

Diary of a Journeyman

*A Selection of Thoughts, Parables, Anecdotes, and
Analogies*

Volume II

By Pastor Edward J. Collins

www.pastoredcollins.org

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Introduction

As was the case with *Volume 1* of what is now rightly called a series, this book is a collection of blog entries that I've written over the course of more than a year. I have attempted to organize the entries into chapters that aim to make a topical search easier for my readers. Please forgive me if I have failed in any way on this (it's harder than it looks, I assure you).

Reading tips:

- A kindle or eBook reader with a search function is recommended, but not necessary
- If not doing a word search, the Table of Contents is a great place to find topics of interest
- A person could read this book from cover to cover, making a “daily devotional” out of it.

However a reader chooses to use this book, it is a tremendous resource for encouragement, learning, practical application, and even sharing amongst friends. There is enough breadth in this book to generate hours and hours of discussion, either between a believer and God, or between believers.

Happy reading!

Love in Christ,

Ed Collins

DISCIPLINE AND PRIORITIES

The Root and Meanings of discipline. Discipline comes from *discipulus*, the Latin word for pupil, which also provided the source of the word disciple (albeit by way of a Late Latin sense-shift to “a follower of Jesus Christ in his lifetime”).

— Merriam-Webster

To be a disciple is to be disciplined. In the case of a believer, the person is a disciple of Jesus Christ. Given the simple facts that Jesus Christ is the Word (**John 1:14**) and that the Word instructs us, as disciples we are to be disciplined.

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. 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. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

— 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

The apostle Paul was highlighting discipline, including the implication of having one’s priorities straight. If we fail this latter test, God will discipline us (the verbal form of the word) in an attempt to reorient us to active discipleship.

*“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.”*

DISCIPLINE AND PRIORITIES

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

— **Hebrews 12:5b-13**

A person with good priorities makes good decisions as a true disciple of Jesus Christ. In fact, they seek to be pleasing to God under all circumstances (**2 Corinthians 5:9**). A disciplined person seeks knowledge, whereas an undisciplined person rejects it.

*Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,
But he who hates reproof is stupid.*

— **Proverbs 12:1**

Wisdom teaches us that discipleship has a cost. We must “*take up our cross and follow [Jesus]*” (**Matthew 16:24**). A person who rejects this doesn’t have their priorities set appropriately and will be disciplined by the Lord (**Galatians 6:7**).

My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD

*Or loathe His reproof,
For whom the LORD loves He reproves,
Even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.
How blessed is the man who finds wisdom
And the man who gains understanding.
For her profit is better than the profit of silver
And her gain better than fine gold.*

— Proverbs 3:11-14

Man Up

"I can't *stand* wimpy men!"

I'm quoting my wife here. I giggle whenever I hear her share that sentiment. I mean, I totally agree, but there's just something about those words rolling off the tongue of a reserved woman. If you don't know her, you might be taken aback. In any case, she brings up a good point.

You might be saying, "Who cares about what your wife thinks!" I'd respond to you by saying, while her opinion ultimately really doesn't matter, her emotions aren't incongruous with the Word of God. In fact, taken in the context of our current world, her disgust is justified. I imagine it stinks being a woman surrounded by a bunch of wimps. I suppose it elicits feelings of insecurity, of feeling unprotected by those who should be standing guard.

Jesus Christ is often referred to as The Lion and the Lamb. It's a wonderful way to think of Him because while He's unconquerable (remember, He *chose* the Cross, He conquered death - 2 Timothy 1:10), He's also as gentle as a lamb (John 1:36). The closer any man is to being these things simultaneously, the more Christlike he is.

The problem with most men is that they like to beat an empty chest. In fact, most talk without any action. They are vapid - mere vessels lacking the grace, love, power, and discipline to get beyond their own selfish desires. "*For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline*" (2 Timothy 1:7). The word *timidity* in v7 refers to a cowardly, shameful fear caused by a weak, selfish character. Does that sound anything like Jesus Christ? Not my Lord. In fact, it sounds like the exact opposite of Him. Let's call that kind of man a "wimp" for the sake of this blog. And by the way, that's the kind of man that my wife can't stomach.

She says they make her skin crawl. I understand.

You might say, “Your wife sounds judgmental.” My response is that you have a right to your opinion; nonetheless, she has a right to her own thoughts (by the way, she won’t know I wrote this until it’s published). It just so happens that while her expression may not be perfect, strictly speaking, her heart is good. And she’s not alone at all, far from it.

There’s really nothing attractive about wimpy men. In fact, to a godly woman, they are repulsive. Why? Because a godly woman’s standard is her true Husband, Jesus Christ. Even so, let’s not make this about my wife’s sentiments. Let’s do something much better. Let’s ponder some Holy Scripture.

Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

— 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

Only a man after Jesus’ own heart can abide in the above commands. A wimpy man never will, for he is too self-absorbed, too preoccupied with himself to serve the Lord this way. True men of God are, above all, His servants. Wimpy men serve themselves, fight for themselves, and only appear to be fighting for others when it’s convenient for them.

One of the things I love most about God is that He makes a point of proving these things to us, through testing. He does this for our benefit. While He already knows our constitution, or lack thereof, He makes a point of proving to each of us where we stand on the continuum between wretchedly wimpy and The Lion and the Lamb. In other words, He’s never satisfied with our own estimation of ourselves, for there’s a good chance it’s set too high. The problem with wimpy men is that they lack the constitution to withstand godly criticism, so they persist in playing pretend, if at all.

We find out an awful lot about ourselves under pressure. This is one of the greatest blessings of all - being humbled through trials.

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

— **Romans 5:3-5**

Even Jesus was tested. In a sense, His Father said to Him, “Time to man up, my Son!” Consider the hours before His crucifixion. Look at His incredible response to pressure.

And Jesus answered them, saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.

Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour.

Father, glorify Your name.” Then a voice came out of heaven: “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.”

— **John 12:23-28**

Do you see it? I truly hope so. If there ever was a “man up” moment in human history, it was surely then. Remember, Jesus’ crucifixion wasn’t a sudden event for Him. He knew what He’d have to endure long before the event, itself - all for the sake of others. He wasn’t weak, selfish, or timid

about it. He was loving, powerful, disciplined. These are the characteristics of a man of God. Is it fair to say that He's the furthest man from wimpiness? I think so.

"For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."

— John 10:17-18

So let's get this straight. Jesus *knew* that He was about to be murdered (unlike most murder victims) and He *still* chose to pursue that route wholeheartedly? Yup. To echo His words once again, "*what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? **But for this purpose I came to this hour.***" While they may not be as magnanimous as the Cross of the Messiah, we all have our own crosses to bear. This means that we all have a real purpose in this life. Let us not forget this. Let's not wimp out under pressure.

Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

— Luke 14:27

At some point in every man's life, he must make a decision - God ensures it. Will I serve God and fulfill my purpose, or will I fail the test? Will I be a wimp, or will I man up?

I'm not commissioned to tell you what your cross is, as a believer, only that you have one. I'm not trying to shame anyone into *acting* like a man, only that the Bible says to act like one. I'm not supposing anyone of us will ever be able to mimic our Lord's strength, only that the same God that empowered Him empowers us. "*With God all things are possible*" (**Matthew 19:26**). Believe it or not, I'm actually trying to be encouraging, not discouraging. I'm actually writing this for your benefit, not mine. If you're

a wimpy man, then what can I say to you, other than, "Man up"? Wouldn't most of you men out there rather hear that from me than from my wife???

The New Average

I'll never forget the time I was watching a documentary on inner city life and some man was being interviewed on the street. I forget the exact context, but somehow he had been on the wrong end of an accusation that challenged his manhood. When the interviewer conveyed what his ex had said about him, he proceeded to put on an air of self-righteousness, boasting, "I take care of my kids!" As the interview progressed, he continued crowing about completing his other responsibilities as a "baby daddy" (that term makes me cringe). Throughout the interview, it was apparent that this man didn't want to just defend his honor; rather, he fully expected to be praised for doing the things that any righteous man does from a sense of duty.

Increasingly, people desire to be praised for doing their jobs. Now, I'm not talking about simple recognition for a job well done over some lengthy period of time. I'm talking about this same plague that begins on soccer fields, where they no longer keep score and everyone receives a trophy for merely participating. Aren't sports trophies for the winners?...not anymore, it seems. People want to be praised for everything nowadays. This is a symptom of something much deeper, something insidious.

Jesus, personally, taught His disciples about this kind of errant thinking:

"Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink'? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"

This parable is a wonderful view into the heart of Christ. It reveals that people ought not expect a special reward for simply doing what is their duty in the first place.

At face value, this issue seems benign. For example, some might argue that celebrating a man who actually takes care of his family will result in positive reinforcement, encouraging more of the same from that individual. However, if we begin inordinately celebrating all the duties in life, we are effectively resetting the bar. Celebration implies excellence, like when a child gets an “A+” on their report card. But, what about the kid who gets a “B” or a “C”, which is considered “average” (at least it used to)? If we lower the reason to celebrate down to the “average” range, then inevitably, the “new average” slides down correspondingly to a “D” or an “F”, which used to stand for failure.

If we celebrate “average” long enough, we end up resetting the “new average” to failure. In other words, eventually, it’s the acceptable norm to be what is rightly a failure. Our scale of values becomes perverted.

Furthermore, the problem with this issue is that it erodes good things surrounding it. It demoralizes and debilitates those in a society that are actually excelling. If everyone from “average” and above is being celebrated, what’s the motivation to excel? I speak in human terms, for learned believers in Christ understand that anything excellent in them is the result of God’s grace. Even so, the temptation exists to tolerate/accept the “new average”.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus,

giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

— **Colossians 3:15-17**

The Bible commands us to be good spouses, parents, children, neighbors, friends, and lovers. We are thoroughly encouraged to marvel at the excellencies that God will accomplish in us as He sanctifies us over time. However, His baseline commands to be good slaves are just that - baselines (aka “averages”). Should we be celebrating faithfulness in marriage now that the rest of the world increasingly normalizes infidelity? Should we raise our glasses to a parent who actually supports their children? Should we praise ourselves for not taking advantage of our neighbors, for not swindling business partners, or using friends like disposable items? Lastly, should we be patting ourselves on the back for actually loving others more than ourselves? Aren't all these things merely the baseline above failure? If so, then what's everyone celebrating???...being good? Newsflash: You're *Supposed To Be Good!*

We have to be especially careful of societal perversions like this one. We must use the Word, now more than ever, to guard against the infection of our Lord's righteous perspective. May we fight being lulled by the “new average”, for even our own arrogant flesh will find it attractive. In the end, there's only one Judge:

His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

— **Matthew 25:21**

"Practice Makes Perfect!"

If you were to interview those who have been deemed the “greatest” in their respective sport, each of them would concede that perfection is impossible (except for maybe a bowler). They’d likely go on to tout incredible discipline, evidenced by long, tedious hours of practice, often over years, sometimes even decades. Still, perfection for them is something they’ll never achieve. Yet, somewhere in the back of their head is a resounding, recurring theme, “Practice makes perfect!”

*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and **perfect**.*

— **Romans 12:2**

It’s similar in the spiritual life. The Bible tells us that perfection is indeed the end goal of sanctification, albeit over a lifetime of God’s grace transforming us. But even then, after the fullest of lifetimes has been lived by the most upright and blameless of us all, no one besides Jesus Christ has ever lived a perfect life. It seems almost counterintuitive, for the omniscient God of the Universe to propose perfect sanctification when He, Himself, knows its impossibility for us in time.

Well, to be fair, as most of you know, we are perfected positionally in Christ when we are saved. And we are perfected wholly when we make it to Heaven. It’s the in-between time where perfection is impossible. The best we’ll ever witness is God’s perfect grace working in us. We have the privilege of realizing the effects of someone perfect working on someone imperfect.

*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will **perfect** it until the day of Christ Jesus.*

— **Philippians 1:6**

*Let us therefore, as many as are **perfect**, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you.*

— **Philippians 3:15**

*Beyond all these things put on love, which is the **perfect** bond of unity.*

— **Colossians 3:14**

So, are we to quit running the race set before us? May it never be! We are to be like the aforementioned star athletes - training, disciplining ourselves, and being ready for spiritual battle. Which of us hasn't stood on the "free throw line" and wished for a perfect shot? Which of us hasn't wished for a perfect round of golf. How about a perfect vault in gymnastics? We know full well that none of these things are possible, yet isn't that our hope? In a way, perfection is what motivates us, drives us harder.

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.

— **1 Corinthians 9:24**

While we must concede that we'll never experience absolute perfection in ourselves in this lifetime, we must strive as if it were possible, for that is God's will for us.

God sets goals that His grace can certainly achieve, as we'll soon see in Heaven, so His command to maintain this attitude even now, as a function of divine hope, is certainly not misplaced (how dare we even entertain such a thought). The writer of the Book of Hebrews wrote about the value of training hard with this kind of attitude.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for

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someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

— Hebrews 5:12-14

As has been coming from my pulpit as of late, so much of living the spiritual life is doing so with the right perspective. So much of sanctification is just that, an issue of perspective. Truth and experience are what we need for wisdom, and, "*wisdom is vindicated by all her children*" (Luke 7:35). Divine wisdom, you see, is an element of perfection - the meeting place between divine and human perspective. I suppose sharing even one iota of it is more than sufficient a display of grace; yet, the Holy God of the Universe has promised so much more to those who "practice to make perfect."

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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have 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."*

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

— **Hebrews 12:1-14**

If we're honest, our greatest opportunity to practice is when we fail. Failure is a way of life for us believers, and we know it, having an understanding of sin, itself. We "miss the shot" as much as we "make it" it seems. Yet, we must be encouraged by God's ability to sanctify us. Over time, as we continue in our imperfections and learn from our mistakes, we realize that this kind of "practice" is essential to our pursuit of godliness, that is, perfection, *"knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope"* (**Romans 5:3b-4**).

"Practice makes perfect!" That is the secular proverb. We'll be perfect in Heaven soon enough; but, until then, let's keep on practicing as if we might achieve it even now, for that is God's will for us. As with all things spiritually appraised, God sees a heart set on righteousness, and this is pleasing to Him. *"Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or*

"Practice Makes Perfect!"

absent, to be pleasing to Him" (2 Corinthians 5:9).

Starting Your Day Off Right

This morning...

“What’s your strategy for overcoming the flesh’s desire to turn your eyes away from the Lord?”

“I read my Bible every morning as part of my routine,” my wife responded.

“So true, isn’t it...how vulnerable we are to the trickery of our own devices!”

She continued, “Let me put it this way, if I *don’t* read my Bible, I’m doomed for the day. If I don’t put on the full armor of God, then I find I’m just too weak to make it through the day in one piece.” Of course, she was referencing the following passage.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with

which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

— Ephesians 6:10-17

“Ahhh, it’s like being washed over every morning by the Word, being cleansed of the stink from the day before, huh?”

“Yes, I don’t know how I could make it through the day without it,” she concurred. Wise woman.

Sometimes I ask folks questions to get a sense of their understanding of certain doctrines (it’s the shepherd in me); other times, I’m simply curious as to how they practically go about applying the Word as ointment in their lives. People live and describe their experiences differently than each other, so I learn an awful lot by just shutting my mouth and listening (that’s sage advice right there, just sayin’ - wink, wink). My wife is no different. In fact, given our intimacy, she’s a real blessing in terms of growing my own perspective on godliness.

The reason I asked that initial question about “strategy” this morning was because I had just finished reading **Exodus 32**, when Moses had to be sent down by God to deliver the Israelites, whom the Lord God called “*obstinate*”, from their idolatry. I was sitting in my recliner reading my Bible over my coffee and I called over my shoulder to my wife, who was getting ready to go to school (she teaches first grade elementary) - I was laughing aloud to myself at the time - and told her the passage I was reading. She laughed along with me and shook her head. “Moses wasn’t even gone that long!”

It doesn’t take us long to defect from God’s will, does it? If His people, Israel, revealed one thing to us throughout the Old Testament, it’s got to be this. God is so patient.

Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." Now when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'"

— **Exodus 32:1-8**

So, let's get this straight. Moses was called up to the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, which took a mere forty days and forty nights (**Exodus 24:18**). And remember, this is the same man who led Israel out of Egypt by the hand of God. It's hard to believe that after just a little over a month, they turned to idolatry, seeking a "*god that will go before [them]*" (**Exodus 32:1**). As incredible as this may seem, we must each ask ourselves, how long does it take for us to turn away from the Lord for idols?...hmmm. For many people, it seems, forty days is a *long* time!

I'd argue that most people possess the loyalty of a hungry dog - whoever's got the snack becomes their best friend for the moment.

Satan knows what kinds of “snacks” we like, so he manufactures them daily. He's got a whole basket full of them ready for us each and every day, on full display, too. And he's like Burger King, pumping scrumptious scents into the air, tempting our senses at every turn. If we're hungry, we are *doomed!* We must learn to fill our bellies with the very bread of life, the Word of God (**John 1:14; 6:35**), so that we don't go out into the world far more temptable than we might otherwise be. The Word is our sustenance and our protection.

I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

— **John 17:15-19**

To be “*sanctified*” this way is to be cleansed by the Word, which is to say that it washes over us supernaturally. This daily exercise shouldn't be considered optional, as it rids us of filth that is clinging to our souls from our previous day in the world. If we neglect washing up, we exist in a weakened condition. The longer we go without washing, the filthier we get. As my wife intimated, this is never a good way to start one's day.

If the Lord Jesus Christ isn't *the* priority in your life, then who or what is? If He's not the One you begin each day with, then how are you starting your days? It's amazing how many people take baths or showers every day - God forbid they smell and be offensive to the sensibilities of others - yet, spiritually, these same people reek to the high heavens and think nothing of it. The Lord God appreciates the sweet aroma of

sanctification, much more than any person or idol could ever appreciate how clean you supposedly are physically.

But even beyond all of that, remember that beginning your day with the Word means putting on the only armor capable of protecting your soul from your enemies. What good is smelling like a bar of soap in the midst of battle if you lack any form of protection for yourself?

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. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

— 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

Zoo Tycoon

*Then I began to weep greatly because no one was found worthy to open the book or to look into it; and one of the elders *said to me, "Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah [Jesus Christ], the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals."*

— **Revelation 5:4-5**

There's a video game called *Zoo Tycoon*. It's a single-player game where the player is the owner/manager of a zoo. The objective of the game is to begin with a small amount of money and build a viable, sustainable, enjoyable zoo for the virtual animals and the patrons who visit it. It's a marvelous game and something I believe would be an effective tool in just about any entry-level business class. The game designers made it so real that if you forget to lock the cages, the animals will escape and wreak havoc on the zoo and the frightened people. If you choose to install a lion cage and forget to lock it (or purposely unlock it, like I did, just to see what would happen), someone's going to get mauled...yes, it's *that* realistic.

I suppose it's fair to assume that most lions, given the chance, would exit their cages and become a hazard to the world around them, especially the hungry ones. Satan is like this. Give the "god of this world" (**2 Corinthians 4:4**) the freedom to roam about and he devours those he comes into contact with...Job would certainly agree (**Job 1-2**).

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

— **1 Peter 5:8**

However, the Lion of Judah, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, has shown us what true restraint looks like. This Lion is not like the one that devours -

this Lion came to protect and to serve. Our Lord is a gentle Lion, though strength is never an issue, for He is also the most powerful of all. He is the Word of God (**John 1**) and He is more than capable of defending Himself.

“The Word of God is like a lion. You don’t have to defend a lion. All you have to do is let the lion loose, and the lion will defend itself.”

— **Charles Spurgeon**

God’s intention is to transform us believers into the very image of His Son, the Lion (**Romans 8:29**). In this sense, we are like little “cubs”, frolicking amongst ourselves while the leader of the pride keeps watch over our souls, always at the ready to fend off predators. We are growing up, by grace, and as we do so, we begin to exhibit more and more of His strength. However, as Satan has proven, strength mixed with arrogance results in carnage. In humility, we are to marvel at how our strength is bridled by self-control, for that is fruit of the Spirit.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

— **Galatians 5:22-23a**

Jesus Christ, the omnipotent One, did not destroy Satan when tempted by him in the wilderness (**Matthew 4:1-11**), even though He could have (ref. **Philippians 2:8**). Instead, in humility to His Father’s plan, He resisted the devil’s temptations by applying scripture, repeating, “*it is written...*”, revealing to His cubs that the Word is able to defend us from any/all spiritual attacks. Therefore, we have a Lord that understands our plight, One who overcame our most powerful enemy by the grace of God, “*For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin*” (**Hebrews 4:15**).

As the Lion defended Himself, so shall His cubs. “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

A believer's restraint is one of the greatest shows of faith, hope, and love... *and* strength. Strictly speaking, it would've been much easier for Jesus to tap into His omnipotent deity and simply destroy Satan on the spot, whenever he opposed Him. Likewise, it would've been easier to follow that pattern *any* time He was attacked by *anyone* during His ministry. The greatest display of strength ever known to man was evident on the Cross. While Jesus could've easily come down from the Cross, He chose self-control in order to fulfill His Father's plan. He understood true strength was in restraint, and has since given it to all of us.

When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!"

Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."

And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

The human flesh is weak and its arrogance is carnivorous (spiritually speaking). Weakness flexes when it shouldn't, where strength exercises self-control. Given our transgressions against each other, and our ever-present flesh, it's a wonder any of us are still standing. Thank God for the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit. Thank God for His power working through us, lest we "give the devil an opportunity" to incite us against each other (Ephesians 4:27).

But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

— Galatians 5:15-16

The next time you walk out of your cage, will you do so as a ferocious beast, seeking someone to devour, or will you exercise true power through self-control, flexing only as necessary in defense of all things good and righteous, as does the King of our pride, Jesus Christ?

EMOTIONAL STABILITY

Our peace depends upon our emotional stability. Our emotional stability depends upon our faith. Therefore, in brief, stability is gained through the Word of God.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

— **Romans 10:17**

There's good reason why the Word of God calls Jesus Christ the "Rock". It's because He is our foundation, "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*" (**Hebrews 13:8**). When a person clings to the immutable Christ they are granted a portion of His faith (**Romans 12:3; Ephesians 4:13**), resulting in peace and stability, hence the criticality of taking in the Word of God regularly.

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.

— **Hebrews 2:1**

*The wise of heart will receive commands,
But a babbling fool will be ruined.
He who walks in integrity walks securely,
But he who perverts his ways will be found out.*

— **Proverbs 10:8-9**

*I have set the LORD continually before me;
Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad and my glory rejoices;
My flesh also will dwell securely.*

— **Psalms 16:8-9**

If we ever find ourselves lacking peace and stability in our lives, we are to search for the solution in the one place where we are guaranteed to find it - the Word.

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

— James 1:5-8

Beautiful Things

What do you find beautiful?

Stop right now and ask yourself that question. What's the first thing that comes to mind?

I'd be willing to bet that many of you conjured up a physical image in your mind. Maybe it's your spouse, your child, a sunset, or a flower...something tangible. Maybe the more introspective of you thought about something romantic like love, tenderness, or compassion. Others may have combined these things and thought of Jesus Christ first. There's no right or wrong answer, of course, as they say, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

What say you of a Boeing 747-400 taking flight? Is that a thing of beauty? I mean, here's a contraption comprised of six million parts, one hundred seventy-one miles of wiring, five miles of tubing, and weighing over four hundred tons fully loaded. The 747 fleet has flown tens of billions of miles over the years with relatively low safety incidences. That's incredible. The beauty is in the system...in the engineering...in the simple fact that *so* many moving parts are able to safely transport human beings for long distances at altitudes over six miles up. Incredible.

Speaking of incredible systems. Let's consider God's system of sovereignty - sovereignty being His right to rule. For the sake of simplicity, let's also narrow our scope down to just believers in His kingdom, especially those living today. If the Church were a Boeing 747, she'd have been in flight since the days of Pentecost! That's not to say that our Captain, Jesus Christ, hasn't had to deal with a few alarms from the cockpit, but incredibly, this "plane" has never crashed. He is faithful. He is beautiful.

He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church.

— **Colossians 1:17-18a**

If the Church, in her purest form, is the very picture of beauty, then why are so many members of it hell-bent on antagonizing her? For example, why are there so many professing members of the Church who seem to take offense with the inspired Word of God regarding our Sovereign's delegated authority? For example:

For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.

— **1 Corinthians 11:7-12**

It breaks my heart that women everywhere have been taught to despise Holy Scripture. By the time the average woman gets around to actually reading such a passage as this one, they have been so steeped in ugliness that Satan seizes the moment and encourages them to throw the Bible out as antiquated or even ridiculous. Instead of a cause for beauty, it's the maturation of ugly in her soul. Paul closed his thoughts by stating there's no place in the church for rebellious women.

But if [a woman] is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

— **1 Corinthians 11:16**

A woman loses her potential to exude true beauty when she becomes contentious against the Lord's divinely ordained system of authority. She becomes truly ugly. Men can be just as ugly, so let's not go pointing fingers!

Think bigger-picture now. Authority-orientation is like the structural integrity of a Boeing 747. Without it, the "plane" doesn't fly. Commands in the Bible are like the three million fasteners that keep a plane's parts in place, functioning appropriately. Hence the fundamental importance of obeying God's commands - they are there to ensure the "structural integrity" of the Church as she continues to "fly at altitude".

One must wonder, then, why do some insist on "undoing fasteners", disobeying our Lord's commandments? Don't they know they are working to "crash" the Church (though they'll never succeed)? Don't they realize that their disobedience is antagonistic to an otherwise smooth flight? Do they know that others are stumbling as a result of their actions? Why can't they embrace the beauty here instead of the ugly?

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.

— 1 Timothy 4:1

The world teaches that independence is beautiful. The Bible teaches that we're all slaves. The world teaches that authority is granted by man. The Bible teaches that all authority is ordained by God. The world teaches that it's greatest to be served. The Bible teaches that it's greatest to serve. Both call their systems of thinking things of beauty!

We each much *choose*, nay we each must *accept*, that absolute authority-orientation is God's will. If you're a child, this means submission to your parents. If a wife, to your husband. If a congregant, to your pastor. If a subordinate at work, to your boss. If a citizen, to your governing

authorities, and so on.

What's more beautiful?...a covergirl?...a pretty flower?...a four hundred ton hunk of steel flying at over five hundred mph?...or millions of believers enjoying "*the unity of the faith*" (**Ephesians 4:13**)? What's more beautiful than a "plane" full of passengers placing their trust in their beloved "Captain", obeying His commands while onboard?

Likewise, what's uglier than a fracture in our Lord's chain of command? What's more disruptive, even? What's more marring to true beauty than a disobedient believer? At least the unbelievers have an "excuse" (save **Romans 1:20**) - they don't know any better.

Learn to appreciate the truly beautiful things God has done through Jesus Christ...especially His lordship over all things. "*And [Jesus Christ] is the radiance of [God's] glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power*" (**Hebrews 1:3a**). We were not saved in order to put God's Word to the test just because His grace picks us back up (**Matthew 4:7, Romans 6:1-2**). The only thing beautiful in that scenario is God's mercy. May we be as bold as Paul in making such distinctions in our own souls:

We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete.

— 2 Corinthians 10:5-6

Obedience is beautiful.

Let us remain obedient, for that is the will of the Lord. It's true, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." May your eyes be on the Lord.

Beautiful Things

*Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain,
But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.*

— **Proverbs 31:30**

Be Anxious For Nothing

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

— **Philippians 4:4-8**

Be anxious for nothing.

The Word of God says, literally, *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (v6)*. Notice that it *doesn’t* say, *“Be anxious for some things,”* it says *“nothing”*. What does that mean to you...I mean, *really*? Is it as simple as, *“Oh, I didn’t realize the Bible actually said that, so now that I know, I guess I’ll never be anxious about anything ever again”*? I doubt it, although that’d be nice, wouldn’t it? No, the spiritual life is often much more involved than that - not because God designed it that way, rather because man is really good at overcomplicating things.

The better question we might ask ourselves is, *“Why am I ever anxious in the first place?”* If it’s not as simple as realizing scripture exists that states we shouldn’t be, then where do we find the remedy? The answer is in the same place where we found the command. In fact, if we open our eyes to the whole truth, we might be immediately encouraged by Paul’s words in **v8**, where he essentially gives us an appropriate strategy for exiting the trappings of anxiety. He says, in a nutshell, *“Stop focusing on the wrong things and start focusing on that which is good and holy in your life!”* The

Message Bible translates **v8** as, *“Summing it all up, friends, I’d say you’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.”*

Deliverance is often but a change of perspective away.

I’m not sure how many times the Holy Spirit has had me teach this to my congregation, but the principle above is profound for the humble receiver of it. In the case of anxiety, given the simple fact that God is not the author of it, rather than seeking to address the source of it, sin, head on (we are *“dead to sin,”* **Romans 6:11**), we ought to seek a remedy through a change of perspective. As the Psalmist wrote, *“I am full of anxiety because of my sin”* (**Psalms 38:18b**). In other words, anxiety is borne as a function of sin; sin being a function of arrogance. Why bother wrestling with dead things??? We certainly can’t make them come alive again, so there’s got to be a better way...and there is.

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.

— **1 Peter 5:6-7**

A person who is wholly dependent on the grace of God is void of anxiety. Jesus Christ is our perfect example. He was literally anxious for nothing (e.g., **Matthew 8:23-27**). Why? He had perfect perspective always. Perfect faith means perfect perspective. Granted, we sinners won’t fully understand this experience until we are in Heaven, but nonetheless, to some degree we are made capable of it, depending on the measure of faith we’ve been given in time (**Romans 12:3**). *“And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed”* (**2 Corinthians 9:8**).

So, then, what is the nature of anxiety? What shall we do with it when we realize we have been overcome by it? Well, first and foremost, we must resist the temptation to blame God for it.

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 anyone.

— James 1:13

We might say that anxiety, being a function of arrogance, is something of fleshly origins (even a chemical imbalance that predisposes a person to anxiety is a result of the human body being riddled with sin - that is part of man's curse after the Fall). Now, this may not sit well with contemporary psychologists, but I'm not a psychologist, so I'm not here to debate like one - I'm only quoting what the Supreme Psychologist, God the Holy Spirit, has inspired on the subject. And for the sake of clarity, anxiety is distinctly different than genuine concern for self or others, which is indeed fruit of godliness. The former leads to depression whereas the latter leads to blessing.

*Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down,
But a good word makes it glad.*

— Proverbs 12:25

One of the guarantees we've been given in scripture is that we *will* face adversity and challenges in life. The Bible says so. It is our *response* to such stress that dictates whether or not anxiety will rear its ugly head. If we respond in arrogance, through the power of the flesh, we are assured a dose of anxiety. However, if we respond in humility, through the power of the new creature, with the encouragement of the Spirit and the Word, we are assured blessings. While the flesh likes to meet our problems head on, the new creature transcends them, choosing a change of perspective, something that is able to deliver us quicker than we can say the words, "Thank you, Lord!"

A change in perspective leaves the dead things to themselves and seeks to be alive.

Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and 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 6:11-13**

In the simplest of terms, anxiety is the result of sin reigning (lording) over you. Your only defense is to humble yourself, resisting the temptation to fall into the pit that leads to compound issues such as depression and/or despair. Pray to God for the faith, courage, and strength to be delivered from the influences of spiritual death. The Lord loves a contrite heart.

*For thus says the high and exalted One
Who lives forever, whose name is Holy,
“I dwell on a high and holy place,
And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit
In order to revive the spirit of the lowly
And to revive the heart of the contrite.”*

— **Isaiah 57:15**

If you want to “see” the truth in your situation, then present your case before the throne of grace, and do not hesitate. If you seek wellness, then approach the Great Physician with the same contrite heart as had the blind beggar, Bartimaeus.

*Then they *came to Jericho. And as He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a large crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, the son of*

*Timaeus, was sitting by the road. When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many were sternly telling him to be quiet, but he kept crying out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him here." So they *called the blind man, saying to him, "Take courage, stand up! He is calling for you." Throwing aside his cloak, he jumped up and came to Jesus. And answering him, Jesus said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" And the blind man said to Him, "Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!" And Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and began following Him on the road.*

— **Mark 10:46-52**

The only thing that ever truly heals a person is faith. God gives faith to the humble (**James 4:6**). May you hear Jesus' words the next time your life is riddled with anxiety and you pray to God for deliverance...*"Go, your faith has made you well" (v52).*

Burned Out Happiness

I've looked. I swear I have. And you know what? I can't find *anywhere* in the Bible that describes true happiness in terms of belly laughs. To be fair, the Bible also doesn't preclude hearty enjoyment. In fact, it may just be a function of the freedom a person already possesses. Happy people tend to laugh more, but visible manifestations are hardly the metric Holy Scripture uses to describe the highest order of living.

It seems we live in a world where true happiness is being replaced by something I can only describe as darkness. In my forty-eight years on earth, I've noticed an insidious fog sweeping over humanity. The problem with fog is that it shuts out the light. In the case of the true Light, Jesus Christ, this means that the source of true happiness is cloaked. Remember, God is the ultimate source of all things good. *"Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow"* (James 1:17).

If it's not from God, then it's not good, even if every sense in your human body tells you otherwise.

The above statement is massive. Its weightiness cannot be overestimated. We all need to remember this, all day, every day. Why? Because we live in a world where multibillion dollar industries exist for a single reason, to counterfeit the fruit of true peace in the soul. Notice I used the word peace and not happiness. The word "peace" shows up in the New American Standard Bible over three hundred and fifty times, the word "happiness" less than five and "happy" less than twenty. What does that say to you???

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in 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. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

— 2 Peter 1:2-4

The apostle Peter, like every other writer in the Bible, understood that *peace* is the transcendent quality God seeks to impart to believers. Happiness is more of an expression, but it cannot truly exist in the absence of godly peace. This is what the Bible reveals to us over and over. Yet, this world is full of so-called “happy” people, people who have made the most of their time here on earth, people who have supposedly found the key to good living. They’ll be the first to tell you that they are exceptionally happy. And maybe from human viewpoint, on a scale of values that is limited to fleshly things, there’s a kind of truth to their words. However, as Solomon wrote extensively of in the Book of Ecclesiastes, such “happiness” is fleeting, vapid.

I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.” And behold, it too was futility. I said of laughter, “It is madness,” and of pleasure, “What does it accomplish?” I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.

I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men — many concubines.

Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor.

Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

— Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

King Solomon wasn't a pontificator who merely speculated about things he *dreamed* of experiencing. The amazing things he set out to accomplish in his life were actually real when he wrote about them. How many people in this world have ever lived like Solomon? How many have his wisdom? Yet, so many people claim they know the secret to happy living. They are liars, agents of Satan, himself. I can say that because the Bible tells me it is true. *"There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked"* (Isaiah 57:21). This world is filled with liars.

No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.

— 2 Corinthians 11:14-15

Happiness is much easier to counterfeit than peace. There are many counterfeits that stimulate some form of happiness, but they cannot stimulate peace in the soul. For some, it's food, others drugs or alcohol, and for others wealth or travel. Choose your poison.

Satan knows this, so he redefines the goal of living in terms of happiness instead of inner peace. If he can get you to accept this fundamental misdirection, he can get you to shift your eyes to myriad counterfeits.

The saddest part about his version of happiness, as Solomon alluded to, is that it is an empty shell.

He who has a crooked mind finds no good, and he who is perverted in his language falls into evil.

— **Proverbs 17:20**

Happiness without true peace is as fragile as glass. It can be shattered in a moment, devastating its possessor. Have you ever wondered why ungodliness produces instability? Well, now you know - people who have bought Satan's lie are like yo-yos - one minute they're on top of the world, enjoying their so-called "happiness", and the next they are crumbling into a heap of distress and emotional despair. Sadly, most of them, at the encouragement of the world, will saddle up for another round of "seeking happiness". This cycle will continue indefinitely. I call this "dysfunction junction". It's a horrible, debilitating, diseased existence. The only cure is Jesus Christ, the Word of God.

A joyful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit dries up the bones.

— **Proverbs 17:22**

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you 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.

— **1 Thessalonians 5:23-24**

The Bible doesn't speak of happiness in terms of belly laughs, rather a "joyful heart" given as a gift from the "God of peace". If you're seeking happiness as a function of your human senses, then you'll surely burn out. Unlike our spiritual senses, human senses have a weakness for scintillating things. Once the flesh grabs hold of a counterfeit, it runs hard and fast with

it until it is worn out and unable to produce any more “happiness”.

You see, Satan’s counterfeit is like a wicked drug. It must be consumed in increasing doses for it to continue to manufacture any kind of happiness. The end game is always the same. Painful detox. The long-term effects of overstimulating the human senses while chasing “happiness” is just plain awful...the world becomes dull and boring. Look around, my friends, and you’ll see a bunch of tired, unfulfilled, unhappy overachievers pretending to have conquered the world. God knows their folly and has offered them His peace. Sadly, most will go to their grave destitute, *“For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it”* (Matthew 7:14).

Inner peace is God’s holy prize for those who seek the Truth. True happiness is a reality that may or may not be evidenced on its possessor’s face. However, God has placed it there, as a function of peace, stimulated from deep inside them, and it is worth rejoicing over because it is from Him.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

— **Philippians 4:4-9**

The Last One In Syndrome

We are “funny” creatures, aren’t we? We’re so fickle, so unpredictable sometimes. One day we’re pouring ourselves all over others, seeking ways to help them, the next day we’re cursing them for not helping themselves. Not only that, but God has given us the ultimate instrument of expression. The Bible depicts the human tongue as a double-edged sword, able to knit or sever the most intimate of bonds.

For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

— James 3:7-10

James was concerned the way I am often concerned even today...that people have an awful habit of saying things to others that would be better left unsaid. In all fairness to them, the motivation isn’t always bad. However, as most of you can attest, in retrospect, there are times where restraint would’ve been the best response to a situation.

*There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword,
But the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

— Proverbs 12:18

Now, to address the point at hand...this so-called “last one in syndrome”. This, of course, is a phrase that I made up a long time ago while observing the dynamics of human interactions. I’m hoping it makes more sense to you in a moment. Here we go...

Clearly, not all believers are at the same level of spiritual maturity. In fact, no two humans are exactly the same. Some are very mature in one area of life while others are immature, and visa versa. Why, then, are we ever *shocked* that someone else doesn't "see" all that we see? And why, pray tell, are others so upset with us for not "getting it" sometimes? Even worse, why do we *express* said shock in the presence of the immature? What's the purpose...nay, what's the fruit of it???

Let me give you a perfect example of this phenomenon.

The Spirit's had me recently reload the Gospel from the pulpit. What I mean to say is that He's had me guide my congregation back to the basics regarding faith, grace, and love...you know, the very essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As a result, there's been a groundswell of rededication of lives, a reevaluation of priorities, and a renewed heart for the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. It's been such a magnificent thing to witness that I have sometimes needed to pinch myself. One of my most consistent prayers is that I manage to stay out of the way while He's doing a lot of this incredible work through me, His anointed vessel.

As with any such activity in a church, there's a corresponding *emotional* uprising. Nothing wrong with emotions, but left unchecked, they can trample otherwise fertile soil. For example, the last thing I want to happen is for my congregation to begin turning in on itself because some are so fired up about the Gospel and accomplishing the great commission (**Matthew 28:18-20**) that they begin making others feel insecure about not "getting or doing it" yet. I'd soon be fighting factions in the church. It's human nature to say, "C'mon, why can't you *see* this?...this is the greatest thing, like ever!" And in their innocent euphoria, some begin elevating themselves over others, inadvertently creating stumbling blocks.

Emotionalism has a habit of fostering self-centeredness. If a person's so excited about something that they begin sowing seeds of division in the

name of progress, even unintentionally, then they aren't thinking about others. Even if the object of their activities involves something as pure as the great commission, they've yet again made it about them.

We are "funny" sometimes, aren't we? Just "yesterday" we didn't "get it", but today we do. We're so egocentric that we've already forgotten where we've come from and we challenge others for "lagging behind". The comedy here is that if we step back and think about how very patient God has been with each of us (as in up until just "yesterday"), we can't help but feeling ashamed of our treatment of others.

This "last one in syndrome", then, is merely a catchphrase for that phenomenon that sometimes occurs when a person has an epiphany in their life. That person tends to become so wrapped up in it, especially immediately following the event, that they vomit their emotions all over those around them, not fully understanding the adverse effects this might have on others. While the intentions are good, the results may not be.

Living for others means having the wisdom to understand the nuances here. It means always considering others in whatever we say or do. That's why over time, when emotions die down, true wisdom sets in, and a person transitions from being a potential liability to the Kingdom to an asset. Patience, my friends.

*The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom,
And his tongue speaks justice.
The law of his God is in his heart;
His steps do not slip.*

— Psalms 37:30-31

Sometimes the wisest thing to do is simply share the truth, nothing more, and then zip your mouth, remembering that not everyone else is riding

your emotional high. Why not simply *show* your faith, revealing what God has done in your life, but doing so without inadvertently imposing shame upon others who might not “be there” yet. The Bible says that only God can change a person’s heart...and this He promises to do in His timing, not ours. In our newfound exuberance, we often overlook where others may be in their spiritual walks. It’s a simple thing to remind ourselves to step back and remember where we came from.

Patience is so very important in times like these.

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

— **Ephesians 4:1-3**

Options

One of the most destructive forces in a human's life is when a person believes they have options. If every good thing is from God (**James 1:17**) then there's really only one good option, God's will. Consider the following...

What if a person were so perfectly subservient that we might rightly call them a "slave"? Does that person believe they have options, or are they *so focused* on pleasing their "master" that the concept of having other options doesn't even enter their mind? Is it fair to say that a perfect slave, though given the volition to reject their master's will, is at the very most only tempted but never really interested in exercising their options?

I've been thinking about this for a long time now. It's a difficult subtlety to explain, but it's worth the effort, considering that our enemies tend to live and breathe, and even thrive, in the shadows of subtlety. There's a certain phenomenon that exists only in the presence of a person who is preoccupied with their so-called "options". Counterintuitively to the human flesh, the most content people are the ones who are so faithful that, practically speaking, their only options are to listen to and follow the commands of their master. It turns out that this phenomenon is ancient.

The idea of perfect submission is offensive to the human flesh. Conversely, it is the most attractive idea to a righteous person.

Let me give you an example using Biblical language. Suppose two slaves labor for the same master. For years they are both equally content in their lot. Their work is difficult, but their master is fair and righteous. Then one day, while one of them is working the far corner of the field, a passerby stops and says to him, "Hey, why are you working in this field so hard and for such meager wages? Did you know that just down the street there's

another master who will give you less work to do and pay you more? All you have to do is leave this place and follow me." The implications are obvious to the slave - he'd have to defect from his master's will, leaving his current place of peace and contentment, all that he's ever known. Even if the slave never actually acts upon this temptation, he is now burdened with opposing options, something the other slave is not burdened with.

This is an age-old story that began in the Garden of Eden and persists today.

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. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

— **Genesis 3:4-7**

The above passage may be one of the most profound in all of Holy Scripture as it relates to options. Before the serpent appeared, God's command to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was so *absolute* in their hearts that Adam and the woman didn't even consider other options. Up until that point, they were at peace and totally content.

In a perfect environment, there's only one option. Obey God. That is what is good. It isn't until a person begins to consider other options that evil seeps into the picture. It turns out that while the world tells us to "keep our options open" in every possible way, the Bible tells us the complete opposite. Jesus said, "Follow Me!"

But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a

stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

— **Matthew 16:23-25**

The ultimate depiction of subservience is to *"take up [one's] cross"* (**v24**); it's what the Perfect Servant, Jesus Christ, did always. Jesus was perfectly faithful to His Father despite the temptations administered at the highest level by the same old serpent from the Garden (e.g., **Matthew 4:1-11**). As a function of His perfection, Jesus was also always at peace. May we all be inspired by *"fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God"* (**Hebrews 12:2**).

The point I'm trying to make here in this blog is that when it comes to life, a slave who functions narrowly on the commands of their Master, casting off any temptations which propose alternative options, is a content slave (see also my previous blog titled *Burned Out Happiness*). A slave whose heart is riddled with perceived options is a miserable slave, even if they never actually *act* contrary to their Master's will. Even the time spent contemplating their so-called "options" is erosive to their peace and contentment. In the most fundamental of ways, we might consider options as simply good or evil, oriented or disoriented to God's will, producing peace or misery. In the end, any option outside of our Master's will is designed to sow discord in our lives. That's what it did in the Garden, and that's what it continues to do every day, even today.

There are countless examples of this...

I think about marriage today. By world's standards, marriage isn't even designed to reap happiness because from the outset divorce is sown as an

“option”. *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7)*. Imagine if people got married and divorce wasn’t an option, as Jesus, our Perfect Master, suggested. *“What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Mark 10:9)*. Imagine how much longer people might wait before even considering marriage. I’m talking about a mindset here. I wonder how many people would not only remain married, but be delivered from the evil of considering their options before or after. I’m not being judgmental at all...truly, I’m not. This stuff breaks my heart. I’m just bringing up examples for your consideration...

I also think about other areas of life where so-called “options” have destroyed otherwise peaceful existences. Here are a few at the top of my mind: sex before marriage, disobedience to parents, disobedience to government, disrespect for those sworn to protect us, tax evasion, lack of giving, and arguably the broadest of all categories, lack of love. Yes, our Master has *commanded* us to love! *“This I command you, that you love one another” (John 15:17)*. If you exercise your “options” against this one command, how content do you really expect to be in this life? Who suffers the most when *you* don’t love???

While we’re all given options, there’s really only one good option, and that is whatever our Master has set before us on the narrow road that leads to life. My encouragement is that you focus on His will for you and ignore all the passersby whispering in your ear, tempting you to consider your options.

FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

Ravi Zacharias, a prominent Christian apologist, once said, “The supreme ethic of God is love.” This is a wonderful way to think about God’s essence and even the nature of His commandments to His children.

For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”

— Galatians 5:14

While love is arguably the greatest motivator of all time, it seems to be often grossly misrepresented. We are greatly privileged to have the following description from the apostle Paul.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like

FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

— 1 Corinthians 13

Love inspires the greatest of things. It is the wellspring of unity in the faith, both at the individual level as well as corporately. It is truly the greatest weapon against the kingdom of darkness.

Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

— Colossians 3:14

Do You Love Me, Dad?

Little Sammy's eyes look up from his bowl of Cheerios as his dad, his hero, shuffles into the kitchen with a nod and a sudden burst of speed towards the coffee maker. If the kitchen floor were carpeted, Sammy assumes in his mind that it'd have a path worn out in it by now. His father loves routine. Sammy loves his father. In fact, to be fair to both of them, this is *their* routine.

The greatest intimacies aren't always physical, or fleeting. Love transcends all things.

Sammy watches the powerful forearms of his father, the dancing sinews underneath the tattoos he got overseas during the war they never talk about. "I'm gonna get one of those when I get big," Sammy decides. For such a large man, his dad handles his morning coffee like that Mr. Miyagi guy from the *Karate Kid* movie handles the tender shoots of his bonsai trees, caressing it tenderly as if it were a tiny pot of gold. His routine is a bit funny to his son, but the boy isn't yet capable of being plagued by overanalyzing, so he simply accepts it. Sammy shrugs and plows another heap of cereal into his mouth. The slurping sound coming from the kitchen table causes his father to emit something between a short giggle and a grunt.

The expression of love comes in all shapes and sizes. To each their own.

Saturdays are big days in Sammy's house, and today is - you guessed it - Saturday. Sammy had checked the weather app on his computer before bedtime last night to ensure good weather. No rain means "manly time" with dad. The forecast was for clear skies. So far so good based on the wisp of light dancing on the kitchen tiles.

History has taught Sammy to wait on his father's first move, lest Sammy rambunctiously cross the imaginary "pre-coffee" line and start this precious time off on the wrong foot. "What is the *deal* with coffee, anyways," he wonders? Whatever the answer to that perplexing question is, it doesn't matter - he has learned the boundary conditions and that is good enough for a six year old boy.

Love cannot always be understood. Its expression is as varied and unique as there are people in this world.

His father sits down across from him and his bowl of cereal, glimpsing briefly at the drop of milk hanging from his son's chin. The corner of his lip curls up and Sammy's insides go squishy. God, he loves his father. He doesn't know what the word 'intoxication' means yet - that'll be how he describes his boyhood relationship with his father when he has children of his own - but if he did, he'd certainly prefer this form of it over any other. His greatest hope in life is that this love never leaves him. The thought of life without it is devastating.

When love is missing, there exists a vacuum in the soul.

For Sammy, in moments like this one, nothing else exists in the world. It is him and his dad, his love and his father's. To him, he can hardly imagine anything more wonderful than this. What he really wants to do is skirt around the big oak table between them, peeling out in his socks like one of those drifter hot rods he'd seen on TV once, jump up on his daddy's lap, and nuzzle himself against his father's masculinity, breathing in his indescribable scent. But he is a "big boy" now, at least on Saturday mornings, so he remains fixed, mind and body, on showing his dad that he can hang with him, no matter the list of things that need to be done today. His father observes all of this from the opposite side of the table, thanking God for moments like this one.

Children are willing to cover vast distances to feel a father's love. They

are pliable, open, and ever available to it.

Sammy's father suffers a stroke of sadness as he realizes his son won't be this age forever. He is missing him before it is even warranted, so he catches himself, and retracts his runaway emotions. His son notices that his father has been caught up in his thoughts, so his own countenance reveals a wrinkle of sadness, but of the immature sort.

His father speaks up to break the silence and alleviate his son's increasing anxiety, "So, you ready to put on some work gloves and get a little done around here today? We've got a lot of work, my son. You man enough to help out your dad?...lemme see those muscles." Sammy puffs out his chest and curls the bicep on his "strong arm", turning a light shade of pinkish-purple as he holds the pose as tightly as possible for his dad. "Whoa!...you been workin' out with my old dumbbells in the basement when no one's looking'?" Sammy lets out a gasp of air and smiles, spent from exerting everything he had to impress the man he loves most in this world.

To Sammy's excitement, his father slaps his thighs with both palms, gets up, spins around from his chair, and walks intently, almost professionally, over to the Mr. Coffee machine. He pours the rest of the coffee from the carafe into his favorite thermos, tops it off with what is left in his mug, seals the cap, and looks over his shoulder to catch his son's eyes, which look as if they belong to a barely-self-restrained puppy waiting for its morning snack. Sammy, and his love, is bursting at the seams...his great hope being realized.

Hope is a beautiful thing, enrapturing all in possession of it, granting purpose to those with faith in it.

Fathers are afforded a lot of space in the hearts of their children, sometimes too much, if we are to be brutally honest. Little boys and girls are completely vulnerable. All they really desire is to be loved, and to love in return. They were made this way, from a pattern formed in eternity past,

by our Father who is in Heaven - *"We love, because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19). Fathers need to love their children because children need to know what it means to be loved. If the relationship is cold, much is lost.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails...

But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

— 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a, 13

Sammy brushes up against his dad's massive thigh as they step off the bottom step of the front porch together. His dad looks down at his son's tousled hair and wonders earnestly how he might best express his love to him. He wants nothing more than to give this precious child faith, hope, and love. He knows it's too big to try to express to a little boy, too magnanimous for a budding heart, so he does the best he can - he gives his son a little squeeze, and it says more than enough. He is present. He is loving.

For now, they're both content to walk in silence, out towards the pig pens and the stables. Who cares what the details of life bring - go ahead

and sling your best at us, even the dung - father and son teams are impossible to conquer. Just ask Jesus and His Dad.

God Comforts the Depressed

“In an increasingly widely disseminated TED Talk titled “Everything You Think You Know About Addiction is Wrong,” British journalist Johann Hari discusses the available research into the underlying causes of addiction and concludes, rather brilliantly, that the opposite of addiction is not sobriety, it’s connection. His statement echoes a theme that I and many 21st Century addiction specialists have espoused for years — that addiction is not about the pleasurable effects of substances, it’s about the user’s inability to connect in healthy ways with other human beings. In other words, addiction is not a substance disorder, it’s a social disorder.”

— Robert Weiss LCSW, CSAT-S

This blog is not about addiction, but rather connection; specifically, it’s about lacking a connection the God of the Universe designed human beings to have with Him. We might call it “fellowship”. According to my iMac dictionary, fellowship is defined as: “friendly association, especially with people who share one’s interests.” The greatest fellowship is enjoyed by believers, “God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9). “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). What the Bible tells us is that this fellowship with our Creator is the sweetest result of having been saved by Him. However, this blog isn’t about fellowship, but rather about what it means when someone lacks it.

If we say that 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 His Son cleanses us from all sin.

— 1 John 1:6-7

To borrow from Mr. Weiss, "*addiction is not a substance disorder, it's a social disorder.*" Biblical fellowship is a social concept by design and to borrow from Mr. Hari, "*the opposite of addiction is not sobriety, it's connection.*" Both men are advocating the same truth. What they are getting at is something the Word of God also speaks to, as I just referenced in scripture, though you may not see it yet.

We were all born with a hole in our hearts (I'm speaking figuratively, of course), at odds with our Creator - we were born *dis*-connected (the opposite of connected, to reference Mr. Hari's words). The only thing that will ever be able to fill that void is a loving relationship with God through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. "*For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive*" (**1 Corinthians 15:22**).

Mankind is born in the condition where sweet fellowship with his own true Lord is impossible until he is saved. In light of this truth, I often think about what it must be like to live every day in the *absence* of said fellowship. It must be the most *dissociated* feeling possible, living disconnected from someone we know deep down inside that we should be connected to, primitively. It must be infinitely worse than the proverbial fish out of water, or a person gasping for oxygen because they are drowning. I don't think there's an analogy powerful enough to illustrate what the Bible describes as an essential aspect of the depravity of man, that is, spiritual death (aka separation from God).

A depraved person is a depressed person.

A depressed person is a candidate for addiction.

Therefore, it makes total sense why even secular experts like Weiss and Hari are coming to these conclusions about addiction and connection. It makes sense that people who lack connection with others feel the need to numb the pain. It makes sense that if the connection is broken with their

Creator, the greatest sense of desperation and even depression should be expected. I look around and that is precisely what I see in this world - a bunch of disconnected people trying to fill the hole in their hearts in myriad ways that'll never work - it's futility, by definition. Left untreated, futility ultimately results in exhaustion, which is the precursor to depression. No wonder so many people are clinically diagnosed as depressed. The remedy is a connection with God.

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 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 10:19-25**

The value of being delivered from the depravity we were born into cannot be overstated. I'm not sure how anyone whose heart isn't completely hardened would ever be able to live without Christ and *not* be depressed. Heck, even for a believer like myself, the surest way to depression is to lose sight of my Lord. Whenever I'm feeling down, I inevitably realize that I've lost my perspective on my relationship with God. It must be utterly horrible to *not* have the ability to turn back to Him daily and enjoy His lovingkindness; yet, that is how an unbeliever exists.

*The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail.*

*They are new every morning;
Great is Your faithfulness.*

— **Lamentations 3:22-23**

As believers, we get to hold onto such promises. May we never take them lightly. The Word tells us that we never lack someone to turn to when we're feeling low, for we always have God. Through our salvation, we have been reconciled to Him, able to delight in the sweet fellowship that only He can offer. We are *eternally connected*, He with us, and therefore we already possess the means of escape from depression and its ugly cousin, addiction.

Let us pray for those still walking around with a gaping hole in their heart. Let us pray that, in their depression, the lost will seek a connection with God through Christ, for we know that He will bring them all the way to the depths of their depravity to prove His grace and love for them. Let us pray that "*God, who comforts the depressed*" (**2 Corinthians 7:6a**), might use us in some way to witness, to His glory.

Lord, give us the courage and the strength to speak about why so much depression exists in this world; guide us, our thoughts and our words, and keep us from judging others in the process. And may we never lose our sense of purpose and compassion for others.

I now 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, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. 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.

— **2 Corinthians 7:9-10**

Is It OK to Question My Faith?

“I just gave Suzie the Gospel and she walked away distraught.”

“Why? Does she not believe that she is saved?”

“Well, she did, but now she says she’s not sure.”

“Hmmm...I guess it’s better to figure that out now than later, huh?”

“Thank you, my friend, I needed to hear that...I was feeling poorly about ruining Suzie’s day.”

“That may be so, but you may have just won a soul.”

*The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,
And he who is wise wins souls.*

— Proverbs 11:30

Believers are left here on earth after salvation to fulfill Jesus’ “Great Commission”:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 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; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

— Matthew 28:18-20

If you’re a believer, this ought to give you the straightest perspective on your purpose in life. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that our objective is

to make friends with this world. In fact, it says just the opposite. Scripture states that if you're a friend of the world you are an 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

Like any friendship, friendship with the world exists in degrees. In brief, to the degree a person shares in the doctrines of the world, to that same degree they are enemies of God. This would include, first and foremost, the truth about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Conflicts with socially accepted norms and standards like “political correctness” are antagonistic to a believer’s great commission. There are similar perversions that have seeped into churches, too, where pastors preach in fear of offending their sheep... what a shame. What are they afraid of?...losing friendships with the sheep?...gaining empty seats???

The world says, “We’ll give you god, but you can’t have Jesus, he’s too restrictive for our taste.” Huh? That’s right - to be on good terms (aka “friends”) with the world, one must err on the side of the “all spiritual roads lead to Heaven” mumbo jumbo. It’s interesting to observe how many professing Christians are friends with the world this way, conceding other ways as viable to salvation, as if it were within their ability to judge. Frankly, this would make Jesus a liar, who said, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me*” (**John 14:6**). If Jesus is a liar, then we can’t trust *anything* the Bible has to say! If that were true, what happens to our own faith, supposing the “*author and perfecter of our faith*” (**Hebrews 12:2**) cannot be trusted? Our faith would be in vain. Thank God it’s not, for we share “*in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago*” (**Titus 1:2**).

It’s not just important that we get the Gospel correct, it’s paramount! It’s

not just important that we get some of it right, either, we've got to get *all* of it right! There's no wiggle room, nor did Jesus or any of His apostles ever teach there is. In fact, if you read the Bible, what you'll find is account after account of evangelists actually *offending* those they are presenting the Gospel to.

For this is contained in Scripture:

"BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone,

AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED."

This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve,

"THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,"

and,

"A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE";

for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

— 1 Peter 2:6-8

Being offensive to the unsaved is to be expected. It's why we who take the great commission to heart are undoubtedly and regularly persecuted.

"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also" (John 15:20). People are persecuted when someone else has taken offense with them. In the case of the believer who's out evangelizing, it's the *whole world* that takes offense. So, what do you think is the natural repercussion of this?

This brings up an even more sensitive area of evangelism - the churches (not the Church, Christ's Body of believers, as there is a distinction). We know from scripture that at any moment in time, there are unbelievers

present in the churches, even though they profess to be believers. *“They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us”* (1 John 2:19). The professing “Christian” unbeliever is not an uncommon phenomenon. Even Jesus taught the *Parable of the Wheat and the Tares* on this topic in Matthew 13:24-30. One of the key principles in that parable is that tares (unbelievers) may look just like wheat (believers), but in the end, the Lord will judge them separately.

Knowing just these aforementioned facts, that Jesus is offensive to some and the churches have unbelievers in them, ought to spawn enough tenacity in the soul of any evangelist worth their salt to address the issue of the Gospel head on every chance possible. If some are offended, then the Gospel-bearing believer stands with Paul, who wrote to the Corinthian church, *“Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you — unless indeed you fail the test”* (2 Corinthians 13:5)? Would such a statement have been offensive to some in the church? Indeed, for the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write it for a reason, after all. But how about those who *were* actually already saved...how might the unadulterated Gospel strike them?

If a true believer’s salvation is severely challenged, the end result is always a reaffirmation of faith. That’s a wonderful fruit to bear in the soul. If a believer is to take Paul’s advice to “examine” themselves, and they indeed pass “the test...that Jesus Christ is in [them]”, then hallelujah!

In a clearly insufficient analogy, suppose you’re born beautiful (you are wonderfully made, btw - Psalms 139:14) and you only hear the words “you’re beautiful” once in your life. How would that existence compare to the one where you hear “you’re beautiful” every day of your life? Which would you prefer? Why? If you’re “beautiful”, you’re beautiful, right? Why would you ever benefit from hearing it more than one time in your entire life?...yet, your heart says you would. What if someone comes along and

says, “you’re ugly”? Would it help if shortly after you hear the words “you’re beautiful, don’t listen to them”? I hope you see the analogy here. If you’re saved, and someone challenges your salvation, then when the Word in your soul reaffirms it, you are all the better off, for the Spirit has spoken directly to you. *“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” (John 14:26)*. With the right perspective, any challenge to our faith results in our faith flexing, resulting in reassurance. *“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God” (1 John 3:21)*. Technically, it’s not required, but it sure can be a blessing to be reminded that you’re faith is not in vain and eternal life is yours to keep!

The more severe the challenge, the greater the fruit!

Let’s consider one last example to reaffirm Jesus’ own stance on being offensive. The truth is that He *never* had a problem with presenting Himself as the standard for the Gospel, standing up for truth, even if it was grotesquely unsettling to those in His periphery.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, “Take these things away; stop making My Father’s house a place of business.” His disciples remembered that it was written, “ZEAL FOR YOUR HOUSE WILL CONSUME ME.”

— John 2:13-17

Given the simple fact that the epicenter of Jewish culture was the Temple, Jesus’ activities that day would have been horrendously offensive to the arrogant. Good! As I’ve taught many times from my own pulpit, “The truth is always offensive to some, particularly the arrogant.” There’s always

fallout when arrogance meets its superior, humility (Jesus is the manifestation of humility). So be it. You must expect to meet the same end when you stand up for the Gospel. The beauty of this scene in **John 2** is that we see immediately in **John 3** that one of the Pharisees (of the “offended” crowd), Nicodemus, came to Jesus seeking truth. He is ultimately saved as a result, proving that the so-called “offensive” Gospel of Jesus does its rightful work in those who are actually open to it.

I have learned through practical experience, even in the churches, that if you stand up for the Gospel...not just the socially acceptable “nice” parts of it that point to how God loves and efficaciously saves man...but the “offensive” parts of it that put man’s humility to the test prior to his own conversion...I’ve learned that you will be persecuted, it’s just a matter of time, and sometimes even by other individuals who are too weak to be standing alongside you from their own pulpits. Nowhere in scripture are we encouraged to compromise the Gospel in order to keep the peace in the churches. *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men” (Romans 12:18)*. “If possible” means that, like Jesus and His apostles, we are to approach others with a peaceful heart. However, we cannot ever compromise the fullness of the Gospel, leaving out the fiercely judgmental side of it, just because we’re afraid some may be offended. Frankly, people’s eternal salvation is in view. We must accept that conviction often draws out the worst in people.

So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them.

— **Galatians 4:16-17**

If someone chooses to attack you because you give them the Gospel and it offends them somehow, maybe even challenges their own profession of the faith, then reply with a simple, “Thank you, that makes me a little like Jesus!” Tell them *why* it is that you’re so adamant about sticking to your

guns...quote Paul if you must, for it is scripture, after all:

But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.

— 2 Corinthians 11:3-4

Be encouraged, my brothers and sisters in Christ. Unfortunately, the true Gospel is becoming increasingly offensive in this world, while other versions of it are prospering. And as the so-called “Christian” churches begin morphing into unholy gatherings, where some counterfeit, watered down gospel is preached, may I encourage you to press on in the face of adversity, for all of this was prophesied long ago.

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. 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 to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

— 2 Timothy 4:1-5

In the eternal estate, when all the battles have been fought, you might have your own “Suzie” reminding you of how grateful she is that you didn’t kowtow to the pressures of those peddling counterfeit gospels and counterfeit saviors, ones without the supreme constitution of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the righteous Judge of all men. And won’t that be a wonderful time indeed...

...and on the flip side, if you happen to be “Suzie” in this example, then be grateful to those who have had the courage (the faith) to challenge you with the true Gospel, for they are the best friends you’ll ever know.

Living For Others

We hear this phrase, “living for others,” a lot in Christian circles. But what does that mean, exactly? Is it that we eat, drink, and sleep so that we can simply stay alive because others might miss us if we don’t? I guess fundamentally that’s true. But is that what the Bible describes as truly “living for others”? Jesus said:

This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

— **John 15:12-13**

OK, now we’re getting somewhere. We aren’t only to merely stay alive for the sake of others...we are to *love* them. Holy Scripture, and even the greatest of all literary giants, depicts love as the greatest motivator of all. We ask, “Why does God choose to do all that He does for undeserving, fallen man?” The answer is simple, and it is found in scripture - “*God is love*” (**1 John 4:8b**). No one is more motivated than God to express His own love. The best we can ever hope for is to know Him in this way, within the sphere of perfect love.

We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. 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 love, because He first loved us.

If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one

who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

— 1 John 4:16-21

The apostles were constantly teaching their disciples about the manifestations of love in mankind. John has been dubbed by many as the “apostle of love” because he spoke voluminously about the subject. The interesting thing to note, in light of this blog, is how often he tied *actions* to love. In other words, he dispelled any notion that the mere words, “I love you”, are sufficient all by themselves. In fact, he went so far as to postulate that unless a person is properly motivated to do for others, such words are empty.

Love in the Bible is not merely some ethereal idea, it is very practical. True love motivates people. Motivation leads to doing, specifically, living for others. We don't create love by doing, but we do prove it.

During the time of the apostle Paul's ministry, one of the hottest points of contention was the lingering idea that eating meats sacrificed on an altar was taboo, particularly if that altar was made to worship a pagan idol. What would happen is that the meat of the sacrificed animals would be sold in the local marketplace. Therefore, if a person were trying to avoid eating something taboo, they'd have to ask about the source of the meat before buying it. Not everyone had this limitation set in their conscience, so another issue would arise when a mixture of folks would sit down to dine together. Paul set his own disciples straight on the subject. When you read the following passage, consider how Paul's instructions kept ‘living for others’ a primary vehicle for spreading the Gospel.

All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor. Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking

questions for conscience' sake; FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS.

If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.

— 1 Corinthians 10:23-30

Paul essentially said to his disciples, "Look, we know that there's no inherent spiritual ramifications of eating meat, regardless of whether or not it was sacrificed here or there. However, weaker individuals may suffer at the sight of our eating such meat, and this might frustrate our chances of giving them the Gospel. So let's not eat it if we know that it's a cause for stumbling." Paul stated that living for others means actually *doing* things that preclude us from enjoying liberties that otherwise we have every right to enjoy.

Living for others means sacrificing our own liberties so that others don't stumble. True love will always be motivated to live this way. True love gives. And as Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35b).

Stop and ponder all that you've read here...

We love because God first loved us. We abide in His love because He saved us, delivered us from the throes of enmity. We are motivated to give as a function of said abiding. In turn, *we* are blessed. YOWZA!!!

I want more of this!...and then some more!!! God, please, I beg you...give me more of Your grace! I sound as if an apostle of old, "Lord, increase my faith" (ala **Luke 17:5**)! I want to love like You do, like my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Your impeccable, beloved Son, loved! I want to live for others. Please let me keep on giving, for in that activity lies the marrow of what it means to be alive. Lord, make me love more so that I can give more so that I may burst *alive* at the seams!...and *thank You* for hearing my prayers!

Might we say that "living for others" is the same thing as "loving others"???

If we concede this one truth in our own lives, might we finally understand the fullness of God's grace and love? "*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life*" (**John 3:16**). And in doing so, might we also take one step closer to our Lord's peace (**John 14:27**), understanding all the more that our life has purpose and meaning...and none of it is selfish, but rather selfless?

Lord, deliver us unto selflessness.

My Friend Bill

Bill is one of those guys that you don't forget...nay, that you *cannot* forget...that your subconscious, even, refuses to loosen your memory of.

Bill is infectious. 'Tis why standing over him while he peacefully lay on his deathbed, in the presence of his wife, his daughter-in-law, and me (the least of all in the moment) was so profound. He's infectious in the most admirable of ways. People have always been attracted to him because of his charisma, something that is all too often counterfeited. I know the truth about its source, though, which makes times like this all the more meaningful, all the more reflective.

As I write this, Bill is dying. His body is riddled with cancer. When he was still able to make it to church, he'd quip, "Only I could come back from the doctor's with *two* cases of cancer!" And then he'd smile his patented smile. You see, Bill understands that death is a promotion. Being the good man of God that he is, his only admitted concern is for the welfare of his wife of over a half a century. Even then, he catches himself, "I know that God will provide for Lois." You can see clearly that his faith is real. What a magnificent display of grace and dignity (let us not forget that this kind of dignity is reserved for children of God).

For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord

— for we walk by faith, not by sight —

we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.

— 2 Corinthians 5:4-9

As we stood there talking, Lois intimated that she had been reading this passage over and over again for the sake of encouragement. Not surprisingly, the Spirit has led me to contemplate this same passage in my own studies. The timing is divine. The Lord's reminding us that, for we believers, our stations in life are confirmed by the love we have for Him and for others (**Matthew 22:36-40**).

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.

— 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

At the end of Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians, after expounding upon the nature of persecution a believer in Christ faces daily, he concludes by saying something that Bill doesn't just believe, but lives out, as an example and a witness for Christ, "*as having nothing yet possessing all things*" (**2 Corinthians 6:10**). Bill is one of the richest people I know, yet he lives in a humble abode, built by his son, not far from his church, our church. If he were co-authoring this blog with me now he'd likely paraphrase what James wrote, "*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*" (**James 4:14**).

Whenever Bill speaks about life, people listen, not because he waxes poetic about this or that philosophy, but rather because he possesses that most valuable thing which all mortals desire, a "*living hope*" realized through new life in Christ Jesus.

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a **living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

— **1 Peter 1:3-9**

I'm going to miss Bill. I already do. But my desire to celebrate right now may be greater than it has ever been. Like I said, Bill is just one of those guys you can't forget. His life has been a gift from God to the rest of us. It's as if God, in eternity past, said to Himself, "I'm going to insert this man into humanity's timeline right here, where all of these other children of mine can behold it, treasure it, reflect upon it, and love it dearly." Bill's life gives us perspective. And as the Spirit's been teaching my congregation for years now, perspective is everything.

For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. 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, 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 things which are not seen are eternal.

— **2 Corinthians 4:15-18**

I don't believe in elevating one person's life over another's, but in Bill's case, I don't mind sharing my adoration with you. Maybe you, too, will be encouraged. My only sadness in any of this is that many of you have never met him, enjoyed his person, and beheld his love for our Lord. My consolation, within my presently warmed heart, is knowing that in just a little while, we believers will have the privilege of spending time with him, for all of eternity.

Until then, let us rejoice. Let us celebrate a brother whose life has been a gracious gift from God. And may we reflect upon every heavenly promotion this way. For our God is an impartial god, affording each of us the time and space to encourage, to be encouraged, and to hope of such things.

Not Far From Love

I think it's easy sometimes to demonize entire groups of people as opposed to recognizing the individuality of each member in said groups. I suppose it's less mental work in some ways, but it's obviously a grave error. For example, in the Bible, given the multitude of conflicts Jesus and His apostles had with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes, it's easy for us to make blanket statements about every member of this crowd. But that's not a fair assessment at all. While it's true that Jesus referred to them as, "*You serpents, you brood of vipers*" (**Matthew 23:33**), it doesn't mean that every last one of them was inextricably bound to Hell. It's no different than when a high school teacher says to her class, "You kids are just plain awful today!" It's quite possible that there are at least a few innocent souls hearing her voice.

It's fair to say that Jesus recognized good things when He saw them, even when they emerged from groups He considered evil as a whole.

One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; 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.' The second is this, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scribe said to Him, "Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM; AND TO LOVE HIM WITH ALL THE HEART AND WITH ALL THE UNDERSTANDING AND WITH ALL THE STRENGTH, AND TO

LOVE ONE'S NEIGHBOR AS HIMSELF, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that, no one would venture to ask Him any more questions.

— **Matthew 12:28-34**

The scene above speaks volumes to the integrity of Jesus. Even though He was conversing with a Scribe, He found a way to encourage the man to continue in his pursuit of the greatest command of all - to love. You see, that's what God is looking for in a person's heart - love. When a person begins to understand this, they are that much closer to the kingdom of God.

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

— **Galatians 5:13-14**

If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well.

— **James 2:8**

But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

— **Luke 6:27**

The Bible tells us that love is what transcends all fleshly prejudices. Love is what crosses otherwise impossibly broad chasms between two people.

There's only one thing that would ever motivate one person to look beyond man's ugly outer shell for another person's own good - love. Love's great desire is to see others reconciled with their Creator. Love presumes it can do unfathomable things; and you know what, it's proven itself time and again. Consider the Cross. Enough said, right?

I think that in our disfavor of evil groups, our thoughts often become misguided regarding individuals within each group, leaving no place for mercy or understanding. Looking back on our own lives, it's easy to see how God found a way to extract us from the perils of spiritual death and all those still abiding in it. What was His motivation for doing so? Love. That's comforting to know, isn't it? Well, why not share that good news with those still afflicted?

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

— 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Love's tender side couldn't care less about the gnarly exterior of mankind. In fact, it understands it and looks upon man with compassion. Love, *"does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things"* (**1 Corinthians 13:6-7**). Love looks for the best in people not the worst. It's encouraging, gracious, and kind. While love doesn't tolerate evil, it accepts what it finds in fallen man as an affliction that can be overcome. That's the power of love. It's a gift.

We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

— 1 John 4:19-21

Jesus is our perfect example. He hated evil and despised those who stood against Him. However, He looked far beyond man's obvious shortcomings and encouraged him to pursue love itself, which, by definition is God. *"The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love"* (1 John 4:8). If/ when a person shows us a spark of love the way the scribe did in **Matthew 12:28-34**, let us do as Jesus did and encourage them. Let us teach them that a humble heart, even though it may not be saved yet, is *"not far from the kingdom of God,"* that is to say, that a humble heart is not far from love.

What Is Compassion?

What is compassion? Think about that for a moment on your own...

It's a great question, isn't it? It's also a very interesting one in the sense that if you were to take a sample of definitions for the word compassion, you'd likely end up with a hundred different versions before too long. To me, that is an even *more* interesting phenomenon. Like most things in this world, at the hand of the "god of this word", Satan (**2 Corinthians 4:4**), compassion has been perverted.

For the record, since true compassion is intrinsic to the essence of God, we may find our bearings in His beloved Word. It's the only way, lest we wearily contemplate myriad attempts by man at defining something already perfectly manifest in Heaven.

So, let's take a quick walk through scripture and nail down this definition once and for all. Like a beautiful rosebush, there is a multitude of ways to approach compassion. Some days, we approach it with a heavy heart for others; whereas, other days, we ponder the plight of others from afar. Whatever the case may be, compassion is something we give. It is directional. It is grace.

Grace is always motivated by love. Love cannot help but express itself. Our greatest example, of course, is the Cross. Compassion was right there with love, manifest in Jesus as He hung naked, mocked, and disrespected.

We must first recognize that compassion is motivation for sacrifice. We read of Jesus saying, "*Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends*" (**John 15:13**). What scripture reveals is that, in light of The Great Commission (**Matthew 28:18-20**), our compassion ought to stretch,

and will in its maturity, as far as it takes to see a soul saved, *“fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:2a)*. Jesus’ compassion for saving others took Him all the way to His Cross. This is the same Person who said, *“Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:27)*.

True compassion is always rooted in the Gospel. In this sense, the greatest impetus for compassion is evangelism. One need only consider the alternative to eternal life in Christ Jesus for their compassion to be rekindled. Hell is real.

Compassion is amplified when our evangelistic efforts fail, sometimes bringing us to tears the way it did to Jesus. *“When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it” (Luke 19:41)*. Compassion has the ability to transcend the sum total of the sins of our enemies. The more a person is wrapped up in evil, the greater our compassion ought to be, for the further they are from the Truth that would set them free. Jesus lamented, *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it” (Luke 13:34)*! He came *“to seek and to save” (Luke 19:10)* and His own people rejected Him. It broke His heart.

Compassion never fails, but it can be unsuccessful in achieving its objective. If the goal of saving souls is met with rejection, we are left with a broken heart. At times our love falls on deaf ears the way a parent’s falls on an obnoxious adolescent. As such, sometimes our greatest challenge in life is not losing our compassion for others. It helps to remember that a person walking in the dark cannot possibly know where they are going, regardless of what they proclaim.

*Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then He *said to His disciples,*

What Is Compassion?

“The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.”

— **Matthew 9:36-38**

The greatest friend compassion has is perspective. To keep it, we must remember the unbeliever’s plight. They are lost and confused. Many of them are venomous, and it stings when they bite us. Others are pathetic, worn, downtrodden, clingy. We ought to have compassion on them all. We ought to lace our boots up every morning the way good soldiers do, and march right back into battle.

This sounds like quite a calling, doesn’t it? Well, my friends, it truly is. Beyond that, though, is the fact that it is a divinely bestowed *privilege*. That’s another part of compassion that fuels us. We mustn’t ever forget where *we* have come from, how far the Lord has delivered us by grace. Our greatest temptation seems to be selfishness, something debilitating to compassion.

There is relief, thank God. Jesus said, *“Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces”* (**Matthew 7:6**). Wait just a minute! Is this contradictory to all that we just pondered? Of course not, my friends. As with all Holy Scripture, it is perfectly complementary and consistent with God’s will for His children. In making this statement, which is consistent with His rejection of the Jews in **Matthew 12**, *“Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come”* (**Matthew 12:32**), Jesus was establishing a real boundary condition to activities associated with compassion.

True compassion is often met with stark rejection. The Word teaches us that there are those in this world who *hate* the truth. It’s hard to fathom, but this hatred exists, and it meets the evangelist in a way that closes all doors

leading to reconciliation with God. Haters are not our friends, they are our enemies. *"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"* (**Matthew 5:44**). This means that although we never stop loving others, our blessing in this situation is that we are relieved of duty. We are to stop charging up certain hills. We leave their fate in the hands of God.

But wait, what about this so-called "true compassion" that pivots on saving souls??? There's another compassion, we might say a final one, which God, in His infinite compassion, extends to the hard of heart. The Bible tells us that there are degrees of punishment in Hell (**Matthew 11:20-22; Luke 12:47-48; John 19:11; Hebrews 10:29**). The more an unbeliever is evangelized, the greater the responsibility they have to the Truth, even when they reject it. In this sense, God is gracious in asking His evangelists to stop presenting the Gospel to them, for each instance represents yet more evidence against them in the supreme court of Heaven. Let us honor God's mercy here.

So, to answer the question...what *is* compassion?...

The world's definition of compassion is untethered from true compassion, which is always grounded in the Gospel. The world doesn't teach a compassion that motivates evangelists. If anything, it demotivates them by robbing them of their passion for saving souls. The world's version of compassion is an emotional waste basket filled with frustration. The Truth is that only one thing will ever deliver a person from the throes of spiritual death and misery, both in time and eternally, and that is being saved in Christ Jesus.

Compassion is meant to draw people to Christ, to salvation, not make a comfy little resting place for those living in sin. We don't want unbelievers to be comfortable in their sin, for that's the exact opposite of true compassion, yet precisely what the world promotes. Compassion looks at the sinner and says, "I'm sorry you're suffering...let me tell you about Jesus."

What Is Compassion?

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.

But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation;

or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.

— **2 Corinthians 1:3-7**

What Murderers Don't Understand

I've been thinking about these school shootings I hear about on the news...

Jesus Christ is the divine originator of life.

Chew on that for a moment.

Consider why those without Him are wretches, even preferring murderers over the "Prince of life."

But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses.

— Acts 3:14-15

Murderers take life in order to impart death. That is their modus operandi - to control others by wielding death as a weapon. Only with Jesus Christ, the grave couldn't hold Him, "knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him" (**Romans 6:9**). The one thing darkness can never overcome is light, for it is defined as the absence of light. So as long as eternal life, the "Light of men," exists, darkness shall never overcome anyone righteously standing in it (Him).

Murderers are perplexed by the resiliency of those walking in His light. The light is offensive to those abiding in darkness because it shows them up as weak.

In Him was life [and the power to bestow life], and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness did not understand it or overpower it or appropriate it or absorb it [and is unreceptive to it].

— John 1:4-5 [Amplified]

The wonderful truth about the Light is that we believers are fellow partakers of it, being “*in Christ Jesus*” (**Romans 6:11**). This means that even though someone may take our earthly life, it is impossible for them to extinguish the Light in us. We have been given eternal life, never to be overcome by darkness.

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 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 His Son cleanses us from all sin.

— 1 John 1:5-7

The scariest thing for a human to face is death. To face it at the hands of a murderer makes the proposition downright horrifying. Yet, the reality for believers is that the threat of losing our current life is really a powerless gesture - “*we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord*” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

Nobody has any real power over us, once saved. What’s the worst anyone can ever do, murder us? Big deal, that’s a promotion for a believer - “*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain*” (**Philippians 1:21**)! This enrages unbelievers because they are still suffering the throes of death, enslaved, living in fear of the very thing we believers have been set free from for all of eternity - death. Neither death, nor the threat of it, has any control over us. “*For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith*” (**1 John 5:4**).

Our faith delivers us, gives us confidence, conviction, and freedom. We have only one Master now, Jesus Christ, and He’s already overcome

death, itself.

America is under siege with public shootings (schools, churches, concerts, etc.). Shall we hide in caves or rest in the truth of the matter? Despite the constant threat of death at the hands of wretched murderers, our faith says, "*And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son*" (1 John 5:11).

Death begets death. Those living in death are murderous at heart, even if they never pull a single trigger. However, neither "*the god of this world*" (2 Corinthians 4:4) nor his agents have any real power over us, this we must understand - for eternal life is just that, *eternal*, and it cannot ever be stamped out.

And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

— 1 John 5:20

Enjoy your precious life in Christ, my friends. Consider yourself untouchable. The Prince of life has saved you. Even the grave cannot hold you now.

THE FLESH AND OTHER ENEMIES

Thus says the LORD,

*“Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind
And makes flesh his strength,
And whose heart turns away from the LORD.*

*“For he will be like a bush in the desert
And will not see when prosperity comes,
But will live in stony wastes in the wilderness,
A land of salt without inhabitant.*

*“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD
And whose trust is the LORD.*

*“For he will be like a tree planted by the water,
That extends its roots by a stream
And will not fear when the heat comes;
But its leaves will be green,
And it will not be anxious in a year of drought
Nor cease to yield fruit.*

*“The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick;
Who can understand it?*

*“I, the LORD, search the heart,
I test the mind,
Even to give to each man according to his ways,
According to the results of his deeds.”*

— **Jeremiah 17:5-10**

The human flesh is just plain awful. It is, by its very nature, opposed to God.

Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath,

even as the rest.

— **Ephesians 2:3**

The Bible tells us that the human flesh is not our only enemy. There also exists fallen angels, the chief of whom is Satan, and a worldly system of thinking that is antagonistic to God as well.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

— **Ephesians 6:12**

*Though I walk in the midst of trouble, You will revive me;
You will stretch forth Your hand against the wrath of my enemies,
And Your right hand will save me.*

— **Psalms 138:7**

The Practical Side To Self-Absorption

The most self-absorbed “person” I’ve ever known is my own flesh. If we’re being totally honest, we can *all* make the exact same proclamation without hesitation...not about me - LOL - about ourselves (nice try). I mean, whom do we know better than ourselves? Which “self”, the old or the new, have we spent more time with over the course of our lives? If you don’t know the answer to that last question, the answer is the “old self”, the one we were born with, the same one we lived with exclusively until we were saved.

The old self is *the* most self-centered, egocentric, selfish, self-absorbed person we’ll ever know. And let’s face it, with whom are we most intimate, our own old self or someone else’s? Our own, of course; hence, my opening statement. The old self, aka the “flesh”, loves itself *way* more than it loves anyone else (that includes the new self).

There’s a reason why an unsaved person never receives the peace that Jesus Christ promises to His own. It’s because it’s impossible for a self-absorbed person to love like He did. Remember Jesus’ words, “*Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful*” (**John 14:27**). What He doesn’t explicitly say, but is very much implied, is that without Him, His heart on the matter, there’s no peace. To knit this all together, we might say that without Christ, it’s impossible to have His peace because the peace He gives is His very own, and it’s a function of loving the way He does.

Peace and love are intrinsically bound through eternal life. “*And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life*” (**1 John 5:20**).

To love others (as opposed to self) is to find peace.

This is the pause I was given this morning as I read **Colossians, Chapters 2 and 3**. In brief, these passages reminded me of my own recent struggles with abiding in His peace (yes, it's entirely true that we pastors struggle - I'd argue even more, in some ways - with maintaining peace in the faith). I've suffered a bout of this recently, and my "eureka" moment arrived just as sure as the Word washed over me. I'm writing this with a very grateful heart right now. Thanks be to God for showing me what the problem has been, namely, that I was being self-absorbed.

I guess the point I'm trying to make here is a simple one that, once you see it in Holy Scripture, sets you free from the bondage of the old self. Sin and death are masters that do not allow their slaves to love others the way Christ does.

For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.

— Romans 6:5-7

Thank God that with salvation comes deliverance from the throes of spiritual death, where true peace simply does not exist in the absence of love. There's a very practical side to self-absorption that is worth contemplating, if you haven't already.

The practical side to self-absorption is that you lose. If you're an unbeliever, you've never had true peace, but if you're a believer, you surrender it each time you turn your back on others, beginning with Jesus. The world will tell you that increasing one's happiness involves increasing one's attention to self. I mean, that makes some rational sense,

doesn't it? It does to the flesh, that's for sure, and that is what the god of this world is betting on. Self-absorption appeals to the flesh.

Let's be a little more practical now...

Self-absorption is the natural response to pressure. It's the go-to estate of a person who lacks faith. For the unbeliever, that's all the time, hence the absence of any true peace whatsoever. However, for a believer, to the degree they lack faith, it's to that same degree that they suffer a lack of peace. This is why the Bible encourages us to keep our perspective straight, as a function of faith, lest we lose out on the most precious, practical grace gifts in time.

Therefore if 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. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them.

But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him — a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of

compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

— **Colossians 3:1-14**

If you're ever wondering where that sense of peace in your life has gone, then look no further than the old self, for it is probably holding it hostage. Learn to identify those times in your life when you've slipped back into your old ways, particularly when you've given into the temptation that is aptly called self-absorption. It's a death trap, but not one that can keep you in bondage forever. As a believer, you are free to "put on love" (**Colossians 3:14**). "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (**Galatians 5:1**).

You've been set free...to love...not self, for that's the old self's desire, but others. "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (**Galatians 5:13**).

It's true, the most self-absorbed person I've ever known is me...well, to be fair, my old self. The same goes for you and yours. If I'm at a loss of peace, the first place I've learned to look is in the mirror...which self do I see in my reflection??? I usually don't have to look that far or for very long before I have my answer...I have my truth...and you know what, "and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (**John 8:32**).

Showing One's True Colors

The most *impersonal* thing someone can do to you is to “make it personal” through attack. Why? To attack someone reveals a weakness in the attacker, *not* the one being attacked. Never thought about it that way before? Let me explain.

*He who walks in integrity walks securely,
But he who perverts his ways will be found out.*

— Proverbs 10:9

Focus your attention on the first part of Holy Scripture above. Stated differently, we might say that a secure person walks in integrity. Conversely, a person lacking integrity is insecure. To attack another person, for any reason, is a lack of integrity, inconsistent with the will of Jesus Christ, Himself, Who, while never afraid of calling a spade a spade, never attacked others from an area of weakness or insecurity. Now, look at the second part of the verse above. Eventually, a person who lacks integrity is *discovered* for what they truly are, namely, evil.

When people show you who they are, believe them the first time.

—Maya Angelou

Allow me to reiterate my opening statement: The most *impersonal* thing someone can do to you is to “make it personal” through attack. It’s one thing to point out something you might disagree with, in a spirit of integrity, for the edification of the receiver. That’s a very good thing because the heart of the approach is love. It’s another thing altogether to seek advantage over others in the process.

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual,

restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ [aka love].

— Galatians 6:1-2

What the Bible says is that even if someone has actually sinned, our job is not to take advantage of the situation and wield that sin like a club. Only a weak person will take that route. You see, the weak attack when they perceive others as caught in a moment of weakness. It's cowardice.

Evil people are among the most opportunistic of all. They see weaknesses in others as a chance to step on them while they are down while elevating themselves. What they don't realize is that folks like you and I, who are trained and filled with the Spirit, see right through them. Though we are tempted to do so, we don't reciprocate. In fact, the most mature will do as Jesus said, "*But I say to you, love your enemies and **pray** for those who persecute you*" (Matthew 5:44).

A person who attacks you, making it "personal", as we say, is really just showing their true colors. They are proving themselves self-absorbed, lacking integrity, and weak. With the right perspective, it's easy to discern that these people need our prayers more than anything.

As a pastor, I've been attacked many times, usually daily, and often from those closest to me. There was a time when I was more apt to take things the way my attackers wanted me to, that is, *personally*. When I allowed this to happen, not only did I stumble, I *also* missed my opportunity to pray for them. I've become significantly better at discerning such situations - thanks be to God for increased faith and wisdom - but I'm not perfect. Let's face it; it's not always easy to back down from someone with the audacity to assault us. Our flesh's first response to aggression is often to meet it with it's own version, with every intent of squashing it. That's not the route Jesus commanded we take - it's the one Satan's hoping you will, though.

The beautiful thing about godly wisdom is that it lets us see past the fangs of our enemies. It reveals to us what they already know about themselves, that they are indeed weak. It tells us that their attacks are launched from a root of insecurity. It reminds us that *we* are not the issue, even though we have been targeted. The truth is that said attacks are merely symptoms of something much deeper inside the aggressor.

What we must learn to do, if we're going to abide in Jesus' command to love our enemies, is to recognize that weakness breeds insecurity, insecurity breeds misery, and misery loves company. And we must heed the following command.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.

Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. "BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

— Romans 12:17-21

The Sign Says "Home Sweet Home", But...

"Atticus says you can choose your friends but you sho' can't choose your family, an' they're still kin to you no matter whether you acknowledge 'em or not, and it makes you look right silly when you don't."

— **Jem Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee**

Whether you agree with His choices or not, God chose your family. Even if you were conceived as an "oopsie", you weren't a mistake in God's eyes. He chose *you* to be a part of your family. The implications are far reaching. The big question is, "Why?" Why choose to slam multiple divergent, often antagonistic, personalities together under a single roof? Isn't God just *asking* for trouble? Well, technically, He's not asking (He doesn't answer to anyone but Himself), He's promoting. Huh? Indeed, He is, my friends. But, why would He do such a thing?

When you understand how God sanctifies His children, you begin to understand why He forms blood relative families the way He does. At face value, it's easy to question His choices, given the constant friction in most families. And, as a side note, we ought never assume any family is "perfect" - there's no such thing, except the family that God has assembled in His precious Son's name.

The only normal people are the ones you don't know very well.

- **Alfred Adler**

We could very easily extend Adler's statement to include the family structure as well and say, "The only normal families are the ones we don't know very well." It's true. How can I say this with such confidence? Because I know what the Bible has to say dogmatically about the human flesh. It's the very essence of self-*everything*. The flesh is self-centered, self-

The Sign Says "Home Sweet Home", But...

absorbed, self-serving, self-righteous...you get the point. The Word of God tells us as much. Two fleshs in even a sizable space are going to have problems eventually.

The concept of coexisting in a shared space is fundamentally antagonistic to the desires of the human flesh. Take a bunch of fleshs, cram them into a box and then put a sign above the entryway that reads "Home Sweet Home" and you've got a good picture of the average household. Is God crazy??? Nope.

Just to put things into the right perspective, Jesus was perfect, the only one, ever. He *literally* came to save the world, including those in His own household. And they rejected Him! It's almost comical, but nonetheless, it's true. *"For not even His brothers were believing in Him"* (John 7:5).

Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household."

— Mark 6:4

Knowing that the perfect man, Jesus Christ, was mistreated ought to be encouraging for the rest of us. Did His Father know that Jesus would be attacked and even killed eventually? Indeed - He planned it! That is the key for all of us to understand.

God has never arbitrarily assigned a human soul to the wrong family.

In fact, He's so intimately aware of His children that we might rightly conclude that our families, as dysfunctional as they might be at times, are the *perfect* ones for us. That may be a hard pill to swallow, but it's no less true. Your crazy mom, your absentee dad, your disrespectful kids are precisely who God knew they'd be to you. I've never met a person that didn't have something to complain about regarding members of their family. Never. I've seen a few posers pull off a good act for a while, but as

soon as they loosened up a bit and dropped the facade, the floodgates opened. Honesty is good.

The point is that families are what they are because they are derivatives of the flesh. While we may find much happiness and encouragement within our families, and God is pleased with that, we ought never be shocked to discover the stench of something awful. As I've taught many times from the pulpit, "Disappointment is nothing more than failed expectations." We aren't supposed to find our base happiness in our blood families. That's a lie from the world. As adorable as babies are, they aren't our saviors. And having more and more of them only guarantees one thing - more challenges in the home. Jesus stated that we ought to love Him so much that *relatively* speaking, we ought to "*hate*" the members of our families (focus on the word '*relatively*' and don't go off hating your family and blaming me - you'd be missing Jesus' meaning entirely).

If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

— Luke 14:26-27

Often, our greatest cross to carry is given to us inside our own homes. This isn't unlike the example we see with Jesus' life. "*He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him*" (John 1:11). Jesus died while bearing His Cross. What do you expect in your own life?

The world's going to tell you that something's wrong with your family - that's the hairline fracture. It's then going to suggest boldly that you ought to throw in the towel and seek other alternatives - that's the break. This is one of the reasons why there are so many broken families in this world. It's easier to seduce a person away from the God-given blessings in their life if they first spurn them. Whether you like it or not, your blood family was

The Sign Says "Home Sweet Home", But...

given to you by God. You only have one. If you're married, stay married, for this is the will of God.

But from the beginning of creation, God MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE. FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH; so they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.

— **Mark 10:6-9**

If you've been divorced in the past, well, what's done is done. Do not live in guilt; rather, take what the Spirit's giving you right now and press on with it. As Jesus said to the adulterous woman, "And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more" (**John 8:11**).

We're going to hurt each other badly, especially in our homes. One of the most treacherous, debilitating mistakes we can make is failing to forgive one another.

Whenever I officiate a wedding, I always present the three pillars: love, respect, and forgiveness. We must learn to forgive each other, lest we take the "alternative" route suggested by Satan, himself, and watch the God-ordained institution of marriage and family collapse like a house of cards.

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called

in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

— **Colossians 3:12-21**

Jem was onto something, I think, when he remembered his father's words. "Atticus says you can choose your friends but you sho' can't choose your family, an' they're still kin to you no matter whether you acknowledge 'em or not, and it makes you look right silly when you don't." Do you "look right silly"? Have you forsaken your own family because you expect more out of them? If God can forgive them, can't you? You'll be better off if you do...just sayin'.

BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.

— **Ephesians 4:26-27**

Wally Cleaver's Nose

The other day, my family and I happened to be watching *Leave It To Beaver*, an old black and white TV show that ran from 1957-1963. The episode was the one where Beaver Cleaver's older brother, Wally, suddenly became self-conscious of his nose. Some girl he favored made an innocent comment about it, thinking nothing of it at the time, and Wally's feelings were hurt.

Beaver overheard his father use the term "self-conscious", so, being the inquisitive little boy he was, he asked for an explanation. His father gave a pretty good synopsis, I thought. I don't remember the exact statement, but it was something very similar to, "A person becomes self-conscious when they think the whole world is paying attention to them for some particular reason."

As you might imagine, this got me thinking about spiritual analogies, particularly the human flesh...

I've come to the conclusion that the flesh is its own worst enemy. On the one hand, it seeks to be the center of the universe, epitomizing the concept of self-centeredness. Yet, on the other hand, when it gets what it wants (everyone's attention), it becomes terribly insecure, knowing that it'll never measure up to their expectations. Talk about a sick head!

In life we see people under the trance of self-consciousness make some of the worst decisions human beings can ever make - all because of this self-inflicted, self-perpetuated disorder. We see everything from minor body modification to major surgery, and when all of that fails, even suicide. Ugh. All of this just because a person doesn't "measure up"???

The question that begs answering is, why? Why is this such a powerful emotion...and better yet, where might a person find relief from it? For us

believers, the answer is very simple. A change in perspective from how man sees us to how God does.

Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

— 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

Wouldn't life be a lot easier if an afflicted person's perspective simply changed from self-centeredness (man's opinion of self) to Christ-centeredness (God's opinion of self)? Doesn't that take just a moment in time? Isn't that something we can help others with, even - those we know who might be struggling? Yes, yes, and yes! As always, *the* most powerful remedy we have at our disposal is Holy Scripture. And it's totally free (unlike the expense of partaking in the beauty industry).

*Pleasant words are a honeycomb,
Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.*

— Proverbs 16:24

Poor Wally Cleaver was all stressed out over nothing. Who knows, maybe if he had the money and lived in contemporary times, he'd have considered a nose job. You might giggle, but in the U.S. alone in 2016, over \$16 billion was spent on cosmetic plastic surgeries, according to the *American Society of Plastic Surgeons*. Yowza!

Here's my suggestion. Let's put some of these surgeons out of business by exposing the whole sham with the Light of Truth.

Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even 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 5:11-13**

It's a tragedy that good ole Wally suffered the way he did. Turns out by the end of the episode, he found out that the girl thought his nose was just swell, and the whole thing was a simple overreaction by a hormonal teen. I wonder how often that's the case (not that it matters).

Whatever the case may be, the point here is that when God saves us, He changes us so dramatically, so completely, so wholly, that our Savior referred to it as being "*born again*" (**John 3:3**). The flesh, our own as well as everyone's around us, loathes this simple truth because it utterly strips it of any real access to our self-esteem. The very best the flesh can hope for in its dwindling plight is to influence our perspective, to get a believer's attention diverted to unholy standards set up to ultimately keep us in bondage to the opinions of man.

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

— **Romans 13:14**

Do yourself a favor my friend in Christ. Reread this blog whenever you are tempted into this kind of self-consciousness. Moreover, share this blog with someone you love, at least, and with anyone else who may need it as ointment to their soul.

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself.

For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

— 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

GRACE AND SANCTIFICATION

Paul said it best.

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.

— 1 Corinthians 15:10

What Paul understood was something we all need to understand about grace. It is unmerited favor and the very means of our deliverance, our salvation, even. It is wholly efficacious.

And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

— 2 Corinthians 12:9

Sanctification is the result of God's grace working in us. Theologically, we typically call out three "phases" or stages of sanctification: positional (from the penalty of sin), experiential (from the power of sin), and ultimately (from the presence of sin).

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you 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.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

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. For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.

— **1 Thessalonians 4:3-7**

Elegance

River stone, sea glass, clouds in the sky...

These are just a few things that come to mind when I think about one of my all-time favorite words, elegance. I won't go so far as reserving its use for only transcendent observations, but it certainly holds a rarified place in my vernacular. If you'll just bear with me and give me the opportunity to impose my own definition of true elegance upon you for a moment, I'd appreciate it.

Something elegant isn't just beautiful, or classically proper, or even necessarily attractive to the naked eye. To me, elegance can be something said, something seen, or even something felt. It is most often something mature. For example, I never think of a newborn baby as elegant, as precious as they are (save my thoughts about God's hand in creating new life). However, I often think of the elders in my congregation as exuding elegance. As a river stone's edges have been smoothed out over years of tumbling about, an elegant person is refined in a way that only life experience can impart.

Of course, when I begin thinking about elegance in its greatest form, I immediately think of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Scars and all, He is *the* most elegant Person to ever grace this earth. Yet, the Bible describes Him as, "*like one from whom men hide their face*" (**Isaiah 53:3**). It goes to show that elegance typically has very little to do with commonly accepted definitions.

The more we learn from the Word of God, the more we realize how elegant God is, in particular, how He sanctifies us. In doing so, we begin to esteem things foreign to social norms. We appreciate it all the more when our own sharp edges, the caustic parts of life, have been smoothed out over time.

Elegance is settling.

As is the case with river stone, sea glass, and even clouds, it's not the presentation layer that demands such a description; it's our knowledge of how an object *becomes* what it is today. The essence of true elegance runs much deeper than the superficial. While river stones and sea glass are indeed beautiful to look at, it is their "story" that makes them elegant, at least to me. It's the untold hours of hammering something or someone which sets them apart from the rest. It's the proof of experience, itself.

*A gray head is a crown of glory;
It is found in the way of righteousness.*

— Proverbs 16:31

Let us also consider an elegance of a different sort. What does it mean to be truly happy? To me, happiness is beauty's analog, but in the spiritual realm. When we're young, happiness usually comes in bits and spurts and, for some in fits and starts. We rejoice for a time with the peaks and then suffer the inevitable valleys that follow. From a distance, a map of our life's timeline looks like mountainous terrain. On the peaks, we catch glimpses of paradise, but in the valleys, we lament in our doldrums. When we're young, we possess jagged edges. Like mountains, our lives are a form of beauty, the source of happiness, but with dangerous possibilities lurking in the shadows.

Over time, the rocks, even the ones as large as mountains, smooth out. As is the case with the sharp edges of a stone tumbling along a riverbed, or the cutting edge of a piece of broken glass at the bottom of the ocean, we humans smooth out over time. With God's divine intervention, our happiness turns from the more superficial things in life to a smoother, more elegant existence that is best described as peaceful. When Jesus said, "*Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.*"

Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful” (John 14:27), He was describing the end product of sanctification, a promise impregnated into the Gospel, itself. It is peace we are after, the more elegant, more mature cousin of happiness.

Here’s what I’ve learned...

God creates craggy man, but His sanctification makes him elegant.

I’m not merely waxing poetic for the sake of this blog. I mean every word I’ve written here (I do apologize in advance because I know I’m not doing my own thoughts justice). I’m just hoping that we can agree upon the fact that elegance is a rare find, usually not evidenced in our youth, neither in terms of possession of it nor appreciation for it. These are blessings given by the grace of God, *“But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Corinthians 15:10).*

Whether it’s the water that shapes a river stone or sea glass, or the wind that shapes the clouds in the sky, maturation is a fluid process wrought over long stretches of time, like God’s sanctification. As the Potter spins His wheel (**Romans 9**), time reveals a story, unique for all aspects of God’s creation. In this way, elegance at its grandest level is reserved for describing His good work alone.

The most elegant person I’ve ever met is Jesus Christ. The most elegant thing I’ve ever possessed is His Gospel. The more I learn to appreciate Him, the less I’m inclined to use the word to describe anything or anyone else.

Good Shoes and Mattresses

If there's one thing, no two, that you're going to spend good money on, let it be on shoes and mattresses.

— **Some really smart person**

The average person sleeps roughly 6-8 hours per night. That's roughly one third of life spent sleeping, presumably on some sort of mattress - whether it resembles a commercially produced one or not isn't the issue. Humans tend to sleep on something friendlier than hard ground for the sake of rest. If we're not sleeping, we're often walking or standing - the statistics vary too greatly to put a number on it, but suffice to say, most of us spend a *lot* of time on our feet. Maybe you and I can agree that at least half of our lives are spent either on a mattress or in our shoes??? I think that's fair (it's gonna have to work for me to make my point, so just go with it- lol).

I have a married friend who owned a mattress so long that he and his wife would complain about rolling to the center of their queen-sized bed every night. I learned that the mattress in question was like twenty years old, long past the useful life of the springs comprising it. When I heard this, I literally bellowed out laughter, mostly because at the time, both of them had high paying jobs and lived in an expensive home in an affluent area of Massachusetts. To this day, I don't understand how they ignored the back pain and the restless sleeping for so long. These are the same people who think nothing of spending over one hundred dollars on a single meal, or a thousand dollars for a weekend getaway. Baffling.

I just watched a YouTube video the other day where a young man - one with over two hundred thousand active followers - was showing off his collection of sneakers. First, they were all brand name, meaning they weren't inexpensive (I calculated that this person had spent over fifteen thousand dollars, possibly twice that, on sneakers and had no intention of

slowing down anytime soon). And get this, all three hundred pairs were still pristine and in their original boxes! I stopped watching the video after seeing him present just a few pairs with the flair of Vanna White (the famous hostess on the TV game show *Wheel of Fortune*). It's times like that when the initial comedy turns to nervous laughter and then finally to sadness, for me at least.

It's crazy to think that some people have *access* to a blessing, but never exercise the option. It's equally mind boggling that others actually *possess* a blessing and yet never truly *experience* it. God's grace is meant to be consumed. Sometimes, it's for the sake of comfort, other times, for protection.

If you've ever been blessed with a quality mattress, you know exactly what I'm talking about. While creature comforts may pale compared to eternally weighted things, they sure do remind us of the blessings of God. It's the little things, right? Wrapping ourselves up in a warm blanket on a good mattress is like Paul's idea of "putting on" grace - God's grace is meant to cover us. We are to adorn ourselves with it, not acquire it, store it away, and then dust it off when it's time to boast about it, like an addition to some perverted shoe collection. "*But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts*" (**Romans 13:14**). His grace comforts us (**2 Corinthians 1:4**), but only if we put Him on.

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

— **Colossians 3:12-15**

What good is a brand new pair of comfortable shoes if you never wear

them? What good is Jesus Christ in your life if you never put Him on? We lack real comfort without Him. In fact, our walks may be painful due to the rough ground we walk upon. His grace not only comforts us, but it also *protects* us.

Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

— Ephesians 6:11-17

Good shoes and mattresses have two things in common: they protect us from the harsh things in life and they comfort us, making our days more enjoyable, peaceful even. God’s grace is the same; and like shoes and mattresses, we have to use it, put it on, in order to enjoy the benefits. Too many of us have full access to His grace and yet we compromise it by allowing our flesh to pervert it somehow.

If God says, “Go buy a new mattress,” then do it, He desires that you enjoy a good night’s rest. If He then says, “Go buy a good pair of shoes,” then do that also, for He desires that you enjoy all of your walks with Him. More generally, if He says, “Receive my grace in humility,” then by all means, do it, for He desires that you know His love for you, intimately, through experience. Grace is a consumable item from a wellspring that never dries

up. We don't need to save it for a rainy day like we may do with money. We are to spend it as quickly as we receive it, knowing that God gives it abundantly to the humble (**James 4:6**). In fact, He is glorified by His own charity - He loves to comfort and protect us - and the angels sing His praise.

The Positive and Negative Sides Of Grace

You might be saying to yourself already, “There’s no *negative* side to grace!...what’s this guy talking about?” Give me a moment to explain myself...geesh! :)

Grace teaches us amazing things...things we’d never be able to understand otherwise. In fact, it’s more precise to say that we lack *every capability* of understanding the things of God in the absence of grace. In one sense, it’s all good, no matter what we learn, as Paul wrote about, “*But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light*” (**Ephesians 5:13**). From that perspective, the knee-jerk reaction supposed above is justified. However, I’m speaking in terms of practical living.

On the positive side, grace teaches us to live righteously, as a function of our God-given motivation via the new heart given to us at salvation. “*Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances*” (**Ezekiel 36:26-27**). From this new heart springs the God-given desire to please Him. Desires like this are grace gifts, nothing any human could ever manufacture on their own. You can’t fake motivation, for God sees the heart, so godly desires must be considered grace gifts. And by the way, would it be right to ever expect anything less from grace??? “*How shall we who died to sin still live in it*” (**Romans 6:2b**)? Remember, God’s intention is to bring glory to Himself through His good work in us.

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.

— **Philippians 2:12-13**

It's easy to see how grace teaches us to live as unto the Lord. It makes immediate sense, too, unless a person's looking to pervert God's doctrines for the sake of antinomianism (aka "grace is a license to sin", something Paul refutes in **Romans 5-6**). If we dub this as the "positive" aspect of what grace teaches us, how about what grace teaches us on the other side of the coin, namely the "negative" aspect? We don't have to even leave our current passage to see this.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will 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, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.

— **Philippians 2:14-16**

Paul never departs from the common sense attitude that grace not only instructs the saints to do certain things, but it also instructs them *not* to do other things. In other words, there's a positive and negative side to grace. Both are equally important if we are to understand the fullness of grace and truth that Christ, Himself, embodies. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth...For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace" (John 1:14, 16).

The very desire to wage war against our own flesh cannot possibly originate within the flesh (the flesh is self-preserving). This is a mistake many believers continue to make throughout their lives. They suppose that there's some way to conquer their flesh on their own. The truth is that the very substance of their enmity towards their own flesh was placed there by God at salvation, by grace. Paul proffered a very simple explanation

through his own life, *“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”* (1 Corinthians 15:10).

This idea of the negative side of grace is something all of us need to fully grasp, lest our perspectives become warped and therefore weakened, susceptible to satanic lies. Grace teaches us to deny ourselves (aka the flesh), just like Jesus proposed, *“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me”* (Matthew 16:24). Since no man has ever been able to do that in the absence of God’s grace, it immediately follows that all denouncement of self is a grace gift, beginning with the fundamental tenets of sanctification, such as repentance. Even hatred of sin is a grace gift.

It is only by grace through faith that mere man is *even capable* of being set apart for God’s purposes, including in his own heart; for prior to God’s call to salvation, every motivation, every thought, every deed was manifest as fruit of the flesh. *“Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest”* (Ephesians 2:3). Man is utterly incapable of delivering himself from the throes of spiritual death. In fact, the human flesh prefers separation from God. However, by the grace of God, man is made able when he is saved.

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 to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

— Titus 2:11-14

The Positive and Negative Sides Of Grace

If we are to abide in God's grace, we must learn what the Word has to say about it. We cannot do as some do in the so-called "Christian" ranks - speculate rather than understand, invent rather than diligently seek Truth, espousing perversions of grace. Grace has two sides to it: positive and negative. It's all too appealing to the flesh to accept the positive aspects of grace and deny the negative, for the flesh is greedy and finds many ways to pervert and leverage such lopsidedness (e.g. antinomianism). The undeniable, freeing truth in the Bible is that grace teaches us both sides of the coin.

It's the negative aspects of grace that are often swept under the rug, for it is easier for some to write off self-denial as legalism or religious works. What these people don't understand is that they are implying that God's grace is incapable of enabling man to do as the Lord, Himself, commanded. The implications of this grave error are far-reaching, beginning with the assumption that God isn't fair (How could God ask man alone to do something righteous?). Since no professing Christian wants to posture themselves on such a statement, false doctrines are invented to cover their tracks. All kinds of complexities follow, errors that Paul had to deal with thousands of years ago, hence his lengthy retorts in his epistles.

To leave out either side of grace is to assist the devil, himself, in undermining the very essence of God. Could there be a worse endeavor???

GOOD VERSUS EVIL

The concept of good versus evil is an ancient one. Evil existed in the heart of the fallen angel, Satan, before human history even began (**Ezekiel 28**). It entered, specifically, into the sphere of mankind when this same creature tempted the woman in the Garden of Eden, resulting in the fall of both her and Adam.

Arguably, the most perplexing battle of all exists on the battleground of one's own soul.

For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.

— **Romans 7:19-21**

The Word of God commands us to observe the fruit of individuals as a litmus test, of sorts, for salvation itself. The one whose lifestyle is dominated by evil is of the world, as the apostle John writes; however, the one whose lifestyle is dominated by good is of God.

Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.

— **3 John 11**

The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

— **1 John 3:24**

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they

GOOD VERSUS EVIL

are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.

— **1 John 4:1-3**

"Equal Rights"

This story takes place in a two-dimensional world.

There once was a square. The square was lonely all by itself, so God gave it company, a circle. He told the square to love and care for the circle, even when it wasn't easy, and the circle to respect the square's expression of love, even when it didn't make sense. So they did as God asked them and life was truly good. The square and the circle loved each other. But even beyond that, they also *liked* each other a lot.

The square and the circle decided to have babies. Some were little squares and some circles. The cool thing about having a bunch of additional squares around was that whenever the gutters needed to be cleaned, they could just stack up like a pyramid and papa square could easily take care of business at the top. Likewise, having a bunch of circles around made transporting things around the yard really easy. There were so many things that squares and circles could do uniquely. God smiled watching His creation accomplish their daily tasks. Again, life was truly good.

One day the squares were off doing whatever squares do (lol). A few of the circles had been playing frisbee when it got lodged in a high tree branch. The circles got tired of waiting on the squares to return, so they decided to fit themselves with temporary edges. They calculated that for each circle, they would need to create four corners. So they took some material from their centers, made four triangles and cut the radius of the circle into the longest side. They strapped these triangles to the test circle, and voila - the circle had been transformed (well, kind of) into a square! They looked a bit queer, especially since they had sacrificed their cores for their new edges, but it seemed to work.

God frowned in Heaven, and the angels moaned.

The circles took no notice of God's malcontent and spent the rest of the afternoon making squares out of circles. They had never worked so hard at anything in their lives - they were determined! They'd have to tend to their regularly scheduled chores at some other point, for they all agreed that this was a much more important task!

As dusk overtook the land, the squares were returning from wherever squares go to do whatever it is they do (lol). They were all wiping their eyes, for before them stood a pyramid against the setting sun that rose up to treetop level. They were awfully confused, for they quickly discerned that the circles had modified their natural selves and managed to become like squares (well, sort of). They began asking each other, "What use will the circles have for us now? Why would they do such a thing as this?"

That night, the papa square asked the mama circle, "What have you done, my dear?" She said, "Well, the girls and I got tired of waiting on your return, so we decided to modify ourselves." Distraught, the square said, "Well, what do you suppose I tell the boys?" The circle said, while simultaneously realizing the full gravity of the afternoon's achievement, "Tell them we don't need them anymore." The square's heart ached.

The square was weak, so he and the rest of the squares got together the next day, asking, "What shall we do now?" Papa square, in his greatest failure to date, responded, "Well, I don't want to contend with your mother or your sisters, so let's figure out a way to coexist peacefully." There was some murmuring among the more mature squares, but he ignored it. In the end, some of the squares decided to trim off their corners so they could become like circles, even though no one had the skill to cut perfectly rounded edges. They adorned themselves with the clippings, as if jewelry.

God and the angels just shook their heads. At this point, the angels began asking God, "Where is this going, Lord, and what will become of Your creation?" Being omniscient, the Lord God said, "Be patient, wait and see,

for there is a wonderful lesson to be learned here.” The angels were upset, calling this situation an abomination. God never voiced disagreement, only persisted in His patience.

It didn’t take long before their newfound identities began to rot the fabric of their society. It didn’t take long before some squares preferred the life of a circle, and vice versa. And it didn’t take long before some squares decided to marry other squares, and some circles married other circles. As of today, there are even some that identify with both squares and circles.

Every so often, a square who identifies appropriately with himself comes along and voices the original intent of their Creator in Heaven. He is taunted by the others, “Don’t be such a square! Why don’t you just go hide in your ancient cave, or wherever you’ve come from...we don’t need the likes of you around here!” They jeer the square for standing up for Truth. What a total mess. Abominations have become lauded as “beautiful” and true beauty has been cast out.

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without

understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

— Romans 1:24-32

At the final judgment, the circles will say, "We just wanted to be *equal* with the squares, that's all. We were tired of waiting around and listening to the flawed authority of the squares. What's the problem with that?" And the Lord will say, "You are liars, the lot of you. You used terms like 'equal rights', but you sought superiority. For what is left for the square if every circle can not only accomplish everything that circles can, but also much of what squares can, too? You don't fool Me, your Creator, little ones, you have only put My patience to the test. And now it's too late. The problem, you ask? Simple. You contested My authority. You broke My chain of command. You decided in your own souls, for yourselves, that My love and My plan were insufficient for you. You chose to be lord over yourselves instead of keeping Me as Lord. You cry 'injustice' and yet forget how beautiful I made each of you. You lash out at the meek and the innocent and call it reparation. You are lost, some of you for good."

The moral of the story?

The term "equal rights" is a manmade term. Be careful what you accept as "equal rights", for in many cases, the proponents aren't looking for equality, they are seeking superiority, regardless of what they say publicly. Such is the nature of sin, itself, "*sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it*" (Genesis 4:7). The sinful flesh is *never* satisfied with equality. While it is crafty enough to use language that appeals to political sensibilities, its goal is to dominate... make no mistake about it.

Learn to see the forest through the trees, my friends. People aren't

unsatisfied with other people, they are unsatisfied with God, their Creator. They are not protesting against elected officials and governments, they are protesting against God. They are not miserable with those “being square” in this world, they are up in arms about Whom these people represent. This malcontent is as ancient as Satan and the fallen angels. Sin stands against the Lord, it always has. It always attacks the veracity of godly authority, be it the Lord, husbands, parents, elected officials, etc. And it is fiercely blind while doing so.

Why do you not understand what I [Jesus] am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. 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. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me.

— John 8:43-45

How Do I Know?

But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know.

— **1 John 2:20**

One of *the* most common questions I receive from people is, “How do I know that I’m doing God’s will?”

Such questions often come after difficult lessons or the emphasis of certain principle commands in the Bible...things like, “*Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth*” (**1 John 3:18**). A lot of well-intentioned believers might walk away from reading that verse scratching their heads, wondering exactly *how* one loves “*in deed and truth*”. The issue becomes very clear once a person learns to discern the differences between human rationalism and achievement and spiritual guidance. The prior is “human” enough to be understood by even the unbelievers in this world; however, the latter is something reserved for true believers only.

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

— **1 Corinthians 2:14**

So, to address the question at hand, a believer must first jettison any natural inclination to look for indicators that even unbelievers can identify with. Understanding the fullness of Christ’s love is beyond the grasp of the unbelieving population; therefore, if a believer desires to “*love...in deed and truth*”, they must first resign attention to worldly thoughts in favor of spiritual ones. Enter the Holy Spirit, the One who Jesus, Himself, promised to send to assist us in answering these kinds of questions. “*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” (John 14:26).

The natural mind plays tricks on us. It’s one of the weaknesses that Satan is able to exploit in human beings - our ability to be confused. Well, God the Holy Spirit is never confused, *“for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Corinthians 14:33)*. It makes sense, then, that a believer seeking truth ought to consult the One who’s never wrong, rather than human understanding, *“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5)*.

Maybe the better way to approach the question, “How do I know?” is, “Who should I be asking?” In other words, “Should I be defaulting to the faculty that even an unbeliever has, or should I be consulting the Spirit in prayer?” Scripture, as we’ve already seen by hardly even scratching the surface of it, makes it obvious.

The secret to answering your innermost questions regarding God’s will is prayer. The “airwaves” must be free and clear of any worldly static so that we can “hear” what He has to say to us. We must consult the very same God that gave us the commands in the Bible on the topic of “How to”. In context, the Father and the Son have given us commands, and both of these Persons have sent us the Spirit to guide us afterwards. If we reject the gifts of any one of the Trinity, we compromise the plan.

We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. 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. This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

One might subsequently be asking themselves, “But how, then, do I know if the ‘answers’ I receive in prayer aren’t just my own thoughts overrunning the Spirit’s?” The answer is simple.

God’s Word is self-authenticating. Dwell on that for a time. Repeat it to yourself every time you’re awestruck by the immensity of the Word. If the Word says something is true, then it is. For example, if the Word says that through prayer and intimation, the Spirit *will* reveal to you the truth of a matter, then expect it to come to pass. Only doubt has the cancerous ability to undermine the manner in which God has ordained our deliverance.

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

— James 1:5-8

In His incarnation, the Word, Jesus Christ (John 1:14), authenticated Himself and His teachings to the Jewish doubters. He taught them that those who are fundamentally committed to His truth will be guided by God in the affirmation of it. In other words, the Word is self-authenticating. An unbeliever will struggle forever with this; however, a believer is adequately equipped to receive this as fact.

But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.

— John 16:13

It turns out that we believers are not to seek the answers we are looking for the same way we used to as unbelievers. Looking back, we realize through the perfect lens of scripture that to do so is absolute folly. To tap a well that simply cannot give us “living water” (John 4:10) is to frustrate oneself indefinitely, for that person will always be thirsty. Contrarily, the humble believer never thirsts for long, for God fills His cup from the wellspring of life, without cost and without end.

As for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him.

— 1 John 2:27

We ought never be insecure about the “big questions” in the spiritual life...“How this or that?” God has met every one of our needs by grace before we even realize them, and He did so from eternity past. Once a believer possesses the faith to deliver them from their doubts, the entire line of questioning moves from “How?” to a very excited, enthusiastic, hopeful “When?”

It's too easy to get stuck in analysis paralysis...asking the wrong questions of the wrong counselor. Learn to step back and remember the fundamentals of the spiritual life, knowing that they won't make any sense to natural mindedness, your own even. Deliverance is often but a change of perspective away.

Relax and enjoy the ride - life's too short to heap artificial pressures upon oneself. When it's time to read your spiritual compass, give the Spirit the space to look over your shoulder and point out true north to you. All will be well - so says the self-authenticating Word of God.

How Do I Know?

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

— **Matthew 6:33-34**

Loyalty Rather Than Sacrifice

*For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice,
And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*

— Hosea 6:6

Every generation of man includes people who simply miss the point about God. Thanks be to Him for His patience.

Throughout the Bible, the Lord God reminds us that commands and ordinances are not what the flesh will try to make them out to be. In fact, they are the exact opposite. It's very true that they exist and apply to mankind, but man's flesh perverts them every chance it gets. *"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh"* (**Galatians 5:16**). Commands are often best understood as simply the expression of God's will for mankind.

While the flesh perceives God's law as confining, God sees it as the pathway to freedom. The pressure the fleshly person feels while trying to uphold the law is completely unwarranted. It's also the purest example of futility in life.

During the prophet Hosea's time, the fleshly Jews assumed that performing sacrificial acts were what pleased the Lord. However, since their hearts weren't right, their motivation being fleshly (e.g., works for grace), the Lord was dissatisfied altogether. As Hosea wrote above, the Lord was looking for loyalty from His subjects.

Works will never produce good loyalty; however, loyalty will always produce good works. Men who have this wrong, like those Hosea was addressing in the Old Testament, are as Jesus described the Pharisees in the New Testament, *"You judge according to the flesh"* (John 8:15).

Contemporary Christianity is hardly any different. There are apparently millions of people alive today who believe that sacrificial performance, without any real loyalty to the Lord, is pleasing to Him. This is false religion.

I have a pastor friend that preaches in Ghana, Africa every day, fighting tooth and nail against this very perversion. Whole sects of so-called “Christianity” are convinced that a person must add works to the true Gospel of Jesus Christ in order to be saved. These delusional folks will fiercely contend with my friend, proclaiming that *he* is the one who is unsaved. Why? **Simply put, they are loyal to their flesh, not the Lord.** As such, through that lens, they perceive my godly friend as ungodly. Everything is flipped upside down. Hence Paul’s retort, *“Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh”* (2 Corinthians 5:16).

***“[The Lord delights] in loyalty rather than sacrifice”* (Hosea 6:6a). In other words, while God’s law is chalk full of commands to sacrifice, performances are merely a show of loyalty, never the establishment of it. An impure heart will never be purified through sacrifice, only by the grace of God. Human flesh cannot understand such a thing.**

When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, “Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?” But when Jesus heard this, He said, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

— Matthew 9:11-13

Again, *“[The Lord delights] in loyalty rather than sacrifice”* (Hosea 6:6a). Since the flesh flips things upside down, we might say that this tenet of God is reversed to say, *“The Lord delights in sacrifice rather than loyalty”* (unholy doctrine). Arguably our greatest depiction of this ungodliness in the Bible

is with the Pharisees.

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath." But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?"

"But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

— **Matthew 12:1-8**

The foul thing about ungodliness is that it justifies itself and condemns the things of God, including His children. It hails false religion - where loyalty is to the flesh, not the Lord - as worthy of praise, and all who practice it, while it persecutes those who refuse to abide in it. False religion crucified Jesus, who said, "*Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.'* If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (**John 15:20**).

Loyalty is a big word. It behooves each of us to understand where our loyalties lie. Are we truly loyal to the Lord God, or are we loyal to the flesh? Why do we sacrifice, if/when we do? What is our motivation for doing so? These are the questions that God already knows the answers to because He sees the heart, "*for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.*" (1 Samuel 16:7b). The question is whether or not we are being honest with

ourselves.

Let us stop saying, "Oh, look there at *that* religion...or over there at *that* one...how wretched they are!" Rather, let us take a long, hard look in the mirror, through the lens of the Word of God. What might we discover about ourselves? Will we run away, or face the facts? "*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*" (**James 1:23-24**).

In my book *Religion By Any Other Name*, I wrote a whole chapter on the fact that religion doesn't need a name to be evil. In fact, the nameless ones are often the most insidious of all. We must turn over every stone in our souls, especially when we pray, in order to bring to light the truth about our loyalties. What good is *any* sacrifice if we are serving the wrong master?

The difference between true and false religion is an issue of loyalty, not sacrifice.

THE GOSPEL

Martin Luther was enamored with Paul's epistle to the Romans. In particular, he is quoted as saying, "You mean the righteousness by which I will be saved, is not mine?" Luther called this *justitia alienum*, an alien righteousness; a righteousness that belongs properly to somebody else. He was referring to the righteousness of Christ. And so Luther concluded, "When I discovered that, I was born again of the Holy Ghost. And the doors of paradise swung open, and I walked through."

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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

— **Romans 1:16-17**

To believers, the Gospel is everything - our reason for living, for hope, for love. It is the centerpiece of the spiritual life and the basis of the great commission, by which we are enlisted as "soldiers for Christ" (2 Timothy 2:3).

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 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; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

— **Matthew 28:18-20**

God leaves a believer on earth after He saves him or her so that they may spread the good news about His Son.

But what does it say? "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH

AND IN YOUR HEART” — that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, “WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him;

for “WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.”

— **Romans 10:8-13**

Modern Christianity has been watered down into something “politically correct.” In other words, the gospel preached in many so-called “Christian” churches isn’t really the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul warned vehemently about this error.

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

— **Galatians 1:6-9**

Sadly, there are many so-called “Christian” churches and/or denominations whose members would more likely fall into the category of the ruler in **Luke 18:18** than Paul’s.

A ruler questioned Him, saying, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is

good except God alone. You know the commandments, 'DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.'" And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth."

When Jesus heard this, He said to him, "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." But when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. And Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

They who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" But He said, "The things that are impossible with people are possible with God."

— **Luke 18:18-27**

Salvation is a miracle. There's no other way to say it. We must put our faith in a miracle in order to be saved. While the world continues to peddle lies, all in the name of Jesus (though it's "another Jesus" - **2 Corinthians 11:4**), we must remain steadfast in what the Bible clearly states, for example:

Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you."

— **Luke 24:45-49a**

The Gospel is God's expression of love.

By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only

THE GOSPEL

begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

— **1 John 4:9-10**

Admission Is Not Submission

In the synagogue there was a man possessed by the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Let us alone! What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are — the Holy One of God!"

— Luke 4:33-34

Demons are fallen angels. This means they have taken Satan's side in the great conflict between God and Satan, a war that predates human history, even. Demons do not bid God's favor; rather, they are antagonistic to His will. They are unholy, ungodly, and horribly arrogant. Yet...and don't miss this...they *openly concede* His position as the "Most High God", and Jesus, "the Son of God".

Even the demons know and accept God's position in the Universe. They also accept Jesus as His Son, the Christ. Yet they are fallen. They are unclean. In fact, one third of all angels are Satan's own (Revelation 12:4).

You might be asking yourself, "How can *any* creature made by the Creator, *knowing* these basic facts about Him and themselves, ever *oppose* Him?" It's easy, they are arrogant. You may have, in the past, said to yourself, "Well, maybe some of God's creatures (including man) just don't understand who God is...if they only *knew*!" But here's my point exactly - they *do*!!! That's how powerful arrogance can be.

Submission to authority and concession of its existence are two separate issues. Arrogant creatures often understand and accept God as sovereign, but they refuse to submit to His authority. Demons are a perfect example of this phenomenon, as noted in scripture. In their encounters with Jesus, the God-man, they immediately understood who He was, even understood His power over them, and yet still only obeyed Him when

there was literally no other option, by force.

*Seeing Jesus from a distance, [a man with an unclean spirit] ran up and bowed down before Him; and shouting with a loud voice, he *said, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God, do not torment me!"*

— Mark 5:6-7

All arrogant creatures share the same trait. While they concede certain facts about authority in their lives, they don't always submit to them. Nowhere is this more dangerous than with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While many people, often calling themselves "Christians", will accept who Jesus is, they reject the idea of submitting to Him, to God. Jesus warned those He taught about the result of this kind of arrogance.

And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

— Mark 8:34-38

The fundamental difference between a saved person and an unsaved person is, minimally, an issue of submission, not knowledge. While an arrogant person seeks things for fleshly advantage, a humble person seeks the righteousness of God.

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

— **Matthew 6:33**

There's a reason why God the Holy Spirit inspired so many accounts of demons interacting with Jesus Christ. It's because we readers of the Bible can learn an awful lot from the demons. Arguably the most profound conclusion is one that applies to mankind as well.

Admission isn't the same thing as submission. A person can admit that a certain authority exists in their life, but that doesn't mean they will ever submit to it, from the heart (by force doesn't count).

But what does it say? "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART" — that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

— **Romans 10:8-10**

God chooses to save those whose hearts are right towards Him. He sent His Son to describe what that means to man. "*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).* And just like the demons, many human beings, while accepting who Jesus is and what He accomplished on His cross, remain arrogant, rejecting the idea of submission altogether. In their hearts, they say, "Gimme what's good for me, like a free ticket to Heaven, but keep your lordship, for I am captain of my own ship."

It seems untenable that one of God's creatures would maintain an arrogant posture in the presence of the admitted "*Most High God*", yet that is precisely what many do. The Bible tells us that demons (and by now I hope you're making the connection to mankind) knew that Jesus was "the Christ". Christ means "Messiah"! This implies that the demons who met up

with Jesus understood the fullness of His mission, even, that as Savior to the world! And *still*, they refused to submit to Him! Sound like anyone you know??? Look around, family and friends included, and you'll see the same spiritual condition in unsaved man.

Admission isn't the same thing as submission.

*While the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and laying His hands on each one of them, He was healing them. Demons also were coming out of many, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But rebuking them, He would not allow them to speak, because **they knew Him to be the Christ.**"*

— Luke 4:40-41

Why would any creature buck a known authority? It isn't an issue of ignorance, but rather, arrogance. From the sophomoric teenager to the puffed up intellectual, God has made Himself known to them. Every creature, whether they choose to admit it or not, knows this to be true, even the starkest of atheists. They are "*without excuse*". They will "*die in their sins*" (**John 8:24**) as a result.

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. 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.

— Romans 1:20-21

My fear is that there are a lot of so-called "believers" out there that have admitted, but not submitted, and so remain in their sins, unsaved. My fear is that today's "Christianity" is a cesspool of accommodation - something neither Jesus nor His disciples ever promoted. But, you see, we are two thousand years beyond the greatest event in human history, the Cross, and

man has invented myriad ways to “get to Heaven” in order to hedge his bets in his own favor, as if that were the primary cause for consideration in the first place (it isn't - the sin issue is - see my previous blog entry titled, “*Repentance: An Issue of Life and Death*”). In his ingenuity (a euphemism for arrogance), man has perverted the Gospel of Jesus Christ, even, supposing that merely knowing what the demons already know is sufficient cause for God to save them.

Salvation is a heart issue, not merely a mental one. The demons help us understand this. Admission is not submission, not even close...

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 will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’

— **Matthew 7:21-23**

The Dance

I guess it's fair to say that people dance for different reasons. One of my all-time favorite country songs is *The Dance* by Garth Brooks. I suppose it's because it somehow manages to capture those emotions that exist between risk and reward, particularly in our relationships. Even though it's a romantic song, I think it applies to just about any intimate relationship.

"The Dance"

*Looking back on the memory of
The dance we shared 'neath the stars above
For a moment all the world was right
How could I have known that you'd ever say goodbye*

*And now I'm glad I didn't know
The way it all would end the way it all would go
Our lives are better left to chance I could have missed the pain
But I'd have had to miss the dance*

*Holding you I held everything
For a moment wasn't I a king
But if I'd only known how the king would fall
Hey who's to say you know I might have changed it all*

*And now I'm glad I didn't know
The way it all would end the way it all would go
Our lives are better left to chance I could have missed the pain
But I'd have had to miss the dance*

*Yes my life is better left to chance
I could have missed the pain but I'd have had to miss the dance*

— Garth Brooks

One of my greatest hesitations nowadays - I almost wrote "fear" - is forming new relationships, especially intimate ones. Why? Because there's a good chance I will be in pain shortly after opening my heart up to another human being. People break my heart. And for the record, I'm not saying that I don't break theirs (I'm sure I do). I say to myself, "You know, I could surely do without all the pain that will come with this..." And it's true, I could, and when I refuse to open up my heart, part of me is relieved. But, then again, I'd have to miss the dance, which could've possibly turned out to be something quite beautiful.

My favorite dance is the one I share with the Lord - I call it the "Gospel Dance". I hear His music in my soul, and I long to dance with anyone who hears what I hear. However, if I ask someone to "dance" with me, it's often a catastrophe, for they favor a different genre of music, a worldly one. They say "yes" because they are attracted to me, not the Lord. As such, before long, we are stepping on each other's toes, grumbling under our breath, maybe never attempting to dance together again. I can't help but think my Lord is grieved.

Sometimes, if I'm on my game, I might dance the socks off of someone new...and for a time, we enjoy a few twirls around the dance floor. But even then, far too often for my heart to bear, my partner grows tired of my Lord's tune, His Gospel, and they walk away from me. I say to myself, "Don't despair, you're a good dancer...it's not you they have an issue with." I find solace in scripture, for even the great prophets fared similarly...danced with for a while, but left alone on the dance floor. Ezekiel is a perfect example.

"Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I make the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations which they have committed." But as for you, son of man, your fellow citizens who talk about you by the walls and in the doorways of the houses, speak to one another,

each to his brother, saying, "Come now and hear what the message is which comes forth from the LORD." They come to you as people come, and sit before you as My people and hear your words, but they do not do them, for they do the lustful desires expressed by their mouth, and their heart goes after their gain. Behold, you are to them like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; for they hear your words but they do not practice them. So when it comes to pass — as surely it will — then they will know that a prophet has been in their midst.

— Ezekiel 33:29-33

What can a teacher say? He may sing his heart out, he may dance his feet off...but if he's just another entertainer to his audience, the affair won't last, it never does. Preachers like me are treated like pop music by most who hear us. Our music is a passing fad. Experiencing this can be emotionally debilitating at times. Even so, I'm encouraged knowing that, as Solomon would say, "*there is nothing new under the sun*" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Note to self: don't take this personally.

Sometimes, when we're sitting out a dance, we have to sit back and watch those in the world make fools of themselves, singing and dancing to music that originates from darkness. We have to watch while they bounce off of each other, swapping partners, changing their tune, as frequently as necessary to satisfy their lusts. There's nothing beautiful about it, this cacophony that plays out all around us. Jesus pointed this out to those who would listen.

But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John. "To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children who sit in the market place and call to one another, and they say, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.' For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine,

and you say, 'He has a demon!' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

— Luke 7:30-35

I'll borrow from the late J. C. Ryle regarding the passage above:

We must give up the idea of trying to please everyone. The thing is impossible, and the attempt is mere waste of time. We must be content to walk in Christ's steps, and let the world say what it likes. Do what we will, we shall never satisfy it, or silence its ill-natured remarks. It first found fault with John the Baptist and then with his blessed Master. And it will go on caviling and finding fault with our Master's disciples so long as one of them is left upon earth.

— J. C. Ryle

It's true, people dance for different reasons. Asking someone to dance means taking a chance, bringing back memories of grade school dance hall rejection or arrhythmic toe-smashing disasters (assuming the courting ever got that far). Both conjure up visceral memories of distress, but nothing compares to the Gospel dance proposition, where the stakes are much, much higher, and the music is led by God the Holy Spirit, Himself.

In the end, the risk is worth it. Guys like me just have to suck it up, pray, and gather up enough courage to keep on asking, "may I have this dance?" If it turns out a bloody mess, then let us exit the dance floor with a little grace. Let us understand the wisdom that Mr. Brooks colloquially sang of, "I could have missed the pain but I'd have had to miss the dance".

In my weakness, I may not always have the courage to ask someone to dance. Forgive me, and those like me, for we are only human. The pain is real. May we be encouraged, knowing what Paul taught, "So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you" (1

Thessalonians 4:8). We may not be perfect dancers, only Jesus Christ is, but the music we prefer is right, and the dance moves we exhibit are good enough to carry on His good work. Pray for us. Pray for our courage. Pray for our healing. Pray we risk the pain and keep on dancing. I'll be praying for all of you, for I know I'm not the only one entreating others to dance the Gospel.

The Great Chowder Cook-Off

Over the past thirty-five years, hundreds of thousands of hungry visitors have sampled some of the best clam chowder in the world at the annual *Great Chowder Cook-off* in Newport, Rhode Island. If you're from northeastern United States, you know how esteemed a good bowl of clam chowder is to the distinguishing palette. We pride ourselves on producing the best chowder a person may ever enjoy.

This past year, the competition drew twenty-one competitors, from Rhode Island to Ireland. That's right, Ireland - this is no "small potatoes" (pun intended :)). This is serious business, my friends. One gets the sense that if you cannot present a truly spectacular soup, you might as well refrain from competition, saving yourself a little embarrassment. While the event is meant to be fun, the expectations are very high.

Have you ever wondered what makes one recipe so much better than the next? I often think about such things, given the fact that - let's face it - there's a relatively small set of ingredients that are germane to making a good chowder (clams, potatoes, onions, celery, cream, flour, salt, pepper, etc.). I don't mean to diminish the efforts that have gone into creating the aforementioned masterpieces - God forbid I have an angry mob of chowder-heads at my front door - but, for the sake of perspective, I think it's fair to say that there are a small number of ingredients included in even the winner's cooking pot.

After bragging rights, arguably the biggest benefit is the spike in business that funnels to the crowned champion. I mean, who doesn't want to give the "greatest chowder" a try?...and won't we pay a bit extra for it, too? The business owners are counting on it!

In the chowder business, reputation means a lot. After all - and I speak for

the sake of simplicity - chowder is chowder. At the end of the day, clam chowder has the distinction of bearing the primary taste of clams. I mean, that's why we call it "clam chowder", right? And by the by, who's to say that there isn't some ancient family recipe floating around in some obscure part of the world that wouldn't annihilate anything ever presented in competition??? Nonetheless, fortunes have been made by those cooks who have created the most reputable chowder(s).

While all of this makes perfect sense, it makes no sense, whatsoever, when it comes to "cooking the Gospel". There's no such analog to The Great Chowder Cook-Off when it comes to spreading the Gospel. Man's competitive flesh will tell you there is, but there's no place for competition in evangelism.

There's no secret "championship recipe" that is meant to make one evangelist stand out over another. God owns the recipe. It has never changed. An evangelist's job isn't to be creative, it is to, *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15).

Jesus, the perfect evangelist, made no mention of a "better or best" Gospel, only the Gospel. Why? Because there's only one. There are no real variants, regardless of man's viewpoint on the subject. Likewise, there's no one better to present the Gospel than the one who has it right. For example, Jesus, Himself, never made a distinction between "cooks" (sowers) and "chowder" (seed) in *The Parable of Parables, The Parable of the Soils*. *"And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables" (Mark 4:13)?*

From The Parable of the Soils, we have, *"The sower sows the word"* (Mark 4:14) and *"The sower went out to sow his seed...Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God"* (Luke 8:5, 11). I encourage you to read each record of this (Matthew 13:3-12, 18-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15). While doing so, make sure you understand Jesus' audience and the context of the parable -

this is critical to understand it, and by Jesus' own words, the *rest* of His parables. Remember, Jesus came to "*seek and to save*" (**Luke 19:10**), so it makes total sense that His parables, especially this first one, are about the Gospel.

What we find when we read *The Parable of the Soils* closely, in context, is that Jesus doesn't spend any real time on distinctions between sowers or seed. Why is that? It's simple - Jesus doesn't want undue emphasis placed on distinctions in those areas. Remember, in general, a parable is meant to drive one key point home. In this preeminent one, Jesus wants His disciples to assume the sower and the seed are righteous, leaving any distinctions being made between the soils (the hearts of men). In other words, He's not interested in any other "recipes" on evangelizing than the one true one that Jesus Christ, Himself, has set forth.

This may take a little time to digest for some of you for the simple reason that this kind of thinking is antithetical to worldly thinking. The world tells us that we ought to strive for creating and hoarding our own "secret recipes", constantly looking for ways to separate ourselves, to make ourselves special, to create distinctions, to compete...and if that includes evangelism, then so be it! While it's true that the Lord desires we earnestly pursue truth, we ought never do so for the sake of personal distinction. Our goal is to be like the sower in the parable, indistinguishable from other sowers who sow the righteous seed.

There's only one truth, one seed. The Lord has given it to us to sow. It's not better or worse today or tomorrow (John 14:6; Hebrews 13:8). As evangelists (Matthew 28:18-20), we aren't competitors, we are fellow laborers in God's fields.

Imagine the pressure the competitors feel on the day of *The Great Chowder Cook-Off* event. They smile nervously at each other, courteous, but fierce competitors at heart. There's much at stake, and it all depends on their own recipe being voted best. It's all about them, you see. The focus is on

The Great Chowder Cook-Off

distinctions between cooks and their chowder. We evangelists don't have that pressure placed upon us - thank you Lord! We really don't.

**We're not trying to make names for ourselves (we shouldn't be anyways)
...we are trying to make a name for Jesus Christ.**

We already have the winning recipe - the Gospel. It's up to the "taste buds" of those who hear it to decide for themselves where it ranks. Some will spit it out, some will remain lukewarm about it, still open to alternatives, while others will look up to Heaven and say, "Thank you Lord...it doesn't get any better than this!" It's the last group of people, having found and embraced the one true "recipe", whom Jesus makes fellow sowers of the seed, for that is what it means to go and bear good fruit forevermore.

Guest Blogger: The Eternal Cookie

I love to bake. My favorite dessert to bake is chocolate chip cookies.

There are many reasons why this is so appealing to me: the exact science of the process, the focus required - which allows my mind to “relax” from all other thoughts - the magnificent aroma, the motivation of love for whomever I am baking for, and the final result - the beautiful, golden brown, delicious chocolate chip cookies. It took me years to “perfect” the recipe. Now that I have it down, I use the same brand and type of chocolate chips, the same butter, and I follow the same recipe every time, without deviation, to yield the same wonderful results. The few times they did not come out perfect, there was a simple reason - I strayed from the recipe.

So it goes with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. See, there is a “recipe” for salvation as described by Jesus Christ, Himself.

I teach for the prep school ministry in our church. We teachers describe this process of salvation to the children as simply “admitting and accepting”. Channeling my pastor here, I add, please do not make the points below into some doctrine in your soul - salvation, after all, is a supernatural “process”. This is just an example of how the Gospel is explained to the prep school children. With that said...

You must *admit* that you are a sinner and that you need a savior, aka REPENT!

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

— **Matthew 4:17**

“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes

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and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

— **Matthew 5:20**

And Jesus answered and said to them, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

— **Luke 5:31-32**

You must *accept* that Jesus Christ, the God-man, is the Savior, and that He died, being judged for the sins of all mankind, and is alive in Heaven.

Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING WITH THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN."

— **Mark 14:61b-62**

"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

— **Luke 19:10**

He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

— **Luke 24:46-47**

You must *accept* Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior!

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person

believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

— **Romans 10:9-10**

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"

— **John 11:25-26**

So, is that it, then - we have the ingredients in a bowl and the knowledge in our soul, so we have cookies and salvation? Not by a long shot. See, *we* don't complete the work. In order to transform raw ingredients in a bowl into the perfection that is the chocolate chip cookie, we need the heat or "power", if you will, of the oven, just as we need God's power in salvation.

In order to transform a wretched person into a perfectly righteous one, we need the power of God working in us. His power alone is able to combine the "raw ingredients" of the Gospel with a humble heart seeking Jesus Christ, in order to impart saving faith. This seems impossible to us!

They who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" But He said, "The things that are impossible with people are possible with God."

— **Luke 18:26-27**

"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day."

— **John 6:44**

One last thought. When baking, if you neglect to add an ingredient or neglect a step, or add an extra ingredient or extra step, the results are disastrous. You will either produce a hideous *looking* cookie or a disgusting

tasting cookie.

Follow the recipe or fail to bake perfect cookies. That's the key.

This is also true with the Gospel. If you either add or subtract from it, the result is a false gospel, a "bad cookie"! Failure in understanding the "recipe" reaps eternal consequences, for you as well as others. Those who bake would never dream of serving imperfect cookies to others. Shouldn't we, as stewards of the Gospel, be all the more adamant about not serving an imperfect/incomplete gospel?

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

— **Matthew 7:13-14**

"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 will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'"

— **Matthew 7:21-23**

"And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God; but he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him."

— **Luke 12:8-10**

It's simple, really. We are 100% imperfect; God is 100% perfect. We need a Savior; He gave us His Son. He is God; we are not. God saves. We must admit, accept, and trust in His power to transform us, and then we may partake of the "eternal cookie".

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

— **John 3:16**

In His Perfect Love,

Monica

How To Prepare Farmland For Planting

About a stone's throw away from my elementary school is Bristol County Agricultural High School (aka "The Aggie"), a vocational school with a busy thoroughfare across the center of its farmland. It's one of the most spectacular plots of land in the area, accented by a gorgeous little bridge on the edge of the property that spans the Taunton River. On the school side of this bridge is the Town of Dighton and on the opposite side is the Town of Berkley.

"Knee high by the Fourth of July!" That's what my wife always says as we pass by the corn in the summer. The road is so frequently traveled that folks like us are actually able to watch the corn grow from tiny sprouts to seven-plus foot mature stalks. All the while, under the tutelage of their instructors, the students at the Aggie are tending to the crop, ensuring a good harvest as the culmination of their training.

I was thinking today, as I was reading chapter three in the **Book of Acts**, what it must be like to grow a crop on a farm. Farmers always make it look so darn easy, but even a quick examination of facts about agriculture reveals that it's anything *but* easy. While passersby like my family and I take this for granted, it turns out there's a lot of preparation and labor that goes into growing corn, or anything for that matter. Only in our ignorance do we suppose anything less.

Preparing farmland for planting cash crops or garden vegetables requires preparations. You cannot simply go out in your yard, dig a hole, place a seed and expect a vegetable or crop plant to produce. Though you may end up with a plant, farmland preparation requires quite a bit more attention to detail. Even hobby or personal farmland used to feed your livestock or family requires more preparation than simply sticking a seed in the soil.

Step 1: test the soil for pH levels (acidity)

Step 2: assemble a soil test by collecting soil samples

Step 3: mow/rake the area to be planted

Step 4: till the farmland

— *Hunker.com*

The more research I do on the topic of farming, the more I realize how critical the pre-planting stages of growing a crop are. In the Bible, Jesus' "parable of parables", the *Parable of the Soils* (**Matthew 13**), uses an agricultural analogy to explain how the soils of people are prepared to receive the Gospel. In fact, three out of the four types of soils Jesus describes result in useless crops (unbelievers). Only the last type, "the good soil" (**v8**) yields a crop (believers). The reason is that the aforementioned soils weren't prepared to receive the seed. Such is the distinction between believers and unbelievers.

Back to **Acts 3** now...

First of all, the context is the early church. The Apostles had been given the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:19-20**) and were encouraged by Jesus to spread His Gospel seed for the sake of reaping a harvest of believers. Given the fact that the Jews had just murdered Jesus, you can imagine the estate of the soil the Apostles were charged with tending! It was difficult farming, to say the least.

The first thing we see is a miracle, one that was undeniable even by the most hardened soil, the fervent Jewish leaders.

Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer. And a man who had been lame from his mother's womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the

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temple, he began asking to receive alms.

But Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze on him and said, "Look at us!" And he began to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene — walk!" And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. With a leap he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

And all the people saw him walking and praising God; and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to beg alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. While he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement.

— Acts 3:1-11

God certainly had their attention at that point! In a sense, God pointed out a field to be cultivated by the Apostles, the plot boundaries being those who witnessed the miracle. Peter seized the moment to make a critical point. He credited the source of the miracle to Jesus Christ, the Messiah they had hung on a cross.

But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk?"

"The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to

death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses.

“And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.”

— Acts 3:12-16

What a beautiful display of good timing, huh? May we all learn what that means, by the power of the Spirit.

As is the case with actual farming methods, you don't use a stick of dynamite to blow up the soil and then proclaim it tilled. While there's a certain violence to preparing soil, there's also a very purposeful, gentle, caring aspect to farming, given the fragility of most soil.

“And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also.”

— Acts 3:17

As we believers are all called to sow the seed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we must learn to appreciate the gentle, forgiving nature of evangelism. As I alluded to earlier, we don't show up with dynamite to prepare a field for planting. Cultivating soil begins with thoughtfulness. The last thing we want to do is make the soil even more difficult to penetrate, or render it unplatable because we blew it up. It's better to soften a heart with love than to harden it with callousness.

Let's continue with this magnificent scene where Peter continues his sermon. At this point in the story, the miracle has gotten his audience's attention; he's given the glory to Jesus and reminded them that He's the one they killed. However, to soften the blow, he shows them mercy and

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forgiveness, for his desire is God's, *"who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"* (1 Timothy 2:4).

Once the soil was prepared for planting, Peter sowed the seed of the Gospel.

"But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.

"Moses said, 'THE LORD GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN; TO HIM YOU SHALL GIVE HEED to everything He says to you. And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.' And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days. It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'AND IN YOUR SEED ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED.'"

For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways."

— Acts 3:18-26

Peter wrapped up his sermon in a way that I fear most contemporary evangelists fail to. He reiterated the criticality of repentance, making it very clear that without it, there is no salvation (their soil would never produce a crop if it wasn't yet ready to receive the seed implanted, as James wrote, *"Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of*

wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls” - James 1:21). A person cannot be saved if they refuse to be turned from their “wicked ways” (Acts 3:26).

One last really important thing to consider here is a truth very much analogous to a farmer’s craft. Not every plot of land is the same. Some are flat with lots of sunshine in a climate that is conducive to harvesting large crops, year over year. Others are much less friendly, depending on the area of the world, the terrain, the type of soil, etc. No matter the case, we evangelists must tailor the Gospel presentation in such a way that the soil is prepared for sowing the good seed. We cannot expect that every situation will be the same. In fact, if you read the **Book of Acts** all the way through, you’ll notice that each time the Gospel was presented, it was unique. The facts were always the same but, as is the case with farmland, each plot required a different cultivation strategy. Paul proved himself a master evangelist because he understood this very thing.

To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law.

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

— 1 Corinthians 9:20-23

As the Bible states, we that sow the good seed are like farmers. Through the power of God the Holy Spirit we are able to contribute to the cultivation of soil. Incredibly, we are called to follow the same basic preparatory steps an earthly farmer must take in order to reap a good

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harvest (see fourth and fifth paragraphs of this blog). While salvation is an issue between God and an individual, we know the work that must be done. So, we toil on, as fellow workers in God's fields.

So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

— 1 Corinthians 3:7-9

The Gospel seed is perfect, always producing good fruit and crops “some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty” when the soil is “good,” cultivated and prepared (Matthew 13:8). Man must be humble to receive both repentance and faith from the only One who is able to save it, for, “GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE” (James 4:6).

“He who has ears, let him hear” (Matthew 13:9).

One Kingdom, One Gospel

There once was a man who was king over a large kingdom.

It was the only righteous kingdom in all the land.

All were welcome to become citizens of his kingdom under two conditions. First, a person had to surrender their previous citizenship, for no other kingdom abided by the laws of his. Second, every new citizen had to agree that he was indeed king.

Now, being a gracious king, he only asked that a person be agreeable to the above terms. He understood fully that new subjects would have to spend time learning the laws of the land. As such, one of his laws was that existing citizens of his kingdom show the same kind of patience he did, helping new citizens acclimate to their new life.

Like a good king, he protected his subjects from those outside the kingdom walls. He loved so deeply that he often referred to his subjects as his own children. Fatherly, he certainly was, and all under his care loved him right back.

Now, outside of the kingdom walls were protestors. Some of their signs read, "Your king isn't fair!" and "Your king doesn't love you!" The king knew that those outside of his kingdom were jealous and weak. Because of his deep understanding, patience, and lovingkindness, the king never turned away a person willing to accept his terms of citizenship, no matter how awfully they may have slandered him or his kingdom in the past. The gates were always open, just guarded.

One day he decided to send his beloved son outside the gate to share the good news about His father's kingdom, something that had never been

done before. Before his son departed, he comforted his father saying, “Father, if I don’t come back, please welcome those who make it to our gates pleading for citizenship in earnest, knowing that I showed them the way. If they kill me out there, Father, please know that I believed my sacrifice was worth it. I love you, Dad.”

His son never came back.

Obviously, this is an analog to the Kingdom of God. Only in this case the Son is resurrected and seated at the right hand of His Father in Heaven.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about entrance into the Kingdom of God (also called the Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew).

There’s only ever been one kingdom. There’s only ever been one King, one Lord over all, and His name is Jesus Christ. And there’s only ever been one way to gain citizenship into His kingdom. The King said it Himself.

*Jesus *said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.”*

— John 14:6-7

Jesus is the perfect representation of His Father (**Hebrews 1:3**). As such, He has been given every right to call out to His own, at the behest of His Father. He has the authority to grant citizenship to those willing to accept His terms, that is to say, to accept **Him**. This is what we call the “Gospel call”.

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who

find it."

— **Matthew 7:13-14**

A person who refuses Jesus Christ dies in their sins.

"Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins."

— **John 8:24**

The Gospel is non-negotiable. What Jesus stated about Himself, His purpose, and His calling is non-negotiable. A person must be willing to accept His terms in order to become a citizen of heaven (**Philippians 3:20**).

The good news is that once a member of His kingdom, the Kingdom of God, a citizen is able to enjoy all that He has promised. Sheep in His kingdom are eternally nourished.

"I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."

— **John 10:9**

There's only one Gospel, my friends. Never, EVER listen to anyone telling you any differently. Jesus taught it clearly, and laid out His terms. The apostles understood it unequivocally. While audiences have always differed, the Gospel has never changed.

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith..."

“But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”

— Acts 15:7-9, 11

Peter, a Jewish apostle taught firsthand by Jesus, knew precisely why I sit and write this blog two thousand years later. He preached the truth to his audience that day, on behalf of the King of the Kingdom of God, the only one that has ever existed. He made it very clear that the very same Gospel he preached to Jews was the same one he preached to Gentiles, without distinction. Likewise, God saves Jews and Gentiles the same way. Those willing to repent and believe in the Son of God are given saving faith, all by the grace of God.

Let us always preach one Kingdom, one Gospel!

It's God's kingdom, my friends. He alone grants citizenship. The terms are non-negotiable.

Selah.

Perspective On Justification and Salvation

Imagine you did something regrettable and ended up in prison. I'd be willing to bet that the majority of people reading this blog have done something in their life that warranted some jail time (they've just never been caught). For example, if you've ever driven a vehicle while intoxicated or intexticated (texting while driving), the only difference between you and the person in jail is that you either didn't get caught or, fortunately for others, you didn't hurt anyone, and then get caught. How about stealing from the government (fudging your tax returns)? I could go on and on, but this blog entry isn't about condemning anyone, it's about trying to get you to relate to *deserving* a sentence and *being* a prisoner.

In the spiritual realm, all human beings are born "in prison", without any possibility of parole, justly sentenced to die there. And there is no escape, even though man continues to suppose the possibility as a function of his own efforts.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.

— **Romans 5:12**

Let's go back to our opening scenario now. Imagine that tomorrow the police come to your home, tear you off of your couch, place you in handcuffs, and throw you in jail. Your sentence is handed down - life in prison without the possibility of parole. You spend the next ten years behind bars, all hope is lost.

Now, imagine that you receive notice that the judge who put you behind bars has pardoned you (why or how isn't important). Your life sentence was lifted at the moment his gavel came down on the sounding block. Somehow, some way, the penalty for your crime is now considered by

Perspective On Justification and Salvation

society to be paid for. You are flabbergasted because in the ten years you've been in prison, you've acknowledged your guilt and resigned to the fact that it was a fair sentence you had received in the first place. So this new development in your case is simply incredible - it has to be by the grace and mercy of God! And it is.

You become excited beyond belief, imagining all the family contact you've missed and have longed for...all the little things you've missed...you can almost feel the sheets against your skin in the bed at your home...almost taste the fudge ripple ice cream sliding down your throat. The sense of anticipation is euphoric. You keep asking the jailers, "When am I going to be released?"

Days turn into weeks, weeks into months...and still you sit confounded in your prison cell. The envelope containing the notice of pardon is as thin and fragile as rice paper from all the times you've opened it to see if somehow someone's made an awful mistake. The letter inside has suffered numerous wrinkles from your tears having fallen on it, though they have changed from tears of joy to what now can only be described as despair. The letter is signed by the judge, there's no mistake...but there you sit...judicially set free, but in all reality, still in prison. The scene is preposterous, claustrophobic even.

This is analogous to the way some people describe salvation. They propound the idea that salvation consists of a gavel coming down in the supreme court of Heaven and that is it. "Freedom" under this concept of salvation consists of merely a forensic detail, a declaration from a Judge, akin to the good news in the fictitious letter described above. However, the Bible states that true freedom isn't merely a statement made by a judge (e.g., our Judge in Heaven); rather it is a *reality* that one is meant to enjoy for all of eternity. After all, at salvation, we are given eternal life.

To say that salvation is merely a judicial issue is like saying to a prisoner, "The judge has pardoned you, but you are not able to leave the

prison.” In other words, this version of salvation is quite frustrating in that it supposes that while “on paper” you are free, in reality, you aren’t. How is that “being saved”? It isn’t.

Imagine throwing a pardon letter on a corpse and saying, “Get up, walk out of prison, where freedom awaits you!” The problem is that dead things are unable to walk out of prison, or anywhere - heck, they can’t do anything in the way of enjoying freedom. A person must be “*made alive*” in Christ, made capable of walking, if they are to have any hope of actually experiencing their freedom.

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

— 1 Corinthians 15:22

When Paul wrote, “*It was for freedom that Christ set us free*” (Galatians 5:1), he was reminding the Galatians of all that salvation means to a believer. It doesn’t just mean the gavel has come down in Heaven and our Judge has lifted our sentence. Salvation includes *everything* the Bible tells us it does, including that we are made “*new creatures*” (2 Corinthians 5:17), no longer unable to walk out the prison gate. The manner in which God changes us, by grace, far exceeds simply receiving a pardon. Salvation means deliverance from spiritual death (a precondition that precludes a person from actually “being” free because they are actually dead). A saved person is a new person, made alive, able to walk, able to *experience* their newfound freedom.

When God says, “You are justified,” it is a declaration regarding a believer’s righteousness. When He says, “I’ve made you a new creature, alive in Christ,” it is a different statement regarding a believer actually having been literally changed.

To say that salvation is merely receiving a pardon from God is to subtract from God’s gracious work at salvation. If this were true, what are we to

say to the prisoner who's unable to walk out because all they have are the words, "you are free" on official letterhead, but they remain unchanged? "Good luck???"

The term justification is forensic, referring to the proceedings in a court of judicature, and signifies the declaring a person righteous according to law...

*If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous and condemn the wicked (Deuteronomy 25:1). Here it is evident that **to justify the righteous, signifies not to make him righteous but to adjudge him to be so, just as to condemn the wicked is not to make him wicked but to declare him to be so...***

There are then two constituent parts in this justification; there is the pardon of sin and the acceptance of our persons; a removal of guilt and condemnation and a right to life.

— **Charles Spurgeon**

As Spurgeon wrote above, *"to justify the righteous, signifies not to make him righteous but to adjudge him to be so."* A judge's job is to recognize righteousness when he see it, and then declare it. A person standing before his bench either is or isn't righteous already. The judge is merely there to decide the truth, and, strictly speaking, isn't responsible for that person's righteousness. They judge impartially based on what they know about the person.

Maybe the easiest way to understand this is to go all the way back to the Garden of Eden, even before the Fall. Adam and Eve were created righteous. They were not only declared righteous, *they (their persons)* were wholly righteous. It was who they were, their very natures, as people. They were alive to God, experiencing the physical, emotional, and spiritual

blessings of being in perfect fellowship with their Creator.

At the Fall, all of that changed. God warned them, *“from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die [die physically and spiritually]”* (**Genesis 2:17**). When Adam and Eve sinned, their *natures* were changed. In an instant, *they (their persons)* became sinners, having sinful natures in place of the ones they were created with. They lost perfect, personal fellowship with their Creator. They had become unrighteous, so God *declared* them so (the opposite of when God declares a believer justified).

The point is that the Fall in the Garden began with man’s very nature changing. The declaration of unrighteousness by God was a function of this fall, but the declaration is not the fall itself. Likewise, when God heals the wound between Himself and mankind, in order for Him to declare a person righteous (justified), He must change them, their very nature. And He does.

You see, it’s as simple as it sounds, my friends. Man fell, was changed for the worse, and God declared him unrighteous. Our merciful God solved the problem, making a way for us to be reconciled to Him. *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life”* (**John 3:16**) - notice there’s no mention of justification in this verse, only the gift of eternal life, which is something very different. When a person is saved, God changes them, gives them a new nature, makes them righteous again (this time forever), declares them justified, and gives them His own life, eternal life. What was “unzipped” in the Garden, is “zipped” back up through God’s gracious plan for salvation.

Thanks be to God for His grace...all of it! Shame on mankind for meddling with any of it, whether he is adding to or subtracting from His work in saving mankind. God is not only Judge, but He is also the One who is able to change the very nature of fallen man. He isn’t just the One who declares a person justified, He’s also the One who makes a believer righteous in the

first place!

I don't want to attempt to elaborate much more on this, hence my sincerest effort to "keep it simple". I believe, as all of you should, that there are machinations which occur supernaturally at salvation that simply cannot be adequately described, no matter how elegant or detailed the timeline. And I'm happy about this, because it demands the one thing that fallen man cannot rationalize - faith. I prefer faith over any further explanation for fear my head might explode! I love that God says, "Trust Me, when I saved you, I changed you, made you a new creature, made you alive in Christ Jesus, gave you His righteousness, declared you justified, and gave you everlasting life." I thank God that I've had no part in any of this good work in me.

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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

— **Romans 1:16-17**

Repentance: An Issue of Life and Death

Tough love, when received properly, cultivates godly sorrow. Received improperly, it produces ungodly sorrow. There is a vast chasm between the two. While one person is reeling from offending God, the other is focused on self.

At some point prior to his writing the second epistle to the Corinthians, Paul wrote what is known as the “severe letter”. We don’t have it as part of the completed canon of scripture, but we know it existed because of Paul’s allusion to it in the Bible. When he wrote that letter, it caused a stir in the Corinthian church, which, as Paul put it, produced a godly sorrow that led to a godly repentance.

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 now 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, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.

For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation [deliverance], but the sorrow of the world produces death.

— 2 Corinthians 7:8-10

I have written about this topic in the past, trying to capture the difference between the guilty child who says, “I’m sorry” to their wounded sibling and *meaning* it, versus the one that doesn’t, at least not in the righteous sense. An arrogant, self-centered child might mutter the words their parents want to hear, but they are only sorry about being caught. Any modifications to obedience are a function of selfishness. This is very

different than the child who suddenly realizes they have hurt someone they love. Are we, as adults, so very different, I ask???

Godly repentance, which sorrow is certainly a part of, is a gift from God, making it permanent, as well. We cannot recognize the darkness of sin if we are standing in darkness. Man, on his own, cannot manufacture godly repentance from sin! We can only recognize and reject sin if we have the Light of life abiding in us. *"Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life" (John 8:12).* In other words, only a true believer receives the gift of repentance. As scriptures tells us, there are lots of professing "Christians" that do not possess godly repentance because God hasn't given it to them. Their sorrow is fleshly, selfish, and only exists because of the penalty they perceive as a disruption to their current lifestyle, or possibly even eternity.

Consider the person who says they "believe" because they don't want to "go to Hell". They are only focused on the penalty of sin, not the power of it. We humans are born into *both* aspects of sin, which means that we need salvation (deliverance) from both aspects, not merely from its penalty. *"For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive"* (1 Corinthians 15:22). We are all born with fallen natures, spiritually dead. Think about it - a newborn hasn't had time to sin, personally, yet they are in need of a savior. A savior from what, exactly? - a savior from the realm of sin, spiritual death. When that baby grows up, they will need to make a decision about the sin issue and Jesus Christ, the solution. This will be either their introduction to or their rejection of godly repentance concerning sin.

You see, my friends, repentance has much more to do with life and death than it does punishment. The person who repents from sin, itself, is different from the one who repents from punishment alone. The prior represents a true believer's heart, the latter, an unbeliever's.

Practically speaking, everyone hates being punished, right?...but only a person made alive in Christ will truly hate sin (death). This hatred is a gift from God, just like its fruit, repentance. Because every gift from God is perfect, unwavering (James 1:17), a true believer carries this hatred with them forevermore. It is never recanted because God's grace never fails. When a person receives eternal life (John 3:16), they never desire to be dead again, do they??? The very thought of spiritual death is repulsive to them.

I *beg* you not to brush off the previous three paragraphs. They describe what is among the most important considerations any human being can ponder. We are talking about life and death. Let that sink in. We are talking about the realm of each, not just the blessings versus the punishments. We are talking about separate dominions, separate power. Sin/darkness doesn't just carry punishment with it, it carries power (death). Likewise, righteousness/light doesn't just carry blessings, it carries power (life).

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

— 2 Corinthians 5:17

Godly repentance considers the power of sin and hates it. A repentant believer is a person who realizes that sin sometimes gets the best of them, influencing them through its power in the flesh. "*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death*" (Romans 7:24)? Paul hated his flesh because it still influenced him. Even though Jesus Christ has defeated death already (2 Timothy 1:10), it lingers in our bodies, where its power still exists.

Chapter seven in the Book of Romans is a wonderful illustration of a man (Paul) expressing his distaste for the power of sin over his body. He knew, as a true believer, that he was freed from the penalty of sin, but he also knew it still had power over his flesh. His repentance was from the result

of that power getting the best of him, even as his new self despised it. On the one hand, he was a “*new creature*” (2 **Corinthians 5:17**) made “*alive in Christ*” (1 **Corinthians 15:22**), but on the other hand, he still lived with a flesh that was born dead in sin (**Romans 7:24**). Such is the true believer’s plight.

When God, by grace through faith, gives us a repentant heart at salvation, it isn’t simply concerned with the *penalty* of sin. Much more so, it is ever aware of the *power* of sin. “*How shall we who died to sin still live in it*” (**Romans 6:2b**)? This is a rhetorical question from Paul. His point is that it is impossible for a new creature, made alive in Christ, to live in sin. A true believer’s *very nature* has been absolutely changed and placed under the dominion of righteousness forevermore (remember, our new self goes to Heaven while our corruptible bodies go to the grave). This is not some judicial reality that may or may not be realized in time in a true believer, as some function of his free will - that would imply (wrongly) that man has the ability to stop God in His tracks at salvation, to frustrate perfect grace, to say, “Give me Heaven, but let me keep my old nature.”

The Bible speaks dogmatically about the fact that if God changes you, and He does if you are truly saved, then you have been given a *totally new nature* that despises sin, every aspect of it, the penalty, the power, and even its presence. This is why a true believer repents as a way of life, for they cannot even help themselves (1 John 1).

The sin nature’s perspective is always from the vantage point of death, which means it cannot even distinguish its own depravity, for it is in complete darkness. However, the righteous nature’s perspective is always from the vantage point of life, which means it can clearly distinguish such things because it is in the light.

Paul often wrote about these perspectives when dealing with perversions in the churches.

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

— **Romans 6:16-23**

My friends, repentance truly is an issue of life and death. When God saves us, we are delivered from both the penalty and the power of sin. God's grace makes us new, not just by judicial standards, but by our very nature. The new creature is wholly perfected, made righteous, and undefiled. This part of us, being made alive in Christ, hates death and therefore its agent, sin. Nonetheless, the great "paradox" for believers is that we are saddled with the vestiges of sin because we are stuck with this "body of death", our flesh, which loves sin and abides in death.

To understand how God's grace makes a person new is to understand why they repent wholly from sin, not just the penalty of it.

Salvation Is Not a Destination

Salvation is not a destination.

Some might say, "If I'm saved, I get to go to Heaven...I want to be saved, then!" Heaven is a place where believers go, but that is inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. Believers congregate in Heaven after death (or the rapture of the Church) because that's the way God designed it.

Technically, He could say to those entering Heaven, "I've saved you, now go sit on that bump on the log over there next to my other children." I'm being silly, but I hope you get the point.

Heaven is going to be wonderful, but that is *not* why God chose to save us. God's plan for salvation is much, much greater than merely a trip to Heaven. This is one of the reasons why an unbeliever's desire 'not to go to Hell' is terribly insufficient as a reason why God might save them.

The issue with salvation is not 'where a saved person is going', it's 'where a saved person is coming from'. With the wrong perspective, a person might think these are two sides of the same coin. However, that's a dangerous oversimplification. Salvation is not about location, it's about status.

Let me explain using a military analogy.

I can fly a civilian and an Army General in an airplane (although, since I haven't piloted a plane in a while, that may not be advisable - lol) from the state of Massachusetts to the state of Vermont. Before they board my plane, they may have similar thoughts about their trip. They may both desire to leave their current abodes behind in favor of the clean mountain air up north. Their location may change, but when they step off the plane in Vermont, they are *still* going to be a civilian and a General...their status

unchanged. Suppose the civilian represents an unbeliever, and the General a believer - if God were the pilot and Heaven the destination, upon debarkation He'd point to two separate lines, one for the Judgement Seat of Christ for believers (**2 Corinthians 5:10**) and the other for the Great White Throne judgment for unbelievers (**Revelation 20:11**). If the civilian then cried, "But my grandmother told me that this plane goes to Heaven, and if I simply decided to get on it, I'd end up there!" God will let that person know, in no uncertain terms, that their grandmother was wrong, as religious as she was.

Religion often waters down the Gospel to something like, "Get on the 'Jesus plane' before it's too late so you, too, can go to Heaven and spend eternity with your loved ones!" That's a perversion - an incomplete representation of what the good news actually is. It's a misdirection. Unfortunately, there are going to be a lot of people that hear the same words the religious folks in Jesus' day will hear when they "debark the plane":

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 will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS."

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell — and great was its fall.

Salvation Is Not a Destination

— **Matthew 7:21-27**

Salvation must be viewed from the perspective of God's plan for His children's deliverance from the penalty, power, and presence of sin (in that order) to imputed, imparted, and perfected righteousness (in that order). In other words, salvation is really an issue of how God saves us from sin. That's different than assuming that salvation is merely a trip to Heaven (with focus on the avoidance of Hell). The prior requires an unbeliever to address the fact that they are a sinner and in need of a savior. Given the Gospel, they must then humbly accept it as the only way they can ever hope to overcome sin and spiritual death - by God's grace (**Ephesians 2**)... climbing out of that pit some other way is futility.

But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

— **Romans 6:22-23**

The Gospel is our most treasured resource. Believers must guard it with their lives, ensuring that it is never presented as something it isn't. While the result of being saved includes a 'trip to Heaven', the real issue is how one finds themselves aboard that "plane" in the first place. What does that trip entail? What is one leaving behind them? The one who presumes to take their sins, undealt with, on their "trip" will be lost forever. Fear of Hell is insufficient cause for God to save a person; yet, that is the motivation that religions propose as righteous. It's disastrous.

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**

In many ways, salvation is better thought of as "coming from"

somewhere (the slave market of sin) rather than “going to” somewhere (Heaven). The real issue is sin, not the final destination.

I can't wait to get to Heaven - truly. My hope is wonderfully secured in the fullness of Christ, having understood and accepted the truth about my own sinfulness and need for my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, my Redeemer, Who paid the only price acceptable to purchase me from the slave market of sin. Honestly, even now, with no disrespect to Heaven, I could care less where I end up in the eternal estate, as long as it's near my Lord always. I just want to be near Him...to thank Him...to worship Him...to love Him.

Thanks be to God for making that happen. 'Destination Heaven' is going to be magnificent, but to us believers, unfettered access to God's love will be the true destination for our hearts.

The Strangest Wrestling Match Ever!

The referee's open palm slammed onto the rubber mat and the hushed crowd erupted in thunderous applause. The wrestler in the blue uniform (let's call him the "blue wrestler") had finally pinned his opponent after a long fought, agonizing match.

The audience rooting for the young man in the red uniform (the "red wrestler") was cheering so loudly it was hard to think in the small gymnasium.

Wait a minute...what???

Prior to being pinned, the red wrestler had been tossed around a bit, but had proven himself a worthy competitor. Sweat was pouring off of him. Each time he managed to buck his way out from underneath his opponent, the audience would gasp and the red side of the gym would sigh, distraught, but still hopeful their friend/classmate/brother/son would be pinned soon.

Huh?...is this making any sense???

The blue wrestler simply refused to give up. Early on in the match it became apparent to all that the red wrestler didn't stand a chance at pinning his opponent. The blue wrestler was just a superior athlete.

When the referee's hand had signaled the final pin, the clock was dangerously close to running out, hence the elated cries from the red wrestler's fans.

This story doesn't make any sense, does it? Not from an earthly viewpoint - wrestling fans don't cheer when their athlete gets pinned. However, in the

spiritual life, it's just the opposite.

In my little story above, the red wrestler depicts the human flesh. We are all born with one and it is a tenacious little bugger. As unbelievers, we "are" our flesh. It's really arrogant so it refuses to give in to its opponent, namely the Holy Spirit of God. It knows deep down inside it is the inferior competitor, but nonetheless it carries on in its stubbornness. For as long as there's still "time left in the match" (**Hebrews 9:27**) the Holy Spirit never stops trying to "pin" the human flesh, to the benefit of its owner.

The cheering fans are like those of us who are already saved, rooting for the flesh of our loved one to give up the fight and surrender, to be "pinned", to lose.

For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man 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**

You might ask why I chose a wrestling match as an illustration. My answer is because this is precisely how the Bible depicts the process of conversion. While salvation is accomplished by God's grace alone, man struggles with it, sometimes for years before being saved, sometimes until death, incurring eternal punishment.

*And He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem. And someone said to Him, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" And He said to them, "**Strive to enter through the narrow door**; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able."*

— **Luke 13:22-24**

The Greek word translated "strive" is *agonizomai*, which means to struggle,

The Strangest Wrestling Match Ever!

to strive (as in an athletic contest or warfare), to contend, as with an adversary [Strong's Concordance]. Those words were spoken by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and inserted into Holy Scriptures by His Spirit. Let us not underestimate why this particular Greek word was used, as it is the root for the English word "agonize."

While salvation is simply by grace, man wrestles with the difficulty of entering through the narrow gate, of accepting our Lord's demand to deny self, of surrender.

It may be the only time we cheer when someone loses a competition, but we ought to cheer as loudly as the angels, for "*there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents*" (**Luke 15:10b**)!

One of my most consistent prayers is that those I love be "pinned" under the mighty hand of God and that their human flesh be exasperated, overcome. I don't want to celebrate with the world when their flesh succeeds or when the clock runs out and their flesh is still standing, for that means an eternity in the Lake of Fire - "*And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment*" (**Hebrews 9:27**). In this sense, I embrace the idea of a loved one struggling with God on the topic of salvation. For as long as they are engaged in battle, there's always hope.

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?

Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

Man wins when he is “pinned” to the mat. Not the best pep talk to give an aspiring Olympian, but certainly the righteous one to give a spiritually dead person.

Why Don't They "Get It"?

I spent many years in sales and marketing roles for the high-tech industry before transitioning to full-time ministry. During that time, my sales teams were tasked with educating potential customers of the value of our solutions, whatever they were at the time. Over time, we developed a sense of feel for the likelihood of a successful sale not long after the engagement process had begun. It wasn't a bulletproof formula - maybe it's best described as a gut feeling or a hunch. The most efficient sales teams would identify potential very quickly and either hone their focus or cut bait to save themselves a lot of time and aggravation.

Some customers just "got it" right away and life was good! We'd present our solution to the decision-makers and this was all that was required. The typical reason wasn't blind trust in our company, but rather an immediate recognition of a critical need, which our company's products or services could fulfill for them. That was the key, you see. The customer had to *first* understand that they lacked something (sometimes we'd have to reveal this to them also); and *second*, the customer had to see that our company could solve their problem.

On the flip side, some customers just didn't "get it". The frustration was very often that the people we were trying to educate were clinging to a different, often antiquated, perspective that precluded them from understanding the value proposition on the table. This typically meant a longer sale with a higher likelihood of failure because we'd have to dig a little deeper and address the perspective issue first (What good is a solution in the absence of an identified problem?). Some customers just weren't interested in such a dialogue, so we'd part ways. Back at the home office, the sales team would have to explain to management why we couldn't close the deal. We'd express our frustration with the aforementioned roadblocks and management would give us tips on how to

approach the next customer struggling with the same issues.

Again, the key to success was our audience understanding their own problem statement *first*. Once we were all on the same sheet of music, a meaningful dialogue about *solving* said problem could be forged and executed upon.

Every day I run into people with *the* biggest problem statement of all - spiritual death. Sadly, most of them either don't recognize the problem at all or don't see it as a big problem, maybe something they can deal with whenever they have some spare time. UGH!!! Unfortunately, if I can even manage to get some time with them to talk about their issue, the vast majority don't "get it". In the same way I described above, trying to give them the solution to a problem they don't recognize is like trying to sell ice to an Eskimo. I hope you get the point.

In all fairness to the unbelievers I've tried to evangelize, some have actually given me some space to state my case on behalf of Christ. But even then, most lack the *perspective* needed for a fruitful conversation to occur. Out of politeness, and even respect for my own beliefs, I've received a lot of head nods and crooked smiles, but underneath the facade I can see that my audience is just biding time until said politeness wears off and we part ways. What I've learned (hence this blog) is that the issue is the same - people lack perspective and therefore true wisdom. And because of this, I am often faced with a person who shackles me with the constraints of human wisdom and then burdens me with proving to them why the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the solution to their problem, if they even recognize they have one, of course.

I cannot, and will not, argue my case for Christ to an audience who wants me to do so within the constraints of human wisdom! Yet, this is precisely what most unbelievers demand. If I use language beyond their wisdom, transcending their earthly perspective, they count me foolish. The only unbelievers I'm able to have a meaningful conversation with

are the ones who recognize they have a problem that they need real help solving. This is what the Bible calls fertile soil (Matthew 13).

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE."

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.

But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."

— 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Our encouragement is that this issue of people not "getting it" isn't a novel concept. In fact, Paul wrote about it extensively above and elsewhere in his epistles. The simple fact of the matter is that arrogant

mankind will always try to box an evangelist into a conversation that is infinitely limited in scope. That is to say, that since the Gospel of Jesus Christ addresses the supernatural problem statement of spiritual death, the solution cannot be addressed in terms of human wisdom.

In his arrogance, man supposes that he is able to save himself. This was apparently the rich young ruler's issue when he asked Jesus, "*Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life*" (**Luke 18:18**)? You see, man always wants to "do" something without considering a change in perspective first. He supposes that it's just a matter of effort, as is the case with most earthly endeavors. But the Gospel isn't an earthly endeavor at all, it is a Heavenly one; therefore, it must be addressed appropriately.

Human wisdom has never found a way to save a single soul and it never will. The so-called wisest men throughout human history have considered us believers as fools (By the way, the Greek word for "fool" is also translated "moron"). Yet, it is this "foolishness" that God uses to shame the "wise" (**1 Corinthians 1:27**). A change of perspective is what God affords the humble. "*GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE*" (**James 4:6b**). Without this change in perspective, from dependence on human wisdom to dependence on godly wisdom, a person is stuck arguing a case from a position of utter futility.

Our job, as evangelists, is to avoid the trap of arguing from a dead man's perspective. We must present our case for Christ from a position of being alive in Christ and in possession of godly wisdom.

No matter what kind of proof man desires, no matter how much human wisdom he seeks to possess, he'll never find salvation any other way than in what he considers "foolishness" in his flesh - the Cross. Until man "gets it", he'll never listen.

HUMILITY VERSUS ARROGANCE

Jesus said, “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (**Matthew 23:12**). A humble person is open to receiving God’s grace; an arrogant person is not. A humble person brings glory to God; an arrogant person glorifies self. A humble esteems others as more important than self; an arrogant is preoccupied with self-esteem.

The primary difference between humility and arrogance is quite simple: living for others versus living for self, respectively. It’s so simple that Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits” (**Matthew 7:20**). His apostle, the “apostle of love”, John, wrote similarly.

If we say that 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 His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

— **1 John 1:6-8**

One might argue that the litmus test for humility is found in Paul’s words to the church at Philippi.

*Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, **but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves**; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.*

— **Philippians 2:3-4**

*When pride comes, then comes dishonor,
But with the humble is wisdom.*

— **Proverbs 11:2**

Humility will always bear fruit that glorifies God. We may rightly conclude, even in our own lives, that a good, long look in the spiritual mirror will reveal all that God desires for us to know at any given point in time.

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

— James 1:5-8

Humility is a choice, as is arrogance.

Therefore I urge you, 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. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

— Romans 12:1-3

But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE."

— James 4:6

God and His Artists

I think one of the great blessings about living during the Exodus generation would've been to witness the building of the Tabernacle. From the gold overlaid table of showbread, to the magnificent blue, scarlet, and purple linen curtains and veil, to the incredibly fashioned bronze altar, and so on, this Tabernacle was truly grand. We should never make the mistake of comparing it to some of the things we might see in modern society. For full effect, we must imagine its glory in the midst of a desert, the estate of God's people at the time. They were delivered from Egypt, but the promised land was yet a ways away.

One might ask how God went about commissioning the building of the Tabernacle and all of its intricate, wondrous components. Did He will it so and then it simply appeared? Nope. Did He have Moses build it himself, akin to Noah's good labor? Nope. Well, what did He do then? The answer is that He created artists. It was those artists who made the Tabernacle for Him, to His glory.

Contrary to the average artist's viewpoint today, God creates art, man doesn't (allow me to clarify). More specifically, God creates artists, which in turn make art. You see, none of this is even possible without God. Unfortunately, most artists I've ever met or read about take all the credit for themselves, seeking glory when they sign their name to their art. Instead of thanking God for their abilities, they thank their fans for idolizing them.

The Bible speaks frequently of beautiful things. As God's creatures, we must accept the simple fact that even the *ability* to appreciate beauty is a blessing from God. The old adage, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" can only hold true if God gives a person the "eye" to see it.

God didn't create art to separate people; rather, He created it to unify them, to give them something to marvel at together, that is, His creation.

Consider the world we live in, the nature we enjoy, the blue skies and the green earth. These things are gifts we can all enjoy, and so it was meant to be. Conversely, ungodly artists use art to feed their flesh, seeking creature credit and elevation among their peers. How vile.

Like everything good in this world, art has been hijacked. Instead of it being something we can all enjoy, it has become one of *the* most contentious, pretentious, ungodly industries humanity has ever known. Art has become so perverted that it's difficult for the average person to even comprehend what today's art scene highly esteems. I'm convinced that certain forms of art are nothing more than fabricated constructs designed purposely, and specifically, to cause division (reminds me a little of the *Emperor's New Clothes* story). And, as part of this scheme, when a person disagrees, the so-called artistic elite, the "creative" types, cast them off as incapable of appreciating "true" beauty. Yet they are the ones who are actually deceived.

*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

The simple fact is that God created both art and artists. And when I use this language, I mean *true* art, not that manufactured stuff meant to drive up sales and/or make the "non-elite" feel inferior, as if they're missing a gene or something. And for the record, I'm *not* saying that God has created every human with the exact same artistic abilities. I'm just trying to make a distinction between those whom God has commissioned to create art that brings glory to Him and those who "create" art to bring glory to

themselves...are the latter even artists???

Maybe you didn't even realize that the Bible speaks about God creating artists??? Well, let's go back to the Tabernacle, where we began this blog entry.

Moreover you shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twisted linen and blue and purple and scarlet material; you shall make them with cherubim, the work of a skillful workman.

— Exodus 26:1

Then Moses said to the sons of Israel, "See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah.

And He has filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding and in knowledge and in all craftsmanship; to make designs for working in gold and in silver and in bronze, and in the cutting of stones for settings and in the carving of wood, so as to perform in every inventive work.

He also has put in his heart to teach, both he and Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. He has filled them with skill to perform every work of an engraver and of a designer and of an embroiderer, in blue and in purple and in scarlet material, and in fine linen, and of a weaver, as performers of every work and makers of designs."

— Exodus 35:30-35

All the skillful men among those who were performing the work made the tabernacle with ten curtains; of fine twisted linen and blue and purple and scarlet material, with cherubim, the work of a skillful workman, Bezalel made them.

— Exodus 36:8

Of course, the above passages of Holy Scripture are a mere sampling of the abundance of evidence that God creates artists. His artists make beautiful things to His glory. If man's flesh would only keep it that simple, maybe we'd all be able to enjoy a little more unity in this world. But that's clearly not the case, for art has been perverted, abused for the advancement of creature credit. No longer is it considered a means of glorifying God; rather, it is a primary means of glorifying man. Just another case of man sanctifying himself, for himself, by himself, because of himself.

Sanctification is a work of God, not man, just like true art. God's work is beautiful, just like His art. The problem is that beauty can be corrupted, as we see with Satan. "Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor" (Ezekiel 28:17). The human flesh is no different - it seizes beauty as its own, as if the author of it.

*But now, O LORD, You are our Father,
We are the clay, and You our potter;
And all of us are the work of Your hand.*

— Isaiah 64:8

If you're an artist, or you know one, do not be offended by any of this. I'm merely highlighting what the Bible states. To the offended, I say, take a look at what this world calls "art" nowadays - music that tramples just about every Biblical tenet revealed, be it sexual, anti-authority-oriented, or whatever - it's garbage. Same with Hollywood - the line between ungodliness and mainstream entertainment has been blurred to essentially nothing.

Today's "art" fuels ungodliness.

Art has become a painful reality and it breaks my heart. I'll admit, I'm not

the most artistic person on this planet (God had other plans), but I'm aware enough of the ridiculousness that surrounds me, as are most of you reading this blog, I'm sure.

Certain "art" may be pretty, even attractive to the flesh, but it isn't beautiful, at least not by God's definition and purpose for beauty, if He isn't glorified.

If you show me something that you've made and then proceed to give glory to God, even the least attractive thing will be beautiful to me, at least in some way. That's art that unifies two or more people under God. That's that kind of art we can all enjoy - no "suffering artist", no creature credit, only beauty.

God Doesn't Answer To Man

"And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, 'To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.'"

— Revelation 5:13

By the looks of things, even in the so-called Christian ranks, people seem to believe that God is somehow accountable to man's demands. Man consistently puts the glorious God of the Universe on trial as if He were approachable as a peer. Such is the natural progression in a world that has systematically pressed the Lord down to its own level through disobedience and lack of authority-orientation. We see reflections of this phenomenon in every divine institution, be it parental authority being usurped by empowered children (ref. **Ephesians 6:1**), or governmental authority wrested by dishonorable citizens (ref. **Romans 13:1**). What most people fail to see is that all of this is a symptom of one simple fact.

Mankind has forgotten that God is not required to answer to him. Man answers to God.

Man is so used to subverting the authorities in his life that his perversion has spilled over into, and eroded, the pristine glory of God (I'm speaking in practical terms, for God's glory is never diminished). Let that sink in...the pristine glory of God. If you read your Bible from *God's* perspective, you'll conclude that the very reason for *everything* exists in that very phrase. It's why God created mankind, and the angels, even - to bring glory to Himself.

This world is filled with people who are fully intent on diverting God's glory to themselves. Look around. What do you see? I see things very

clearly - a bunch of self-absorbed creatures fighting over the glory of man. The issue isn't who wins *that* battle, as the world proposes; the issue is that most have lost sight of the glory of God, and to do so is to forget why we are even here on earth! While man is busy beating each other up, he is disregarding the One whom he ought really fear (**Luke 12:5**), the One whose impeccable glory will be the only thing left standing after the infighting ceases among His creatures. I hope you realize that through all the beauty and ugliness - things which man lays claim to have manufactured for himself - it is the Lord God who intends to use history to reveal His glory. Remember that. Everything that has ever happened or will happen in this world is something that God ordained. And in the end, He alone will be glorified. *"Let them praise the name of the LORD, for His name alone is exalted; His glory is above earth and heaven"* (**Psalms 148:13**).

When we lose sight of why we are here, nothing makes sense anymore. The temptation is to do so, though, because the flesh demands answers but doesn't receive them. Frankly, God's not always willing to give them to us. That's not some divine oversight; it's purposeful. It demands the one thing that sets us apart from the lost in this world - *faith*. *"And without faith it is impossible to please Him"* (**Hebrews 11:6a**).

True faith glorifies God.

We reveal our lack of faith when we put human viewpoint demands on our Lord. We don't have the right. A byproduct of doing so is a litany of insecurities, doubts, and sins. The easiest way to fall off track is to forget why we are here. Agreed? When we allow that to happen, we begin questioning the very foundation on which we stand, namely, *"the Rock"* (**1 Corinthians 10:4**). Who are we to make human viewpoint demands???

So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, 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? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

— Romans 9:18-24

The loftiest goal of mankind is to glorify God. It's why we were created. Even the forgiveness of our sins is not meant to elevate our self-esteem, but rather to glorify Him. "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake" (1 John 2:12). The Gospel exists to the glory of God. "I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another" (Isaiah 42:8).

If we can agree to all of the above, then let us consider the following question that seems to personify mankind's attitude towards God nowadays. What makes man think he has the right to hold the Holy God of the Universe accountable to himself? What makes him think that God owes him anything at all? Why is he not spending his time learning how to bring glory to God rather than to self, or his idols?

We can often most easily answer the above questions with a few more. I encourage you to ask the following questions to yourself regarding each and every moment of each and every day that God gives you to live in His purpose.

- **Is what I'm doing glorifying God?**
- **Is what I'm doing honorable in God's eyes? Will it honor Him, personally?**
- **Is what I'm doing reflecting God's character? In other words, is it**

good?

- **Is what I'm doing an expression of my gratitude towards God? Am I praising Him?**
- **Is what I'm doing Christlike? Would Jesus do what I'm doing if He were me?**

Are these really difficult questions for any believer to answer? They are not. Our answers reveal our hearts. The truth becomes inescapable. Maybe this is why so many professing Christians avoid this line of questioning altogether. They'd rather question God (maybe even ignore Him), challenge His sovereign right to do as He wills, and discredit the glory of God by stealing some for themselves along the way.

May we never lose sight of why God has created us and why we are still here on earth.

"Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

— 1 Corinthians 10:31

I'm Proud of You

*A false balance is an abomination to the LORD,
But a just weight is His delight.
When pride comes, then comes dishonor,
But with the humble is wisdom.
The integrity of the upright will guide them,
But the crookedness of the treacherous will destroy them.*

— Proverbs 11:1-3

A “*false balance*” is a bent scale of values (v1). Whenever I hear the words, “I’m proud of you!”, I contemplate the context of the situation. I’ve heard it a lot beside fields of sport as well as in academic arenas. If it’s me saying those words to one of my two sons or my daughter-in-law, I really think about not just my own heart’s desire in the moment, but also how they might receive such an expression. I know how much those words can mean to children, so I long to say them. However, I won’t say them if I discern they might actually be a cause for stumbling...as v3 says, “*the crookedness of the treacherous will destroy them*”. What father wants to contribute to the destruction of his own kids??? Not this one. May integrity be my guide.

Not surprisingly, the world touts pride as the hallmark of achievement...as if to say, “Strive until you can look yourself in the mirror and say, ‘I’m proud of myself’...or at least until someone else says they’re proud of you.” This is the acceptable dynamic in our culture. In a sense, without pride, some lack a sense of self-worth. Sadly, self-pride is as brittle as glass because it isn’t forged in Christ.

In the most fundamental of terms, the only boasting that brings glory to God is that which attributes its cause to Him.

On behalf of such a man I will boast [Paul speaking about who / what he

was by the grace of God]; *but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.*

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me — to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.

And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

— 2 Corinthians 12:5-9

So, the question is: where does this leave expressions like, “I’m so proud of you!”? It’s an interesting thing to ponder, indeed, because so many of us have adopted the expression as acceptable without considering our scale of values. When we say these words, are we saying, “You are great” only, or are we saying, “You are great as a result of God’s grace”? Are we encouraging our children to adopt a viewpoint of themselves such that their own self-esteem is based on what we, and others, think of them? Or are we teaching them our Lord’s heart - that pride in self is an abomination?

Some of you might be taking offense, and that’s a good thing because the Spirit’s just trying to make your way straight. My job is often simply to present the ‘scene’ and let you, *“work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12)* - with the Spirit’s guidance, of course. *“The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverted mouth, I [Wisdom] hate” (Proverbs 8:13).*

The term “pride” is a slippery slope. On one hand, it seems benign, a mere

expression of love from parent to child, for example. On the other hand, it's literally the source of every fall recorded in scripture! Besides this evidence, the Bible plainly states that God hates it!

Scripture tells us that pride is an abomination to God. That's a strong statement. If pride were a BBQ, and boasting the aroma, we'd have to ensure that we aren't cooking self-assertion to perfection and boasting about how good it smells.

The only place where any form of pride (e.g.: boasting) is allowed in scripture is when God's grace is evident in an otherwise wretched person. *"But by the grace of God I am what I am"* (1 Corinthians 15:10). We are encouraged to boast about God's grace when we see its result in someone else. The principle is that we aren't to assert man's self as the cause for boasting, rather God's good work in them. How many I'm-proud-of-yous expressed bring glory to God?

Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction.

— 2 Corinthians 7:4

Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.

— 2 Corinthians 8:24

For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another.

— Galatians 6:3-4

My greatest fear regarding this topic is that the subtleties surrounding pride go unnoticed in our souls...like spiritual cancer...and that the

**seemingly “kindhearted, encouraging” words, “I’m proud of you”,
deceptively set a course that leads away from grace. As the Bible states,
“For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34).
We must “examine [our] own work” (Galatians 6:4), lest we contribute to
the delinquency of our own children, even!**

*But HE WHO BOASTS IS TO BOAST IN THE LORD. For it is not he
who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends.*

— 2 Corinthians 10:17-18

Trying To Extract a Little Leaven

Leaven

1a: a substance (as yeast) used to produce fermentation in dough or a liquid;

1b: a material (as baking powder) used to produce a gas that lightens dough or batter

2: something that modifies or lightens

— *Merriam-Webster.com*

I recall the first time I read of leaven in the Bible and was like, “Huh? What’s leaven?” Like anything in scripture, there’s always a context that we must understand before we can gather the fullness of its meaning. When Jesus, for example, used the term, it would’ve resonated immediately with His contemporaries. *“He spoke another parable to them, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened’”* (**Matthew 13:33**). Leaven has the ability to infuse itself, not just the way salt and sugar might physically mix in a bowl and remain chemically unchanged, but rather the way salt dissolves into water, splitting into separate sodium and chloride atoms. In other words, leaven actually invokes several complex chemical reactions that permanently change the dough.

You cannot “un-leaven” dough.

If you want a loaf of bread that is unleavened, you’d better begin with a brand new loaf rather than trying to extract the leaven from a lump of leavened dough.

In the Bible, leaven is often used to describe the infusion of evil into something good. Like yeast (a type of leaven), evil feeds off of the intrinsic nature of its host. In the spiritual sense, evil propagates as it feeds off of the

flesh, figuratively speaking. The flesh is puffed up over time the way bread rises with leaven in it. Once it rises to a certain height, it is baked as it is, creating a finished loaf that is analogous to a heart that has been hardened (e.g., Pharaoh's heart in **Exodus 8:32**). Only God, with His great mercy towards man, is able to "un-leaven" that which man cannot. It's His sovereign choice.

So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH."

So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, 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? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

— **Romans 9:16-24**

How can something so small, microscopic, even, create such a change in something else? The same could be asked about evil in man. We may not possess the apparatus to trace the entire process as it transpires, but we know, by faith, that it happens. We are able to witness the end results, too,

in ourselves and often in others as well. The leaven analogy is applicable to many situations in life, where evil of myriad sorts infects our souls. A perfect example of this is regarding our conclusions about Biblical principles or teachings, often called out as “doctrines”. What should we do when we discover that our doctrines have been leavened? What if the Gospel, itself, the foundation of all other doctrines, has been leavened?

If the Gospel is leavened in your soul, even in the slightest way, such that you haven't the fullness of it, as expressed by Jesus and His disciples, and you've since “cooked” a whole loaf of doctrines based on that leavened “dough”, then what say you of the individual slices of bread you may carve off of that loaf? If this be the case, what should you do? If you're humble, you start over. I've done it. I personally removed over 1,300 hours of lessons from the ministry website because “a little leaven had leavened the whole lump of dough”. If I can do it, as a pastor, so can you. Courage is nothing more than applied faith. By grace, faith is given to the humble (**James 4:6**).

Arrogance will cling to the former, leavened loaf of bread, considering it partially worthy somehow. And while that's an understandable reaction, it is a potentially crippling one, as scripture describes. A lesser arrogance may even try to extract the leaven from the already cooked bread, which is futility.

With the rise of advanced communications technologies, Satan has the Christian ranks distracted, even fighting amongst themselves, competing over the so-called “progress” of doctrines upon doctrines. Satan has rewarded them with small fortunes, selling books, sermons, and speaking engagements. Meanwhile, the Gospel has been shoved into a corner, receding into darkness in the name of “progress”. Instead of questioning their own understanding of the Gospel, they press on, ad nauseam, in the pursuit of greater knowledge and wisdom. So they go the way of Pharisees, Scribes, and Gnostics of old...slicing up loaves of leavened bread and feeding the masses tainted doctrines. The people are lazy, so they accept

their meals, their support often commensurate with the amount of leaven present.

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 to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

— **2 Timothy 4:3-5**

If the loaf is leavened, then throw it out! If you see any leaven, especially in your gospel, then start over...and do it quickly. For some, this means dusting off the Gospel, heading back to the New Testament books bearing the name (**Matthew, Mark, Luke, John**), to see if their version of it has strayed off course. It may subsequently mean reevaluating all doctrines they've "sliced off" of a leavened loaf. It's a humbling experience, trust me. If that means you, please know that you are not alone, for even Paul had to go through this. And if you know anything about him, he never proposed to have everything ironed out - ever humble to the prospect of being readjusted by God.

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

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, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 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; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: 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. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I 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. 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.

— **Philippians 3**

Trying To Extract a Little Leaven

Beware of leavened bread. Pray for the discernment to see it. Remain humble when you do discover it and God will grant you the faith to address it. If that means throwing out an already-baked loaf of bread, then so be it - step out with confidence. Better to digest something pure and simple than continue to eat something unhealthy. And don't waste your time and energy trying to "un-leaven" your doctrines, for that is futility. Have the courage to start over again. Who's all this about, anyways???

INDIVIDUALITY

God has created each of us just the way He intended. He has never made a single mistake, nor has He any regrets. Individuality is rightly a part of life, therefore we ought to embrace it.

*For You formed my inward parts;
You wove me in my mother's womb.
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;
Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were ordained for me,
When as yet there was not one of them.*

— Psalms 139:13-16

As wonderful as individuality is, we mustn't ever translate God's good intention into something it isn't meant to be. We should never envy others to the point where we resent the One who created us. We also should understand that God has made each of us with our own strengths and weaknesses.

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in

INDIVIDUALITY

regard to another. For each one will bear his own load.

— Galatians 6:1-5

One of the wisest men to ever live, Solomon, had this to say about individuals forming unity in the faith.

Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him.

A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

— Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

We ought to simultaneously embrace our own individuality while celebrating that found in others, for unified we make a worthy foe to our enemies.

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

— Romans 12:4-8

I Can't "Be" Everything To Everyone

Ugh.

"God, it's me again."

"Yes, my son?"

"Am I doing enough?...I mean, when I look in the mirror, there are times when I just flat out pale in comparison to what Your Word tells me You desire me to be, to Your glory."

"Son, I'm well aware of who and what you are. I ordained your life knowing long before you were even born that you'd have these struggles, this inner turmoil, this *wrestling* match with your flesh."

"So what should I do, then, Dad?"

"Relax...you're not my only child. There are many others laboring beside you to My glory."

I read the Bible a lot, but not enough. I love others a lot, but not enough. I care about others, people I don't even know, but not enough. It never seems like it's enough...well, at least not to me, anyways. So most days are filled with the basic realization that I'm a failure. And it's true - I fail every day in just about every possible way. Heck, some of the thoughts I have are so foreign to my new nature that I have to stop and ask myself, "Now where in the world did *that* thought come from?!!!" Ugh.

A long time ago, I resigned to the fact that nothing I ever do will be perfect, for one particular reason.

I Can't "Be" Everything To Everyone

I'm not perfect.

Phew! What a blessing it is to be reminded of this. Seriously. My heart *wants* to be perfect, for Christ's sake, not even my own, strictly speaking. But ironically, it's Christ, Himself, the living Word, who stands before me as the perfect standard, reminding me that I'll never be just like Him...at least not in this life. However, the same Book that convicts me of my perceived shortcomings is the same one that assures me that it's Christ's righteousness my Father sees in me. Thank God!!!

If I can't be perfect, like Christ, then what *can* I be for Him? Can I be good enough?...is that even the right question to be asking? With the Spirit's help, I can do good, though never perfectly, it seems. Heck, I'm so flawed that I need Him to intercede for me when I pray to my Father in Heaven!

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

— **Romans 8:26-27**

I'm so weak I can't even *pray* without mucking it up somehow! It's true. And I'm glad.

Huh?

"That's right, I'm *glad*, Dad...I'm *glad* I'm weak and pathetic and needy... I'm *glad* I'm not perfect...I'm *glad* I can't do this without someone who *is* perfect helping me!"

"Good, my son...I'm glad you see it that way. Just look at how I used my other son, Paul, and be encouraged."

*And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." **Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.** Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*

— 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

"Do you love Me, my son?"

"Abba, Father...You know I do!"

"Then remember the Word that I've given you."

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.

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED."

I Can't "Be" Everything To Everyone

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

— **Romans 8:28-39**

“But Dad, there are so many commands, so many things that I haven’t been able to even address in life. I seem so caught up in being a pastor, a husband, a father, a laborer, a friend...and yet, there’s so much more to do on earth...so many soils to cultivate! It just seems futile sometimes...overwhelming.”

“My son, not even the Perfect One, the ‘*Son of Man*’, Jesus Christ, was able to *be* everything to everyone in the most practical sense. You are a husband, but He was never married, nor did He have any children in His humanity. My beloved Paul was the same. Some of My commands never even applied to them, personally. Do you think I’m any less satisfied with their lives because of such things? May it never be!”

“So what You’re saying, Father, is that even though I realize there are a lot of things You desire to be done, to Your glory, I cannot assume responsibility for them all. What You’re saying is that I need to trust that I can’t *be* everything to everyone...and that You’re totally fine with that. Right?”

“Yes, my son, you are correct. In fact, it isn’t my will that you ever feel ashamed of who you are in Christ. I want you to focus on the things that you *can* be by grace. I want you to be encouraged, not discouraged. You’re imperfect, we both know this, but your love is blossoming and I, and even My angels, see you bearing good fruit. For now, that is all I can ask of you. You’ll be perfected soon enough; I’ve already predestined

you to that end. Be patient, son, and allow My Word to comfort you.”

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

— Philippians 4:6-8

“Thanks, Dad. I love you.”

“You’re welcome. Anytime. I loved you first (wink wink).”

"It's OK, I was born this way!"

We are all born sinners. If you don't believe that, then you don't believe the Bible and you may spurn the remainder of this blog.

If, however, you do believe the Bible is the infallible, inspired Word of God, then listen up! This blog may require you to concentrate more than normal. Why? I propose it's because the world we live in has so perverted the truth about sinners that we've all but given every sin a "free pass", citing the mantra, "It's OK, I was born this way."

First, every person is created by the hand of God. Second, it's also true that God created all of us knowing that we'd be sinners. So? Isn't that His sovereign right to do so? Scripture says it is.

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, 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? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

— Romans 9:19-24

The person who doesn't fear God and keep His commandments will challenge His sovereign right to both create them in sin and then judge them. This is futility, of course, but nonetheless, it happens. Some people argue that since God created them "this way", they are somehow exempt from responsibility for sinning. If this were true, the Bible is worthless and God is unjust.

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

— Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

By the way, you don't get to change the Bible just because modern thinking has changed regarding certain sins. It doesn't matter what the so-called progressive churches have to say about it; the Word, the mind of Christ, has never changed.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace.

— Hebrews 13:8-9a

The truth, as Holy Scripture reveals it, is that our Creator has indeed created us as sinners. He also claims exclusive rights to judging us for our sins. These are the irrefutable facts that must be reconciled by every sinner. Now, before we get to the magnificent, "indescribable" solution, let's consider how arrogance responds to these two facts.

The truly arrogant will say, "If there is a God and He created me this way, then it's His fault that I am a sinner; therefore, I refuse to take responsibility for myself. I blame God for making it impossible for me to live up to His standards; therefore, I denounce His judgement altogether." Since this person fails to take responsibility for their sins, they effectively never arrive at *the* most important conclusion ever, which is that they *need* a savior. The fact that the same God that they have rejected has also offered them a solution through Jesus Christ becomes inconsequential, as the internal "conversation" never gets that far.

Here's an example to help amplify the issue. Suppose you have a five-year-old daughter and a drunk driver kills her. In court, the driver's defense attorney says, "Well, God made my client an alcoholic, so they can't be held accountable for this sin." What would you have to say in that

"It's OK, I was born this way!"

moment? Isn't it clear that this person ought to be held accountable since they knew what they were doing was wrong? Of course.

Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

— **James 4:17**

Well, if you claim to believe the Bible, and the Bible says something is wrong, then how is it any different than the courtroom example above? It isn't, unless you want to throw out certain parts of the Bible, which relegates the whole thing untrustworthy and your faith worthless. So, you're either "in" or "out" when it comes to the Bible - there's no "negotiated" in-between based on societal norms and standards. Sin is sin. Period. However, as I'm about to describe, the issue isn't even about specific sins...it's about the **arrogant sinner**.

The conversations about this or that sin are irrelevant! The homosexual says, "I was born this way, so how can this possibly be wrong?" All I can say to that person is what the Bible says - homosexual acts are sins. I'm not judging that sin, for that is God's duty but, as a Bible teacher, I don't have the right to play God and disregard sins that are plainly listed in the Bible. I've actually been publicly called a "narrow-minded Nazi" because I simply presented what the Bible has to say about homosexuality.

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

— **Romans 1:26-27**

Here's what I've learned on this oh-so-sensitive subject. Again, this might take a little concentration, so I encourage you to focus hard now. What is

the *real* issue here? Is the core conflict between the offended person and the Bible teacher, or the offended and the Bible? Is the issue the sin, or the sinner? Well, the Bible answers this.

For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

— 1 Thessalonians 4:7-8

Any offense taken with the Bible teacher is merely a calculated misdirection - a sinner's attempt to deflect personal responsibility for sinning. In other words, the intent is to discredit the messenger since the alternative is to attack the Word of God directly. This has become increasingly commonplace as other so-called "messengers" (false teachers) have compromised the Bible while clinging to the "Christian" title, effectively "greasing the skids" for assaults on God's truly anointed communicators. However, opposition to the truth never changes the truth. "*For we can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth*" (2 Corinthians 13:8).

The *real* issue is whether or not a person believes the Bible is the infallible, inspired Word of God. If they claim they do, then they must accept the sins as they are listed in the Bible. They must also accept that their Creator actually created them "in sin". They must then reconcile these two facts. When they do, they will arrive at a natural impasse. The only solution is supernatural. This is the beauty of the "good news"...and it's the ONLY way a person will ever be able to reconcile that God is both just and righteous in judging sin *and* loving in providing a solution.

You see, all of this misdirection is part of Satan's plan to distract us from the real issue, that is, *man's need for a Savior - Jesus Christ, to be exact. If Satan can get someone to systematically dismiss personal responsibility for their own sins, something the Bible teaches profusely, citing the*

"It's OK, I was born this way!"

socially acceptable excuse, "I was born this way", then that person may never be humbled to the point of realizing their own depravity. They'll just blame God; or, even worse, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalms 14:1).

So, the next time someone sins and attempts to justify it to you with the likes of, "It's OK, I was born this way", respond with, "So what? We're all born sinners. Does that somehow make your sinning acceptable to your Creator? What's your point? Do you have a problem with the Bible? Do you consider yourself a "Christian"?...because a title means nothing. If you don't accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God, why not just say it and be done with it? Are you on one hand presenting yourself as one thing, yet on the other, living as someone you're obviously not - a believer in the Holy Scriptures?"

My friends, people need to see the big-picture...beginning with YOU! Whether the sin is drunkenness, sensuality, carousing, idolatry, homosexuality, etc., it doesn't really matter (strictly speaking). We're *all* sinners! What matters is that people don't lose their sense of *personal responsibility* for their own sins. Society's never going to help us in this cause, coming up with God-knows-how-many new "disorders" and excuses for sin. We must see it all as truth, calling a spade a spade, while never judging a soul, for that is God's work.

Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even 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 5:11-13

People Are People Are People

*That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done is that which will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun.*

— Ecclesiastes 1:9

Upon my return from our recent missionary trip to India, multiple people asked me the same question, “Was this a life-changing event for you, or what?” My answer, though maybe unexpected, was “no”. Now before you make any wrong assumptions, like, “this man’s constitution is impermeable” or “his eyes and heart must have been closed for a week”, please hear me out. If anything, my heart was splayed out all the more, more open as a function of the experience itself. And as was the case with Solomon’s wisdom above, I realized that no matter where a person travels in this world, whether it’s next door to a neighbor’s or literally to the opposite side of God’s green earth, people are people are people.

Every person I have ever met is a walking dichotomy. What I mean to say is that the more I understand the mind of Christ, the Word of God (as Wisdom will have it - ala Proverbs 1), the more clearly I am able to witness the inner struggles of man, including my own, of course. For starters, every person, whether saved or not, has a flesh.

*As it is written,
“THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;
THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,
THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;
ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME
USELESS;
THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,
THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.”*

— Romans 3:10-12

This is not to mar my trip to India with some new realization about the depravity of man (the trip itself was tremendously fruitful in many ways - praise be to God!). I'm merely stating that while I was there, I wasn't blind to the full spectrum of mankind and the evidence of his oft-dueling natures, the old and the new. While no one necessarily rejoices in having to deal with the ungodly flesh of men, there is light in Holy Scripture that allows us to discern it when we see it.

But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light.

— Ephesians 5:13

The idea of something being "*exposed*" implies a real experience. In some cases it's merely a change of perspective, something that can happen by simply reading the Bible and having the Spirit reveal something new to you. However, in other cases, said experience is a function of physical circumstances.

When you live on one side of the planet, it's impossible to fully experience the presence of someone on the opposite side. Given the fact that man is a complex creature, we might conclude that pictures, emails, and even phone calls pale in comparison to face-to-face interactions. We may theorize that a person is this or that, and through faith we might believe it. However, face-to-face contact enhances that which we believe to be true, like salt adds flavor to food.

Firsthand exposure is often the basis of a truly enlightening experience. As most of you will attest, there's no substitute for experience. In the case of a disciple like myself, a missionary trip results in increased "*exposure*", and therefore, light. This light produces a certain kind of wisdom...while it's not necessarily new, it's extremely valuable because

it's weighty.

Affirmation. Yes, that's the right word here.

It's the word I used with my eldest son as we'd chat privately throughout the trip. As I alluded to earlier, it's one thing to know something, it's another to experience it - 'tis why I encourage people to resist ever being overcome with idleness. "*Because of laziness the building decays, and through idleness of hands the house leaks*" (**Ecclesiastes 10:18 - NKJV**). Life is meant to be lived - so go live it! If that statement confounds you, leaving you pirouetting, that just means that you've forgotten your purpose in life. Here, let me help:

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. 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 5:13-16**

Jesus, Himself, encourages us to resist becoming idle, for as the secular analog to **Ecclesiastes 10:18** goes, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop!" "*Let your light shine before men*" is something many of the folks I came into contact with on my trip seemed to understand.

Culturally, I found the Indian believers quite hospitable. I also found them to be gentle, kind, attentive, supportive, and above all, loving (although their expression of said love was sometimes markedly different than in America). (For the record, I'm not just basing my observations on my interactions with my hosts, for I know there was a concentrated amount of such things. We spent a fair amount of time simply traveling, giving us

plenty of time to soak in our surroundings. The list above was apparent even between Indian nationals.)

Now to be fair, I also noticed the same old fleshly tendencies that I am very accustomed to at home, such as partiality, greed, religion, jealousy, and malcontent, to name a few. Was I thrown back or disappointed? May it never be! I wholly *expected* to see such things - that's the point of this blog! The "good" part, which is the value of the experience itself, was being able to see both good and evil manifest in a vastly different set of circumstances. This is what it means to be privy to the "light".

As I teach from my pulpit, the objective is to "see it all as truth...the good, the bad, the ugly" because the truth is *always* better than a lie, even if it's a hard pill to swallow.

My motivation for writing this blog entry is to encourage you. While you may find yourself in a different part of the world someday, just know that if your eyes are opened wide, and your heart is set on seeking truth, you'll see what I see in the end.

People are people are people.

They've been the same since the fall in the Garden of Eden. While dealing with human flesh can be discouraging, overall we can be encouraged as long as our expectations are appropriately set.

The good news is that when God calls you abroad by faith there will always be some who love Jesus the way you do. Concentrations may vary, but you'll always find loving brethren if you look hard enough. For example, I met a lot of people in India whose light seemed to outshine my own, which was truly humbling, frankly. I loved every moment because I found it both refreshing and inspiring, being from one of the areas in America (the northeast) that has been dubbed the least Bible-oriented part of the country. So, in that phrase, "people are people are people", I'm not

just droning on about having to endure human flesh. This isn't a pity party. Included in that catchphrase are a whole lot of people whom I cannot wait to spend eternity with! These are the same people who consistently went out of their way to express their gratitude to me for feeding them the Word of God. Many of them served my son and I tirelessly. Even when we woke up at odd times, we'd have the most delicious coffee waiting for us within minutes. It's the little things that reveal a person's heart...the things they do for others when nobody else is watching, or even awake yet to do so!

I thank God that He showed me His heart through the many servants I met on our trip. For they embodied that which we know to be true.

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees 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 with tongue, but in deed and truth. We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. 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.

This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

— **1 John 3:16-24**

Please, by all means, do *not* just take my word for it. Make a point of experiencing life itself. Enjoin others to do the same. Be encouraged by

each other's faith along the way (**Romans 1:12**). Who cares if we fail each other sometimes - what do we expect, given our flesh??? There's no substitute for experience, especially when it comes to living for others; so, go get it!

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

— **Romans 12:14-18**

If you ask me if a trip to the other side of the planet is a life-changing experience, I'll say "no" ...but I won't want you to walk away at that. There's so much more to life than just so-called "new experiences" in the traditional sense. There's a whole lot of opportunity to have our faith affirmed as we simply live out our lives as unto the Lord. Few things are sweeter than that.

"What Color Are You?"

"What color are you?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" my son responds. He looks down at the skin on his hand and then back up at me with a quizzical look on his face.

"I don't mean your skin color...I mean your personality," I say, laughing.

We had just finished eating dinner; my wife had already gotten up and was puttering around, though still within earshot of the conversation that was about to unfold. I caught a glimpse of her looking over the top of the couch back towards us, eager to engage, but awaiting her son's response.

I like to ask open-ended questions like this to my family. For example, "If you were an animal, what would you be?" and "If someone else were to describe you with one word, what do you think it would be?" Besides being an exercise in introspection, it's fun...well, mostly - LOL. Case in point, the title of this blog entry, "What color are you?"

It's a good question because it forces you to oversimplify "you", as a personality, a character. Interestingly enough, most people associate basic colors with specific emotions. For example, red is typically reserved for aggression, blue for peacefulness, brown for earthy, etc. This affords the game-players a reasonably consistent platform for discussion.

I won't tell you precisely which colors we all chose for ourselves, but suffice to say, as I suspected when I asked the question in the first place, none of us completely agreed with each other's self-assessments. One of us supposed we were one color while the two remaining tried to convince them otherwise, and the two others discussed different shades beyond their original responses, even considering other primary colors being

mixed in (this precipitated a five minute debate over what basic colors made up the color brown - LOL).

Why do I share this? Better yet, why do I pluck at such things, risking the otherwise calm closure to a nice dinner? Because I've always thought that people have a different viewpoint of themselves than others do. While my advice to my sons has always been, dogmatically, "Be yourself, always," it's a good exercise to step back and ponder what we project as "us" to the rest of the world. If you're around people whom you trust will be honest with you, the fruit of the discussion may prove quite valuable, if you're humble.

Here's a perfect example. Unequivocally and resoundingly, I am dubbed "red" by the two other people living under the same roof as me. While I understand why they might say that, I'm a little bummed out because just beneath my "red" exterior is a very soft heart. I sometimes revolt a little when I see how decidedly easy it is for others to suggest my "color", even though I already know what they are going to say before they say it. In all fairness to my family, they do concede that I'm not pure red, hardly, for I have concentrations of green in me the deeper you dig. It's no wonder my favorite color is green - maybe we like the colors we wish to be more of??? I know that the favorite colors of everyone else at the table that day were the ones they thought they were, or at least more of than others proposed.

In any case, my point is twofold. First, the personality that is received by others isn't always the one we think we are projecting (and possibly not the one God sees, for God sees the heart - 1 Samuel 16:7). Second, and most importantly, while little games like this one are fun, at the end of the day, we mustn't forget one simple principle about who we are and whose opinion matters most. I'll let Paul's words explain this second point most succinctly.

But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am

*conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted;
but the one who examines me is the Lord.*

— 1 Corinthians 4:3-4

Earlier in that same letter to the church at Corinth, Paul wrote:

But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one.

— 1 Corinthians 2:15

While the context of **v2:15** is different, the underlying principle of each man standing before the holy, sovereign, righteous Judge of all creation is the same. That is, if one Person is going to set us straight as to what “color” we are, it’s the Lord God. In fact, in all fairness to His omniscience and in light of our own delusions, we must concede that He knows such things better than we do about ourselves! I chuckle when pondering what He must be thinking when we propose certain things to be true about ourselves, things that leave others scratching their heads, wondering if we ever look in the mirror (both literally and figuratively).

If nothing else, such a game as the one I’ve described above might spawn a bit of critical thinking and self-examination, something that most of us could do a lot more of. While we ought never take someone else’s opinion of us as “gold” (only God knows the absolute truth), we might at least *consider* the words of those we trust. I suppose that is what good friends are for, right?

*Faithful are the wounds of a friend,
But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.*

— Proverbs 27:6

I suppose it doesn’t really matter what “color” God reveals that you are,

"What Color Are You?"

for He has chosen to make you that way. The greater tragedy is *not* finding out that your true color is different than you originally thought, but rather not accepting the truth when your Creator reveals it to you.

*I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well.*

— Psalms 139:14

There are enough actors in Hollywood.

Be yourself. Love what God has made, especially as a born-again believer in Christ.

INTEGRITY AND JUDGING

Integrity is the fabric of stability. Without it, there is no holding to a standard that all may measure themselves against. Without integrity, one's scale of values slides from the goodness of objectivity to the potential evil of subjectivity. One of our greatest blessings is that God is immutable - He never changes.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

— **Hebrews 13:8**

This means that if we want to abide in a scale of values that produces stability in our lives, we ought to seek the very mind of Christ (**1 Corinthians 2:16**).

*He who walks in integrity walks securely,
But he who perverts his ways will be found out.*

— **Proverbs 10:9**

*A false balance is an abomination to the LORD,
But a just weight is His delight.
When pride comes, then comes dishonor,
But with the humble is wisdom.
The integrity of the upright will guide them,
But the crookedness of the treacherous will destroy them.*

— **Proverbs 11:1-3**

Integrity to truth means doing what is right, regardless of circumstances. Integrity puts aside partiality, for God is not partial.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were

INTEGRITY AND JUDGING

yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY." If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth.

— **1 Peter 1:14-17**

Functioning in integrity will often mean that you will suffer for doing so. Regardless, it is more important that you suffer for doing what is right than for the alternative.

But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.

— **1 Peter 3:14-17**

Integrity is opposed to lying. In fact, God never lies because He has perfect integrity. The Lord God hates lies. We ought to always tell the truth, no matter the consequences.

*Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD,
But those who deal faithfully are His delight.*

— **Proverbs 12:22**

A Love Letter To My Enemies

You have a name for everything I am; but I've only got one for you.

You call me a dinosaur because the principles I am bound to live by are ancient.

You call me a racist because I disagree with social programs that, in the long run, cripple those you claim to be helping.

You call me a chauvinist because I stand up for the divinely ordained authority structure in the household.

You call me a homophobe because I believe that homosexuality is a sin.

And when you run out of specific names for whoever you think I am, you lump me in with the rest of those who stand up for Biblical values, and you call me a hater.

By the world's standards, I can understand why you would call me these things. In fact, it makes total sense...so much so that I wouldn't expect to be called anything less. In a perverse way, at least you have integrity to that which you believe. I'm not applauding you, but I ask you to hold that thought.

It's fair to say that you and I stand on polar ends of the spectrum when it comes to life itself.

You see, you believe there's life in this life. I don't. (**Matthew 16:25-26**)

You believe there's a way to make your life better if you just focus on self. I don't. (**Matthew 16:24**)

You believe that love is weak, always compromising, accommodating. I don't. (**1 Corinthians 16:13-14**)

How can two people born into the same world end up so polarized? Easy, you were born once and shall die twice. I was born twice and shall die but once. Huh? Let me explain.

Both of us were born in sin, but only I was born again, long after my physical birth. Unless you are saved, you will die physically ("first death") and in your sins ("second death" - **John 8:24**). I will only experience physical death.

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"

— **John 3:4-7**

You see, when I was born again everything changed for me, even my citizenship in this world, "*For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ*" (**Philippians 3:20**). My second birth has placed me in union with the One who saved me from the throes of spiritual death. You are still under the reign of death. I am not. So it makes sense that you think one way and I think another. For while we are physically neighbors, spiritually, we are worlds apart. "*Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come*" (**2 Corinthians 5:17**).

This may sound odd to you, but hear me out. I actually think it's a good thing that you feel the way you do about me, for two reasons. First, it lets

me know that my ambassadorship in Christ is bearing fruit (**2 Corinthians 5:20**). Second, it lets you know that we are vastly different, and what I have, however you perceive it, you cannot have (at least not in your current condition). We are so different, you and I, that my life is offensive to you. I mean, isn't that why you have so many names for me, to discredit who I am??? Indeed. But here's the shocker...

I'm not offended by you. You are offended by me. You hate me, but I love you.

I know you want me to enter into lengthy arguments about why the names you call me are justifiable, but what you're forgetting is that I once walked in your shoes. I know your arguments because I once defended your viewpoint. But here's the thing, you don't have my perspective on things (as a former worldly professor, I know that deep down that upsets you, too). How dare I stand this far from the crowd and exhibit uncommon grace, conviction...and oh, the doozie, love. How dare I, right??? How can someone like me claim love and wear your slanderous names without shame, without retort? As I alluded to earlier, I expect you to be upset with me. I am in Christ, and He is the greatest stumbling block to ever grace the earth.

While you remain agitated, enraged, and poised for battle, I am content, willing to let the very Words of my Lord, Jesus Christ, wage war with you. If my role is anything here, it's simply to present you with said words and resist the urge to engage you (**James 4:7**), the enemy whom I love (**Matthew 5:44**). That's right, I said I love you - sorry if that provokes you even more, it isn't meant to.

I don't want to fight with you, but I invite you to fight with Christ. I believe if you take an honest shot at Him, the One who is full of grace and truth (John 1:14), you will be crushed. I can't do that, nor am I to even try. In fact, I'm not interested, except to see you made like me some day, hopefully.

I pray that your ferocity persists and never fades away. For if the latter happens, I fear that you will have become hard of heart, less passionate, less caring about any of this. That's when my hope for you dims, and I become truly saddened. The fight in you means that you still care enough about things that matter in life. I don't want you to resign. I do hope that at some point in the future, when you're exhausted, you experience something akin to the apostle Paul, who realized his vigor was wholly misplaced. I pray this for you, my enemies.

Call me whatever you'd like, I can bear it - I already have in many ways. If when we clash you are cut cut deep, know that my heart goes out to you, for it is the Word of God that has gashed you, crippled your arguments, relegated you to subjective bantering. It wasn't me, Ed Collins, for I'm just a soldier for Christ (2 Timothy 2:3), wielding a weapon that I couldn't even pick up unless He helped me.

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

— Hebrews 4:12

I don't hate you, even though you may hate me right now. In fact, I love you. Aren't I proving that to you right now by writing this? I mean, I could be writing to my brothers and sisters in Christ, building them up, rallying around their everlasting hope, right? But I'm not, so give me that, will you, lest you be condemned by your own conscience? Part of you hates me for even writing this - I know, I remember, too.

*If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;
For you will heap burning coals on his head,
And the LORD will reward you.*

You keep calling me whatever you need to. If that's your ointment, then so be it. I'll take it, as long as you give me, an honest disciple of Jesus Christ, a smidgen of regard, even if ever so slight. That's all light needs, just a crack in your armor, to shine through to your heart. When you raise your weapon against me, my prayer is that light finds its way through the folds of darkness, for said armor isn't infallible. It's not really a fair fight, but you don't know this yet, do you? I remember. Some day I'm hoping you do and your role is reversed; instead of me standing in awe of what He's chosen to do through me, it's you instead.

Just know that I've heard you, loud and clear. While you have a multitude of names for me, I submit but one for you - **lost**. I'll be praying for you. I love you.

Being Really Honest With God

A few years ago, I had the privilege of leading the congregation from North Christian Church through the Book of Jonah. To date, it has been one of the most enjoyable series I've ever taught. In fact, to the students' great joy, the prep school still keeps the age-appropriate version of the series in rotation. It's a relatively short book in the Bible, but it is chalk full of wonderfully edifying lessons - some concerning blessings while others concerning judgment, all relating somehow to mercy.

If you haven't read the Book of Jonah in a while, I encourage you to do so now (this blog isn't going anywhere). The rest of my writing here will prove much more impactful if you do choose to read it. It'll be worth your time. Trust me.

"Ho hum...I'll just wait right here until my readers finish up with Jonah..."

— me, to myself

OK...you're back? Good. I hope you enjoyed the book. Depending on your personal experiences, your predisposition towards either blessing or judgement, or even your own current mood, your takeaways will differ each time you read the book. That's one of the things I generally love about the Bible - every read reveals something new! Even so, most books elicit common emotions from all of us, regardless of who's reading it.

Jonah never fails to make me ponder honesty and transparency before the Lord. You can say what you want about him, but Jonah doesn't hide his emotions from God. In fact, he puts them on full display, acting out his unholy malcontent. Have you ever done that? Have you ever pouted like Jonah before the Lord? I have. It's silly, but we *are* silly, aren't we???
Indeed.

As you just read (I hope), Jonah, a prophet, ran away from the direct command of God. Yowza! Don't act shocked, my friend, *we* do it *all the time*! If you disagree with me, then you must be reading a different Bible than I am. In any case, I hope we can agree that Jonah's flight from God landed him in the belly of a great fish for three days with plenty of quiet time to contemplate his error. As the story goes, he recovers to the degree where he follows the original command to warn his archenemies, the Ninevites, to repent, lest they endure God's impending judgment. Here's where the story gets really interesting, at least to me (as if it weren't already interesting enough).

In the final chapter of the book, we see Jonah waffling, torn between what he knows is the right thing to do and his contradicting emotions. I think it's fair to say that this last sentence describes the vast majority of Christians. We're all wafflers, aren't we? To help guide you through this passage, I've added comments in brackets.

When God saw their [the Ninevites, Jonah's enemies] 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.

But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. [Jonah's emotions overran his mercy.]

He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. [Jonah's honesty is inspiring. If only we could all be this honest before the Lord always!]

"Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." The LORD said, "Do you have good reason to be

angry?" [The Lord is calling Jonah to the carpet regarding his ungodly drama, saying, "Step back and look at the big-picture here!"]

Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city. So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. [The Lord God proves Himself merciful once again to Jonah, and Jonah is happy about being the receiver of it, though he's still pouting, proving himself partial.]

But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life." [Here we go again with more drama.]

Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" ["Step back!"] And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death." [While Jonah has been open/honest about his feelings before the Lord (which is a very good thing that we all can learn from), he still needs to learn a big lesson about mercy. God preconditions his soul and then closes with divine perspective on mercy.]

Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

— **Jonah 3:10-4:11**

The fact that Jonah seemed to fail miserably isn't the point of my writing this blog entry. In fact, if *we're* honest with ourselves before the Lord, it just means that Jonah is someone we can relate to, personally. The point is that Jonah was at least being up front and honest about his emotions. He wasn't pretending he wasn't angry about the goings on. In fact, he was wearing his emotions on his sleeve.

Even when our emotions are displeasing to the Lord, it is best to be honest about them. If we pretend to be happy when we're angry (because we suppose our facade will somehow please the Lord), or vice versa, we have stymied our own spiritual growth. One of the most debilitating things we can do to ourselves is put on a show for the Lord. *"for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart"* (1 Samuel 16:7). If nothing else, Jonah was really honest about his unhappiness. We can learn a lot from him and how God used his honesty as a platform to teach him mercy.

We'll never learn a thing if we're not *first* really honest with God. What good is any lesson set before us if our perspective is wrong? A house built on sand rather than bedrock will never stand the test of time, will it (ala **Matthew 7:26-27**)? Perspective is everything when it comes to spiritual growth.

We're human. We're flawed. We get angry when we shouldn't. We're happy when maybe we shouldn't be. We let our emotions run wild and we contend with God for trying to reel us back in. This is life - the ebbs and the flows, the ups and the downs. Some days, we sleep in the bow of a ship on rough seas (**Matthew 8:24; Jonah 1:5**), other days we're the ones looking to throw someone overboard (**Jonah 1:15**).

It's not what we feel that's most important before the Lord; rather, it's what is right. The good Lord can and will work with the latter. Wisdom isn't getting better at pretending, it's abiding in humility, being totally openhearted before the Lord. It means being honest about our emotions,

even when we know they're technically awry. Like any good husband, our Great Husband, Jesus Christ, simply wants His Bride to confide in Him, to be vulnerable, even.

In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.

— Acts 24:16

I suppose if Jonah hadn't at least been honest about his emotions to start with, the book written after his name would likely be significantly longer. Might we do well to ponder the same things regarding our own life story?

Character and Integrity

Character: the way someone thinks, feels, and behaves : someone's personality

Integrity: the quality of being honest and fair

— Merriam-Webster

People sometimes say things like, “Oh, that man right there...he’s a man of character and integrity!” And the typical context for such an accolade is the speaker giving someone else their own stamp of approval, as if to say, “You can trust them, for they are who/what they say they are.” A person would be hard-pressed to receive a more admirable proclamation made about them. Furthermore, to be entrusted implies being empowered since the giver is conceding some level of vulnerability to the receiver.

In the purest sense, trust is the fruit of good character and integrity.

If you are agreeable to my presumptions here, then you must be begging the answer to the question, “Well, then, how do I identify a person of character and integrity so that I might trust them?” It’s just about *the* most important skill *any* person can ever hope to acquire. Think about it. In the most extreme of all cases, consider the trust a person must have in Jesus Christ to receive Him as Lord and Savior. Is there a greater call for trust? No. Is said trust based on the merits of His character and integrity? Indeed, it is. Believers have been convinced of His intrinsic goodness, in every sense. He, then, is our perfect prototype of godly character and integrity.

However, no one else has ever been perfect, so this “skill” of identifying character and integrity in others becomes that much more difficult to hone. In many ways, only experience with others is able to grant us the appropriate wisdom on the subject. Some of us need to be “burned” several times in order to possess greater skills. On the flip side, we also must be

reassured when good people “bless” us. Wisdom is a gradual blessing in our ability to discern those we can trust. It takes time to develop.

My son and I were watching a political debate recently between Dinesh D’Souza, a professed Christian, and Cenk Uygur, a professed atheist (I’m not one to debate politics for very long because my belief is simple - if our country’s in trouble, it’s because it’s lost its heart for Christ, it’s that simple. Arguing ad nauseam over political “white noise” and diversions seems stupid to me. I think Jesus would agree, but I digress). What struck me as profoundly obvious was the manner in which the debate transpired. Dinesh’s platform for debating was impersonal, with integrity to the political doctrines at hand. However, Cenk consistently assaulted Dinesh’s person, especially when his own doctrines failed to hold up under scrutiny. Objectively speaking, it was like watching a wise, mature person arguing with an intelligent, sophomoric adolescent. The underling knew he was outclassed, and so he resorted to base derogation and character assault.

Likewise, people of true, godly character and integrity will wholeheartedly argue for the doctrines in the Word of God; however, they are never interested in destroying their opponent’s person. Sound like Jesus? It should.

*When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem; and He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. When His disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But He turned and rebuked them, [and said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; **for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.**”] And they went on to another village.*

— Luke 9:51-56

If you read the Bible, paying particularly close attention to the way Jesus approached others, what you'll see is a gentle spirit, one occupied with saving lives, with clearing the air of false doctrines, unafraid of challenging accepted norms, and willing to take the heat for doing so. What you'll see, if you truly "see" Him, is that while He was a very harsh judge of false doctrines and those hardened by them, He was very gentle to those with repentant hearts, regardless of their past failures or even their adherence to false doctrines.

Jesus' ultimate goal was to save people, not attack their person. We can learn everything we need to know from Jesus, if we're humble.

An additional word to the wise, one of the most difficult challenges when debating someone lacking godly character and integrity is overcoming their predisposition to *making* all things personal. They do so because that's all they are capable of. Therefore, they will often assume that when you dismantle their doctrines, you are, in effect, trying to dismantle them. Arrogance is inherently insecure (recommended book, *Covert Arrogance*, by yours truly).

Arrogant people tend to take everything personally, even when a person of good character and integrity is attempting to sort through doctrinal discrepancies. "*So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth*" (**Galatians 4:16**)? This is the death of any meaningful dialogue because the entire scope and objective of the well-intentioned person has been hijacked by arrogance. This is why, after about 5-10 minutes of the aforementioned Dinesh-Cenk debate, I threw up my arms, turning to my son, saying, "This debate is garbage...we've got one person trying to discredit his opponent's doctrines and the other trying to discredit his opponent's person."

But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

We must learn to hate the sin, but never the sinner, for that was Jesus' way. If we despise something against the Word in someone else, may we learn to "debate" it openly and with character and integrity, without succumbing to the temptation to make it personal. We are all sinners, none of us completely delivered from false doctrines, none of us with perfect faith. May we be compassionate, too.

Jesus' opponents always attacked His person because they lacked His heart. Darkness strove to extinguish the Light. The irony, like many of character and integrity will attest, is that He was actually trying to *deliver* them from their misguidedness.

To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children who sit in the market place and call to one another, and they say, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep." For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon!" The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children.

— Luke 7:31-35

The human flesh lacks godly character and integrity, therefore, it will seek to destroy others, not deliver them. Jesus said to the adulterous woman, "*I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.*" Then Jesus again spoke to [the Pharisees - who were trying to destroy the adulteress], saying, '*I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life*'" (John 8:11b-12). Jesus' use of "I am" established His own security in His person, something His attackers would never destroy, even though that was their intent.

Beware of those who make a habit of attacking your person. They are showing themselves untrustworthy.

So, to answer the key question, “Well, then, how do I identify a person of character and integrity so that I might trust them?”, we have our answer. If you want to know whom you should trust in this world, those with character and integrity, then look no further than their heart for the Gospel. If their intention is obvious, that they are living for Christ and for the spreading of the good news about Him, then you have someone you can trust, for that person isn’t even interested in what you think of them, strictly speaking. In fact, that person isn’t interested in what you think they think of you! We are not judges; we are evangelists, like our Prototype, “*for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world*” (**John 12:47**). A trustworthy person is like Paul, who proclaimed:

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

— **1 Corinthians 2:1-5**

History Repeats Itself

History repeats itself. This isn't merely an assertion made by historians. I think most of us will agree there is truth in that statement, based on our own experimentation. Nowhere is this more magnified than in the enduring Word of God. Let me show you what I mean before you take my word for it. For context regarding the passage below, understand that Israel was riddled with seventeen identifiable sins that resulted in her judgement from God.

You have become guilty by the blood which you have shed, and defiled by your idols which you have made. Thus you have brought your day near and have come to your years; therefore I have made you a reproach to the nations and a mocking to all the lands. Those who are near and those who are far from you will mock you, you of ill repute, full of turmoil. Behold, the rulers of Israel, each according to his power, have been in you for the purpose of shedding blood. They have treated father and mother lightly within you. The alien they have oppressed in your midst; the fatherless and the widow they have wronged in you.

You have despised My holy things and profaned My sabbaths. Slanderous men have been in you for the purpose of shedding blood, and in you they have eaten at the mountain shrines. In your midst they have committed acts of lewdness. In you they have uncovered their fathers' nakedness; in you they have humbled her who was unclean in her menstrual impurity. One has committed abomination with his neighbor's wife and another has lewdly defiled his daughter-in-law. And another in you has humbled his sister, his father's daughter. In you they have taken bribes to shed blood; you have taken interest and profits, and you have injured your neighbors for gain by oppression, and you have forgotten Me," declares the Lord GOD.

Behold, then, I smite My hand at your dishonest gain which you have

acquired and at the bloodshed which is among you. Can your heart endure, or can your hands be strong in the days that I will deal with you? I, the LORD, have spoken and will act.

— **Ezekiel 22:4-14**

Ezekiel wrote these words to Israel at the behest of the Lord around the time of the Babylonian captivity of Israel in the fifth century BC. That's over twenty-five hundred years ago! You might be saying, "So, what's that got to do with anything?" If that's your response, let me point something out to you...and concentrate. If you read the above passage and adjust for time/cultural changes, you cannot help but see parity with the sins that are prevalent our own country. Not convinced? Read **Romans 1** also, for good measure.

America is under divine judgement. Yet there's no fire and brimstone from Heaven. So where's this so-called "judgement"?

Judgement comes in all forms and administrations. In the case of America, I'd argue our judgement is our neighbors. That's right, divine judgement is pouring out through an entire population of anti-christians, led by a whole new generation of antichrists - children, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, leaders - some of whom are elected officials.

*Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 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. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever. Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, **even now many antichrists have appeared**; from this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.*

— 1 John 2:15-19

Jesus Christ and His apostles stood up for what many theologians call “divine institutions”. Those institutions are (from top down): nationalism, family, marriage, self. God has ordained these institutions for the sake of order and protection. Authority is delegated downwards.

History has shown us that departure from God’s will for a nation (like the U.S.) begins with the smallest building block, self. Here’s what the Bible has to say about self.

*Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child;
The rod of discipline will remove it far from him.*

— Proverbs 22:15

Children are born defiant. God gave their parents the authority to restrain them. But what happens in a society that systematically undermines discipline? Children do not fear authority. What do these now-tainted children grow up and do? They get married. They become a cord of two.

And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

— Ecclesiastes 4:12

Carrying this process up through the divine institutions, we now have the increased probability that two unchecked people get married. Since they agree in their ungodliness, their union becomes something unholy than it should. While the Bible clearly states that it is God’s will for the wife to submit to the husband, our contemporary societal norms state something very different. More and more husbands have relinquished authority to their wives (if the couple is even married...but that’s another perversion for another day, yet still an assault on the divine institution of marriage).

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them.

— **Colossians 3:18-19**

What do married couples do? They have children. They teach their children their own increasingly perverted doctrines. Authority-orientation is an emaciated tradition held weakly, if at all, by the head of the household (at this juncture, it could be the man or the woman). Since the family organization is now flattened regarding authority, we might say that we now observe the “*cord of three strands*” (ala **Ecclesiastes 4:12**). The institution of family, which is meant to bring glory to God, has now been perverted into a union aligned against Him. Its very strength is founded on its evolution. It’s difficult to shake a family with God’s truth when all members are lockstep in their ungodliness.

Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.

— **Colossians 3:20**

What does the above scripture even mean to a family that dismisses divinely ordained authority? It’s no wonder we see children being so disrespectful. If their parents don’t instill authority-orientation in their lives, why would the rest of society expect them to respect lesser authorities?

To finish our logical course of reason, families comprise nations. If the families in our country are increasingly anti-christian, what are we to expect from the results of our public elections? Throughout human history, God has allowed man to pursue ruinous ends, but never without warning. For those of us in Christ Jesus, we must sit back, obey our “*masters on earth*”, and watch as our country’s path intersects with God’s judgement. We rightly view this as a good thing, for at this juncture, it appears nothing else will correct our country’s current vector except discipline.

Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.

— Colossians 3:22-25

God's judgement on America is from within. She has been split in two by dysfunction. She no longer even loves herself. In fact, she is now consuming herself, her members her own cancer. "For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another" (Galatians 5:14-15). When she was young, she boasted a bright and prosperous future. But now, she's played the harlot one too many times, raised too many idols, made too many sacrifices to false gods. And like the prostitute who's given up her virtue, her own defiance has come back on her like an incubus, using her time and time again, until she is depleted and depressed, sitting back and watching herself waste away.

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.

— Galatians 6:7

History repeats itself. America is part of a long line of countries that has turned against God. I, personally, am not fearful or anxious, for God has everything under control, and He promises to take care of His own children. America is still alive and kicking, so there's always hope, and scripture tells us that with God all things are possible (**Mark 10:27**). How

about you and I focus on spreading the good news about Jesus Christ and see what happens, OK? :)

Profession Is Not Confession

Think about what it means to confess something. In religious contexts, it typically means to confess a sin, but in its most generic usage, confession is not so narrow. The Greek word in the New Testament is *homologeō*, which means “to say the same thing, or to agree (with God).” Now consider what it means to profess, or simply claim to be true, that same thing. And keep in mind, God already knows everything about you, so, no matter what you profess, you can’t fool Him.

I think Christians are really good at professing, but maybe not so adept at confessing. People say a lot, but they really aren’t “saying” much because what they are professing isn’t the truth. It seems many professions made by Christians are thin veneers, deceptions.

It’s evidently easier to profess rather than confess because profession only requires a mouth whereas confession requires a mouth and a heartfelt conviction. Since God sees the heart (1 Samuel 16:7), vapid professions are only able to fool man, at best.

Don’t fool yourself and don’t hide behind unfounded profession because it’s easier. Profession without confession is fool’s gold. “*Professing to be wise, they became fools*” (**Romans 1:22**).

God already knows the truth. It doesn’t matter what others think.

Ultimately, our goal is for our lives to align with those of the Lord’s, not under compulsion as indentured slaves, but willingly, under the sovereignty of a Master who rules perfectly. If we miss this point in our lives we miss the very meaning of sanctification. If you dismiss this blog, for example, you’ve thwarted God’s good counsel.

But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

— 1 Timothy 1:5

As an undershepherd of Jesus Christ, I want us to be *honest* with ourselves. That's all. It's impossible to live a life of blessing if we live in a fantasy world. If we're healthy in one area of our lives, let us confess it and be merry; however, if we're unhealthy in another part of our lives, let us confess that, too. May we always avoid *false* profession of faith, first and foremost as it pertains to our salvation, of course.

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you — unless indeed you fail the test?

— 2 Corinthians 13:5

Furthermore, as believers, we must confess before we profess. Critically speaking, false profession relegates true repentance dead, for it is impossible to repent from something we won't admit is sinful. This is precisely why I love the infallible Word of God so much. It's because whenever I have a question about my own life, I have the ability to consult God directly. Besides, I'm much more likely to openly confess to God than I am to any other person. In fact, the temptation is to *profess* one thing to others while *confessing* something different in the privacy of my own soul (I'm not saying I personally do this by default, but the temptation is always there).

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

— James 1:5

The continuous challenge for all of us is to *accept* what God reveals as true.

That is the critical first step of becoming a “[doer] of the word” (ala **James 1:22ff**). To confess agreement with God requires you first understand what God thinks about the subject at hand. It’s only then that you are able to observe God’s law firsthand.

But 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 will be blessed in what he does.

— **James 1:25**

God always makes good on His promises (**Romans 8:28**). We have a wonderfully simple one above - the person who confesses the truth, abiding in it as an “effectual doer,” is the one who is blessed. As a soldier for Christ (**2 Timothy 2:3**), how do you suppose ever being such an individual if you refuse your marching orders?

Do you not know that when you present yourselves [receive your marching orders!] to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

— **Romans 6:16-18**

Practice professing only what you have already confessed to be true. Do not make the mistake of professing in the absence of true confession, even though the world may cheer you on, for that is nothing more than folly to God, the One alone who is able to bless you.

To put it simply, be honest with yourself. 'Tis the best place to start each day.

This Is How Judgement Works

Grace precedes judgment.

Grace precedes judgment.

Grace precedes judgment!!!

OK, got it? Do yourself a favor and keep on repeating that to yourself until it cannot escape your conscious mind. Make a jingle out of it if you must, but do not let it leave you...ever. Satan hates me for writing this (part of me is curious as to what kind of attacks I'll be surviving this week), but too bad for him! As Paul said under even greater pressure, "*And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you' "*" (**2 Corinthians 12:9**).

Grace is how God reaches across otherwise insurmountable chasms to save His children, beginning with salvation from spiritual death and eternity in Hell, the condition and destination of our birth, respectively. If a person doesn't understand this, or refuses to accept this truth, they have effectively chosen death over life. **If a person fails to see grace preceding judgment, all they see is the judgment.** This is precisely what Satan wants, so he has propagated a world system that diverts man's attention from God's grace at every possible turn. While in all reality this is an impossibility (God's grace is abundantly supplied), with a little help from man's volition, he finds success. It's a real tragedy.

As a result, many people in this world see God as a fiercely judgmental being that is approachable only through the vicious barbs of condemnation. Sadly, they see God as a predator, when all along He's standing in front of them as Savior.

Even so, the truth is that saving some implies judging others. The key

here is understanding which precedes the other, grace or judgment. Get them backwards and God becomes a monster.

So, I thought I'd write a few words about how this judgment thing works, partly for those still lost and confused about God, partly for those already saved. I'm pressed deeply to find a greater consideration regarding my Lord and Savior. It hurts to think of Him being misrepresented in the souls of others, not just because it's a wrong He must endure, but that the perpetrators suffer horribly as a result, some destined to do so for all of eternity.

And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

— **John 9:39-41**

Jesus made the statements above after healing a blind man. In **v39** He says, "*For judgment I came into this world,*" which, at first glance to a grace-oriented believer, may seem a contradiction to what we know to be true. Jesus stated plainly elsewhere, "*If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world*" (**John 12:47**). As earnest disciples of the Word of God, we must reconcile all tensions that exist in our souls regarding scripture, as no such tension actually exists in the Word, itself.

"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (**Luke 19:10**). In light of this, **John 9:39** demands an explanation if we desire clarity on the whole of scripture. Let me see if I can help with reconciling this for you, if it is not already. The good news is that like most "aha" moments in our learning, once understood, it remains part of our permanent perspective. The best way to pursue this end, as always, is to

seek more scripture on the topic. So let's start there.

First, the Bible says, "*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (**John 1:14**). Well, Jesus Christ is the Word, and He is full of grace. With a little substitution in **John 9:39**, we might say, for our purposes here, that "*And Jesus said, "For judgment [grace] came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind."*" In other words, for the sake of judgment, God sent the manifestation of grace, Jesus Christ, into the world.

It is in the presence of grace that the actual rejection of it can exist, precipitating judgment on those grounds.

God is a righteous judge. A righteous judge demands evidence against the accused. Grace is always the evidence for judgment, specifically when it is rejected. Grace, then, becomes the grounds for sentencing. Without it, there'd be no viable conclusion a judge (God in context here) could make, at least not righteously.

Satan's accusation is that God is *not* gracious in His dealings with His creatures. That is to say that since grace is absent (this is his argument), then there ought to be no judgment. So, he propagates this lie in the world. He's not afraid to twist the truth, even Holy Scripture, to pursue his goal. He's no different than a sleazy lawyer (note: "Satan" is actually a title that means attorney) who convinces the jurors that good evidence should not be admissible as grounds for indictment.

What the Word of God *does* say is that grace precedes judgment. In fact, it is for judgment that grace came into this world (ala **John 9:39**). Grace stands as the evidence in the supreme court of Heaven that every indictment against every creature ever created is righteous. But just because evidence exists as the means of painful judgment doesn't mean the righteous Judge, or the evidence, is bad. In fact, both of these are

intrinsically good. Remember, perpetrators are not victims, like sleazy lawyers like to suggest.

There is no valid argument against grace. The best our enemy can do is try to hide it from our sight.

Grace is so simple and pure that often Satan's best wager is to introduce foreign complexities into the minds of the unsuspecting, as Paul feared, *"But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ"* (2 **Corinthians 11:3**). God's dealings with His creatures is, in fact, so magnificently flawless, that once seen clearly, it's a wonder we ever saw anything else, or would ever want to again.

God's first dealings with His creatures were gracious. He created them holy and righteous. And every one of them fell. Then came judgment. From the outset, grace has preceded judgment. This pattern has continued throughout human history. Out of love, His grace was manifest in Jesus Christ, and it hung on the Cross as the greatest evidence in human history ever proffered in the supreme court of Heaven. Judgment has never been His desire; salvation is, by grace (**Ephesians 2:8**), for He *"desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"* (1 **Timothy 2:4**).

Judgment, then, in all fairness to the righteous Judge, Himself, is the choice of man, not some predatory god. It is the result of one first rejecting God's grace. For in the presence of something good there must exist the choice for the opposite, lest there be no such thing as free will.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live.

— Deuteronomy 30:19

Grace precedes judgment.

MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP

We are all ministers of the Gospel, minimally. However, some of us have been called out with particular spiritual gifts for the sake of edifying the Body of Christ, the Church. Jesus Christ loves His Church as a bridegroom loves his bride. As such, He has anointed individuals with specialized abilities within the Church ranks in order to tend after His flock.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of 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**

With the call to ministry comes the call to leadership. It is implied. If not administratively or authoritatively, as in the case of an undershepherd, then at least with regards to thought leadership. In particular, when it comes to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, believers are called universally to spread the good news to the far reaches of the earth. The objective, of course, is in keeping with the One who has given us The Great Commission (**Matthew 28:18-20**).

For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.

— **Luke 19:10**

While ministering to others may take on various forms and activities, it is rooted in the Gospel call, itself.

I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

— 1 Corinthians 9:23

For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory.

— 2 Timothy 2:10

For "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED." How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!"

— Romans 10:13-15

In the face of mounting evil in this world, we ought to appreciate those who lead us.

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

— Hebrews 13:7

The Advantageous Estate of Brokenness

Have you ever been face to face with someone who is completely ravaged by guilt and shame? I have, a myriad of times. These individuals were, by all accounts, broken. Now, this may sound strange, but at the time, I was truly happy for them. Allow me to explain.

God is merciful. Any time we can reveal this to someone, it is a very good thing.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure — pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.

— **Luke 6:36-38**

When a person is downtrodden, having realized the futility of living for self, exhausted, and spent, I'm actually happy because there's no better time to be as my Father in Heaven is - *merciful*. After all, what's sweeter than showing a person mercy in their time of need? What's a greater display of Christ-like love? To me, brokenness spells opportunity... opportunity to show a person how much their Creator loves them.

Brokenness ushers a person through the door to salvation that mercy has opened.

When a person's cup is completely emptied of all hope, mercy fills it. When a person cries out in despair, mercy responds. When a person is pressed to their knees, mercy picks them up.

Divine mercy is open to all, but only the humble will receive it.

Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?" But when Jesus heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

— **Matthew 9:10-13**

I love the above scene because it shows Jesus' heart towards those whose soil was ripe for planting. His intention wasn't to judge them, but to save them. In the presence of obvious sin, Christ chose the loving path - He opened His heart up to those who would break bread with Him, regardless of their past failures. He was even able to empathize with those He was trying to save, like many of us can, having been tempted as others had been.

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

— **Hebrews 4:15-16**

Jesus understands us. His mercy is all the proof we ever need.

Mercy leaves no room for condemnation. How could it, lest it become something less than mercy??? A broken person doesn't need to hear that they deserve to live a life of despair; they need to hear about God's forgiveness, His desire to save, and the depths of His mercy, grace, and love. We are often too quick to judge and too slow to forgive others, aren't we? Yet, in those moments, we cling selfishly to our own hope in eternal

life with every fiber of our being. Right?

Let us never be selfish with God's merciful message of salvation! Let us encourage the humble, the brokenhearted, the morally destitute, those without hope. Let us put God's mercy on full display like a neon sign that reads:

Come to Me [Jesus], all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

— Matthew 11:28-30

This is the message for those who have lost hope - thank GOD for His mercy. There's hope for the weary!

*Bless the LORD, O my soul,
And all that is within me, bless His holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
And forget none of His benefits;
Who pardons all your iniquities,
Who heals all your diseases;
Who redeems your life from the pit,
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;
Who satisfies your years with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle.
The LORD performs righteous deeds
And judgments for all who are oppressed.*

— Psalms 103:1-6

Until a person is saved from drowning in their own guilt, it'll be difficult for them to hear over all of the thrashing, especially the good news about God's saving grace. Mercy has the unique ability to settle a distraught

soul. Let us become specialists in settling souls, and may we always be empathetic. Was it so long ago that we were in their shoes?

*For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, **but according to His mercy**, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

— **Titus 3:3-7**

A Punch To the Throat

This may sound odd coming from an anointed man of God whose heart is set on spreading the Gospel, but in the heat of my preaching, you'll often hear me express a certain righteous indignation in strong language, such as, "I want to punch them in the throat!" My congregation, knowing my heart, always laughs aloud, as do I. But in fairness to the emotion itself, I recognize that there is substance behind it. Truly...and a *lot* of it. For a split second, my anger spikes so high that I physically clench my fists. I never carry out such a thing, but the question always arises in my soul, am I being ungodly in this moment? This is a fair question, so I thought I'd ponder it a little while I've got your attention. I hope you don't mind.

On the one hand, Holy Scripture demands specific characteristics of pastors. For example, in both **1 Timothy 3:3** and **Titus 1:7**, the Bible clearly states that a pastor "*must not be pugnacious*", which means they must not be eager or quick to argue, quarrel, or fight. There's a real boundary condition set on the election of true pastors of Christ. A person like me must be intimately, ever aware of such things. If I ever begin breeching such a boundary, I need to make immediate corrections and/or walk away from the office in humility, for the love of others. You see, the Greek word translated "*must*" here is in the present tense, active voice, and indicative mood. This means that a pastor must be personally responsible to such demands on his life at all times, without question. This is serious business, my friends.

God holds those who have been given much to a higher standard. "*From everyone who has been given much, much will be required*" (**Luke 12:48**). The office of pastor is given a *lot* of responsibility. Therefore, when the owner of said office reads the requirements set forth in Holy Scripture, he must abide in them - remember, present-active-indicative!

So, back to my threats about punching others in the throat. Should I be concerned about my own qualifications as a pastor? If I'm humble, I must at least give this question fair consideration. And, for the record, I do. And just so you know, my primary concern is not the loss of my office, but that I don't want to cause any of the sheep under my care to stumble...ever! To me, that's the most painful thought of all.

I want those who learn from me to understand my heart on the matter. It's true, I have spikes of anger that boil over into words that seem a bit over the top. But am I the only viable pastor that has ever done such a thing? May I find encouragement somewhere in the Bible? The answer, thank God, is "yes". Paul seems to have had similar sentiments towards those who were disturbing his sheep in the church at Galatia.

You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.

I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves.

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

— Galatians 5:7-13

The Greek word that Paul uses in **Galatians 5:12** translated "mutilate" means to cut off, to castrate. Ouch! Ummm...need I say more? Will you agree with me that such an act is more extreme than being punched in the throat? Yowza!

So, this begs the question, how could the apostle Paul have even suggested such a thing? I mean, wasn't he the same guy who wrote the aforementioned letters to Timothy and Titus regarding "*not being pugnacious*"? Then what gives??? The answer to these questions is simple.

Paul's response to violence against the Gospel is proportionate in his heart to the magnitude of said violence.

In the case described at Galatia, the Judaizers were attacking the substance of the Gospel, adding works to it, leading some astray. Nothing would have irritated Paul's soul more than seeing those he loved being led back into slavery after they had already been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Same goes with a guy like me, whose life is dedicated to the same cause. It's wildly agitating to witness such things. It makes me go bonkers (there's a technical term for you - LOL). As Paul wrote to that church, "*Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh*" (**Galatians 3:3**)?

I'm hoping by now that you see the point of this blog. This isn't about me, or even the apostle Paul, it's about you! It's about understanding what righteous indignation looks like, and how it might manifest itself in your own soul and then spill out of your mouth from time to time. It doesn't mean you're going to actually wound someone's throat, it just means that if someone's attacking something that you hold so near and dear to your heart, namely the Gospel, your immediate desire is that they get what they deserve, even though your self-control prohibits any violence.

Wrath is God's work.

*A jealous and avenging God is the LORD;
The LORD is avenging and wrathful.
The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries,
And He reserves wrath for His enemies.*

*The LORD is slow to anger and great in power,
And the LORD will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.*

— Nahum 1:2-3a

Be encouraged, my friends. There's nothing wrong with a visceral response to an attack on our Lord or His Gospel. This is a godly emotion, for even the Lord God expresses Himself similarly throughout the Bible. While it remains solely His place to enact actual punishment, it's absolutely normal, and expected, of someone abiding in His love to share in His disgust for unrighteousness and evil, for these things are antithetical to His essence and therefore grossly objectionable.

I suppose one would have to question their own heart if they *aren't* offended by the sheer audacity of God's opposition in this world.

So, while it's a healthy exercise to ponder our gut reactions to ungodliness, the truth is that for as long as our indignation rests on the pillars of faith, hope, and love (ala 1 Corinthians 13), we're well within the boundaries of righteousness. In fact, it's proof that such things exist in our lives. By this, we may be encouraged.

Duty or Desire?

“The greatest leaders do not seek their position, rather they assume responsibility out of necessity,” said the noble leader mentoring their protege in a movie my family happened to be watching.

My 15-year-old son turns to me on the couch and says, “Hey, dad, that sounds like something you’d say.” The corner of my lip turns up and I respond, “I believe that, always have.” Selfishly, I was really glad to know that he knows this about his father, who also happens to be his pastor. I can only hope that these sentiments abiding in his own heart offer him comfort, knowing the base reason behind my sense of leadership.

As is the case in many such situations, this got me thinking about whether or not the Bible concurs. I’ve learned over the years that sage-like wisdom is folly without backing from the Word. While an occasional point of wisdom may spill out of the mouth of an actor, as attractive and tempting as it might be in the moment to make it doctrine, I’ve learned to earmark such “wisdom” as suspect until the Holy Spirit convicts me of the truth of it in the Bible.

*How blessed is the man who finds wisdom
And the man who gains understanding.
For her profit is better than the profit of silver
And her gain better than fine gold.
She is more precious than jewels;
And nothing you desire compares with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
In her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are pleasant ways
And all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her,*

And happy are all who hold her fast.

— Proverbs 3:13-18

There are a lot of well-written books on leadership, but none compare to the Bible. In fact, most of the best books ever written are merely commercial ripoffs of doctrines conveyed long ago in the completed canon of scripture. The same goes with leadership consulting - anyone worth their salt is a mere shadow of our Lord, Jesus Christ...though most will hardly admit it.

So I set out on a bit of a “refresher mission” you could say, albeit a brief one, as it turns out, since I’ve always known that every one of the so-called “greatest leaders” in the Bible were humble responders to necessity. In every case I visited in scripture, from Jesus Christ, to Moses, to David, to Paul, to Mary (Jesus’ mother), the Bible revealed them as obedient to their Father’s calling on their lives. These were not the wannabe “rock stars” we see nowadays leading Christian ministries (many of who are former performers of some sort or another looking for an outlet).

Every godly leader in the Bible was pressed into service. The biblical accounts of many of them make it plainly obvious that the only reason they assumed their responsibilities was a sense of duty to their Lord in Heaven. The only time desire towards such an endeavor was apparent was as the *result* of their hearts already being forged dutiful.

Allow me to share a small glimpse of the abundance of Holy Scripture that endorses my point about leaders, starting with the greatest leader ever to walk the face of the planet, Jesus Christ.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man,

Duty or Desire?

He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

— **Philippians 2:5-8**

After being called to lead Israel out of bondage, Moses said:

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?"

— **Exodus 3:11**

After being given the Davidic Covenant ("*Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever*" - **2 Samuel 7:16**), David uttered these words:

Then David the king went in and sat before the LORD, and he said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far? And yet this was insignificant in Your eyes, O Lord GOD, for You have spoken also of the house of Your servant concerning the distant future. And this is the custom of man, O Lord GOD. Again what more can David say to You? For You know Your servant, O Lord GOD!"

— **2 Samuel 7:18-20**

With the utmost respect and humility towards the Gospel presentation, Paul said:

For I am the least of the apostles, and 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.

— **1 Corinthians 15:9-10**

Jesus' mother, Mary, in her Magnificat said:

And Mary said:

“My soul exalts the Lord,

And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant;

For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

For the Mighty One has done great things for me;

And holy is His name.

AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION

TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM.

He has done mighty deeds with His arm;

He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones,

And has exalted those who were humble.”

— **Luke 1:46-52**

I challenge anyone to find a clearer picture of the very heart of good leadership than that found in these simple passages I've referenced above. You won't. And if you're honest with yourself, you'll realize that what I say is absolutely true.

Duty precedes desire in the heart of every great leader. Such is the way of the humble. For the arrogant, desire always leads duty. Satan's the perfect example, however, it doesn't take a person very long to identify the fruit of arrogance in leadership.

In my 47 years, I've both followed and led in sports, the military, industry, family, and ministry. My own wisdom on this has only been solidified with each passing experience. There's nothing sweeter than being a subordinate to a leader who's doing it for the right reasons. Conversely, there are few things more disheartening than working under a leader who isn't.

Thankfully, we have Wisdom, Herself, to guide us in every circumstance:

Duty or Desire?

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. With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free. And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

— Ephesians 6:5-9

The desire to lead is a wonderful thing - truly. However, it must be in accordance with the heart of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who humbly came down out of Heaven to obey His Father, to save, and to serve. "Your will be done," said the Son to the Father (Matthew 26:42).

For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.

— John 10:17-18

Good Stewards

The world often asks itself, “Why are we here?” Some of us already have our answer.

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.

— 1 Corinthians 4:1-4

I love Paul. I do, for a lot of reasons. But, one of my favorites is that he was confident about his commission in life. Not only that, but he was also unapologetic about his life, which often caused strife. Yet, his labor was for others, starting with Christ. As was his love. So, while he spent incredible amounts of time fighting, his motivation was from the deepest of wellsprings - grace.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the 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 also to all who have loved His appearing.

— 2 Timothy 4:7-8

One of the most difficult things for any believer to deal with is something I, personally, struggle with every single day. I find it hard to keep my emotions at bay - a good fight enrages me. I don't *always* want to fight, but what choice do I have when my enemy never sleeps? What choice do I have, knowing that every day more and more people are being led astray?

It turns out, as the Bible says, I *do* have choices, so that is what I must focus on (I feel a little like Bruce Banner). My encouragement is that I know I'm not alone, not just as a result of reading my Bible, but also through my chats with some of the brethren. After all, we're all suffering the hardship of standing up for the Lord Jesus Christ in a world that mocks Him, increasingly so. All the more reason to preach the Gospel, right???

For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me.

— 1 Corinthians 9:16-17

So, what are my "choices" here? And since there's nothing really special about me, what does *any* believer have to choose from? The answer is simple. We have one particular choice that only godly wisdom reveals to us. And as I've been teaching from my pulpit as of late, this kind of wisdom is a function of faith, which is, in turn, a function of humility, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE" (1 Peter 5:5). That "choice" is to have and maintain the perspective of a good steward. Jesus even taught parables on this (e.g. Matthew 25:14-30)!

The Word of God teaches us that we are not called by our own will, but rather by God's (1 Corinthians 9:17). This is an important lesson for all of us to ponder because it gives us proper perspective on why we're left on earth after being born again and saved - God's purposes, not our own (we don't call ourselves to service, God does - His calling means His orders). Without this perspective, we are like ships without sails upon a tumultuous sea.

Perspective gives us the strength and ability to fight in order to keep our bearings, to keep heading true north, and to the surprise of some, to

sleep in the bow of the ship when it's time to rest.

I have failed in every aspect of said perspective. I'm not ashamed to say it because the Bible tells me to expect it of myself. I'm not fully delivered yet, and neither was Paul when he wrote, "*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin*" (**Romans 7:24-25**). In light of Holy Scripture such as this, I've learned to relax and accept that I'm not perfect and that I'm going to fail, much more than I'd expect some days. So be it.

I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us. Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things. If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you. But we must hold on to the progress we have already made.

— **Philippians 3:12-16 (NLT)**

Allow me a moment to close my thoughts on this, as it may seem that there are multiple dangling threads. Deliverance is about perspective. Without proper perspective, we fall prey to the temptation to give credence to mere mankind and his judgements. If we're not careful, we lose sight of our stewardship of the Gospel. This is the one thing we never want to happen in our lives. If we lose sight of this, we lose sight of everything, beginning with our very purpose for living. We must remember that our lives are "*hidden with Christ in God*" (**Colossians 3:3**). We mustn't ever lose that precious perspective! One key strategy to that end is remembering that God called us to *His* purpose, *not* the other way around. We are stewards,

given the responsibility and duty to carefully manage His gracious gifts (e.g. our lives - ala **Romans 12:1**). While doing this, we must always show ourselves grace. We aren't perfected wholly yet - that's something we get to look forward to in Heaven.

We're going to bounce around on the seas, but as believers in Christ Jesus, we'll never capsize and drown. The good Lord knows whom to trust as good stewards of His grace - those He calls to be His own. While we aren't perfect stewards, we mustn't buy the lie that we are complete failures, for that would be a reason to quit fighting. As Paul wrote to his beloved Timothy, *"But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses"* (**1 Timothy 6:11-12**).

A good steward lays down his life for that which he's been given charge over - it is, after all, his fundamental purpose. We believers have been given the *"ministry of reconciliation"* (**2 Corinthians 5:18**), that is, the very good news about how the God of the Universe has solved the issue of sin. If we keep this as the mainstay of our perspective, not only will we fight, but we'll *want* to fight the good fight, our sails filled with the Holy Spirit, Himself! We may bear a few battle scars by the end of all of this, but our inspiration comes from the One who it is said, *"by His wounds you were healed"* (**1 Peter 2:24**).

I thank God every day that I've been given this stewardship. I didn't ask for it, strictly speaking, but now that I've got it, I know how important it is that I never lose my perspective on it. I'll fight for it tooth and nail if I have to. So be it. As Michael Buffer would say, "Let's get ready to rumble!"

How To Engage A Sinner

“Don’t judge me!”

Have you ever noticed when a person is caught in a sin, they often respond this way? When on the receiving end of such an exclamation, you often find yourself with your hands in the stick-‘em-up position, saying something like, “Whoa, don’t kill the messenger!” A sinner’s conscience prompts a multitude of defenses to thwart the pressure of acknowledging guilt, including, but not limited to, launching an *offensive* against whoever happens to expose said sin. “*Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret*” (Ephesians 5:11-12).

As the old proverb goes, “Sometimes the best defense is a good offense.” That’s something the human flesh loves to abide by. However, in the case of godly living, it’s wholly inappropriate. There is no defense against Truth or the bearer of it, “If God is for us, who is against us” (Romans 8:31)?

In my line of work, I am exposed to this kind of an exchange quite a bit, as you might imagine. I don’t go looking to call out sin in others, but what I teach stings the active sinner. As a pastor, I have been commissioned by the Lord, Himself, to tend His sheep. Being our “*Great Shepherd*” (Hebrews 13:20), he instructs us undershepherds to use the same methods that the humble Psalmist found comfort in, “*Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me*” (Psalms 23:4). Both the “*rod*” and the “*staff*” are necessary instruments of a good shepherd, which means that both discouragement *and* encouragement are necessary, respectively (discouragement of the flesh and encouragement of the new creature). If someone rejects either the rod or the staff, we must understand that they are *really* taking offense with the Holy Spirit who convicts them of the truth, not the messenger (me, in my

case; you, in yours).

For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

— **1 Thessalonians 4:7-8**

The truth is that there's a fundamental difference between an arrogant sinner and a humble one. The prior reacts as described above, whereas the latter confesses, agreeing with God regarding their sin. This fundamental issue tends to compound itself over time, where arrogance keeps humility at bay, resulting in a type of premeditated momentum towards unholy living. This is just awful to observe, like watching a car wreck in slow motion. Let that sink in for those of you who are engaged in such activities right now in your own lives. Are you going to be arrogant about it? If not, then listen up, for I write what I do out of love.

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.

Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one will bear his own load.

The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him.

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 will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap

eternal life.

Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.

— Galatians 6:1-10

There are three things in particular worth noting in the passage above. First, it is placed upon us fellow believers to “restore” a person “caught in any trespass” (v1). The Greek word for “restore” is translated from a word that means “to repair a dislocated joint”. The perfect example is giving a person Holy Scripture. As far as I understand it, there’s a lot of pain in putting a dislocated joint back into its socket, so they might react negatively to it. But the good news is that afterwards, the pain of dislocation is completely gone.

A good friend seeks to restore a “dislocated joint” in the Body of Christ, regardless of how painful the process of doing so might be. Our job is to ensure that the sinner understands we are merely instruments, not the power source, though we are privileged to serve in such a capacity. When the Word is the recognized strength behind our deeds, both the giver and receiver are relieved of personal affronts (we are not personally offended by someone else’s sin, nor are they offended with the truth we present regarding it).

Second, as Paul taught, “The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him” (v6). While the context reveals the relationship between shepherd and sheep, the principle is the same for everyone who teaches another person the Truth (every believer, when equipped, can teach another in the faith). A humble person will accept all correction from the Word of God, even sharing their gratitude with the “messenger”. Like the physical analog, a joint put back into place is cause for much rejoicing.

Third, Paul gives us our motivation for engaging a sinner, *“for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap”* (v7-8). We don't want anyone we love to suffer at their own hands as a result of ongoing sin in their lives. In fact, as Paul wrote, *“while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith”* (v10). We need to let those with a tendency towards arrogance know that we approach them out of love and respect for truth. We are not interested in judging them. Our motivation is that they are healed, set back “into joint”, left to enjoy sweet fellowship with their Lord.

As believers wielding the truth, we are not called to hide in caves and turn a blind eye to sin. In fact, just the opposite is true, *“But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light”* (Ephesians 5:13). Even so, I suggest you don't run about as someone who points fingers (remember, when you point a finger, there are three pointing back at you). There's a balance to be struck, and our own humility to think about (Matthew 7:1-5). Even Jesus focused on giving the Gospel above all else, something impossible for anyone to do if we spend all of our time pointing out sin in others.

Let us pray to God about when the right time to approach others about sin is; let us always do so within the sphere of true love. And above all, may our hearts be forever oriented to spreading the good news about what Jesus Christ has accomplished on the Cross, for we are all sinners saved by grace.

How To Join the Perfect Church

“If you find the perfect church, then don’t join it, because you’ll be the one to mess it up!”

— Phil Johnson, Theologian

Mr. Johnson’s point here is that there’s no such thing as a “perfect church”. I couldn’t agree more. I’d argue that some people make this an *excuse*, claiming they just can’t seem to find the “right church,” so they continue to freelance their way through the spiritual life. Over the years, I’ve learned the simple truth is that many in this group are essentially unwilling to submit to the God-given authority of a pastor.

Once bond service as unto the Lord is sidestepped (remember, God ordained local churches for a reason), people are “free” to begin treating churches and pastors as they would vendors at a flea market, with a dismissive, “sell-me” attitude. Well, the last thing we pastors are supposed to foster in a godly church is salesmanship! Yet, isn’t that what most so-called “Christians” are looking for nowadays - to be sold to? (Have you seen today’s megachurches???) Maybe I missed the part of the Bible that likens spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a business model...maybe that’s why I regularly receive unsolicited correspondence from industry-leading marketing firms on how to “market” my church and gain more congregants.

Sadly, the demand for “Christian” salesmanship is certainly there...

If only I’d just let go of my integrity...

Not going to happen.

So, what do these “churchless” people do? Well, some of them church hop

as I alluded to earlier. Others design their own homemade curriculum, a virtual patchwork of Internet based sermons, from both dead and living pastors, that appeals to their personal interests and allows them to avoid the discomfort of becoming offended by honest teaching.

A person who's waiting to join the so-called perfect church is arrogant.

Perfect churches simply do not exist...and they know it.

There are so many options when it comes to churches. What's a person to do in such a muddied landscape? I mean, so many buildings bear a cross on the outside, but is that enough to trust that it stands for Truth? The answer is simple - one that I've been teaching for years now. **Find a church that teaches the inerrancy of the Bible and that articulates a doctrinal statement that is in keeping with Holy Scripture.**

Unfortunately, most church seekers pay more attention to the *style* of the church than the *content* it produces. That speaks volumes to motivation.

Church style has no place in making a decision about joining a church. Heck, if style were the issue, I wonder how many congregants would sit under the apostle Paul's authority if he were alive today. Not many, I suppose, given his unimpressive stature, marred looks, speech impediment, and intolerance for frivolity. For that matter, I wonder how many would sit under Jesus, Himself. This makes me sad and, frankly, a little angry.

*He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.*

— Isaiah 53:3

Neither Jesus nor Paul would garner much in the *style* department these days, yet who could teach the Gospel *greater* than them???

I wonder, what say the person who claims they joined a church because of the prep school, or the music ministry, or the personality of the pastor? What say this person in the presence of the Lord if they know another ministry exists in their area that has a more sound doctrinal statement? Who leads their family away from "*truth that sets [them] free*" (John 8:32) in favor of style? Dishonest people, that's who.

The question one needs to ask themselves when joining a church is very simple. Does it have a rock-solid doctrinal statement in keeping with the Word of God? If not, there is no reason to consider it any further (unless a person is seeking to satisfy their flesh, of course). I wonder how many people choose a church based on a heartfelt, prayerful analysis of a church's beliefs. I wonder how many take the time to "*seek first His kingdom and His righteousness*" (Matthew 6:33). I wonder how many people have been deceived, as Paul would teach if he were still alive on earth, "*But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ*" (2 Corinthians 11:3).

So, how should we confront the issue: How to join the perfect church?

Easy. First, there's no such thing as a perfect church, so stop making excuses. Second, if you're truly looking for a church where the good Lord will shepherd you, then consult the doctrinal statement before you even consider other things the church might have to offer (if "offer" is even the right word). Given the dire drought of honest, accurate Biblical teaching nowadays, not to mention mainstream "Christian" errors like the charismatic and ecumenical movements, these considerations are all the more critical.

As many happy congregants will tell you, finding a church home is one

of the greatest blessings in life. Breaking the very “bread of life” (John 6:35) with like-minded believers is a form of fellowship that is second to none.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 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 10:23-25

Look for strong leadership, beginning with the pastor. He (never she) is the one responsible for guiding the church. Faithful ones usually aren't that difficult to locate - they are the ones that most people find offensive. I speak from experience - *“If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you”* (John 15:20). As I stated earlier, **a person who's waiting to join the perfect church is arrogant. Arrogant people hate to submit to authority, even if it is God-given. Yet that is God's command.**

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

— Hebrews 13:17

Our Great Shepherd has promised to care for His own. But what can He do if a person chooses to ignore His Spirit's guidance? What's He to do when people claim, “the Spirit led me this way,” as they walk away from sound teaching or refuse to submit to a pastor? The Lord provides, always, so there are no excuses.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of 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.

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

— **Ephesians 4:11-16**

Choosing a church is a **big** deal! It is neither a flash-in-the-pan decision, nor one to be made on style points. We pastors are commissioned to watch over your souls. Our accountability is very great as a result. *“As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed” (Galatians 1:9)!*

Integrity to truth is increasingly unpopular. So be it. It is to be expected, for our Lord and Savior, Himself, was called the *“Rock of offense” (1 Peter 2:8)*. If you’re a church hopping or Internet sermon “freelancer,” now’s the time to reconsider the vector you’re on. Are you, too, offended by the Truth? Have you made excuses in the past? Are you disjointed from the Body of Christ as a result?

If you’re disenchanted with your past church(es), maybe you ought to take the time to seek an honest conversation with the elder(s) instead of simply throwing stones and moving on. Be a part of the solution, to whatever degree possible, not merely a pretender passing through, flying under the radar, as they say. If none of that works, then read this blog again and see where the Spirit leads you. Just don’t fall for any more lies from the kingdom of darkness!

Though imperfect, good pastors and good churches still exist out there - trust me, I'm leading one of them. If you're looking for perfection, you aren't going to find it. Besides, a good pastor will always tell you to have your own convictions before the Lord, even if they differ from his own. Just don't miss out on the blessing a godly church can bring to you and your family.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

— 1 John 4:1

M.A.S.H.

M.A.S.H. stands for Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. The television series sharing this acronym ran from 1972-1983 and was a favorite of many - still is, I suppose. In any case, the show was a situational comedy based on a group of surgeons out near the front lines in the Korean War. Their mission was to receive wounded, battle torn soldiers from the front lines, fix them up, heal them, and then send them on their way.

Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

— 2 Timothy 2:3

The question came up recently, “What are local assemblies actually for?” My answer included the M.A.S.H. analogy. A local church is like a medical tent and the pastors like the surgeons inside. As is the case during wartime circumstances, the local assemblies are placed near the front lines and the pastors are placed inside like “soul doctors”, applying the Word like medicine to wounded soldiers for Christ.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of 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

So, what *are* local assemblies for? How do they “fit” into the grand scheme of things? Well, there’s not just one purpose for a church, but we do know that it is analogous to a M.A.S.H. facility. Churches are places where people are able to find rest from the front lines. People often drag

themselves into church battered and bruised. I see it all the time from my pulpit - it's a wonderful realization that my church and pulpit have been ordained by God to tend to His flock (**John 21:15-17**). Much healing takes place there, as well as encouragement, "*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 10:25**). So it's obvious that this is a fundamental reason for the existence of local assemblies.

*He who gives attention to the word will find good,
And blessed is he who trusts in the LORD.
The wise in heart will be called understanding,
And sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness.
Understanding is a fountain of life to one who has it,
But the discipline of fools is folly.
The heart of the wise instructs his mouth
And adds persuasiveness to his lips.
Pleasant words are a honeycomb,
Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.*

— **Proverbs 16:20-24**

There's one area that has been bothering me as of late. Some Christians have bought the lie that going to church is somehow the end-goal of the spiritual life. How could that be if the battle is outside the "tent", on the "front line"? It can't be, and it isn't. How can a soldier for Christ ever comply with their marching orders (e.g., the great commission - **Matthew 28:18-20**) if they never step foot towards the front line? While the church certainly has a function, it isn't the front line. Therefore, simply going to church isn't the fulfillment of why God leaves believers here on Earth after salvation. "[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (**1 Timothy 2:4**).

Do some believe they are fulfilling the "great commission" by simply attending church services? Sadly, I get the sense that this might be true. If it

is, isn't that a little self-centered? I mean, if a soldier spends all of their precious time here on Earth inside the "tent", and they never take the Gospel out to the front line, hasn't all their time and energy been focused on building up self? While it's perfectly good and acceptable and encouraged to attend church services under the authority of a pastor, the ultimate goal is to send soldiers *out* to the field.

The objective of the local church is to equip soldiers for the heat of battle. Going to church should have a real purpose that extends far beyond merely building up oneself; it should have the greater purpose of equipping believers with the Gospel and encouraging them to go out and serve it up in the trenches. In other words, the soldier's mission is not *in the church*, although the church fulfills a critical role (ala Ephesians 4:11-12; 6:10-17); rather, the soldier's mission is *outside* the church!

Perspective is the key when asking oneself, "Why am I here?" Too many seem to be "holed up" in the churches, effectively out of commission. In some cases, like new "recruits" or the truly "wounded", this is perfectly acceptable. But there also seems to be a group who are like the soldier who fakes injuries longer than they exist to avoid the harshness of the field. This is no good! Even we "soul doctors" are called to the front lines to spread the Gospel outside the churches. No soldier is exempt.

When Paul wrote, "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith*" (2 Timothy 4:7), he wasn't writing as just a shepherd who tended to the war-torn souls of Jesus' disciples. He was writing about having gone out to the front lines, himself, as commanded. He was conveying that being left here on Earth after salvation implies a fight. That is why we are here, my friends...not to hide in churches, merely dressing each other with bandages, but to gird our loins and take the Gospel out to a lost and dying world!

Hurrah!!!

MONEY MATTERS

People who have issues with money actually have a much deeper issue they must confront within themselves. A person who looks to money for fulfillment reveals themselves as malcontent with God's divine providence.

Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU."

— **Hebrews 13:5**

Contentment has absolutely nothing to do with money or what it can purchase for an individual.

Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.

— **Philippians 4:11**

In fact, Jesus Christ counsels us to focus our time on purchasing heavenly wealth directly from Him - that is to say, to purchase the Word of God with our time and energy while we have the opportunity.

I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

— **Revelation 3:18**

The big lie in this world regarding money is that having it will make a person happy. Peace and contentment are far superior blessings to so-called worldly happiness, which is fleeting, at best.

But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.

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 griefs. But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

...

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy.

Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.

— **1 Timothy 6:6-12, 17-19**

America's Greatest Export

Therefore speak to them and tell them, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the LORD will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols, in order to lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who are estranged from Me through all their idols.'"

— Ezekiel 14:4-5

"What's yer poison, cowboy?" asks the barkeep in the old western saloon.

"Gimme a double," says the dust-caked, weary man with the unkempt teeth, "...bourbon...and put a rush on it!" He growls on the big screen and somehow the moviegoers are intrigued by it...even attracted to him.

It seems just about every American has seen, or minimally understands, this scene as it's been played out so many times through media. The so-called "poison", in context, is liquor. Americans, in general, love their drink.

So I did a cursory search for some data. Here's what I found. The top selling American-made liquor is Jack Daniels Whiskey, which is really bourbon. Here's an excerpt from a *CNBC.com* article titled *Strong US Dollar No Match For Whiskey Fever*.

Boom times in the American whiskey market and record exports helped spirits sales to grow in 2014, as the industry continues to take market share from beer, the Distilled Spirits Council said in a new report.

Spirits sales to suppliers rose 4 percent to \$23.1 billion, and total U.S.

volume growth increased 2.2 percent to 210 million cases last year, it said.

The trade group said total exports are projected to have risen 3.7 percent last year to \$1.56 billion despite a jump in the dollar's value, which makes buying U.S. goods more expensive in other countries.

Whiskeys are expected to make up roughly 70 percent of total U.S. spirit exports.

Wow. Now that's a *lot* of "poison" being exported. Impressive. But I ask, is this our only export? I mean, how does it compare across our export portfolio? Well, without any research, most will agree that our greatest export is our culture, or at least some facet of it. We imported our "western culture" from the European countries by virtue of being colonized by them. Having since matured it even further, it has now become our greatest export. Think about it.

Is that a good thing? Biblically speaking, is the American culture a good thing to propagate abroad, or is it just another poison, possibly our worst at that?

Now, before you go off accusing me of anti-Americanism, please remember that I love my country, as much as I'm allowed to by God. In other words, I love her like I love a dysfunctional teenager who regularly poisons themselves and others with ungodliness. This blog isn't about me trying to throw stones at America (no country is perfect)...it's about perspective. I'm an American, after all. I'm just not deceived.

What I *can* say is it's entirely possible that we export more poison than good. Oh sure, we do a lot of so-called "good" in this world, but the good often seems far outpaced by the evil. I'm not even convinced the things we deem "good" are actually good at all (**Matthew 6:23**). And I'm not talking about bourbon here, I'm talking big-picture.

America is known for its culture. It uses media as the syringe that injects it into the world. Movies, television, radio, and now the Internet are dominated by American culture...and the world fiercely consumes it all. In a word, we are talking about idolatry.

Idolatry is America's greatest export, to net it out. There's hardly a more popular subject in the Bible than idolatry. The caution is profound.

We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

Little children, guard yourselves from idols.

— 1 John 5:18-21

The Apostle John was the “apostle of love”. At the very end of his magnificent epistle, he closed with a warning against idolatry. Why do you think that was? I believe it's because he knew what any godly shepherd knows.

Idolatry isn't just everywhere present, all around us; it infects us. One might even say that its presence is intrinsic to us. And that's a true statement because we all have a flesh that loves its idols.

Export businesses are only successful if what they are selling abroad is perceived as better than what is obtainable locally. Well, America is really good at making and distributing idols! Whether it's movie stars, music bands, runway models, sports heroes, moguls, politicians, or all the wannabes, we manufacture and distribute as much or more idolatry than any other country in the history of the world. In fact, our “product”

is so well made, the world is crying for it, “more, more, more!” It’s grotesque.

On the flip side, we have the Great Commission, which implies a totally different kind of “export” - the Gospel:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 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; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

— **Matthew 28:18-20**

I wonder how well our Gospel exports are doing, compared to our more famous ones. I wonder why a country that likes to tout itself as “Christian” does so very little, relatively speaking. I wonder how other countries, maybe even a few third world ones, compare to America on this front.

History has shown that the most “successful” countries/empires in the world have all been tremendous exporters of idolatry. Rome comes to mind first, of course. Just look at what Paul had to say back when that empire was still in power:

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. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

How about a smaller microcosm of worldliness? Let's take the first century city of Corinth, for example, another wealthy area well documented, both Biblically and historically. They were steeped in idolatry...in many ways, consumed by it. Paul had to write multiple times to combat this disease (**1, 2 Corinthians**)!

Wealth breeds idolatry. Who needs God if they already have a god (I speak as a man)? Isn't that why Jesus said, "*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*" (**Mark 10:25**)? Idols are difficult to destroy!

Idolatry is a heart issue, plain and simple. "*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*" (**Luke 12:34**). America sure does treasure its culture... just sayin' ...and it's extremely successful at exporting it to other countries. Idolatry is at the very heart of it all. And before I sign off, let's not just blame Hollywood here. Remember, a pointing finger gesture has three fingers pointed back at its owner! If each of us were to consider ourselves our own private enterprise, what would our own export portfolio look like???

A Waiter's Conclusion

Growing up, my family was categorized as living below the poverty line. Looking back now, having been to several third-world countries, I'm not sure the term "poverty" is completely appropriate, but I do understand that, from an American's perspective, even one meal missed due to lack of finances is too many. In that sense, I guess my mom, my brother, and my two sisters were impoverished.

My mom worked multiple waitressing jobs to make ends meet. She'd come home and say things like, "It's amazing who tips well and who doesn't." As a child, I'd shrug it off, not understanding exactly what she was talking about. However, the time came when I spent about three years as a waiter, myself, as I was attending college. It was hard work, but it was good money...and thanks be to God for the folks that *weren't* wealthy (allow me to qualify this). I finally realized, through experience, what my mom was trying to teach me so many years ago.

As a general rule of thumb, the wealthier a patron is, the less they tip their waiters. Correspondingly, the less wealthy a person is, the more they tip. If tips are an expression of gratitude, are the wealthy really consistently less satisfied with their waiters, or is it something else?

Come to find out, after studying the Word of God for a time, this principle isn't a novel one. In fact, the apostle Paul had to deal with it regularly. Case in point, the Corinthians were known to be wealthy, yet he purposely forwent taking financial support from them at times due to their issues with money (even though he rightfully should have received their support - **1 Corinthians 9:7**). There were those in that community who were "rich" in finances, but "poor tippers".

Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted,

because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge? I robbed other churches by taking wages from them to serve you [sarcasm]; and when I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone; for when the brethren came from Macedonia they fully supplied my need [Paul relied on other, poorer churches for support], and in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so.

— 2 Corinthians 11:7-9

Paul understood the influence of those with money issues in Corinth. He knew the excuses people made, as do I even today, through experience. He understood, and yet he still loved. He pressed himself even further into service for the sake of the Gospel, despite the weaknesses in those he was ministering to. He reasoned that the peripheral issue of financial support was less important than the spreading of the Gospel, and that if some might stumble instead of seeking the blessing of giving, then he would bear a greater burden.

On the flip side, the Macedonians, especially the Philippians, were not only willing to support Paul in his work for the Lord, but they sought out ways to do so. And interestingly, in accordance with this blog, they were not considered wealthy...at least not financially, that is.

Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

— 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

What a stark difference between those Paul was contending with in the wealthy Corinthian community and those in the poorer Macedonian community. The Macedonians actually *begged* to participate in the support of the Gospel. As scripture clearly states, the more generous people were actually those without a lot of money. The poorer were actually the more gracious. Reminds me of the widow's mite:

A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

— Mark 12:42-44

Jesus, the wisest, kindest, most honest man to ever walk the face of the earth, saw what I have seen as a waiter. He also enjoyed, as I do even today, seeing those freed from their bondage to money. "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16:13). A person who serves wealth will never be a good tipper. Sadly, man has been serving the wrong master throughout human history, to his own demise. "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 5:10).

Paul wrote to those "good tippers" and praised them, not out of sheer gratitude for personal benefit, but for allowing God's grace to bless them through giving. I sometimes refer to myself from the pulpit as a "waiter" because it's a pretty good approximation of my primary duty while I'm standing there - deliver the food, the bread of life (**John 6:35**). Jesus said, "But He answered and said, 'It is written, "MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD"'" (**Matthew 4:4**). In a sense, we're all waiters. While we

aren't "working for tips", we do rejoice in seeing others responding to God's grace through giving.

*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. **Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account.** But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

— **Philippians 4:13-20**

The proper perspective, from a "waiter's" standpoint, is that God's economy functions on the basis of grace alone. Gracious labor and gracious giving. What a beautiful thing to see. It's saddening when people, especially those serving wealth, are blinded by their own lust. The Bible teaches us that those who sow bountifully will reap bountifully.

Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; as it is written,

*"HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR,
HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER."*

Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and

multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God.

— **2 Corinthians 9:6-11**

Death and Taxes

“In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”

— Benjamin Franklin

It wasn't too long ago that I had a couple of conversations, interestingly not that far apart, regarding the content of the above quote. In the ministry, death is an ever-present thought for the simple reason that our great hope abides in the knowledge that the very best is yet to come for believers, after death. Believe it or not, death is often an easier subject to broach than taxes.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

— 1 Peter 1:3-9

Ahhh...I could pour over scripture on the topic of life and death forever, it seems, but that's not the topic of this blog (I just wanted to address the first

of the two topics Mr. Franklin mentioned).

Taxes. Back to my conversations about them. I could stop writing this blog right now by simply quoting Jesus on the topic, but I won't because whenever folks have doctrines confused in their souls, there exists the potential for ungodly frustration to result. Jesus said:

"Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax." And they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's."

— **Matthew 22:17-21**

There's no real wiggle room in that statement from Jesus...until someone introduces a perversion, like "Well, what about first fruits?...aren't we supposed to give to God *before* we give to anyone else?" I've heard this general sentiment from several individuals over the years, not surprisingly, who have had tax issues. It's true, God *does* want the very best of all that we produce (assumed to be "first" of our harvests, using the ancient agricultural context where "first fruits" derives its name). "*You shall bring the choice first fruits of your soil into the house of the LORD your God*" (**Exodus 23:19a**). He still desires that we give our very best. However, we must focus on the term "our".

The theological phrase "verbal plenary inspiration" means that every word (verbal) in the entire Bible (plenary) is Holy Scripture (inspiration). This is the godly viewpoint every believer must adopt when reading or studying any single verse, phrase, or word in the Bible. Verbal plenary inspiration demands that we reconcile any seemingly contradictory passages of scripture, never allowing what we *desire* to be true to falsely lead us to sin.

Regarding taxes, we must reconcile what the Old Testament “first fruits” instructions were to the people of Israel with the words of Jesus in the New Testament. It’s easy. One just needs to stop and ponder the context of each situation.

First, by law, taxes are incurred at the moment we work for something, whether or not we have yet received our paycheck or not, and whether or not it is tax season. In other words, as far as the government is concerned, there’s an outstanding debt owed them once that labor transaction has occurred. This means that taxes owed are not a part of the “first fruits” calculation - so says Jesus in Matthew 22:21 above. Practically speaking, a person can’t rightly give from a pool of money that isn’t theirs to begin with since they are essentially giving someone else’s money. Yet, so many do this while keeping the credit for themselves. Sounds like quite a racket, doesn’t it??? It is. It’s actually stealing, by definition.

There are some who sympathize with the “Robin Hoods” out there, but they are arrogant, misguided fools. Robin Hood was a thief. Those who proclaim nobility under the auspices of “first fruits” giving, by giving gifts to the needy from finances that ought rightly be earmarked as taxes due, are putting God to the test. *“Jesus said to him, ‘On the other hand, it is written, “YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST””* (Matthew 4:7). How is this so? They are thieves according to the order of Robin Hood.

Misappropriation of Holy Scripture never results in nobility.

In order to rightly reconcile first fruits giving and paying one’s taxes, all a person need do is realize that firstly, there’s no contradiction in verbal plenary scripture. Secondly, one must realize that taxes incurred as a result of laboring are *never* the laborer’s to begin with.

In the U.S., we often pay our taxes “in arrears” (as opposed to in advance

or at the time incurred). This means that some folks actually handle cash that belongs to someone else (the government). Touching someone else's cash doesn't mean it is yours; it just means that they have entrusted you to hold onto it for them until they get around to collecting it. Imagine if you put your life savings into a bank and the bank refused to give you your savings back because they had possession of it? See the point?

Paul also addressed this issue directly and in no uncertain terms:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor. Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.

— **Romans 13:1-8**

To summarize, “first fruits” giving begins with calculating what's rightly *yours* to start with. As you labor, simply consider a percentage of what your employer (your customers if you're self-employed) pays out as being wholly and instantaneously owned by the government. This will nip in the bud the temptation to assume ownership over tax money (aka stealing). Once you've got a handle on what's actually *yours*, then you can begin rightly giving of your “first fruits”.

I'm confident there are some who will read this who won't receive this blog the right way. Do I understand implicitly that some will possibly even stumble? Indeed. But the truth is like that, for even Jesus, aptly described as "*grace and truth*" (**John 1:14**), was a "*stone of stumbling and offense*" (**1 Peter 2:8**). My prayer is that those who read this remain humble, for, "*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling*" (**Proverbs 16:18**). Clarity is critically important, for if one cannot see clearly, their whole outlook is muddled. "*The eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is clear, your whole body also is full of light; but when it is bad, your body also is full of darkness. Then watch out that the light in you is not darkness*" (**Luke 11:34-35**).

I write the "difficult" things out of love and integrity to truth, for I just want people to be set free.

So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

— **John 8:31-32**

Equal Pay

People seem to be preoccupied with so-called “equal pay” in this country. I seriously wonder why that is. Not because I don’t understand such a simple concept, but rather that I wonder if people really ought to be making such comparisons at all, given that the very concept of a “wage” is subjective, from man’s point of view, and objective from God’s. Let me see if I can explain this to you, from a Biblical perspective.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; and to those he said, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ And so they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing.

*And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he *said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day long?’ They *said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He *said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard *said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.’ When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.*

When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.’

But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong;

did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’ So the last shall be first, and the first last.

— **Matthew 20:1-16**

The premise of this magnificent parable is that it wasn't until evil thoughts entered the minds of some that malcontent arose. The landowner acted honorably with all, yet the workers suggested a breach of integrity somehow. No such breach existed, for at the time of each negotiation, the workers were satisfied. Relations didn't degrade until subjectivity reared its ugly head. As is the case in the parable above, a work agreement (a contract) constitutes an agreed upon value for the work in question, even before the job commences. This is standard practice in any business venture between two or more parties. It begins with negotiation.

In a simple world, everyone would share the exact same scale of values (e.g., God's). If this were the case, the so-called "art of negotiation" wouldn't be a necessary part of contract negotiations. Contracts would be easy to draft and the need for lawyers would dwindle significantly, if not disappear altogether. However, we live in a world where value is fluid, often whimsical even, based on the mindset of the individual assigning it. This means that, in theory, there's always some degree of disagreement between parties.

In business, *compromise* becomes the bridge between negotiating parties. Most of us have signed lengthy contracts drafted by attorneys seeking to establish the greatest possible value for their clients. If you've ever signed a lease agreement or purchased a home, you know what I'm talking about. We pay lawyers to maximize our interests within the legal instruments we sign. When we sign, we are stating that we agree to whatever compromises are described in the contract, which really just explains, often in monetary terms, a balanced equation (in theory, each side has "equal" amounts at the

close of the transaction).

The very nature of contractual negotiations means that it behooves each party to stress their scale of values upon those on the opposite side of the table. If they don't, they risk being outmaneuvered and compromising too much, accepting a diminished value of their interests. Since value fundamentally must settle somewhere, it ultimately lands in the pocket of the ones with the greatest ability to negotiate. As it is, the best sales professionals are the ones able to establish the greatest value to their interests, typically resulting in greater profit.

The greatest salesman of all time is Satan. Think about it. He was able to get one third of the angels and the first two humans to betray God. What was he selling? Value, of course - only the value in his portfolio was only *perceived* as great to the temptable nature of those he was negotiating with. He knows there's no greater value to you than your soul in light of eternity, but he plays that down while pumping up things of temporal value - things that appeal to our lusts. He's a master at his craft. *"By the abundance of your trade you [Satan] were internally filled with violence, and you sinned"* (Ezekiel 28:16).

Since this isn't an MBA class, I'll leave it at this - not every transaction ends up with a balanced equation, from God's perspective.

A person might spend their entire life amassing a so-called "fortune" (even the term "fortune" is subjective). But who says having a lot of money means you've garnered a lot of *value* in your life? Who says that the values you've exchanged for all that "wealth" were actually *advantageously* traded for? Is it possible that you may have made many *poor* contracts with the god of this world and in fact, while you have a very large bank account, you have diminished *value* in your life?

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

— Mark 8:36-37

The greater one's ability to divorce themselves from the world's scale of values, the more successful they will be with their negotiations. Whether they are working for wages, purchasing, selling, or trading, the more they fight the good fight for things of true value, the greater their portfolios will be.

Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

— Revelation 3:17-19

So, getting back to where we started here, people seem to be preoccupied with so-called "equal pay" in this country. This is a trap that the god of this world uses to lead people away from the *true value* of knowing and investing in the Lord. While most people are fighting both figurative and literal battles over wages, I'd argue that both parties involved in such disputes are confused, terribly so. Like the workers in the opening parable, their focus is perverted and therefore they lack contentment in life.

But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.

But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. 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 griefs.

But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

— 1 Timothy 6:6-12

The Bible tells us to orient our scale of values to the Lord's, for His are perfectly balanced with eternally weighted things.

A just balance and scales belong to the LORD; all the weights of the bag are His concern.

— Proverbs 16:11

I pray that you don't fall into the whole "equal pay" war being waged by many in this world. Whether you think even the secular argument holds water or not, that isn't the point the Holy Spirit's trying to make with you right now. What He's saying is make sure you don't find yourself at the negotiating table with an agency of the god of this world, Satan, himself...for chances are, you will forfeit something of much greater value than whatever it is he's trying to sell you.

PATIENCE, PREPARATION, AND PRAYER

Meditation ought not to be hijacked by gurus and ungodly religions. Meditation is something every believer should do, and frequently. It is during these amazing times of fellowship with God, our Creator, that we really begin to appreciate all that He has done for us.

Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

— **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

This should be our preparation for the start of each new day. Joy, followed by prayer, followed by thanksgiving. It is then that we realize our purpose in life, which is not living in self-centeredness, but selflessness that pleases God. It is impossible to love others the way Jesus commanded (**John 15:17**) if we are preoccupied with ourselves, what makes us miserable, and why we think we have little to be grateful for.

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. 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 tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

— **Romans 12:9-13**

Life is tremendously practical, by God's design. This means that there's a lot of time to be one way or another, a lot of time to be joyful or miserable, and a lot of time to show these things to others who may or may not be seeking Christ.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in

everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

— Philipians 4:4-9

Effective Prayer

I can't tell you how many times I've prayed to God for this or that and somewhere in the deepest recesses of my mind, I doubted whatever I was praying for was even possible. Yup - I've been, and am confident that I will continue to be from time to time, *that* insulting to God. This thought had me up the other night, thinking about why I would ever even kneel down with my doubts to pray, given Jesus' own words, "*with God all things are possible*" (**Matthew 19:26b**). This is the same man who said that true faith could move a mountain.

*Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry. Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He *said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered. Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?"*

And Jesus answered and said to them, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

— **Matthew 21:18-22**

This passage has given me fits in the past, but as I've grown spiritually, I've learned the deeper, more practical aspect of it. That is to say when taken at face value, it's a wonder the world's mountain ranges aren't being shuffled across our landscapes daily, if for no other reason than for the joy of seeing God's omnipotence on full display. However, here's the catch. In **v22**, Jesus said, "*all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.*" The Greek word for "*believing*" is from the same root word as that which is translated "*faith*" in English. Well, suffice to say that faith is a grace gift from God. Oh, we can have *human* faith, but that will never move mountains - we might just

as well go down to the hardware store, grab a pickaxe and start chopping at the base of the mountain!

When Jesus made the statement that faith can move mountains, He wasn't lying. If God happened to will it so, guess what...the mountains would move at your command! But again, here's the catch - God doesn't will such things, therefore, said faith to actually do so is never granted. With reference to **v22**, we are never given the actual *belief* that some prayer of ours will move a mountain. That kind of belief is a *gift*, remember, not a function of the will of man. In other words, it's literally impossible for us to believe that our prayers can move mountains if we don't actually possess the God-given faith to do so. And since that kind of faith is a supernatural gift, without it, we will doubt our own prayers.

Now, this "mountain" will most likely be something much more relevant to our lives. For some of us, it's an addiction, for others, an illness. We all have things in our lives that we perceive as obstacles - things that would apparently make our lives a lot easier to navigate if they were no longer present. Most of us have prayed to have said "mountains" removed, and in our own sphere of weakness, have doubted God would comply. Frankly, it's appropriate to doubt in this case, righteous even, because we are praying for things we don't actually *believe* will happen. Why? Because God hasn't given us the supernatural gift of faith on the subject. He doesn't desire for us to believe it. He's got other plans. He wants us to *scale* the "mountain", not avoid it. It may be an arduous task, but by grace through faith, He'll ensure you *believe* it's possible.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must

ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

— James 1:2-8

Here's what we need to really focus on when our prayers go seemingly unanswered. Doubt is not from God. If it were, we wouldn't be able to trust Him regarding anything, including our salvation! Doubt is a human condition.

Pure faith cannot doubt. It's an impossibility. Let that sink in.

To net this out in a more practical way, consider that God never fails. His will be done, right? OK, then, if God gives a person true faith, implying the ability to believe something is truly oriented with His will, then if/when that person exercises that faith through prayer, the objective will always be met. Since God is omnipotent, said objective is irrelevant, regardless of how massive it may seem to mere man (e.g., moving mountains). If God can create and orchestrate the Universe, then moving a mountain isn't really a big deal.

It turns out that we pray all the time for things without this perspective in mind. We pray, knowing deep down that our will is disoriented with God's. Therefore, we doubt while doing so. We may not call it "doubting", but that's what the Bible calls it. Praying without true faith is the same thing as doubting, even if it's wrapped in the most earnest request. It's impossible for us to believe in a prayer if God hasn't willed the content of it.

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of

the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 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.

— **Romans 8:26-28**

God is intrinsically and wholly good. Dwell on that.

Romans 8:28 states that God will work all things together for good. The only way man can do anything in the sphere of His perfect goodness is if He enables him. *“By the grace of God I am what I am”* (**1 Corinthians 15:10**). If God so desired, then He’d give you the faith to move whatever “mountain” exists in your life. I have to believe that most of us require more divine perspective than what we allow Him to impart to us in a lifetime; this long before we are even candidates for such faith, lest we attribute its results to our own will. I also must believe that in our own natural disorientation towards God’s will, we misinterpret the “mountains” in our lives as obstacles rather than gifts in and of themselves, being placed by God in our paths to strengthen us.

When all is said and done, I believe this is our problem - we lack faith because we lack the humility to receive it (**James 4:6**). And since we never receive it, at least the kind that can move “mountains” in our lives, our prayers, while always heard, are disoriented with God’s will and therefore impaired. If we want our prayers to be effective, we must believe in them the way Jesus taught. True faith, and its sibling belief, is a grace gift from God and never given in contradiction to His own will. When our faith and His will become symbiotic, anything is possible - truly.

The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

— **James 5:16b**

Guest Blogger: What's Your Carb?

One of the first things you must do if you want to lose weight, or just adopt a healthy lifestyle, is modify your diet. You must start by making calories count by replacing “empty” ones with those that are beneficial. Instead of snacking on foods such as bagels with cream cheese, chips, or cookies, all of which have no nutritional value and leave you craving more, you opt for bananas with peanut butter, almonds, or avocados, all of which are more filling and better for you. If you are anything like me, the thought of subtracting carbs (cookies, crackers, etc.) from your diet makes you want to weep. Why would one even consider it when they are SO darn yummy?

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? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

— **1 Corinthians 6:19-20**

If you want your body to be healthy, you must take care of it. You must provide it with nutritional food, plenty of water, and exercise while limiting/eliminating the things that are unhealthy- drugs, cigarettes, alcohol, junk food. Likewise, if you want your soul to be healthy you must take in the Word of God and limit/eliminate the poison from the world-ungodly television shows, movies, music, and companions. How do you do that?

I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes.

— **Psalms 101:3a**

Then He said to them, "Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you."

— **Mark 4:24**

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?

— **2 Corinthians 6:14**

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

— **Philippians 4:8**

In other words, what we see and hear should be from the Lord, fostering spiritual health. Does it seem right for you to listen to music, view movies and shows, or interact with people who are not motivated by the mind of Christ and condone violence, disrespect of authority, and pre-/extramarital sex? If these things are against God and opposite His thinking, then it's safe to say, "NO" is the correct answer. Some might feel that this all sounds very "Puritan" or "Amish". Well, are we not called to be different and set apart? Are we commanded to think and talk and look like those of the world, the enemies of our Lord and Savior?

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

— **Romans 12:2**

That you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

— **Philippians 2:15**

Am I saying get rid of all your DVDs, CDs, and unbelieving friends this very day? Of course not, that would be an emotional reaction. We cannot sanctify (set apart) ourselves, only God has the power to accomplish that feat. If/when these things are eliminated from your life, it will be a function of His will and timing for you.

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

— **Philippians 1:6**

What I am saying is to not ignore the gentle “nudges” from the Holy Spirit WHEN He convicts your conscience to make such changes. I have all but stopped watching T.V. He had me look at what I was watching- The Big Bang Theory, How I Met Your Mother, The Vampire Diaries- and every show said the same thing- “Jesus, who?”. The same goes with music - 99% of the time I have either K-Love or The Message (satellite radio) playing. Am I bragging here? Not at all - I have a long list of “carbs” that He is currently “nudging” me about. I am merely providing examples of ways He will deliver us. We all have our weaknesses, “guilty pleasures”, if you will. If we let Him, He will replace the insatiable craving we have for the things of the world, which contain no spiritual nutritional value, with His nutrient rich Word that always satisfies.

But whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

— **John 4:14**

What’s your “carb” of choice? Will you let Him deliver you from it? I hope so.

In His Love,
Monica

P.S.: That “little voice” that says it is impossible or even unnecessary to eradicate such things from your life isn’t the voice of the Holy Spirit, it’s your flesh and it is a liar... just sayin’.

The Last Five Percent

I've always enjoyed movies depicting individuals who are able to overcome extreme odds. Guys like *Indiana Jones*, by the sweat of his brow, evading certain death to save his gal, seemed exciting, full of purpose. I guess something inside of me has always appreciated characters like that, fictional or otherwise. In many ways, it was a source of hope, be it misguided, for a young lost boy, like I was. I was searching for heroes, dreaming of becoming one. Then I met Jesus, who said that He came "*to seek and to save that which was lost*" (**Luke 19:10**), and everything changed.

The greatest work a believer can partake in is saving a soul. It's heroic in a sense, but we are not the heroes, Jesus Christ is. We are merely His supporting cast. Nonetheless, our roles can be difficult.

To help them keep perspective, I've taught my sons that just about everyone in this world can do ninety-five percent of the work that needs to be done (assuming their training is commensurate with their task). However, it's the last five percent, often the most difficult part, which distinguishes between "mice and men". In other words, if a person isn't able to dig deep and find the reserves necessary, the "intestinal fortitude" as some might say, then chances are they will fall away at the point of greatest pressure and fail to complete their mission.

Of course, there are a thousand and one excuses as to why a person cannot complete their labor. But as the apostle Paul said, it's not about human will power, it's about faith - faith in a purpose that transcends human rationalism, objectives, and hope. To those with faith go the crowns.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the 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 also to all who have loved His appearing.

— 2 Timothy 4:7-8

Paul knew, like anyone throughout human history who has faithfully spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that he was among the “top five percent” - aka those who have “*finished the course*”. You see, it’s easy to evangelize those we’re comfortable with, those that we run into daily who eventually, by virtue of simply being around us, know Whom we stand for. That’s all fine and well, but what about the rest? Doesn’t the Bible say we ought to love all of them, even our enemies? Yup! “*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Matthew 5:44). Jesus said that. Some might retract from the race altogether at the disclosure of this, saying, “I’m not sure I can do that...I mean, if *you only knew* my enemies!” Ummm, Jesus knew *all of your personal enemies* when He made that statement.

We ought to go the extra mile for our enemies just as soon as we would for those we love. The Gospel is without partiality. As difficult as this prospect sounds, it is what is necessary to finish the job we’ve been given, that is The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it. 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.

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. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

— 1 Corinthians 9:23-27

This all sounds so wearisome, huh? It certainly can be; especially the last five percent, the steepest incline, the greatest opposition to progress. Where are we going to find all of the energy to accomplish this? How about a tuna melt, a boiled egg, and a baby spinach salad...that ought to do it, no?!! While that *sounds* like a tasty, robust, nutritious meal, it's sorely lacking. The fuel it provides will only take us so far. God has designed the "race" that Paul summarized above as a test of *faith*, not physical stamina. The prior precedes the latter.

Physical food can never provide us with spiritual sustenance. However, spiritual food can indeed provide us with physical sustenance. It's supernatural.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples were saying to one another, "No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?"

Jesus *said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.

"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 they are white for harvest. Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this case the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor."

— John 4:31-38

Jesus understood that in order to finish the race, to carry His own cross, it would be a function of faith, of spiritual nourishment, not physical food.

While the disciples were concerned about human sustenance, Jesus taught them the truth about perseverance by faith. It's not that Jesus never ate regular food, but rather His point was one of perspective regarding supernatural abilities.

This work He speaks of [in John 4:34], and in John 4:32, as actual food, as the supply of the truest needs, and the satisfaction of the truest desires of His nature. Analogies to this are within the limits of every man's experience, and, faint as they are, help us to learn something of what this spiritual sustenance was.

The command of duty, the cheering power of hope, the stimulus of success, are forces that supply to weak and weary nerves and muscles, the vigour of a new life. Under them the soldier can forget his wounds, the martyr smile at the lion or the flame, the worn-out traveller still plod onward at the thought of home. We cannot analyse this power, but it exists. They have food to eat that those without know not of.

— Charles Ellicott

I imagine most of us long for the ability to finish the course the way Jesus did, or at least the way Paul did. *"To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some"* (**1 Corinthians 9:22**). It's true, it can be *really* difficult at times to take the Gospel to those we can't stomach. So what??? Was the Cross easy? Heck, the Bible explicitly says, *"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly"* (**Romans 5:6**). Consider the fact that when you were still unsaved, in your flesh, you were *"hostile toward God"* (**Romans 8:7**). That made you an *enemy*. That didn't stop Jesus!

At some point in your life, *someone* gave you the Gospel, even though you had enmity against God. It's possible that to your evangelist, *you* were a part of their last "five percent". Yet, here you are reading this blog. While

they were dealing with you, *thank God* they were chewing on the Gospel, the sweetest sustenance of all. And because of that, they pushed through to give you the truth about Jesus Christ, about your awful natural condition, about your fleshly opposition to the One who wished to save you. Aren't you grateful for whoever that evangelist was? Aren't you glad they pushed through? I am.

Most of us have a marathon to run after we're saved. As is the case with the Boston Marathon's famous "Heartbreak Hill", we are often called to exert the most effort when we are weariest. If all we've eaten is a tuna melt, we'll never make it. However, if we've gained our sustenance by grace through faith, being prepared by the Word of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, all things are possible (**Philippians 4:13**), even evangelizing the person we dislike the most.

*Onward, Christian soldiers,
marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
going on before!*

*Christ, the royal Master,
leads against the foe;
Forward into battle,
see his banner go!*

— *Onward, Christian Soldier* by Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924)

Thank God For His Patience With Us!

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And Jesus said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

And He began telling this parable: "A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.'"

— Luke 13:1-9

Jesus spoke this parable using the following symbolism: the fig tree represented Israel, the vineyard owner represented God the Father, and the vineyard-keeper represented Jesus Christ. He gave these people this particular parable because they were supposing that the Galileans in question, those whom Pilate murdered, were somehow more deserving of their punishment than their peers. It was common for Pharisees to believe and teach that all such catastrophes were absolute indicators of divine judgement from God. This is the same error that Job's so-called friends made when they assessed Job's dire situation. "*Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright destroyed*" (Job 4:7)? As we know from the Book of Job, Job was not guilty of anything warranting his specific suffering, thus dispelling the you-must-be-guilty-if-you're-

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suffering viewpoint.

When Jesus said, *“you will likewise perish,”* He was making a clear reference to the simple fact that ALL were guilty and needed to repent, lest they, too, be destroyed. This is a tremendous lesson for all of us, even today.

In our weakness, we tend to point fingers at others we have deemed “guiltier” than ourselves. The Bible tells us that we are all deserving of death. Jesus’ message to the finger-pointing crowd (and to us today) was to consider God’s rightful judgement on themselves, sinners, instead of their neighbors. As a corollary, consider the fact that they didn’t know what God knew about the heart of the Galileans in view. So, what gave them the right to judge, lest they make themselves out to be like one of Job’s so-called friends?

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

— Romans 5:6

Need I quote more? Is **Romans 5:6** not a magnanimous enough statement for you? Or are you going to continue pointing fingers (we all do it). If we can manage to get past our own ridiculousness, then we can continue with the meat and potatoes of the aforementioned parable of the fig tree above. Let’s do that now.

As I mentioned, in this parable, the vineyard owner is our Father, the vineyard-keeper is Jesus Christ, and the tree is Israel. The owner has chosen this fig tree to prosper under Him, which is something the prophet Isaiah wrote about as well:

*Let me sing now for my well-beloved
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.*

*He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
And He built a tower in the middle of it
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,
But it produced only worthless ones.
“And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge between Me and My vineyard.
“What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?
Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce
worthless ones?
“So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.
“I will lay it waste;
It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.”
For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel
And the men of Judah His delightful plant.
Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.*

— **Isaiah 5:1-7**

Throughout history, and particularly during the time of Jesus' parable of the fig tree, Israel hadn't fulfilled her duties as His chosen people (save a remnant), resulting in little or no righteous fruit bearing. They had been akin to a fruitless fig tree, hence the parable. What Jesus was conveying to His audience was that God the Father had every right to destroy the fruitless tree. This is something all believers need to remember, even today, being His chosen as well.

If we all got what we deserved in time, we'd all be destroyed in the blink of

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an eye. Therefore, in the first place, we have no right to judge our neighbors, regardless of how sinful they might be, or “deserving” of punishment. Secondly, we ought to be grateful for the Lord’s intercession, the way the fig tree ought to have been in Jesus’ parable. What the parable tells us is that God the Father was divinely patient with His own people, and additionally, that the Messiah interceded for them, asking for even *more* patience. God increased His own patience as a result. The same pattern holds true today, for each of us. Thank you, Jesus!

Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

— Romans 8:34

The truly amazing thing is that while we run off and point fingers at others, God increases His patience for us through the intercession of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. What we deserve, we do not receive in time. Even His Spirit “intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). This kind of unwarranted, stupendous patience can only be described as grace. While we suppose others guiltier and therefore more worthy of punishment, we show ourselves the greater culprit all the more. “But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God” (Romans 2:3)? Yet, our rightful judgment is withheld. Incredible.

I thank God every day for His patience with me. When I’m honest with myself, as I hope you are, I must accept that I’m no better or worse than the next guy. And even if I were, I’d never know about it because only God knows such things. That’s the point of the parable. While I don’t know how or when divine discipline ought to be metered out, I do know that I’ve earned my own fair share of it. And yet here I am writing this blog in the comfort of my own home, in the loving embrace of the same One who is

able to crush me, as I so deserve.

Thanks be to God for His patience!

What, Exactly, Are We Resting From???

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens.*

— Ecclesiastes 3:1

It's summertime here in New England and the smell of BBQs wafts through the air. It's a nice reprieve from the harsh winters we often endure. So go the seasons. By the end of the summer, after having sweat gallons of water out of our bodies, we New Englanders will be ready for the fall. Just ask us (we have a habit of anticipating the next season while complaining about the current one dragging on...you know, the same one we were anticipating so richly last season...lol). It's summer now, so I'll stick with it to help our plot along.

Summer represents sun and fun and pool time, or beaches for many. It also means it's time to catch up on those projects that were put off during the winter. So there's work to be done. Americans are really good at packing their schedules chalk full and then lamenting their days afterwards. Summer quickly becomes a time of chaos, between the honey-do lists and the yard/home projects, then trying to squeeze these things in between graduation parties, family reunions, sporting events, etc. Life can quickly become filled to the point of exhaustion. And for many, that's as far as it goes.

But what about Jesus?...*insert sound of scratching record*...

Where does *He* fit into our busy schedules (what we compliment each other for being oh-so-talented at completing)?

Isn't He the one who said, "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; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20)? This is called “The Great Commission”. We’re all held accountable to it, regardless of spiritual gift. It’s a command. Resting in the absence of it in our lives is not a command.

What if we’re all “too tired” to follow this *one* command?

How often do we run into friends while out and about and they say, “What’s up for the weekend?” And we respond with, “Well, I just need to relax...it’s already been a busy summer.” And our friends nod in agreement. We all love the idea of resting, but what, exactly, are we resting *from*? That, my friends, is the big question.

If all we ever find ourselves resting from are activities that have nothing to do with the Great Commission, I wonder what God’s opinion of said rest is? I mean, even Jesus rested, right? He did rest, but the distinction between Jesus and most people is that He was resting as a result of doing His Father’s will. That was always His first priority. How many of us can say that? Most are as Solomon stated:

I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.

— **Ecclesiastes 4:4-6**

What Solomon so wisely wrote about was the cause and effect that I write about now, thousands of years later. As he, himself, would say, “*There’s nothing new under the sun*” (**Ecclesiastes 1:9**). Solomon warns us of our motivation for working hard and being tired as a result. If it, “*is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor,*” then it is no good. The Word of God says we are supposed to be living for our neighbors, not competing against

What, Exactly, Are We Resting From???

them.

If we're going to rest from anything, it ought to be from our labor as servants of the Most High God. With this attitude, we find true rest. As Jesus said:

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

— **Matthew 11:28-30**

A "yoke" is something an ox wears while plowing or threshing. It implies real labor. The Holy Scriptures explain that hard work (working for Christ, for others) is a blessing. The primary rest that the Bible speaks of is a spiritual reality, not necessarily a physical one. What's physical rest in the absence of spiritual rest? How does one find themselves having to ask such a question? Something to ponder.

But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.

— **1 Timothy 4:7-10**

I wonder sometimes, what happens in the soul when the Spirit convicts us of something as profound as the Great Commission, and most are off barbecuing and such, ignoring His command to "go and make disciples"? I wonder how much ingenuity it takes to read the Bible and still live for self. I wonder at how terrifically talented we are at justifying our own

ungodliness.

Again, the big question here is, what, exactly, are we resting from? Is it exhaustion from working so hard at our jobs? That'd be acceptable if people weren't actually "storing up treasures for [themselves]" (Luke 12:21). Are our families pooped out because our kids have joined so many activities and sports teams that nobody has any time for church or the Bible? Are we actually trying to justify such things to ourselves? Are we perpetually drained because we're in the midst of some dysfunctional cycle of "party on the weekends" and then grind it out over the weekdays? These are the honest questions we must ask ourselves.

Just remember what the Word of God has to say. *"Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple"* (Luke 14:27). We all have a cross to bear, a yoke to harness into. We need to cast off the bondage that suggests we've somehow *earned* our rest. Whose economy are we functioning in? We are slaves - we are to rest when our Master says to rest. Most are resting from self-induced weariness, and our Master is not pleased.

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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

— Hebrews 12:1-2

PERSPECTIVE

Perspective is everything! This is a statement that has been made from my pulpit for years upon years now, and every time, without apology. The beautiful thing about perspective is that it can change one's attitude in the blink of an eye. So often we find ourselves miserable one moment and then elated the next. What causes this? A change in perspective. Conversely, we often find ourselves cruising along peacefully and bam, we lose our perspective and fall into despair.

Again, I say, perspective is everything! We seek the proper one in the Word. If we don't, we run the risk of being led astray, lulled into complacency that leads to misery. The apostle Paul gives us wonderful perspective in his letter to the church at Thessalonica. He reminded them to maintain a perspective consistent with God's - something we all benefit from.

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.

Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing. But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.

Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you 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. Brethren, pray for us.

Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:1-28

Black and White Photography

There are two reasons to shoot black and white photography. One reason is because you think it looks old fashioned and it's a cool effect. A better reason to shoot black and white photography is because of the lessons it can teach you. Black and White Photography teaches you about values. We're not talking about ethical values but the value in a monotone sense where color is taken out of the picture and we can focus on value as a single element. Once you understand value you can use it to create stark contrasts or to create soft, subtle compositions. Value in the photography world really just translates to light. If you have a heavily lighted photography it is high on the value scale. If you have a low lighted photograph then it is low on the value scale.

— Derek Watterson

Many of you know that I recently traveled to India on a missionary trip with my eldest son. It was a wonderful experience for myriad reasons, but as you might suspect, some things were challenging for us Americans. For example, we did not speak their native tongue, Telugu. While at times this limitation was frustrating, I like to think that God will use any circumstance to His glory. In fact, I believe that such “limitations” are actually blessings.

Case in point, due to said language barrier, many of the otherwise distracting elements of life weren't present, leaving me to focus on a smaller spectrum of experiences. And by the way, Telugu isn't one of those languages where every so often you pick up an English derivative and are able to piece together some semblance of what the speaker is saying. Not at all. In fact, if you attempt to decode it while it's being spoken, chances are you'll miss everything else. I learned quickly to tune out the speech and focus on body language, intonation, etc...things I *could* understand.

In many ways, partaking in the goings-on was like being immersed in one of those black and white silent movies of old - while exposed to a mere subset of normal human interaction, what you *are* able to absorb becomes the focus of your attention. It's one of the reasons I adore black and white visuals - there's an unmistakable clarity. As Mr. Watterson stated above, there's "*value*". As I wrote in my last blog entry titled, *Equal Pay*, value is a relative thing.

Sometimes God removes things we otherwise would perceive as having intrinsic value for the sake of proving to us that they really don't, at least not in context. We often think that more is better, but I've learned that most often, less is better. Simplicity is good.

Such lessons seem to be impossible to teach until God decides to deprive us of so-called "critical" elements in our ability to comprehend the human experience. Such is the inherent value of learning to step out of your comfort zone, by faith. It's one of the baseline elements of true wisdom that I try to share with anyone interested in spiritual growth. I say, go experience life to the fullest, just don't take the world's wisdom as your compass; rather, pray to God for guidance. Orient your will with His. Lay down your life for others, even if it means venturing into the "unknown". Do not fear such things; rather, fear the Lord, for this is "*the beginning of wisdom*" (Proverbs 9:10).

Black and white photos are among the most stunningly beautiful works of art man has ever known. Yet, they lack something fundamental, color. Go figure, right? Add color and we *lose* something. Begin with the color version and most people will argue there's no way a black and white version of the same photo could ever top the original in beauty. Because of this preconception, most never take the time to even find out. What a tragedy.

Learning to trust in God means learning to live with circumstances that do not match your *own preconceptions* about what your life should be. I use the

example of going a week without the ability to communicate verbally. For you, it might mean going broke, financially (I'm using the world's definition for "broke" here). For others, it may mean long periods of time without certain kinds of relationships, be they friendships or otherwise. So-called "deprivation" can occur in just about any possible way in life. Regardless of the challenges to our own sensibilities, we must abide in faith.

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.

— **Romans 8:28**

The next time you see a lovely color picture on your computer screen, open it up and find a way to view it in black and white (most simple picture viewers have a toggle somewhere that allows this). When you do this, the strangest thing might just happen - you may like the black and white version more than the original. You may never be able to put your finger on it, or even articulate why, but you may be moved in a way that you formerly weren't. Though *technically* you are experiencing less, you are, in fact, experiencing *more!*

Deprivation is often the pathway to enlightenment.

I know, that sounds a bit Taoist, but I didn't know how else to write it - LOL. Besides, every other religion and / or philosophy that expounds some divine truth is a ripoff. So in all fairness to the Wisdom of God, if the above is indeed true, then it was God's first, so there! In any case, the point I'm trying to make is simple (no pun intended). More is not always better. While that may be offensive to the gluttonous flesh of man, it is very true.

Learn to simplify in dimensions you haven't thought of before. Seek guidance through prayer. Be open to starkly different forms of living. I witnessed such things on the other side of the planet recently and am

considering such things myself even as I write this. And you know what? I'm *really* excited! I trust God; therefore, I know that as long as simplification is aligned with His will for me, whatever I may be "deprived" of in the future will be to my benefit and to His glory.

As Mr. Watterson stated, "*If you have a heavily lighted photography it is high on the value scale.*" The end game isn't more color, necessarily, it's more light! It's with this increase in light that we begin to truly see things the way our Creator has made them. "*But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light*" (Ephesians 5:13). Deprivation is a tool that our Lord uses in our lives in order to sanctify us. There's just no other way sometimes, given the presence of our human sensibilities. Consider it a blessing to go without this or that for a time, even if you've clung to it your whole life. For the Lord knows best how to reveal Himself, that is, the Light.

Election Perspective

The U.S. presidential election is over. Thank God! One half of the country is celebrating, while the other is choking on disbelief. The 2016 election has been dubbed an upset, possibly the greatest in U.S. history. Regardless of where a person stands on the results, I think the entire country just breathed a big sigh of relief, "It's over...finally."

The entire, often ugly, democratic process of electing our next president has left me scratching my head. It seems blatantly obvious to me that the country is filled with individuals who lack perspective. And I'm not throwing stones at either major party, specifically. As I've taught many times from the pulpit, politicians are merely symptoms in this country - they are not to blame - yet it seems the whole country is intent on pointing fingers rather than addressing what God desires, which is personal responsibility to Him, the Sovereign in the Universe. Here's what God has to say about those in leadership positions in our government. It really is this simple.

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.

For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but

also for conscience' sake.

— **Romans 13:1-5**

I wonder how many Americans, following the presidential election, have clear thoughts like those Paul wrote about above. I wonder how many have lost sleep, or concerned themselves unnecessarily, as if God somehow made a mistake. And then I remember that many of those in that camp have no real relationship with God because they have bigger problems... not the so-called "death of a nation" (for that is often their mantra), but rather their own spiritual death. I also remember that even saved individuals can get sucked into the vortex of political hoopla and lose sight of the eternal prize. *"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"* (**Philippians 3:14**).

U.S. presidential elections occur every four years. "Jesus Christ elections" occur every moment of every day, yet the country seems more concerned about the prior than the latter, even though the prior is temporal while the latter is eternal. **Political elections aside, who's voting for Jesus???** On the grand scale, one "Trumps" the other (pun intended). With a little perspective from the Bible, government election results, while significant enough, really don't amount to much, given the simple fact that God has got everything under control. And the best news for those of us with the right perspective is found in scripture, *"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"* (**Romans 8:28**).

It may sound odd for a pastor to publicly state that he's OK with whoever wins the election, but if you understand Holy Scripture, it really ought not be surprising at all. In fact, it should be expected. I'm OK with whoever gets elected because I know that God ordained it. Good, bad, or ugly in the eyes of my fellow Americans, it's God's vote that counts. I trust Him more than I trust man. Man's going to throw tantrums and bellyache no matter who gets elected.

People with the wrong perspective regarding politics are as implacable about election results as they are disoriented about God. People like to skewer their politicians because it allows them to transfer personal responsibility to others. As I wrote once in a blog entry titled, “*Why Blame the Marionettes*”, shouldn’t we be interrogating the puppeteers (the individuals who collectively comprise the voting population)?

By the way, what is everyone so concerned about in this country? Seriously. Is it really as obvious as it appears? While decreasing numbers are turning out to vote for Jesus Christ, record numbers turned out for the 2016 presidential election. It seems the average American is far more concerned about preserving the life he was born with rather than gaining eternal life. I, for one, am not surprised at all.

The real tragedy (I speak as a man) isn’t who is or isn’t elected president of the United States. The real tragedy is that many “voters” aren’t voting for Jesus Christ. In fact, they continue to vote against Him.

And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?

For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”

— Mark 8:34-38

What good is voting for and having your political candidate elected if you vote against Jesus Christ and God refuses to elect **you**? Perspective, my friends.

Embrace the Suck

I remember being on Facebook years back and reading a post from the daughter of an old friend of mine who had married a West Point graduate. Her husband, a highly sought after U. S. government asset, was spending many days away from his new bride. The Army life is a difficult one, to say the least. Troops are often sent away at a moments notice for long periods of time; often minus the normalcy of being able to let their families know the details of their departure.

Imagine being woken up in the middle of the night by your spouse's commanding officer who is on the other end of the phone line saying, "I need you to pack up and be ready to deploy within the hour. This is a secret mission so you can't tell your spouse anything other than 'goodbye'." Imagine being your kids, who wake up to find a parent gone for some indeterminate period of time.

This young woman, after her husband was deployed, posted "Embrace the suck!" on her Facebook page. I had never heard the expression, even as an Air Force veteran, but I quickly learned what it meant from the droves of other military wives who responded encouragingly. While I fought off a wave of sadness, I was more so overcome by a wellspring of appreciation for these women. They shared a unique courage, tenacity, and perspective that I could only presume to understand.

"Embrace the suck!"

I've since said this very thing to myself during those times when the good Lord has asked me to accept situations in my life that are, let's say, less than palatable. When this happens, the Spirit brings to remembrance Holy Scripture, which always keeps me away from any kind of pity party.

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying,

“Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

— Acts 14:19-22

The young lady I mentioned earlier was also a military “brat” (one of her parents was a retired Army soldier), so she knew what she was signing on for when she married her husband. While there’s no way to fully prepare oneself for certain hardships, we believers and our own families ought to learn what it means to be a soldier for Christ (**2 Timothy 2:3**). We must, likewise, “embrace the suck!”

It doesn’t do anyone any good to throw a pity party. In fact, a rightly oriented soldier considers it a *privilege* to serve - the more difficult the mission, the greater the glory - Hoorah! Besides, the rewards for doing so are eternally wrought, far more valuable than any earthly benefit could ever be.

Peter began to say to Him, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You.” Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life.”

— Mark 10:28-30

A change in perspective is usually all any of us ever really need to be

delivered from our so-called woes. I have found that a simple sit down with the Holy Spirit and His divinely inspired Bible fixes everything, every time. He may never promise me that a certain “*thorn*” in my flesh (ala 2 Corinthians 12:7) will be removed, but as Paul reflected:

And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

— 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Who ever said fighting for a good cause was easy or even pleasant?

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

— James 1:2-4

This passage is the Spirit’s way of saying, “Embrace the suck!”

Amen?

Just Eat Whatever You Want!

“Just eat whatever you want!”

Let's see here...hmmm...how may I count the ways (and people) I *won't* be hearing this from?!!! Let's see, at my doctor's? Nope. How about from a nutritionist? Yeah, right! What about a cross-fit trainer? Do they even eat anything other than green veggies and tofu? LOL - just kidding, of course. You get the point.

I was having lunch the other day with a seventy-nine year old man. Before we had finished eating, he had consumed several pharmaceutical pills along with his meal. I asked what one of them was and he said it was for his cholesterol (surprise! - again, I joke - seems like everyone over the age of fifty is on that pill). We had a good laugh about how while he was taking this pill, he was eating something that arguably was the cause of his high cholesterol. In all fairness to him, at the very end of his five-course lunch he did eat a slice of both celery and carrot.

He mentioned his ninety-year-old buddy that is on even more pills than he is and, with the tone of resentment we often have towards our physicians whenever they limit something we enjoy, he said that his buddy has been really sticking to his prescribed diet. I said, “Man, I'd be eating everything and as much as my little heart desired! The guy is *ninety*, for crying out loud!” We laughed some more.

When I got home, I told my wife the story and how I was saying that *both* of these guys ought to be eating whatever they want, given the fact that they have already exceeded the average lifespan in the U.S. She responded very simply, “That's because you aren't afraid of dying; whereas, most people are.” She's totally right. That got me thinking...

One of the greatest things I enjoy every single day is knowing that this life on earth absolutely pales in comparison to what awaits me upon physical death. I have what Peter called a “*living hope*” (1 Peter 1:3) in things to come, being a future partaker of the “*resurrection of the righteous*” (Luke 14:14), aka the resurrection of the saints, as Daniel prophesied:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.

— Daniel 12:2

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord — for we walk by faith, not by sight — we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

— 2 Corinthians 5:6-8

So, like I said, my wife is right on this one. The reason I’d be pretty much eating whatever, and however much, of what I wanted if I did indeed make it to ninety-years-old is very simple. I’m not afraid to die. However, let me give you a balance statement here. I’m not so selfish as to possess zero reservations about leaving this earth too soon. I’ll echo what Paul wrote.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.

— Philippians 1:21-24

I couldn't agree more. As a pastor, a husband, and a father, I know that God has plans for me for as long as I live on this earth in this wretched body. Maybe some of you reading this have already judged me as selfish because of my desire to leave this earth for something better, but please don't sin against me like that. I have a "*joy set before me*" (ala **Hebrews 12:2**) is all, and it's mixed with a healthy dose of I-can't-wait-itis!

For the record, if you and I are still around at ninety, you may want to come visit me from time to time because chances are I'll be partaking in a killer meal (no pun intended)!!! Woo hoo!

The Son of Man

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

*“THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME,
BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO
THE POOR.
HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE
CAPTIVES,
AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND,
TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED,
TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD.”*

And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

— **Isaiah 4:16-21**

This past week the Spirit blessed the congregation of North Christian Church with two sermons on the celebration of Christmas. He had His teachers, myself on Christmas Eve and our evangelist two days later, remind those listening that Jesus is not only God incarnate, but He is also a human being. And as a man, in His incarnation, He was tempted, *“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15)*. Because of this second fact, we have a Messiah whom is someone we can, and ought to, relate to, personally.

It’s really comforting to know that the One who saves us is intimately

familiar with what it means to be a man. Not only that, but He personally withstood suffering of the worst kind, all of it undeserved. He did this for us, even learning along the way.

Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

— **Hebrews 5:8-10**

The Christmas celebration is often condensed down to catchphrases, such as, “Jesus was born to die.” While this is true, the *fullness* of what it means for the Son of God to become the Son of Man and then die on the Cross for the sins of the world, demands much deeper consideration; so much so that I’m often intimidated at the prospect of having to stand behind my pulpit and teach on it. I mean, where does one even begin???

I guess one place to start is with the simple phrase “Son of Man”, a phrase that Jesus used predominantly to describe Himself, in light of the fact that *“although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men”* (**Philippians 2:6-7**).

Have you ever wondered why Jesus used this title instead of ones that others were using? Jesus used this Messianic title (**Daniel 7:13-14**) eighty-three times in the four Gospels. He used it to emphasize His humanity and His humility. For example, the God-man said the following in the presence of His own subjects:

*Jesus *said to him, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”*

— **Matthew 8:20**

Dwell on that for a moment. Imagine rightfully standing in the throne room of Heaven as the Son of God, King of kings one day, and then being humiliated to the point where you look around and realize your *subjects* are living a more honored life than you (I speak from man's perspective here). Imagine the temptations you'd face, personally, if all of this were true about **you**. How would you fare? Would you love the way He did, despite the shame, ridicule, and impending death? Would you consistently use a title for yourself that amplified your own humiliation? I doubt it.

Only Jesus, the humble One, was able to accept the humiliation He did. Only Jesus could've taught His disciples through the supreme example of humility.

"It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

— Matthew 20:26-28

Jesus called Himself the Son of Man because it suited His humiliation. While most men spend their entire lives wrangling for position as "king of the mountain", Jesus gave us the perfect example of that which pleases our Father in Heaven. While the human flesh is murderous (Matthew 15:19), plotting and dreaming of the destruction of its enemies, God has revealed to us that true love motivates man to esteem others higher than self. God loves His Son for manifesting this for all to see.

"For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."

— John 10:17-18

So, as the Christmas “buzz” fades all around us and others shift back into high gear, chasing their “dreams” into a numb and everlasting oblivion, may we recall our Lord and Savior’s dignity, in light of His humility. Let us seek to understand why He chose to refer to Himself as the Son of Man, and remember that He chose His words wisely. And let us apprehend the uniqueness of His perspective.

May Jesus Christ, the Son of Man by His own accounting, in His humiliation, be our inspiration always.

The Value Of Failure

What's more impressive: a person who never fails or the one who fails constantly but keeps getting back up? My vote is for the second person.

For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again.

— Proverbs 24:16a

*And hearing this, Jesus *said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

— Mark 2:17

First, everyone fails. So the aforementioned question is silly, really. Even so, I hope you get my point. To be blunt, people who think they never fail have already proven themselves to be utter failures, for they are extremely arrogant. In many ways, one of the greatest things we can ever do is learn how to fail. Of course, said education begins with admitting failure and ends with learning from our mistakes.

Without humility, the value of failure is lost.

Only a humble person realizes that they are what they are by the grace of God, as the Apostle Paul would say (**1 Corinthians 15:10**). Anything good in them translates into gratitude to the One who gave it to them.

When it comes to failure, perspective is everything!

For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

— 1 Corinthians 4:7

An arrogant person either never admits when they fail or, possibly even worse, attributes their ability to get back up as a result of their own human strength. The saddest thing about this is that, in essence, they have already rejected God's grace. The greatest manifestation of this folly is with salvation, of course. An arrogant person will always posture themselves as self-righteous enough as they are. And if they believe that Heaven exists, they will say that they are good enough on their own to gain entrance. They could not be further from the truth.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

— Romans 5:1-5

As Paul wrote, we believers are to “*exult in our tribulations.*” To some, this is a strange thing to say. But, to us believers it is the very means of our sanctification. For the Bible tells us that God uses testing to sanctify us. And by the way, how many of us can actually say we've passed every test the first time around??? Laughable, right? In fact, most of us, if we're being totally honest, will admit to being really slow learners. It often takes *years* before we learn our lessons and begin enjoying the fruit of God's sanctification.

But back to my main point here...

If failure isn't an option, then neither is sanctification.

We are failures without God. An arrogant person may disagree, but that is precisely why they may very well spend eternity in Hell.

Learn to embrace the idea of failure, for it is certainly a part of God's plan for your life. Get used to failing. Heck, take a few risks, knowing you'll likely fail. For example, try to evangelize someone and see what happens. You may get dirt kicked in your face, but you'll, undoubtedly, grow as a result. Dust yourself off and learn from the experience. Stay humble and pray that God soon puts you back out into His field again to sow a seed or two.

I've never met an honest evangelist that wasn't a failure. Nobody besides Jesus Christ has ever presented the Gospel flawlessly every time. We fail as evangelists all the time. Should that stop us from trying? May it never be!

*My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
For, behold, those who are far from You will perish;
You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You.
But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
That I may tell of all Your works.*

— Psalms 73:26-28

RELATIONSHIPS, FAMILY, AND KIDS

There may be no greater area of struggle in this world than in the hearts and minds of parents, children, husbands, wives, and intimate relationships. Some might argue money is a close first or second place, but most agree that the content of this chapter is the hotbed of much debate, consternation, and strife. The question is, why? The simple answer is that the kingdom of darkness is striving to advance on the kingdom of heaven. There is no better place to tactically pursue this end than through our most intimate relationships.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments we see God's warning against fellowshiping with and befriending the world. In fact, the Bible says, "*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**). Satan knows this and so do his agents. Therefore, believers are consistently enticed to join arms with unbelievers.

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?

— 2 Corinthians 6:14-15

Arguably, one of the most destructive forces in harming those in the Body of Christ is unforgiveness. Simultaneously, forgiveness is most needed in our intimate relationships. We might say that unforgiveness is the archenemy of love.

*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 *said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.*

RELATIONSHIPS, FAMILY, AND KIDS

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’

“And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’

*“But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord *said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you? And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.’*

“My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

— **Matthew 18:21-35**

In the end, it is love that binds us together, *“Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity” (Colossians 3:14)*. While the kingdom of darkness tries to sow a different seed in us, we ought to seek the unique love that is from God, sharing it with one another in the unity of the faith

(Ephesians 4:13).

Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint.

— 1 Peter 4:8-9

A Woman's Touch

*How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
Who walks in His ways.
When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands,
You will be happy and it will be well with you.
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine
Within your house,
Your children like olive plants
Around your table.
Behold, for thus shall the man be blessed
Who fears the LORD.*

— **Psalms 128:1-4**

Families are important. God ordained them so. The Bible speaks about the value of family at every turn. Think about it, we call God in Heaven, “Father”, and our beloved Savior, Jesus Christ, His “Son”. The very essence of the Godhead is expressed in familial terms. Jesus also referred to Himself as the “Son of Man” throughout the Gospel Books. Furthermore, the Word of God refers to godly Wisdom as the “woman of the house”.

*Wisdom has built her house,
She has hewn out her seven pillars;
She has prepared her food, she has mixed her wine;
She has also set her table;
She has sent out her maidens, she calls
From the tops of the heights of the city:
“Whoever is naive, let him turn in here!”
To him who lacks understanding she says,
“Come, eat of my food
And drink of the wine I have mixed.
“Forsake your folly and live,*

And proceed in the way of understanding."

— Proverbs 9:1-6

While a man can labor with all his might to build a castle, might we agree that God has given women the privilege of making each shell of a house a home? A woman's touch can turn even a cave into a delightful place of rest.

Now before you single men get all up in arms, I'm not suggesting that your home isn't "right" somehow...or lacking or incomplete...not at all. I'm merely pointing out that a woman's touch is a grace gift from God...and it cannot be manufactured by the will of man. We humans must remember that God made man and woman in His *own image*, which means that this intangible quality that I'm writing about existed first, with God, Himself. I point this out so that we don't write off femininity as mere semantics.

A woman's touch, especially in a home, is real. You can call it whatever you'd like - that's not important - but, you'd better recognize it for what it is - grace.

I suppose much of this has to do with the simple fact that man's curse from the Fall in the Garden of Eden is to provide for himself and his family by the sweat of his brow (**Genesis 3:17**). When a man completes his daily labor, he comes home and leaves said labor *outside* of his abode. This must be why the proverbial bachelor pads are as much like hunting cabins as anything - LOL (I really hope you're following this).

God created women to complement man. It's a beautiful thing. May I again suggest they are inclined to transform the *inside* of houses into homes?... will you give me that space (I know it's difficult in today's feminist society)? I'm not being a chauvinist; rather, this is my way of saying, "For once, let's *celebrate* a woman's God-given talents, especially in our homes!" Whether we are looking to our moms, our wives, or even our

sisters, especially in the faith, we ought to see what God intended to give us...part of **Himself!**" *God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them*" (**Genesis 1:27**).

You're not a failure if you're a woman who embraces being a homemaker. I'm not suggesting that you relegate your life to being "barefoot and pregnant" ...I'm not that guy...and, more importantly, neither is your Creator (all you have to do is read **Proverbs 31:10-31** to know this). I'm just saying that if you're a woman, you're a gift...just *being* a woman. Dwell on that...and then share the good news!

Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored.

— Titus 2:3-5

Ladies, celebrate your femininity. I know I am. Every good man does. Being a woman brings with it precious gifts from above, complementary to man's. Embrace them wholly and stop allowing this sickening world to mar your beauty! Quit second guessing God's perfect plan.

Some might say, "Boy, that Ed Collins guy is a real doozy...I think he's still living in the dark ages!" And the feminists will cheer. Say what you want about me, but at least *I'm* happy you're a woman, even if *you're* not.

And remember, the resounding message to women in this world, under the guidance of the "god of this world" (**2 Corinthians 4:4**), is that they ought to be disappointed with their lot, with how their Creator has made them. Ugh. From that perspective is sown the seed of malcontent and therefore a life of misery. Instead of embracing the idea of homemaking, the miserable woman tears it down along with her own happiness.

*The wise woman builds her house,
But the foolish tears it down with her own hands.*

— Proverbs 14:1

A woman's touch is a precious thing, especially in the home. There's an undeniable presence of femininity in the home of a godly woman. The doormat reads, "Welcome Home" rather than merely, "Food and Shelter". Her home is draped in the most virtuous of ways. It's an honest, humble, loving place. It's warm and inviting. It's precious.

Let's encourage the women in our lives to remember how beautiful God has made them, how very special they are to us. They are truly gifts, after all. Let us not even stop there, for the "*god of this world*" hates me for writing this...hates the idea of you being inspired by it...hates anyone who dares make a house a home.

Satan hates a woman's touch, as do his worldly followers, because it's an indictment on all those who suggest God's grace is insufficient.

The Bible Says To Run Away!!!

Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground when there is no bait in it? Does a trap spring up from the earth when it captures nothing at all?

— Amos 3:5

No and no, to answer the prophet Amos' questions. What's he getting at, though? The simple gist of his wisdom is that if the end goal of capturing prey is to get it into a trap, then the trap must be rigged with bait. Bait is the appeal to the birdie. Lust is the bait for man. Man is the prey. Sin is the trap. Like a bird caught in a trap, death ensues.

*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.*

— James 1:14-16

A wise person, like a cagy old bird, knows a trap when he sees it. Maybe he's got the scars that prove it. No matter how tempting the bait is, he flees from it; and he does so quickly, for he knows that the longer he looks at it, the harder it is to refuse. And by the way, God doesn't set traps. "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 anyone" (James 1:13).

If there's one thing we can say about our Creator, it's that He knows His creatures inside and out. After all, He created us, right? In fact, the Bible tells us that God knows us better than we know ourselves. This is why the Bible tells us, "*But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God*" (James 1:5a). Some of you, after reading this blog, are going to go to Him in prayer and

ask for guidance on this (I pray you do). My advice to you is listen carefully to what He tells you - I promise it won't be that I'm crazy.

Never approach the Word of God with a worldly lens; rather, pray earnestly to God and ask Him to reveal to you the Truth, as ancient and unpopular as it may be by contemporary standards. Learn to do that and you'll begin to see why He has men of God, like myself, encouraging you this way.

Presumably, most of you reading this blog have gone through your adolescent years. So you remember what it was like when your hormones were ramping up into overdrive. If you don't, just go find an old Bruce Springsteen album and let "The Boss" take you on a trip down memory lane. In any case, is it fair to say that during your teen years you experienced what we might call your "sexual awakening"? Some secular experts place this as early as ten to twelve years old - middle school age. A good Biblical word for this time in a person's life is "youth". What does the Bible say about youthful lusts?

*Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. **Now flee from youthful lusts** and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.*

— 2 Timothy 2:20-22

The Bible *clearly* states that we ought to "flee from youthful lusts". The Greek word for "flee" means to flee away, seek safety by flight; to run away. This is an important text because it reveals our Creator's counsel on how we ought to deal with the bait, our "youthful lusts". And by the way, Timothy was most likely in his thirties, so we know that we don't shed our youthful lusts with age (this wisdom clearly applies to everyone, regardless of age).

The Bible Says To Run Away!!!

As we noted earlier in scripture, when we give into lust, we sin, which brings forth death (**James 1:14-16**). God saves us from death; He doesn't deliver us over to it, at least not without our consent. His will is purely for our own good. "[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (**1 Timothy 2:4**).

God the Holy Spirit could've inspired Paul to use a different word than the one that means to flee, run away, seek safety by flight. He could've had Paul use the word he used in **Ephesians 6:12** that is translated "wrestle", which implies sticking around for battle. But He didn't. He specifically tells us to run away!

Our Creator knows our weaknesses and our inabilities. If He tells us to "flee from youthful lusts", He's making a direct statement, leaving no wiggle room for adolescent-inspired interpretation. Our Creator has informed us that sticking around means you *will* fail. It means that you will eventually fall prey to temptation, like the little birdie taking the bait in the trap. He's saying that the bait is irresistible, so run away from it before you are ensnared in the trap!

So am I saying what you think I'm saying? Yup. Can you *even believe* my audacity? I say that tongue in cheek, of course. Listen, I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to speak the truth about my Lord's will for you. If you disagree with me, I understand that you are not taking offense with me, but rather the Holy Spirit, Himself, the One whose scripture I've been quoting here. "So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you" (**1 Thessalonians 4:8**).

Let me put this into plain language, just in case you haven't had your "aha moment" yet. You had your sexual awakening when you were in your teens (possibly prior). You've had lusts of the flesh ever since. The last thing you want to do, if you desire to remain a clean, usable vessel for God's glory, is put yourself into positions the Word says to run away from. The obvious example, in America at least, is so-called "dating".

Could there be a more antagonistic situation to pure thinking, to clean thoughts? You'd be hard pressed to identify one, save watching or reading pornography.

If you think I'm being "over the top" here, it's only because you grew up in the last century. Contemporary "dating" is a modern phenomenon in Christian circles. The 1960's hosted the *Sexual Revolution* in this country. That was fifty years ago. While we can't blame the flower children and the free lovers completely, they surely advanced ungodly ideas about sexuality. Given the simple fact that sex was designed by our Creator for marriage only, and sexual thoughts, too, then it's easy to see how far our societal norms have strayed from His will.

What Holy Scripture states is that in order for Him to use us to His glory, we must be clean, not living filthy lives in our lusts, recklessly sinning, for that type of lifestyle leads us away from the abundant grace life in Christ. We noted earlier, "*Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work*" (2 Timothy 2:21). Do you want to suggest that today's "dating" is clean or honorable, increasing one's usefulness to the Master??? You'd have to throw out a *lot* more Holy Scripture than just what I've quoted in this short blog.

You are not going to be the exception to the rule, my friend. You won't be, so stop pretending you have abilities that God never gave you. I can write this because the Word of God tells me that you are unable to resist your own youthful lusts, less running away. Your Creator has commanded you to "*flee from youthful lusts*" because eventually, you'll sin - let's face it, how long does it really take for any one of us to have a lustful thought when left alone with an attractive member of the opposite sex? Jesus calls these thoughts no less sinful than the actual act.

You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with

lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

— **Matthew 5:27-28**

Do you think a teenager making out (kissing) on a couch isn't having sinful thoughts? How about you and another doing the same? Then why promote a situation as "OK" if it's a factory for impure thoughts and therefore sins of the mind? Do we love our children or not? How about ourselves? How about others we might be sinning with? If we love, then let's protect the virtue God has given each of us by avoiding every possible situation that might produce sins of the mind as well as the flesh. Let's accept the fact that sinning occurs long before physical intercourse. Saying, "Well, we've never had sex, so it's all good" is an ungodly attempt to leave room for satisfying youthful lusts, for it supposes that anything up to, but not including sexual intercourse that leads to conception, isn't sin. That's a lie and the cause for many regrets.

God doesn't want any of His children to have regrets or bear the scars of sin, even though He's forgiven every one of them.

Why do you think that before the aforementioned *Sexual Revolution* took place, it was commonplace to have chaperones? Why do you think parents were so adamant about not leaving their opposite sex adolescent children alone together? It's because they knew better. Today, I sound like a dinosaur, which is what Satan wants. He wants guys like me to be written off as fanatical. Whatever. I don't care what this world thinks of me. I love you enough to write this...give me that...for starters.

One final thought, expressed through a few simple questions. Read them slowly and thoughtfully. What is the benefit of contemporary dating, other than to satisfy your own lusts? How can you say you care about someone else and knowingly contribute as bait for sin in their life?...sounds like selfish love, motivated by selfish lusts, to me. What is the benefit of your dating now to your future husband or wife? How will your experiences

today affect your future marriage? How will your future spouse's actions today effect you?...and don't say they won't. I've never met a single honest person who says their preference for marriage is to someone who's shared themselves physically with another person.

Can we stop playing games here, my friends??? Can we stop teaching our children, encouraging them, even, to go out and "date"??? Can we stop mainstreaming dysfunction and calling it "good" or "innocent" or "harmless"? These are the last words we ought to be teaching our kids, ourselves even, regarding such things. Holy Scripture exists to protect our souls from harm (**Philippians 4:7**), but we must cling to it for what it is, truth that sets us free (**John 8:32**). If you want to keep pretending as if you never read this blog, then at least be honest with yourself right now and admit that you prefer the lusts of your flesh over the desires of God.

God's not in the business of leading you away from godliness, of tempting you with youthful lusts, or of turning a blind eye to something that harms His children. He's telling you to run away from youthful lusts, to quit being selfish, and to quit playing pretend. What most of you consider "dating" is actually an abomination and a direct attack on the purity and sanctity of human relationships, primarily marriage and secondarily, family.

There's a difference between Biblical courting and American-style dating. The specific end goal of the prior is marriage; whereas the latter is satisfying one's youthful lusts. Can you guess which is holy and which isn't? Can you guess which one is virtuous and which is a manufacturing plant for sin, both mental and physical? Can you guess which one brings glory to God and which doesn't? Ask yourself, which do you subscribe to?

Erosion

Beach erosion occurs when waves and currents remove sand from the beach system. The loss of sand causes the beach to become narrower and lower in elevation. Storm waves carry the sand offshore, depositing and storing the sediment in large sandbars... Beach erosion has become a serious concern for coastal counties throughout the United States [and it] also threatens coastal properties and infrastructure, such as roads, homes, and businesses. A series of storms can cause significant retreat of the shoreline, leaving coastal property more vulnerable to future storms.

— **United States Geological Survey**

As I was doing a little preparatory research for this blog, I saw a multitude of ‘before, during, and after’ pictures of coastal areas around the world that have suffered this fate, many catastrophically. Most were taken over the course of several decades, revealing the stages of erosion.

Erosion’s sinister side is that while it’s occurring, it’s so gradual that a person observing it doesn’t realize that it’s even happening. Likewise, human life is long enough that each of us experience erosion in our lives.

For the sake of this blog, let’s imagine that some of us have built our “homes” on solid ground, say somewhere in the center of our country, away from the shorelines, while others have decided to build themselves magnificent “homes” along the shorelines, overlooking the sea. Suppose also that solid land represents life in Christ and the sea represents life in the world. Finally, let’s assume that the closer we build our “home” to the shorelines, the greater the conflict between good and evil.

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

What James, Jesus' brother, wrote here describes the inherent, eternal antagonism between the world and God. In our little analogy above, this conflict would occur along every coastline. Therefore, the more a person flirts with the coastline, the stronger they must be, lest they be carried out to sea.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.

Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell — and great was its fall.

— Matthew 7:24-27

The sad thing is that, by world standards, the most sought after properties are the ones *on* the shoreline! For example, one of the most expensive places to own real estate is in Malibu, along the coast of California. It's also one of the most erosive places to build a home. Hence my ongoing analogy here. The very worst place a person, who otherwise has a safe haven inland, can take up residence is along the coastline. This would be indicative of a person who decides to "go to church on Sundays" and yet live a life adoring the view of the "sea", who goes so far as to position themselves in such a way that erosion is inevitable. These are the folks that at the end of their lives are haggard and spent, and if not floating out to sea already, are barely holding on by a thread, by the grace and patience of God alone.

So I got to thinking about specifics. I mean, how exactly does this erosion

occur? A perfect example just arose in my own life. My son's high school, abiding by a federally recommended book reading list, asked my son to read a book that included an explicit rape scene between a father and a daughter. Seriously, who's making these recommendations? Well, for starters the latest edition at the time of this writing has its forward written by Oprah Winfrey...need I say more? This woman is a perfect example of one who is "out to sea", a self-described antichrist (although she doesn't use proper Biblical language).

Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.

— 1 John 2:18-19

For the record, Oprah, like many popular antichrists, grew up in a "Christian" faith home. It wasn't until later that she decided to leave the faith. As an apostate, she now spends a significant portion of her time eroding the shorelines on behalf of the kingdom of darkness, promoting "alternative faiths" and unholy "spiritual leaders". This isn't a rant against Oprah - she's nothing more than a symptom of a more fundamental issue. Folks like her represent the agencies that Satan employs for the sake of eroding sound thinking.

As is the case with my son's school, more and more grade schools and colleges are being built on the "shorelines". Some, I'd argue, are already floating offshore. One must wonder where we're sending our kids off to during the day and what kind of "education" they're really receiving. As truthfully as I'm writing this blog right now, I just received a note from a friend who lives in the United Kingdom who said their schools are mandating sex education for five year olds!!! I'm stupefied, but not

surprised. Are you? If you are, you shouldn't be...these types of goings on are the result of decades, even centuries, of erosion.

What used to be intolerable is now acceptable, even promoted, due to erosion.

One last example worth writing about that ought to resonate with anyone reading this. How about, what I'll call, "American dating"? We don't even need to travel back in time too far (maybe one hundred years?) to identify a time when godly courting was for the purpose of marriage, nothing more, lest it be considered rightly as perverse. In other words, to cut to the chase here, there was no such thing as "dating" the way most Americans understand it. Biblical courting has been supplanted by today's dating, which includes, minimally, kissing, fondling, and often sex (all are forms of sexual intercourse, btw). This is considered socially acceptable, even promoted in Christian circles! In fact, sexual virtue has been so eroded that instead of abstinence, the objective is to precede marriage with sexual experimentation. If you're conservative enough to hold to godly virtues, you are shunned by those self-righteous enough to assume God's Word is antiquated / irrelevant.

So-called "American dating" is an abomination. How many of you reading this blog understand this? How many have promoted it in your own households, with your own kids, even? How many attend churches that promote dating instead of Biblical courting?

Stop. Take out the "photo album" in your soul. Instead of looking at consecutive pages over the course of your life, hold your place on the first page and compare it against the last. What you might see is analogous to the pictures I alluded to at the start of this blog, startling before and after images. You might see the truth about how much erosion has occurred in your own life when you weren't paying attention. You might realize that certain doctrines you now regard as holy are actually terribly marred and unholy. You might realize that you

haven't noticed because everyone else in your vicinity is suffering the same fate.

It's time to move away from the shorelines, where we can ensure our "homes" are built on solid ground, "the Rock", that is Jesus Christ.

All of this reminds me of the words of our Lord to John in the Book of Revelation to the church at Sardis. This church was just that, a church. The problem was that it only included a remnant of believers. Meanwhile, the rest of its members were simply "going to church", but living a life adoring the "sea".

"I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy."

— **Revelation 3:1b-4**

Getting Married

“We just want to *be* married and bring glory to our Lord.” Could a pastor and a father be any more satisfied, relieved, and elated??? Probably not.

This was my future daughter-in-law’s response to why she and my oldest son decided to push up their wedding date by eight months, foregoing the “big wedding” plans. There they both sat on the visitor’s couch in my office at the church, undergoing the obligatory pre-marital interview. Two adults now, committed members of the church. For a moment, I imagined them being themselves ten years prior, when they met back in high school, when my son introduced his new girlfriend to his family. Seems like so long ago...but here we are...life is short, as they say. I’m glad I’m smiling. As her mother told me recently, “God had a plan.” I agree.

“I’m so proud of you both...happy, too,” I say. And it’s true. Very true. Let me share with you why I said that.

I can’t speak for the social norms and practices of other countries, only of my own. Unfortunately, most engaged couples spend inordinate amounts of time focusing on *getting* married (which takes less than an hour) rather than how their Lord (if they even submit to Him) sees their prospects regarding actually *being* married (which is supposed to last a lifetime). It’s all about engagement rings, wedding dresses, venues, guest lists, flowers, hairdo’s, bridesmaids dresses, pictures, showers, etc...but hardly ever about the Lord. Oh, they may be getting married by a Christian pastor in a Christian church and maybe even have a Bible quote and a Cross typed on their mailed invites...but it’s mostly tradition at that point. Yet, He’s the one who invented marriage so that two believers can bring glory to Him. Marriage is meant to be a reflection of Christ and His Bride.

The greatest wedding ceremony to ever take place will occur in Heaven

after the rapture of the Church.

*“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.” It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he *said to me, “Write, ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’” And he *said to me, “These are true words of God.”*

— **Revelation 19:7-9**

Do you see anything missing? Bridezilla, for starters! It’s sad when your country, at the writing of this blog, has a primetime television reality series titled, “Bridezillas”, that is still running strong after ten years! Weddings and their engagement proceedings have become a joke, hence the program, yet very few seem to be alarmed. In fact, most jump into the fray, insulting the Lord with their blatant disregard for Him. It’s a nightmare with various shades of scary, depending on the self-centeredness of the parties involved.

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body.

— **Ephesians 5:22-30**

Evidence of this ongoing nightmare occurs daily all over the country, with

wedding details and plans and celebrations strewn all over every conceivable social network known to the Universe. In brief, and this seems disproportionately skewed towards women, but not exclusively, engagements and their ensuing “let’s celebrate my *getting* married” are carried out ad nauseam. Something tells me that “bridezilla” isn’t concerned with glorifying God as she’s gathering as much glory unto herself as she can. Others encourage her wildly on the unspoken agreement that she’ll do the same for them when it’s their time to be celebrated.

Is there anything wrong with a big wedding? Not at all - we read about sizable weddings in the Bible, one in which our Lord famously turned water into wine (**John 2:1-11** reveals between 120-180 gallons worth)! Jesus certainly was in attendance and even contributed to the celebration. But that’s not the point here, at all. The point is simple.

There’s nothing wrong with making wedding plans, whether large or small. The question for all, especially those getting married, is *what* is being celebrated...better yet, *who* is? If the reason for all the unnecessary celebration is to attract attention to oneself, then the motivation is wrong. If *being* married is meant to glorify Christ, then why would *getting* married be any different?

“Oh, and we want the Gospel presented as part of the service,” the two on the couch tell me. My soul warms even further. Their hearts are rightly postured in all of this. They see the blessing of the wedding as an opportunity to share the fact that Christ has brought them together to bring glory to Himself...to reflect His relationship with His own Bride, the Church. They see their personal celebration as a time to evangelize a captive audience. Awesome.

The Bible talks a lot about *being* married, not *getting* married. Anyone can *get* married, but *being* married unto the glory of God is something entirely different. I suppose that’s also why the secular adage says, “The bigger the ring/wedding, the shorter the marriage.” In my experience, there’s some

truth to this...but divorce is another topic for another day. I don't want to end this on a sour note...not at all. This is a true celebration here...a godly one worth writing about...and it has nothing to do with that subject.

Presumably, I shall be choking down my emotions while officiating the marriage of these two individuals...but not for the reasons that most will suspect. Indeed, I am gaining a beautiful, godly daughter-in-law, and watching my oldest son take the next step in his life. However, my greatest joy on that day will be in knowing that their intentions are righteous - that Christ will be front and center and His precious Gospel delivered.

As my youngest son plays in his older brother's bride on the piano, and as the crowd settles down and rises to its feet, readying themselves to witness the bride's beaming father walk her down the aisle, I'm guessing the chap behind the lectern will be humming a little melody to the following scripture:

*This is the day which the LORD has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

— Psalms 118:24

I want to say "thank you" to my son and his bride-to-be...for reminding me that not all are lost in this world...and that despite the temptations to do so, they haven't displaced their focus on Christ. It's such a wonderful blessing, and surely will be on that magnificent day, to see two of God's children meeting at that place where Christ alone can adorn them with His approval - His own heart.

The Golden Rule

Treat others the same way you want them to treat you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. 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.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure — pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.

— **Luke 6:31-38**

Jesus spoke those words. Many in His audience would have reeled in their offense upon hearing such things. The scribes and the Pharisees, and their followers, would have been especially offended, given their affinity for judging those they deemed “enemies”. Unmerciful people, like the religious folks during Jesus’ time, have no compassion for others. Instead of taking the opportunity to help another in need, they say things like, “I told you so!” Instead of praying for the weak, they punish them, they oppress them, they show them the very opposite of love. If said people claim to be Christians, they are damaging the good name of the One who embodied love, Jesus Christ, who said:

You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

— **Matthew 5:43-45**

Who among us hasn't been weak? Only an outrageously arrogant person would deny ever being weak (that person wouldn't likely be subscribed to my blogs, either). So, if we can all agree that we're *all* weak in our flesh, then can we all agree that, as individuals, we're weak in different ways? In other words, we don't sin the same way. In fact, some of us sin publicly more than others. For example, suppose your weakness is a lack of trust in God to provide for you and your family. What might you do that others might eventually find out about???

No man trusts God implicitly, despite the presence of Holy Scripture that states he ought to. If he did, he'd never sin. He'd never lie, cheat, or steal to compensate for his lack of faith. *"For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things. But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you"* (**Luke 12:30-31**). You might say, "That doesn't apply to me!" For the record, that'd be your 'arrogant voice' speaking...just sayin'. Ever lied about and/or stolen even the smallest thing? I guess you didn't trust God's Word regarding integrity to truth and/or His divine providence, huh? Just because some of what you've done in the past out of weakness isn't public knowledge doesn't mean it's any less vile to God. So let's stop judging one another, proclaiming this or that sin is worse than our own. That type of thinking is missing the mark set by Jesus, Himself.

The flesh is so ready to categorically dismiss public sinners, yet Jesus made a point of spending time, publicly, with such people! How about

you? If you thought a prostitute needed Jesus, would you take her out to lunch and give her the Gospel? No? Why not? What are you worried about? What others might think? Every believer is a prostitute, only their trespasses aren't always publicly known...for we merchandise with the world system daily to "get ahead". Ask yourself, what's worse, physical or spiritual prostitution? You know the answer - and you're grateful God has mercy on you, aren't you? Then why don't you have mercy on those with the lesser sin...say the prostitute, or the thief, or the addict?

Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?" But when Jesus heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

— Matthew 9:10-13

Treat others the same way you want them to treat you.

— Luke 6:31

One of the greatest things that Jesus left His disciples, and consequently all of us, is perspective on sinners. There are two basic, opposing ways we can approach a fellow sinner (I say "fellow" because I never want to lose sight of the fact that we're *all* sinners). First, we may choose to approach a sinner with the Law in one hand and a pointing finger protruding from the other. This is condemnation personified. The other option, the one that Jesus employed, is to approach a sinner with mercy and compassion. This is grace personified.

No person has ever been willingly or unwillingly saved (delivered) in the absence of grace.

Who among us doesn't appreciate God's grace? I mean, imagine our lives without it for a moment...phew! We'd all get exactly what we deserve, now and in Hell. How is it, then, that we turn up our noses to those with sins more public than our own? Nobody has ever understood, seen, and felt the impact of sin in this world more than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Yet, under the fullest disclosure of the ugliness of mankind, His preeminent qualities were love and compassion for sinners. This love motivated Him, *"the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross"* (Heb 12:2).

When Jesus saw lost people, He felt compassion for them. He looked beyond the symptoms to the root cause. *"He Himself knew what was in man"* (John 2:25b). Instead of judging them, He sought to save them, *"for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world"* (John 12:47). If a person's a prostitute, something's broken inside of them. The same goes for the drunkard, the abuser, the adulterer, etc. We are born broken, sick in the head, in desperate need of a Savior. That's the point. An honest person already knows this about themselves. They don't need others pointing out their problems. Let them pray to God, their true Judge, about their failures.

People are born lost. They are broken inside. Their destiny is futile, searching and only finding misery. Quick fixes and bandaids never hold up. Life becomes oppressive and depressing. This is their lot in life - darkness. Instead of telling them what they already know, shouldn't we give them a compass that guides them to the Light, the Gospel for starters? "Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).

Let's approach others while leaving our fleshly instincts behind. Let's not see a person for who they are as sinners, but rather who they might be or become in Christ, our brothers and sisters. Let us love them. *"Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins"* (1

Peter 4:8). Let's leave the judging part up to the One with the authority to judge. Love knows no boundaries, and it certainly doesn't differentiate based on sins that have already been paid for on the Cross.

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. 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 tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

— Romans 12:9-13

How To Carry a Cup of Coffee Without Spilling It

Following the completion of my stint in the U.S. Air Force, I was tasked with, as they say, “working my way through college”. Until being hired into a formal engineering internship, I worked primarily as a waiter at the breakfast diner my mom owned and operated. I also worked nights at a Chinese restaurant not far from there. This lasted roughly three years. To say that both of these experiences were valuable is an understatement. Ever since, and even more so now, as I grow in wisdom, I have recommended to young folks that they wait on tables at least once in their lives.

Let’s just say that serving others their food and drink is analogous to serving them the Word of God. Even though it is their sustenance that you are serving them, the very thing that keeps them alive, some will spit it out. Others will murmur and complain, threatening to never return (though they often do). And some will say, “Thank you!” While your service remains constant, as does the quality of the food for the most part, the reactions of your customers will vary greatly. Reminds me of *The Parable of the Soils* (**Matthew 13:3-23**), but I’ll let you investigate that. :)

So, after three long years of serving people coffee in the morning, you can imagine how proficient I became at it. Like any profession, many of the little nuances that others never even think about actually become vital to a waiter. For example, not spilling the coffee on your walk from the carafe to the tables is a big deal. It sounds silly to be bringing this up, but I’ll get to my point in a moment.

The key to carrying a full cup of coffee as quickly as possible from one place to another is to *not* look at it. Natural instinct is to watch it the whole way to ensure it’s not spilling, but as it turns out, that is exactly what increases your chances of spilling it! This phenomenon really doesn’t make much sense until you’ve experienced it. You learn to trust that which you

cannot see...that your body will faithfully maintain a level cup during your walk. It takes training...or shall I say, retraining?

There are so many spiritual analogies here, but I'll highlight one that seems immediately relatable for most, especially for the control freaks out there.

The Bible describes believers as members of the same Body, the "*body of Christ*" (**Ephesians 4:12**). Suppose you're the eyes in said Body, and you haven't yet been retrained to trust the hands to "carry a cup of coffee". So, you naturally keep looking down and sending what *you* think are appropriate adjustment signals, sort of like the way the central nervous system works in a human body. In other words, since you lack trust in other parts of the Body, you feel the need to "help" control them. What ends up happening, though, is you only exacerbate the situation.

While a person in the Body of Christ is trying to go about their own business, it's often quite counterproductive to completing the task at hand when other parts of the Body have taken it upon themselves to send "controlling signals" their way. This often confuses and even frustrates them, making matters more difficult than they already are. It also interrupts their training on how to "carry a cup of coffee" on their own.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of 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.

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the

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whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

— Ephesians 4:11-16

In other words, if I love you, I'll let you perform whatever it is the Lord has set your hand to do. If I happen to see you “spilling a little coffee”, then so be it. I have to remember that we all learn from our mistakes, arguably much more so than from our successes, even. If I'm too preoccupied with your business, even as a pastor, or a husband, or a father, for example, then I'm actually doing you and the Lord a disservice. I'm no longer “serving” in the Body the way I'm supposed to be serving. I have to trust you the same way you trust me. This is what consummates unity in the Body.

Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

— 1 Peter 4:8-10

Love and trust are hardly separable. If we share a mutual love, then we share a mutual trust also. If one of us stops trusting the other, we risk spoiling the purity of true love.

Control freaks are those with trust issues. Maybe that's you. Don't point fingers now that the Spirit's got you right where He wants you. Maybe your trust issues are understandable. Maybe you weren't loved as a child, or maybe you were abused, like I was, by those you were supposed to be able to trust. I understand. And as a recovering control freak, believe me when I say that you are in bondage. Are you ready for this? You are not in control. You are especially not in control of your spouse, your kids, your friends, or anyone else in the Body. So let it go, my friend.

[Jesus Christ] upholds all things by the word of His power.

— Hebrews 1:3b

He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

— Colossians 1:18

Jesus Christ is the Head of the Body, certainly not you or I. His Spirit has placed each one of us perfectly into His Body (1 Corinthians 12). We shouldn't be sending "control signals" to other parts of the Body in the name of love. That's not love, it's the disruptive flesh hiding behind selective reasoning. True love isn't interested in controlling others, even those they love the most.

Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm.

— 2 Corinthians 1:24

The apostle Paul wrote the above to those whom he loved dearly in the Body of Christ. Consider that after Jesus, Himself, there's never been another human being more gifted with godly authority than an apostle. Yet, the last thing Paul wanted to do was lord over another's faith, even those much weaker than himself...you know, those still learning how to not "spill a little coffee while carrying it".

True love isn't controlling; rather, it's encouraging!

I recently heard a theologian quoted as saying, *"The greater the potential to be used by God, the greater the potential to be used by Satan!"* How true that is. The greater our responsibilities to the Body, the greater our power is to

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wreak havoc in the lives of others. This is especially pertinent to those in authority: pastors, husbands, parents, etc. There's only one Lord, and it's neither you nor I. Jesus stated this principle similarly as follows:

From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.

— Luke 12:48b

By the very nature of our being uniquely made and placed in the Body of Christ, we have responsibilities to each other. However, let us not supplant responsibility with control. Our primitive is to love each other. Love isn't controlling; rather, it's encouraging (yes, that's the second time I wrote that). If you know anything about Jesus, you know He epitomized this...and He is the Lord of lords! He is the very manifestation of pure love. The controlling folks never understood Him, just like some of you still don't understand what I'm writing here. You'll point to others first instead of looking in the mirror.

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

— Matthew 11:19

Jesus Christ is "*wisdom from God*" (**1 Corinthians 1:30**). As He stated in **Matthew 11:19**, "*wisdom [Himself] is vindicated by her deeds.*" He was saying that regardless of what is said about a person, whether by themselves or by others, it is their deeds that show their love for others. Controlling people prove themselves un-Christlike. It means they are still in bondage, lacking love and trust, for these things come in pairs. Let us not despair, even so, for the "*[Lord] heals all your diseases*" (**Psalms 103:3b**).

In love, may we allow each other the space to grow in His grace and knowledge (**2 Peter 3:18**). May we learn to trust one another for the sake of

unity in the faith (**Ephesians 4:13**). Instead of sending little “control signals” to other parts of the Body, let’s “*encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today”*”(**Hebrews 3:13a**). Let’s not spill any more coffee.

Ladies and Gentlemen, You Can't Save Them!

For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers. Prescribe and teach these things.

— 1 Timothy 4:10-11

Superman's not the only one that wears a cape and tries to save people. There are many who make it their life's work to "save" people, often from themselves. However, the cold, hard truth is that no human being, except Jesus, has ever saved anyone.

Allow me to explain my thoughts here (although, if I were a betting man, I'd wager that some of you already know where this is going). We've all seen relationships between men and women fall apart, sometimes after years of struggling to "get it right". In the end, things just don't seem to work out because one or both of the individuals is critically flawed. Maybe they're self-loathing...or self-destructive...or they have severe trust issues...and the list goes on. Maybe there are also very identifiable traumas that are to "blame" ...and it's understandable why these people need healing.

If the survival of a relationship depends upon one person saving another, it is destined for ruin. People aren't designed to save each other. We already have a Savior.

How many times have we heard of, or seen, couples implode because they are disappointed with each other, after years of living together. One says they can't endure it anymore, trying to help the other "find the solution" to their problems. The other is bitter because their "savior" has failed. All along, both have been deceived. Nobody's supposed to be saving anyone else, and neither should anyone be expecting it.

Nowhere is this scene more readily orchestrated in life than between a believer and an unbeliever. It's incredible the lengths that some men and women will go to in order to try to make a relationship work.

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said,

*“I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM;
AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY
PEOPLE.*

*“Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE,”
says the Lord.*

“AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN;

And I will welcome you.

“And I will be a father to you,

And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,”

Says the Lord Almighty.

— 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

It's one thing to give someone the Gospel and hope they are saved. It's another thing to enter into a relationship with them and hope you can save them. You can't. Only God saves, through Christ. It's true, we all need a savior, but it isn't you!

I, even I, am the LORD,

And there is no savior besides Me.

— Isaiah 43:11

I have had a multitude of conversations with women who, after being asked why they have chosen unhealthy relationships, have intimated that

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they thought they could “save” their mates. They couldn’t. It’s an impossibility. Yet, some of these women have strung together a history of failed attempts over the years, with multiple men. To paraphrase Einstein, insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. The issue isn’t something lacking between the two parties, the issue is what lacks between each individual and God. I’m not proposing there’s not an equal number of men out there wearing “capas”, just that, for whatever reason, women seem to be more open about their failures on this front. I suspect men are just as guilty, just not as verbal about it. In any case, the intimacy everyone’s seeking in relationships is actually called “*abiding*” in the Bible, and it’s available to all who humble themselves under God. If you abide in God, you abide in true love.

We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

— 1 John 4:14-16

The world tells us that we *can* actually save each other, that we *can* fill that void in our hearts for one another. But that’s a lie that plays on our arrogance. Arrogant people lap it up, proposing to be so “special” themselves that they will finally be the *one* person who is able to “save” whoever it is they perceive as needing salvation. When written out like this, it’s almost laughable, yet it happens all day, every day, even among the Christian ranks. The smoke of futility is hardly aromatic to God. To sacrifice oneself as a personal savior for someone else isn’t noble, it’s awful and it often frustrates true salvation in Christ. To entice another person to consider you as their personal savior is to oppose God’s will. Each of us has but one savior, and it’s not each other.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as

Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

— Ephesians 5:1-2

As the title of this blog entry states, “*Ladies and Gentlemen, You Can’t Save Them!*” People need to stop trying. You aren’t saviors, nor am I. None of us are. Our job isn’t to supplant the Savior in our relationships, no matter how “right” it may *feel*; rather, we are to encourage the most important relationship of all - “*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).*

The pressure of trying to save someone from themselves is far too heavy a burden for any human being, save Jesus, to bear. Such things were never meant to be. God allows us to challenge this by letting us fail miserably at it (some of you just uttered, “Amen!”). Eventually, most of us figure it out - that relationships are very simple once all parties understand that there’s only *one* that really matters - that a relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, is what promotes healthy relationships thereafter.

So lose the red cape and take the Superman soundtrack out of your playlists. Replace it with something edifying, like Josephine Pollard’s beautiful hymn titled, *I Stood Outside the Gate*:

*I stood outside the gate,
A poor way-faring child;
Within my heart there beat
A tempest loud and wild;
A fear oppressed my soul,
That I might be too late;
And, oh, I trembled sore,
And prayed outside the gate.*

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*"O Mercy!" loud I cried,
"Now give me rest from sin!"
"I will," a voice replied,
And Mercy let me in:
She bound my bleeding wounds,
And soothed my heart oppressed,
She washed away my guilt,
And gave me peace and rest.*

*In Mercy's guise I knew
The Savior long abused,
Who often sought my heart,
And wept when I refused;
Oh, what a blest return
For all my years of sin!
I stood outside the gate,
And Jesus let me in.*

Momma Bears

When I think of scary things, I sometimes think of big cats (e.g., lions) or crocodiles or venomous spiders. Having watched my fair share of wildlife documentaries and inevitably witnessing nature's ferocity, I'm not sure how anyone could *not* be frightened by the sheer danger these creatures represent. Oh yeah, I almost forgot to mention sharks, too...yikes, right?!! One word - Jaws.

The dichotomy is that some of these wild animals are downright beautiful to watch (I'm just glad I'm not making my living as a wildlife cameraman). For example, have you ever seen a grizzly bear just sort of minding its own business, going fishing for a bit? It's truly a sight to behold because while they are enormous creatures, they possess incredible dexterity. They are among the earth's greatest fishers. I recall watching a National Geographic video where a momma bear was teaching her cubs how to fish - pretty comical, actually...cute, even...from a distance, that is.

Grizzly bear cubs will stay with their mother for two to three years before venturing off to establish their own home range. And even then, it's likely the cubs will remain close to their mother's range, especially the female ones. C'mon now, doesn't this sound a little like humans??? Like I said, it's downright cute.

As cute as grizzly bear cubs are, you'd better not ever get near one with the momma bear around. The adorable little scene you imagined in your head would soon become a nightmare!

It's no mystery that momma grizzlies are fiercely protective of their cubs. Besides the derelicts I've run across, most human mothers I've known are just as fierce when it comes to protecting their young. In fact, I've joked from my pulpit that there are a *lot* of dangers I'd rather face than finding

myself squaring off with an angry “momma bear” ...and for the record, I’m not a wimpy guy. I actually believe, with no disrespect to men, that when it comes to protecting their kids, there are few people who would sacrifice more, and more readily, than a loving mother.

In general, I believe mothers would die just as soon as they’d live for their kids. As sweet and gentle as they can be, I also believe they can be very dangerous to predators eying their young. My advice is to never poke the bear, especially not the little ones while their mother’s watching, for their momma will do just about anything to preserve the safety and wellbeing of her cubs. A mother’s strength is nothing shy of astounding.

*Strength and dignity are her clothing,
And she smiles at the future.
She opens her mouth in wisdom,
And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household,
And does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and bless her.*

— Proverbs 31:25-28

The Bible depicts “momma bears” throughout its pages. They are given a special charge and a special place in Holy Scripture. Arguably the most famous, of course, is Mary, Jesus’ mother. However, there are many more worthy of our attention, most of which can be seen in one way or another functioning as “momma bears”, keeping a close eye on their “cubs”. We may not read about them pouncing on predators, but we do see a much greater strength expressed through them, by grace through faith.

A faithful woman of God is both gracious and tenacious. Make her a mother and she often becomes even more so when it comes to her kids. I believe this is why, in keeping with our grizzly bear analogy, a good

mother's children never stray too far from her home range, even as adults (I speak figuratively as much as literally). I believe it is often the case that the greatest strength a child ever sees is that which exudes from their faithful mother. There are few things engendering more loyalty than knowing another human is wholly willing to lay down their life for you... willing to do whatever it takes to ensure your safety. Mothers are like Jesus, huh? Yup. He redeemed us from slavery, just like the mother did here:

Now a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD; and the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves." Elisha said to her, "What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?" And she said, "Your maidservant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil." Then he said, "Go, borrow vessels at large for yourself from all your neighbors, even empty vessels; do not get a few. And you shall go in and shut the door behind you and your sons, and pour out into all these vessels, and you shall set aside what is full."

So she went from him and shut the door behind her and her sons; they were bringing the vessels to her and she poured. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another vessel." And he said to her, "There is not one vessel more." And the oil stopped. Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debt, and you and your sons can live on the rest."

— **2 Kings 4:1-7**

The mother in this story, widowed and working exhaustively, took it upon herself to ensure her two children weren't taken away as slaves. Her good labor redeemed them (sound like the Cross?). Her resourcefulness was remarkable. Are you surprised? I'm not. That's what mothers do - whatever's necessary. As was the case here, and even in the next account in scripture (read **2 Kings 4:8-37**), and in life as we know it today, we might

take it for granted how determined this woman was. It's beautiful. Mothers are beautiful.

I'm sure many of you reading this can relate to what I'm about to say. One of my greatest blessings of all time is the unshakable memory of knowing that as a "cub" my mother would have died to protect my siblings and me - let me be selfish for a moment and say "to protect ME" because it's that personal. And as a result of knowing this, I feel loved. It's funny, I feel like one of those NFL players on TV after a big win right now, but who cares, can't I give my "momma bear" a shout out? "Thanks mom, for instilling in me this precious gift - your love." I encourage you to do the same. Go tell your mom that you appreciate her, even if she wasn't the "best", even if she failed you miserably at times...you're alive, aren't you??? You might say, "Yeah, by the grace of God!" Well, maybe, just maybe, God used your mom to work His grace in your life. Don't be a nincompoop and wait until some commercial holiday like "Mothers Day" to thank her!

God made mothers. Then He gave them incredible strength extending beyond human comprehension. This makes sense because God's grace is like that - it stretches far beyond our natural abilities and it provides us with true peace. Who's to say that God hasn't, in part, blessed us with the knowledge of His own love through our mothers??? I certainly believe this to be the case. As chaotic as our lives may have been as children at times, if we were so fortunate to have received it, one of the bedrocks of peace was our "momma bear's" love. In many ways, it's indescribable. I guess that's why God made hugs, too...when words fail us.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

— **Philippians 4:7-8**

Parents Need To Be Good Investors

By world standards, “good” parents make bank deposits on behalf of their children, often when the kids don’t even realize it until years later, when the principle and interest accrued make for a nice car payment, college tuition, etc. There are a variety of investment options, including savings accounts, government bonds, 529 education savings plans, and the like.

Parents need to be good investors.

If you’re a parent, you’re an investor, whether you like it or not. If you’re not a parent, then you’ve at least had a couple of them that have invested in your future. There’s no such thing as a parent who hasn’t invested in their children. The issue is how parents invest. I’m obviously not just writing about money. Money is the least of a child’s problems.

For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life?

— **Matthew 6:25-27**

The greatest investment a parent will ever make on behalf of their children is in the spiritual realm.

Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye

salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

— **Revelation 3:17-18**

Parents are given the opportunity to make “deposits” into the accounts of their children - only in the spiritual case, they may or may not be good ones. It’s entirely possible that a bad parent heap a load of spiritual “debt” to the account of their children. What I mean to say is that parents, given their familial influence, can wreak havoc in the lives of their unsuspecting children.

There are few responsibilities greater than being a parent. Poor investors ought to think twice before deciding to have children. Selfishness and parenting are mutually exclusive things.

*Train up a child in the way he should go,
Even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

— **Proverbs 22:6**

In this spiritual metaphor, the “bank account” I’m referring to is the welfare of the child. Parents are responsible for many, many transactions before a child up and leaves the household to navigate the world on their own. Some children leave the home with tremendous spiritual wealth, while others are at a terrible disadvantage due to debt accrued from poor investments made on their behalf.

A perfect example of a poor investment is what we might dub, “deferral”. This is when a parent realizes that their child is wrong about something, not realizing the severity of their circumstances for themselves, being sophomoric (wise in their own estimation), and the parent chooses the path of least resistance, either doing nothing, or even worse, contributing to the delinquency of their child. A selfish parent will choose to make their own life easier, while a selfless parent will meet difficult situations head on, in the moment, regardless of how inconvenient, embarrassing, or heart

wrenching.

Life is filled with critical moments.

Good parents shine in those moments by training up their children in the ways of our Lord, whereas bad ones defer to another day. The prior is a good investment strategy, the latter, a poor one. Both kinds of investments, once made, bear interest over time. In other words, the longer the lesson remains in the “bank”, the larger it becomes in the soul. If a parent reinforces something negative in a child, by the time the child is out on their own in the world, they are strapped with the burden of “debt”... something they didn’t even intend on accruing for themselves. “Gee, thanks mom and dad,” they might say sarcastically. Can you blame them?

I’m not throwing stones here - God knows I’m as imperfect a parent as the next guy. All I’m saying is that growing up, children don’t invest in themselves - they don’t know how. It’s wonderfully encouraging to see a small group of young adults who have been well trained and, as a result, are able to handle the stresses of this world. On the flip side, there are lots of young people who not only haven’t been exposed to God’s Word, but also have tremendous debt to their account, weighing them down before they even get a start on life.

A parent who chooses to be lazy, *not* addressing or nipping something in the bud, as necessary and timely, is essentially taking a potential credit and depositing it into their kid’s account as a debit, often without the child realizing what’s being done. It isn’t until later on in life that the child realizes the full impact of the “bad deposits” their parent(s) made to their account, and the compounding issue of “interest” on top of that!

Parents, be good investors. Children, be forgiving of your parents, for they are flawed just like you. God is patient, but He is also demanding. When He delegates authority to parents, He makes those people investors. Even a parent that abandons their child has made an investment, depositing

“You’re not worth it” to their child’s account. That’s a heavy burden to carry around, even as an adult. Thank God we are made His children, adopted into His perfect family at salvation.

He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

— Ephesians 1:5-6

If you’re a parent, be a good one. Don’t shrink away from conflict with your kids; embrace it as an opportunity to teach them a lesson. All children are born totally depraved, with natures that want nothing to do with God and everything to do with themselves. It’s *your* job to stand firm in the faith, encouraging and disciplining, whichever God deems as a “credit”, not a “debit”. That is love.

Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

— 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

Good parental investing far outweighs any success on Wall Street. What good is leaving your children with an inheritance that perishes? The critical deposits are the spiritual ones, and they are time-sensitive windows of opportunity. Make them count when you have the chance - it’s much harder to reinvest when the “stock market” has crashed or is severely depressed. Don’t saddle your kids with debt because you’re too self-absorbed to be a good parent. It’s difficult enough out there without us sending our kids out into the world with clipped wings.

Practicing Being Present

Being present. Why is that so difficult? Is anyone actually “there” anymore when they are conversing with another?

Go to the local fast food restaurant and watch how people, families even, treat each other. Their actions say, “You’re not worth my full attention, so I’ll offer you an occasional acknowledgement, either verbally or visually, so you don’t feel like whatever you’re saying to me is completely worthless.”

In my own life I’ve found that with the majority of people I talk to, especially with those in younger generations, if I want the conversation to last any longer than 10-15 seconds, I must be willing to be their sounding board. Frankly, that’s about the only time I can get most people to stop staring at their smart phones. People vomit all over me (figuratively speaking) and then close down whenever I try to respond. It’s offensive.

Human interaction isn’t the same as it used to be. I’m not quite sure how to explain what I see, other than people don’t actually care about what other people might have to say. The opportunity to converse meaningfully seems all but lost nowadays. It’s an affront of the most severe degree.

The most important person (besides the Lord) in your life ought to be the one standing right in front of you at any given moment. In other words, it’s really important for others to know that you are invested in them. Consider Jesus. That is how He was. When you read the Gospels you see a man trying to connect with people.

Connecting with others cannot happen if one of the parties isn’t present - I’m speaking figuratively, of course.

Consider how devoted Jesus was to those who were around Him. When

He dined with them, He gave them His full attention. They were assured of His presence. It didn't matter who it was either, be they prostitutes or tax collectors. Jesus was present. Are you like that?

Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

— **John 13:33-35**

Do you see how present Jesus was with those He was with? He practiced what He preached, for it's a genuine show of love to be present when you're physically with someone and, conversely, not so much if you're not. I, personally, find it very discouraging to speak to the backside of someone's cell phone while they feign interest in whatever shred of conversation might be occurring between us.

Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

— **1 Thessalonians 5:11**

I think some of my greatest regrets as a father is knowing how many times over the years I wasn't present when my sons were speaking to me (I'm not saying I did that all the time). In retrospect, my greatest fear is that they took my failure personally. I mean, isn't it understandable that a son would feel a bit unloved if their father were absent from a conversation *while* it was occurring? Love is the tie that binds us. It's the fabric of Christ, Himself, who *is* love incarnate, who always made a point of being present with others.

Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

One of the greatest things about a relationship with Christ is simply knowing that He's always present, always listening, always loving. We ought to practice being present like Jesus was. Maybe, just maybe, people will see more of Christ in us; that His presence would become our own in a way. This would be truly good - people would experience His precious love as a result.

The Voice of My Father

The assistant coach penciled in “K”, for strikeout, on the scorecard...

“C’mon, Johnny...damnit!!!” The assistant coach’s shoulders sagged as Johnny’s father, the head coach, threw his hat onto the cinder in front of the little league dugout, creating a little dust storm near his feet. The degrading, tyrannical speech continued publicly, as Johnny slipped by his irate father, wishing he were invisible in that moment. His teammates inside the dugout didn’t know whether to fear for themselves or for the coach’s son, Johnny, who was going to feel it, big time, on the ride home and presumably afterwards. Depression swept over an otherwise bright, sunny day. Some of us would look over to the assistant coach, but he wasn’t looking up from his clipboard...his countenance reflecting a sense of shame.

Johnny, an all-star athlete in multiple sports, had fortunately learned how to channel the basket full of emotions he had. What choice did he have, really? Awful. From my perspective in the dugout, looking around my coach’s knees to catch a glimpse of Johnny’s face, I think he seemed even better at it than his teammates. We were all floored the first time we witnessed such an outburst. I was the sensitive kid whose heart broke every time I saw it. As much as I craved a father figure in my life, I knew I didn’t want *that* (I’m not judging Johnny’s father, for I’m confident they loved each other, so please don’t misunderstand my writing here).

“Johnny” represents quite a few kids that I grew up with. I went through the public school system in the same town, with the same kids, starting with the first grade. I saw Johnny grow up and the pain in his eyes never waned, and it never seemed any less gnawing; if anything, by the time we were playing ball in high school, his father seemed more vocal, and not just at baseball games, but football, basketball, and track. Johnny was

everywhere...and so was his screaming father. The older we got, the more embarrassing it was...for all of us, too. However, the collective heart went out to Johnny, silently, often with teammates like myself trying to alleviate the sting of his father's words with a little extra personal encouragement.

"Nice job, Johnny," we'd say, each of us in our own way. He'd say thank you, but you could see it in his eyes, that our 'approval' was overcast by the shadow of his father's persistent disapproval. To this day, it makes me sad. As a father myself, having said things to my own sons that I wish I could take back, the whole scene breaks my heart. Nobody's perfect, neither father nor son. However, fathers have a special place in the lives of their children. It's a precious responsibility that's never afforded "do-overs". Once the words are out, and the cuts are made, the best anyone can hope for is that they heal quickly and the scarring is minimal.

Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

— **Colossians 3:21**

An "exasperated" child is an angry child (the Greek word translated "exasperate" in **Colossians 3:21** is *erethizo*, and it means "to stir up, arouse to anger, provoke, irritate, incite" - Strong's). Anger is a destructive force and few things are able to contend with it. It doesn't meld with love, either, when it's unwarranted. Righteous anger has its place, but it must stay there, never breaching its boundaries and somehow overrunning God's love.

BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.

— **Ephesians 4:26-27**

By exasperating their sons, fathers create an opportunity for the devil to gain an advantage. Depending on how long the wounds take to heal, that

advantage may exist for a very long time. Satan's demons know this and will assuredly be inciting fathers like Johnny's to project their own anger issues upon their undeserving sons. These are a type of the "flaming arrows" the Bible speaks about.

Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

— Ephesians 6:13-16

The kingdom of darkness is going to fan the flames of anger in fathers; and it'll do the same with the objects of said anger, the children, as they react. While father fires at son, and son at father, Satan's got both in his crosshairs. This kind of familial carnage is very effective at distracting people from the things that truly matter in this life, starting with Jesus Christ.

I sometimes wonder what Johnny's life would be like had Jesus been his dad. I can't say for sure that Jesus wouldn't have said something like, "I know you could've done better than that", but I can say with certainty that He'd never project anything on His son that was ungodly, misguided, and explosive as a result. Even in His criticism, He'd be looking to edify His son. He'd never lose His self-control and He'd never make any cuts into his son unless he was looking to remove something ungodly.

My prayer for Johnny nowadays is that he realizes that he was a whipping boy. He took the lashes when his father lacked the strength to take them upon himself. What Johnny needs to realize is that while *he* suffered, the truth is that his *father* was suffering even more in his own soul. Little

league outbursts aren't about the kids, they're about the adults (I've seen my fair share of mothers losing their self-control, too, and it's no less painful to watch). My heart goes out to Johnny, even today, knowing that it doesn't have to be this way.

Johnny was a good kid. Like any kid, he just wanted to hear his father say, "Son, I'm proud of you - truly" ...and he wanted to be convinced of it...no, I'm-proud-of-you-BUT...just peace and love. Now, to Johnny I say that this day may never come. He may long for his father's approval until the day he dies, aching long after his father dies, even...suffering because a hole exists in his heart that was meant to be filled by one person, his father. Satan wants Johnny to remain a slave to this situation, even as an adult with kids of his own, but I submit the following.

For you have not 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!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

— Romans 8:15-18

If Johnny's day of reconciliation never comes with his earthly father, may he understand that his Father in Heaven chose his life for him by placing him under the guardianship of his father in time. May he embrace the fact that his father is/was a flawed man, just like the rest of us. May his own anger towards him, or his mother, or anyone for that matter who should have "done a better job", melt away with the knowledge of his own adoption as a child of God. May he embrace the fact that a greater reconciliation has occurred on the day he was saved.

Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our

hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

— **Galatians 4:6-7**

Who knows, maybe before all of this chaos is behind him, Johnny will realize that God placed him into his father's life so that he'd be pressed down to pleading for deliverance, be saved, and then eventually evangelize the one who exacerbated him. God works in mysterious ways, that's for sure.

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. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

— **Romans 8:28-32**

Johnny, you were meant for bigger and better things, so says your Father in Heaven, the One who was by your side as you took those lashings from your earthly father, the One who ordained each one, as painful as they may have been, the One who knew you'd be reading this blog this day, filled with love and gratitude. Do not let the sun go down on your anger for even one more day. Your life is precious, for you are a child of God...forgive and be free...and do not listen to the distant echoes of your father's strained voice...instead, hear the voice of your Father in Heaven, and be at peace.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has

forgiven you.

— Ephesians 4:31-32

"Want to pray with me...?"

Ding-ding...my cell phone informs me of an incoming text message. I guess wrongly at who it could possibly be this early in the morning... partially, I suppose, because one wouldn't suspect it originated from within the house...but I'll get to that.

It's 7:30am and I'm warmly nestled into my recliner near the window. I'm already finding myself leaning forward to avoid the sun's glare, which has been coming over the tops of the trees now for the past 10-15 minutes, making my left eye squint. While I finish reading a portion of the Gospel of John, I make it through the "Lord's Prayer" in **John 17** when the cell phone comes alive.

It's my wife, texting me from the bedroom. It says simply, "do you want to pray with me this morning?" She's invited me to share in that precious time that she reserves for Him every morning before her feet even hit the floor. I feel honored. I text back (which seems odd, given our proximity to one another), "sure!"

It hasn't been until recently in my own spiritual walk that I've been so encouraged at the prospect of group prayer (whether it's two or more). I suppose it's just been a function of my I-like-to-fly-solo type personality (it's not a selfish thing, I've just always assumed I could get more accomplished in a day that way). As I've learned, I've been missing out. I've learned that praying together is a special kind of ointment for the soul...a different eye salve for one to "see" with. It's a wonderful blessing to be joined in prayer through a joint fellowship with the Lord in that most intimate of times.

As I listened to my wife pray, I realized that the invitation was for my benefit - that the Lord wanted her to minister to me. I heard her pray for

her pastor in the third person - the silly side of me was like, "Hey, that's me!" I heard her pray for things that I didn't know she even thought to pray about...things that are really good for a shepherd to hear from one of his sheep. I was encouraged and I'm sure God was pleased.

Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing. But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Live in peace with one another. We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.

*Rejoice always; **pray without ceasing**; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

— 1 Thessalonians 5:11-18

Prayer takes the sting out of self-absorption. It whisks us away from spiritual myopia. By joining hands with others, it expands our sense of awareness, reminding us that we aren't alone and that others are rooting for us. "With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:18).

It's critically important to our own spiritual growth that we pray in the privacy of our own hearts. "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you" (**Matthew 6:6**). However, group prayer has a place, too.

"Want to pray with me...?"

Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.

— **Matthew 18:19-20**

The Lord has amplified this even through the church that I pastor. Every so often, when our "prayer warriors" are moved to organize it, we hold a prayer vigil for those in the local assembly that are hurting. We stand in a large circle, holding hands, being encouraged. I often think about what that must look like from above...what the heavenly perspective must be - a big circle. A circle has no sharp edges and it symbolizes unbroken unification.

What a beautiful sight for the angels to see, our collective prayer wafting upwards, a sweet aroma, to the throne of grace.

Wedding Vows

According to *www.theknot.com*, the standard wedding vows read:

"I, ____, take thee, ____, to be my wedded husband/wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge thee my faith [or] pledge myself to you."

Sounds about right, I guess.

Now, let me draw your attention to two key parts of these vows...

First, marriage is a covenant before the Holy God of the Universe. Only death releases a party from a holy covenant, hence the part of the vow that says, *"till death do us part."* Therefore, in God's eyes, marriage is a lifelong promise. Period.

"Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery."

— **Luke 16:18**

Second, there's the promise within the wedding vow that says, *"for better, for worse."* Now, this is where things get "interesting" nowadays. I'm wholly convinced that some people getting married in the eyes of God are doing so in violation of the covenant itself. If a person is in breach of said covenant while they are declaring it, how can they ever hope to abide by it? They are at a great risk of being miserable. Allow me to explain.

Suppose a person agrees to marriage, but in their heart they have wittingly included, though not verbalized, an "out" that says, "If this person doesn't measure up, I'm going to divorce them and move on." That's not a

covenant, that's a lie. That's more like hedging a bet on a "hot stock" on Wall Street than entering into a marriage. As in the case of a bad investment, this person will simply dump the stock (divorce their spouse) when it fails to meet expectations.

What happened to the "*for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health*" part of their wedding vow? The truth is that it never really existed in their heart. However, **in the eyes of God**, the covenant was made "*till death do us part.*"

Many people marry in the eyes of God without regard for the completeness of the covenant they vow to. Marriage involves a *whole person*, not just the parts that are so-called "desirable" (God knows many of said parts sag over time - LOL). A person who says, "First time is for love, second is for money" is a complete buffoon. When I was a waiter, I listened to a woman say, right in front of her husband who just sat there like a beaten down donkey, "If I had to do it all over again, I'd marry for money." I was flabbergasted, but the husband just feigned a sheepish grin. To this day, it still bothers me.

I fear that "whole people" aren't vowing to marry "whole people"; rather, it appears that marriage is being treated more like a business contract, where one party agrees to fulfill a finite number of duties for the other, and vice versa. If one party fails to fulfill their part of the contract, the contract is null and void, and therefore divorce is imminent. That's not the holy covenant, "*till death do us part.*" That's something entirely different, yet it is the normal attitude going into marriage nowadays.

What's the point I'm making? Am I trying to make divorcees feel guilt or shame? Not at all, I'm just saying that when it comes to covenants made in God's eyes, "*God looks at the heart*" (**1 Samuel 16:7**). If a person cannot accept the *whole person* they are considering as their spouse, then they ought not be married. Too many people rush into holy matrimony without

regard for the way God sees it, as a *covenant*.

Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words.

When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.

Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.

— Ecclesiastes 5:2-7

The greatest marriage of all time is that which is ordained between Jesus Christ and His Bride, the Church. Consider His own promises to us, members of said Church. Consider that He has already agreed to our hand in marriage, knowing full well how awful, wretched, and unfaithful we would be to Him. While He is the perfect Husband, we are terrible wives. And yet, since we are covenanted to Him, He never divorces us! Amazing, right? Well, that's our prototype example for marriage.

So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.

— Ephesians 5:28-31

Wedding vows involve two *whole people* in the eyes of God, just like whole people are involved in the wedding between Christ and His Bride. We don't get just a part of Him and He doesn't get just a part of us - we get *all* of each other! The holy marriage covenant is something that cannot be broken until death of one or both of the parties. This is why earthly marriages do not persist in Heaven (**Matthew 22:30**).

The key point the Spirit's making here is one that He's been making from my pulpit as of late.

God deals with whole people, not bits and pieces of them. When He betrothed His Church to His Son in eternity past, He saw each of us as individuals, saving those whose whole person was willing to enter into said marriage. He doesn't say, "Oh, look at that person there, they're really nice...or they are pretty...or rich;" rather, He says, "Are you, the whole you, willing to marry my only begotten Son on my terms? Are you willing to enter into this covenant? For you must enter as a whole person, not half-cocked or half-hearted or under the inferior premise of a business contract."

Nobody's perfect except God. However, imperfect people can indeed make holy covenants in His eyes that bind themselves "till death do they part."

If you're not married, then think long and hard about your prospects, knowing that God expects you to accept all of a person, "for better, for worse" throughout the remainder of your natural life. If that's not something you can live with, then don't get married. And just some parting words of wisdom...never enter into a marriage assuming the other person is going to change in a way that is agreeable to you. There's a good chance that, given the fact that the human flesh gets worse over time, that your spouse may never change, but rather worsen!!!...but I'll leave that for another day...

SUFFERING AND PERSEVERANCE

Suffering is an essential component of the spiritual life. In fact, we are sanctified by it, for there are just some things that must be learned as a result of suffering. Jesus Christ, our prototype, suffered more than anyone else.

Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

— John 15:20

By the grace of God we are able to withstand any form of suffering we may need to endure, to His glory.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

— Romans 5:1-6

In our suffering we ought not depend upon our human power, lest we be captured by our great enemy. We must always turn to the Word of God, the very power of God and His Spirit for deliverance.

SUFFERING AND PERSEVERANCE

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 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. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen.

— **1 Peter 5:8-11**

Suffering demands reliance on God. This is a very good thing, for it gives us the proof of our faith, establishing confidence and conviction while bringing glory to God.

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

— **1 Peter 1:6-9**

May we all rest in the joy of knowing that our Lord provides, saves, and delivers.

*The righteous cry, and the LORD hears
And delivers them out of all their troubles.
The LORD is near to the brokenhearted
And saves those who are crushed in spirit.
Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
But the LORD delivers him out of them all.*

Diary of a Journeyman

— Psalm 34:17-19

I'm Exhausted. Where's the Spirit?

Have you ever returned home from a long day and literally sunk into your favorite chair? Have you ever gotten into bed and you're so exhausted, feeling so pressed down and heavy, that it feels like the line between you and your mattress becomes blurred? Do you wish you had more strength, stamina, power? Have you ever wondered about the power of the Holy Spirit the Bible speaks so profusely about? I mean, where does He fit into the equation? He is omnipotent, after all, right? For years, I was confused about such things, even thinking that if I was weary, maybe I wasn't filled, or minimally, somehow thwarting His power with my flesh. But I was wrong...very wrong.

Every man of God, doing the will of God, living his life as unto the Lord, gets tired. And I'm not just talking about pastors and evangelists. I'm talking about everyone, man or woman, who's put their hand to the plow. There's a reason why Jesus' parables often depict physical labor. It's because when He created us, He knew that He'd be able to relate to humanity through the very real existence of exhaustion, not just spiritually, but physically as well.

On the one hand, we have the power of the Spirit; on the other, we all get tired. We hear preachers say things like, "You can't do anything good aside from the power of the Spirit!" And they are correct, but statements like that require qualification.

Why do we grow tired if God never does, given the fact that we live and walk, as believers, *by* His power? *"If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit"* (Galatians 5:25). It's a good question, and it requires a good answer, because many have missed the point and taken polar stances on the subject. Some suppose that the power of the Spirit is to be taken academically and therefore by exerting their own power, they do nothing

good and still grow tired in the process. Others suppose that the power of the Spirit will go so far as to lift them onto their feet, walk them to a soup kitchen, and feed the poor...and if it doesn't, well then, the Spirit mustn't want them to do it. This group never grows tired because they never actually *do* anything.

The truth is that we may be both tired *and* walking by the Spirit. The implication is that although the Spirit empowers us to press on, since we're human, we grow tired from physical, emotional, and spiritual exertion. As believers, God demands that we employ ourselves as "*God's fellow workers*" (1 Corinthians 3:9). However, the Bible never states that we are immune to fatigue, even when filled by the Spirit. In fact, it says just the opposite. Lazy Christians would prefer I didn't write such things, but I'd be dishonest if I didn't - I'd be grieving the "*Spirit of Christ*" (Romans 8:9; Ephesians 4:30). By the way, I can just as easily say that I'd be grieving Christ, Himself, and the Word, too, for they are essentially the same.

We may rightly say that if we have Jesus Christ, then we have His Spirit (aka the Holy Spirit) and vice versa. This means that whatever Christ's desires are, they are the same as the Spirit's; and whatever the Spirit's are, they are, in fact, the same as Christ's. Oh, and Jesus Christ is the Word, the *Logos*, which is another name for Holy Scripture, something the Spirit of Christ inspired. Do you see the "connective tissue" yet? I hope so. If not, let me help you.

Consider the will of the One who asks us to put our hand to the plow, that is, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Master. Know that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit will reveal the same things to us. In other words, when you read the Bible, you are reading Jesus Christ's thoughts and the inspiration of His Spirit. These three things are never inconsistent with one another. Therefore, when we read in scripture, "*Christ the power of God*" (1 Corinthians 1:24), the "*power of the Spirit*" (Romans 15:19), and the "*word of God is quick and powerful*" (Hebrews 4:12 - KJV), we may rightly conclude

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that the “power” in view is the same power in all cases, just represented differently. How awesome, and simplifying, is that perspective? Even so, what does this all mean to us believers, who have been endowed with said power?

And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

— **2 Corinthians 12:9**

To answer the question on the table, we need a little more theology. Again, we consider Jesus, for He became a man in part to “sympathize” (**Hebrews 4:15**) with us, including our labor to do good as humans. As God, He could not be tempted, “for God cannot be tempted” (**James 1:13**). However, as a man, He “has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (**Hebrews 4:15**). This means that the man who asks us to labor for Him understands what it’s like to labor, and grow tired in the process.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

— **Philippians 2:5-8**

So let’s just wrap our arms around the abundance of doctrine set before us. What we have is a nice picture of the eternal unity between Jesus Christ, the Word, and the Holy Spirit. We also have the truth that Jesus was temptable, which means that in order for the human side of the God-man to remain sinless (Jesus Christ is 100% God and 100% man simultaneously), Jesus had to rely on a power source that wasn’t of His human nature. It’s in this reality that we humans are able to relate directly to Jesus...especially

regarding our current topic - human fatigue.

Let's take all of this back to where we started from. The title of this blog entry is, *"I'm exhausted. Where's the Spirit?"* The recurring question is, "Why would I *ever* be tired if I have the power of God literally inside of me, which is tantamount to saying I have Jesus Christ, the Word, and the Spirit indwelling me, filling me with their power?" Well, without overcomplicating the supernatural things of God, let me give you this.

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

— Matthew 11:28-30

Do not make the mistake of thinking that Jesus is implying that His "yoke" is without labor. It's true, His yoke is easier to bear than the world's, but the implication is still that as believers, we are yoked. This implies real labor, and therefore real fatigue, hence His allusion to rest.

The Word of God speaks clearly about the strength of man. It says that without the power of God, man is incapable of bearing up under load. Yet, and heed my words, the Word of God never says that man, even holy men, won't ever grow tired. They do. And it isn't a bad thing; rather, in many ways, it's proof of one's effort in doing good. In fact, even the perfect One, Jesus Christ, was worn out from time to time, having to break away from the intense labor of ministry. We know the pressure was so real at one point that, *"His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground"* (**Luke 22:44b**). Where was the Spirit then? Right where He always was, empowering Jesus. Yet Jesus experienced real strain.

Jesus had compassion on humanity, having experienced it firsthand, so He encouraged His disciples to rest.

I'm Exhausted. Where's the Spirit?

*The apostles *gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. And He *said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.)*

— **Mark 6:30-31**

While it's impossible to describe every nuance between the physical and spiritual parts of a believer, what we can say from scripture is that physical and spiritual stresses interact. But how can this be if we have the very power of God within us? I mean, why doesn't God just bear the complete load for us, regardless of the type of stress? Why do we *ever* become tired? I suppose, theologically, it'd be a lot "tidier" if we could just postulate that since we can't do anything good without God's power, then we might as well just kick our feet up, sit in our recliners and wait until that power physically lifts us up to "*visit orphans and widows in their distress*" (**James 1:27b**). That's silly talk, isn't it? It is, based on scripture, yet some Christians live just that way. It's how they justify never doing anything for anyone else...ever!

This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

— **John 15:12-13**

Ask anyone who's laid down his life for others if they've ever grown weary doing so while being filled with the Spirit. If they're honest, they'll all affirm what I'm writing here. Heck, you don't even need to do that - all you really have to do is read your Bible. Find a godly character and search for the truth about this.

While every believer is indwelt with the very power of God, we know from scripture that we grow tired under the pressures of life. We also

know that even Jesus, in His humanity, grew tired, and He was perfect! If we read the whole of the Bible, we see prophets, apostles, and disciples all growing weary as a result of doing God's good work in time. Fighting takes its toll, even if it's with the help of God's divine power, as believers. Remember, the Bible says the Spirit is our "Helper" (John 15:26), it never says that we are His little puppets on strings. We ought never shy away from potential exhaustion on the false premise that fatigue somehow means we lack the power of God in us. The Bible is chalk full of examples to the contrary.

But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. 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;

— 2 Timothy 4:5-7

Stress Fractures

“You’re what we runners call a ‘Clydesdale’,” said my podiatrist, chuckling to a phantom audience of other “runners”.

We both had a good laugh after he explained that there actually exists a category of runner in organized running called “The Clydesdales.” As you might have already guessed, it is an exclusive club for runners over a certain size / weight. Feel free to draw any / all conclusions about why yours truly is an honorary member, as per my doctor. Let’s just assume that we will never see a man with my frame winning the Boston Marathon anytime soon. ‘Nough said?

The reason for my visit to the podiatrist was because my foot hurt. I had trained for and run a 5K race and didn’t even know I had injured it until about a week later. It turns out that I had a stress fracture in one of my metatarsals (the long thin bones spanning from your toes to the arch of your foot). The cause of stress fractures is very simple: overuse coupled with rapid changes in running conditions and / or surfaces. I was guilty of all of the above. Add to that my less-than-marathonesque frame and I’m a Clydesdale just waiting for injury!

Now, the strange thing about stress fractures is that, as was the case with mine, even a trained physician can’t always see them on x-rays. In fact, they often diagnose stress fractures “clinically”, through physical examination only. As my podiatrist said during the visit, they are serious business because if left untreated, they can easily turn into full-blown fractures.

Stress fractures are interesting injuries because nobody can actually see them, yet they are the cause of significant pain. There are no outward indications that an injury has occurred. Left untreated the pain continues to

worsen, which is the human body telling the athlete to take a break before a much worse injury occurs. Thankfully, the prognosis for recovery is very good as bones tend to heal predictably. The key to recovery is strict adherence to doctor's orders. In my case, "No running for eight to ten weeks."

This blog occurred to me while running (I'm mostly healed now and elated to be back on the roads again - woo hoo). I thought about how in the spiritual life we all suffer stress fractures that are invisible to others. They, too, are the result of overuse and rapidly changing conditions. Most believers nowadays are pretty sore from plugging on in a world that despises Christ. And most are guilty of not heeding the warning signs.

*They made me caretaker of the vineyards,
But I have not taken care of my own vineyard.*

— Song of Solomon 1:6

We believers in Christ must learn to avoid "overuse". We must tend to our own vineyards, taking time off as necessary to recuperate, allowing the Word to wash over us, to mend us. Even Jesus took time away from His ministry to tend to His own vineyard from time to time. "After [Jesus] had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone" (Matthew 14:23). The prescription for healing spiritual stress fractures is found in the Word.

*Pleasant words are a honeycomb,
Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.
There is a way which seems right to a man,
But its end is the way of death.*

— Proverbs 16:24-25

Solomon was a wise man who gave a lot of sound counsel, as is the case

above. The world tells us that if we want to excel in this life we must push all the more, sacrificing life and limb for the sake of heroics. But this is folly - the Bible says as much, "*There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death*" (v25).

As is the case when we go to the doctor's office suffering with a stress fracture, we must be the ones to accept our pain and articulate it openly. In the spiritual life, we do this how Jesus did - we take time out of our busy schedules and we pray, "*casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you*" (1 Peter 5:7).

If you find yourself sidelined with a stress fracture, take your medicine and sit it out. If you push any harder, you might break something, incurring a much longer healing process and likely greater pain as well. It isn't worth it, trust me - been there, done that. Learn to recognize the symptoms as they arise and don't be arrogant and ignore them. God has put certain safeguards in place to warn us when we're overdoing it. Being our Creator, we ought to listen to Him, right?

If you're a "Clydesdale" like me, be extra careful when you're out there "*[running] in such a way that you may win*" (1 Corinthians 9:24). It's great to run the race, but overtraining that results in injury means you can't run at all! What good is that? You're not even competing at that point! Pace yourself and never be afraid to listen to your senses. God gave them to you for this very purpose!

Enjoy the race, my friends...we only run it once!

Sufferin' Fer MEEEsus!

*He made the moon for the seasons;
The sun knows the place of its setting.
You appoint darkness and it becomes night,
In which all the beasts of the forest prowl about.
The young lions roar after their prey
And seek their food from God.
When the sun rises they withdraw
And lie down in their dens.
Man goes forth to his work
And to his labor until evening.
O LORD, how many are Your works!
In wisdom You have made them all;
The earth is full of Your possessions.*

— Psalms 104:19-24

Whose possessions is the earth full of? The Lord's. If you lost everything tomorrow, and you understood plainly in that moment that God willed it so, would you truly share in Job's sentiments? *"He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.' Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God" (Job 1:21-22)*. Job had just lost what the world would call "everything", his livelihood, his possessions, even his children! Through it all, he knew God had His hands in it. We may rightly conclude that God willed it, knowing how He personally unleashed Satan onto Job, the one the Lord, Himself, described as *"no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man" (Job 1:8)*.

Most Christians "fight the good fight" for all the wrong causes, it seems. Oh, they'll suggest they are "sufferin' fer JEEEsus", but they are liars. I wonder what it would look like if the average "Christian" was to make a

pie chart out of the time/energy spent during their week on material gains versus the time/energy spent on spiritual matters. If they're honest, most will have to say they've been "sufferin' fer MEEEsus".

The meaningful question here isn't whether this happens or not (it does), it's "why?" Why does man spend so much of his precious life on earth striving after things that have no eternal value whatsoever??? And once a person latches onto that perspective, what are some of the other manifestations in their life? Do they love more and fear less, or fear more and love less? Consider **1 John 4:18** and you'll have your answer. Love your life and you will fear losing it.

Jesus Christ was constantly trying to give His disciples the Heavenly perspective. It's the same one that looked down upon Job as he was suffering undeservedly. It's the same one that His Father had while His Son died an agonizing death on His Cross. It's the same one we ought to have right now. So, the question remains, "Why are we so hung up on material things when they are merely temporary...props in a theater, where the world is the stage and we, merely playactors?" Physical death to a believer means promotion! "*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain*" (**Philippians 1:21**).

Darn it!!! - WHAT...ARE...WE...SO...AFRAID...OF?!!!

Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.

— **Matthew 10:28-31**

The simple answer to our recurring question is...are you ready for this?...**NOTHING!!!** That's right, absolutely nothing. With the proper perspective,

we are set free from fear, for *“there is no fear in love”* (1 John 4:18) and *“God is love”* (1 John 4:8), so a true believer has every right to feel invincible, because they are. What’s the very worst thing that could happen (so says the world)? You die? Big deal. You get to be with Jesus and shed *“the body of this death”* (Romans 7:24).

If you fear losing a grip on your life, you fear a shadow. In fact, losing your life is something Jesus spoke of specifically. *“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it”* (Luke 9:24). Why hold onto something that’s dead to you? At salvation, your old life was put in the grave, new things have come. If you’re truly born again and saved, even death has no power over you. *“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things”* (Romans 8:31-32)?

All of this makes *no* sense to the world. Yet it makes perfect sense to God.

*For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD.*

— Isaiah 55:8

Jesus labored daily for the sake of His disciples, knowing their fleshly weaknesses in this area. They were constantly failing to maintain the godly perspective, just like we continue to do nowadays. Until we lose this body, this battle will rage on (Romans 7). In the interim, may we find encouragement simply knowing that the early disciples, even the pillars of the early church, the Apostles, failed miserably time and again. We are imperfect creatures made perfect in Christ. We drag around a dead man with us, which tends to hinder our progress. Nonetheless, *“greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world”* (1 John 4:4). If God says He’ll sanctify us, then He certainly will (Philippians 1:6).

Let us not forget what's really important in this life. It's not our next meal, for, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD'" (Matthew 4:4). It's not our shelter, for, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20). The important things in life have literally nothing to do with the things the world will posture as important. In fact, they are diametrically opposed. The world sows fear whenever Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* is threatened. The Lord sows Himself, love, which transcends worldly preoccupations. May our perspectives be changed the way Jesus fought to change those of His disciples in the early church.

And the disciples came to the other side of the sea, but they had forgotten to bring any bread. And Jesus said to them, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." They began to discuss this among themselves, saying, "He said that because we did not bring any bread."

But Jesus, aware of this, said, "You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up? How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

— **Matthew 16:5-12**

Jesus taught His disciples to focus on the things that really matter in this life, to understand the limitations of the human mind, to see past all the lies. His gift to His disciples was His perspective. It's the same gift believers are given as God sanctifies us experientially.

So, the next time you run out of butter for your morning toast, thank God for the toast instead of complaining about it being dry. The next time your kid misses the game-winning shot, give them a hug instead of a lecture. The next time your boss gets on your nerves, be grateful you have a job. Never allow such things to distract you. Perspective is everything, my friends. This truly *is* "God's country", and He gives and takes when and how He wants, regardless of your flesh's reaction. There's nothing to fear, nothing to sweat, only faith, hope, and love...and the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Love your life, whether you're full or hungry right now. And don't focus on the bread, focus on the Giver, the One who gives Himself, the Bread of Life.

"For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world." Then they said to Him, "Lord, always give us this bread." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst."

— John 6:33-35

THE WORD OF GOD

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

— **Hebrews 4:12**

Nothing is more powerful in our lives than the Word of God.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

— **2 Timothy 3:16-17**

The Word of God is our sustenance.

But He answered and said, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.'"

— **Matthew 4:4**

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.

— **John 6:63**

Jesus Christ is the Word.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light

shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.

There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. John *testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'"*

For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.

— John 1:1-18

The Bible Is God's Testimony

Testimony - a: a solemn declaration usually made orally by a witness under oath in response to interrogation by a lawyer or authorized public official; b: firsthand authentication of a fact: evidence; c: an outward sign

Synecdoche - a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole (such as fifty sail for fifty ships), the whole for a part (such as society for high society), the species for the genus (such as cutthroat for assassin), the genus for the species (such as a creature for a man), or the name of the material for the thing made (such as boards for stage)

— Merriam-Webster Dictionary

God has given His own testimony. We know it as the Bible, Holy Scripture, the Word of God (aka “the law”, which is a synecdoche used to describe the whole of scripture). The Bible is a formal declaration from our most trustworthy source. It is God’s self-declaration, His own account of who He is and what He is like. If anyone has the right to speak about God, then it is God, Himself. That is unless you believe God is a liar (in contradiction to “[God] cannot lie” - **Titus 1:2**). I suppose if you believe God can lie or even tell half-truths about Himself, then you might as well throw the whole Bible in the garbage can.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

— 2 Timothy 3:16-17

The Greek word for “*inspired*” (v16) means “God-breathed”, from *theopneustos* (*theos* = God + *pneo* = breathe out). This means that the Bible is the very expression of God, not man. And since God is perfect and cannot lie, then His word (aka His “law”) must also be perfect,

always accurate, divinely describing Him and His ways.

For example, note the very first phrase here:

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul;

The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.

The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;

The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.

The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;

The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.

— **Psalms 19:7-9**

The Hebrew word for “perfect” (v7), from *temim*, means “blameless, complete, entire, full, intact, perfect, unblemished, whole without defect”. Holy Scripture is superlative in every way. In a practical sense, the best way to apprehend it is to consider it untouchable, unchangeable, immutable. As soon as man supposes the right to question or modify it in any way, he has taken it upon himself to question the veracity of *all* of it. The Bible is meant to be taken as it was presented, pristinely as well as wholly.

At the end of **Psalms 19:7**, the Word says “*The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.*” In the Hebrew, the word used for “simple” refers to naive ignorance. “*The naive believes everything, but the sensible man considers his steps*” (**Proverbs 14:15**). However, the original language does not describe someone with a learning disability. In fact, the onus of responsibility remains with the individual. In other words, this person is willingly simpleminded. The ancient Hebrews would have described this person as being a door left standing open. Today, we’d call this person “open-minded”, which would be a compliment. In the context of Holy Scripture, open-mindedness is the broad way that leads to destruction (**Matthew 7:13**); yet, isn’t so-called “open-mindedness” en vogue today? You bet. In fact, such philosophical living is what is *encouraged*, despite

what the Almighty Creator has to say about it.

The result of challenging the Word as it stands is as God warns; spiritually open-minded people are never settled, entertaining counterfeit truths that are never meant to set them free (**John 8:32**), as James writes, “*being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways*” (**James 1:8**). Such is the self-described “agnostic”, which is derived from two Greek words that combine to mean, “without knowledge”. The Latin word for this is “ignoramus.” To call oneself an agnostic is to declare oneself ignorant, yet these same people boast in their folly.

*But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.
The way of the wicked is like darkness;
They do not know over what they stumble.
My son, give attention to my words;
Incline your ear to my sayings.
Do not let them depart from your sight;
Keep them in the midst of your heart.
For they are life to those who find them
And health to all their body.
Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life.*

— **Proverbs 4:18-23**

One last comment about **Psalms 19:7**, “*The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.*” If we look closely enough, we see God’s base desire for man, “*who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (**1 Timothy 2:4**), in the phrase “*making wise the simple.*” Only immutable wisdom from the Word of God could ever do this for man, delivering a spiritually dead fool unto divine wisdom. “*He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but he who walks wisely will be delivered*” (**Proverbs 28:26**). But you see, in order for this to happen, a person must fundamentally

believe that the Word of God is His own testimony. This goes for Christians, too!

"For a Christian to doubt the Word of God is the grossest kind of self-contradiction."

— **John MacArthur**

I couldn't agree more. The saddest days for me lately are the ones when I meet a professing Christian who doubts, or even outrightly dismisses, the inerrancy of the Holy Bible. I've heard everything from, "Oh, that book's ancient, so we've got to 'get with the times,'" at which time my soul leaps up with, "Not as ancient as its author!", to "The Bible was written by a bunch of guys who lived thousands of years ago," at which time I recall that while man penned it, he is not the author. The One who inspired it is, that is God, Himself, as He declares it His Word, aka His Son (**John 1**), "*Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith*" (**Hebrews 12:2**).

Do not be "open-minded" about your faith, my dear fellow believers. Know that Holy Scripture is just that, holy! Do not be deceived or pressured into thinking that you are inferior in your righteous posture about the inerrancy of the Bible and its divine Author. Do not apologize for the fruit of your faith. Understand why the apostle Paul wrote, "But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3). A surefire way to justify Paul's fears, and my own for that matter, is to begin questioning the veracity of the Bible.

Always remember that there is no other book like the Bible. It is the very Word of God, His own testimony, the very "*mind of Christ*" (**1 Corinthians 2:16**). It is the manifestation of the mind of Christ's Spirit. It is the wellspring of all wisdom, delivering an otherwise distraught, ignorant person from the throes of spiritual death to true joy and enlightenment, "*The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the*

The Bible Is God's Testimony

LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Psalms 19:8).

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.”

— **John 6:63**

Dear Abby

Consider the following:

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

— James 1:5-8

When I was growing up, there was a columnist, Pauline Phillips, who went by the pen name Abigail “Abby” Van Buren (Abigail from the Book of 1 Samuel and Van Buren from the last name of the former U.S. president). She wrote a syndicated advice column published in multiple newspapers, beginning in 1956. Her popularity grew and the column, “Dear Abby”, sustained a loyal following until she died. Today, her daughter carries on the legacy.

Dear Abby’s current syndication company claims the column is “well-known for sound, compassionate advice, delivered with the straightforward style of a good friend.”

— Wikipedia

The Dear Abby column is a good indicator of how people will seek advice and counsel from others, even though scripture says, “*But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God...and it will be given to him*” (James 1:5). Whether it’s advice from a newspaper, a book, daily devotionals, or today’s en vogue medium, blogging, the “market” for giving advice is rather large. Heck, a person can go sit at the local diner and hear a plethora of advice

Dear Abby

being given over coffee every morning...some on the best way to plant tomatoes...others on the best spark plugs to buy for today's vehicles...and so on. Others may sit quietly off to the side, reading a different part of the newspaper, seeking an astrologist's counsel...something that's been going on for millennia.

*You are wearied with your many counsels;
Let now the astrologers,
Those who prophesy by the stars,
Those who predict by the new moons,
Stand up and save you from what will come upon you.*

— **Isaiah 47:13**

The prophet Isaiah obviously had very little faith in astrology, as evidenced by his sarcasm. Rightly so. Astrology is just another false ointment for the soul to tide a person over for a day...just another false eye salve pretending to impart clarity.

Regardless of the mode, people love to give and receive advice. I suppose it's one of the fundamental byproducts of coexisting in a world filled with so many unknowns.

The question naturally arises then, "What is the best advice a person can give?" And given the general realization that most people, even after hearing sound advice, don't always heed it, "How does one make advice stick?"

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

— **Chinese Proverb**

Most agree that there's truth in the above proverb (of course, it's a ripoff from the Bible - e.g. **Ephesians 4:28**). Wouldn't it be prudent to apply this

maxim to the advice we might give others?

Instead of simply addressing a problem with a one-time prescription, why not give a person a principle from the wellspring of wisdom, the Bible, which is able to serve as an ongoing remedy for a multitude of scenarios? That seems wise in and of itself, if not at least economical, right?

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

— 2 Timothy 3:16-17

If we're going to entertain the idea of doling out advice with any regularity, it behooves us to draw from a source worthy of doing so. Do we really want others leaning on our own understanding ("*do not lean on your own understanding*" - **Proverbs 3:5b**), or do we want them deriving their wisdom from the Holy Scriptures? My vote is for the latter...and God agrees.

So, the next time you're faced with the challenge of giving advice, consider the eternal righteousness of the Word of God. Consider how you might best serve our Master, Jesus Christ, in sharing His mind. Trust that His wisdom is in every way superior and edifying compared to your own.

The very best thing a person can ever give another to meditate on is Holy Scripture. Try it. You might enjoy the effects you see in others, as well as yourself.

O how I love Your law!

It is my meditation all the day.

Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies,

For they are ever mine.

Dear Abby

*I have more insight than all my teachers,
For Your testimonies are my meditation.
I understand more than the aged,
Because I have observed Your precepts.
I have restrained my feet from every evil way,
That I may keep Your word.
I have not turned aside from Your ordinances,
For You Yourself have taught me.
How sweet are Your words to my taste!
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
From Your precepts I get understanding;
Therefore I hate every false way.
Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.*

— Psalms 119:97-105

Man Wrote It, But God Authored the Bible

Skeptics love to point out that man wrote the Bible. In many ways, they rest their caps and their arguments against true faith in Jesus Christ on this very supposition. Me? Well, I guess I'm a bit like the apostle Peter, the one who relished the fact that every last bit of his confidence, spanning all the way back to the Gospel, itself, was affirmed by the Word of God.

The Bible *is* the Word of God. The words therein are not the basis for something mystical; they are to be taken for what they truly are, God's chosen words, every last one of them. To read the Bible is to hear the very voice of God. If we doubt this, then we doubt everything Jesus Christ ever said, for when He spoke, God spoke.

The apostle Peter spoke plainly about such things.

For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased" — and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.

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.

— 2 Peter 1:17-21

Peter makes two key statements here: "*no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation*" (v20) and "*no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will*" (v21). The Bible is self-authenticating. It makes no

apologies, nor did its human writers, about being divine. To think any less of the Bible is to venture into the modern skeptic's viewpoint that it can/should be interpreted as written by fallible man.

Man certainly wrote the Bible, but he is not the author. God is.

We find proof of this in the passage we just read above. The language that Peter uses is very important. For starters, he says, *"But know this first of all."* This is his way of saying, "this is of first importance; it's critical you never forget what I'm about to say!" He then writes those aforementioned statements, wiping out any attempt by man to usurp the authority of Holy Scripture, *"no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will."* Peter essentially removed the possibility of an honest man taking any responsibility for the contents of the Bible. Now, it's at this point that he explains exactly how the Bible was authored, *"but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."* The Greek word, *phero*, translated "moved" here means "to bring, to carry, to be borne," also translated "made" in v17. Warfield commented on this word, describing the Holy Spirit as the "bearer" of responsibility for Bible authorship.

The term used here is a very specific one. It is not to be confounded with guiding, or directing, or controlling, or even leading in the full sense of that word. It goes beyond all such terms, in assigning the effect produced specifically to the active agent. What is "borne" is taken up by the "bearer," and conveyed by the "bearer's" power, not its own, to the "bearer's" goal, not its own. The men who spoke from God are here declared, therefore, to have been taken up by the Holy Spirit and brought by His power to the goal of His choosing. The things which they spoke under this operation of the Spirit were therefore His things, not theirs. And that is the reason which is assigned why "the prophetic word" is so sure. Though spoken through the instrumentality of men, it is, by virtue of the fact that these men spoke "as borne by the Holy Spirit," an immediately Divine word.

This same Greek word, *phero*, is translated as “*driven along*” in **Acts 27:15**, denoting the absolute power of the one doing the driving. In the same way that the Holy Spirit “carried” the writers of the Bible, depositing them at a place of His own desire, the ocean “carried” a ship in the illustration Paul gives us when caught in a storm at sea. He and his shipmates had to surrender completely to the sovereignty of it, accepting wherever it chose to take them.

*When a moderate south wind came up, supposing that they had attained their purpose, they weighed anchor and began sailing along Crete, close inshore. But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo; and when the ship was caught in it and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and let ourselves be **driven along**.*

Running under the shelter of a small island called Clauda, we were scarcely able to get the ship's boat under control.

— Acts 27:13-16

Skeptics may cry, “To err is human!” In this thing, they are positively correct. Thank God the Bible was not “made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:21).

When God speaks, He speaks with absolute authority, regardless of the medium used. “For when [Jesus] received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased” (**2 Peter 1:17**). Want to guess what Greek word is used for “made” in v17? *Phero*. Why? The concept is identical. God spoke to Jesus the same way He speaks to us through scripture, with inerrancy. His words are no less authentic or divine when He uses writers instead of His own voice.

Whatever was written by the writers of the Bible was perfect because

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God “made” them write it that way, to His glory. To suggest anything less is to cast doubt on the entire canon of Holy Scripture, something Satan and the kingdom of darkness would love!

Nutrition and Ingredients Labels

The older I get, the more I find myself reading the labels on the back of food packaging. When I was younger and presuming invincibility, I would poke fun at those who used to do this. Now, here I am, looking down my nose, underneath my prescription glasses, trying to read all of the fine print regarding calories, vitamins and minerals, ingredients, etc.

It's a bit of a cruel joke when you think about it. By the time you become concerned about nutrition and ingredients labels, you have a hard time reading them! LOL - God certainly has a sense of humor, doesn't He?

I've been on a green tea kick as of late; more specifically, a green tea and honey kick (the honey makes all the difference, just sayin'). My favorite brand was all natural and around 180 calories per 23.5 fluid ounces of liquid gold (OK, maybe that's a slight exaggeration, but to each their own, right?). And that's not the whole of this wonderful tale of "man meets drink." For months, the local grocery store was selling these beauties for one-third the regular price! Woohoo! Life was good...until they disappeared off the shelves without a trace. I have since concluded that the store was simply clearing their inventory out before discontinuing carrying the product altogether. What a tragedy...

I'm now forced to read labels again, something I did just yesterday, as a matter of fact. In an apparent lapse of discernment due to exhaustion, I went and purchased a couple of different "replacement" products without reading the labels (I put that word in quotations because there's just no replacement for the original - are you feeling my drama yet? - LOL). When I got home, I read the label and found two ingredients that creped me out: acesulfame potassium and sucralose. It turns out, this zero-calorie drink is full of sugar substitutes, something I try to avoid.

I figure that since God created my body, I'm going to try to sustain it, to the best of my knowledge, with natural foods that He also created. It seems whenever man messes with the pure things in this world, he mucks it up, especially when it comes to food. I'll gladly drink a few extra calories of a drink made with pure sugar than one made with some chemical I have to look up to even begin to understand. The economics of contemporary food production has resulted in all kinds of poisons being ingested by humans. No wonder there are so many digestive disorders / diseases today.

As I was reading my Bible this morning, I came across the following well-known passage. It started out by making me think about what my great-great-grandmother might say to me about consuming unhealthy food.

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 you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

— 2 Timothy 3:14-17

It may sound funny, but the above passage also made me think of nutrition and ingredients labels and why we all ought to read them, since great-great-grandma isn't around to warn us anymore. The Bible is like one big nutritious meal. Jesus said it best:

But He answered and said, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.'"

— Matthew 4:4

"EVERY WORD" means the *entire Bible*, given the fundamental fact that

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable" (2 Timothy 3:16). Not only is the Bible profitable for our spiritual sustenance, it also has a very specific "nutrition and ingredients label" on it. All you have to do is take the time to read it to understand what it says about its own contents. 'Tis why so many people are sick nowadays - they get their daily sustenance from other books/media without "reading the label". This is analogous to the person who goes to the grocery store and buys food filled with unhealthy chemicals because they are too lazy to check, or maybe even unconcerned about their health.

"For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world." Then they said to Him, "Lord, always give us this bread." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst."

— John 6:33-35

Jesus essentially stated that we have been given the perfect source of sustenance - HIM! And since He is the Word (just read the "label" - John 1:14), you know that when you ingest Him you are dining on the very "bread of life" (John 6:35).

There are a lot of spiritually emaciated people in this world. Unbelievers are spiritually dead, so there's nothing to feed yet - they need their first critical meal, namely the Gospel. But I'm not discounting believers here, either, for many seem to be in various stages of self-deprivation, preferring to "feed" themselves harmful ingredients because they are either too lazy/unconcerned to read their Bibles, or they are too cheap with their time/energy to spend it on doing so. So they exist on minimal nutrition, filled with aches, pains, and diseases that come from ingesting toxins from the world (e.g., bad doctrine).

I won't buy food without a nutrition and ingredients label on it that I can't read/understand. I'm too cautious nowadays to turn a blind eye, knowing

the myriad unhealthy chemicals populating the shelves of mainstream grocery stores. And that's just my physical body (though it still matters - **1 Corinthians 6:19**). My primary concern is my spiritual health, so I'm really not interested in filling up on toxins that my Lord detests and that my "*new self*" rejects (**Colossians 3:10**). I fear what it will do to me, of becoming malnourished. "*Fear the LORD and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones*" (**Proverbs 3:7b-8**).

The Bible not only gives us everything we need to be well-nourished, healthy disciples of Christ, it also comes with an easy-to-read nutrition and ingredients label, something I'm learning to appreciate the older I get.

Refilling Our Gas Tanks

We might drive our car twenty miles per day all week without a refill. However, if we drive five hundred miles, we'll likely run out of gas. There are two fundamental considerations to filling our gas tanks. First, we must actually take the time to fill it (dah!). Second, a full tank of gas will only keep us on the road for a finite amount of time, depending on how many miles we drive.

I've often heard the analogy of filling a gas tank to reading our Bibles (maybe even taught it in passing to make a quick point). But I've been thinking about this and have concluded that reading the Bible isn't like filling a gas tank in a car, at least not exactly.

While at first glance, such an analogy may make sense in a variety of energy consumption scenarios (oil burners, kerosene lamps, etc.), we might wrongly rationalize the spiritual life this way. You might be asking, "What is this guy getting at?" I guess what I'm saying is that I don't want to dishonor God's basic desire for us to read our Bibles *daily* by supposing that we can "fill up our fuel tanks" and be on our way for a week or so, depending on supposed "driving conditions" or "time on the road," so to speak.

Though it's true, we must take the time to fill our tanks ("*receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.*" - **James 1:21**), beyond this is where the two analogs differ significantly. With a vehicle, you could technically go a very long period of time on a single tank of gas - it all depends on mileage driven. For example, I have a motorcycle that sits in my garage all winter with a single tank of gas. However, in the spiritual life, if we attempt to go long stretches of time without a "refill", we are certainly going to suffer the consequences.

There's another critical difference between these two analogs. In a car, you might drive all day, consuming a full tank of gas. If you don't have the money to pump more into the tank, you're stuck. Consuming petroleum fuel isn't a *supernatural* phenomenon, but ingesting the bread of life for our spiritual sustenance is. "*Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst'"* (**John 6:35**). This means that you could "drive" an unlimited number of miles in a day on a single "tank of gas". In other words, you are not constrained by *finite* formulas of consumption like combustion engine automobiles are. You drive the bumpy roads of life all day, every day, supernaturally energized.

Part of realizing this is doing as this blog is suggesting, "refilling" daily. For example, how energizing is the following perspective?

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.

— **Romans 8:35, 37**

The Greek word translated "*we overwhelmingly conquer*" is *huper nikao*, where *nikao* means overcomer and *huper* is where we get the prefix "hyper-" in the English language, which means "over, beyond, above, or super". In other words, our "*conquering*" is a *supernatural* feat. We are able to "drive all day" without a "refill" because the Word of God and the Spirit of God are supernatural enablers. This is impossible in an ordinary car. To know such things in and of themselves, is tremendously energizing. But again, the way we remain encouraged by such things is to have them implanted into our souls daily.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

—**Romans 10:17**

We may drive well over "a thousand miles" in a single day on "one tank

of gas” in the spiritual life. However, we may “run out of gas” the very next day, even if we’ve only “driven twenty miles after a refill”. The fact is that each day presents its own issues, its own challenges. Jesus described this as, *“Each day has enough trouble of its own”* (Matthew 6:34). As such, the Word encourages us to “refill” our spiritual tanks as often as possible, regardless of how “filled up” we think we are at the end of the day before. While God promises to sustain us, we aren’t fully blessed with the fruit of His Spirit (ala Galatians 5:22-23) unless we abide in His commandment to “refill daily”.

Happy driving!

WORLDLY LIES

Lies are what keep us in bondage to the world's system of thinking. Truth frees us from such things.

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

— Galatians 5:1

This “*yoke of slavery*” that Paul often wrote about is something every human being that has ever lived (save Jesus) has experienced, whether they know it or not. Lies envelop us. Lies erode godly blessings such as peace and contentment, and they even threaten our ability to love recklessly the way God does. Lies are robbers.

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word.

“You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. 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. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me?

He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.”

— John 8:42-47

Believers have already been rescued from the domain of lies that

epitomizes satanic thinking, that is, the kingdom of darkness.

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 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; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

— **Colossians 1:9-14**

Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him — a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

— **Colossians 3:9-11**

Don't Be a "Martha"

Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

— Luke 10:38-42

Have you ever caught yourself spun up in something that, in retrospect, has got you saying to yourself, "What a dummy!?" I have. In fact, I have lots of those moments. Thankfully, as I mature spiritually, the distance between my being spun up and my realizing my own folly has shrunken. In most cases nowadays, I'm able to catch myself even before I stumble. I'm more relaxed because my perspective on life has changed drastically - thanks be to God. My wife describes my younger, "pre-Biblical" days with the euphemism, "Ed was, ummm...intense." That's her kind way of saying I was uptight, overbearing at times, and not always the most fun to be around. Tough pill, but I swallow it wholly and willingly.

The world has given the "Marthas" among us a more palatable name; they are the so-called "Type A" personalities. Jesus cautioned Martha, revealing to her that Mary, her sister, had the proper perspective. We can all learn a lot from Mary here. While so many of us are out trying to "manage" the onslaught of life as it befalls us at ever-increasing velocity, others of us have figured out the secret to relaxing and enjoying each day for what it truly is - a gift.

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

— **Matthew 6:33-34**

My point is that, with perspective, we all can be a lot more like Mary and less like Martha. And since perspective is free of charge, complements of the Lord God by grace through faith, we simply need to heed Jesus' wisdom above.

If I were a betting man, I'd be willing to bet that Paul, certainly before his own conversion, was a Type A personality. He was what the world might also categorize as an "overachiever", which, in many ways, is just another euphemism for someone whose life is dominated by things that have no real eternal value whatsoever, and everything to do with worldliness. One has to ask, "Who are these so-called overachievers aiming to please?" The answer should be obvious, but I'll give you a hint.

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.

— **1 John 2:16**

Many of us are trained to conquer at a young age, whether socially, intellectually, athletically, or financially. As a result, our perspectives have been stained by the doctrines of this world. They are Satan's doctrines, after all, for he is "the god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4). Even if we are not naturally inclined to excel in areas of life esteemed by the world, we are pressed into service in such a way that if we don't excel, at least in *some* way, we are considered failures. To avoid this "shame", we must strive after the wind, as Solomon would say, "I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14).

Type A folks (or overachievers, or whatever term suits your fancy) are often stuck in a vicious cycle of climbing and resting, climbing some more and resting...yet they never find true peace. In fact, their "rest" is actually within the confines of the world system, likely on some beach somewhere, as if geography were the answer to their unrest. The only "out" is a change of perspective. This is what Jesus was trying to teach Martha...and now us many years later.

Paul realized that the fruits of his personal achievements, especially prior to his own conversion, were essentially worthless garbage, even though the world celebrated them. Paul saw this plainly in his own life by looking back through the lens of righteousness. He was washed free from the bondage of the self-life, the one that the world encourages we strive tirelessly to improve. He saw it as a trap, peddled by a pack of liars, led along by the "father of lies", Satan (**John 8:44**). As I like to say from the pulpit, trying to improve the self-life is like trying to dress up a pig - it's a futile endeavor. The better idea is ejection from the mire, itself.

Being king of the hill in a pigsty does not make you clean...if anything, you're all the more filthy for achieving such a thing.

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, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.

— **Philippians 3:7-8**

Let us throw out the world's concept of success and its ungodly methods for achieving it. Let us reexamine enticing human categorizations like "Type A" or "overachiever", stepping back the way Paul did, the way Jesus encouraged Martha to. In doing so, may we loose ourselves from the bondage of poor perspective, embracing our Lord's viewpoint - that is to

say that true success on the eternal scale of values actually has nothing to do with how much man accomplishes oh so diligently on his own; rather, it has everything to do with what God accomplishes through him by grace.

Don't be a Martha.

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, "THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM."

— 1 Corinthians 2:1-9

The Great Land Rush of 1893

At precisely twelve noon on September 16, 1893 a cannon's boom unleashed the largest land rush America ever saw. Carried by all kinds of transportation - horses, wagons, trains, bicycles or on foot - an estimated 100,000 raced to claim plots of land in an area of land in northern Oklahoma Territory known as the Cherokee Strip. There had been a number of previous land rushes in the Territory - but this was the big one...

By the time of the Oklahoma land rush of 1893, America was in the grip of the worst economic depression it had ever experienced. This was one of the factors that swelled the number of expectant land-seekers that day. Many would be disappointed. There were only 42,000 parcels of land available - far too few to satisfy the hopes of all those who raced for land that day. Additionally, many of the "Boomers" - those who had waited for the cannon's boom before rushing into the land claim - found that a number of the choice plots had already been claimed by "Sooners" who had snuck into the land claim area before the race began. The impact of the land rush was immediate, transforming the land almost overnight.

- <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/landrush.htm>

I often wonder about times like these, how utterly dramatic they must've been for all those involved, including the original occupiers of the land, the Indians - the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole. One would have to be a buffoon to imagine this time in America as anything but chaotic. I think about how many times I've seen fraternal fisticuffs as the result of an argument over the last donut or slice of pizza or whatever. How much greater the tension over upwards of 160 acres of free land! I'm glad I wasn't subjected to it. And that's just land, my friends!

How much greater, still, is the struggle for "real estate" in the human

soul! The most precious possession of all is a person's soul, after all. Our Creator knows this, and so do we. But then again, so does Satan. The greatest "land grab" of all time, for an individual, is carried out on the "plains" of one's soul.

We know that the Word of God is omnipotent and that there's nothing more powerful in the Universe than it. In a tug-of-war, the Word of God would always win.

*I know that You can do all things,
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.*

— Job 42:2

In a fair contest, which is the only way God contends with His opposition, His Word always wins. On the plains of the soul, this means that His Gospel seed would be planted on fertile soil every time, and all would be saved and given eternal life, flourishing spiritually in time. But we know this doesn't happen. We know, from scripture, that Satan is like a "Sooner" in the 1893 Land Rush. He'd rather set up camp dishonestly in an effort to stake an ungodly claim to a person's soul. The world and the flesh concur with his tactics, too, of course. If our enemies are already squatting on the precious soul of an individual, the soil isn't going to produce anything good because it has been spoiled.

*And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil and *yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear."*

One of Satan's most effective strategies, then, is to be like a "Sooner" and stake a claim to all or parts of a person's soul long before the Gospel ever shows up, under fair circumstances, like the "Boomers" did back in 1893.

You might be saying, "Well, all of that sounds theologically good, but what does this mean to me, and how might ungodliness stake a claim in my own soul?" That's a great question - thank you for asking (wink, wink)! One of the greatest methods our enemies use, even with believers, is to "capture" something as fundamental as a definition. For example, think about the word "Christian". How is it being taught to children? Is the average so-called Christian actually Christ-like? How about so-called Christian religions...are they abiding in His Word? If you're honest, you know that the word "Christian" has been hijacked, redefined over the years. Today, it's a complete mess...to the point where I, personally, have stopped referring to myself as a Christian, for fear that whomever I'm speaking to apply some perverted definition to my person. When this happens, the soil where I might have been able to plant the Gospel seed becomes spoiled, "rocky" (ala **Matthew 13:5**). And that's only *one* word! The average adult has roughly 15,000 words in their vocabulary...that's a *lot* of real estate up for grabs.

Our enemies love to pervert definitions because in doing so, they've staked an ungodly claim to whatever portion of our souls that definition applies to. As we know, we use words to define words, sort of in a circular way. Get one word wrong and your entire vocabulary is "leavened" (Galatians 5:9). The Bible warns us vehemently against allowing such things to take place, even after salvation.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

— Colossians 2:8

One of the most fruitful, consistent exercises any believer can go through is the re-evaluation of their own definitions, especially concerning the doctrines of God. Definitions have a tendency to “drift” over time under the pressures of the world system. Before we even suspect it, our own may have taken us significantly off course. Satan’s an incredibly crafty creature, and he’s patient, too.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

— Ephesians 6:10-11

While our enemies are like the “Sooners” of 1893, those who give us the good news in the Word of God are like the “Boomers”, arriving under the premise of integrity. It’s a hard-fought battle for the Boomers at times, for the Sooners may have been there for quite some time, having already cultivated the land to their own liking. Since God gave you your life, you get to decide who’s right and who’s wrong in any dispute over the real estate in your soul. We find resolution in the “supreme court” in Heaven (**Matthew 5:22**), where “*God, the Judge of all*” (**Hebrews 12:23**), presides.

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. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

— 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

No One Sets Out To Be An Addict

No one sets out to be an addict.

I think that's a fair statement, right? I mean, who wants to be enslaved to some drug to the point where they are no longer able to say "no"? Nobody I've ever met.

Yet, anytime I've ever had a conversation with an addict, their story is always the same. None of them were *planning* on being an addict. In fact, the delusion for the longest time, until their admission of their problem, was that they had everything under control. They would lie to themselves, and others, about their fleeting ability to exit the downward spiraling path they were on.

Addiction (Google.com): *physically and mentally dependent on a particular substance, and unable to stop taking it without incurring adverse effects.*

I wonder how many people are addicted to this world. After all, the world's goods are like drugs, and the human flesh, an addict. At some point, the addiction becomes so severe that all truth is cast off, deflected with little or no consideration. Nothing else matters to an addict except their next fix. In the spiritual realm, the Bible refers to this phenomenon as the "hardening of the heart by the deceitfulness of sin".

*Take care, brethren [addressing Jewish brethren, ala **Romans 9:3**, as opposed to holy brethren, ala **Galatians 1:2**], that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will 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 is said, "TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME." For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient?

So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.

— **Hebrews 3:12-19**

In a very real sense, we are all born addicts. Our flesh has such a strong propensity for the "drugs" of the world that it's as if we were born to live a life of addiction. But, Jesus, the Great Physician, is like the drug counselor playing hardball, placing before us life and death, encouraging us to choose life that we may live.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

— **Matthew 16:24-26**

We've all heard the exchange between counselor and addict, "If you don't stop taking this drug you're going to die!" That is precisely the same thing, analogously, that Jesus explained to His disciples in **Matthew 16:24-26**. The point is simple. If you live your entire life with your back turned to truth and life in Christ, you will die in your sins, a horrible, depraved death. If you've ever seen the physical state of a severe addict just prior to death, you get the picture. Only in the spiritual case, unlike the physical addict, the "addict" spends eternity in agony.

I've had several loved ones in my life that have been addicts. Some of them died still using. One of the most hopeless feelings in the world was trying to talk sense into them before their bodies finally gave up. At some point, it seems that addictions become so bad that it's virtually impossible to get through to the addict. In the spiritual realm, we liken this to the "searing of the conscience".

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later 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.

— 1 Timothy 4:1-2

Sadly, I fear I know a lot of spiritual addicts that are just about immune to the Truth. They've said "no" to the Truth about salvation for so many years that sowing the Gospel seed is like trying to plant a tomato seed on a slab of slate rock - it's fruitless (I say this knowing that with God all things are possible, of course). It's painful to think about the finality of it all. It hurts to watch someone keep choosing death over life, self over Christ. I guess our motivation should be to keep evangelizing before it's "too late".

No one I've ever met ever started out wanting to be an addict.

They've all said somewhere along the way, "I've got this under control...I can quit anytime I want." They keep on saying that until it's too late and they're engaged in a battle their flesh can no longer win. Some have been through so many iterations of "help" that they've run out of options, and even the most dedicated "helpers" have thrown in the towel, simply awaiting a phone call or a trip to identify a body on a gurney. I hate to be so graphic, but this is heart-wrenching stuff.

So goes the life of the unbeliever who's "putting off" the "big decision"

about Jesus Christ...who says, "I've got this all under control...I'll quit the self-life when I'm old and have sown my oats to the world...I'll grab my portion of eternal life just in the nick of time!" My friend, this person is playing a game that no one ought to play. They are playing with life and death, light and darkness, bliss and agony. Who's to say that this person's heart won't be so hardened by then that they won't even be interested in the Gospel? Who's to say that their conscience won't be so seared that the Truth is no longer something they'll even listen to? That is my contention with the spiritual addict's retort to spiritual death. Their plans for salvation may shrivel up, proving in the end that they were merely the product of human power, which has never saved a soul.

My fear is that by the end of their lives most spiritual addicts will be so hooked on worldly "drugs" that they will have long since forgotten about, or carried any affinity whatsoever for, the things of Christ, particularly as Lord and Savior. My prayer is, that since none of us laborers have been able to get through to them, that the Spirit will find a unique way to humble them before it's too late. So goes the pain and suffering of watching an addict spiral down towards death...it's just so awful...and to hear them proclaim they're in control long after they've lost said control makes it all the more agonizing to watch...like a fatal car wreck in slow motion.

PART 1 - "Oh, Deep Down They Are a Good Person"...Really?

The world says that man is inherently good; therefore, it must be some external force that corrupts him, making him less than his true self.

The Bible says that man is inherently bad, and the only remedy is from God.

These are diametrically opposed systems of thinking, and one brilliant way in which Satan deceives the world. I'd argue it's among his most effective strategies.

Now that I've got that off of my chest (it's been there for a while), let's slow this thought process down and dissect it a bit for the sake of clarity. Let's begin with the idea that man is inherently good. Think about how many times you've heard people suggest that deep down all people are 'good'. The theory is widely accepted, certainly portrayed by Hollywood, that people are somehow at odds within themselves, fighting their so-called "demons", as if to say that their inner goodness just needs to be saved from whatever it is that is pressing it down. The proposition supposes phantom evils exist as the suppressors of human goodness. People are portrayed as "damsels in distress", tied to railroad tracks by external forces. The world has fostered this entire system of thinking by calling many of these phantom evils "diseases" or "disorders".

Have you ever asked yourself why, as the world spirals away from Christ, there is an increasing number of so-called "diseases" and "disorders"? Could it be that they are fundamental to upholding the lie that all men are born inherently good?

*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.*

— **Psalms 51:5**

As it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE."

— **Romans 3:10**

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

— **Romans 3:23**

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.

— **Romans 5:12**

I guess that blows the aforementioned theory out of the water, doesn't it? Either you believe the Word of God or you don't. If you do, then the irrefutable fact is that we are all born sinners. As the Lord, Himself, says, "*the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth*" (**Genesis 8:21**). The Bible clearly tells us that we are born spiritually dead, incapable of bearing the same fruit that the Holy Spirit does in a person who is reborn in Christ, such as, "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*" (**Galatians 5:22-23**). And not only is an unregenerate person incapable of bearing such fruit, they will indeed bear just the opposite!

For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.

— **Galatians 5:17**

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath,

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even as the rest.

— Ephesians 2:1-3

For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit.

— Luke 6:43

The disease is within man. He is *born* diseased. Let's not buy the lie that disease from without is the real issue. That's what Satan and the kingdom of darkness wants us to believe more than anything. Why? Because it supposes God a liar.

Just suppose for a moment that Satan's lie were true. Theoretically, man would be inherently good enough, able that is, to fulfill the law of righteousness. In other words, he'd be able to do what Jesus Christ alone has done. The conclusion, then, is as Paul stated, "*for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly*" (**Galatians 2:21**). Oh, how Satan would love for every human being to cast off the Cross as frivolous.

Do you see it yet? Do you see the point of this blog? Let me state it clearly just in case you don't. The world, and its father, the devil, who is the "*father of lies*" (John 8:44), wants mankind to believe himself inherently good, only plagued by the external pressures of disease, able to deliver himself by himself and for himself. If man believes this, he no longer has a need for the Savior.

Jesus said, "*If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*" (**John 8:31b-32**). The truth is as the Bible states, "*The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick*" (**Jeremiah 17:9**). The fundamental truth about human beings is very simple - we are born diseased, especially spiritually, and no remedy exists other than being made new. "*Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come*" (2

Corinthians 5:17).

How *convenient* it is to Satan's ploy to simply lie about man's inherent condition. How *accommodating* this lie is to the human flesh, the very entity that despises the Spirit of Christ.

Every time I hear someone say those words, "Oh, but they're a good person deep down," I cringe a little. My immediate response is to wonder if they are saved, for without Christ, there's no possible way they are "good". Oh, they may cling to a morality of sorts, but they are not good, not by God's definition. Either that's true or Jesus, Himself, is a liar (ref. **Luke 6:43**). Are you prepared to suggest such a thing?

I think about when people make excuses for loved ones who constantly wreak havoc in their lives. They say things like, "Oh, they didn't mean what they said, they were just having a bad day...they're really a nice person." My response is, "Oh, yes, they most certainly *did* mean what they said, they just lacked the self-control to contain it!" That may not be a popular response, but you know what? It's the righteous one. "*Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear*" (**Ephesians 4:29**). If a person says something damaging to another, can we just call it what it really is? In that moment, they revealed their flesh. "*But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison*" (**James 3:8**).

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

— **Romans 7:18**

When someone opens their mouth and evil flies out, we are seeing the disease of the flesh. Let's not blame something from without, even if it has a snazzy medical term tied to it, for that is sidestepping the truth, that a

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person controlled by the flesh is going to produce fleshly thoughts and say/do fleshly things that aren't righteous at all. In fact, this person will say/do evil every single time. Some so-called "disease" or "disorder" from without doesn't make them do it. The sooner a person realizes this, the quicker they are in seeking the real remedy to the real disease.

Contrary to the lie peddled by the world, man is not born inherently good, corrupted from without, being kept from his true benevolent self. That is a lie meant to undermine the Cross. The fact is that every person ever born was born inherently bad. The only viable remedy is being born again and saved. That is how our Great Physician has healed us.

*And hearing this, Jesus *said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

— Mark 2:17

If you love others, be honest with them. Turn them towards the Light, and do so in the presence of Holy Scripture. Carry your Bible, or load a Bible app on your cell phone...whatever it takes, as Paul would say (**1 Corinthians 9:22**). And learn to sniff out the ungodly aroma of self-righteousness in those who believe they were born good. They weren't - none of us were.

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 fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them.

— Ephesians 5:7-11

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If you believe that eternal life exists in the Lord God, and also in His saved children, and that Heaven exists (ref. **John 1:4; 17:3**), then you must ponder what it takes to partake in these things for all of eternity (ref. **Matthew 25:46**). I think it's fair to say that this question is on the minds of most people, at least those who choose to believe that God exists (ref. **Romans 1:18-21**). If you believe that God is Holy and know that you were born a sinner, then the barrier to entry is raised to heights beyond the reach of mankind. Man must concede he is incapable of justifying abiding in the presence of the Holy God of the Universe for all of eternity as he was born, a sinner - somehow, he must be justified (made righteous) to be tolerable to God, who hates sin (**Habakkuk 1:13**; I suggest you read my last blog titled, *PART 1 - "Oh, Deep Down They Are a Good Person"...Really?*).

The problem statement is very simple, given the above assertions. How does someone apprehend the righteousness necessary to achieve eternal fellowship with God? From this particular perspective, there are really only two ways: God or man. In other words, either God saves a person from their estate of sinfulness, or man is somehow able to do so on his own.

We know from Holy Scripture that man is born in sin, estranged from God, created spiritually dead (theologically, this simply means that he is born separated from God as a result of his inherent sinfulness). The Bible states that man is born with "*enmity*" between God and himself.

But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one

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new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

— **Ephesians 2:13-16**

This “*enmity*” the Bible speaks of is something that began at the Fall in the Garden of Eden. God warned man from the very beginning, “*from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die*” (**Genesis 2:17**). The original language reveals that God dictated that both spiritual and physical death would be the results of sinning against Him. So goes Adam’s condemnation for every human being ever born.

For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

— **1 Corinthians 15:21-22**

So, we rightly conclude from Holy Scripture that we are born spiritually dead, at odds with the Holy God of the Universe. If we’re ever to hope for eternal life, we must be “saved” from our initial estate of sinfulness. This takes us back to the topics posed by the original question, which are: what does it take to partake in eternal life and how does a person end up in Heaven for all of eternity? If a chasm of enmity exists between God and each of us at birth, how might we cross it? How might we be *reconciled* to God (in theology, reconciliation simply means to restore friendly relations)?

Once again, we are on the precipice of two options. Either God saves us, reconciling us to Himself; or man saves himself, reconciling himself to God. The prior is a work of grace, the latter human works. The prior is by grace through faith in Christ alone; whereas the latter is through faith in human works. These are completely different approaches to the throne of our Lord. The prior assumes that only God is able to cure man; the latter assumes man is able to cure himself. The prior assumes the

Gospel of Jesus Christ; the latter assumes a different gospel.

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

— Galatians 1:6-9

The “good news”, aka the Gospel, is intrinsically good because man doesn’t *have* to live with the insecurity and anxiety of thinking he has to, by his own exertion, perform the work of justification, thereby reconciling himself to God. Phew! That’s *really* good news. To those who don’t believe this goes the obvious curse of living a life without any real hope. For who is bold enough to hope their human righteousness equals the very righteousness of God in Heaven? Surely, not I. It seems preposterous at face value, but that is exactly what many so-called “Christians” suppose.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

— 1 Peter 1:3-5

Any so-called gospel that claims man can justify himself, therefore reconciling himself to God, is a false gospel. Look around, there are lots of people who believe such lies. For example, if the Catholics understood their church’s doctrines of faith, they’d know immediately that they are

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inconsistent with the inspired Word of God. They'd understand that "being good" isn't how a person is justified in God's eyes, otherwise, "Christ died needlessly" (Galatians 2:21). If sinful man doesn't need Christ's righteousness imputed to them at salvation, then why did Christ go to the Cross? False gospels always attack the work of Jesus Christ on His Cross. Why? Because, if He really did do all the work for justification by faith (He did), then man has no work to do, which derails his plans to save himself!

The truth, that which sets us free (ala **John 8:32**), is that by the power of God we are reconciled to Him. It's the only way that has ever existed, the only *"living hope"* (**1 Peter 1:3**) we've been given. Man may invent *"alternative ways to Heaven"* in his arrogant contention for control, but the Sovereign God of the Universe scoffs at him (ref. **Psalms 2**). It is a vile thing to propose alternative gospels; yet, this is what most religions today thrive on, being primitively predatory. The Lord God has no tolerance, whatsoever, for those who supplant His Word.

*For the devious are an abomination to the LORD;
But He is intimate with the upright.
The curse of the LORD is on the house of the wicked,
But He blesses the dwelling of the righteous.
Though He scoffs at the scoffers,
Yet He gives grace to the afflicted.*

— **Proverbs 3:32-34**

Why did I write this blog? Because I fear the same thing the apostle Paul feared a couple thousand years ago.

"But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different

gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.”

— **2 Corinthians 11:3-4**

I don't write this blog to cast stones at sinners. My deepest desire is that every sinner realizes how desperate their situation is before the Almighty God. I don't want anyone believing the lie that self-justification is an option, or that reconciliation comes from anyone other than God, Himself, through Jesus Christ. *“For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2)*. My motivation is love, always. I am acting upon the very *“ministry of reconciliation”* that I've been given, through the Gospel, itself.

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

— **2 Corinthians 5:18-21**

It is by grace through faith alone in Christ alone that we are reconciled to God. It's impossible for man to reconcile himself, by himself, lest salvation be dependent on the works of man.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

— **Ephesians 2:8-9**

The Sobering Truth About Demons

Whenever the unclean spirits saw Him, they would fall down before Him and shout, "You are the Son of God!"

— Mark 3:11

I've met Christians who scratch their heads when the topic of demons comes up. Some of them don't even believe they are real. I can understand such things for new believers or folks just getting into the faith. But for others who have been "Christian" for a while, what is their excuse? Not entirely sure there is one. The Spirit tells me that in most of these cases, it's a function of laziness...but that's not the emphasis of this blog, at least not today.

Demons exist. They are fallen angels. Satan swept one third of them away before mankind was even created. *"And his tail *swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth..." (Revelation 12:4a)*. Because they are angels, they know God, personally. In fact, as far as we know through scriptural accounts, the angels know God by being in His very presence, *"Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them" (Job 1:6)*.

In Holy Scripture we see that demons always knew who Jesus Christ was when they met Him. How? They've known God ever since their own creation. Sadly, they fear Him more than most Christians do, even, certainly more than unbelievers. "You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder" (James 2:19). Here's a perfect example of a demon knowing Jesus immediately:

In the synagogue there was a man possessed by the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Let us alone! What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us?"

“I know who You are — the Holy One of God!”

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet and come out of him!” And when the demon had thrown him down in the midst of the people, he came out of him without doing him any harm. And amazement came upon them all, and they began talking with one another saying, “What is this message? For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits and they come out.”

— Luke 4:33-36

Some of you by now might be saying, “So, what’s the big deal? Why are you bringing up the fact that demons know Jesus?” Simply put, though demons may be on the wrong side of Jesus, they are far more intimately aware of His power and glory than, arguably, most so-called “Christians”. To put this into perspective, as a little experiment, imagine which creature would fear Jesus more in His presence today, the demon or the average Christian? If you believe the answer is the demon, as I do, then you must absorb the magnitude of this reality from Holy Scripture. The point I’m trying to make is that we might look at the demons to find a good example of what ‘fear of the Lord’ in the Bible looks like, as odd as this may seem. These creatures *literally* cowered in His presence, even before He chose to do anything to them.

I wonder how many so-called “Christians” fear the Lord this way? How many beg Him for mercy when they know they’ve sinned against Him? How arrogant sinners can be, “Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD” (Proverbs 1:29). It’s an incredibly sobering reality that demons, fallen angels who stand opposed to the Lord, fear God more than mere humans, some of the latter group being saved, even.

One last thought. As a believer in Christ, I hate it when I have to deal with a smug unbeliever. Do you remember my recent blog post titled, “***A Punch***

The Sobering Truth About Demons

To the Throat”? These folks are first on my list. In any case, unless these individuals do as Jesus Christ stated, “*for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins*” (**John 8:24**), they will be sent to the Lake of Fire for all of eternity. *Shudder* (yes, that was an allusion to **James 2:19**)! Even demons know what their impending judgement is, and that it is from the Lord Jesus Christ, Himself; yet, unbelievers? Meh. “*And they [demons] cried out, saying, ‘What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time’*” (**Matthew 8:29**)?

As creatures, believers and unbelievers alike, we are incredibly arrogant towards the Lord. It seems the demons, creatures that some so-called “Christians” don’t even know exist, possess a greater fear of the Lord than humans do, at least most of us anyway. What does this say about us, or the demons, for that matter??? To me, it says a lot...

Take Me Out To the Ballgame...

Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made.

— Genesis 3:1a

Imagine the following scene with yourself being a part of it, allowing yourself to get emotionally involved in it...

You show up to the baseball field - just in time, too - as the team captains are about to finish picking sides from what's left of the pool of players lined up along the first base line. You scurry up to the line unnoticed, stand up straight like the rest of the players, and your best friend nudges you in the arm with their elbow and says, "Where've you been?" You say, "I've been busy...had some chores to do around the house...but then I saw the stadium lights and heard the music, so I got here as soon as I could!" You both giggle it off, get picked for the same team, and join the others on your team's bench for a little pre-game pep talk.

Your coach is an amazingly motivating speaker - so much so that whatever concerns you had prior to the game have all melted away. This guy's so good; in fact, your teammates have dubbed him "the preacher". All is well, it seems. The crowd stands for the national anthem as it's sung by a local schoolgirl with reasonable talent. The whole affair is building up to a crescendo and you're now all jazzed up to win! You take the ball field as the team's shortstop, an infielder position that historically gets a lot of activity. You notice your opposing team getting all pumped up in a similar way, and it looks like they've got their own "preacher" for a coach...some of them are so frenzied they look like they're out for blood! "This is gonna be a good game," you say to yourself as you rock onto the balls of your feet.

Take Me Out To the Ballgame...

The game is ferocious. Between innings you and your best friend exchange sentiments like, "Wow, can you believe this game?...what a colossal battle!...love it!" The game ends in extra innings, but your team manages to win. Each team lines up to shake hands, saying, "Good game, good game, good game...", avoiding eye contact with those on the opposing team who were especially unsportsmanlike because of their lack of competitive self-control. Back in the dugout, the "preacher" is beside himself with joy, doling out complements to all, and has just given your team directions to the nearest ice cream shop, his treat. "Doesn't get any better than this," you say.

But it does. The game was a lie. The battle was wasted energy. The dirt is real, the skinned knees and dirty socks are all real. You smell of battle, that's for sure. But it was all a charade, a misdirection, a chance for your real opponent to distract you while he burned your house down. That's right, while you were at the game, pouring all of your energy into winning, he was dousing your home with gasoline and lighting a match to it. He even stood by for a minute or two, admiring his work, grinning while most of your town was at the game, knowing that your newborn twins, the teenage babysitter, your two dogs, and all your memories were trapped inside.

It's a gruesome scene...something you'll have to live with for the rest of your life. While you were away "playing the game", Satan was claiming victory over your life. While you were distracted by what you *thought* mattered, he was destroying any hope for what did. And then it was too late, his work is done. You've lost everything. You find out later that everyone on both teams that day suffered the same fate. No matter who received the trophy, everyone lost.

What most people in this world fail to realize is that Satan is a genius. I'd argue that even the well-educated believers in this world are far too lax in their estimation of his devices. A fine work worthy of reading on this is *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. I highly recommend it to anyone who's

interested in contemplating spiritual paramilitary genius. Satan's not "kind of" smart, he's a brilliant strategist. Our only hope is to keep studying the Word of God and learn more about how our "*adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:8). Satan is far too cunning and efficient to merely jump out in front of you and say, "Here I am, your worst nightmare!" How childish of us to presume such a thing. He's not Inigo Montoya from *The Princess Bride*, so he's not going to be announcing himself nobly.

Satan, the "god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4), has devised innumerable distractions for no other reason than to divide man's attention. If he can divert a person's attention through misdirection, he can perform his evil when they aren't looking. Could this world of technology and instant gratification be more distracting???

While most people are off "playing this game called life", warring it out with their also-misguided opponents, no less intent on winning than the next person, Satan's weaving destruction behind the scenes. If it weren't so easy to fool humans, magicians wouldn't have jobs. A magician's greatest skill is misdirection. Satan's no different.

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it.

— **Matthew 7:13**

Satan has purposely created "games" that have no bearing on eternal life whatsoever. That's not to say that the folks playing them aren't completely invested in winning - most are. That's not the point - not at all. The point is to keep them playing so that they never play the real game, the one where the Gospel is pitched from the mound. This world is filled with "ballparks" of cheering crowds applauding the next famous idol, the professional sports team, or the latest social cause. Satan's not jeering man's stupidity, he's exploiting it.

The “big game” is God, good, versus Satan, evil. The “little game” has teams *labeled* “good” versus “evil”, but they are indeed under the umbrella of true evil. The reality is that anyone playing in the “little game” is on an evil team, win or lose. For you math junkies, we might express this as: Good vs. Evil (“good” vs. “evil”), where the “little game” is in parenthesis. However you’d like to conceptualize it, the simple fact is that most people in this world are playing the wrong game, even though they are playing their hearts out. Their game is organized and promoted by Satan, himself. He’s even hired some of the best preachers on the planet as “coaches”. Ugh.

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.

— 2 Corinthians 11:13-15

We cannot get caught up in the “little games” in this life, as if they had any real value. From the perspective of eternal life, they don’t. As it is, the world is increasingly less interested in the “big game”, preferring to build new stadiums and promote new franchises. We must keep on “pitching” the Gospel and encouraging others to find the right game to play. It is a “good fight” indeed (1 Timothy 6:12), but let us not be discouraged (even though it happens to the best of us), knowing that God promises that those who seek Him will find Him. Everyone’s invited to the big game and everyone has a chance to play for the winning team.

So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened.

— Luke 11:9-10