous Athenians worshipped *“in ignorance”* a god that was *unknown* to them. Be sure you *know* the God you worship, for He is **not** a god to be served only when it is *convenient,* or one whose will and ways can be *subjected* to ours. He is to be praised when He *provides* what we want, and when He provides what we need but don’t want. He is the creator of heaven and earth and all things therein- and as such, is surely not a god to be *compromised* or contradicted. As Jesus once told Satan, *“You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only,”* Matthew 4:10! (4-25-17)

**Which Truth Saves?**

In John 8:32b, Jesus uttered the oft quoted and seldom understood dictum, *“the truth shall make you free.”* While this statement is completely true and accurate, I fear it has been so often divorced from its contextual meaning that most fail to truly comprehend it. To properly understand the proposition, we must further ask and answer this question: What kind of truth is under consideration?

**Divine truth saves.** Jesus is not speaking with regard to secular/academic truth, scientific truth, political truth, or any other kind of truth which emanates from man. He is talking about spiritual truth, divine truth- eternal truth. This “truth,” by necessity, must come from a spiritual, divine, and eternal being, which is obviously God. The specific “truth” to which He has reference seems to be the statement He made in the latter part of v.24, *“unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins.”* Thus, those who reject this “truth” will not and cannot be saved by it! Why? Because the “truth” which saves is interactive – It must be known and applied through obedience.

**Known truth saves.** Romans 1:16 teaches us that the gospel truth is *“God’s power to save”.* But, this gospel must be received into the mind/heart in order to accomplish the goal. It will not save those who are unwilling to hear it, read it, study it, and know it. In the language of James 1:21, such is the *“word implanted, which is able to save your souls.”*  That is, the truth which saves is not only divine truth, but truth which is made a part of our hearts and minds (intellectually and emotionally).

**Applied truth saves.** But even truth that is divine and known, does not, on those bases alone, save. Divine and known truth must also be applied in order to save. Note Titus 2:11-12, *“For the grace of God appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly, in this present age.”* Truth must be applied by obedience in order to receive its saving benefits. Otherwise, this passage teaches that God’s grace will save everyone- which obviously contradicts the clear teaching of other verses, such as Matthew 7:13-14, 21.

Given the above, it is imperative that we realize and admit a couple of things: 1) Today, it is still *“not within man who walks to direct his own steps”* (Jeremiah 10:23); and, 2) We all need truth from God to properly direct and conduct all facets of our lives: in love (all applications); in work, in relationships; in everything! Therefore, consider the validity of the following statement: **“There is no problem we face in life that will be helped or solved by less teaching and study of God’s word.”** While most would agree, is it really the way we approach the situations and circumstances of our lives?

Overall, churches and Christians alike are de-emphasizing God’s word. We rarely make personal Bible study part of our daily routine. We want sermons that are filled with anecdotes, human quotes, and humorous illustrations instead of being “so preachy.” Bible classes and children’s church programs are either poorly attended, or are becoming more about entertaining than educating. And when we have problems, we look for answers everywhere but the Bible. Such tendencies and practices surely make impotent God’s power to save! We cannot relegate “Truth” to sound bite status in our lives. God’s Word must instead be the basis of our lives, at least if we expect it to benefit and save us. Yes, *“the truth can make you free”-* if you understand and mean *divine* truth which is *known* and *obeyed!* Otherwise, it just sits on the coffee table or bookshelf and collects dust. (5-16-16)

**Whited Sepulchers: The View from Above**

Our house sits on a fairly flat plateau that is a good seven or eight feet above street level. The yard is nearly two acres and has a lot of “road frontage,” so I had a good long look at the approaching pick-up from the seat of my lawnmower as I mowed on the cusp of the embankment leading down to the street. It was a beauty! Its jet-black paint job was polished to a mirror finish as the late afternoon sun soon peaked through trees creating flashes of gleaming light as it wound its way toward me. It was “chromed out” with little pieces of sparkling trim all over it- false engine exhausts appeared to be ported through the fenders, and the headlights, mirrors, and taillights all sported buffed chrome. The wheels were fitting for a Roman Emperor’s chariot, intricately cut and highly polished aluminum wheels enveloped by thin but wide rubber soles that were as black as deep space. This “ride” was simply dripping with “bling” and oozing with sparkle and shine! It was something to behold as I peered down from the elevated “bleacher seat” atop the lawnmower at the passing parade- that is, until it passed below me….

The top of the cab was unpainted and splotched with rust! All that polished chrome and mirror-finished paint was on a truck with an unpainted top. It looked spectacular (depending on individual tastes, of course) from ground level, but from above the splotches of paint and pockmarks of rust made it look like it belonged in the auto graveyard! I nearly fell off the mower laughing, but after I regained my composure, my mind immediately went to the passage in Matthew 23:27.

Jesus said, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.”* The old King James Version uses the phrase *“whited sepulchers”* instead of *“whitewashed tombs”* (as does the NASV). Either way, the meaning is plain: The view from the side is very different than the one from above! Just like that pick-up, which looked great from the side but horrible from above, these whitewashed tombs gleamed from the mountainsides in the morning sun like daisies. But from above, the divine perspective instead saw the putridity of death and ugliness of decay. What a vivid image and assessment the Lord made of these supposed “leaders of religion”!

All of which goes to show that we can “polish” and “chrome” the exteriors of our lives all we want, and fool those “on our level,” but the view of God “from above” manifests the internal reality. In fact, we can fool our contemporaries with “whitewash” (or chrome and polish) to the extent that they even applaud our “spirituality” or holiness. However, in Luke 6:26, Jesus again emphasized the distinction between man’s and God’s view of such things, *“Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets.”* The assessments and accolades of those “on our level” do not influence the divine perspective for it comes “from above.” And God explained through His prophet Isaiah, *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways…. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts higher than your thoughts,”* Isaiah 55:8-9.

There is one more point I’d like add to these things. Although Jesus was speaking to the religious “leaders” and those who fashioned themselves as such of His day (cf. Luke 20:46), the problem of the “whited sepulcher” facade is not one that is limited to church leaders *then* or *now*. It has the same eternal consequences for everyone- *leader* or *lay person* alike. Note Matthew 18:5-7 in this regard, *“And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!”*  These things should cause us to respect even more, and desire to emulate even more, the divine perspective of Nathanael- of whom Jesus said, *“Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile* (or *deceit,* NAB95)*!”*  (5-21-13)

**Whose Will Will It Be For 2014?**

The so-called “Lord’s Prayer” really isn’t His. He taught and gave it to the disciples for their use, Matthew 6:5-9a (one of His prayers is recorded in John 17:1-26, and is very different). The prayer is not a *formula* to be ritualistically recited,but it does contain a *form* that preaches as well as it petitions. For instance, note that the prayer includes:

* A ***spiritual salutation***that recognizes and praises the greatness of God, v.9;
* A ***spiritual plea***for God’s will and purposes to be done everywhere, v.10;
* A ***physical petition*** for only daily sustenance, v.11;
* A ***spiritual supplication*** for forgiveness that also requires us to think, feel, and act the way we would like God to think, feel, and act toward us, v.12; and,
* A ***spiritual entreaty*** for God’s protection and deliverance from temptation and evil, v.13.

What’s missing in this prayer? Think about our own current prayers. Are they more like this model, or do they sound more like we’re presenting “our list” to some sort of celestial Santa Claus version of God? Are our petitions filled with *physical* requests for everything under the sun to make our life here the way “we” want it to be, or are they filled with *spiritual* requests for “God’s will” to be done in our lives, and only include the *physical* necessities of life? Which dominates our prayers: *spiritual* concerns and desires, or *physical* requests*?*

Certainly we are to pray for, and recognize our dependence upon God for, *physical* things, Matthew 6:25-32. But, doesn’t this passage also teach that *spiritual* concerns, needs, and requirements should dominate and come first, cf. vv.19-24, 33-34? So why don’t *spiritual* things comprise at least the majority of our thoughts, desires, and prayers (if indeed they don’t)? There are probably a number of reasons for this, and not all of them are necessarily indicting. Consider a couple of them.

1. We are *physical* creatures that, although we possess an immortal/eternal soul, live in a mortal/finite world. This is not an excuse; it’s just our current reality. But, it is a reality that has both a temporary *escape* and permanent *end,* 2Peter 2:4; 3:8-13.
2. We are *selfish.* While upon the earth, everything Jesus Christ did was for us. He *selflessly* lived and died for us. If we are to truly be His *disciples* (followers), we must learn to pattern our lives after His *selflessness* and away from our own *selfishness,* cf. Galatians 2:20; 6:14*.*  Simply put: We can live for *self,* or we can live for *Him* and *others.* An integral part of discipleship is *self-denial,* Matthew 16:24; unfortunately for many of us, it is the most difficult part. And our prayer life reflects it. So, we wind up presenting “our” list to God in prayer of all the things “we” want and think would make our lives all that “we” want them to be. The consequence of these things is that *“Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”* is rarely mentioned, and even less often really meant. It doesn’t have to be this way!

Let’s all decide to make 2014 different. Let’s acknowledge (and confess if need be) that:

1. God is God, and I’m not Him, Philippians 3:19;
2. He knows what is best for me and everyone else, and I do not, Isaiah 55:8-9;
3. His will is therefore better and more important than my will, Jeremiah 10:23; and so,
4. I will want and I will pray for His will to be done instead of mine, Matthew 6:10.

Now, wouldn’t these things necessarily make 2014 a better year? I think so. Let’s give them a try, and be sure to include *“Thy will be done, on earth* (and in **my** life) *as it is in heaven”* in our thoughts and prayers- and let’s mean it too! (12-31-13)

**Why Are Christians Despised and Persecuted?**

The apostle Paul warned, *“And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,”* 2Timothy 3:12. Jesus earlier cautioned, *“Woe to you when all men speak well of you…,”* Luke 6:26. But with persecution, as with most things, the reasons matter. Christians are sometimes despised for doing the *wrong* things, and other times for doing the *right* things. Think through this a moment…

**Christians are often despised because we’re not *thinking, feeling,* and *acting* like Christ:**

**Arrogant and Condescending**- Jesus was ever humble, and never arrogant or condescending. And yet, His “followers” are sometimes both. If we think, feel, and act as if we are better than everyone else just because we profess to wear the name “Christian,” we’re missing a big part of what that name is supposed to mean! We need to remember, and constantly remind ourselves: that Jesus died for *everyone* because *all have sinned* and *fallen short of the glory of God.* Despite being Christians, we still sin too, and are in constant need of God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness- just like everyone else.

**Holier Than Thou Attitudes/Actions**- Obviously, this point is related to the previous one. As Christians, we need to also remember that sin is sin. A “Christian’s” sins are just as painful to God and condemning to us as a “sinner’s” sins are to him. Sins are sort of like surgery in most people’s eyes: *Mine* are “minor” but *yours* are “major”! Even the Christian who has mastered *self* to the degree that sins are almost none existent in his life, must have compassion for those who perhaps have not had the opportunities to *know* and *obey* the gospel of Jesus as have we. Instead of adopting a “holier than thou” stance, why not manifest *compassion* for their lost condition and *teach* them as did Jesus, cf. Mark 6:34?

**Christians are also despised because they are *thinking, feeling,* and *acting* like Christ:**

**Transcending Faith**-One of the great tragedies of believing the lie of evolution is that it robs mankind of the opportunity to believe in something bigger than himself. But the Christian is afforded the guidance and support of *transcending faith.*  Through *faith* (see Roman 10:17), God is the center of the universe rather than man. God is arbiter of “right” and “wrong” rather than man. God determines the “higher path” of living instead of man. God is the source of light, love, and happiness rather than man having to struggle and fail to find these on his own. Evolution neither leaves nor provides anything in which man can *believe* or *hope* other than himself- which is a pitiful and bleak existence for only a very short while. But, when one has such *hope* and *faith* in the God of truth*,* and lives accordingly, others lacking it will despise, ridicule, and seek to tear down that which upholds and sustains us- God and His Word. In the process, those living *by faith* will also be despised, ridiculed, and persecuted.

**Revelatory Light-** Jesus is *light,* John 1:9; and those believing in and following Him naturally *reflect* that light, Matthew 5:14-16. But, those *living in* and *loving darkness* hate this *light* because it exposes their deeds as *evil,* John 3:19-20. Lovereveals hatred. Kindness exposes cruelty. Strength of character brings to light weakness of character. Humility highlights arrogance. Selflessness divulges selfishness. Faith discloses faithlessness. Hope bares hopelessness. Truth uncovers falsehood. The boat of “everyone’s doing it” is rocked by those who aren’t. Therefore, *darkness* hates *light* regardless of the form of its manifestation: the God who said, *“Let there be light”* in a *dark* universe; the *divinity* of Jesus Christ; the *truth* of God’s Word; or the *example* of those following Him and It.

**What’s the point?** A few of them, actually: 1) being despised and persecuted is not necessarily a result of personal righteousness- it may well be the consequence of doing “Christianity” wrong; 2) if you are being despised and persecuted, make sure it is *“for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong,”* 1Peter 3:17; 3) *“if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God,”* 1Peter 4:16; and then, 4) *“keep on rejoicing,”* 1Peter 4:13! (10-27-15)

**Why Churches Don’t Grow**

God created living things to pretty much follow the same process of conception, gestation, birth, growth, maturity and reproduction, Genesis 1:24. This pattern exists in the *physical* (particularly *animal*) world, but unfortunately, rarely follows in the *spiritual* world of those claiming to be Christ’s church. Why is this? Could it be that they are not nearly as spiritually “alive” as they presume themselves to be? Perhaps so, but there are also other key reasons…

**Some churches don’t grow because** **they are made up of members who are not growing.** Local congregations are made up of individual members. If most of the members are spiritually immature and not growing themselves, the congregation won’t grow for a simple reason: *Reproductive* growth is the product of spiritual maturation. If church members are not growing individually, they will not mature sufficiently to be spiritually reproductive. **Spiritual reproduction, just like physical reproduction, is accomplished by the mature rather than the immature.** Consider carefully this question: What is the real point of addingthe so-called “Christian Graces” of 2Peter 1:5-7 to your faith? Is it to make you an example of faith to be admired and respected? That may indeed happen, but such isn’t the stated reason. This growth surely assures the individual of continued faithfulness and eternal life, vv.10-11; but notice also that v.8 provides an additional purpose. *“For if these qualities are yours and* ***increasing****, they render you neither* ***useless*** *nor* ***unfruitful*** *in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Those who grow to maturity are *“useful”* because they ***bear fruit***(which in keeping with the metaphor, contains even more *reproductive seed*)! And, let’s not forget or misconstrue John 15:1-8 on this particular point either.

**Some churches don’t grow for the simple reason that they do not understand *spiritual reproduction* (growth) as a personal responsibility.** When we comprehend that things are *supposed* to happen, we generally work toward that objective. Somewhere along the line, churches have forgotten, or have not been adequately taught, that it is the job of every Christian to reproduce themselves spiritually. It is God’s will for each saint, Colossians 1:25-27; 2Timothy 2:2. This is how the early church grew so dramatically, Acts 8:1-4. And, for far too long we have ignored the fact that Matthew 13:6,23, the part about the *good ground* ***bearing fruit* of *100, 60,***and ***30 fold***, is the point of the parable of the Sower! Spiritual reproduction is the job of every Christian. Churches comprised of members that don’t take this personal responsibility to heart die sooner or later- it is just a matter of time.

**Some churches don’t grow due to the false notion that Christian “maturity” is determined by time rather reproduction.** When a “mature Christian” is contemplated, most folks generally consider the length of time one has been a Christian as the main component. While spiritual maturity definitely has a time element to it (cf. Hebrews 5:12; 1Timothy 3:6ff), there are far too many Christians that are considered to be “mature” just because they have been Christians for a long time. Why isn’t *spiritual reproduction* considered? Plants, animals, and people are considered “mature” when they have grown sufficiently to reproduce. But somehow, and for no good reason, in the spiritual realm we never seem to think in these terms. Consider this: When we understand that our child is not growing at a normal rate, we start paying closer attention to the factors that produce growth to maturity like nutrition, exercise, and freedom from disease. Like the life cycles mentioned in the opening paragraph, these *growth factors* translate from the physical to the spiritual. The same types of factors that produce *physical* growth have their *spiritual* counterparts. So, if spiritual growth is not occurring, and because of it spiritual maturity is lacking, there is likely a deficiency in one or more of the factors that typically produce it: spiritual *nutrition* (1Peter 2:2)*;* spiritual *freedom from disease* (1Peter 2:1)*;* orspiritual *exercise* (Hebrews 5:11 – 6:1). If a Christian isn’t growing sufficiently to mature and spiritually reproduce, something is wrong. To change this, we must stop thinking of spiritual maturity as only relating to time. “Growing up” spiritually also has to do with taking on the mature responsibilities of spiritual reproduction. This mindset must change for sustainable growth to occur.

While there are other factors that surely inhibit the growth of churches, it is hoped these can help us to think and act in ways that will ensure that the Cause of Christ not only survives, but thrives in and through growing local congregations. (6-3-14)

**Why Do You…?**

I’ve jokingly (and more seriously) said many times that “I usually have reasons for what I do- they may not be good ones, but I have them nonetheless.” We all do. Usually, the reasons for what we do are simple: either, “It is what I *want* to do;” or, “It is what I *have* to do.” Let’s think about these a bit….

“It is what I *want* to do” is the controlling factor for most of what we do when we think we have a choice. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this motivation **if** and **when** we really have a choice. But when there are obligations or responsibilities in play that are above mere personal preference, then we must choose whether or not our personal desires will trump those duties and control our activities. We will either *selfishly* choose what we *want;* or, we will *selflessly* and *submissively* choose to *obey.* The latter seems to increasingly go against the grain of our culture. More and more, we live in a culture and society wherein *what I want* selfishly supersedes what *I should* or *I must.* Personal likes and dislikes have come to dominate us in the area of motivations.

Unfortunately, this *cultural trend* has invaded our religion also. This is true with our *individual* commitments to Christ, as well as our *collective* associations with Him. *Individually,* we want to be saved *in my own personal way,* and serve Him *in the way(s) that I want and desire to do so.* The problem with both of these is that *salvation* and *service* is not a matter of *personal choice.* Oh, we can choose whether or not we are willing to do what Jesus requires in order to be saved, and we can choose whether or not we are willing to do what Jesus requires in order to serve Him, but we do not get to choose *how* we will be saved, or *how* we will serveHim. Please read carefully what Jesus said on these matters:

*“He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned,”* Mark 16:16. And,

*“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven. And many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you, depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness,’”* Matthew 7:21-23.

Salvation is not a matter of *personal preference*, but of *obedience* to the method and means Jesus chose: *belief* in Him and *baptism* in Him for remission of sins, cf. Acts 8:35-38 and Acts 22:16. Likewise, we do not get to pick-and-chose how we will serve Christ. He is either our *Lord* (Master) or He isn’t. If He is our *Lord,* then we do *what* He says, *how* He says, *when* He says. He addressed this problem in Matthew 15:8-9, *“You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as their doctrine the precepts of men.”* Additionally, Paul condemned those *“whose god is their appetite”* in Philippians 3:19. He wasn’t speaking literally of their bellies, but rather of their own *desires.* These are said to be *“enemies of the cross of Christ”* whose *“end is destruction,”* Philippians 3:18-19.

Now, think these things through a bit. We don’t get to choose how *we want* to be saved, or how *we want* to serve Jesus. He has already determined those things. While salvation is *personal* in the sense that those saved are saved *individually,* it is not a matter of personal *preference*. In every conversion to Christ recorded in the book Acts, three things occurred: 1) the *gospel* of Jesus Christ was heard; 2) the person(s) *believed* Jesus to be the Son of God; and, 3) they were *baptized* into Christ. Isn’t this exactly what Jesus stated as necessary in Mark 16:15-16? *“Go into all the world and* ***preach the******gospel*** *to all creation. He who has* ***believed*** *and has been* ***baptized*** *shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”* See how simple that is? After belief and baptism, service to Christ is determined in exactly the same way. We look to the New Testament to *“learn what is pleasing to the Lord,”* Ephesians 5:10, rather than attempting *please ourselves* in how we worship and serve. Please, examine your motivations in the light of the gospel of Christ (the New Testament). Were you “saved” in the way it says, or by what you *wanted* and were *willing* to do? Likewise, are you “serving” Christ by doing what *you want,* or what He says? It makes all the difference in the world, and eternity! (10-13-15)

**Why Marriages Fail**

June is the time for summer vacations, trips to the lake, and weddings. I’m not exactly sure why June became the month weddings, but I’m fairly certain that whoever decided to make it that way didn’t live in the Texas heat and humidity! Unfortunately, many of the marriages produced by these summer weddings don’t last much longer than summer itself. This is a sad reality that we don’t need statistics to prove- the landscape of life is strewn with failed marriages. But why is it that even though our society advances in so many areas, we can’t seem to get this part right? I’m sure most everyone has an opinion as to the answer to this question, and perhaps mine is no better than any other, but in twenty-five or so years of preaching a couple of things have become clearer to me on the subject. While my answers to the question are certainly not the only ones, and generalizations obviously don’t meet every specific case squarely, there seem to be a few basic causes of failed marriages that many of them have in common.

Marriages often fail because the couple has little idea what real marriage is supposed to be. The basic problem here is twofold: (1) we’ve forgotten that marriage is an institution created by God for mankind, and that it must therefore be done according to His dictates to work properly; and (2) so few people have seen it done right in their circle of family and friends, that they have no “working models” after which to pattern themselves. Let’s take these in order.

Marriage was created by God for man’s ultimate happiness and good- Genesis 2:18-24 makes this point abundantly clear. So, for it to work right (which means according to God’s purposes), marriage has to be done His way. Both husbands and wives have roles and responsibilities that are clearly defined in passages such as Ephesians 5:22-33. When we are truly committed to fulfilling these roles and meeting these responsibilities, the wisdom of God’s plan is manifested, and “marriage” becomes a foretaste of heaven on earth. But if we fail to “do” marriage the way God says, it can surely become a foretaste of hell on earth.

The other issue is that so few have any “working models” after which to pattern themselves. Years ago, I studied the Bible with and baptized a young couple who had two small children. They were looking for answers to “life” issues pertaining to marriage and raising children. Their problem was that in both his and her families and extended families, there was not one couple with a successful marriage. And most had been married, divorced, and remarried multiple times. They had no practical examples of successful marriage, and thus no one to advise them that actually knew how to make a marriage work! The sad truth is they were not at all alone in that dilemma- many others fall into the same category.

But perhaps the greatest challenge to successful marriage today is that we don’t know how to love. It is a failure of both understanding and application. Everyone knows that “love” is the key to marriage, right? So if we don’t understand and apply it correctly, marriages are going to fail. Herein is the problem: we love “selfishly” rather than “selflessly.”

“Selfish” love only loves because there is some value to self. “I love this person because he makes me laugh and feel good,” or “I love this person because she’s hot, and I sure look good beside her,” or “I love this person because he buys me expensive things,” or etc. etc. etc. All of these are selfishly based. But true, biblical love does not “require” a value from its object; it “creates” a value in its object. Instead of “I love this person because he/she is valuable to me,” biblical love says “This person is valuable to me because I love him/her.” There is a huge difference in these two mindsets!

Here’s the danger: If our love is based on required (and often superficial) value, what happens when he is no longer able or willing to buy those expensive gifts? What happens when she no longer looks as “hot” as she once did? Then the value on which “love” was based has changed, and the couple thinks that they have fallen out of love. The truth is they were never really in true, biblical love in the first place. The marriage fails because it did not have the proper foundation.

The correct picture of love is selfless rather than selfish. Biblical love, which must be the proper basis of successful/godly marriages, creates a value instead of requiring one. Consider the example of God’s love for us in Romans 5:8, *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* Question: What value did we have to God while we were sinners? The answer is “none”- and yet He loved us. How? His love did not require a value, it created one. Because He loved us, we were valuable to Him, and thus He sacrificed His Son for us! This is exactly how we are to love in marriage- *“Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself up for her,”* Ephesians 5:25.

Loving this way is a learned experience. We think we fall into love and have little control over the matter. But in Titus 2:4, older women are commanded to *“teach younger women…to love their husbands, to love their children…”*  The love we think we fall into does not continue to love husbands or children when they act unlovely or unlovable- because they then have no value. However, love that has been patterned after God’s love for us, and has learned to be selfless rather than selfish, is capable of constancy even when its object is otherwise unlovable! If husbands and wives love each other this way, marriage has its proper basis and can be successful.

Marriage is supposed to enhance and bless our lives. That’s what God wanted it to do. But it can only be that foretaste of heaven on earth if we do it right. And “right” means loving each other the way God loves us, and fulfilling the roles and responsibilities He gave each of us in marriage. Then we can enjoy the full blessings and benefits of the union. I sincerely hope this helps you to be “happily” married! (6-23-10)

**Why People Change Spiritually… Or Don’t**

Change is difficult for most folks, especially major life-altering changes. This is why *repentance* is probably the most arduous command given us by God. Repentance requires a change *of mind* that results in a change of *heart* that leads to a change of *activity.*  But repentance, and the changes it inherently requires, remains a constant challenge for anyone who seeks to grow and mature spiritually because this maturation process demands continual corrections. Some of these “corrections” are at least marginally easier because they involve only minor adjustments to our attitude or activities, but the degree of difficulty certainly increases when more major alterations are required. So, what are the most significant factors that *allow,* or conversely *prevent,* these spiritual changes in our lives? While this list is certainly not exhaustive, here are some of the most significant factors…

**Desire to please God.** It sounds simple, and it is, but unless our desire to please God is stronger than our desire to please ourselves, we will never change. This is true of “major” changes such as becoming a Christian or “changing” religions, as well as more minor changes such as breaking a sinful habit, or becoming more dedicated and diligent in our service to Him. Until we are able to say and mean, “Thy will, and not mine, be done **in all things**,” substantive change will remain elusive to us. As long as our choices are based on what pleases us more than on what pleases God, and let’s be clear about this, we are worshipping and serving **self**rather than **God**. *“For many walk, of whom I have often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things,”* Philippians 3:19-20. If our “choice” of a place or method to worship is based on what pleases us, then we are choosing “our” church rather than His, and we are worshipping “ourselves” rather than Him.

**Dedication to God’s Word.** Pilate asked Jesus, *“What is truth?”* in John 18:38, and apparently intended the question to be rhetorical. But the answer to Pilate’s question is important. Actually, Jesus, surely unbeknownst to Pilate, answered the question in a prayer to His Father in the previous chapter, *“Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth,”* John 17:17. Get that: the Word of God *“is”* truth. It is not *“a”* truth among many, nor is it *“partly”* truth- it *“is truth,”* period. Therefore, God is the author of that which is true, and this *“truth”* is revealed to us in His *“word.”* Now, if we are to be dedicated to God in any kind of realand truesense, we must, therefore, be dedicated to *His word.* Simple enough. But, how many of us who claim a belief *in* and allegiance *to* God are ***really* dedicated to His word**? Are the *major* or *minor* changes in our lives really dictated by God’s word, or by or through some other impetus? Are we willing to change when God’s word dictates such? Or, do we equivocate or evade the truth revealed to us in His word, reverting back to our will and desires, either to avoid change altogether, or justify changes that we are already making that are contrary to Truth? No changes can be made ***toward***God unless they are properly founded in dedication ***to***His word. Thus, spiritual “changes” are either motivated by our dedication to understanding and applying God’s word, or they are conversely prevented by our lack of dedication to God’s word.

**Family ties.** The bonds of “family” can motivate changes- either positively *toward* God, or negatively *away* from God. Familial relationships can be tremendously strong motivators. Jesus, fully aware that we can easily substitute a desire to please our family for our desire to please God, warned, *“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me,”* Matthew 10:37. Likewise, our dedication to the truth of God’s word can be easily exchanged for the dedication to family. Again, Jesus emphasized where our true allegiance must lie when, in reference to His own *physical* family, He chose the *spiritual* family of those committed to God and His word over them, Matthew 12:46-50. On the positive side, the godly example and patient teaching of God’s word by our physical families can also help tremendously to motivate our changes *to* or *back to* God. The bottom line is this: Our desire to please God must supersede our desire to please our families, and our dedication to the truth of God’s word must overcome any dedication to our families- always.

Change is indeed hard. But **everyone *can* change**- if we desire to please God more than ourselves or anyone else, and if we truly dedicate ourselves to understanding and living by the truth of God’s word. (8-19-14)

**Wisdom or Experience?**

Willie Nelson is quoted as saying, *“Don’t come to me for wisdom. Come to me for experience.”* This sounds like sage advice- at least on the surface. It perhaps even sounds somewhat “deep.” And it may indeed be both of those things, but what is he really saying? If I understanding his meaning, he’s saying that he has no wisdom to impart, but he has plenty of experiences to share.

In this context, what is the difference between “wisdom” and “experience”? Again, if I understand him correctly, he’s using “wisdom” as the ability to know what to do in and with life. He is talking about making good choices and doing right things. Of this particular ability he confesses the lack. He means he can’t tell you how to live and stay out of trouble. Though a tremendously gifted songwriter and musician, and one who’s lived beyond his three score and ten despite himself, he seems to be admitting that he has made a lot of mistakes in life. Or, maybe he’s just slyly relishing in them with a wink and nod? Whichever is actually the case, he seems to acknowledge that he’s not the one to come to for that wise information and instruction.

What we must realize is that this same lack of ability to guide his own steps is exactly what has produced all his “experience”! How so? From where does “experience” usually come except failure(s)? But we’re supposed to learn from our mistakes, and therefore become **wise enough to stop making them**- just like the Book says in Hebrews 5:14b,*“…the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”* Even better, we can learn from the mistakes and experiences of others to avoid making them ourselves,(please read 1Corinthians 10:5-13). Maybe that was Willie’s intention by making the statement in the first place, but I kind of doubt it.

Take a moment to become “wise” through the “experience” of one who only became concerned with eternal matters too late: the “Rich Man” of Luke 16:19-31. Will you become “wise” through the “experience” of this lost man, or will you have to learn *the hard way?*

He was only concerned about eternal torment after he was there, vv.19-26. Obviously, his concern and convictions about eternity came much too late to benefit him.

He was only concerned about his family after it was too late for him to influence or benefit them, vv.27-28. This was much too late to do them any spiritual good.

He never learned enough in and from life to be concerned with what God said/wrote until it was too late to do anything about it, vv.29-31. *Wise behavior* comes from knowledge of God’s word. If we’re unwilling to *hear, learn,* and *obey* it in life, a desire to *know* and *do better* won’t do us any good in the afterlife.

**So, how “wise” are you?** Wise enough to live right according to God’s word now, and influence your family and friends to do likewise, before it is too late? Be wise and learn from the mistakes of others so that you don’t have to make them all yourself! Some of them have irreversible and eternal consequences. (2-2-16)

**Why is the World Turning Upside Down?**

When Paul and Silas came to ancient Thessalonica, according to their custom, they went to the synagogue of the Jews and *“for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence”* concerning Jesus Christ as the basis of Christianity, cf. Acts 17:2-3. The preaching of Jesus produced its intended effect and many were converted from Judaism to Christianity. This sparked opposition from non-believing Jews, who in turn, became jealous and took along *“some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar.…”* In their jealous rage, they sought the lives of Paul and Silas. But the mob couldn’t find the preachers, so they settled instead for a man named Jason, and drug him and some other believers before the Thessalonian city officials. Acts 17:6 records the event this way, *“…..they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also….”* (English Standard Version). Despite themselves having *“set the city in an uproar”* (v.5), this mob accused the preachers of the gospel of Christ and those converted by it of having *“turned the world upside down”*! How is it so often true that the guilty blame the innocent of their own crimes?

Few could now argue that current news stories don’t suggest a world *turning upside down-* especially in economics and finance! The stock markets of the world fluctuate wildly. Businesses are collapsing. Our government is pumping billions of tax dollars into the mortgage banking industry, and is contemplating the same for the “Big Three” auto makers in (most would say “misguided”) efforts to stabilize the economy. Seafaring pirates have captured an oil tanker and are holding the ship, its crew, and its $100 million cargo hostage. Terrorist organizations and their leaders issue threats to the world and criticize elections here in the U.S. (Ayman al-Zawahiri, the number two man in Al Qaeda). A trial began this week of a mother accused of using the internet social site MySpace to taunt and ridicule a former friend of her daughter’s to the point that the girl committed suicide. **Is the world turning *“upside down”?*** It sure seems like it to me!

So, what’s to be done? Many say that assigning blame for the current host of economic and moral calamities is not the answer. **I strongly disagree.** What if your doctor decided that “assigning blame” wasn’t important to either your diagnosis or treatment when you’re sick? How successful would he be a treating an illness which he could neither identify, nor for which he could find a cause? Even if some prescribed general antibiotic was successful, nothing would prevent a reoccurrence of the same problem (perhaps with even more devastating effects!) since the *source* of the problem wasn’t identified and subsequently treated or eliminated.

The obvious question for all of this then becomes: **“What, or who, is to blame as the source of the current *upside down world* calamities we’re experiencing?”** And “no” it isn’t the Democrats or the Republicans of government (at least in the “bigger picture” view). The answer to this important question is **Charles Darwin and those who believe in, and propagate, his false theories of Evolution at every level!** How so? Read on.

It readily admitted that total responsibility cannot be laid completely on Mr. Darwin. He formulated a theory that many have expounded upon. Then too, it is the *application* of his theory which has produced much of this current calamity. Here’s how.

Mr. Darwin theorized on the formation of life- that it ultimately came from chance and circumstance rather than a benevolent and all-powerful Creator. The effect of the acceptance of his theory was atheism. In support of this logic, hear the words of noted evolutionist Aldous Huxley, *“I had motives for not wanting the world to have meaning….The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation* ***from a certain system of morality. We objected to morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom”***(Ends and Means; 1946; emphasis added, PCS). Did you get that? He, and doubtless others, accepted evolution as the origin of the species to rid himself of the *restrictions of morality.* From where did these *restrictions of morality* come? God, of course! If God is eliminated as the Creative Power of the Universe, then God is removed from man’s morality as well. If Jehovah is not the *Originator* of man, neither is He the *originator* of man’s morality. Man, as the product of evolution instead of God, is thus freed from any restraints he refuses to place upon himself!

One more quote on this point from Huxley’s son, Sir Julian, *“Darwinism removed the whole idea of God as the creator…Darwin pointed out that no supernatural designer was needed; since natural selection could account for any known form of life, there was no room for a supernatural agency”.* With “the whole idea of God” removed, man was now, through evolutionary thought and explanations, his own “god” with no one other than himself to whom any *accounting* should ever have to be done. (see 2Cor.5:10)

I hear some logically saying, “OK, so what does this have to do with our world being turned upside down right now?” In one word, **GREED!** “Greed” with regard to corporate raiders who buy, sell, and/or bankrupt companies for personal profit. “Greed” with regard to players on the stock market looking to capitalize on a “big something return for a little of nothing investment.” This isn’t just dealers of junk bonds, it’s people rolling the stock market dice with their retirement plans hoping to quit work early and filthy rich. It’s politicians looking to parlay a political seat into wealth and power for life by promising to fulfill the greedy desires of those who elect them- and that’s you and me! Stop and think about what all you expect “the government” to pay for- is it more or less than the New Testament would define as government’s divinely appointed role? This financial world of ours has been turned upside down by one thing, **GREED**. People are now willing to do anything to anyone to fulfill their own selfish desires. *“For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.”* (1Tim.6:10).

When Darwin and his subordinates convinced most of the world that there was *“no room for a supernatural agency”* in the origin of man, they convinced the world there was no room for God in the life of man- and morality was left to be defined through *natural selection* and the *survival of the fittest….*or the greediest! A lack of morality in the world is the source of most all of our current crisis. And we can thank Mr. Darwin, and those still preaching evolution for that! Think about it. (11-19-08)

**Is “Worship” *Life* or *Congregational?***

Perhaps “yes” is the best answer to the title question! And as is often the case, “it depends” is the reason….

First things first: “worship” is usually translated from the Greek term *proskuneo,* and literally means, “to kiss, like a dog licking his master’s hand” (Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon). More generally, it refers to *kissing the hand to one, in a token of reverence;* or in the NT, to *kneel or prostrate* oneself *to do homage* or *make obeisance-* either in *respect* or to make *supplication* (*Ibid*). In common religious vernacular today, it is used to refer to specific acts such as *singing* hymns of praise, offering up *prayers* of adoration, *memorializing* the Lord’s death through partaking of symbolic emblems, and hearing *devotions* and *exhortations* from His word.

But, there has been a movement afoot for many years based upon a stated principle that “All of life is worship.” Whether subtle or more directly, the intention seems to be to suggest that “worship” is *how we live* on a daily basis **rather than** *what we do* when we are assembled *“as a church,”* cf. 1Corinthians 11:18. I get it. There are plenty of examples of the corruption of what should be “worship” into either entertainment or a talent show, or both. But remember, corruption of the original intent and practice into something else shouldn’t condemn the genuine, but the fraudulent imposter! Let’s note a few passages that should shed some light on the subject…

Genesis 22:5, *“…and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you.”* Abraham and Isaac performed specific acts at a specific time and place that were called *“worship.”* They made specific preparations, and journeyed for more than two days in order to worship, vv.1-4. Such does bode well for the “all of life is worship” notion.

Acts 2:42, *“And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”* The fact that the early Christians did these things *continually* seems to foster the “all of life is worship” position. But if we notice the verses that follow in the context, we see that there seems to have been a distinction made between the *holy* and *ordinary* activities, *“And day by day continuing with one mind* ***in the temple****, and breaking bread* ***from house to house****, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.”* The *spiritual* activities associated with worship (from v.42) were done in God’s house, while the *physical* eating of meals occurred in their own homes (see also 1Corinthians 11:22ff). Why, if “all of life is worship”?

1Corinthians 11:18, *“For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it.”* In this context, Paul is rebuking the Corinthians for turning the Lord’s Supper (an act of worship) into a common meal, cf. vv.20ff. But notice from v.18 that *“coming together as a church”* was assumed to be common practice. Later, in 16:2, the *“first day of every week”* was specified as the time for monetary collections to be made by church members. Why then? They were *coming together “as a church”* at that time,as we’ve already noted. Now, *why* were they *coming together as a church* at that time*-* or at least *why should they have been coming together as a church* at that time if “all of life is worship”?

One more from Hebrews 10:25, *“not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.”*  Say what you will, there is really just no way around it: God expects Christians to *assemble together* to worship and *encourage one another.* And why shouldn’t He? It is for our own good! Worshipping God and encouraging one another is the best thing for us!

There is no doubt or argument that we can “worship” God *outside* of the specified time and place we gather on the first day of the week. Several passages support such, Matthew 14:33; 28:9,17; Luke 24:52; John 9:38; *et al*. Romans 12:1 even states that the *presentation of our bodies* as *living and holy sacrifices-* which I take to refer to *our lives* and *how we live them,* should be a *“spiritual service of worship.”* Again, I get it: we can *worship* outside of the church building with how we live our lives. But, this does not negate that God also expects His people to gather weekly, at a specified time and place, to perform specific *acts of worship* to glorify His name, and thereby to be lifted up and encourage one another. One need not exclude or eliminate the other. Just remember a couple of things: 1) abuses of congregational “worship” by some doesn’t mean it can’t be and isn’t being done properly by others; and, 2) we can and should worship by living *sacrificially holy* lives, but such doesn’t negate the expectation of God that we assemble weekly for *congregational* worship, or thankfully, the benefits of so doing! (1-3-17)

**“You Can’t Take It With You”**

We’ve likely all heard statements to the effect that “Hearses don’t have trailers.” The basic idea, that *you can’t take it with you when you die,* is a scriptural one. The ecclesiastical writer put it this way, *“As he had come naked from his mother’s womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand,”* Ecclesiastes 5:15. While the concept and quotes seem to primarily refer to “material possessions,” there are a few other things that we can’t take with us when we die- especially if the intended destination of our after death journey is heaven…

**Sin-filled lives.**  In this life we all sin and fall short of God’s glory and expectations, Romans 1 – 3; 3:21-23. But it is also true that if heaven is our goal, these sinful habitudes must be left behind. We cannot be content to *“continue in sin,”* Romans 6:1ff. We must be willing to be *transformed* and *renewed* to a new life of obedience to Christ rather than continuing in *conformation to* and *with the world,* Romans 12:1-2. Yes, Jesus will forgive us and pardon our sins, if we will repent and follow Him in righteousness. You can’t take a sin-filled life with you to heaven! *“And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure,”* 1John 3:4.

**“Minor” sins.** Unfortunately, we often *classify* sins like this: *Mine* are “minor,” but *yours* are “major” (kind of the opposite of how we classify surgeries). So, failures to *love* as we ought, and *forgive* as we ought, are viewed as only “minor” offenses. By comparison to these sins of omission, there are also other sins of commission that we also consider “minor”- such as *gossip, slander, course jesting,* or being *factious* or *dissentious,* cf. Ephesians 4:29-32; 5:4; Romans 16:17. Make no mistake about these “minor” sins. The Scriptures are clear regarding these types of sins regardless of how we may classify them- that these sins can’t be taken with us to heaven any more than *immorality, impurity, covetousness,* or *idolatry,* Ephesians 5:5.

**Time.**  Virtually everything we do here in this life, and even our existence here, is bound by time. This makes it somewhat difficult for us to even imagine a *timeless* eternal existence in heaven. But nonetheless, “time” will be “no more” in heaven. Revelation 21:25 and 22:5 explain that there will be *no night there,* but one *continuous day* in which the *glory of God* will be the light forever. “Time” will, therefore, be left behind.

**Loved Ones.** As much as we love our families, and as strong as our desires are for them to spend eternity in heaven, we can’t take them to heaven with us. We certainly can and should do all that is within our power to influence them to want to go, and to teach them the gospel that enables it, but *they* must make that decision and pursue the course themselves. No one will be in heaven because of your desire alone. This is true for everyone- including God. Though He *“desires all men to be saved,”* such is, by His decree, dependent upon them and their willingness to *“come to the knowledge of the truth”* and its obligations,1Timorthy 2:4. In this regard, *“each will bear his own load,”* Galatians 6:5.

**Tears.** I’ve often been asked how there can be “no tears” in heaven when one recognizes the absence of friends and loved ones there (cf. Revelation 21:4). This is one of many things about heaven that I confess ignorance. My best guess is that in heaven, with mortality and time stripped away, and in the presence of the glory of God and the Lamb, we will then see things from the divine perspective. But tears, and the things that cause them, will not be taken with us to heaven. Note from the same verse, *“there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain: the first things have passed away.”* The things that cause *tears* and *mourning* are part of this life that we simply cannot take with us. For while they are certainly part of the *corruption, groaning,* and *futility* of this life, they are not part of heaven!

Jesus Christ came to this earth and lived and died as a man, but was resurrected to eternal life proving Him to be the Son of God, Romans 1:4. He has gone to *prepare a place* for those who are willing to *hear, learn,* and *follow* Him in obedience, John 6:44; 14:2-3. But of the things of “this life,” it is indeed true that “you can’t take it with you” there! (2-16-16)

**Do You Have a Love of the Truth So As to Be Saved?**

2Thessalonians 2:10, *“…those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth as to be saved.”* This passage brings a stark reality to our awareness, or at least it should- that if we don’t *love the truth* we will be eternally lost. So please understand that…

**We don’t really love the truth if we try to change it to fit our desires or lifestyle instead of changing our desires or lifestyle to fit it.** The truth does not change to fit our needs, wants, or desires- these change many times throughout our lives, but the truth of God’s word remains constant. *“Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the Lord, it will stand,”* Proverbs 19:21. When we start trying to make the Bible fit our plans, instead of fitting ourselves to the Bible’s plan, we’re *transforming* and *conforming* the wrong thing, cf. Romans 12:1-2. And yet, such is exactly what takes place day in and day out. We *bend, twist,* and *distort* the Scriptures in an effort to make them say what we want them to say- so that we get what we *want* from them, instead of honestly and objectively ascertaining what they actually do say, and therefore getting what we *need* from them. In doing so, we want God to succumb to *our will* rather than us humbly submitting to His will. If this is your intent or practice with the Bible, **you don’t really love the truth.**

**We don’t really love the truth if we only want bite-sized and pre-softened portions.** Some people only seem to want to *flavor* their religion with the truth, rather than have it be the entree. The *“solid food”* of the truth is that which provides the *nourishment* necessary for *sustenance* and *growth,* Hebrews 5:14. But those who content themselves with *milk* from *“the word of righteousness”* are destined to spiritual *immaturity,* Hebrews 5:13. It is the *“word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified,”* Acts 20:32. It is the teaching of the word by *evangelists, pastors,* and *teachers* that *equips “the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ,”* Ephesians 4:11-13. If you just want enough truth to fit on a bumper sticker, or to be a motivational quote, or to *flavor* your life with the guise and false security of “Christianity,” **you don’t really love the truth.**

**We don’t really love the truth if it has to be *packaged* just so for you to listen to it, accept it, and learn from it.** Paul wrote to the brethren at Corinth that he *“did not come with superiority of speech or wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God… and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God,”* 1Corinthians 2:1,5. This is no excuse for lack of preparation, crudeness of manners, or slothfulness in exposition of the truth by teachers/preachers, but it is an indictment of us who are willing to “tune out,” dismiss, or otherwise ignore truthful preaching and teaching that does not fit our precise requirements of its presentation. If the truth has to be presented in an exact “box” of time, and be “wrapped” with all the modern concepts of appropriate speech-making (according to the worldly wisdom of experts on public speaking and presentations) for you to listen and benefit, **then you don’t really love the truth.**

**We don’t really love the truth if listening to it presented, or studying it privately and/or publicly, only occurs in “convenient” occasions for us.** When the truth got too “close to home” for the governor, Felix said to Paul, *“Go away for the present, and when I find time, I will summon you,”* Acts 24:25. There is no record in biblical or historical text of that “convenient” time ever again occurring. It is incredibly frustrating to see brethren who ought to, more than anyone else, *love* and *desire* the truth (cf. 1Peter 2:2) set aside the hearing and study of it for anything and everything under the sun. When the kids never miss a ball practice or game but rarely make bible study, we don’t love the truth- and we’re teaching them not to love it either. When we never miss an opportunity to take a weekend family outing, but regularly miss the preaching/teaching of God’s Word, we don’t love the truth. When family, work, recreation, extra-curricular activity, and everything else come before our attention to God’s word, we don’t love the truth. If preachers are commanded by God to *“preach the word; be ready in season and out of season”* to *“reprove, rebuke, exhort with great patience and instruction”* (2Timothy 4:2), don’t you think He expects brethren to be also *ready* to listenand learn at those same times? When you are only willing to hear the truth when it is “convenient” for you, **you don’t really love the truth.**

**Sidebar: Preaching & Worship.** The preaching of the Scriptures is obviously not the only purpose for our assembling. We assemble to worship and praise God, and to commemorate the death of Jesus His Son. But just as singing praises to God, praying to Him, and communing with Him are part of this worship, so also is the preaching/teaching of His Word, Acts 20:7. The early disciples were *devoted* to the *apostles’ teaching* as much as they were to *fellowship* and *the breaking of bread,* Acts 2:42. As important as it is for the Christian to share in the worship/praise of God, and to commune with Him in the memorial of the Lord’s Supper, it is equally important to *hear* and *study* His word that we might *learn “what is pleasing to the Lord,”* Ephesians 5:10. No act of worship should be about *entertaining* or *pleasing* us, despite the obvious benefits we derive when we *“worship the Father in spirit and truth,”* John 4:23. But if we truly have a **love of the truth**, we will worship God according to its dictates, with the proper mindset and purpose, as well as with praise and gratitude in our hearts.

However, if we don’t really love the truth, worship will deteriorate- in all its specific acts and forms, either to a “dull” and “monotonous” obligation in which we take no pleasure and from which we derive no benefit (cf. Psalm 122:1 and Psalm119:165), or to *self-pleasing* and *self-promoting* idolatry, Philippians 3:15-19.

**If we don’t have the kind of *love of truth* that we ought, how do we develop it?**

* **Make such a conscious priority.** If we decide to “learn” (and *love*) something new- a craft, sport, hobby, job/task, language, etc., we have to make such a priority. This means that we make a conscious decision to “do” whatever it takes to understand its concepts, learn its “rules” or standards of application, and then practice, practice, practice. All of which requires that we make mastery of the activity a priority- we *decide* to do it, and then follow through with whatever is required to do so.
* **Spend time with the truth.** Far too many folks decide that the Scriptures are “too complicated” or “too hard to understand” without ever spending any real time and effort to comprehend them. Some of us have been *around* the word of God all of our lives, but have never really put ourselves *in* the Word through **personal**, **persistent**, and **purposeful** study, and **consistent application**. This takes a comprehensive overall view, but also a sequential step-by-step process that proceeds from the simple to more complex constituent elements. First, understand the point of the Bible as a whole- the telling of the story of man’s salvation through Jesus Christ from *the beginning* in Genesis to *the end* in Revelation. Second, break it down into its main two divisions- the Old Testament (history of man, sin, and need for salvation), and the New Testament (salvation through Jesus Christ). When we spend sufficient time with the Scriptures to “see” the ‘big picture’ they reveal, then we can more fully understand and appreciate the smaller individual books that combine to tell a complete, harmonious, and beautiful story of God’s love and provision for man and his salvation through Jesus Christ.
* **Don’t allow your study of the Word to be just an *academic* pursuit- make it real by seeking opportunities for daily application in your life.** You’ll be amazed by how many day-to-day “normal” activities, and specific and “exceptional” ones- both tragic and exhilarating, are dealt with in the Bible. Its “coverage” and benefits to all aspects of life simply supersede the possibility of human authorship. Only God could *foresee* and *provide for* all our informational needs so profoundly (cf. 2Peter 1:3)! But like any “self-help” book, unless we put its teachings into practice, the real “value” of them cannot be realized by a mere *academic* approach to it. For better or worse, our “love” is usually attached by a *perceived value* to us. Thus, the more we are able to perceive the *value* of the Scriptures *to* and *in* our lives- both now and unto eternity, the more we will *love* them!

Now, we conclude where we began- with 2Thessalonians 2:10’s *implied* question: Do you have a *“love of the truth so as to be saved”?* Or if not, are you willing to *receive* (or *develop*) a *“love of the truth so as to be saved”?* (10-21-15)

**Sorry, But You’re Not “Special”**

And neither am I. Your mother may cringe, but it’s true. You may have knowledge, abilities, and traits that make you “special” to your mother, your dad, your best friend(s), or your spouse, or even the world, but that’s about as far as it goes. But in the area that really counts, none of us is really special, and the sooner we accept it, the better off we’ll be. Here’s why….

**When it comes to temptation, you’re not “special.”** The temptations you face are not “special,” or different from those everyone else faces, *“No temptation has overtaken you but as is common to man,”* 1Corinthians 10:13a. “My situation is different” is a lie we tell ourselves to feel better about failure. “The devil made me do it,” or “I just couldn’t help myself,” are also lies we tell others and ourselves for the same reason. Neither your present situation nor your past circumstances make you “special” in regards to temptation. You don’t *have to sin-* you and everyone else (including me!) chooses to *give in* to temptation instead of *fighting* or *fleeing* from it, cf. Ephesians 6:10-13; 2Timothy 2:22. But, to be successful in *overcoming* temptation*,* we must first stop making excuses for ourselves because we believe we or our situation is “special.” This just isn’t so.

**When it comes to sin, you’re not “special.”** You sin in the same ways everyone else does, *“For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world,”* 1John 2:16. What is “sinful” for everyone else, is also sinful for you, because God is *impartial,* and judges accordingly*, “For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality,”* Colossians 3:25. Thus, your sins are not “special,” and have the same spiritual consequence as everyone else’s, *“For the wages of sin is death,”* Romans 6:23.

**When it comes to salvation, you’re not “special.”** If you are saved, it will be in the same way as everyone else. Peter realized this himself, and made it clear for all of us, *“I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him,”* Acts 10:34-35. If you’re waiting for some sort of “special” invitation from God, it won’t be coming. You have been *“called…through the gospel”* just like everyone else, 2Thessalonians 2:14. Your *faith,* should you have it, will come from the Scriptures rather than from some sort of “special” experience, *“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ,”* Romans 10:17. Thus, your salvation will come by the same means as everyone else’s- *hearing* and *doing* what Christ says, Matthew 7:21-27. There simply wasn’t one Great Commission for everyone else, and a “special” one for you. The apostles were sent into *“all the world”* to *“preach the gospel to all creation,”* Mark 16:15. That this *gospel* is the *same for everyone* is made abundantly clear in the next verse, *“He who has believed and is baptized shall be saved,”* Mark 16:16. You’re not “special” when it comes to what *you must do* in order to be saved by the grace of God- it’s the same for everyone.

**When it comes to living as a Christian, you’re not “special.”** You don’t have a *separate,* or *special* set of rules by which to live, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age,”* Titus 2:11-12. This isn’t a cafeteria where you get to pick and chose only what you “like,” or what you feel is “right” for you. You don’t get to serve God in “your own way.” If you serve Him at all, it will be according to *His* will (rather than yours) just like everyone else, *“And why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”* Luke 6:46. Some, thinking they are “special,” speak of “finding God’s will for **me**” as if His will for them is different than His will for everyone else. It just isn’t, cf. 1Timothy 2:4; 1Thessalonians 4:3; 1Peter 2:15; 1John 2:17.

Now, does God **love you**? Assuredly, as He loves *everyone,* John 3:16. Did He send Jesus to die for **your sins**? Certainly, but not for *yours only,* 1John 2:2. Does God **want you to be saved?** Absolutely, but He does *everyone,* 1Timothy 2:4. Can **you be saved eternally**? Of course, by obeying the gospel just like everyone else, Romans 1:16-17. Regarding temptation, sin, salvation, or living as a Christian, **you’re no different from anyone else.** But, believing and obeying Jesus will make you *different* from those who refuse to do so, and you will receive the **“special”** reward of eternal life, 1Peter 2:9-10! Please consider these points and passages carefully, won’t you? (2-19-15)

**­­Lessons from a “Wee Little Man”**

If you went to bible class as a youngster, you probably remember a song about a man named Zaccheus. You know, *“Zaccheus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. He climbed up into a sycamore tree for he wanted the Lord to see.”* Aren’t you glad this is a printed article rather than a live lesson so you don’t have to listen to me sing? As is often the case, at least for me, the “children’s” stories and songs we learned way back when have some real “grown-up” lessons included too- if we will just revisit and restudy them as adults.

Do you remember the story of Luke 19:1-10? Jesus came to the ancient city of Jericho. It was destroyed by God as the Israelites initially entered Canaan, cf. Joshua 6. After the fall of the city, Joshua pronounced a curse upon whoever might rebuild it. Thus, 1Kings 16:34 records the fulfillment of that curse upon Hiel, the Bethelite, for that reason. Jericho was situated near major fords that allowed commerce to traverse the Jordan River. Therefore, it was a suitable place for a *“chief tax-gatherer”* like Zaccheus to reside and work. Evidently such was profitable work, for Zaccheus is described as *“rich,”* v.2. But this job also came with notable liabilities. Since the taxes were being collected and sent to Rome ***from***the Jews typically ***by*** their countrymen, the “tax man” was despised and hated. Zaccheus apparently fit into this category.

But, being the “tax man” wasn’t his only challenge. As Jesus came near to the city, evidently a large crowd gathered. Zaccheus wanted to see Jesus, but because he was *“small in stature,”* he couldn’t see over the crowds, v.3. However, he was determined- so he ran up ahead of the procession and climbed up a sycamore tree to enable a better view, v.4. Such was surely neither a noble nor respectable activity for a man of his position, but Zaccheus didn’t allow these things to deter him! In what certainly must have been an embarrassing situation, at least at first, Jesus stopped the parade, looked up into the tree at Zaccheus, called him by name, and said, *“hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house,”* v.5. Zaccheus not only complied with Jesus’ demand, but *“received Him gladly,”* v.6. Though he did not directly deny the charge of being a *“sinner,”* v.7, he did voluntarily offer *“half of my* (his) *possessions”* to assist the poor if he had defrauded anyone, v.8. For both his attitude and activity, Jesus pronounced Zaccheus to be a *“son of Abraham,”* v.9!

Let’s put the particulars of the story in perspective. Zaccheus **did not get** ***“caught up in”*** or ***trust in either his position or wealth***. Do you, cf. Luke 12:33? Do these things prevent you from a close personal relationship with Jesus? Zaccheus **was not deterred by obstacles- even his *inherent* one(s)**, from “seeing” Jesus. We have all been given characteristics by our parents- either genetically or perhaps from teaching and training, that can be obstacles to our “seeing” Jesus (certainly the inverse may also be true). Do you allow your *physical* or *spiritual* inheritance to prevent you from truly “seeing” Jesus, cf. Matthew 10:34-37? Zaccheus, when presented with the opportunity to be with Jesus, **offered no hesitation or excuse, but *joyfully* responded *immediately.*** How long have you been delaying your obedience or excusing your disobedience to the invitation of Jesus, cf. Luke 14:15-24? Zaccheus also **penitently offered to make restitution for whatever wrongs he had committed.** While restitution cannot be made for some sins (murder, etc.), are you refusing to repent of your sins- and perhaps even denying their sinfulness, cf. Luke 13:3,5; 24:47? Please understand: If an activity, lifestyle, or relationships was “sinful” prior to salvation, it is not made “holy” after salvation.

Salvation came to Zaccheus because he: did not trust in his wealth or position; was undeterred by obstacles- even the inherent ones; did not hesitate, delay, or offer excuses when faced with the Truth, but joyfully responded with acceptance and obedience; and allowed true repentance to repair what could be fixed from the past, and to amend his future course. Perhaps the song about a “Wee Little Man” didn’t convey all of those lessons, but the attitude and activity of Zaccheus as told through the inspiration of Luke surely did! (3-13-13)

Congratulations- you made it all the way to the end! Unless, of course, you read “selectively.” Either way, thanks for reading, and for your interest in things spiritual.

-Philip C. Strong