

Diary of a Journeyman

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

Volume III

By Pastor Edward J. Collins

www.pastoredcollins.org

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	6
The Context of Life.....	7
Context Demanded.....	11
Crisis: The Hysterics and the Gnostics.....	15
E.T. Has Nothing On Us!.....	20
I'd Die For... ..	24
Life is Good.....	27
The Rock.....	31
The Simple Life, With A View.....	36
The World's Largest Ball Of String.....	40
Encouragement.....	43
Being Too Hard On Ourselves.....	45
The Great Depression.....	48
The Insanity of Choosing Hell.....	55
The Parable of the Wedding Feast.....	59
The Season of Encouragement.....	63
Sticks and Stones.....	66
A Victor's Perspective.....	71
The Win-Win Of Encouragement.....	74
Fight the Good Fight.....	78
Doolies.....	81
Do Not Grow Weary In Doing Good.....	85
Fit For Service.....	89
Glossophobia.....	93
My Struggle With Disdain.....	96
What's the Message We're Sending?.....	101
When the Going Gets Tough... ..	107
The Flesh, Temptation, and Sin.....	113
Awakening the Sleeping Giant.....	116

Enmity Imagined.....	119
Short-Wicked Firecrackers.....	125
This Little Game I Play.....	129
Walking On Thin Ice.....	133
The Gospel and Salvation.....	138
Assurance Of Salvation Is By Grace Through Faith.....	139
But They're a Good Person.....	146
Emotional Salvation Isn't Enough.....	151
The Gospel Is a Command.....	157
No Such Thing As An Ex-Christian.....	160
The Prince Of Life.....	164
Sabotage: The Council of Trent.....	167
Stumbling Blocks.....	171
Grace and Religion.....	177
God's Morality In the Law.....	180
Grace, Works, and Indifference.....	185
People Love to Make Lists.....	191
Should I Sell All Of My Possessions? Should You?.....	195
Springtime.....	200
Gratitude.....	204
Giving Thanks on Thanksgiving.....	206
Joy to the World.....	210
Humility.....	214
Guess Blogger: Flippancy.....	217
Mommy, I Threw Up.....	221
"Oh, They LIKE To Work".....	226
Who Am I?.....	231
Individuality and Self-Examination.....	234
Best Dressed!.....	238
Confessing Someone Else's Sin.....	242
Embracing Your God-Given Niche.....	246
Identity Politics and Sports Fandom, Too?.....	250

Lies Produce the Opposite Of Advertised Results.....	254
Looking In the Mirror.....	259
Two Kinds Of Practicing Believers.....	263
What Is A Good Name?.....	267
Integrity and Obedience.....	270
The Beauty of Submission.....	273
Church Ordinances.....	280
The Cold Shell Of Obedience.....	285
Compromise Isn't Compassion.....	290
It's the Little Things.....	295
Name That Tune.....	301
Saying Thank You For Discipline.....	306
Two Ways Of Approaching the Truth.....	309
Love.....	314
If You Could Read My Mind.....	317
The Lion and the Lamb.....	322
Love and Humility.....	326
Love Is Faithful.....	330
True Love In Action.....	334
Perseverance, Patience, and Faith.....	338
The Gift of Faith.....	341
God's Patience Has Purpose.....	347
"I do believe; help my unbelief.".....	351
My Aching Back!.....	354
Time Will Tell.....	358
Prayer.....	362
The Things We Pray For.....	366
When Blind Arrogance Trumps All But Our Prayer.....	371
Spiritual Economies and the Sphere of God.....	375
All Your Eggs In One Basket.....	378
Be Like a Wise Birdie.....	383
Heaven on Earth.....	391

Let Freedom Ring!.....	394
Managing Debt.....	397
Post-Season Expansion.....	401
The Three Pillars of Satan's Unholy Economy.....	406
Tragic Irony.....	411
Spirituality and Spiritual Warfare.....	415
The Complexities of War.....	419
The Entertainment Trap.....	425
Every Circumstance In Life Is a Spiritual One.....	430
How To Digest Social Injustice.....	435
Running and the Spirit Life - Guest Blogger: Tammy Collins.....	440
Temple Invasion.....	444
Stress.....	448
Abuse and the Fight or Flight Response.....	450
Preoccupation With Being Happy.....	454
The Stress Experiment.....	460

Introduction

As was the case with *Volumes 1 and 2* 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 two years. 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

The Context of Life

Life has context. As a result, life has meaning. The Bible teaches us this.

For a believer in Christ Jesus, this is very good news. To have purpose is to understand God's will for you. Is there anything sweeter than this? I doubt it. To have purpose is to be given a new lease on life every time you open your eyes in the morning. To have purpose is to revel in life, itself - to understand life is a grace gift from our Father in Heaven. For that is what it is, a gift; and since it exists through the life of Christ, thoughts of it transcend human rationale, even. *"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift" (2 Corinthians 9:15)*! In a way, we are the true star gazers looking towards Heaven for the simple reminder that we have peace from above - a precious gift that cannot be rescinded, marred, or compromised.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

— **Colossians 3:1-3**

Life is also short. Considering eternal life is infinite, the average human lifespan is less than a drop in the bucket. If it weren't for the work which God has us complete on His behalf during our lifetime, we might conclude that life is insignificant. While it's easier to think in human terms about the origin and nature of life, the truth is that eternal life preexisted everything mankind has ever known, experientially, and will continue on long after the Earth as we know it is gone.

For a believer, life is short, but it has purpose. This is what we rightly conclude.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

— **Ephesians 2:10**

This kind of thinking situates us nicely, doesn't it? It gives us a confidence in this world. It grounds us and ensures us that each and every day we're alive on Earth has been ordained by God, to accomplish His good purposes. If you think about life this way, it also handily removes the weight of the world off of your shoulders. You quickly realize that this is God's game to play - we are merely play actors on a stage set before even the angels to observe (**1 Peter 1:12**). God has, through us "*vessels of mercy*" (**Romans 9:23**), put the fullness of His grace on display. It's good to know that our life has had a context from before we were even born, that we were made to glorify God.

*For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.
How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!*

— Psalm 139:13-17

Life as we know it may be fleeting, but it is, nonetheless, ripe with fruit. Let us embrace it for what it is - a gift from God. Let's wake up every morning with a sense of purpose that is foreign to our own human flesh. Let's remember that every moment is a time to rejoice; not because every moment is joyful in the traditional sense, but rather because we know that God has a purpose for us, as individuals, and it is good.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

What gain has the worker from his toil?

— Ecclesiastes 3:1-9

The context of life is simple; it may be short, but it's good because God has made it so. At the end of the day, when we lay our heads down to rest, it's good to know in our hearts that God, before we were even born, set His seal upon our lives and gave us purpose.

Context Demanded

Context changes the meaning of everything.

If a person tells you they love their dog, you might say, “Awww, how adorable.” However, if they tell you they love their wife, also, are you to suppose they love their wife the same way they love their dog? I hope not! In the case of this example, we conclude that the concept of love has a variety of meanings, or shades (since the root meaning of the word in both cases expresses a certain affection for someone or something else). Within a single word, a very powerful word at that, there’s a lot of gray area that *only context can resolve sufficiently*.

How about if a person says to you, “Oh, I just *love* it when I drive all the way to the ice cream parlor and they are out of the only flavor I like,” as they roll their eyes and drag out the word “love.” In America, this is a universal way of expressing the exact *opposite* of love (depending on the person’s affection for ice cream, it might even express a certain hatred). Same word, except this time, it’s much more than just a shade off from its alternate meaning. Such is the *power of context*.

We live in a world where modernization gives consumers a competitive edge in a global society. What I mean to say is that many of our brightest minds and their creative energies are being employed to produce essentials (e.g. food, transportation, communication) faster, in greater quantities, and with increased efficiency. One might argue this is being done out of necessity due to population explosion. Regardless of the impetus, we’re being forced to exist in a world that is becoming increasingly void of context. Hyper-efficient processes tend to supplant humans with machines, reducing the number of human-to-human relationships while increasing human-to-machine ones. We lose context as a result. Let me summarize:

We live in a world that is starving us of precious context, the one thing we need to truly receive what the author of an emotion intended. Love is a perfect example.

Love demands context. In the absence of context, the receiver is left with little more than speculation and predilection. If there's a good relationship between giver and receiver, then the receiver will probably assume the best, even though they may actually be wrong. Same goes for when the relationship is rocky - the person may assume a lesser degree was intended, even though the giver may have desired to earnestly express much more.

What happens when we accelerate away from our ability to express ourselves effectively? The communication channel becomes pinched, less conducive to conveying the whole truth. What happens when the only way we can consistently tell our sons and daughters that we love them is through an instant messaging app? We hope the artificial means of expressing our emotions (e.g., an emoticon) will suffice as truth; but, we know it never can.

Context is light. Light is truth:

Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light.

— Ephesians 5:8-14

The Bible clearly tells us that the fruit of light is found in the truth. We might visualize the effective communication of truth as our ability to shed light on a situation, to shine into darkness, and to deliver a person from ignorance to knowledge. The best way for this to happen, typically, is for one person to be

physically standing in front of the other while speaking. Distance and obstacles retard the intended expression, something even the most advanced communications technologies can only partially make up for. For example, if I want to express my love for you, I want to shed as much light on the emotion as possible to ensure you understand it. If something is standing in the way of that, the light is diminished. Blocking the fruit of light, namely the truth, damages context, which in turn perverts the original intention of the expression.

In the absence of context, we are relegated to whatever smidgen of truth we can squeeze through the narrowed orifice between us.

This reality has profound implications, especially in the spiritual life, where our knowledge of the Holy One is everything. Anything or anyone that occludes the Light is an enemy of God (in that instance, at least). Our goal is to learn the Word of God, in context. What good is saying we know the love of God if it has been perverted by ignorance? Said differently, what good is anything received unto our person in the absence of light and truth? For example, if someone says, “Jesus loves you,” but you’ve never read or heard Holy Scripture in support of that truth, aren’t you relegated to someone else’s experience? What if they merely write that in a text and you never see the light of Christ in them, in their own countenance? Furthermore, do we come to know love through someone else’s experiences? May it never be! That’s like standing in the shadows, seeing light around a corner, and concluding we know what it’s like to have the sun shine on our face.

For love to be understood, it must be experienced in context. It’s never enough to whisper it through a narrow orifice and expect the full, transformational light of it to shine through the darkness in this world. The same goes for any fruit of light, of truth. We might consider the following as an extension of this thought:

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

— Galatians 5:22-23b

The Trinity is comprised of three Persons. We, too, are persons. When we read our Bibles, we read about the adventures, the downfalls, and the interplay between persons. God has created us in His own image in order to relate to us, as persons. Other creatures don't have this privilege. We are truly blessed, and yet, my fear is that the kingdom of darkness, by using advances in technology, has separated us from the very thing that gives our lives context, *each other*.

Crisis: The Hysterics and the Gnostics

During times of crisis (whether perceived or real isn't the issue) there's always two camps that unbalanced perspective produces. I have dubbed them "The Hysterics" and "The Gnostics." Let's consider these individually and then we'll wrap up with a Bible-based conclusion. At the writing of this blog, the world is just coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, where countries are now trying to get back to some state of normalcy again. While this has all been an inconvenience, I've learned to love times like this because they reveal the estate of mankind and what the pus looks like when you squeeze him like a pimple (I know that's gross and some of you are reading this over breakfast on a Saturday morning, but it's a great analogy, sadly).

First, we have The Hysterics. These are the folks who, at the slightest sign of pressure, fold like a house of cards. If you observe their lives, they essentially remain in a state of constant fear, worry, and anxiety. In a sense, they are addicts to their own hysteria - it's all they've known and so it's become their norm. There's a stickiness to it. For believers, this is very much contrary to the Word of God. For example:

*Cast your burden on the LORD,
and he will sustain you;
he will never permit
the righteous to be moved.*

— Psalm 55:22

Do not be anxious about anything, 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 understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

— **Philippians 4:6-7**

Casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

— **1 Peter 5:7**

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

— **Matthew 6:34**

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

— **John 14:27**

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

— **Proverbs 12:25**

The Bible is full of reasons why hysteria isn't a good option under distress; it only proves that a person lacks faith in God's Word. That lack of faith can be the result of several things, beginning with willful ignorance (as mentioned earlier, for some of the folks in this camp, this high-tension estate is all they've ever known), but it also may be that they are just immature in the faith, being new believers. Whatever the case may be, without any condemnation in my voice, my advice is they humbly submit to the Word of God and be delivered from their fear and anxiety. Over time, as God sanctifies them in the Truth (ala **John 17:17**), they will surely be set free from their bondage to hysteria.

To me, The Hysterics are easy to understand and even sympathize with - we humans tend to fear the unknown or things we just don't understand. It's The Gnostics that drive a pastor like me berserk. The Bible speaks to this erroneous

camp as well. In fact, the Apostles of Jesus Christ were constantly having to fight against these types of people. What makes this group particularly gnarly to deal with is that they are equipped with enough Bible doctrine to be dangerous. The word “sophomore” comes immediately to mind (*sophos* means “wise” + *moros* means “moron”) - “wise morons.” The Gnostics are the wise morons in the unbalanced group during times of crisis.

The Gnostics reveal a base truth about themselves; they strive to be relevant. But here’s the thing - their folly renders them irrelevant on the grand stage, becoming merely white noise to folks who truly understand what the Bible has to say about peace and contentment. Shouting from the rooftops that you know when Jesus is coming back because of a string of earthquakes or a pandemic simply proves your ignorance. Here’s what Jesus, the Messiah, had to say about that kind of speculation, “*But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only*” (**Matthew 24:36**). Some of these wise morons have the audacity to disturb the Body of Christ with their vanity, for they proclaim to “see” things that even Jesus, Himself, said he didn’t have insight into.

*If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, **he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing**. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.*

— **1 Timothy 6:3-5**

When it comes to The Gnostics, Paul hit the nail on the head when he wrote, “**he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing**” (v4). That’s pretty much the epitaph of every vain profession of spiritual insight and knowledge of God that the typical gnostic makes. In their search for relevance they discredit themselves. In fact, the original Greek language translated “*unhealthy craving*” in v4 means

“mentally or spiritually diseased” (Strong’s).

*Such men are proud. They profess to have superior knowledge, but actually they know nothing. As Paul mentioned previously, they do not know what they are talking about...The word obsessed [“unhealthy craving” in the ESV] literally means to be sick. **These men are not spiritually healthy, and instead of teaching healthful words, as in the previous verse, they teach words that produce sick saints.** They raise various questions that are not spiritually edifying...Since the things they talk about are not matters of Bible doctrine, there is no way of settling them decisively. As a result, their teaching stirs up envy, strife, reviling, and evil suspicions.*

— MacDonald on 1 Timothy 6:4

Beware of gnostic thinking, my friends. I’ve got a few folks in my church who get carried away themselves and it drives me crazy. God squeezes a pimple and everyone becomes an expert regarding prophecy and conspiracy theories. Geez, and all this time I thought Jesus knew what He was talking about (wink-wink). Not every plague or natural disaster is a “sign of the times,” my friends. Stop **looking** for things that aren’t there. Might certain goings-on be judgments from God? You bet; but even if that’s true, we don’t know specifically what God is responding to, only generally, namely sin. As Paul wrote, the “disease” exists in the heads of this camp. Am I condemning anyone here? May it never be! I’m just doing my God-ordained job of shepherding unsuspecting sheep away from moronic thinking. God is using yours truly as an instrument of righteousness to protect you from ungodliness that leads to bondage.

As we look back on this era of our lives, I encourage you to remember this blog. There are always two camps that stray from the balanced truth we find in the Word of God, The Hysterics and The Gnostics. Both lack faith and wisdom, which means that both are dangerous to your peace. Do not partake in their folly, lest you be sucked in and robbed of the blessings that God has reserved for those

with true wisdom living happily and faithfully.

I guess maybe a practical way of thinking about this is in terms of fruit. Hysteria stirs up fear and gnosticism stirs up strife. Are either of these fruits godly???

Isn't it good fruit that we're seeking to produce? Don't let the simple fact that God doesn't disclose everything to us, including every reason why certain things happen in this world, drive you to fear or strife; rather, do as the Word of God suggests - have faith. If you really want stability in your life, you'll do as Paul suggested, "*Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong*" (**1 Corinthians 16:13**). In other words, find the centerline, my friends, and avoid falling into either ditch on the sides of the way that leads to life, for this is profitable for you and for the Body of Christ.

*The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. **These things are excellent and profitable for people.** But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.*

— **Titus 3:8-11**

E.T. Has Nothing On Us!

In case you haven't seen the movie *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, the main character is an alien from outer space who gets displaced from his family for a time, bonds with a young boy, and is protected by a small group of kids from those who would do him harm (the "evil" scientists and such). I know, I know...I'm stretching your imagination a bit here by mentioning a fictional extraterrestrial being but, just bear with me, I promise I'll make a connection.

During his time on Earth, E.T.'s physical body decayed to the very edge of death. Finally, E.T.'s family returns to receive him back and remove him from dire circumstances, delivering him from certain death, whether by physical deterioration or at the hands of prodding scientists. Throughout the movie, E.T. longed to be home, united with his family. The famous image is E.T. pointing his finger to the heavens and saying, "E.T. phone home." Sound familiar? Have you ever looked up to the heavens and uttered along the lines of what Paul wrote?

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 5:6-9

How about the Apostle John's cry for deliverance in the penultimate verse of Holy Scripture?

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

— Revelation 22:20

I believe any true believer possesses such an affection for their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, that they long to be in His presence, in the most intimate of ways, namely, in Heaven. Until then, we must exist as aliens in a land filled with guaranteed persecution (**John 15:20**).

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 3:20-21**

We must dig our heels in and press on in the face of promised tribulation. Our home, our citizenship, is in Heaven. While we earnestly desire to be there, our wont is to please our Lord, for this is the overriding conviction given to us by our Savior, Himself. We are His sheep, guided by His Spirit, empowered for good deeds. *“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them”* (**Ephesians 2:10**). As such, we are estranged from this world, even from our own households!

“Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

— **Luke 12:51-53**

“This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may

be manifested as having been wrought in God."

— **John 3:19-21**

Let us be encouraged. Like our little buddy E.T., we are displaced from our true home in the heavens, we are physically dying daily, we are persecuted from without, and yet we maintain a "living hope" (**1 Peter 1:3**) based on the veracity of our Father in Heaven, who has assured us that we are indeed His children, soon to be fetched out of this heathen, adulterous, evil world.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

— **2 Corinthians 4:7-10**

I have no doubt (nor should you) that God will deliver each and every one of His children, as He has avowed their "survival" in this foreign land; for such is the promise of sanctification (**1 Thessalonians 5:23**). Our job, as believers, is to transcend the confines of earthly reasoning, fighting the temptation to hate when hated on (**Matthew 5:44**), realizing that sin has ripped an infinitely wide chasm between good and evil that only the Holy God of the Universe can mend. While we behold the peerless Christ so very dear in our hearts, and as all things antichrist pale in comparison, let us indeed "survive" the condition in which we have been called.

The rift within ourselves is understandable - you are not alone in your struggles.

The matchless charms and superlative glories of the Saviour make everything else appear mean and contemptible to [a believer in Christ].

— **Arthur W. Pink**

E.T was lost and then found. So were we. Unlike E.T., though, we have been purposely left here on Earth after being saved and granted eternal security. We are to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ as members of His Body. The Word of God assures us of our success. May we find peace in knowing the end game before we even arrive and in doing so, bring glory to the One who, by grace, has taught us to believe in Him, and His divine purposes, from the start.

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**

I'd Die For...

"OMG, I'd *die* for an ice cream cone right about now!"

"Wow, did you see the legs on that woman? I'd *die* to have legs like that!"

"Man, I'd *die* to have a penthouse in Manhattan...just for a week, even."

How many times have we heard, or even expressed, sentiments like these? When they are uttered, people draw out the word "die", like, "I'd *dieeeeeeeeeee*," all for the sake of emphasizing how much we supposedly want something. Are we serious?

The truth is that no one who ever says such things is actually serious. We throw around superlative emotions for affect. It's a farce, isn't it...maybe a little offensive even to someone who has actually kept their word?

Let me give you some Holy Scripture that speaks honestly about who dies for what and what's actually worth dying for.

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

— **Romans 5:6-8**

It's like Jesus said, "I'd *dieeeeeee* for you!" And then He actually followed through. The difference between Him and the rest of us is that He really meant what He said when He said He'd die for you!

"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**

What a stark contrast to our empty proclamations about ice cream, physical attributes, and wealth.

So, this begs the question, "What *would* you die for?" Really. The apostle Paul said, "I affirm, brethren, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, *I die daily*" (**1 Corinthians 15:31**). What would you exchange for your own life? Food for thought the next time you pretend you are willing to barter with it.

Life is a gift, is it not? Shall we belittle the blessing by casting it off, even if in word only? Wouldn't that be in accordance with the attitude of, say Esau, who sold his birthright for a bowl of soup (**Genesis 25:29-34**)? He bartered something of great value for something menial. The Bible says that we have been "*wonderfully made*" (**Psalms 139:14**) - we are of great value to Him. God has created us so that He could save us and then spend eternity with those whom He loves, and who love Him back (**1 John 4:19**). Isn't it a little crass to say we'd "*dieeee*" for something of comparatively little value? Is it fair to say that dying for another human being, say like a soldier might, is the only fair exchange for your life?

According to the old saying, "There is truth in jest." Well, is there? Only you can answer that.

The next time you say "I'd *dieeee* for this or that," remember the One who meant what He said and actually died so that you may live for all of eternity with Him. Perspective is everything. Let us not forget what Jesus said, "*But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man*" (**Matthew 15:18**). May we respect God's blessings wholly, starting with our own lives. "*There must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse*

jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks” (Ephesians 5:4).

More than all of that, though, let us ever-appreciate that Jesus was a man of His word. When He said He’d die for us, He really meant it. Thank God for this singular truth.

Life is Good

Life is good.

I don't really want to spend my time here writing some deep theological treatise on why this is absolutely true, but I will take a brief stab at it to sway you from thinking I'm only waxing poetic sans Biblical proof.

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

And Jesus said to him, "...No one is good except God alone."

— Luke 18:19

*But put to death the **Prince [Author, Originator, Founder] of life**, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses.*

— Acts 3:15

*For the wages of sin is death, but **the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

— Romans 6:23

These four verses alone prove, logically, that life is good. Every good thing is from above. Jesus is from above; therefore, He is good. He is the Author of life; therefore life is good. We have been given His life, eternal life, as believers; therefore, we are owners of this good life. Done. Proven. Life is good.

Again, this blog isn't a theological discourse on the technical reasons why life is good. I don't want this to feel sterile and void of emotion. I want, rather, to express a different aspect of why this is true, dare I say in a bit more practical language. Allow me to begin by quoting Holy Scripture (always the best place to start whenever we begin speaking boldly).

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you. But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE," we also believe, therefore we also speak, knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you.

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 4:7-18

I'd like to focus your attention on v16, "*Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.*" I think that any believer who loses sight of this basic truth about our lives here on Earth runs the risk of losing the opening perspective that life is good. I often wonder how this might happen to a person. I never have to look any further than in the mirror, to be totally honest. I get down and even depressed from time to time, which, technically speaking, makes no sense (I speak purposefully in a limited way to draw out a point). I mean, why would a man like me, with countless blessings, the foremost being possession of eternal life, ever cease saying, "Life is good"?

Whenever we focus on the "*outer man,*" we doom ourselves to poor perspective on life, itself. Physically, the older I get, the more my body seems to betray me. After a pair of knee surgeries, even basic motions like squatting have become painful. For a lifelong athlete like myself, getting old can be a real bummer. But that's just me being self-absorbed, ungrateful, and silly. My body is *supposed* to fail, just like God promised it would when He doled out the curse against it after the Fall in the Garden of Eden (**Genesis 3**). I shouldn't be discouraged; rather *encouraged* by the fact that what God said would happen is happening.

Disappointment is nothing more than failed expectations.

One thing life has taught me is to never depend on the "*outer man*" as a source of happiness, for it is "*decaying*" (v16). There's nothing grandiose about decay. Decay also carries with it disease and infection, negatively affecting surrounding areas (e.g., attitude towards life). However, my "*inner man is being renewed day by day*" (v16). This gives me hope! There's a part of me, the good part, that is *improving* over time! It's that part that will enjoy the eternal life given to me forever and ever. Meanwhile, my "*outer man*" will be long since dead.

Like everything in this life, it's all about perspective. If we wake up each morning with the habit of dwelling on, and complaining about, how awful

it is to get old, we miss the boat on why life is good and actually getting better by the day!

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 4:8**

Perspective is highly influenced by the direction of our thoughts. Learn to dwell on good things and your feelings about life will follow. Life is indeed good, especially to those of us who, “*Do all things without grumbling or disputing*” (**Philippians 2:14**). We have so much to be grateful for in this life; therefore, “*In everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus*” (**1 Thessalonians 5:18**).

The Rock

When I was enlisted in the U. S. Air Force, I had the privilege of traveling to Kathmandu, Nepal. It was a fascinating place to visit for a young man in his late teens. Two things stand out in my mind from the trip. First, was the size of the bats. I remember eating pizza on a roof top restaurant around dusk and seeing gigantic creatures flying overhead. At the time, I assumed they were large birds, given their size; however, the waiter informed us that they were indeed bats (ewww)! The second thing was taking a rickety bus to a mountaintop at dawn and watching the sun come up on Mount Everest. The scale of the mountain range was so enormous that it was surreal, disorienting even.

I think about Mount Everest nowadays as the largest rock (well, rock formation to be totally accurate, but I'll call it a rock here) I've ever seen. I've since been to Colorado Springs, CO several times and atop Pike's Peak - the effect is the same; its size is so overwhelming that it unhinges primitive bearings such as depth perception. It's a unique, intoxicating feeling, which is why folks like John Denver and Katherine Lee Bates wrote songs about it.

Then, I think about how truly insignificant the two aforementioned "rocks" are compared to The Rock, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

*And all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and **the rock was Christ.***

— 1 Corinthians 10:4

The English language is entirely insufficient to fully articulate the vastness that is Christ. Truly, the best we can ever hope to do is describe Him in a way that isn't insulting. We must defer to His creation to receive glimpses of His immensity, using our best language to direct attention to His marvelous work. Mount

Everest is one good example. How about the Grand Canyon or deep space for others? Again, the best we can hope for is to communicate a visceral reaction to something that transcends our finite minds. Possibly, but certainly not wholly, we might relate the immutability of Christ to a mountain.

Just to put things into perspective, Christ is so much larger than anything on Earth that pure faith, as a gift from Him, the *“author and perfecter of faith”* (**Hebrews 12:2**), is able to move that which mere humans presume immovable. By the power of His awesome Word, faith alone could move Mount Everest. It seems unfathomable, but it’s true.

And He said to them, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.”

— **Matthew 17:20**

There’s a reason why great mountain ranges exist. *“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse”* (**Romans 1:20**). God uses nature to impress divine scale upon mere mortals. Though we are incapable of fully understanding all things pertaining to God (**Job 26:13-14**), He has been gracious enough to “wow” us.

The natural minded man in his folly worships and serves so-called “mother nature” and the multitude of her elements. He takes the enamoring parts of her and idolizes them. When they fail his expectations, he wallows in his own insecurities. Mountains may be among the most majestic sights on God’s green Earth, but they are nothing compared to their Creator. The same goes for animals and even human beings. We are nothing compared to the Lord God. That is the scale we must cling to. *“A just balance and scales belong to the LORD”* (**Proverbs 16:11a**). When we do, our sense of security blooms.

*For who is God, but the LORD?
And who is a rock, except our God,
The God who girds me with strength
And makes my way blameless?
He makes my feet like hinds' feet,
And sets me upon my high places.*

*He trains my hands for battle,
So that my arms can bend a bow of bronze.
You have also given me the shield of Your salvation,
And Your right hand upholds me;
And Your gentleness makes me great.
You enlarge my steps under me,
And my feet have not slipped.*

— **Psalm 18:31-36**

If Mount Everest could speak, it'd say something like, "Listen, I'm but a speck in the hand of God. Do not lean on me for guidance. I'm sick and suffering, too, in need of the Redeemer. Come, Lord!"

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

— **Romans 8:20-23**

Let us cling to the Rock of salvation. Our peace, joy, security, and confidence rely

on this.

*O come, let us sing for joy to the LORD,
Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.*

— **Psalm 95:1**

*And they remembered that God was their rock,
And the Most High God their Redeemer.*

— **Psalm 78:35**

*There is no one holy like the LORD,
Indeed, there is no one besides You,
Nor is there any rock like our God.*

— **1 Samuel 2:2**

May we eternally rest on the words of The Rock, Himself.

“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**

So, the next time you're atop a mountain, beside the sea, or gazing at the stars in wonder, remember who made it all. Remember how much greater our Creator is than His creation. God cannot be confined to human observations alone, like the size of a rock. The next time you're utterly blown away by something as

magnificent as Mount Everest, say to yourself, "That's a mighty big rock, but it isn't THE Rock!"

The Simple Life, With A View

“How sad it would be to come to the end of life and realize that most of our time was spent in slaving for what was already included in the ticket home to heaven!”

— William MacDonald

Jesus possesses wisdom so brilliant that it transcends all underlying knowledge becoming divinely simple. Such is the pattern for true wisdom. This wisdom is like white light, what we tend to imagine at the mention of light. Although our eyes do not detect it, the scientific fact is that white light is the combination of all color wavelengths combined into one. It turns out that the simplest light to imagine is actually the fullest in terms of bits comprising it.

There is a multitude of facets that make up wisdom, but in the end, true wisdom is expressed in the simplest of terms. Jesus was so wise that pretty much everything He ever said was simple. Yet, we know that He understood every last nuance of the subject matters that He spoke of. This is one of my favorite things about Jesus. He spoke in primitives that, even under the most intense scrutiny and dissection, always held true. He stood on a mountain of Truth, forever inclined to share the view from the top for the sake of motivating His disciples. Jesus kept it simple and pure. Might we learn something from Him?

As Jesus taught, the best things in life are the simplest. Living a simple life of “faith, hope, and love” (ala 1 Corinthians 13:13) is the best life to live. This wisdom produces freedom.

And He said to His disciples, “For this reason I say to you, do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on.

“For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds! And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life’s span? If then you cannot do even a very little thing, why do you worry about other matters?”

“Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass in the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more will He clothe you? You men of little faith! And do not seek what you will eat and what you will drink, and do not keep worrying. 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 12:22-31**

I often ask myself why people are so stressed out in this world. I ponder what, exactly, it is that keeps people up at night, tossing and turning. The answer, the simple wisdom on this, is that the world is filled with people who don’t have faith in God’s ability to provide. I’m speaking primarily of unbelievers, but even believers can get caught up in the rat race. What Jesus was teaching His disciples in **Luke 12:22-31** was threefold. **First, our daily needs are small, much smaller than we have been deceived into thinking. Second, not only can we live simple lives, but we should. Thirdly, why should a believer be anxious about the future?**

The best way to live is in the fullness of the Light, that is Jesus, *“For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace” (John 1:16)*. True wisdom understands that God is especially gracious to those in Christ. *“And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19)*. While some will continue to argue about this or

that concern in time, we believers are free to cast any such anxiety on Him (**1 Peter 5:7**).

You don't need the history of how a mountain was formed, or even to understand the underlying rock structures that support you standing on its peak. You only need to enjoy the transcendent view it offers you, in its most raw and simple form. Such is wisdom from above. "But the wisdom from above is first pure" (James 3:17).

Paul, one of Jesus' prominent disciples, explained the value of simple wisdom, "*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 2:4-5**), making the same general statement Jesus did when he wrote, "*No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier*" (**2 Timothy 2:4**). Paul's fear was that, "*[our] minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ*" (**2 Corinthians 11:3**).

Simplicity is light. Like white light, while it is the sum total of its parts, it expresses singularity. Jesus Christ was the very manifestation of divine wisdom. "*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*" (**John 1:4-5**). Unbelievers, being stuck in darkness, cannot comprehend how very simple eternal life in Christ is. Instead, they behave like scientists seeking to understand something pure by deconstructing it to the point of frustration, missing God's intent for sharing it in the first place.

Sadly, so many people spend their days toiling over things that we believers are promised - food, clothing, and pleasure - things that form the very center of their existence. They are slaves to their own appetites. We believers have been set free from bondage, given hope in things eternal and faith in the One who provides all our needs.

Let us enjoy the view from the mountaintop, for that was Jesus' vantage point. Learn to live a simple life and watch how magnificent it can be to look across the expanse that God has seen fit to bless us with.

The World's Largest Ball Of String

Imagine a man who lives in a kingdom. He spends his whole life gathering string and winding it into a giant ball. At the end of his life, it is abundantly clear to him that he has created the largest, most impressive ball ever! It's so impressive that the king himself comes down to see it. However, when the king arrives, he says, "That's not impressive at all... that string was stolen...arrest this man!"

The man is dejected, not because of the jail time, but rather because he spent so much time working on something that turned out to be completely worthless.

I think that'd be just about the worst fate any man could ever suffer - that is, to arrive at his final destination only to realize all of his efforts were in vain.

Do you realize that this is the fate of so many people in this world? I recently read a quote from Deon Sanders, the famous NFL/MLB athlete, stating that following his winning the Super Bowl he considered himself very lonely. He described this unexpected sensation by saying, "That's not what I'm looking for. It's got to be something else. I'm so hungry." All that hard work to become a star athlete, in not just one but two professional sports, and at the end of all his efforts he was worse off than when he started! In retrospect, I suppose we can say that he really wasn't worse off in God's eyes because he had to get to that place before realizing He needed Christ in his life.

Mr. Sanders isn't alone, not by a long shot. I'd argue that most people I've met in my life, especially men, but women also, in their own unique way, have spent inordinate amounts of time searching and reaching for goals that persistently elude them; or shall I say *one* goal that remains

unidentified until after they are saved by the grace of God.

In America, the scale of values typically revolves around currency, namely money. Self worth in this country is almost unanimously accepted as a derivative of wealth. The richer you are, the more “right” you have to be happy and content. That’s a lie that every single humble person who’s ever “made it” has realized.

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.

— 1 Timothy 6:7-11

No human being has ever found self worth in personal achievement, regardless of the measuring stick used. Some are striving for fame, others fortune, while still others find a variety of ways to amass worldly goods in an attempt to satisfy an eternal craving. I like the way Mr. Sanders said it, “I’m so hungry.” I also like the way Jesus responded to such folks. “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).

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

Like our Lord, the king in the parable above was not impressed with his

subject's personal labor for glory. In fact, it turned out to be insulting to the king because the object of the man's self worth was actually an abomination to the king.

It doesn't matter if it's a giant roll of string or a roll of money, you can't take either to the grave with you, nor will either purchase your way into Heaven. A man who places his hope in riches is a fool.

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity. When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on? The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep. There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt.

— Ecclesiastes 5:10-13

One of the greatest lies ever perpetuated in American culture is that we ought to “dream big” and cultivate a lifestyle in keeping with the world's scale of values. I suggest you take a good look around, not just at your neighbors, but also at the so-called “success stories” and look behind the curtain to see the sadness behind the painted on smiles. Do not be fooled by Hollywood, either, for they are actors, remember, many of who are living proverbs as to how *not* to live out your life.

For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.

— Ecclesiastes 5:7

Encouragement

To encourage is to inspire with confidence. In fact, the etymology of the word is “en + courage,” where “en” means “to cause to be in” and “courage” means “the ability to face difficulty; bravery.” We might say that encouragement, being the nominative form of encourage, is the act of encouraging. OK, enough on English grammar. The point is that when pondering what encouragement is, we realize that we humans can gain encouragement from a multitude of sources. God instructs believers to seek it in the Word of God. Does this mean we always do? Nope. Therein lies the folly of the average believer. They seek, and even “find,” encouragement from sources outside of the Bible.

For example, if we look in the mirror and say to ourselves, “Wow, you’re looking old today,” we might become discouraged - our mirror becomes a source of discouragement. We might then impose such thoughts on an unsuspecting spouse or friend when we ask things like, “How do I look in these new jeans?” Loaded question, right? There are a thousand and one ways we seek discouragement, even though we, initially, set out to find encouragement. The result is dependent on the source.

If we go to the world, with its perverted system of thinking, for encouragement, we always return with discouragement. Why? Because the fruit of something evil is always bad. To pluck a poisonous fruit from a tree and expect not to get sick from eating it is folly; yet, that’s what we often do when we consume worldly fruit.

So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.

— **Matthew 7:17-18**

To keep returning to the same tree and expecting different results is the very definition of futility. Einstein is quoted as saying, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” I think he was on to something, don’t you?

If we want to be truly encouraged, we must seek the truth in the Word of God. We must receive our sustenance from the Tree of Life, that is, Christ, Himself. We must go to the source of all goodness.

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

— **Matthew 6:33**

We need to learn to avoid the promises of blessings from the world - they are bad fruit from a bad tree! No matter how attractive or tasty it may look, we mustn’t be seduced by it and follow Eve’s example set in the Garden of Eden. To be “encouraged” is to be filled with courage, to be brave in the face of adversity. That’s impossible to do if you have a bellyache because you’ve been eating poisonous fruit. If you’re incapacitated (e.g., depressed) then consider which tree you’ve been eating from - I guarantee it’s not the Tree of Life, for this tree is full of vitality, with life, itself.

The good news is that the true source of encouragement is always available to us. Christ has given us access to His mind through the Word of God. Christ was never discouraged. To the degree we share His mind, we shan’t be either.

Being Too Hard On Ourselves

One of the most exciting things in life is to identify something God has accomplished in you. I mean, we read the promises, but do we really spend the time to appreciate what He's done in us?

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

— **Philippians 1:6**

I ask you to take pause now and consider yourself, say ten years ago. What do you “see” in terms of spiritual growth? I bet you see a lot if you are viewing your life through the lens of the Word of God! You see, that's half the battle - having our eyesight turned on, so to speak. If we view God's good work in us through a worldly or fleshly lens, we might say, “Oh man, I'm worse off now than I've *ever* been!” I suppose this statement might be true if God measured growth by worldly standards. But He doesn't. He measures it by His own currency, grace!

Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.

— **Luke 6:38**

We give and we're blessed in return. That's what Jesus taught us.

Nowhere in the Bible does it say that the measure we receive in return is based upon the world's scale of value. In fact, the Bible warns us against making that grave mistake. If we engage in this error, we miss out on the encouragement of seeing God's good work in us! For example, if we're looking for silver and gold, we miss the true reward of helping another; or, if we're looking for creature

credit, we miss seeing someone else's life being edified.

So, the first thing we have to do is remember that we are not to evaluate our growth by world standards. If we do, it's very likely we will perceive it as *negative* - doh! The reality may be that there's been *tremendous* growth in you, but you've been bewitched by the kingdom of darkness. All it takes is a bit of truth to set you free! Perspective is everything - remember that.

Here's a perfect example I was thinking about recently. The world tells us that we need to spend our time taking care of ourselves, even if it's at the expense of those around us. In other words, the world promotes a self-preservation mentality. To be fair, it's an easy game to promote, given the primitive fact that we're all born this way (e.g., who's more self-preserving than a newborn baby?). Looking out for self comes quite natural to us - it's humanity's default disposition (this is an unbeliever's status quo). However, the Bible teaches us something very different:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

— **Philippians 2:3**

Instead of being self-preserving, the Bible tells us that God's intention for His own children is that they become like Christ, "others-preserving." Now, remember that vision of yourself from ten years ago? Is it fair to say (I'm not a betting man, but I'm betting I'm right on this) that you're much less selfish than you used to be...much less self-preserving than you were years ago? Is it fair to say that there's a noticeable difference between your attitude towards others today than back then? Well, you can thank God for that. It's called sanctification. Are you ready for the mind blow???

Sanctification happens for believers. It never doesn't happen. To suggest otherwise is to declare God incapable of delivering on His promises. If you're a

believer, you have been changed. Period. My encouragement to you is to apply God's lens to your life so that you can actually *see and appreciate* those changes.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

— **Romans 8:28-31**

Allow me to loosely summarize the above passage for the purpose of this blog: God never fails. If He is for us (and He is), then we must believe that whatever He has set out to do in us, as individuals, will come to pass. In fact, a lot of stuff has already come to pass in you! All you need is the right perspective!

Some of you need to stop being so hard on yourselves. God is a God of compassion and mercy. Stop listening to the whispers from the kingdom of darkness, they aren't true. Read your Bible and you'll realize that what I am writing here is absolute truth. God isn't a god of confusion (**1 Corinthians 14:33**), so He certainly doesn't want any of us to be confused about all the good things He's done in us! Go ahead and rejoice in the simple fact that He's changed you. You're no longer the same, nor will you ever be again. Loose the chains, drop the lies about yourself. You're a co-victor in Christ Jesus, my friend - embrace it, live it, love it! And, oh by the way, there's a *lot* more where that came from!

The Great Depression

I've never met an honest person who hasn't admitted suffering from some form of depression in their life. Never. Not once. There's often a hesitance to admit it, for it reveals one's soft underbelly, making them vulnerable; but, if a person is truly forthcoming, the truth follows shortly behind.

Depression, anxiety, sadness, etc....these are all essentially the same thing (for the sake of brevity, I will hold them as such). Let's just agree to loosely define depression as anything that presses you lower than you have a right to be, especially in Christ Jesus, as a believer. Let's also hold our thoughts to believers only (there are too many disjointed maladies in existence among the ranks of unbelievers on this topic).

When we're young and without much to care about, we sometimes mope around in a certain state of depression because our favorite toy broke, or we got grounded for sassing our parents, or for being unfriended (choose your poison), etc. Is this kind of depression real? Sure. Is it debilitating? It depends upon the severity of the situation. But, I'll tell you what it isn't...it isn't great, at least not by comparison. Losing a possession, or some free time, or even a friend pales in comparison to losing blessings from God.

This is where true humility comes into play. Do not read any further in this blog until you understand this point: the greatest depression we'll ever know as believers is to live in sin and refuse to confess it; that is, to live a lie in the presence of our Lord. We will waste away from it.

I'm writing this blog as my own healing has just begun. I'm not about to confess my sin to you, so don't ask (it's something buried deep inside of me, unique to my own relationship with God, nothing worth you trying to even guess because while very common, it is rarely, if ever, even talked about among believers). Just

trust me when I say that living in sin crushes you.

David was, if nothing else, humble. His humility was always the vehicle for his deliverance. The same goes for you and me. We all sin. We are commanded to confess it...*all* of it. We can lament all we want, groan to others, and pray to God for relief. We can stretch and squirm, even attempt to improve our disposition with a happy dance, but nothing will work until we confront and confess the sin we're living in. There's no other pathway out of our depression. Let me say that again...

There is no other pathway out of our depression than confessing our sin before God. Youthful depression (the type that we learn about when we're young) is fleeting, usually because the thing we're so wound up about is replaced eventually by a shiny new object and our affections are restored. But there is no replacement for God (keep repeating that to yourself). Though we try out substitutes, nurturing them, stroking them, loving them...the truth is that turning our back on God is the surest way of diving headlong into depression. Remaining silent about it only exacerbates our blight.

David, the humble one, shares:

*When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.
Selah.*

*I acknowledged my sin to You,
And my iniquity I did not hide;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD";
And You forgave the guilt of my sin.
Selah.*

*Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found;
Surely in a flood of great waters they will not reach him.
You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble;
You surround me with songs of deliverance.
Selah.*

— **Psalm 32:3-7**

David wrote **Psalm 32** based on personal experience, just as I am writing this blog to you today. He described depression as well as any psychologist might; even better, if you're a believer. Depression affects you physically, which is why some days, while suffering it, you just don't seem to have the strength to get out of bed, not to mention the will. Depression is real. Our greatest affliction is when we are at odds with our Creator. This is the lesson David teaches us.

You might be reading this blog and already be thinking, "Where is this sin you speak of? I don't see it in myself." Keep looking. Our God isn't cruel. "*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find*" (**Matthew 7:7a**). If you're depressed, there's something to find. Accept whatever God reveals to you. "*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 key is a humble ear. Listen very closely. Go deep.

"From everyone who has been given much, much will be required" (**Luke 12:48**). The more you know better, the deeper the affliction. Nothing in this world is heavier than the weight of God's righteous hand on unconfessed sin. If you're suffering horribly from depression as a believer, this is the first place you ought to look. I did recently and finally succumbed to the truth about a sin I was living in. I'm a stubborn jackass, so it took a while. But, I'm writing to you today as a man delivered. Thanks be to God!

I [the Lord] will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go;

I will counsel you with My eye upon you.
Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, [e.g., don't
be so stubborn]

Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check,
Otherwise they will not come near to you.

— Psalm 32:8-9

So I ask you this, “What good is admitting you’re depressed in the absence of a willingness to find the root cause?” What good is taking the advice of worldly physicians when you have the Great Physician calling you to Himself for healing? Broken toys are replaceable, but a relationship with the Lord God is not. Nothing in this life, my dear friend, will depress you more than being at odds with Him (the Bible refers to this generally as disobedience). If you know God’s will, then do it. If you refuse, you are living in sin. This, my friend, is the true cause of your affliction.

David pleaded with God for mercy while confessing his sin:

O LORD, rebuke me not in Your wrath,
And chasten me not in Your burning anger.
For Your arrows have sunk deep into me,
And Your hand has pressed down on me.
There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your indignation;
There is no health in my bones because of my sin.

For my iniquities are gone over my head;
As a heavy burden they weigh too much for me.
My wounds grow foul and fester
Because of my folly.
I am bent over and greatly bowed down;
I go mourning all day long.

*For my loins are filled with burning,
And there is no soundness in my flesh.
I am benumbed and badly crushed;
I groan because of the agitation of my heart.*

— Psalm 38:1-8

Depression dims our outlook on life, doesn't it? When it goes on too long, we can lose sight of our will to live even. David described this so beautifully:

*Lord, all my desire is before You;
And my sighing is not hidden from You.
My heart throbs, my strength fails me;
And the light of my eyes, even that has gone from me.*

— Psalm 38:9-10

Like many of us, David turned to his loved ones and they stood at a distance from him. The lesson here is to never expect your loved ones to deliver you. And don't blame them for not trying - it's not their job to be your savior. During my own recent bout of depression, I bit and clawed those closest to me, bleeding all over them and pleading with them for answers. They gave me none, other than the one that truly counts - seek God. I have good friends, huh? I do. I love them very much and owe each of them an apology.

*My loved ones and my friends stand aloof from my plague;
And my kinsmen stand afar off.*

— Psalm 38:11

On the other hand, our enemies can smell when we're weak! They lie in wait, taking advantage of us when we're down. Never be surprised by worldly attacks designed to leverage your depression. "When it rains it pours," as they say, right? Indeed. Your enemies lack scruples - compassion is not in their bag. Expect

nothing except additional taunting from them.

*Those who seek my life lay snares for me;
And those who seek to injure me have threatened destruction,
And they devise treachery all day long...
For I said, "May they not rejoice over me,
Who, when my foot slips, would magnify themselves against me."*

— Psalm 38:12, 16

At the crescendo of your depression, before you are ultimately delivered, there's always a reckoning with God and no one else. It must be with God, for He is the one you've sinned against. "Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge" (Psalm 51:4). God uses depression. It has a purpose, a corrective one. It is the rod of the Great Shepherd manifest in discipline. The world *lies* and tells us it's not our fault, supplying myriad options at which the weak might point a finger; but, the truth is that it is *our* fault, and ours alone, for we are the ones who refuse to confess our sin...*all* of it. We must be willing to take the fall for it.

*For I am ready to fall,
And my sorrow is continually before me.
For I confess my iniquity;
I am full of anxiety because of my sin.
But my enemies are vigorous and strong,
And many are those who hate me wrongfully.*

*And those who repay evil for good,
They oppose me, because I follow what is good.
Do not forsake me, O LORD;
O my God, do not be far from me!
Make haste to help me,*

O Lord, my salvation!

— **Psalm 38:17-22**

Be ready to fall from your perch. David fell and was delivered. Likewise, for me. If you're depressed, seek God, seek to confess whatever sin it is you've been living in. "*Examine me, O LORD, and try me; test my mind and my heart*" (**Psalm 26:2**). This is what true humility looks like. God gives grace to the humble, but is opposed to the proud (**James 4:6**). Do not go on protecting the unconfessed sin you've got tucked way back where you suppose no one can see (God sees the truth and holds you accountable). You have been a *prisoner* to your own stubbornness. Let it go and watch your depression evaporate like the morning dew!

*The humble have seen it and are glad;
You who seek God, let your heart revive.
For the LORD hears the needy
And does not despise His who are prisoners.*

— **Psalm 69:32-33**

PS: So you really want to know what my sin was, don't you? I'll tell you in hopes that, if you find the same sin festering in you, you be delivered through humility. I was angry with God... 'nough said... I have no intention of telling you why.

The Insanity of Choosing Hell

And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

— Revelation 20:15

Hell is awful. The fact that anyone chooses to spend eternity there is foreign thinking to me. And, yes, people *choose* Hell over Heaven when they reject God's undeniable presentation of Himself and His gracious offer for salvation from sin.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

— Romans 1:18-21

The original language reveals that the word translated “*suppress*” in v18 is in the present-tense, active-voice. This means that a person must actively and responsibly make this choice daily. God has made Himself known to every human being who's ever chosen to suppress the truth about Him. Let that sink in so you don't lose too much sleep over the fact that millions of people will spend eternity in the Lake of Fire. This punishment is unlike any we humans have engineered for governing ourselves. Even a life sentence on Earth *ends* when the convicted person dies. For an unbeliever, physical death *begins* their final sentence (there is no end to it).

Jesus Christ spoke of Hell more than anyone else in the Bible. Why? *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”* (Luke 19:10). Hell is real. If we truly believed what the Bible says, maybe our hearts would bleed for others more like Jesus’ did.

Here’s how Jesus described Hell:

- *“Unquenchable fire”* (Mark 9:43).
- *“Where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched”* (Mark 9:48).
- *“In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”* (Matthew 13:42b).
- A place of *“torment”* (Luke 16:23).

I pray you never become familiar with the above scripture. I hope they become motivation for you to reach out to others, to encourage them, to teach them the truth. We ought not want even our worst enemies to spend eternity in Hell. God didn’t.

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

— Romans 5:10

*If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. **But love your enemies...** Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*

— Luke 6:32, 35-36

Hell isn’t a place where God sends bad people, it’s our *default destination* from the day we’re born. The Bible teaches us that we need to be *rescued* from this death sentence, contrary to what some in this world believe, even so-called “Christians.” In fact, a lot of “Christians” I’ve met have the perspective that Heaven is something to be lost, leaving them in a constant state of fear of losing

their salvation (be it a perverted notion of salvation). They fear being “too bad” and having God exile them from His family, as if they were born into it (e.g., born saved). In the event they fail to keep God happy, they are cast out of Heaven and into Hell. What a terrible way to live. What a destructive way to imagine the Lord’s character and nature.

Should we fear God? Of course.

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

— **Matthew 10:28**

Fear God, for He is the one who makes the final judgement call on whether or not a person’s name appears in the “*book of life*” (**Revelation 20:15**). Fear God, indeed; however, we cannot fear losing something we never had in the first place. **We are not born saved.** We are born dead (spiritually - meaning alienated from the one, true Holy God). So, our fear should be directed towards not being saved. This is the fear we need to help instill in others when we try to evangelize them. We need to dispel all the lies that say otherwise. We are born hopeless. Therefore, hoping we’re “good enough” to keep our heavenly abode is folly. “*All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*” (**Isaiah 64:6b**).

Hell is a sobering reality that I’ve struggled with my entire life, and even more so as I continue to learn the truth of it in Holy Scripture. It’s so real to me now that the very thought of it stirs extreme discomfort in my soul. I use this as motivation. You should, too. I have compassion for those currently choosing to remain in the estate in which they were born, even though they mock me at times. I love them, maybe not personally, per se, but the way Jesus loves them. I don’t want anyone to go to Hell, but I know they must, for God’s goodness includes punishment.

To embrace God with love implies the opposite is possible. Choosing to accept

His invitation to save you implies the ability to reject it as well. It seems insane that anyone would choose Hell over Heaven, but, sadly, people do. I go to sleep at night comforted, knowing that my loving, merciful, gracious Lord has righteously empowered this choice. While rejecting His love is foreign to me, I respect an unbeliever's right to do so because God does.

The Parable of the Wedding Feast

Just recently it occurred to me that my ministry has been very much characterized by the *Parable of the Wedding Feast*. As you read the passage below, remember the context; Jesus was speaking to the chief priests, the Pharisees, and the elders in the Jewish Temple, their most venerated place. Also keep in mind that, like most parables, there's a singular theme being taught. In this case, it's the root cause of eternal damnation, namely **the rejection of God's invitation to fellowship**.

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. Again he sent out other slaves saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, "Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast."' But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them.

*"But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. Then he *said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests.*

*"But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, and he *said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

“For many are called, but few are chosen.”

— **Matthew 22:1-14**

The idea of kingship was held in the utmost regard in the eyes of the religious Jews. Kings were regal, worthy of idealized, though often worldly, reverence. This cultural dogma would've given Jesus' audience understanding regarding the offenses made to the king in the parable. For example, it would've been a personal offense against the king that his subjects *“were unwilling to come...[and] paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business.”* This type of overt disrespect would carry certain punishment; even Jesus' opposition would agree to this. Disrespect was considered an intolerable, personal offense against the crown.

As the parable unfolds, we see a certain patience being exercised by the king. Instead of immediately railing against insolence, he requests his citizens' company again for his son's wedding feast. How many of us non-kings would show this kind of patience??? God's patience is truly astounding. Not only did the king offer a fine meal, but he extended the invitation more than once. The response was to kill the king's messengers (this is akin to Christian martyrdom). The king's response thereafter was to denounce his original list of invitees (those with a special relationship to him, ala Israel) and pursue others considered lower in social stature to fill his banquet hall (ala Gentiles). The only issue with the gathering of the latter was that the wedding feast included some who weren't adorned with clothing provided by the king for proper attendance.

In the closing of the parable, we see something that is seen in our own churches today - pretenders. When the king presented one of these people with the truth about their condition - their ill-preparedness for the wedding feast - the individual *“was speechless.”* The implication is that this person would've refused the king's kindness in clothing him righteously, preferring his own garb instead. In some ways, this exhibits an even greater offense to the king because it includes

a certain public mockery fueled by individual arrogance and insubordination, as if to say, "I don't need your grace to be righteous." This person, of course, represents the opposite heart of one who accepted the king's graciousness, adorned with attire provided by him, personally.

*I will rejoice greatly in the LORD,
My soul will exult in my God;
For He has clothed me with garments of salvation,
He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*

— **Isaiah 61:10**

He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.

— **Revelation 3:5**

*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**

As I mentioned at the outset, this *Parable of the Wedding Feast* reminds me of my ministry over the past few years. "And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord" (**1 Corinthians 12:5**). I feel for my congregation because they are able to relate, firsthand, to the slaves asked to help gather up attendees for the wedding feast. "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost" (**Revelation 22:17**). Thankfully, it is not our calling to save others,

only to announce the invitation. The striking reality is that we are often mocked for doing so. However, it is not our burden to bear when some choose to clothe themselves while assuming a seat at The King's table. This reality, *"For many are called, but few are chosen,"* may indeed be crushing news for those already endued with eyes to see and ears to hear (**Mark 8:18**); however, we mustn't doubt our faith in the sovereign, holy God of the Universe to act righteously. After all, He is the one who has planned this great wedding feast before any man or woman ever walked the Earth. The end was known before it all began.

"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."

— **Revelation 19:7**

The Season of Encouragement

Be encouraged, my dear friends. If you're reading this, you know that there exists whole populations of people who desire to celebrate Christmas for Christ's sake alone. You know that some of us are here with you in spirit (if not physically) and that our love for our Lord grows with a velocity towards all things heavenly, the same way yours does. For believers, now is a time of celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is this alone we focus on. We focus on God's gift to mankind.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

— Isaiah 7:14

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

— Isaiah 9:6

Before human history even began, our Father in Heaven looked down the corridors of time, saw the Fall in the Garden, and reconciled us to Himself through His beloved Son. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (**John 3:16**). What a wonderful blessing it is to know the Truth, "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (**John 8:32**). Our Father sent His son as an expression of a love that we simply cannot fully grasp; a love that transcends even the boundaries of time. God's love is timeless, perfect, resolute - having reached

across an infinite chasm ripped open because of man's sin, to no fault of God's - He became a man to take the punishment.

Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

— 2 Corinthians 9:15

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

— Romans 8:32

I pray that each of us be able to relax this Christmas season, to sift through all the white noise and the irritating tension that precedes December 25th each year, to see beyond the snotty kids crying for more toys from Santa, and to remember why Jesus was born. He was born to die for our sins. He is the greatest gift conceivable. He is the reason for the season, at least for us believers. And He is the essence of all things promised and worth hoping for. He is our everything. He was born to be this for us.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

— John 14:6

My prayer is that all of us keep our eyes on the prize. I pray that we remember our Lord's precious words above and that we abide in them. Christ was born a Victor. He's already defeated His adversary, death. We are secured in Him for all eternity. There is no losing now, only winning. I pray for clarity on this, especially this Christmas season, as things unwind and children become unhinged with avarice. Though I'm saddened, I rejoice always, to be fair. It is by the grace of God that any of us have any hope at all this year, or any year. *"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6).*

Let us remember why the magnificent One was born. Let us remember who He is, our Redeemer.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son."

— Revelation 21:3-7

God loved us so much He became a man (what a humiliating prospect) in order to reconcile us to Himself. Love, my friends - this ought to be our focal point this Christmas season; not presents, not food, not even family gatherings, strictly speaking.

Love. Keep it. Treasure it. Abide in it.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

— Ephesians 5:1-2

Sticks and Stones

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.”

I can't remember the first time I heard this, but I'm confident it was after I had been verbally abused by another child. I imagine either my mom or an elementary school teacher handed this little quip down to me. I've since also handed it down to youngsters; but, honestly, I can't remember the last time I did. In any case, to my understanding, it means that words alone cannot cause pain (well, that's the theory anyway).

Au contraire, I say! Through experience alone I know better than the “Band-Aid” lie I was told as a child. I'd argue that words are far more hurtful than even a punch in the face to a person without Christ. Considering that many people base their happiness on the fragile, worldly lie called self-esteem (as opposed to Christ-esteem, where a person's self worth is based on His merits), it's easy to see how, while physical bruises may last a few days and heal, wounds inflicted by the tongue may linger for much, much longer (maybe even a lifetime).

Beyond personal experience is what the Bible has to say about the human tongue (figuratively speaking, of course).

*My soul is among lions;
I must lie among those who breathe forth fire,
Even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows
And their tongue a sharp sword.*

— Psalm 57:4

The psalmist describes the tongue of his enemies as a sharp sword, supporting my observations above regarding its unique ability to lacerate the souls of man.

A physical strike to the chest may leave a mark, but it only goes so deep; whereas a soulful strike from a violent tongue leaves a mark deep down within a person, taking captive one's psyche. The prior may knock the wind out of you, but the latter can prove suffocating.

Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.

So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. 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 3:4-10

One of the most prominent areas I've seen this awfulness played out is in the ministry - and not just any ministry, but the "Christian" ministry. Believe it or not, the most profoundly hurtful wounds I've witnessed in the past ten years (I've been in full-time ministry this long) have been from others within the so-called faith (I cannot presume all are brothers/sisters upon self-proclamation alone - the Bible disallows it). Ask me if I'm surprised and I'll tell you that I'm not. I may even refer to Jesus, "*But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man*" (John 2:24-25). I know what kind of strife lies in the heart of man, especially in his flesh. When the human tongue

becomes the expression of man's evil intentions, it is venomous.

Case in point. Christians, theologians in particular, have a bad habit of giving names to doctrines that don't actually exist in the Bible. The presumption is that a name provides a virtual handle on a concept that simply cannot be described in a word or two. I get it. Even God the Holy Spirit inspired doctrinal handles such as "salvation, sanctification, and faith," for example. There's no danger in such name-calling when it's given to us by God. However, things get pretty messy when someone takes it upon themselves to create a new name, an extra-biblical one, to describe someone they disagree with (these names usually end in "ist"). And just so you know, derogatory name-calling isn't a novel concept. "*The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch*" (**Acts 11:26**). What some folks don't realize is that the word "Christian" had been used by Jesus' opposition as a derisive title. Later on in the Book of Acts, we see this played out with King Agrippa, who used the term to mock Paul during his defense of Truth. "*Agrippa replied to Paul, 'In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian'*" (**Acts 26:28**).

Our enemies know the power of name-calling. In its unholyest machinations, name-calling becomes the hallmark of ignorance. In fact, I'd argue that one of the easiest ways to spot a Christian ignoramus is to pay attention to their vernacular. If they persist with extra-biblical terms and contend with others using dismissive name-calling, chances are they haven't done their homework. If they have, it is often nothing more than a mere reading of some theologian's commentary. When pressed, these same people defend their doctrines with the names of men who are supposedly more learned than their opposition. This, too, is a telltale sign of dishonest conviction. Name-calling is often the teeth of a cornered rat.

It's far better to admit that you don't understand everything there is to know in the Bible than to cast aspersions at others who disagree with you, calling them names as an attempt to discredit them. By faith, the earliest "Christians" held fast to their simple doctrines, despite the name-calling. They were derided by kings

and laypeople alike; yet, they remained firm in one thing that guarantees victory (1 John 5:4) - their *faith*.

But resist [the devil], 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.

— 1 Peter 5:9-10

As a general rule, sophomoric (wise-morons) Christians, armed with just enough knowledge to be puffed up, tend to make huge piles of all things they do not yet understand and then set them ablaze, their vile tongue the fire-starter. In social circles, we call this kind of ignorance “discrimination.” The Bible simply calls it the fruit of the flesh.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” I’m not entirely sure how I feel about this old proverb now. It is multifaceted. I’ve gone through several iterations of understanding it, even while writing this blog to you. In the spirit of keeping it simple, I think I’ll conclude this way...

While sticks, stones, and names may all bruise me, the Great Physician, Himself, promises to heal me.

*He heals the brokenhearted
And binds up their wounds.*

— Psalm 147:3

Don’t allow your enemies to use their name-calling like a billy club. Realize quickly, for the sake of your own deliverance, that such people are revealing themselves as ignoramuses who need your prayer more than your vitriol. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). My humble

suggestion is to stick with Biblical revelation alone, starting with the terminology you adopt into your vocabulary. Avoid labeling others with names not included in Holy Scripture, for there's a good chance they have Satan's fingerprints on them. Stick with the unadulterated opinion of God rather than man's and all will be well with you.

*For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; **for by His wounds you were healed.***

— **1 Peter 2:21-24**

A Victor's Perspective

Most of you who read my blogs have been wrongly persecuted at some point in your lives. Is that fair to say? I think so. The question, then, is, "How do we respond to being treated unfairly?" I think this persists as one of the great challenges all believers face. As I've taught from my pulpit over the years, if you *aren't* being persecuted, something may be wrong with your spiritual walk, for the Bible speaks dogmatically about such things.

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

— 2 Timothy 3:12

Notice that Holy Scripture states clearly you "*will be persecuted.*" The Greek word used for this phrase is in the indicative mood, denoting an unavoidable fact. So, as I mentioned earlier, if you've never been persecuted, you need to do some soul-searching, starting with, "*If you were of the world, the world would love its own*" (John 15:19a) and, "*whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*" (James 4:4b). These are very serious considerations for every Christian proclaiming salvation in Christ Jesus. My fear is always that there are some living a lie...and I just want them to see the Light before it's too late!

Holy Scripture establishes the fact that believers *will* be persecuted, no doubt. Understanding this basic reality is very helpful in the sense that we may find peace knowing that God has ordained such challenges in our lives.

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

God has a purpose for all of His children. In the grand scheme of things, it runs contrary to the kingdom of darkness' intentions for us. Anytime there's real friction, there's resultant heat, pressure, and even pain. So be it. This is God's will. He uses such things to forge us into the image of His Son, who was perfectly forged through suffering of His own.

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.

— Hebrews 5:8-9

With the right perspective on persecution and suffering, we are set free from bondage to doubt. Consequently, we learn to embrace our differences with the world, even though it inflicts pain on us. Shall we expect anything less? Aren't such things merely affirmations of our faith? Indeed, they are.

"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 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. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me."

— John 15:18-21

I know by now I sound like a broken record, but perspective is everything! When it comes to suffering, the first question we humans tend to ask is, “Why?” Well, God has given us His answer, and it’s the only one that really counts. We will suffer for Christ’s name sake. *“For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Philippians 1:29)*. Our God-given ability to persevere under pressure is living proof of the hope that abides in us, *“through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4)*.

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 14:21-22

May we learn to rest on the security of His Word, especially in times of persecution. Let us cling to the freedom that perspective provides, for in truth we are indeed set free, *“and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32)*.

I wouldn’t say we go so far as grappling with our opposition, for we are commanded to, *“leave room for the wrath of God” (Romans 12:19)*; however, shall we agree to find a certain contentment in *“whatever circumstances”* we find ourselves (**Philippians 4:11**)? The kingdom of darkness and its minions are tireless in their antagonism - we just need to accept their presence in our lives.

When we expect something to happen, we can make peace with it. This is what it means to “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). While the world continues to conjure up ways to torment us, let us posture ourselves as Jesus does, as victors.

The Win-Win Of Encouragement

Disability, disadvantage, disband, disbelief, discomfort, disconnect, and **discourage**. What do all of these words have in common? The answer is obvious - it's the prefix "dis."

Enact, enable, encircle, encompass, and **encourage**. Likewise, "en" is the common prefix in the list.

According to *dictionary.com*, "dis" is a Latin prefix meaning "apart, asunder, away, utterly; or having a private, negative, or reversing force." According to the same source, "en" is a Greek prefix meaning "within, in; occurring in loanwords from Greek: energy and enthusiasm." Please allow me to put this in lay terms as it pertains to the common root word "courage": "dis" means to separate from courage while "en" means to join together with it.

Ok, back to the reason for this blog (no, it's not a lesson on the etymology of words - LOL)...

I've always marveled at the courage of the Old Testament saints: folks like Abraham, Moses, David, and Joshua. What we see in Holy Scripture is that courage is a gift from God, often bolstered by righteous instruments of God, namely others. Jonathan was a perfect example of this.

*Now David became aware that Saul had come out to seek his life while David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh. And Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David at Horesh, and **encouraged** him in God. Thus he said to him, "Do not be afraid, because the hand of Saul my father will not find you, and you will be king over Israel and I will be next to you; and Saul my father knows that also."*

— 1 Samuel 23:15-17

The Apostle Paul is another wonderful example of a terrifically courageous man empowered by the encouragement of godly individuals.

*But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be **encouraged** when I learn of your condition.*

— **Philippians 2:19**

As is often the case, whenever we experience a certain gift from above, we desire to share it with others. For example, Paul spent large amounts of his precious time on earth encouraging others to continue on in the faith, to “walk by the Spirit” (**Galatians 5:16, 25**), as it were.

*For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, that their hearts may be **encouraged**, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument.*

— **Colossians 2:1-4**

One of Paul’s faithful encouragers was Barnabas, “which translated means Son of Encouragement” (**Acts 4:36**), who epitomized the power of encouragement in the lives of others.

So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.

*The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to **encourage** them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.*

— Acts 11:19-24

Compare such excerpts from the Bible with the following example of discouragement. The sons of the tribes of Reuben and Gad put their human desires above God's. In doing so, they requested that Moses allow them to remain in a land which was different than the land promised by God.

[The sons of Reuben and Gad] said, "If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants as a possession; do not take us across the Jordan." But Moses said to the sons of Gad and to the sons of Reuben, "Shall your brothers go to war while you yourselves sit here?"

*"Now why are you **discouraging** the sons of Israel from crossing over into the land which the LORD has given them? This is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to see the land. For when they went up to the valley of Eshcol and saw the land, they **discouraged** the sons of Israel so that they did not go into the land which the LORD had given them."*

— Numbers 32:5-9

It turns out that the Lord God is not fond of discouragement. He, as our Creator, understands that we are weak in our flesh and that we may fail to accomplish His will; however, if you read the Bible from cover to cover, what you'll find is that He despises discouraging people. In fact, in this particular account, God curses an entire generation of Israelites for being discouraging to others.

"So the LORD'S anger burned in that day, and He swore, saying, 'None of

the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob; for they did not follow Me fully, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have followed the LORD fully.’ So the LORD’S anger burned against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until the entire generation of those who had done evil in the sight of the LORD was destroyed.”

— Numbers 32:10-13

I consider the times I have been a discouraging influence to others. Every time, without a doubt, it is because I neglected to do the will of God. That kind of negligence is infectious, like a disease. This is what I’ve learned about the concept of discouragement. It saps others of a healthy viewpoint regarding God’s will. It undermines good things meant for others. It’s cancerous.

On the flip side, I think about those times I’ve encouraged others. The fruit is always amazing. To encourage is to add to the healthy disposition of others. The most effective way, I’ve found, is simply by giving someone Holy Scripture that suits their circumstances. So often we miss the opportunity and give them, instead, our so-called “advice,” which ends up discouraging them in the long run, no matter how good our intentions may be.

Make it a habit to encourage others. Do this enough and you might be surprised by how your own disposition changes. God loves a cheerful giver, right (2 Corinthians 9:7)? To give is to add to. Jesus said, “*It is more blessed to give than to receive*” (Acts 20:35). This means that you will be blessed when you encourage others (give others courage, as an instrument of God). That sounds a heck of a lot better than the other option...just sayin’...everyone wins with encouragement, everyone loses with discouragement.

Fight the Good Fight

We are engaged in the greatest war this world has ever known. We just can't see it, physically.

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**

Jesus Christ, the Word of God (**John 1:14**), is our protection. We are enlisted soldiers (**2 Timothy 2:3**) in Christ's army. He is our supreme leader. We are to gird our loins for battle.

We've got our battle cry down pat, now what? Look around, can you see a war being waged? I can't. Well, not exactly. We fight by faith.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.

— **Hebrews 11:1-3**

We fight an invisible war - a war against evil, itself. We fight enemies that we cannot see! It sometimes feels like a scene in a sci-fi movie where soldiers are felled in the absence of visible opposition. I mean, if we look around, there's certainly carnage. Thousands of people die every day and head straight to Hell for eternity, right? People are dying, that's for sure; but, we can't see who or what is killing them. Does it have to be frustrating? Not always.

As Paul wrote:

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. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will bring about at the proper time — He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.

— **1 Timothy 6:12-16**

By faith, we engage in this war that we cannot see. If we get down to brass tacks, we might even include faith as the front line of every battle; a clashing between the world's faith in itself and the faith we have in Christ Jesus. Both systems of faith cannot be simultaneously correct. The Holy Bible clearly states that the world is wrong and that we are already foregone victors in Christ. Our job is to

preach this truth so that others may be saved before this war ends.

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**

Doolies

For the first nine months of their existence at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) new cadets are referred to as “Doolies.” Until recently, I thought the term had been derived from the last name of the late James Harold Doolittle, General, U.S. Air Force and aviation pioneer. I figured it was a play on words, so to speak, out of respect for one of our beloved airmen. I found out that the term Doolie is actually derived from the Greek word *doulos*, which means servant or slave. As you might imagine, I smiled a big smile because that’s the same word the Apostle Paul used to describe those of us who have been born again and saved, purchased by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Being a Doolie at USAFA means that you are on the lowest rung in just about every way. You are *never* treated unkindly or poorly; however, being the lowest ranked airman on base means you must faithfully perform duties that are considered menial, maybe even unpleasant at times. To a properly motivated cadet, this is a pristine opportunity to show themselves willing and able, worthy of wearing the prop and wings insignia on their flight caps. In essence, by showing themselves to be faithful servants, they prove themselves worthy to the rest of the cadet body to be received into their ranks - this day in March each year is called “Recognition Day.”

We are Doolies in Christ’s army. We are servants. We must understand what a true privilege it is to be a part of the Body of Christ.

As Doolies, it is our honor to serve in whatever way necessary in order to contribute to the success of our squad. This often means that we must do the menial things which nobody else wants to do. Isn’t this what Paul has taught us? *“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave [doulos] to all, so that I may win more” (1 Corinthians 9:19).*

*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 [doulos] 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.*

— **Ephesians 6:5-8**

Paul describes the life of a believer in Christ as predominated by servanthood. He also describes this service as what might be best described as “all in.” What I mean to say is that a true servant doesn’t just serve when it suits them, or when it is convenient for them, or when it is at or above their perceived “pay grade.” That is the attitude of a self-serving individual. It remains cloaked and unidentifiable, however, until that point where they are presented with a task they refuse to perform because it is “beneath” them. Paul had every reason to boast by human standards, but he never assumed a job was too lowly for him (read **Philippians 3** when you can). In fact, he considered *any* labor that advanced the Kingdom of God a privilege to perform.

For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. [Paul writes sarcastically now] We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

— **1 Corinthians 4:9-13**

A servant is identified by their heart. A heart is identified by its willingness to

perform any and all duties assigned to it, regardless of how menial or lofty they might appear. A true servant isn't interested in personal loss/gain in any way, but is only grateful for being given the opportunity to serve. *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:45). This same man stated, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive"* (Acts 20:35b). This attitude, when it truly settles into its rightful, central place in a person's heart becomes a quality of life, something inestimable in worth, and, above all, something that sets them free.

We find our greatest freedom in serving. This is something we aren't taught in schools. In many ways, it is a cautious journey most of us take, requiring Bible study, prayer, and the proof of faith (ala **1 Peter 1:7**) as it is given to us a little at a time. We are being sanctified one day at a time into the image of Christ, after all.

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.

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 2:3-8**

Let's behave as Doolies do, shall we? Let's adopt a whatever-it-takes attitude this day - why wait any longer? Let's shed any notions that this or that type of labor is beneath us, exchanging the lies for the truth. Let's stop worshipping the creature (starting with the one in the mirror) rather than the Creator. Let's step back and remember how very fortunate we are to be in the position to even understand such things, to be members of Christ's army.

When the contents of this blog become *real* for you in the most practical way (e.g., a duty is presented to you), do not shy away and make excuses like so many do. Share the load the way the Doolies do at USAFA. Sweep a floor, clean a toilet, pluck some weeds, paint a fence, wash some dishes, be someone's helper for a day (stop talking and start listening). Don't worry about who sees you - God sees the truth about your heart. Don't take the cowardly way out by pronouncing, "The Spirit hasn't convicted me to do this or that labor," when your pastor, your parent, or whoever has charge over you asks you to do something (Have you ever considered that the Spirit works through those in authority to test your willingness to obey?). We're all in this together - let's act like it, lest we discourage one another.

God is good, my friends. Life is short. It's time to serve. Be a Doolie and be grateful to the Lord for making you one of His own.

For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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.

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.

— **Philippians 2:9-16a**

Do Not Grow Weary In Doing Good

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

— 2 Thessalonians 3:13

As I wrote about in my last blog titled, “Crisis: The Hysterics and The Gnostics,” God uses times of tribulation to squeeze mankind like a pimple. While the Word of God is the ultimate source of Truth, it’s not the only instrument God uses to impart wisdom to us. The most direct route is simply reading our Bibles, where it’s inevitable that we engage with truth designed to set us free. That process, as you may attest, can be painful. In addition to simply reading the Bible, God the Holy Spirit leads you to truth through ordained men of God, such as myself. We are gifts to His flock in the sense that our utility to Him is in our teaching. However, having another human being in the mix often introduces temptations that otherwise wouldn’t exist. To be blunt, we pastors (and, frankly, you if you’ve ever tried to give someone the Word of Truth) are often pummeled for being messengers of God. This is why encouragement is so very vital to our refreshment (ala **2 Thessalonians 3:13**).

*I 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, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.** For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.*

— 2 Timothy 4:1-5

Paul wrote to Timothy for encouragement's sake. I am writing to you for the same reason. Do not grow weary in doing good, my friend. You *will* be persecuted for it - expect it. Jesus shared this wisdom with us:

*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' **If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.** If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.*

— John 15:18-20

I want you to be encouraged. I want you to be bold when it matters most. I want you to share in Christ's confidence from here on out - no more timidity about who you are; that is, a child of God, "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord" (2 Timothy 1:7-8a). I want you to take the Gospel truth out to a world that will hate you for it. Why? Because not everyone will despise you in the end, and some may, by the grace and mercy of God, be saved! What's a few bumps and bruises, I ask, when the stakes are so high?

*Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse,
and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.
Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;
reprove a wise man, and he will love you.
Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser;
teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*

— Proverbs 9:7-10

*Whoever is wise, let him understand these things;
whoever is discerning, let him know them;
for the ways of the LORD are right,
and the upright walk in them,
but transgressors stumble in them.*

— Hosea 14:9

Be encouraged. You have purpose. Your life is not to be lived out in vain. Your faith is real and so is your love for the Lord. Do not doubt these things about yourself, ever! God, Himself, has put that light in you and it is meant to shine! “*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden*” (Matthew 5:14). Don’t allow anything or anyone to disturb this fundamental truth in you. Satan is a thief, a liar, and a murderer of truth, such as I’m writing to you here. His demons hate that God’s using me this way. Let them. God loves me just like He loves you. I will not be torn away from Him, not by anyone or anything. Who are they who accuse us???

Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

— Romans 8:33-39

You are an instrument that God uses for His own glory. Act the part. Stand firm in your faith, especially during times of persecution. Those are opportunities to shine. Let messages like this one polish you, refresh you, encourage you. Life is good because God says so! Doing good begins with *being* good.

And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

— Galatians 6:9

Fit For Service

But by the grace of God I am what I am...

— 1 Corinthians 15:10

What does this mean???

I'm so tired right now...I can't believe God has got me writing to you in my current estate (I speak in physical and emotional terms); but, then again, if history has proven anything to me, I can. I've learned over the years that some of my most productive times as an undershepherd of the Lord Jesus Christ are when I can barely think straight...when I might be inclined to heed the warning on the back of certain prescription drug containers, "Do not operate heavy equipment," and such. God likes to prove things to us in our weaknesses, doesn't He?

*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 12:10

God, in His infinite wisdom, likes to remind us that it isn't by means of our own strength that He accomplishes His will in and through us. I think of His precious words to Gideon just before He sends him off to battle with three hundred soldiers against one hundred and thirty-five thousand enemy soldiers. In lay terms, He lets Gideon know that there's no place for arrogance in His kingdom.

*The LORD said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, **for Israel would become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me.'**"*

— Judges 7:2

Why am I so tired and reflective? Well, for starters, I only got about thirty minutes of sleep last night. My whole household got up at 2:30 AM this morning to bring my youngest son to the airport in Boston, MA, which is about an hour away. I'm tired for obvious reasons, but more so because I'm emotionally drained. Unless unforeseen circumstances arise, my son is going to be permanently leaving the house, being committed to a minimum of nine years to the U. S. Air Force. I'm going to miss him. While it's not my first rodeo, as they say, given my oldest son spent five years serving in the U. S. Army, this time's a little different because the house is now empty of kids. This is going to be an adjustment for sure. Right now I am filled with mixed emotions.

As I write this to you, I have a file folder open on my desktop with thumbnails of pictures taken over the past few days. The last one in the roll is the one my wife took of my son and I standing on the sidewalk at the airport this morning. He's taller, fitter, and more ready for military service than I am - heck, if I study the picture too long I might be shamed by the "thousand words" it speaks to me - LOL. All kidding aside, what strikes me in this photo is the fitness of my son to serve. I had my time thirty-plus years ago; but now it's his time, just like it was his brother's not too long ago. My prayer is that he serves with honor and dignity worthy of the Lord.

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 3:17

I've had the exceptional privilege of raising a son for eighteen years and a sheep for ten (my son has been a member of my church since inception). The fruit of all this labor has left me feeling sort of worn out, to be honest - LOL! I am not complaining, for I shall defer to my opening references, **1 Corinthians 15:10** and **Judges 7:2**, whenever I lose my perspective. I'm grateful that God can and does

use moments such as a sidewalk goodbye and a hurried picture to keep us humbled. These are the visual aids that remind us of whose glory we live for.

I'm no longer fit to serve the way my son is about to. My creaky joints wouldn't stand for it. Fitness is a relative term, though, for I am more fit than ever to serve in my spiritual gift. For this I am truly grateful. I still have a purpose here on Earth, even though the very best of my paternal efforts just flew off in an airplane headed for Colorado Springs, CO this morning.

I don't want this blog to be about me, though. I want to use its contents as encouragement for you. Even as I write this blog in a mental fog, God is beckoning you to give your attention to the situation, specifically that He is *purposely* using a depleted soul (mine) to do His good work. I may be tired (as you might also be for personal reasons this same day), but in God's eyes, it's just a perfect opportunity to remind us of the fact that fitness is a relative term, and that while some head off to train up as airmen and soldiers, others head off to battles void of guns and ammunition. Not every battle is the same, though the war is. We form a collective for God's glory, by grace through faith, "*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 1:17).

It's strange in a way that God uses times of fatigue to get through to us, to teach us lessons we are too busy to learn otherwise. We humans are famous for taking credit where credit isn't due, aren't we? Knowing this about ourselves is half the battle when considering the calling placed on our lives at salvation. It's a miracle He can use any of us in any way, whatsoever, to His glory; but, He does.

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

Being fit for service means being able to do the will of the Lord. That's it. Not everyone is called to serve in the military, no matter how noble the endeavor may be. We are all called to fitness, though, for fitness' sake, you see. The real question is, "Fitness for what *purpose*?" None of us are without purpose. In fact, it is our uniqueness that makes us special in the eyes of God, for we are "*wonderfully made*," (Psalm 139:14) each and every one of us. I know that my son is exactly where God wants him to be right now; and I can say the same for myself (a grainy picture taken at 4 AM this morning reminds me of this simple fact). We each go our own way, often tired as I am at this moment, other times rejuvenated, but always to the glory of God.

When the trumpet sounds and roll call is taken, I want to show up faithfully. I pray you do, too. I want all of us to be fit for service, always, however unique that may be. God knows.

There's beauty in diversity. God has purposed it. Embrace it. Exercise your faith with a purpose. Train. Serve.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.

— 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

Glossophobia

Raise your hand if you're petrified of public speaking.

Glossophobia or speech anxiety is the fear of public speaking. The word glossophobia derives from the Greek glossa, meaning tongue, and phobos, fear or dread. Some people have this specific phobia, while others may also have broader social phobia or social anxiety disorder.

— Wikipedia

Statistically, the only two things that consistently challenge the fear of public speaking as humanity's greatest fear are death and snakes. Recent studies, however, have shown that corruption is now also climbing the ranks. Regardless of which fear tops the list, public speaking is always, and presumably will always be, close to the number one position. So, relax if you're among those afflicted with glossophobia; you're certainly not alone in this world.

There's something very interesting about glossophobia worth mentioning. It's possible that the ultimate fear responsible for the phobia, itself, is but a mere shadow. While the initial fear is real, it is often much smaller than the scary thing we put a fancy medical term to.

Cognitive behavioral theory suggests public speaking fear is a type of social phobia. Researchers believe that a person, in part, creates their social phobia by inflating the consequences of their failure. In other words, we perceive public speaking to be more of a risk than it really is.

So many speakers I work with are more afraid of being afraid than of the actual speaking.

— gingerpublicspeaking.com

Do you know who in the Bible apparently had this fear? The one and only, Moses! It's incredible whom God chooses to be His messengers. My hunch is that He chooses individuals who *know* their communication abilities pale in comparison to that of the Holy God of the Universe. Otherwise, an individual might be tempted to attribute success to their human abilities.

Then Moses said to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say."

— Exodus 4:10-12

The Lord put Moses' fears to rest by reminding him that the message itself wasn't his. We ought to all remember such things when we are presented with an opportunity to share the Word with others. Oftentimes, such opportunities involve multiple people as our audience. The more eyes upon us, the more daunting it may seem. But, be encouraged, my friends, you are not alone. You have God the Holy Spirit with you always.

"When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

— Luke 12:11-12

Under the most pressing circumstances, the Lord's disciples are able to stand up to their fears when they depend wholly upon the grace of God. As Paul intimated, "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'" (2 Corinthians 12:9a). Understanding our weaknesses is paramount to doing God's will. If we go so far as to prepare

fine speeches and wax poetic about this or that, we have already missed the mark. Our job is to simply speak the truth. Eloquence has nothing to do with our success, regardless of what mere man tells us.

*“But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name’s sake. It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. **So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute.**”*

— Luke 21:12-15

“Make up your minds not to prepare beforehand” (v14). Food for thought... when it comes to giving testimonies, preparation is a slippery slope. It’s true, we ought to *“always [be] ready to make a defense to everyone who asks [us] to give an account for the hope that is in [us]” (1 Peter 3:15)*; however, there’s a difference between reading /knowing Holy Scripture and worrying about what we’re going to say the next time we’re given a divine appointment to share the Good News with a crowd.

Relax. Let God do His job. He’s good at it. If He asks you to speak in public on His behalf, know that He’s already prepared you for success.

My Struggle With Disdain

I struggle with anger sometimes.

I'm a pastor. I ought to know better. But a man's heart is a man's heart, right? I cannot suppose I am able to control it, modify it, or play pretend with it. Only God can change it, and He has. And yet, here I am, struggling...

Struggling with what, you might ask? I mean, Ed, it's Christmas time. You just got out of your vehicle and was reminded of the thoughtfulness and giving attitude that seems to permeate the season. You were just listening to your favorite radio station and the deejay told the heartwarming story about how a "secret Santa," who goes by the handle "Santa B," just spent forty-six thousand dollars paying off all layaway items at a Walmart in Everett, PA, effecting one hundred and ninety-four individual accounts. The store manager who accommodated the transaction is quoted as saying, "During the holiday season, many people will use layaway to pay off Christmas presents over time so they don't have to buy all of them at once...many of the items that were paid off by Santa B were Christmas presents."

As you can imagine, such a story travels quickly, absorbing a lot of media attention and inducing many tears in the eyes of its hearers. So what's my problem, then? Why am I not filled with joy, but rather cynicism, anger even? Why does my heart break when I hear such things? Three years ago, I wrote a blog titled, *"What Would Paul Say About Christmas 2015?"* It addresses some of my woes. It's worth a read.

What I'm sharing today goes much deeper than what's wrong with the Christmas season nowadays, though. It's an examination of my own heart (and maybe yours, too). It's the twinge that occurs every time someone

asks me to celebrate something that detracts from the glory of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Christmas season folly is a perfect example, but it is merely a symptom.

My very visceral, sometimes overwhelming, struggle is with the nature of mankind. I hate it. I despise it. I suffer waves of utter disdain in my soul over it. It's a disease, a plague, and, unfortunately, an intrinsic part of everyday life. The weight of it is asphyxiating. I long for a deep breath of fresh air, but when I walk in this world, the air is awfully polluted. No one seems to notice because men are born natural smokers, with lungs conditioned for it.

Am I bleeding a little in front of you? Yes. My heart aches for this world and I get tired of fighting with it. I'm human, too. We pastors aren't impervious to the effects of this world just because we spend so much time with our noses in the Word. In fact, I'd argue just the opposite is true. Spending so much time immersed in the Bible means that the "lights are always on" (ala **Ephesians 5:13**) and I see things for what they truly are. This world is ugly, and it celebrates itself every chance it gets, even on holidays that rightfully belong to Jesus Christ.

*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 1:28-32

On the one hand, my heart desires nothing more than to celebrate the One

who laid His precious life down for me. I see all the seasonal paraphernalia with crosses and mangers, I hear the words “silent night” playing on the radio, and my heart leaps for joy. But then I crash into a wall of duplicity. I’m stricken with deep pain when I realize that most of the celebrating isn’t in accord with my own, it’s celebrating folks like “Santa B” in PA and the folks who apparently spend more than they have in order to satisfy a sinful desire to placate the social pressures of American entitlement.

I’m not going to lie. Some days I feel like throwing in the towel in a fit of disgust - my struggle with disdain for humanity exceeding my self-control. The Spirit of Christ never allows this to consummate, of course, because it’d be wholly inconsistent with the heart and will of Jesus, my Lord. My job is to serve. My recovery lies in the hope I have in His promise to work out salvation in the lives of others. I have to remember how very far He’s delivered me (if that doesn’t give me hope, nothing will). These machinations that I endure are to be expected. Knowing this helps a lot. Perspective is key.

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. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

— Romans 5:1-8

Yes, Lord! Thank you for giving me perspective. Deliverance from this constant struggle can only be from You. I lament, but who am I, after all, but an unworthy recipient of the same grace awaiting those poor souls I'm lamenting over. My anger is pressed backwards when I recall the words you gave Paul so long ago, "*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). I want to love others the way You do, Lord, but I'm weak. I need You. I need Your guidance, Your power.

*When my heart was embittered
And I was pierced within,
Then I was senseless and ignorant;
I was like a beast before You.
Nevertheless I am continually with You;
You have taken hold of my right hand.
With Your counsel You will guide me,
And afterward receive me to glory.
Whom have I in heaven but You?
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.
**My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.***

— Psalm 73:21-26

I really don't want you to think of me as some poor, crippled soul. I have supernatural vitality that sustains me - trust me. I'm doing fine and concede to God that I will be until the day I die. This blog is to share just a little of my heart, a heart that was changed the day the Lord saved me. I just want to let some of you know, whoever you are, that if your heart breaks, you are not alone. You're not the only one who is seeing things through a lens that exposes your soul to the ugly barbs of sin in this world.

The “*god of this world*” (**2 Corinthians 4:4**) has done a masterful job of sowing counterfeit righteousness even among the Christian ranks. I see it, and it hurts. Do you?

While this struggle is real, it’s only temporary. Alas, we are delivered, each one of us who shares a broken heart. There is good in this world after all, we just need to be reminded where to look for it.

*O taste and see that the LORD is good;
How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!*

— **Psalm 34:8**

What's the Message We're Sending?

A beautiful woman bears a daughter. As she grows up, the mother buys her all the latest fashions and before she takes her daughter out in public, she dresses her up like a little porcelain doll. She beams with pride each time a stranger approaches the beautiful duo to say, "Wow, what a precious little girl you have there!" This continues throughout the little girl's life. The older she gets, the more she realizes the financial cost of maintaining this image - it produces a type of economy in her soul. At the behest of her mother, she enters multiple teen beauty pageants, always placing high if not winning the competition. By the time she's a senior in high school, she's known as the "town beauty," reminiscent of her mom during her own high school years. She heads off to an esteemed college and is met with the same unwavering adoration she enjoyed in her home town. Everyone agrees, this girl is a knockout! The most amazing thing about her, though, is something hardly anyone ever takes the time to notice - she's a kindhearted, patient, loving young woman.

One night after a sorority party, she decides to go for a late night breakfast at the local greasy spoon, which caters to college kids suffering the "munchies." Her boyfriend offers to take her, so while he's driving, she takes the time to put on some makeup, looking in the visor mirror, not realizing that he is driving erratically. She doesn't even see the other car coming...

She wakes up from a coma two weeks later. The nurses call for her parents. Her mom shows up and the girl notices the intern's jaw drop as her mom walks through the door (her mom is undoubtedly the most beautiful woman she knows). Her mom has a pained look on her face, though, and before she can say a word...

The beautiful woman by her bed asks, "Did they tell you yet?"

“Tell me what, Mom?”

After a sigh and a look of utter dejection, a look of mourning comes over the woman’s face that jolts her daughter up from her bed. “What’s wrong, Mom? Is Rick dead?” She begins to cry. Her heart is breaking fiercely, for it had been her idea all along. Rick had said that he was only going because he missed her and wanted to spend some alone time with her. How would she be able to carry on with this burden?

The mother responds, “Huh? Rick? No, he’s fine, just a few scratches and some bitterness over his BMW being totaled.”

“Then what’s wrong, Mom?” The girl is confused at this point. She knows she isn’t misplacing her mom’s countenance - she is mourning something for sure. “Tell me!”

“Oh, honey, it’s your face,” as the mother begins to weep. “It’s ruined. The whole right side of your face is going to be scarred for life!” Then she begins to wail loud enough that the nurses at the central station hear her. She abruptly gets up and leaves the room.

The beautiful little girl, who became the beautiful teenager, who became the beautiful young lady was now void of the greatest asset to her self worth she ever knew (I speak from a worldly perspective here, not my own). Later that afternoon, she jumped out of an eighth story window to her death. At the funeral, her mother mourned less than she had that day in the hospital over her wounded daughter’s scarred face.

What began nineteen years ago ended tragically. Do you think this sad, nameless young lady doesn’t exist somewhere, or hasn’t been missed by those who loved her for who she was on the inside? Do you think that suicide among teens isn’t brought on by this same pattern every day? Do you think the threaded evil

which hoisted the esteem of these two women doesn't represent generations of women in this world?

Here's my question for you: When the little girl was being pelted with compliments, even long before she understood the worldly value of them, was she being conditioned to believe that her self worth ought to be tied to external beauty? Let's take this issue to heart here and now, specifically us believers.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;

my soul knows it very well.

— Psalm 139:14

God's valuation of this little girl is the same as any other little girl born to His glory. It's the same He has for the one standing five feet away from our main character all those times she was fawned over at the shopping mall, the grocery store, or wherever; you know, the unremarkable one who's forced to absorb the social shame of not measuring up.

What's the *message* we're sending these little girls when we fawn over one but not the other, just because we find one more physically appealing than the other? What's the *message*, I ask, not the supposed compliments (the words are not what count here). Let us not be cowards when it matters most! In the end, who are we screwing up more, the so-called beauty or the others? Both suffer, this we know, but *is it fair to say that the message we send these impressionable young souls is that it matters?*...that physical beauty matters when assigning self worth? Does it, really? Says who?

I keep telling myself that I need to write my next book on this very topic and title it, *What's the Message We're Sending?* I can't wait until God gives me the green light, for there are a multitude of chapters to be written on this. **So many**

compliments, so much damage! Here's a spoiler alert for you; and I'll give it to you in an array of comments, letting you connect the dots and assign things rightly into the pattern I've outlined above.

"Oh, wow, you're so handsome!"

"Oh my, did you see the size of that house?!!! It's got to be worth at least a million bucks, right?!!!"

"Phew, you are so smart, you know that?"

"I'm not surprised that you were voted prom king/queen...everyone just loves you!!!"

"I'm so glad you decided to go on that diet - you've never looked better!"

"You're my hero!"

What do the above statements have in common? Well, for starters, they are all compliments. Most look favorably on them, for who doesn't want to be praised once and a while? The question is, "Why should we even care?" That's the other thing the above quotes have in common and it's this latter point that instigated my writing this blog to you. If God has made things just as they are, having never once made a mistake, placing all things in their perfect time and space, then why should we make such a big deal about things like beauty, wealth, intellect, popularity, or heroism?

What's the *message* we're sending our children, raising them up this way? Why do we lie to them and tell them to purchase as much worldly currency (aka creature credit - see the recent *Tragic Irony* blog entry) as possible so that they might "enjoy" the spoils that come from our merchandising?

For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?

— Luke 9:25

My friends, we have to step back and ask ourselves how we have been a part of the problem instead of the solution (and it's not "if", it's "how" - we're *all* guilty). We believers have been called to the same ministry Jesus espoused, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10). Can you imagine, even for a fraction of a second, that Jesus would've endorsed the mother's behavior illustrated above? Well, if you can point a finger at this fictitious person, you can certainly take a long look in the mirror (see recent blog titled *Looking In the Mirror*). To say Jesus is repulsed by such actions is a massive understatement...and yet, most of us would chime in with, "Oh yes, isn't she just the most beautiful little thing," the debilitating, cancerous message to the little girl being, "Go ahead, little one, place your self-esteem in superficialities!"

Balance Statement: I'm not suggesting we can't appreciate beauty or other things the world values in its own way. What I'm highlighting is the system of thinking, the "economy", that most people abide in when they say such things. They don't say them with a nod to God, they place the glory squarely on the shoulders of these youngsters. What a burden. Shame on us.

Learn to ask yourself one very important question, especially if you have children of your own: *What's the message I'm sending?* It can be so powerful that over time it contributes to something as tragic as suicide. If we suggest something is true long enough, a person tends to believe it. We don't even really need to articulate it, but behind the so-called "compliment" is an insidious message, an evil one that implants itself deep into the psyche of others, especially those with certain vulnerabilities, like kids. Some of you are saying, "Yeah, that kid grew up and it's me!" Hey, join the club, my friend, we're all victims as much as perpetrators. The solution is the unadulterated Word of Truth.

*So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and **you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**"*

— **John 8:31-32**

Amen?

When the Going Gets Tough...

Two women, Sally and Maggie, meet in the waiting room before a Christian bereavement group meeting. They strike up a conversation and manage to forget their woes just long enough to crack a smile, albeit small ones with a tinge of guilt. Come to find out, they have similar stories. Each had played a part in the loss of a loved one, or so they both perceived that to be the case. They managed to form a bond right there on the spot, and each bruised heart accepted it with gladness.

Standing in the doorway to the room filled with folding chairs set in a circle, the counselor called out to the group in the waiting room, inviting them to come grab a seat. The two newfound friends sat next to each other, for it offered them a little salve for their anxiety about attending such an event.

As the members of the group, led by the prodding and encouragement of the counselor, shared their stories, Sally had to keep dabbing her eyes with a tissue. Maggie, on the other hand, sat there like a rock. By the time the fifth story was shared, Sally began wondering who her new friend was; she thought, *this woman is either heartless or is still in shock from her loss*. She leaned over to Maggie and said, "Doesn't this bother you, hearing about all this loss?" Maggie responded with caring eyes and pursed lips.

When it was Sally's time to share her story, she broke down and sobbed, uncontrollably. Maggie didn't say a word, only held her new friend's cupped, tissue filled hands, and put her arm around her shoulders. The wave of emotions subsided eventually and Sally regained her composure, knowing others needed their time to share.

When it came to Maggie, she pulled out a worn piece of paper, crumpled with yellowed edges, as if it was something she'd had in her purse for years. It

reminded Sally of a vintage photo with the old sepia hue to it. Maggie said to her audience:

“My father-in-law gave this to me ten years ago when I lost my first son in the war and I still read it every day. There were times when I resented his gift because it gave me comfort...and who was I to take comfort when my beloved son had been tortured and killed in an enemy camp? After my daughter died from ovarian cancer at the age of thirty, I’d often look up to God and ask, ‘Why me, Lord? Why me?’ I’m here today because I just lost my second son to alcoholism, at the age of 41. I used to think that God had it out for me - that I must’ve done something wrong to anger Him. I never felt like I was any worse than the next person, so - I’m not going to lie to you - He and I didn’t see eye to eye for years. I was angry with Him.

“After my first son died, I wept for what seemed to be years, completely withdrawn and depressed. Looking back now, I can only estimate the damage my absence from the family did to my remaining two children. They’d say to me, ‘Mom, we miss you, please come back to us.’ I was too bereft to listen. It causes me much sorrow to think about it now because, while mourning is healthy and even necessary, it turns selfish if we aren’t careful. God has a plan; we have no right to be selfish about it.

“When my sweet petunia died of cancer, I thought my world would end. I lost twenty-five pounds and withdrew to a new low. I didn’t think it was possible. I had kept this gift (gesturing to the worn note in her wrinkled fingertips) as a memento of the first great tragedy in my life. I then got angrier with God as I considered people like my sister, who, by societal standards, is a louse and a floozy. All seven of her kids were still alive. ‘This isn’t fair,’ I’d say to God. I got even more angry, sorrow turning into something venomous. It wasn’t a good time to be around me; my poor husband and son.

“Before my son drank himself to death, he would call me from his studio apartment in the city and say, ‘Mom, I’m always so sad.’ While what remained of my heart would cry out, breaking in some small way - I had nothing left to give. My mind was galvanized against God, who, interestingly enough, had never set Himself against me. I held my son’s hand as he died on a gurney in the hallway of the city hospital. I looked up to God and asked, ‘You couldn’t even have given him the dignity of dying in a private room, Lord?’

“My third and final child had left me. God had taken them all away. I stood there in that hallway with medical staff whizzing by, overwhelmed with tending to people still living, and I pulled out this note to read again. I’ll share it with you all now.

“It says, ‘My beloved Maggie, the apple of my son’s eye, God has a plan for you, I know it. His Word says in **Isaiah 40:31** *“but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”* I love you like a daughter so I give this gift of perspective to you. **1 Chronicles 16:11** *“Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually!”* The good Lord knows what He’s doing, trust me, my dear. **Hebrews 1:3** *“He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”* You might say that you have a right to be angry with God, but you don’t. You truly don’t. God allowed this tragedy to happen because He desires to use it for good. **Romans 8:28** *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”* Do you believe that?”

At this point, Maggie stopped reading the note to say, “I didn’t always,” and then continued:

“My dear Maggie, I beg you to accept the Truth about God. **Isaiah 55:8-9**

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” **Philippians 2:1-4** “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* I miss my grandson and so does your husband and your two other beautiful children. We don't want to lose you, too, dear.

“Perspective is everything, Maggie. While we have a right to cling to our own perspective, God's is the only one that really matters. I pray that you see this before grief overwhelms you irreparably.”

Maggie looked up and realized the room was perfectly quiet. She broke the silence with a softened voice, “My son died in that hospital hallway for a reason. I'm here because God has changed my perspective, just like my sweet father-in-law prayed He would. I still miss all three of my children terribly every day, but I realize now that God's plan for me is a noble one. **1 Peter 5:10** says, ‘*And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.*’ The Bible also says in **Psalms 34:19** ‘*Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all.*’”

Maggie scanned the room to ensure every last soul was listening. She said, “You lost your loved ones because God ordained it. God has a purpose for you. You may be blinded by grief like I was, stewing in unrighteous anger towards the One who, like Job said, has every right to give and take away. Go ahead and mourn, but I beg you to not allow this loss to ruin your perspective as to why you are on this Earth and your loved ones aren't. We go through these tragedies with the Lord right beside us. He is our friend through it all. He expresses this

friendship through vessels of mercy - that's you and me! **Galatians 6:2** '*Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*' I'm sure it's not the only reason their lives ended so young, but it took me losing all of my beloved children before my perspective changed."

That's the end of the story, my dear readers.

I wrote it in an attempt to use an anecdote rather than traditional methods. I hope you don't mind - I'm, by no means, a professional writer. More importantly, I hope you get the point.

When the going gets tough, the tough get going - that's what they say, right? I think there's a lot of Biblical truth to this saying. Like, how do we really know that our faith is strong until it's tested? How do we know if we're self-absorbed or not until we suffer certain losses? How do we know that our love is pure until it's put on full display under the harshest of conditions? God's plan is to reveal the answers to these questions, which, frankly, can never happen if we live in a comfy little cocoon. God likes to shake things up in our lives, to whatever degree is necessary, in order to bring glory to Himself.

When we sit back and accept God's will for us, we are blessed.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

— Matthew 5:4-6

It's the truth that sets us free, regardless of the circumstances. The one truth that we ought never forget is that God is in control. We have to trust Him.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this

grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

— Romans 5:1-5

The Flesh, Temptation, and Sin

As outlined in the chapter titled, “Fight the Good Fight,” we are at war. We have enemies - one of which lives inside of us, namely the flesh. Our flesh is weak, which makes it especially susceptible to temptation, which leads to sin.

Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

— **Matthew 26:41**

Jesus spoke the words above from a heart that understood the basic challenges we face when confronted with temptation; for He was tempted in every way, according to Holy Scripture.

Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

— **Hebrews 2:17-18**

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

— **Hebrews 4:15-16**

We have a sympathetic Lord in Christ Jesus. He has shown us that grace will prevail for as long as we depend upon it. We cannot make the grave mistake of attempting to wrangle with our flesh by the flesh - that’s a losing proposition every time.

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

— **2 Corinthians 12:9-10**

We must always remember that grace trumps temptation! We are overcomers because our Lord empowers us, by grace, through His Holy Spirit. *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"* (**Philippians 4:13**).

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

— **1 Corinthians 10:13**

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, has equipped us with every form of escape from temptation by means of grace. The flesh is strong, but it is utterly weak in comparison to God's grace. Our success depends completely upon our humility to receive it, *"But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble"* (**James 4:6**). Stay humble and you won't be overcome with temptation or sin.

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. 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. 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 1:12-16**

Awakening the Sleeping Giant

“If you tell me to do something, I won’t want to do it all the more. Don’t ever tell me what to do! I will make my own decisions, thank you very much!”

Have you ever had a discussion with someone that ended like this? I have. People with so-called “strong wills” are famous for reacting this way. When these types of individuals are confronted with external demands, they revolt. In fact, to make a point, they often take it even one step further, vowing to never do whatever it is they’ve been asked to do, at least not until all parties fully understand that they are indeed the ones in control!

Maybe the strangest thing about the above kind of interaction is that the subject matter could be relatively mundane. Until a conflict arises, the “offended” party couldn’t care less about it. Something primitive sparks in the deepest recesses of them whenever someone else threatens their boundaries. It’s as if they are saying, “You can give me data, but don’t even think about forcing me to act on said data. I will decide if/when I’m ready. You have no rule over me.” If you know anything about the Hebrew word *teshuqa* (**Genesis 4:7**), you recognize that such sentiments are precisely the same as the human flesh’s, in the Biblical sense. The human flesh desires to dominate, rejecting anything/anyone trying to challenge it.

In a sense, to give an active human flesh a command is like awakening a sleeping giant. Even believers who aren’t filled with the Spirit are susceptible to this (**1 Corinthians 3:3**). Since the human flesh’s base desire is to rule, any perceived threat to its dominance is immediately met with force. It’s not even the issue at hand so much as it is the issue of authority. The flesh postures itself as the ultimate authority in this world, hence its attempt to supplant God. In fact, it so despises God’s authority that any godly command sends it into an uproar. Again, it doesn’t matter what the subject at hand is, only that it finds God and His commands challenging and, therefore, offensive.

So, when God lays out His law before the human flesh, the flesh’s first reaction is

to fight it. As is the case with all of us, we don't experience such things until an actual command is inserted into our souls. Once our flesh has a moment to comprehend it, we feel the rising temptation to reject it. I'm sure everyone reading this blog can relate. For example, have you ever read Holy Scripture that left some part of you bitter, affronted...angry, even? I have. Knowing and being honest with myself, I understand that while my new self (**Ephesians 4:24**) adores God's authority in my life, my flesh hates any form of authority that threatens its dominating posture, especially God's authority. To be totally transparent, this is most evident when the Word convicts me of disobedience. My flesh uses this conflict as a launching pad for aggressive revolt in my soul, creating a real battle between my two natures (ala **Romans 7**).

For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter. What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET."

But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.

— Romans 7:5-8

The key phrase above is, "*But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment.*" This essentially means that in the absence of a commandment, sin (the human flesh's domain) lies dormant. It isn't until something poses a threat to the flesh that the sleeping giant is awoken. This is why folks abiding in the flesh (e.g. unbelievers) can be incredibly calm and even pleasant most of the time. However, if these same people are confronted with the law of God, all bets are off. This is why the old adage exists: never talk religion or politics in mixed company. Why? Because inevitably, since both topics involve God-given authority, someone's human flesh is going to lose its cool and pick a fight.

I believe it's critical that we all understand the nature of the human flesh. It's not a stretch to say that it not only opposes God's commands, but it also hates the One giving them. If you wish to get along with someone controlled by the flesh (yourself, even), you're going to have to concede to never talk about God's Word, which speaks volumes about our Lord's sovereign right to rule. I would caution not to use that approach, though, given Biblical wisdom:

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

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.

— 1 John 2:15

If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.

— John 15:19

The world we live in is dominated by the human flesh. It runs on an economy that does not recognize God's authority over His own creation. In fact, it specifically stands opposed to His commands simply because it refuses to submit to His authority. Whenever the Word is thrust into the fray, it awakens a sleeping giant among the masses (have you seen what's happening to Christian preachers nowadays??). This is when the friendly mask comes off and we see the very same ugliness that we see within ourselves when our flesh takes its stand. Learn to recognize the telltale signs of impending strife - they aren't hard to spot once you know exactly when to look for them.

Enmity Imagined

“The only God whom the natural man is not at enmity with is one of his own imagination.”

— A. W. Pink, *The Total Depravity of Man*

What *is* enmity? I mean, really. I wonder how many so-called “Christians” even understand what the Bible means when it uses the word *enmity*. I submit that, like so many other aspects of their fraudulent spirituality, they find their definition without Biblical investigation in their trusty, worldly dictionary.

Enmity: positive, active, and typically mutual hatred or ill will.

— Merriam-Webster Dictionary

We are always remiss if we limit our definitions to worldly texts. Based on Holy Scripture, we may rightly conclude that a specific enmity exists as the baseline manifestation of the Fall in the Garden of Eden. We know this because the Lord God uses this very word to describe the nature of Satan’s relationship with the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” And the woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

The LORD God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this,

Cursed are you more than all cattle,

And more than every beast of the field;

On your belly you will go,

And dust you will eat

All the days of your life;

And I will put enmity

*Between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her seed;
He shall bruise you on the head,
And you shall bruise him on the heel."*

— Genesis 3:13-15

The Lord God addressed Satan directly as "*the serpent*" in this passage and the Messiah as the "[*woman's*]...*seed*." It's plain to see that the Fall in the Garden produced something cataclysmic between two "*seeds*." Even nature suffers to this day as a result of this event.

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.

— Romans 8:19-22

Here we see the ripple effect of the Fall in the Garden - that all of creation suffers (everything except man is included in context here). The blight of sin and death is on every living thing. Think about it, even plants, trees, and grass are infected by disease. This wasn't the case in the Garden before the Fall. All of creation enjoyed the lively fruit of unadulterated peace with its Creator. The Bible teaches us that creation longs for God's salvation plan to finish its course. The perspective the Bible gives us is that it was pressed into this horrid estate "*not willingly*" (for no reason of its own). As a result, it has been subjugated to the curse that mankind *does* deserve to suffer. It's like if I decided to create a bomb in my basement and it detonated, decimating not just my own home but a block of homes surrounding mine. Until the insurance companies and the hired contractors rectified the situation, my neighbors would be "*subjected to futility, not*

willingly,” to the repercussions of a stupid decision to create my own little Manhattan Project.

What’s the point I’m trying to make here?

This enmity that was borne at the Fall so many years ago is much more pervasive than most people care to acknowledge. The proper way to bind our thinking on this is to conceptualize it as follows: **enmity energizes every sinful act**. The proof that we are all under its influence in this life, even as believers, is that we all sin. The inescapable fact is that we all harbor enmity (that’s hatred, my friends) towards God. I’m not referring to the new creature attributable to a saved person; rather, I’m addressing the sin nature in every man and woman, believer or not. We may recoil at this news, for it is truly distasteful to that part of us that has been so perfectly changed in Christ. Nonetheless, we must all suffer the realization that another part of us still hates God (for some, the *singular, unregenerate* part of them hates God). Enmity is a virtual splinter of infinite scope and magnitude, keeping us naturally separated from God - we call this spiritual death.

Enmity implies being wholly incapable of harmony with God.

Let the above statement sink in. Heck, leave this blog now and come back later if you must, after you’ve had time to ponder the far reaches of it. Make it personal, too. I beg you not to simply nod your head and read on with a disregard consistent with those whose eyes have been blinded by the devil. Do not allow the very deceitfulness of sin, itself, to usher you away from what might be an utterly eye-opening experience. If the Fall in the Garden is likened to the blast of an atomic bomb, enmity is the radioactive fallout that pervades every square inch of what remains. Even the ground we trod is toxic and hazardous. Don’t believe me? Take an African safari and jump out of the safety of the tour bus when you happen upon a pride of lions. Pre-Fall conditions would have allowed you to do just that without any fear of being harmed. “*The wolf and the lamb will*

graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox; and dust will be the serpent's food. They will do no evil or harm in all My holy mountain,' says the LORD" (Isaiah 65:25). Do that today and you're likely to suffer the direct consequence of the Fall - death.

This enmity may be summarized twofold. *Defensively*, the natural man resists the Holy Spirit, *"You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did" (Acts 7:51).* *Offensively*, the natural man aggressively pursues that which opposes God, *"Do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness" (Romans 6:13a).* The Bible teaches us that enmity is much, much more active than a mere knowledge of hatred. It animates every foul action against God, every sin, every lust of the flesh. We mustn't shuffle away from fully realizing what happened in the Garden at the Fall. The blast zone and its enduring effects cannot be underestimated, though this is precisely what our enemies would like us to do!

I think most Christians are shocked to find out that a part of them literally hates God. Furthermore, I think that a lot of so-called Christians are playing pretend, only affiliating with Christianity for the sake of conformity with family, friends, society, etc. It's this latter group that must answer to the Holy God of the Universe on one simple front (for the sake of this blog) - are they imagining a God that doesn't actually exist, a God of their own speculation, one that is a slave to their natural sensibilities? Do these same people fail to understand the full extent of their depravity, as a function of the enmity promised between the two *"seeds"* way back in the Garden? Are they planting their crops, cultivating them aside from the power of God the Holy Spirit? Do their crops bear fruit consistent with complete surrender to the Lord's will, or are they merely posers, inventors, *"sons of disobedience"* (Ephesians 2:2)?

***THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.***

***BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,
TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.***

— **Matthew 15:8-9**

I'm not what you would call a "popular" pastor. In fact, I'd argue that the longer I go about fulfilling my duty towards my Lord, the more I am despised. People who used to love me now take offense. As I spread the Light of the Word of God, it shines in places labeled "off limits" in the souls of man. It unlocks the doors with all the skeletons in the closet. It leaves no place of escape, no room for quiet disrespect, no homage to self-righteousness. Only true righteousness can survive the Light. Darkness is exposed for what it is, its very origins revealed, and its manifest enmity against the one true God made clear. Natural man hates the effects the Light has upon him and his life, as does the regenerate man acting carnally for a time, "*For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed*" (**John 3:20**). These people would like to imagine a better existence than what evidence has shown it to be. They'd prefer pastors of integrity, like myself, kowtow to the wanton lusts of the flesh... you know, to keep the peace so that they can purport a common fellowship with others, regardless of their spiritual condition. I will not be a slave again to such things, for they are utterly dishonorable to my Lord. How about you???

Enmity is the primitive reason for all sinful activity. It is a captor, of sorts. Unless God intervenes by grace on behalf of a sinner, there is literally no way a man can be anything but utterly opposed to Him. He is a slave to this reality, no matter how reputable his activities are by world standards. "*If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness*" (**Matthew 6:23b**)! A tree can only bear fruit after its kind. Evil seed means evil fruit, never good, not even once. In fact, enmity *guarantees* that every thought and action will be held captive to it. Our only relief, as human beings, is to be saved/delivered by the hand of God. Even then, the vestiges of this enmity carry on in our flesh (ala **Romans 7**). This is a vile, ancient war my friends. There's no truce on the horizon; that is mankind's palatable invention. This ends badly for Satan's seed. Destruction is the only way

out; fortresses holding God's creation hostage must be annihilated.

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 10:4-5**

Our salvation/deliverance from the curse administered at the Fall is grace. God alone is able to dissolve the enmity between Himself and fallen man. Depravity is all we'll ever know otherwise. *"But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Ephesians 2:4-5).* Let us not attempt to shrink the chasm between natural man and his Creator. It exists by the hand of God for a reason. God has a purpose in revealing such things to us, for our benefit, to humble us. In the absence of truth there exists the wide plains of imagination. As such, natural man supposes the most dangerous thing of all, a god that he is not naturally at enmity with, a god that sympathizes with his innate sensibilities, a god that accommodates his perversions, lusts, and disobedience. None of this is true, of course, but try to explain this to a man who's rejected the Spirit of God, of Christ, of truth and righteousness.

"The only God whom the natural man is not at enmity with is one of his own imagination."

— **A. W. Pink, *The Total Depravity of Man***

Short-Wicked Firecrackers

Have you ever lit a firecracker with a really short wick? I remember being a kid and somehow gaining access to fireworks (usually just the small stuff, either firecrackers or bottle rockets, with an occasional Roman candle). My cousins and I were essentially menaces when we were young. Being equipped with explosives, even small ones, only added to our creative delinquency. We used to draw straws whenever we'd come across a firecracker with a really short wick because having one blow up in your fingers *really* hurts! Whoever drew the shortest straw became the focus of perverted jubilation for the rest of the members in the group (yes, we were that sick in the head). The shorter the wick, the more likely some injury, though always temporary (luckily), would occur - heck, we were counting on it. Why we thought of such things as entertaining I do not know...well, all I can say is that we were stupid.

Sin is like a firecracker. It's always there, but the wick must be lit. Depending on the firecracker, a person may or may not have much time to escape certain injury once the process of combustion is initiated. Firecrackers, when left alone pose no real threat; however, under the right conditions, they are explosive and dangerous. Sin is a lot like firecrackers in the sense that the potential for personal harm is always there, but a person must engage in certain activities in order to *ignite* it.

The wise thing to do with a short-wicked firecracker is to avoid it altogether. Some would argue rather wisely that fireworks are too dangerous - period! A person can be equally entertained without the risk of bodily harm. Furthermore, fireworks often affect more than just one person. Sounds like sin, doesn't it? Sin always has some sort of a ripple effect.

The Bible has some wisdom for us all regarding how we ought to approach situations in our lives where the potential for sinning lies.

*The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and **make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.***

— Romans 13:12-14

Paul shares invaluable wisdom here. In **v14** “no provision” carries with it the idea of planning and forethought. Let’s face it, and let’s be totally honest with ourselves, we pretty much know what situations will result in our sinning. Fair enough? So, if we know (often times from firsthand experience) that under certain circumstances we are especially vulnerable to temptation, we ought to nip it in the bud immediately by eliminating any and all conditions leading us in the wrong direction. For example, an addict ought never be around their “drug” of choice (e.g., alcohol, hard drugs, sex, etc.). This requires good planning and forethought, not rocket science.

The above advice is especially critical if/when we have a really “short wick” in certain circumstances. Like the foolish kids I described at the start of this blog, short-wicked explosives often burn so fast that there’s no time for escape, guaranteeing injury to self and often others. In a “brick” (eighty packs, where each pack contains around twenty individual firecrackers), there’s always one or two short-wicked firecrackers. As individuals, if we are represented as a brick, our unique weaknesses are the short-wicked firecrackers. We ought to be all the more diligent to heed Paul’s good counsel, “*make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts*” (**Romans 13:14b**). This may mean a drastic change of mindset and lifestyle for some of you.

You might argue that you’ve somehow “recovered” from your weaknesses just because you are a little bit stronger than you used to be, a little more capable, by the grace of God, to “*resist the devil*” and his schemes (ala **James 4:7**). It’s a

wonderful blessing to realize you are stronger today than yesterday, but no one is infallible because we each still possess a flesh that thrives on (is even excited by) the prospect of sinning. *“For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were **aroused by the Law**, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death” (Romans 7:5).*

Handling anything explosive is always dangerous, whether it’s fireworks or our own lusts. Both have the potential to blow up in our faces and wreak havoc on our peace. Sometimes, the temptation is so very fierce, though, isn’t it? It’s hard to resist the challenge and excitement of playing with fire. As soon as we invite this danger into our lives, though, we have introduced a foregone conclusion - something can and will go wrong for us. If it’s a “short-wicked” area of weakness for us, we might as well resign to the fact that sin is inevitable, as is the resultant suffering that comes with it.

The longer we allow the “wick” to burn, the closer we come to serious injury. Some wicks are shorter than others and some burn quicker. So, the best advice is to avoid the risk altogether, lest you be carried away by your own explosive, death-filled lusts. Do not be deceived!

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

As kids, we should’ve never played with firecrackers. Looking back, I chalk it up to stupidity. Drawing straws to see who’s to light the short-wicked firecracker is like saying, “Hey, it’s your turn to be mocked as you run around with numb fingers.” We knew better, but we chose to ignore the warning signs. Little perverts. The same goes for children of God. It’s fair to say that we know better, right? It’s good for us all to remember Paul’s advice, *“But put on the Lord Jesus*

Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (Romans 13:14).

It’s infinitely wiser to hold fast to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Author of goodness, than it is to approach an explosive situation with a lit match.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 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 5:16-17

This Little Game I Play

I like to play a little game with people called, "Watch this!" This may sound evil for a pastor like myself to do, but maybe I just have an odd sense of humor? In any case, it's fun because all parties usually end up laughing at the outcome. I help ensure this by only targeting folks that I'm confident can handle being the butt of a joke.

Here's how the game is played:

I set my sights on someone who has previously announced some so-called important, though not yet ubiquitously known, news. Said news can range from political, to media, to obscure facts, or to just about anything others might deem useful or interesting. Whatever the case may be, my target knows full well that I learned of it from them, so there's this sort of "ownership" they have over this information - since they found it and were first to announce it to the group, they "own" it.

So, once the target is chosen, I commence the game by announcing my *own* knowledge of said information in a group setting, as if I were the first to hear it. In essence, I am challenging my target's "ownership" over the information. Since most people have the fleshly desire to be linked to original knowledge, when I announce the information as my own, they, almost without fail, throw a small hissy fit. It's hilarious. I'll exacerbate the situation by playing dumb, saying things like, "Oh, you've heard of this, too?" Then they'll respond, "I'M the one who told YOU!" I keep playing dumb until they know I'm just busting their chops.

That's when I reveal my scheme to them. I tell them that they were merely the subject of my experiment. The conclusion I share is that people like to own things, even information, because ownership is perceived as having value in this world. My point to them is that no matter how spiritually mature they think they are, they *still* have a problem with creature credit. The reality is that the Lord owns everything.

*The earth is the LORD'S, and all it contains,
The world, and those who dwell in it.*

— Psalm 24:1

As the wisest man of his time, Solomon, once wrote:

*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

Back to my little game. Is my target actually the “owner” of anything, especially given the fact that God knew all information before human history even commenced? Isn't it fair to say that God owns all knowledge as well as all tangibles? Indeed. Then why does man constantly bicker amongst himself about who owns what? Why, on a much more solemn note, does one man kill another over ownership rights that actually belong to someone else, namely God?

The reason my game produces a consistent outcome is because the human flesh is predictable when it comes to taking credit where credit *is not* due. People like to pretend they are humble, but this little game has snagged just about every person I've ever played it with. And to be fair, I've been the target myself, with similar outcome. So I'm not judging anyone, just proving a point.

Like anything good, knowledge is a gift. A truly humble person will receive it as a function of God's grace and then, in humility, share it with others, giving glory to God. An arrogant person will always assume ownership and seek glory for himself by announcing said ownership to others. When someone else challenges said ownership, there is conflict.

Consider how much less conflict there would be in this world if people weren't prone to fleshly antics like the one I've described here? Imagine how much more peaceful our relationships would be if nobody was worried about taking credit for stuff.

Now, here's where we get to the crux of the issue, and it is the reason I'm writing this blog to you...

So often, a person who takes credit for something believes that since they've somehow "earned" it by finding it first among their peers, they *deserve* the credit for owning it. Once a person believes they deserve something because they've earned it, they are in immediate danger of linking their self-esteem to it. Uh oh. Once a person deems themselves "worthy" of the glory that comes with owning something, they have leaped headlong into a pit of misery!

A person whose self-esteem is tied to anything but Christ is relegated to a life of misery, anxiety, and despair. Why? Because only Christ is sufficient. Stated less theologically, if we take credit for God's grace, we eject ourselves from His plan for blessings because we now believe that said blessings are a function of our "worthiness," instead of as a function of Christ's worthiness. It's at that point that we live in fear of losing said worthiness and are subject to atrocities waged against our self-esteem.

One of the quickest ways to pervert grace, in a practical sense, is to take credit where credit isn't due.

But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

— James 4:16

Can you see the danger in this? The human flesh robs God of His glory by quenching the Spirit's desire for you to give thanks for everything in your life.

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.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:16-19

Properly receiving grace is fundamental to receiving the blessings that come with

said grace. The baseline to all of this is humility, “*GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE*” (**James 4:6**). If we lack humility, we act like the aforementioned “target”, striving and even fighting to establish and retain “ownership” over things that we have no title deed to. The better perspective is as Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

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**

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**

This is the perspective our Lord desires we cling to. It is the one that sets us free, delivers us, and even saves us from the perils of sin’s power. Our Lord is always giving. Our job is to learn what it means to receive His grace righteously, for this is pleasing to Him.

Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

— **Hebrews 13:20-21**

Walking On Thin Ice

Arguably, the most practical use of science is its establishment of predictability. How awful would life be if every day the laws of physics changed? Thanks be to the Lord, “[The Son of God] upholds all things by the word of His power” (**Hebrews 1:3b**). The more we discover about science, even for ourselves, the surer we are in our environment. For example, we don’t play with matches around open canisters of gasoline because most of us have seen or heard of tragic stories involving gasoline and burn victims. We often learn about laws of cause and effect through scientific discovery - the more we understand, the more assured we are of our relationship with our surroundings - do this and expect that, and so on. Our Creator has used science to teach us about some of His own precepts.

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.

— **Galatians 6:7**

Experience tells us that it is unsafe to walk on thin ice. It tells us to walk slowly on ice, as well, lest static friction give out to its weaker relative, kinetic friction, and we begin to slip and slide, inducing a painful fall. Walking on ice is a great example of the dynamics of scientific cause and effect. Certain dangers await us if we’re ignorant of certain precepts, like those mentioned above. For a person who is completely unaware of the nature of ice, their first step onto an icy pond leads them towards peril. In the same way, a person who remains ignorant about the schemes of his or her enemies, is also heading for disaster. The Bible warns us of the inherent danger of walking where we shouldn’t.

Take hold of instruction; do not let go.

Guard her, for she is your life.

Do not enter the path of the wicked

And do not proceed in the way of evil men.

Avoid it, do not pass by it;

Turn away from it and pass on.

— Proverbs 4:13-15

Proverbs 4:15 is like a big sign beside a pond that reads, “Danger, thin ice, stay away!” On this sign is a picture of a person that has plunged through the ice. The sign is there for our protection, just like the Holy Scripture above is there for our protection. We are given clear instruction to take God’s word for it and “*not enter the path of the wicked*” (**v14**). In fact, we get the same type of warning a good parent gives their children when they see danger signs regarding icy ponds. We are told to stay clear of it altogether (**v15**) - don’t even go near it, lest you be tempted to test the veracity of the sign. Why the distance? Because our Creator knows that our sin nature gets excited about an opportunity to disobey, especially when a new prohibition is made known to us. “*But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead*” (**Romans 7:8**).

Have you ever noticed that since you were a child, temptation lives and breathes, even thrives excessively, in the presence of law? This law could range from a simple, “Don’t snack before supper,” to “Don’t break the speed limit in your car.” Whatever the case may be, we humans like to “test the waters,” don’t we??? You bet. In fact, we get a certain fleshly rush from disobedience. It isn’t until the inevitable consequences come (ala **Galatians 6:7**) that we take pause and learn our lesson. Even then, if the perceived punishment was tolerable, we often repeat our disobedience. Hence the Word’s caution altogether, “*Avoid it, do not pass by it; turn away from it and pass on*” (**Proverbs 4:15**). If you’re weak, say, sexually, avoid any type of situation that places you “on thin ice.” This is why I once wrote a blog titled, *The Bible Says Run Away!* Let me tell you, it was **not** popular because it shined light on the American dating scene. I felt like the poor guy that has to post the “No swimming” sign on a beach in Hawaii. If danger exists, then it exists - it’s that simple. It’s part of my job to post danger signs. For example, on the dating issue:

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 2:22

Here's an excerpt from the blog, *The Bible Says Run Away!*:

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.

The Bible tells us to avoid decisions that take us to places where we simply cannot be trusted. A perfect example is spending time alone with someone you are sexually attracted to, particularly in situations that are conducive to sexual sins (e.g., being intoxicated while alone or, even worse, planning the whole ordeal to include privacy). Another example is choosing to visit a local bar if you're an alcoholic. The best approach for you is to avoid that side of the street altogether. Or suppose you're a business person who deals with a lot of cash transactions and has a weakness for hiding your profits from the IRS. Maybe you ought to ask for checks or credit cards only as payment from your customers (I know that's almost impossible in some situations, but you get my point).

Avoid taking the first step on the path of unrighteousness! Don't even go near said pathway, for that is the way of the wicked. God has afforded us many illustrations of what happens to those who choose to walk on "thin ice". He tells us that He uses morons for our edification, to show us what *not* to do. Why? Because He loves His children. It's akin to a high school principal putting a wrecked vehicle out in front of the school the week before prom.

*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?***

— **Romans 9:21-22**

If we are to avoid any situations that tempt us, what shall we do instead? Simple. We do as the Psalmist did, we stay on the righteous side of the road, or on the

righteous path, where we remain close to God.

*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.*

— Psalm 73:28

As believers, we walk in a world strewn with dangers. When we're tired and we see our objective for the day just on the other side of the icy pond, maybe just a stone's throw away, let us choose to go around, to not even put the warning sign on the shore to the test. It is there for our safety, after all. Let us do the right thing and walk around the pond, being led on this pathway by the "Light of men" (John 1:4). Sure, it may take a little longer, but isn't that the whole point?

*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.*

— James 1:2-5

So what if it takes us a little longer, if it requires a little more patience, and if it demands a bit of endurance. Let our lives shine for all to see, to God's glory! "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" (**Hebrews 12:1**). We are God's children. We have been prepared from eternity past for a purpose, and it isn't to be seen as the idiot jumping up and down on thin ice. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (**Ephesians 2:10**).

Heed the warning signs, my friends. If you see them from a distance, thank God for your visual acuity and take the opportunity to walk around the temptation. Don't give your sinful flesh even the minutest thing to play with. There's no such

thing as an innocuous sin. It's that damned first step that leads to the next. Without it, you would never walk in the way of the wicked. Avoid that first step, for it is a *lot bigger* than it appears!

The Gospel and Salvation

The Gospel:

Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate, humbled Himself to die on our behalf. Thus He became the sinless sacrifice to pay the penalty of our guilt. He rose from the dead to declare with power that He is Lord over all, and He offers eternal life freely to sinners who will surrender to Him in humble, repentant faith.

If you're uncertain about your own faith or salvation, I suggest you visit www.pastoredcollins.org and search for the pulpit series titled, "The Gospel, Salvation, and Sanctification". This 117 part series was taught from September 13, 2015 to August 28, 2016. If you have any doubts in your soul right now - trust me - it'll be worth your time to listen to every last part!

Assurance Of Salvation Is By Grace Through Faith

As a pastor, one of the most frequent questions I receive is, “How do I know if I’m saved?” By the grace of God, Holy Scripture contains everything we ever need to know about the assurance of our salvation in Christ Jesus. God is love. As such, He imparts to us a “*living hope*” that the apostle Peter so gloriously expounded upon.

*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

If a person doesn’t possess said “*living hope*,” presenting the above passage may cause them to stumble. Nonetheless, if encouraging true believers in Christ the way Peter did comes with the risk of offending those who profess a faith vapid of God’s grace, I accept that risk. In fact, I embrace it, wholeheartedly, knowing that my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is described in the Bible as a “*stumbling block*” (1 Corinthians 1:23; cp. Galatians 5:11). I believe that the Word of Truth is

supposed to make an unregenerate person stumble. In the case of a believer whose faith is weak, I believe that such an exercise permanently and predictably results in an affirmation of existing faith, courtesy of God the Holy Spirit.

No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

— 1 John 4:12-13

The recurring pattern of any form of salvation in the Bible, whether referring to justification by faith at salvation or deliverance for a believer thereafter, is always the same - ***by grace through faith***. Can I get a hallelujah?!?! "*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**). This pattern reveals itself throughout the Old and New Testaments, regardless of era or dispensation. It transcends all audience limitations, preconceptions, and predilections. It doesn't matter what I want to be true about God's grace, even if I desire to reject a little of it to insert my own self-righteousness; the truth is immutable. Without grace, there is no salvation to speak of, of any kind.

*For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive **the abundance of grace** and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.*

— Romans 5:17

*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

I can't imagine a loving God like mine ever saying to His own children, "I've saved you, but I will give you no sense of assurance of your salvation - you're

just going to have to wait until the great reckoning to find out if you 'make it to Heaven'." My God, *"is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints"* (**1 Corinthians 14:33**). My Lord has encouraged me with a solemn oath of peace. *"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**). If I know the Lord God at all, I know He wants me to understand that I'm one of His own, that I follow Him because it's His voice I hear, and that He, the very Word of God and Light of my life (**John 1**), is my salvation. Jesus, while on earth, made a point of encouraging His own (**Matthew 28:20**) and discouraging the self-proclaimed salvation of those who weren't (**Matthew 7:21-23**). The Lord God loves His own, especially so. Out of the deepest sense of gratitude, I say thank you for giving me this *"living hope"* and for assuring me of my salvation.

God wants everyone to enjoy this peace, this divine assurance, by grace through faith. He even had His Spirit author the words of the writers of the Bible, from Moses, to Paul, to John and James (all of them, in fact) for our encouragement. The end goal is saving faith in Jesus Christ. However, before said assurance may be had and subsequently expanded upon through a believer's life, a person must first ensure they have reason for it. As the apostle Paul plainly wrote, *"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**)?; or as the apostle Peter wrote, *"Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble"* (**2 Peter 1:10**); or as the apostle John wrote, *"These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life"* (**1 John 5:13**).

The writers of Holy Scripture clearly desired that believers be assured of their salvation. There is no evil in examining oneself for evidence of genuine spiritual life. 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 8:31-32). By grace through faith we know this truth, where, "faith

comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:23) - my friends, be encouraged, Jesus wants you to know you are saved!!!

The evidences of this are wonderfully supplied to those of us who understand them and are encouraged by them. Any discouragement incurred in the soul of the unregenerate is to be handled by God the Holy Spirit - let us not dissuade our own confidence in proclaiming these truths. *“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).* If you are reading this and are confused, I say in the spirit of Paul and the other apostles, “examine yourself!”

For the sake of space and time, allow me to give you some Holy Scripture on the title of this blog, *Assurance of Salvation Is By Grace Through Faith*. As true believers:

- We enjoy fellowship with God the Father and the Son through the Spirit (**1 Corinthians 1:9; 1 John 1:3; cp Galatians 2:20; 1 John 5:1**).
- We are personally comforted / assured by the God of all grace (**Psalm 34:8; 2 Corinthians 1:3; Philippians 4:19; Hebrews 4:16; 1 Peter 5:10**).
- We enjoy being made new, freed from a fearful spirit of slavery, in Christ Jesus (**Romans 8:15; 2 Corinthians 3:5-6, 5:17**).
- We are given new abilities to learn from the Word of God, for sanctification’s sake (**1 Corinthians 2:10-14; 1 John 2:27**).
- We enjoy the fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:22-23**).
- We have an abiding love and eagerness for Christ that unbelievers do not have (**1 Corinthians 16:22; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 John 3:1-3**).
- We are given spiritual discernment (**1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 Timothy 2:11-13; 6:3-6; 2 Peter 3:14-16; 1 John 2:12-19, 4:1-6**).
- We are acutely aware of God’s holiness and the presence / power of sin and we are grateful for the God-given ability to confess / repent from it (**Romans 7:14-25; 2 Corinthians 7:10; 1 John 1**).

- As patterns of sin decrease, patterns of obedience increase (**John 8:31; 1 John 2:1-7**).
- *“But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love”* (**1 Corinthians 13:13**). We love God and others with a love previously unknown to us (**John 13:35; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 John 2:9-11; 3:16-19; 4:19**).

The above list is hardly exhaustive. I encourage you to do as the Bereans did, *“examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so”* (**Acts 17:11b**), as well as Jesus suggested, *“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”* (**Matthew 6:33**).

As I mentioned at the start of this blog, I’m often asked, “How do I know if I’m saved?” In all fairness to the oft-present immaturity of the person asking me this question (no offense intended - we’ve all begun this way), I typically avoid lengthy responses like the one outlined above. If I can, God willing, I try to discern through prayer and listening to the Spirit (ala **John 14:26**) what key elements I ought to present, knowing that more than just one will typically be identifiable in a person to affirm their salvation (for themselves, of course, as I don’t have that ability). I don’t want to say too much here for fear that some will make it a cookie-cutter approach or, even worse, a doctrine on how to speak with those who ask such questions. What I’m willing to say is this: the fact that a person is asking is a very good sign. The fact that there exists some affection for God’s opinion of them is another very good sign. Love and gratitude for the Lord is undoubtedly present in a believer’s heart (what an undeniable gift this is). But, beyond all this, the Bible gives us a sort of “litmus test” - a starting point for self-examination, namely *“obedience of faith”* (ala **Romans 1:5; 16:26**). For some awful reason, people have mangled revelation from God the Holy Spirit on the topic of obedience - obedience being evidence of saving faith, that is. I’ll quote John Newton in closing:

Obedience is the best test of sincerity; feelings are various, transient, and

often deceitful; but a broken, humble spirit, and an upright walk, evidence the finger of God; other things may be and are often counterfeited.

In comparing Paul and James on works (Romans 3:20–28; James 2:14–24), Newton writes:

The sum is; The one declares that nothing renders us acceptable to God but faith in the Lord Jesus Christ: the other, that such a faith, when true and genuine, is not solitary, but accompanied with every good work. The one speaks of the justification of our persons—this is by faith only; the other of the justification of our profession—this is by faith not alone, but working by love, and producing obedience.

The simplest, most practical example of evidenced obedience I can think of in this moment is that you are obeying God's will right now by seeking the Truth, by reading this blog. You see, my friends, this isn't complicated at all. In fact, it's so simple, so "easy" (ala **Matthew 11:30**), it's incomprehensible to those without saving faith.

A believer's assurance regarding their salvation is provided by grace through faith. If God loves us enough to save us (**John 3:16**), then He loves us enough to grant us a living/abiding hope in His promise of salvation. He is the one who has chosen to adopt us, after all, making us children of His personal family. What kind of father doesn't want to wrap His arms around His sons and daughters the way the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son did (**Luke 15:11-32**)? Our Father in Heaven is glorified by our God-given ability to "cry out, *Abba! Father!*" (**Romans 8:15b**) and so, by His grace, we shall. By means of divine perspective granted to us through the God-given faculties accompanying the giving of the new creature in Christ Jesus, being born-again, let us rejoice!

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.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

But They're a Good Person

Since the Fall in the Garden, man has inveterately tested God's patience. This habit is clearly illustrated in the microcosm of the household, where children test their parents' patience via disobedience. Eventually, the children suffer the consequences (assuming the parents are active and upholding their duties). I place specific emphasis on the word *eventually* here because, with God, the outcome is absolute. "*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap*" (**Galatians 6:7**). To an unregenerate person, this is an idle threat. This person argues that since they don't subscribe to the demands of the Holy God of the Universe, they are loosed from His sovereign right to administer justice that affects them, personally.

Man is so depraved that his natural heart actually *celebrates* disrespecting his Creator. As foul as this may seem to a believer in Christ - we are in possession of a new heart - it is normal thinking for an unbeliever. Historical accounts, including those recorded in the Bible, have proven man's propensity for all things antagonistic to God. In fairness to carnal man, this is all he is able to be, nothing better, being wholly depraved. Therefore, it follows that he would behave the way he does.

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

— **Genesis 6:5**

The above verse reveals a completeness in man's depraved nature, leaving no room in his natural heart for anything purely good to exist, for every part of his essence has been polluted by sin. David said, "*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me,*" (**Psalms 51:5**) because he knew of his natural plight. This is the hallmark of any repentant person - humility in the face

of human depravity. Even this is something that must be stirred by God the Holy Spirit in man, for in his natural estate, he is utterly arrogant.

What I write here and, more importantly, what the Word of God clearly reveals, isn't popular at all, not even in Christian circles today. In fact, the greatest assaults I've ever endured have consistently come from so-called "brothers and sisters in Christ." This may be a shocking revelation to some reading my words here, but it is nevertheless true, as awful as it sounds. The sad explanation for this is a very simple one - even Christians have been duped, grown complacent, and have sought conformity to the sentiments and sensibilities of the world rather than to God. I'm not throwing stones at anyone in particular here, just setting the foundation of my point that follows. What I say is to be expected, given the influence of sin in this world, even over believers. *"For the imagination (the strong desire) of man's heart is evil and wicked from his youth"* (**Genesis 8:21b**). Job described natural man as *"[drinking] iniquity like water"* (**Job 15:16b**)! Man's thirsts are not for God; rather, they are for the things that satiate his flesh.

A perfect example of this is when a person presents, even defends, an unbeliever as "good." I actually think this may be one of the most common affronts that we believers must learn to handle because, in his natural estate, man's estimation of his own righteousness/goodness is emboldened by hearty agreement from his peers (some of who may be professing Christians). It is a highly functioning economy between fallen men that doesn't even require harmonious relationships to thrive. The currency in this economy is what many know as "creature credit" (derived from a scale of values based solely on self-righteousness - cp **Romans 1:25**). The issue with the aforementioned defense of the so-called "good" unbeliever is that **God wholly disagrees (that's a really big deal)**. It's inconsequential if I (or you) disagree, for we are fallible and therefore open to question. God has said that natural man is literally incapable of doing any good in His eyes.

This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men.

Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead.

— Ecclesiastes 9:3

The above argument usually progresses from here as follows; the worldly defender of “good” will contend that unbelievers can do good things, providing lists of reasons why this is true. For example, we must concede that unbelievers can/do accomplish the following: love their children, obey their parents, help others in need, sympathize with those suffering, work hard, respect their leaders, etc. While these things may be true, they do not address the actual issue of human depravity, and therefore they’ve missed presenting viable proof of man’s goodness.

In God’s eyes, good must sprout from a root of goodness; that is, all thoughts and behavior must be fruit of love for God, in subjection to His authority, and with the intent of glorifying Him. “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31b). A carnal person will never ask themselves, “Is what I’m doing right now glorifying God?”

What defenders of human goodness are actually revealing about themselves is a love for darkness. “The lamp [the light that guides the plow] of the wicked, is sin” (Proverbs 21:4b). “If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness” (Matthew 6:23b)! This type of labor is evil.

Those who defend the so-called good in this world and the supposed nobility of human nature must contend with Jesus’ own verdict on the subject. If they are unwilling, or unable, to agree with Jesus, they may rightly count themselves as being in greater fellowship with those they defend than with God!

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot

receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

— **John 14:16-17**

The trap for us believers, when confronted by defenders of human goodness, is to concede that the love of God isn't an imperative. In a world filled with polluted souls, it's easy to get tripped up by satanic arguments that are based on the presupposition that divine goodness can exist in the absence of love for God. Love is everything to us believers. Without love, we are lost, just like Jesus said, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (**Luke 19:10**). Without love for God we are relegated to love for self. Selfish love never produces good in God's eyes.

By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.

— **1 John 3:10**

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?

— **1 John 3:17**

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 4:20-21**

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**

The next time someone proposes you accept an unregenerate person as “good,” know that God disagrees. What you’re experiencing in that moment is the deep roots of human depravity attempting to gather righteousness unto itself. While exalting someone arbitrarily as good may seem palatable at first, it’s no less evil than the satanic deception that was carried out in the Garden of Eden. Don’t take fruit of unrighteousness and suppose it’s something good for you to digest. It is rotten to the core, no matter how adamant or convincing your adversary may be (trust me, I’ve come across some pretty passionate defenders of human goodness). The Bible has equipped us with a single question that cuts through the smoke screen and illuminates satanic devices used to dismantle our defense (cp **1 Peter 3:15**) - **“Does this person truly love God?”** If the answer is negative, from God’s perspective, there exists no good at all in them, for they remain selfish lovers, antithetical to God.

“The only reason why we do not more clearly see this foulness is because we are accustomed to it, just as those who work daily among offensive odours at last cease to smell them.”

— **Charles H. Spurgeon**

Emotional Salvation Isn't Enough

I know a *lot* of people who were abused as children. If it wasn't abuse of the physical, psychological, or sexual sort, it was minimally some category of neglect. It's no wonder why so many people are burdened with scars, both literal and figurative, that often seem inescapable. In many cases, this permanency proves true, even though God's Word is our pain-relieving salve. While the truth sets us free from the bondage of our pasts (**John 8:32**), helping us to see the light (**Ephesians 5:13**), this type of salvation isn't salvation from sin in the most critical of ways.

No matter how emotionally relieved a person is to know that God will bear their burdens, His promises of deliverance are the *result* of being saved, judicially, *not* the cause.

The above statement is an important one for several reasons. I believe it's easy to "sell" a person on Jesus Christ if He becomes a person's savior from emotional pain. While this pain is very real - in the case of deeply scarred individuals it is ever present and agonizing - it is nonetheless merely a function of someone else's sin acting out against the injured. Before a person is saved, positionally / judicially speaking, the only hope they have of deliverance from said pain is to cope with it using natural remedies (e.g., worldly counseling), which never sufficiently heals them because only God's grace is sufficient (**2 Corinthians 12:9**).

It's very important that we believers understand the subtlety being presented here in this blog. It's too easy to fall into the trap of focusing on the pain someone is in rather than addressing the *real* issue, which isn't how badly they've been sinned against and therefore damaged, but rather their *own* sin. When we speak about pain and sin in the same sentence to others, we must do so very articulately, each topic having its own purpose. Why the distinction? Because

there are a lot of people out there suffering miserable lives who keep buying the lie that deliverance from pain is finding the right savior from sin borne in others.

We never escape sin in this world, that is, the sinful nature of others, or its effects. Salvation doesn't promise such things; rather, it promises escape from the dominion of sin in our own lives.

Here's my concern which occurred to me while I was out on an extra-long run the other day (those are good times to fellowship with the Lord). I don't often share unrefined thoughts, but this is what He gave me while I was huffing and puffing down the street (be nice, I'm fifty years old now): "When we're young we seek salvation from the pain caused by others (deliverance from the effects of their sins); when we're older, we seek salvation from the pain we cause (deliverance from our own sin)." I realize this thought may require a little decoding as it's merely germinal, hence my writing to you now. I want you to see the distinction between what I'll dub "emotional salvation" and "judicial salvation". I'll come back to this.

Right now I want to give you some startling statistics to set the stage for an example that will explain all of this. According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), in America, one in nine girls and one in fifty-three boys under the age of eighteen experience sexual abuse or assault at the hands of an adult. About ninety percent of perpetrators are men and ten percent women.

The effects of child sexual abuse can be long-lasting and affect the victim's mental health. Victims are more likely than non-victims to experience the following mental health challenges:

- *About 4 times more likely to develop symptoms of drug abuse*
- *About 4 times more likely to experience PTSD as adults*
- *About 3 times more likely to experience a major depressive episode as adults*

Eighty percent of perpetrators are a parent of the victim, six percent relatives, four percent unmarried partners of a parent, and five percent "other" (from siblings to strangers).

— RAINN.org

Please don't allow the above statistics to distract you emotionally (I know it's a big ask, but hang in there).

Suppose a little girl you know is a victim of sexual abuse at the hands of her father. I think it's fair to say that she is going to be battling deep scars her entire life. She is going to suffer in ways many of us cannot even fathom. My heart bleeds for her, truly, as does yours, too, I'm sure. She has been injured by the fruit of sin. Whose sin was it? Her father's. The key here - now concentrate on what I'm about to write - is that the sin causing all of this pain *isn't hers*. Why do I point this out? Because, while she likely cries herself to sleep night after night, seeking salvation from her awful pain, maybe even plotting revenge, hatred taking its natural course in her psyche, the fact is that in this sense, she isn't seeking deliverance from her own sin, but rather, her father's. She's seeking emotional relief, which is wholly understandable.

Painful issues in our souls, especially those borne of childhood tragedy, exist due to the depravity of others. It is the sin of others that wound us so terribly as children. As adults, saved by the grace of God from our own sins, we might pray for our transgressors as we look back and contemplate the horrors that befell us as innocent children. No child deserves to be abused. But again, what is under consideration here is the sins of another person, not our own. This is a separate issue from the one we are called to consider regarding our own sin and its penalty, "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (**Romans 6:23**).

The Bible teaches us that we are accountable to God for our own sin. As it pertains to the sins of others, well, that's between Him and them. Even though

the sins of others have damaged each one of us uniquely, our salvation is independent from theirs. While their sins have left us to struggle with emotional pain - it often feels like "Hell on Earth" - the plain truth remains that before being made a "*new creature*" (2 Corinthians 5:17) we have a bigger problem, requiring a bigger Savior.

In the case of our fictitious little girl above, what say you of her salvation? Should she turn to Jesus as her savior from emotional pain? Is something she can feel even as a young, wounded child the impetus for being saved by the blood of the Lamb? Is this the basis of her crying out for salvation? What is she seeking salvation from, exactly...is it from emotional pain caused by another's sin, or from her own sin? The prior is most likely the truth, for how can a young child, who nonetheless is trying to keep from drowning in an ocean of pain, truly come to grips with her own depravity? Not even relatively stable childhoods manifest in an ability to contemplate one's own depravity (the precursor to crying out for our Savior from their own sin) as a child. And yet, I've met many people who are confused about this, and it concerns me deeply.

As awful as childhood abuse is, the emotional pain cannot be the impetus for crying out for salvation from one's personal sins. Salvation, in the positional/ judicial sense, is an act of reconciling one's own sins with the sovereign, holy God of the Universe, for even abused children carry their own portfolio of sins that have harmed others (often in similar ways that they've been harmed). Even the most awfully damaged child is without excuse before God regarding sin. Strictly speaking, regarding an eternity spent in the Lake of Fire, an unbeliever's primary issue isn't emotional salvation at all, it's salvation from sin, itself.

I fear that many people have sought deliverance from childhood pain and believe to have found it in Jesus Christ in the absence of true salvation. The demands from God never waver. A person must address their own sinfulness before His holiness. Emotional relief may come with sanctification, but sanctification must begin where it begins with every other human being who's

ever been saved, with repentance. “God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent” (Acts 17:30b).

I truly hope I haven't come off as insensitive, callous, or unfeeling - nothing could be further from the truth, being an abused child, myself. My heart goes out to anyone who's suffered at the hands of another person's sins. But you know what? Jesus, who promised peace and deliverance (**John 14:27**), said, “*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (**Matthew 5:44**). Why would He ever suggest such a thing? Simple. When it comes to the sins of others, our focus is forgiveness towards them, whatever we can muster in light of the Word of Truth, “*just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you*” (**Colossians 3:13b**). When it comes to our own sins, though, our focus must depart the throes of our pain caused by others and turn inward, to the pain we've caused our Creator.

It's not enough to seek a savior from our childhood pain. That is not the salvation Jesus came to establish, “*For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost*” (**Luke 19:10**). Is He able to protect and even heal our wounds? You bet. But healing takes time, something sanctification addresses in the life of a *believer*. Sanctification doesn't begin until a person is saved from their *own* sin, having been washed clean and delivered by the redemptive power of the Cross. Knowledge of our *own* depravity is the impetus for crying out for our Savior, for this is the deepest source of our pain. Being at odds with our Creator is a much greater malady than being abused as a child. The stakes are much, much higher.

Seeking relief from childhood pain is never enough to drive us to repentance, for it deals with the sins of others, which isn't the issue in personal salvation. There are victims of child abuse both in Heaven and Hell.

One last thought before I wrap this up. When trying to evangelize an unbeliever who is struggling with pain like that described above, we mustn't lose focus. For starters, we don't want to be dismissive, for their pain is real. What we want to do is let them know the truth about salvation, itself, and why they need a Savior,

and why He came to save. We mustn't be afraid to tell the truth. We must avoid the temptation to water down the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the one that includes both repentance and faith, in an attempt to avoid causing any more consternation in the souls of others. If we fail this test, we are lying to them, creating even more confusion in their lives, and ultimately more pain down the line.

Tell people the truth about their depravity and their need for a Savior. Don't just "sell" Jesus as an emotional crutch like so many churches seem to do nowadays. And if you're ever faced with dealing with someone staking a claim to Heaven on the basis of what smells like "emotional salvation," do them a big favor and cut to the chase - give them the full Gospel of Jesus Christ, you may just be winning a soul. They may reject you, sadly, *"So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?" (Galatians 4:16)*, but at least you've done your job. That is what matters...you presenting the unadulterated Truth from the Word of God.

The next time someone claims to have been saved at an early age (before what is likely their ability to contemplate something as deep and personal as their own depravity), ask them the following: "Saved from what, exactly?" Chances are, they felt saved from the craziness that was their childhood and/or the pain that defined it. Tell them that such things are never the impetus for true salvation in Christ Jesus. Salvation is a gift given to those seeking a Savior from their own sins, not the effects of others' sins upon them.

The Gospel Is a Command

Have you ever heard the phrase, “Ask Jesus into your heart”? Is this biblical? Doesn’t it presuppose that Jesus is sort of just hanging around waiting to be invited into the heart of man? The whole fictitious scene reminds me of a shy kid waiting to be asked to dance at a school function, as if Jesus Christ wasn’t the One asking His Bride to the dance floor. What are the implications here? Who’s inviting whom?

This might be news to some Christians, but the Gospel is a *command* - something God instructs all people to believe in, or else. Or else what, you ask? Well, Jesus said, “I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (**John 8:24**). Any questions? Is this a cold and unloving statement? Actually, it’s just the opposite! A command takes all of the guesswork out of the equation. When it comes to salvation, do we really want anything left to chance?

So, let’s get this straight here and now (and let’s not be coy about the opening errant suggestion that unbelievers are to “invite Jesus into their hearts,” as if that is the gist of the good news He preached). If the Gospel is indeed a command, then the subordinate elements of it are also commanded: repent and have faith, two things encapsulated in the word “believe” in popular Bible verses, such as **John 3:16**. When the Bible says to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, it is a command, not a suggestion, and definitely not some perversion that involves the Messiah reconciling Himself to us, by way of invitation (as opposed to man being reconciled to the holy God of the Universe). In summary, God commands everyone to accept His invitation to be saved.

Say it again to yourself and don’t forget it. *The Gospel is a command*. Jesus preached it in such a way that disobedience to it results in one spending their eternity in the Lake of Fire, for, “*the wrath of God comes upon the sons of*

disobedience” (Ephesians 5:6). It’s true that the Gospel is an offer of salvation, but it’s also true that it is a command. It seems this latter principle has been lost in translation in contemporary Christianity.

For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

*But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for
“Their voice has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.”*

*But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says,
“I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation;
with a foolish nation I will make you angry.”*

*Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,
“I have been found by those who did not seek me;
I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.”*

But of Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”

— Romans 10:10-21

I remember spending long summer days outdoors as a child and then being called inside around dinnertime. The offer, of course, was for food, but the call from the kitchen window was a command. I was simultaneously excited about being fed and intent on obeying my mother's command to come to the table. The Gospel call is a lot like that - it's both an invitation (God invites, we don't) and a command to believe in Christ.

We ought to be so very encouraged by this good news because it is an act of grace on behalf of God. He has informed every human being of His command to believe the Gospel, leaving no room for injustice on judgement day. What a wonderful God we have!

No Such Thing As An Ex-Christian

I always get a kick out of people who claim to have once been a Christian, but have since decided against it. On paper, this sounds acceptable, but there are two presuppositions that I refuse to accept because they are garbage. First, that being a Christian is akin to partaking in something temporal, like a vocation. Second, and more importantly, that a person who simply proclaims to be a Christian is actually a Christian.

Let me dispose of the first presupposition quickly. Being a true Christian isn't like being a carpenter, a dentist, or a ballerina. A person can quit a job, or become unable to perform the required duties, and it is correct to conclude that they are no longer a member of that vocation. Being a true Christian, however, is like becoming a child to parents. Once a person is born, they are a child whose parents have been permanently assigned. Once a child of two people, always a child of these people. Being a true Christian means being born-again into God's family, as a child of His forevermore.

Now, I want to get to the more grievous error above. I've met many people in my life who say, "Well, I used to be a Christian, but not anymore." I usually don't argue the point because the person typically isn't using their position to attack or disrespect mine. I write it off as semantics and move on to a more meaningful discussion about why they left the faith, do they really understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ, etc. However, there's a group of self-proclaiming former Christians who use their so-called "experience" as Christians as a position of strength in their argument against Christianity, proper. These are the folks who need to be exposed.

Here's a perfect example from a book I'm reading (see if you can spot the arrogance and the false presupposition):

“Michael Ruse, an atheist philosopher who specializes in evolution, forthrightly calls out the new scientism, particularly evolutionary scientism, for being a religious belief. ‘I am an ardent evolutionist and an ex-Christian,’ Ruse says. ‘But I must admit that in this one complaint...the literalists are absolutely right. Evolution is a religion.’”

— *Saving Truth* by Abdu Murray

Mr. Ruse claims that he is an “ex-Christian”, and that Christianity is on the same plane as every other alternative religion out there. I can say without hesitation that he was never a Christian, at least not a true one, by Biblical standards. I can say this because the Bible teaches us about the eternal security of a believer in Christ. This simply means that once a person is truly saved (not merely a professor of Christianity), that person is guaranteed to remain a child of God forever. In other words, if a person is truly saved, even if they somehow were able to denounce Christ the way some kids try their hand at emancipating themselves from their biological parents (this isn’t possible, by the way - see **1 John 4:1-4** below), they can’t escape being one of Jesus’ sheep. When God makes us a member of His family, it is permanent.

*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. 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; and this is the spirit of the antichrist**, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.*

— **1 John 4:1-4**

I want you all to clearly understand that a person who denounces Christ cannot possibly be truly saved. So, to Mr. Ruse’s point about being an “ex-Christian”, we

shouldn't give him any more credence than we would any other unbeliever we run across. This means that when a person such as he uses their so-called "experience" with Christianity as a pillar of their argument against it (sort of like when a person says, "Yeah, I tasted chocolate ice cream and I don't like it."), we ought to dismiss their claim completely. Based on what I've read about Mr. Ruse, he was *never* a Christian the way I am today. I will concede that, apparently, he has "*tasted the heavenly gift*" (**Hebrews 6:4**), but as the Bible teaches us, this isn't the same thing as being born-again into God's family, as Jesus described to Nicodemus in **John 3**. I resent the fact that Mr. Ruse uses false presuppositions about his experience with God in order to rail against Christianity. The Bible says that he has no real knowledge of the One he has chosen to discredit.

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.

— **Hebrews 6:4-8**

Bottom line, there's no such thing as an "ex-Christian". It's a ploy that, if not dissected as above, catches a lot of unprepared Christians off guard, which is why Peter instructs us, "*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*" (**1 Peter 3:15**). I can respect another person's right to choose for or against God. But I vehemently reject the idea that just because a person has attended church, spent time reading the Bible, or grew up in a Christian family that this makes them a brother or sister of mine in the faith. If their claim was true and they were somehow able to defect from the perfect, holy, omnipotent Savior, either God is too weak to hold them, or they

were never saved in the first place! Which explanation do you think is most likely???

The Prince Of Life

I think sometimes we forget the centrality of Jesus Christ to life, itself. I mean, His person and His work on the Cross are the standout elements of His incarnation. But, we are remiss when our conception of Him ends there. He is so much more than just our Lord and Savior (not to belittle His supreme offices one iota, of course). I think we forget that He is both eternal life and the originator of it. He originates, persists in, and gives eternal life. These are transcendent qualities far beyond our own finite beginnings.

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am."

— John 8:58

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

— Hebrews 13:8

This is a perspective that we'd all do well in remembering, always. For if we forget that Jesus Christ is eternal life, we may unintentionally bring Him down to us, to our finite realm of thought and existence. If we rob Him of His eternal glory, we rob ourselves of perspective. In doing so, we affect our own sanctification because we are short-changing ourselves of knowing the true God of the Universe.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

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. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross;

through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

— **Colossians 1:15-20**

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. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority.

— **Colossians 2:8-10**

The righteous way to think of Jesus Christ is as He is aptly described in Holy Scripture, as the “Prince of life”. The Greek word for “Prince” means “originator, ruler, founder, or beginning of something.” It’s in this very description of Jesus Christ that we find our proper perspective. He isn’t just our Lord and Savior, He is much, much more.

*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 3:14-16**

The last thing we ever want to do is diminish the fullness of Christ. We should never confine Him to His work on earth alone, or even His work in us through salvation. That’s like trying to fit the ocean into a mason jar. While, in a human sense, it provides a certain convenience to our finite minds, it nonetheless would result in a gross underestimation of all that He is. While offensive to God, it’s tragic for us.

We can never perceive Christ’s essence as less than it is without damaging ourselves in the process.

Our dependence on Christ stretches far beyond human comprehension. It is by faith alone that we accept and abide in these truths. If we were to detract from and/or diminish Him in any way, what would happen to the necessary faith we cling to as the basis of our hope? In other words, if we begin to view Christ as merely a peer, though a perfect one, we have injured our own faith. *“For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees” (Romans 8:24)? “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).*

Learn to reflect on Jesus Christ as both eternal life and the Author of the faith required to receive it. Your sanctification is tied to it. *“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).* In doing so, watch the glory of God rise to new heights in your soul.

*For with You is the fountain of life;
In Your light we see light.*

— Psalms 36:9

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings.

— Hebrews 2:10

And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.

— 1 John 5:11

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

Sabotage: The Council of Trent

What happens when you dislodge a deeply rooted doctrine from the human soul and replace it with a lie? Inevitably, you get false religion. Case in point, the Catholic Church.

The Council of Trent (Latin: Concilium Tridentinum), held between 1545 and 1563 in Trent (or Trento, in northern Italy), was the 19th ecumenical council of the Catholic Church. Prompted by the Protestant Reformation, it has been described as the embodiment of the Counter-Reformation.

— Wikipedia

The Council of Trent denied the elemental truth that it's sin for man's soul to possess an innate propensity for evil (e.g. lust). The council specified that sin becomes sin when man chooses to give in to the aforementioned evil (e.g., to give into lust). In other words, the low watermark for sin was distinctly and purposely raised to a level above where God demands His creatures recognize it to be (where it actually is). This one lie gave birth to a multitude of false doctrines that have plagued so-called "Christianity" for centuries (I place quotes around the term Christianity here because false religion, such as Catholicism, and Biblical religion are fundamentally different).

In effect, what the Council of Trent accomplished was the undermining of the very substance by which God the Holy Spirit uses to convict man with the Gospel. For example, the Gospel call requires repentance. But what is there to repent from if a person can, with this false presupposition about sin, by their own means and power, at any time, choose to stop being sinful? In other words, if the power to rectify enmity rests in the creature, what cause is there to reach out in humility to the Creator for grace/mercy? This is precisely why almost every practicing Catholic I've ever met believes that they can be "good enough" to please God and "make it to Heaven." The genesis of this perverted hope is the inevitable result of the great error the Council of Trent held up as truth.

We are *born* sinful. We do not *become* sinful as a result of choosing to follow

the evil tendencies that we are born with. To believe otherwise is to destroy the impetus of the Gospel call. If we believe that our personal sinning is the only reason we need a Savior, then we must also include the balance statement that follows logically; that is, if we stop sinning, as a function of our free will, we cease needing *His* salvation, being able to provide it for ourselves.

The Bible is essentially one big Gospel call. Every historical account, every feature, every doctrine conveyed points to one thing - man's utter depravity and God's salvation plan. Everything written in the Bible supports and directs our attention to this one end. So, it makes perfect sense that the "god of this world" (2 **Corinthians 4:4**) subverts knowledge of fallen man's plight, which is to say that "the darkness has blinded his eyes" (1 **John 2:11**). Undermine the basic truth about man's sinful nature and the Gospel becomes a "different gospel" calling for "another Jesus" (2 **Corinthians 11:4**). Here's the simple truth:

*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.*

— Psalm 51:5

Jesus has taught us to judge a tree by its fruit. Setting aside for a moment all the nuances of discerning good and bad fruit, the principle is very simple. If the fruit is sinful, then so is the tree (e.g., if sin is sinful, then so is the sinner).

Beware of the false prophets [those who teach false doctrines, like the aforementioned one established at the Council of Trent], who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

So then, you will know them by their fruits.

— Matthew 7:15-20

Jesus established this truth through examples recorded in the Bible. *“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 5:28)*. The Apostle John wrote, *“Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15)*. The Bible clearly states that it is what comes forth from the heart that defiles man. *“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it” (Jeremiah 17:9)*? How does one honestly, objectively propose that God is pleased with such a condition??? The fact is that He isn't, at all; and this condition exists prior to personal sin being accounted for in the life of a person.

And He was saying, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”

— Mark 7:20-23

Sin is self-preserving; therefore, sinners seek to preserve the condition in which they were born, lusting after things that elevate the flesh. Being predisposed this way to sinfulness, being blind, being wholly incapable of seeing the Truth about themselves means that they will invent ways of saving themselves from whatever watered-down version of human depravity it is they cling to. The fruit of their bad tree is a watered-down gospel. Such is the gospel of contemporary Catholicism and any other false religion that supposes man isn't quite as depraved as God says he is. In fact, it's often the case that false religions are the most vocal in their disregard for God, though they propose themselves spiritual benefactors, appealing to the collective flesh of the world to gain approval/momentum. They are deceivers who hate the Biblical precepts of God, yet propound goodness and love.

*He who hates disguises it with his lips,
But he lays up deceit in his heart.*

— Proverbs 26:24

You might be saying, "Geesh, Ed, aren't you splitting hairs and taking this a little far here? Aren't we supposed to be advocating love and forgiveness and such?" The absolute answer is, "No," I am not taking this too far. In fact, I lament in my prayer life that I don't do enough to fight the good fight. In what relatively little impact I feel I've had as a pastor I feel like a relic, an old warrior from ancient times, a man desperately clinging to Biblical truth that has all but been defecated on by mainstream "Christianity." I ache whenever the Spirit instructs me to communicate about this stuff because it forces me to stand in front of something vile that is being upheld on a grand scale, and - I cringe having to write this - in the name of Jesus Christ.

If a man has one hundred lusts in a day and consents or yields to none of them, it doesn't mean he isn't a sinner. Lust is the result of man being polluted by sin. The ever-popular, though intrinsically evil, doctrine that sin is only sin when it bears overt fruit would confound Jesus, Himself, for He is the One who stated that a sinful tree is the root cause for sinful fruit.

The tree isn't saved from its fruit; rather, it is the tree that requires saving.

Every false religion has this wrong, thus sabotaging the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. If we are to fulfill the great commission (**Matthew 28:18-20**), we mustn't be deceived by the lies so prominently propagated by today's "Christianity." *"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**).

*But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with **the lusts of deceit**, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.*

— **Ephesians 4:20-24**

Stumbling Blocks

“What are we celebrating?”

This one question has been recurring from my pulpit for quite some time now. The context typically includes an admixture of invitation, partiality, oversight, and misguided emotions. The example most often mentioned concerns family (I'm speaking of blood relatives, particularly immediate family members). Family represents a natural petri dish for conflict. For example, how many of us can actually say that we've never fought with members of our family? Furthermore, aren't our most monumental fights usually with members of our own household? Is it fair to say the following is true?

Longevity of affection is often the greatest predictor of pain during conflict - the longer we've loved someone (e.g., a member of our family), the deeper the wounds that result.

I think, generally speaking, the above is true. And yet, knowing this, God has divinely chosen every one of our families for us! This implies that He *knew* our faith would be tested often and severely within the confines of natural life. Given the fact that each member of a household possesses a unique personality (a unique human flesh, too), it's pertinent to believe conflict is inevitable. This reality is magnified when others in our family remain unsaved. The main reason is that an unregenerate person remains hostile towards God, unable to please Him, wholly unmotivated to do so.

*For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because **the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the***

flesh cannot please God.

— **Romans 8:5-8**

Let's focus on the family dynamic for a moment, supposing that we have a family unit comprised of all unbelievers, save one - you. Suppose it's your family, even if it differs from your actual one (let's make this personal). Based on Holy Scripture, we know that the unbelieving members of our family are disinterested in the things God has placed as good and righteous on our hearts, as sanctified believers in Christ Jesus. We also know that Jesus warned His disciples about several points of contention with those still living in the flesh.

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**

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**

Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

— **Luke 12:51-53**

Allow me to summarize the above three passages for the sake of this blog. As a believer, you will be persecuted. Oh, and by the way, expect said persecution to

be prevalent in your innermost circle of relatives, beginning with your immediate family. This may come as a shock to many Christians, but it is absolutely the truth. And don't forget to include passive aggressiveness towards Christ also!

Partiality blinds us from the truth. Arguably the most rampant cases of partiality occur within the family. Even well-intentioned believers struggle with this. Nonetheless, it is true. Furthermore, our faith is called to the carpet each and every time a member of our family asks us to celebrate something ungodly with them. While it may cause extreme consternation in the soul, even gut-wrenching distress, we believers are called to stand up for Christ Jesus, for He is our principle reason for celebration. Anyone and/or anything that requires a slight of Christ ought to be rejected.

If you're having a knee-jerk reaction to this, please allow me to ask you a simple question. Who are you more willing to offend: your family members or your Lord and Savior? At the end of the day, this remains the unavoidable question. Do you wish to celebrate the things of the world with those of the world, or do you wish to celebrate Christ? You cannot do both. Jesus said, *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other"* (**Matthew 6:24a**). Celebrating with someone implies friendship. *"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**). If the members of your family are relegated to fleshly/worldly thoughts, affections, and celebrations, you must stand firmly opposed. You must also remain open in terms of what you choose to adopt as good, knowing that, as a believer in Christ, His Bride, *"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"* (**Ephesians 2:1-2**).

I've heard some say, "But I don't want to reject an invitation to celebrate if it is going to make someone stumble." The Bible teaches us two aspects of stumbling

- both are based on association with a household. In other words, whose household will we recognize as honorable (hint: **Philippians 3:20**)? First, Jesus Christ, the Head of the household of faith, is called a stumbling block, "*BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED*" (**Romans 9:33**). Second, we are not to make members of this household stumble, or else, "*Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea*" (**Mark 9:42**).

Whose household will you offend: your earthly one or the household of faith? From which do you desire acceptance? Is it possible that making an unbeliever stumble is a *very good thing* after all? Isn't that exactly what Jesus did? What was His motivation? "*For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost*" (Luke 19:10). What's your motivation when you, in partiality to familial loved ones, choose to celebrate ungodliness? Is your failure to stand up for what is Christ-like an endorsement of said celebrations? What's the message you're sending unbelievers when you fail this way? What does it say about your faith, for many of them know what you supposedly stand for, right? What would Jesus have you do, for the sake of the Gospel? Are you searching for loopholes even now that you've been convicted? They don't exist.

These are just some of the questions that we all need to think about the next time we are concerned about making unbelievers stumble. We must realize that stumbling is precisely what is *supposed* to happen! The human flesh despises the things of God (technically, it despises you even though it may not be verbalized due to social proprieties). No person has ever been saved that hasn't first repented of their sinfulness. No human flesh has ever stood silently by as this part of conversion took place. How dare any of us, in our partiality, thwart this from happening; that is, to thwart the very will of God, "*who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (**1 Timothy 2:4**).

What's a greater crime: to offend a family member in order that they might stumble over the Gospel or to watch them continue on their path towards Hell while you celebrate alongside them? I'd rather every member of my family hate me for a time and be saved than love me while on earth and spend eternity "in that place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12).

Woe is me! For I am

*Like the fruit pickers, like the grape gatherers.
There is not a cluster of grapes to eat,
Or a first-ripe fig which I crave.*

*The godly person has perished from the land,
And there is no upright person among men.
All of them lie in wait for bloodshed;
Each of them hunts the other with a net.*

*Concerning evil, both hands do it well.
The prince asks, also the judge, for a bribe,
And a great man speaks the desire of his soul;
So they weave it together.*

*The best of them is like a briar,
The most upright like a thorn hedge.
The day when you post your watchmen,
Your punishment will come.
Then their confusion will occur.*

*Do not trust in a neighbor;
Do not have confidence in a friend.
From her who lies in your bosom*

Guard your lips.

*For son treats father contemptuously,
Daughter rises up against her mother,
Daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
A man's enemies are the men of his own household.*

*But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD;
I will wait for the God of my salvation.
My God will hear me.*

— Micah 7:1-7

Grace and Religion

Besides the Gospel, itself, and possibly the idea of love, grace is arguably the topic which has been most perverted by the world. This makes sense, too, because if you understand the value of God's grace to a believer in Christ Jesus, you know that their faith rests upon the veracity of it. If you get the concept of grace twisted in your soul, you'll become blind to the truth altogether. Grace is the lynchpin of all that we are as saved persons. In fact, salvation, proper, depends upon grace.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

— Ephesians 2:1-10

Grace is not only our entre into salvation, it's our sustenance. As I've taught many times from my pulpit, we are saved daily by the grace of God. The common misconception that salvation is a one-time event is a shortsighted

viewpoint of the gracious work of God. Are we saved at a foreordained point in human history? Yes. But we remain saved by the grace and efforts of God, for our faith never fails to the degree that we are lost again. In other words, the One who saved us, keeps us saved! He didn't go all the way to the Cross only to lose those He had elected!

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

— **John 3:16-21**

Worldly religion attempts to pervert the very definition of grace, making it about human works (e.g., man attempting to please God in the absence of humility). James clearly set the record straight.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

— **James 1:22-27**

God's Morality In the Law

We are all governed by law in some way. A law's jurisdiction is the established boundary that protects and preserves its subjects. Lawmakers perform their duties by translating morality principles into written format which law keepers (e.g., police and judges) are to uphold. I think it's fair to say that we most often hear about the law when someone breaks it. We might even go so far as to say that our relationship to the law is a fearful one. As a result, our conception of it begins to skew towards what it can do to us rather than what it actually is, what it represents.

Before we get to God's Law, let's consider human law...

In America, given the decline of biblical morality, the law has been put on trial. This reflects man's contemporary morality being at odds with that which was held hundreds of years ago. Laws that were written and signed on September 17, 1787 were contained in the United States Constitution, a morally guided governing document. Since then, America's values have changed. Some, like myself, would argue that we've departed from our Judeo-Christian roots, hence the inevitable attack on the laws that uphold the U.S. Constitution's fundamental morals.

Is the law bad or are we simply witnessing the recoil of those whose morality looks nothing like those held by our forefathers?

Now, what if we elevate our thinking and consider the Law of the perfect lawgiver, God? Is His law bad, too, since an apparent majority object to it? Are our misguided peers right? Shall we abandon our biblical morals and attempt to morph God? Is God dead, or at least antiquated? Shall we "get with the times"?

Whenever I begin thinking critically along these lines, I have to go back to the ground floor. I mean, what *is* the law of God, anyways, and why is it persistently attacked? Is it a problem with the law or the subjects? Is it maybe more accurate to ask, is there an issue between the Lawgiver and His creatures?

If we're ever confused about *what* the Law is in the Bible, we have a good, working definition given to us in Holy Scripture.

There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

*But if you bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God, and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, **having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth**, you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?*

— Romans 2:9-21a

We have a simple definition for God's Law in **v20b**, "*having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth.*" **The fact is that the law is a perfect reflection of God's holy character.** I suppose in a flawed society like our own, it's fair to assume that some things are lost in translation when we write our own societal laws. But it is not so with God. God's law is intrinsically good. Since the Holy Bible was authored by God the Holy Spirit (**2 Timothy 3:16**), we may rightly conclude that nothing is lost in translation, giving us no reason for contention.

A little further along in the **Book of Romans** Paul writes about his own interactions with God's Law. He writes very practically for our encouragement and edification. Interwoven into his discourse are the core theological principles that encapsulate biblical morality - this being the reason for having law in the first place, after all.

I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.

— **Romans 7:9-13**

I think we Americans have to be very careful about our attitudes regarding the laws, lawgivers, and law keepers that govern us. For example, the always-make-it-a-point-to-question-authority attitude has eroded the very fabric of the country that affords us the freedom to even hold such opinions. I wonder how many Americans know that this freedom is God-given.

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.

— **Romans 13:1-2**

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

We don't often like to think this way, but God is the source of all authority in this life. He ordains it and, therefore, demands our obedience to it.

But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge."

— Acts 4:19

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."

— Acts 5:29

While the above represents righteousness, unless our laws propose we live contrary to God's Law, we should obey them, lest we be in opposition to God (and therefore His Law). How often is that really ever the case, though? Be honest. At the end of the day, when we make our stand, whom are we opposing, if not God???

What about the Law of God as it is laid out in Holy Scripture? As already mentioned, His Law is perfect and so is its written format, the Bible. Because of this, we never have grounds for doubt. We certainly ought never waste any time challenging it. If it arouses sin in us or condemns us, as Paul described in **Romans 7**, it doesn't mean that the Law is evil, only man.

God's Law is the standard for us believers to live by. Its perfect source ensures us of its eternal nature and immutability. Unlike the laws that govern our lands, God's Law cannot be rewritten or modified to "fit" contemporary morality. God's morality, and therefore His Law, is absolute, dogmatic. It's a blessing that we have it, as it is, "*the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth*" (**Romans 2:20b**) as well as, "*holy and righteous and good*" (**Romans 7:12b**).

When we think about God's Law, we need to remember that it is perfect; not just as a list of perfect commands, but rather the manifestation of God's essence. We need to dig a layer deeper than an adolescent believer would, looking beyond the rules, seeking the truth about God's own morality, for that

is what His Law embodies, after all. When we consistently approach His Law this way we begin to see, and be thoroughly encouraged by, the Spirit of the law, not just the letter of it.

*Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; **for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.***

— 2 Corinthians 3:5-6

*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.
They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them Your servant is warned;
In keeping them there is great reward.*

— Psalm 19:7-11

Grace, Works, and Indifference

Suppose you are picnicking with your family in a park. It is the last conceivable time you'll be able to splurge on a day off from work and enjoy a little cheese and wine because you just lost everything you own to a natural disaster. You are broke. Suddenly, a man arrives at your site and asks if he could be so kind as to give you a certified check for ten million dollars. He says he wanted to find some folks to give his lifetime earnings to before he dies. Suppose for some unexplainable reason, there's no doubt whatsoever in your mind that this man is telling you the truth.

You ask, "Well, where is this ten million dollar gift, sir?"

The man says, "I've placed it in a shallow well at the top of the hill over there." He points to it, and you estimate it's about a hundred yards away.

"Will you come with me, sir?"

"Absolutely," he says.

So, you walk up the hill, reach into the cool, shallow water and pull out a strange, ancient looking box. After inspecting it ever so curiously, you turn to the man and say, "Sir, it appears to be locked."

The man says, "Ask me for the key, and you can have it."

"May I have the key, sir?" He hands you the key without hesitation.

You open the box, see the check, and with tears running down your face, you say...

I end the story there because the rest isn't important. Feel free to finish it anyway you'd like. However, for the sake of illustration, imagine there are several invitees to the well, each with their own ten million dollar gift box, some of them having walked just twenty yards while others looking as if they had just walked across the country.

Allow me to ask you a few questions, please. In monetary terms, is the ten million dollars worth any less to you than it would be if he had simply dropped it onto your picnic blanket? Is it worth less to the person who only had to walk a very short distance to the well? Does ten million suddenly turn into twenty for the person who had to walk partway across the globe? The answer to all of these questions is "No." Ten million dollars is worth exactly ten million dollars, regardless of where a person finds it. Its value is set.

Who did all of the work to make the ten million dollars in each of the boxes given out? The giver. Did you or anyone else have to work for it? Nope. This box is analogous to the Cross of Jesus Christ. More than two thousand years ago our Lord labored so that He could offer you a gift. You weren't even born yet, so it is impossible for you to stake any claim to the Cross' valuation. It is by grace alone that we are offered salvation on the merits of Jesus' work.

But what about the walk to the well? Might that be construed as labor? Indeed it is. The distinction is that it neither increases nor diminishes the value of the gift. Whether a person has had to walk two feet or two hundred miles makes no difference in the value of the gift, itself. The value is set, just as Christ's work on the Cross has been set. We ought never confuse His work with the work we accomplish jointly with Him (ala 1 Corinthians 3:8; 15:10; 2 Corinthians 10:15; Galatians 4:11, etc.).

Suppose the fictitious man told some other folks that day the gift box was up in a tree and all they had to do was climb to fetch it. Or maybe for others the box was out in a field, or under a rock, or stowed away in a cave in Egypt. Would any of

that change the value of its contents? Nope. You get the point.

[Jesus said] "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

— **Matthew 13:44-46**

Jesus never said God's grace implies we have no part in salvation. We just can't stake a claim to accomplishing the work required to secure it. Someone once asked Him why so few are saved.

*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 13:23-24**

The Greek word translated "*strive*" is *agonizomai* (Can you see the English cognate "agonize" in there?). Jesus stated that salvation implies a certain struggle. The Greek word carries a wrestling connotation with it, meaning to contend for a prize. Are we to suppose that Jesus was suggesting additional work to the Cross as a requirement for salvation? May it never be! That work is complete, as Jesus said while on the Cross, "*It is finished*" (**John 19:30**). In **Luke 13:24**, Jesus was referring to the analog of walking from our place of origin to the shallow well. Is salvation any more gracious - and therefore effective - for someone who is forced to take a longer walk (think of how many conversion stories you've heard over the years - they're all unique)? How about a shorter walk, shall we presume a lesser grace, then? May it never be! The point I'm making is simple, but you might be surprised by how many people are confused about it, that is, confused about grace (Satan is a crafty one).

The gracious work of Jesus Christ on the Cross was completed when He cried *tetelestai!* (it is finished). Like the gift in the well, there's nothing we can do to alter its value. Those who attempt to do so comprise legalistic religion, adding works to Christ's sufficiency (as if Jesus was lying in **John 19:30**). Some of us have become so "gun shy" regarding this egregious error that the "walk to the well" is counted as adding to the finished work of the Cross. This is actually an error, too. It's not an error, however, to quote Jesus' own words (e.g., "*strive to enter*") and label it as our part in our own conversion. I hope you see the distinction I'm making here, it is very important for your own freedom.

Grace is the unmerited favor of God. Nowhere in the Bible does it say grace is easy (as man's flesh would define "easy"; that is, accommodating to man's sensibilities) - Jesus said entering through the "*narrow gate*" is akin to a wrestling match. We sweat when wrestling, some of us more than others. Heck, even evangelism is real work (**1 Corinthians 3:9**). The Bible says dogmatically that grace is sufficient for God's purposes (**2 Corinthians 12:9**); but (and here's the key), grace is always aligned with *God's* purposes, *not man's*. Considering **Isaiah 55:8**, it's understandable that man gets his lines crossed.

It's a good work to walk to the well when invited. It's a bad work to suppose that in doing so you have increased what Jesus stated as finished on the Cross. Bad works in the Bible refer to attempts made to supplant Christ's propitiatory work. Searching for the truth (e.g., answering God's call) about salvation isn't adding to Jesus' salvific work. Jesus said, "*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness [ala "*strive to enter through the narrow gate*" - Luke 13:24], and all these things will be added to you*" (Matthew 6:33). Our Savior encourages the lost to come to the well, "*but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life*" (John 4:14). If you've ever read *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan you know what I'm getting at - an unbeliever must struggle with pride and their own love of sin, counting the

cost of losing it (Luke 14:28), all of which amounts to real labor. Does this labor overlap with that performed on the Cross? Not at all, but it might mean a person's in for a long walk.

There are some who hear the Gospel of grace and respond, "Meh." I see this everyday - utter indifference. This is akin to a person in our fictitious story above responding to the giver with, "I have no need of your riches, sir, run along now." This person is too lazy to even entertain counting the cost of salvation because they don't see the need. The truth is that they are blind. *"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God"* (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). Does their indifference devalue the gift "in the well?" Not at all. Such is the point of this blog - the value of salvation is immutable. The value of man's seeking for it varies greatly.

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.

— 1 Corinthians 1:18-21

Grace is Jesus accomplishing everything necessary to secure our eternal salvation. *"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). There's nothing man could ever do to alter the value of Christ's redemptive work. However, hearing the Gospel truth and understanding it leaves no one unchanged. A person is either moved towards receiving His so great salvation or

they are moved to reject it. In both cases the Gospel makes a profound difference. Even an indifferent moron is forced to respond in their soul to the Holy Spirit's convicting ministry. In each case the convicted person is forced to exert themselves (the Gospel demands it). This work is in the struggle either to cast aside the sinful pride of life and pursue salvation or to reject the Gospel (or even remain indifferent to it). Striving in one direction or the other doesn't increase or diminish the value of the Cross in any way - that negotiation between Father and Son took place in Heaven long before man even walked the earth, as a function of God's grace alone.

People Love to Make Lists

Before I even begin making my point here, I have to give you a little background on the Greek language. In particular, the present tense as it pertains to verbs. In brief, when we encounter the present tense, we ought to think about something done habitually. Colloquially, we might call this “real-time, all the time.” I know I’m oversimplifying, but for our purposes here, this definition serves us well.

As you can imagine, the Bible uses the Greek present tense a *lot*. If we don’t understand the basics, such as those above, we misinterpret the expression of the writer. Such is the case in *any* language, including the eternal language of God. The Bible refers to Jesus Christ as “*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.

— John 1:1-2

Suffice to say, words have proven to be the greatest conveyance of truth. It behooves us to pay close attention to the details an author has chosen to express, especially when it comes to the infallible Word of God. So, when the “*inspired*” (“God-breathed” in the Greek - **2 Timothy 3:16**) Word uses the present tense, we ought to pay close attention, especially when it pertains to we believers and our thoughts/behavior.

Ok, back to my point...

People love lists. They love making them. They love crossing things off of them.

Look around any office environment, a desk, or even a refrigerator in a home and you’re likely to find a plethora of lists. At face value, there’s nothing wrong with a list; however, the danger lies in overstepping the true value of it, turning it into a proof-point for righteousness, in the absence of habit (ala real-time, all the time). What I mean to say is that, instead of having good habits, people tend

to habitually point to accomplishments instead of their heart, effectively insulating themselves from certain truths about themselves.

You might argue that Jesus said, “*You will know them by their fruits*” (**Matthew 7:20**). It’s true, He did say that, but it just so happens to be one of the most misinterpreted statements in contemporary Christianity. On the one hand, there are those who suppose (wrongly, as the religious crowd during Jesus’ day did) that godliness is something to be gained through list-making. On the other hand, there are those whose primary concern is obedience, with or without a known list in view.

Stated differently, there are those who read the Bible and compose a list for the sake of the list, itself, and the ensuing “righteousness” they seek to achieve by accomplishing said list. It’s a form of crafty premeditation, sort of like the way a primary school student compiles a list of to-dos to optimize their chance of gaining acceptance to their first-choice college. The struggle for admissions committees is the same - to try and sift out prospective students whose *hearts* are righteous, not just their portfolios.

Righteousness is a way of life, not a list to be checked off. While it may take diligence to accomplish a good thing, it’s not true obedience unless the heart is convinced it’s the right thing to do. Stated differently, obedience to a list of good things is never the root cause for righteousness.

Obedience is a way of life, a mindset, in the same way righteousness is.

Let’s make some real sense of Jesus’ words now.

“So then, you will know them by their fruits. 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.”

Those who think that obedience is a list of accomplishments are predisposed to interpreting Jesus' words, "*you will know them by their fruits,*" as justification for their folly, sympathizing with the ones who Jesus addresses as presenting Him with a list of so-called accomplishments (v22). However, Jesus quickly disposes of such wrong thinking in the passage above. He uses the word "*PRACTICE*" in the **present tense** for a reason, to reveal their lawless hearts and their true habit.

A multitude of accomplishments does not constitute present tense habit. Just because you've done a lot of good things doesn't mean it's your habit.

For example, when I was working in industry, I saw many resumes filled with impressive accomplishments. However, some of these people never really found success, regardless of their on-paper credentials. It was those whose hearts were "in the game," so to speak, that were ultimately the most successful. They were the most dynamic. It was also the latter group that you could see a passion burning in. Two completely different categories of people.

I think one of the easiest ways to identify a "list" person versus a "heart" person is to put them to the test. One particular way is the way Paul wrote about.

For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. But one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.

— 2 Corinthians 2:9-11

The key phrase here is "*obedient in all things.*" Paul is sifting here, seeing if the Corinthians were truly being obedient, as a way of life (habitually). Paul chose the parameters of the test, namely, forgiveness. Forgiveness, as a command, is like righteousness and obedience in the sense that it is a mindset, a way of life. For it to be genuine, acceptable to the Lord as righteous, it must be from the heart, being given to all, *impartially*. The Lord isn't interested in hearing about

our lists (ala **Matthew 7:23**), for they tend to reek of partiality because *we* are the ones compiling them.

There's a big difference between being obedient to a select, self-prescribed list of commands and having an obedient mindset, fueled by a righteous heart that is open to whatever circumstances demand of it. It's related to saying that you don't really know a person until difficult times arise. Everyone seems to fare pretty well when there's no pressure on them. It's when people are asked to stretch outside of their comfort zone that we see the extent of their obedience to righteousness.

Pressure tests our habits. It is impartial and demands impartiality as a response. It reveals the true extent and nature of our obedience.

God purposely allows pressure in our lives so that we are able to discern for ourselves the condition of our hearts. Are we truly prepared with the full armor of God for *every* circumstance; or, are we deferring the real work God desires to accomplish in us, pointing to our checked-off lists as justification? Pressure has the ability to reveal such things to us. May we learn to accept the truth about ourselves, in humility.

Should I Sell All Of My Possessions? Should You?

Have you ever read a passage of scripture and suffered a knee-jerk reaction to it that feels an awful lot like true conviction, only to later find out that it was a simple misunderstanding? I have. It carries a bit of panic with it, sometimes even shame. But, as I said, it subsides once I spend a little more time with plenary scripture. Although those moments are further and fewer between nowadays, it can and does still happen from time to time.

I've learned to use conviction as motivation to dig my heels into the Bible. If something doesn't "sit" right in my soul, I take it as an opportunity to learn. After all, doctrine is like a puzzle in the sense that if one piece is occupying the place of another, sort of jammed into place through human will/desire/error, it means two absolute things, minimally. First, there are now *two* pieces out of place and second, the big-picture perspective is marred. It's really important that we use moments of confusion and/or conviction to adopt the Berean attitude (**Acts 17:11**).

Let me give you a perfect example of a passage that seems to give even the most devoted believers "fits" from time to time.

And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.

— **Acts 2:44-45**

The first question any well-intentioned believer is going to consider is the obvious one - should we sell all of our possessions and give to the poor? I suppose, at first glance, one might conclude that since the early church members did such things that it ought to stand, throughout all of human history, as the prototype example of living a life that brings glory to God. Before we take that leap of faith, let's consider some more Holy Scripture.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy,

and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal.

— **Matthew 6:19-20**

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.

— **1 John 3:17-18**

And 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."

— **Luke 9:58**

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.

— **Luke 14:26**

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.

— **Luke 6:35**

At one time or another in my life the above passages have stirred my soul and caused a bit of consternation in me. In every case, I was stricken with an immediate, lasting desire to ensure righteousness before God. Even if I was unprepared to make changes in my life, I at least wanted to understand if my heart was disoriented to my Lord. It turns out that this last thought is the key to unlocking the truth, which subsequently always releases me from my anguish.

God is after our hearts. Since the beginning of time, He's wanted our affections, our devotion. You see, that's what stands out, in context, in our initial passage,

Acts 2:44-45. If you take just those two verses out of context, it's easy to be falsely convicted by the actual acts that are recorded in the Bible. I think this is a grave error a *lot* of Christians make, and it's the cause for unnecessary grief.

Context is key!

For example, instead of focusing on what the early church was convicted to do at the time, the righteous perspective is to consider their hearts. We find this perspective immediately when we consider the verb translated, "*filled [pleroo in Greek],*" in **Acts 2:4**, "*And they were all **filled** with the Holy Spirit,*" coupled with the action verb that translates, "*continually devoting [proskartereo in Greek],*" in **Acts 2:42**, "*They were **continually devoting** themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*" What we may conclude is that the Holy Spirit was upon their hearts to "do" the will of God. This is what Jesus embodied, "*Jesus *said to them, "My food is to **do** the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work"* (**John 4:34**).

Our affections for the Lord, when expressed, are what fill us up. It doesn't matter what we do, only that whatever we do, we do as unto the Lord.
"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 3:17**).

Jesus Christ was completely "filled" with the Holy Spirit, always "doing" the will of His Father. No one has ever been more devoted to righteousness, for He is described as, "*full of grace and truth*" (**John 1:14b**). As such, there are several questions worth pondering in our self-induced times of doubt. Why wasn't Jesus convicted to sell everything to feed the poor, to deny every last possible indulgence, to stop and heal every last maimed beggar, or solve world hunger (to get lofty for a moment)? I mean, He certainly witnessed all of these issues during His incarnation, right???

Again, the key is context. His Father had unique plans for Jesus, just like He has unique plans for each one of His children (that's you and me). To take recorded actions from the Bible out of context and automatically assume them as appropriate for ourselves is an awful mistake, one that results in self-induced agony, doubt, and condemnation. Religious folks *love* to oppress

others with their own so-called asceticism, pointing to their acts of giving. And yet Jesus had little tolerance for the religious crowd of His time (cp Luke 11, 18).

We are Christ's sheep. He is after our affections. Since works vary greatly from sheep to sheep, we cannot presume that we are called to sell all our possessions like the early church did (ala **Acts 2**). Since this is absolutely true, we ought *never* fall prey to the temptation to doubt our own personal convictions to live a life as Jesus, our true Prototype, did. His heart was perfectly righteous before our Father in Heaven and He decided *not* to help every person He ever met with an apparent need.

If we are motivated out of affection for the Lord, we should help others. But in doing so we mustn't ever sacrifice our commitment to integrity, lest we begin doing things with wrong motivation. Each of our lives has a unique context to it. As Paul wrote, "*Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called*" (**1 Corinthians 7:20**). If you, personally, are convicted to sell all your possessions and give to the poor, then by all means, do it! But, do not attempt to enslave others by supposing, and even publicly expressing, the need for all believers to follow suit, for this is surely not God's will. The Son of Man has proven this to us.

At the end of the day, we must extinguish any / all doubts about the fruit we bear as believers. A good place to start is the first of the ten commandments ("*You shall have no other gods before Me*" - **Exodus 20:3**), for it embodies the affection our Creator desires we each have for Him. If our motivations are oriented to this commandment, our fruit will be righteous, for our true affections will be well placed.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

— **Deuteronomy 6:5**

Is my heart sickened by the fact that I haven't sold all of my possessions and given to the poor? No. Why not? Because I love the Lord and His Spirit hasn't

convicted me, personally, to do so. Ahhhh...freedom from religion and its fleshly bondage, *“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)*. Do yourself the same favor and remember to read your Bible in context, never allowing the flesh or anyone else to place you into bondage to guilt and condemnation that isn't yours to keep.

Springtime

It's a typical Wednesday morning and the sun has finally decided to show its lovely face after a brief surrender to a patented New England let-me-darken-your-mood storm system. I know, I know, what would become of the green grass and the beautifully budding trees and flowers in the absence of life sustaining rain? Sometimes, I'm just a brat (surprise)! In this, I'm not alone, I'm sure of it. :) Here's my point:

Contrast gives our perspective scale. Something can only be described as greater if there exists a point of comparison. Good is so much greater than bad when we understand bad before we are presented with good. Beauty is amplified in the presence of ugliness. A bright light is so much more vivid if alone in the darkness. When our perspective is given scale, we are able to perceive magnitude. This becomes the basis of our gratitude.

This morning represents one of those times when my appreciation for springtime has been amplified. I can thank the rays of sunlight dancing on the wet grass outside of my writing perch for that. I might as well call it what it is right now - grace. While, technically, I could draw upon the abundance of science I've learned over the years, settling on concepts like refraction to describe what my eyes see, I think in these moments it's the grace of God I should take notice of.

Did I mention I can be a brat sometimes? Every winter, this somber metamorphosis happens and then I'm dragged into springtime needing to molt my dreary skin. It's awful. This 'winter funk' is a foregone reality for me come the end of fall, but I've resigned to the fact that it just is. Every year I fight the gloomy spiral and every year (this year is no exception), a few months later, my attitude emerges from its chrysalis with the butterflies, like clockwork. I realize there's a certain reliability to this pattern after fifty years of witnessing it in myself. But you know, as they say, "Every cloud has a silver lining." Allow me to

explain.

As children of God, having been purchased from the slave market of sin, do any of us have reason to be anything but completely elated? The answer, strictly speaking, is “No.” But, yet, God has ordained such darkness in our lives so that His Light shines all the more magnificent. **He ordains every low for a reason.** I believe it is, in part, to establish a baseline point of comparison for our perspective.

The greater the distance between what we understand to be darkness and light, the greater the scale by which we are able to measure His grace.

Refractions of light on a dewy spring morning speak to me this way. I don't just see an image in my brain; I see so much more. The vestiges of my 'winter funk' give my perspective scale. I feel a sense of emergence in springtime akin to those dark times in my life (they are often cyclical) when the Lord has saved/delivered me. Salvation proper is the greatest example, of course. But, there are countless moments in time that have been etched into my soul because of the contrast between where I was stuck and where His grace brought me. Furthermore, I can't recall a time when He raised me up to higher ground then clouded my vision as I looked down to where I came from. In fact, it seems He prefers to give me clarity in retrospect. Why? I assume for the sake of gratitude.

Aha! There it is. Gratitude. The point of this blog. Like faith, gratitude always has an object. In terms of perspective, the grander the scale, the more gratitude we possess. We all have 'winters' in life, times of lowliness and even depression. Likewise, we all have 'summers' in life, times of highness and elation. It's when we step back and consider the entire scope and the distance between our 'winters and summers' that we are filled with gratitude towards God's grace. This perspective, in and of itself, is a blessing.

I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound.

As the Spirit's had me teaching for years now from behind my pulpit - *perspective is everything*. If it becomes defiled or tweaked somehow, we lose the righteousness in it, our perceptions become marred and our gratitude spoiled. What's greater than living a life of gratitude, I ask? How critical is it for us to remember where we have come from? How perfect are God's ways compared to our own? While we curse the lows, God sees the end from the beginning. While we fester in our 'winter doldrums,' God is working out a good thing in those who love Him (**Romans 8:28**). Once we realize, as human beings, that it's the *combination* of highs and lows that comprise our righteous perspective (for this is the way of the divine One), we are filled with gratitude, love, and appreciation. Every last drop of experience that somehow, inextricably brings glory to God is now realized from this vantage point, and the idea of sanctification in Christ Jesus broadens to include His perfect wisdom from up on high.

*The right hand of the LORD is exalted;
The right hand of the LORD does valiantly.
I will not die, but live,
And tell of the works of the LORD.*

*The LORD has disciplined me severely,
But He has not given me over to death.
Open to me the gates of righteousness;
I shall enter through them, I shall give thanks to the LORD.*

*This is the gate of the LORD;
The righteous will enter through it.
I shall give thanks to You, for You have answered me,
And You have become my salvation.*

The stone which the builders rejected

*Has become the chief corner stone.
This is the LORD'S doing;
It is marvelous in our eyes.*

***This is the day which the LORD has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.***

— Psalm 118:16-24

Gratitude

God wants us to be grateful because we are blessed for it.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

— **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

Gratitude begins with perspective. If we apply a godly lens to our lives, we rejoice and are so very grateful for all that God has done for us, “*giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (**Ephesians 5:20**). It’s when we’re tempted away from our affections for God that our perspective suffers. It’s not long afterwards that we lose the attitude of gratitude we once enjoyed so fully. This is a sad day. We have so much to be thankful for - all it takes is a few friendly reminders from our Bible.

*This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

— **Psalm 118:24**

*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

— **Psalm 136:1**

A life of gratitude means a life of peace.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, 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 understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What 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**

In order to have this peace added to your soul, you must seek the Word of God, namely the truth. When you find it in Holy Scripture (**Matthew 6:33**), you must submit wholly to it (**James 4:7a**) in order to receive the resultant grace blessings (**2 Corinthians 9:8**).

And 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 dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

— **Colossians 3:15-17**

Giving Thanks on Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving week is approaching and my prayer is that my brothers and sisters in Christ be blessed with an attitude of gratitude. I think about how many turkey dinners are going to be served during this holiday season, and then I think about how many families will be truly blessed as a result of giving thanks to the holy God of the Universe. Strangely, even as I write this to you, I'm stricken with the fear that the essence of this holiday has been lost to food and football. Nonetheless, I'm encouraged, as should you be, also, that there will be millions of us celebrating God's grace. May I echo Paul's sentiments:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be apparent to all. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think on these things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me, put into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

— **Philippians 4:4-9**

Thanksgiving isn't just about a laundry list of things to be grateful for; rather, it's a sense of abiding. As I've been preaching from the pulpit, as of late, it's a sense of abiding in the sphere of God, which, as I like to remind folks, is a "package deal". When you abide in thanksgiving, you find yourself in love, too! Isn't that just grand?!! What I've found over the years is that a good attitude about one's blessings is mighty contagious – most of us just need a little nudge, a quick reminder of how much we have to be grateful for – well, *you* might be that nudge for someone else this year!

Sadly, we often preoccupy ourselves with all the things we “think” we want, but don’t have (I say it this way because, obviously, God has decided against this thing we want). We think we want a lot of things, don’t we? Maybe this year we dwell on the fact that God’s decision *not* to grant certain wishes is as good a reason as any for thanksgiving. Maybe we turn our attitudes upside down and appreciate God’s protecting us from our own lusts. Maybe a little perspective really does go a long way.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

— 1 Thessalonian 5:16-18

Life is short – the older I get, the more I realize that this isn’t just a punchline someone spouts as they do something daring or stupid. How shall we spend our time, then? Shall we reach across the thanksgiving dinner table with a kind word? Shall we invite others to engage with us instead of being cold and distant? Shall we reveal Christ’s love to others this year, and then give thanks to God for the opportunity to do so? These sound like great alternatives. And you know what? They’re all attainable with a little commitment to thanksgiving this year.

It doesn’t take much to simply be thankful. I’d argue that it’s more exhausting being ungrateful, not to mention, it makes you miserable.

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

— Ephesians 5:19-20

There’s so much encouragement in the Bible on the topic of thanksgiving. I think sometimes we forget that God gives us this kind of guidance because it’s good for us, His children. Some might argue (I’ve heard such things) that the

Thanksgiving holiday just isn't what it used to be. Fair enough in some cases. But, aren't we partakers of that same table? Might we share a little of the blame by giving up so soon on an attitude of gratitude? Might we be a part of the problem and therefore a potential catalyst towards the solution? Might we be the ones called to spread the good news this year?
Food for thought.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

— **Colossians 3:16-17**

We believers have been blessed beyond measure. It's an awful thing to realize that what's been haunting us over the past few years may have been our lack of thanksgiving, isn't it? We Americans, with our ultra-competitive natures, often cripple our own ability to rejoice by focusing on all the things we *don't* have. All we have to do to escape this plague is to remember that every human being that's ever lived has done so with *way* more unfulfilled desires than fulfilled ones. Life is so short that it's silly to concern ourselves with the billions of things we don't have or haven't experienced.

We'd all do very well this holiday season if we simply remember the following:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge — even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you — so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

— **1 Corinthians 1:4-8**

I'll be praying for your happiness this year, I promise. Please enjoy your loved ones, considering your time with them precious. Take a moment to spread a cheerful attitude. If anyone asks what you're so happy about, tell them that God is good, Jesus loves you, and life doesn't get any better than that!

Joy to the World

Every year, my congregation and I celebrate our Lord's birth with a special Christmas message. Over the years, it has varied quite a bit. Thinking back, I can remember messages that were focused on the supreme nature of the One who became a man to die for our sins. I also remember deeply heartfelt messages that focused on His love. Each message given has always been perfectly placed with whatever the mainstream studies have been focused on at the time. This year was no different.

At the time of this writing, North Christian Church has completed seven parts of an ongoing series titled, *The Deceitfulness of Sin*. The emphasis from the Spirit has been on the key word "deceitfulness" - this in an effort to shine divine light and wisdom on the insidiousness of sin. Our insights have ranged from baseline definitions for sin and depravity to the very practical manifestations of sin in our lives. What we've learned is that sin is, by nature, elusive. Given that every man ever born (save Jesus) has possessed a sin nature, "*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**), we must be trained by the Word (**2 Timothy 3:16**) to "see" sin where it lurks and hides (**Ephesians 5:13**). This requires the "*the Word of God...the Light of men*" (**John 1:14**).

What happened from the pulpit this Christmas was very interesting because it reminded us of the solemnness of Jesus Christ's birth. If we pause for a moment, peering past all the hoopla and the Christmas lights, to remember exactly why God had to become a man - Jesus was born to die - we may just find ourselves weeping. We endeavor, then, to find the balance between solemnity and joy. After all, the One we are celebrating is "*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 glaring dichotomy of Christmas is that Jesus came to die, and yet He lived with a joy set before Him. At face value, these two realities may seem paradoxical. However, the Word reveals that they are intrinsically bound, and

ought, therefore, be so bound in our hearts, particularly during the Christmas season. This very paradox was placed front and center during this year's Christmas message at North Christian Church.

The message was solemn. It forced each congregant to stop in his or her tracks and face the reality that Jesus Christ, the God-man who experienced perfect peace as an eternal member of the triune God of the Universe, humbled Himself, knowing that He'd suffer and die for others. Death is a solemn subject (I'm not referring to dying and going to Heaven, just death, itself).

[Jesus Christ] 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 2:7-8

Imagine being Jesus Christ for a moment, knowing that you'd have to suffer as an innocent man - that the very reason for your birth was the culmination of the Cross. Ask yourself, is this a solemn thing? Here's your answer:

Then [Jesus] said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me."

— Matthew 26:38

Any Christmas celebration is remiss if it exists in the absence of the solemnity that Jesus carried to the Cross. The kind of joy that Jesus carried to His Cross could only exist in the presence of knowledge about death. Likewise, it can only be present in the soul of a person celebrating Christmas if the aforementioned solemnity exists as well. These things are mutually dependent. This is why Paul wrote what he did just prior to reminding us all of the Lord's humiliation in **Philippians 2:7-8**.

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 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.

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 2:1-8**

So, after a wonderfully placed, particularly solemn, Christmas message was preached this year, the Spirit gently reminded us to not be overcome by the weight of it. It's true that we ought never celebrate the birth of our Lord in the absence of understanding the reason for His birth; however, since our Lord, Himself, possessed a "*joy set before Him*," we ought to share in that joy. It may not invoke a burst of smiles, but it will most definitely fill our hearts with a balanced "*measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ*" (**Ephesians 4:13**). What more could we ever ask for, really? If the emotions that Jesus felt during His lifetime here on earth are sharable by us even today, then my vote is that we pursue that end, regardless of any anguish we might experience along the way.

The truth is that we all carry a cross. It's a solemn reality. In order to maintain a joy set before us, we must understand the glory of the suffering that goes along with this. It is with Christ's attitude that we are able to "*run with endurance the race that is set before us*" (**Hebrews 12:1**), in the face of death, itself, as Paul wrote, "*I die daily*" (**1 Corinthians 15:31**). Christmas truly is a time to rejoice, but it must be in light of the whole truth, including the reason why Jesus Christ was even born in the first place.

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come
Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And Heaven and nature sing
And Heaven and nature sing*

And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing

Humility

For years I've been saying from my pulpit, "Humility is the key to the spiritual life." This is a summary statement, of course, with a lot of context implied. Before a person can understand this statement, they have to wrestle with their own flesh to release control (or what is perceived as control) of their own life. *"And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'" (Mark 8:34).* Without humility, neither an unbeliever nor a believer is sanctified. At every phase of sanctification, the Bible teaches us that God favors the humble.

*And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for **"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."** Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.*

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

— 1 Peter 5:4-11

1 Peter 5:11 is particularly telling because it puts life, itself, into its proper place. We need to have godly perspective to be sanctified as believers and the only way for this to happen is for us to, at a minimum, understand **v11**. This is God's

Universe that we live in - let us not forget this. This is **His** creation, not ours. We are His creatures - He is our Sovereign. Mankind has a bad habit of forgetting these simplest of truths; this leading him away to the fanciful speculations which inevitably accompany arrogance.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about 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 up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

— Romans 1:18-32

The downfall of mankind has always been his arrogance. What began at the Fall in the Garden of Eden has persisted throughout human history. We see the fingerprints of arrogance all over the stories of those whose demise is recorded in Holy Scripture. Contrarily, we see the humble, repentant faith of the victors as they are saved and sanctified. God gives grace to the humble, but is opposed to the arrogant. Repentance, itself, is a grace gift, as is saving faith.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

— Hebrews 11:1-3

It's impossible for an arrogant person to get beyond their own self-centeredness. As a result, they render themselves blind to the greater things that God desires for them, beginning with salvation, proper.

[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

— 1 Timothy 2:4-6

Whom does God save from the throes of spiritual death and Hell? The humble. Whom does He save experientially afterwards? The humble. Do you see a pattern here?

Humility is the key to the spiritual life.

Guess Blogger: Flippancy

Have you ever said or heard someone else say in prayer, “I bind / rebuke you, Satan”? Hold that thought.

Merriam-Webster defines flippant as, “lacking proper respect or seriousness” and flippancy as, “unbecoming levity or pertness especially in respect to grave or sacred matters”.

As I was reading my Bible the other day, the following verses stood out to me, particularly the bolded section.

2 Peter 2:10-12 *and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, **they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord.** But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed,*

Here is an excerpt from the MacArthur study notes on the first part of that bolded section, *Wicked angels have a level of existence in the supernatural world that has a dignity and a transcendent quality that is beyond humanity (Eph. 6:12). A certain honor belongs to those who transcend time. Consequently, **there must be no flippancy regarding Satan and his angels.***

The end of the bolded section in **2 Peter 2:11**, *whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord*, is a reference to **Jude 1:9** *But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, “The Lord rebuke you!”*

Continuing with Mr. MacArthur’s study notes, *“Even the archangel Michael, refused to speak evil of him (Jude 8,9), but called on the Lord to do so (Zec. 3:2). No believer should be so boldly foolish as to mock or command the power of supernatural*

demons, especially Satan”.

This brought to mind the times I have heard people claiming to “bind” or “rebuke” Satan in their prayers. I have always found it odd, inappropriate even. Now, I think this- if God has not deemed it the proper time to bind Satan’s powers yet and the archangels do not even rebuke him, then we lesser creatures certainly have neither the right nor the power to do so. It is obvious that people, in general, possess a lack of respect, or flippancy, towards both fallen and elect angels. Consider how the elect angels are often depicted by the world- chubby, diapered babies sitting on clouds and playing harps. Meanwhile, the Bible describes angels as being elevated above mankind (Hebrews 2:7; 2 Peter 2:11) and angelic encounters as eliciting great fear in the people they were sent by God to speak to. This due to their glorious appearance, most often prompting the angels to say, “Do not fear!” (i.e. Daniel 10:18-19, Matthew 28:2-5, Luke 1:11-13; 2:9-10). As far as I know, chubby babies do not usually elicit great fear (lol).

Do I share my thoughts with you to serve as motivation for showing respect towards angels? Not really, though, as you have seen, we should have an appropriate regard for angelic creatures. The true motivation of this blog is to get us to consider the source of this flippancy in the first place. What is the reason behind any disregard? Well, to start with, it stems from a flawed attitude towards The Most High and His Word. Is it fair to say that people are flippant with God at times? Is it fair to say that they often demonstrate flippancy with regard to His commands? I am confident that it is beyond fair to say and, sadly, is an accurate description of all people, even us believers, from time to time.

Luke 23:11, 35 *And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!”*

Luke 6:46 *Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?*

This flippancy towards God, the ultimate authority in our lives, is then expressed through flippant attitudes towards those beneath Him but set “above” us (i.e.

pastors, parents, husbands, teachers, bosses, police, and even angels). What instructions are given in the Bible regarding the proper attitude we should have towards God, His commands, and those He has given authority?

Psalm 33:8 *Let all the earth fear the Lord; Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.*

Matthew 22:37 *And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind"*

John 14:15 *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."*

1 Peter 2:13-14, 18 *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.*

Colossians 3:18, 20 *Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.*

We are commanded to fear, love, and obey the Lord. We are also commanded to submit to those whom God has given authority over us in this life. This is only possible when we are humble towards Him and show humility towards His commands.

Merriam-Webster defines humble as, "not proud or haughty: not arrogant or assertive: reflecting, expressing, or offering in a spirit of deference or submission" and humility as, "freedom from pride or arrogance". As you can see, being humble and behaving in humility towards the Lord is, obviously, the opposite of being flippant and behaving in flippancy towards Him and His infallible Word. The cure for this unhealthy attitude of flippancy then is this:

James 4:10 *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

Our focus, both in our prayers and in our lives, should be our relationship with Jesus Christ; fearing, loving, and obeying Him . Let's leave the binding and

rebuking to God, the only One with the power and right to do so.

In His Love,
Monica

Mommy, I Threw Up

“Mommy, I threw up,” said the little girl from the bathroom. Sally heard her daughter from the kitchen. It was getting close to the time her siblings and their budding families were scheduled to arrive so she hadn’t been paying much attention to her daughter’s snacking. Pressure was mounting.

“I told you not to eat too much junk food! Hold on.” *God help me*, she murmured under her breath. *Wasn’t Christmastime supposed to be relaxing?*

The bathroom was a mess. Apparently, her darling Annie hadn’t quite made it to the toilet, and even worse, she had gotten some of what appeared to be regurgitated brownies in her wee pigtails, too. This scene was getting worse by the moment. Sally’s mind kept transporting her back to the kitchen she had just left behind, the one with the ham in the oven and several cooking pots on the stove. *I don’t care how cute she is, this little girl’s going to hear it if my meal gets messed up.* She had been carefully planning the meal, every detail, down to the place settings and the festive loops hanging on the bottom of the wine flutes. In her mind’s eye she’s already imagining a full glass of Pinot Noir. She’s grateful it’s only brownies that have made her daughter sick - could be worse. She experiences a mental shudder thinking about Annie’s lack of self-control and that someday she’ll be a teenager with access to more toxic substances, like alcohol, no matter how hard she might try to warn her against the idea.

Sally turns to Annie, “Did you get it all out?” Her eyes tell the whole story to the little girl standing beside the tub - *we’re going to deal with this later.*

“I think so.” Annie adds a little manufactured despondence to her countenance in a last ditch effort to mitigate her mom’s wrath. Like every fleshly child, she doesn’t want to receive what she deserves. It’s not like she doesn’t remember her mom explicitly telling her, “Stay away from the brownies, you’ve already had enough. You’ll get sick.” She remembers, alright - all ten or more warnings. She’s young, though, so she doesn’t give it much thought, she just wants someone to take away the belly ache now. Her mind gets twisted around the fact that the

same person she's offended is the one she wants comfort from. If her dad were home from work already, she'd play the sympathy card with him, seeking some kind of solace in his distance from the situation. She'd rush to him before news of her disobedience got to him. She'd take advantage of time. She'd cry a few extra crocodile tears into her daddy's neck and gain an ally. But none of that was possible - he wasn't there.

In the few minutes it takes Sally to clean up the bathroom floor, the corner of the vanity, and the toilet bowl - *my goodness, how many brownies did my little rascal consume?* - she frets for allowing herself to get spun up in a frenzy. History has shown that when it's her turn to host the gathering she inevitably takes on more than she can handle. Every year, once everyone's partied out and gone to tuck their own families to bed, she concludes that it wasn't worth it. While she could blame her not-so-innocent child, redirecting her inner anger, she knows that wouldn't be right. Maybe God is trying to convince her of what she already knows to be true deep down inside. She remembers a verse from the Bible she heard her pastor teach this morning.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

— **Luke 12:34**

On her knees in front of the toilet, Sally contemplates her life in that moment, how the stir of chaos and emotions during the holidays is really just a microcosm of life, itself. She likens it to a pimple being squeezed and the grotesque pus that oozes out, requiring cleanup not a whole lot unlike the one she's presently tending to. She reflects back upon the decisions she's made over the years, each one carefully plotted. She's a self-described control freak, even posited that this gives her an advantage over her peers. Heck, it seemed to work throughout high school and college, where she excelled. It also seems to have worked in her landing the husband of her dreams. But were her dreams and God's the same? Were her dreams even fair to hold over anyone else's head? Looking back as if viewing her past down a long corridor, was following the misguided advice from her feminist mother the wisest thing to do? "You don't need anyone...cut your own path," she'd say. Years later she'd find out that her mother was a closet agnostic. In retrospect, with the wafting smell of puke singeing the insides of her

nostrils, she wonders...about all of it...about all the ill-conceived advice she'd taken.

How did she end up here, not utterly depressed or beaten, just solemn? Her plans, though well thought out - some might say fool proof - were proving folly the older she got. Is this all a part of God's patient planning??? Is this how wisdom is gained? She's beginning to see the forest through the trees. Interesting that it occurs while facing a porcelain bowl meant to catch and flush human excrement. Maybe that's what she ought to do with her so-called "plans", and everything for that matter, that causes her anxiety and pain - flush it all!

Wisdom smashes our plans to smithereens.

Sally remembers her beloved pastor saying this earlier, too. At the time, she was barely paying attention, preoccupied with last minute adjustments and thoughts about the evening's celebration. *The Spirit must've ensured I kept this pearl in my soul. Thank you, Lord!* She began to recognize how the Holy God of the Universe was going to use this situation for good - *evil for good, yes, evil for good.* She recalls one of her favorite verses, "*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**). She sinks a little deeper into her heels. *It's true. My little girl is a visual aid that He's using right now. While I chastise her for disobeying, I ought to be confessing my own sin to my Father in Heaven. I'm the one who's chosen the path I'm on. I'm the one with the control issues. I'm the one who has ignored the good counsel of the Word, even when it came forth a little frothy from the pulpit* (she chuckles a little when she recalls the reason why she sits in the third row - her pastor's spittle only makes it to the second). *I'm responsible for my current situation. God never lies. For what a person sows, that is what they reap, right? God help me accept the truth about myself.*

*"But when I look, there is no one,
And there is no counselor among them
Who, if I ask, can give an answer.
"Behold, all of them are false;
Their works are worthless,
Their molten images are wind and emptiness."*

She needs to hurry up now. She's not sure how long she's drifted and she thinks she smells something burning from the direction of the kitchen. She calls to her daughter, but there's a commotion at the front door drowning out her voice. Her daughter has met her husband before he's even had a chance to remove his coat, wrapping her arms and legs around him. Sally would rather not plop this little episode on her husband's lap right now, so she resigns to picking up the pace. *Stall him, Annie, even though I know what you're up to.* Maybe she can finish, stow her gloves, apron, and cleaner and greet him before he's none the wiser. For now, she'll keep the heartfelt aspects of this moment between God and her. She'll keep it intimate until He directs her otherwise, which may be never. Who knows. One step at a time.

Sally emerges from down the hall and the kitchen is filled with thick smoke. Her husband and daughter are just standing there, wide-eyed, not sure whether to state the obvious or wait for their beloved wife and mother to bark out commands like she typically would in stressful situations like this one. Nothing comes, not even a peep. Instead, Sally calmly walks over to the stove and turns every dial down, then to the oven and turns it off, not even opening the door because she already knows that it's the ham emitting the smoke that's making her family's eyes water. Instead of fulfilling the cringeworthy expectations of her family, she turns to them and says, "I love you two so much." Tension melts. Not all is lost.

In the hour or so before their guests arrive the triad, in their determination, is able to toss everything burnt out, clear the kitchen of smoke, and set a lovely, though unexpectedly small spread on the table. Tomorrow Sally would receive several calls, complementing her on the simplicity of the bounty they all enjoyed. Her older sister, the one who introduced her to her church, would tell her that it was really good to see Sally relaxed this time around, confessing it was a pleasant surprise. She'd also receive a text message from that same sister:

*For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;*

*And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.*

— Isaiah 9:6

That night, all night, Sally kept smiling. Her secret, unexpected bathroom interlude remained between her and the One she truly loved the most. Her pocket-sized lesson was growing roots and already bearing good fruit. She was finally “getting it,” finally beginning to realize the magnanimity of Christ’s work in her. Most importantly, she was beginning to understand God’s unerring love for her. His is the voice of wisdom. She listens all night and He reminds her that He loves her and has everything under control. *It’s funny how life works, how You work, Lord. I’m sorry I try to take control from You. I’m sorry I make my own plans without consulting You. I’m sorry I take the counsel of others as gold when You are always available with perfect advice. I’m sorry I ever doubt You.*

Every so often, her husband would catch his wife gazing off, pensive. He was happy for her, having already witnessed the fruit of whatever God was doing in her. He didn’t want to press her or interrupt her, so he enjoyed her from a distance. He’d find a way to encourage her later, remind her that he didn’t marry her for her cooking abilities, however substantial they may be. He married her because of that glint in her eye - the same one he was seeing now, from across the room. He attributes it to Christ. As he sat there, loving her from twenty feet away, he hummed to himself, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine...” He was blessed and he knew it. The grace that he beheld so dearly on his wife’s face was now reflecting from his own. *This is how grace works - it’s contagious, like love.* He was beaming along with Sally...

Seizing the moment, Annie says coyly, “Daddy, I threw up.” Well played, little girl...well played.

"Oh, They LIKE To Work"

I'm convinced that hard work is a part of God's plan for us (I once wrote a blog titled, "40 Hours a Week - Says Who???"). If you read your Bible regularly, I'm sure you agree. Yet, there are some folks I've met, even Christians, whose perspective on work makes me scratch my head. Now, before I write any more, I want to qualify "work" here as anything done for the purpose of producing good, in God's eyes. The most obvious example, of course, is working to support yourself and your family; so, I'll be using this example here since it's indicative of the principles the Spirit wants me to describe. Whether you're single or married, all principles apply.

But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

— 1 Timothy 5:8

I can recall an inspiring story of a man who used to work with my oldest son when he was still in high school. My son was working at a fast-food restaurant and there was a forty-something year old man working in a similar role. I learned that this man not only worked hard at the restaurant, but also had two other similar jobs. He told my son that he had to work hard to support his wife and children. I never knew the man's religious beliefs, but he certainly had an admirable work ethic. Why any professing Christian would be less intent on providing for themselves or their own family raises certain questions about their motivation, and therefore, their faith.

*Whatever you do, work **heartily**, as for the Lord and not for men.*

— Colossians 3:23

The Greek word translated "heartily" in **v23** means "from the soul," implying that

whatever we do, regardless of the task, it ought to be “*for the Lord.*” Even the most mundane or unpleasant of tasks is an opportunity to bring glory to God, which is why rewards in Heaven won’t be given for prominence or success, but rather for *faithfulness*. Whatever work we perform, we ought to do it faithfully for the Lord. Is it fair to say that most people work for themselves, to their own glory, and for their own purposes (e.g., saving up for that shiny new object)? Even if this is true, I only mention it for context (I have a more subtle reason for writing this blog, and it’s to protect *your* sanctification). I want you to think of why some people are able to work really hard and remain content while others work sparingly and are miserable. The difference is a matter of perspective.

*The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing,
while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.*

— Proverbs 13:4

*In all toil there is profit,
but mere talk tends only to poverty.*

— Proverbs 14:23

The Bible clearly states that we are to work diligently. Does God guarantee that we’ll all be rich, financially, as a result? Nope. According to the world’s system of thinking, this is folly. We must remember, though, that we aren’t supposed to be working to impress the world (remember, “*not for men*” - **Colossians 3:23**). The Word of God never says the reward for hard work is lots of money, as if that’s where God’s blessings come from. Contentment never comes from worldly assets gained from working hard.

A contented worker works hard because their eyes are fixed on pleasing the Lord, not on the personal gain of the work, or the work itself.

I’ve heard people say to me that I work hard because, well, I’m one of those

people who “like to work.” I suppose there’s some truth to that; but, what these folks aren’t taking into account is my motivation. I am, for the most part, intrinsically wired to work hard because deep in my soul (ref. “*work heartily*” - **Colossians 3:23**) I know it’s the right thing to do, and, therefore, my Lord is pleased with it. Is the work always pleasant? Let me tell you about the time my son and I had to snake out a septic pipe and the sewage was splashing all over my body and face. Neither one of us wanted to be there - trust me - but it needed to get fixed and it saved my family a lot of money (money that eventually could be sent to, say India or Africa, in support of Christ’s ministry). For the record, I asked the Spirit while writing this if I had to share that story about myself because I didn’t want you accusing me of trying to come off as being so awesome at this (trust me, I fail just like you do).

What do I discern when a lazy person discounts the hard work of another with a wave of their hand and a flippant comment like, “Oh, they work hard because they *like* to work”? That comment stems from ignorance (for the hard worker may just be working “*heartily, as for the Lord*” - **Colossians 3:23**) and a deflection of the simple fact that the accuser *isn’t* working the way they ought to be. ‘Idle hands are the devil’s workshop,’ as they say.

*For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, **but busybodies.***

— **2 Thessalonians 3:11**

Am I writing this to throw stones at anyone? Not at all. I’m writing it because I’m confident that the Spirit has His reasons - that at least one of you is plagued with this disrespect for those who work hard and for Him whom they work for. Read **2 Corinthians 11:18-28** when you get the chance and ask yourself if Paul always “liked” the work of the ministry the Lord called him into.

Newsflash! God-fearing people don’t work hard because they like the work, itself; rather, they work hard because they like to be pleasing to the Lord. They

work hard because it's simply the right thing to do.

Now, I get to share the little “secret” that prompted this blog (I haven't even alluded to it yet, but I promise you, I'm on the edge of my seat right now as I write). The blessing of working heartily for the Lord is that He rewards the hard worker with the special blessing of “liking” their work, regardless of their station in life. This “liking” is what the aforementioned ignorant, flippant person misunderstands and is blind to. What this person sees is another person who's content in working hard, so much so that it appears they actually like the hard work, itself. What they don't see because of their own arrogance is the joy set before the one working.

God gives a greater grace to the humble person who works heartily for Him and not for man. This grace results in contentment that is often construed as attributable either to the work, itself, or the blood and sweat it drains from them. While some work is enjoyable, much of it isn't. To write off hard work as something optional for only those who “like to work” is a complete cop out for those still missing the greater blessing that God gives.

I'll give you one more example to help drive this home. Suppose a student desires to go to a certain trade school to become a plumber. Their dream is to help pastors like myself avoid having to wrangle with rented septic snakes that spew awfulness all over them (maybe that's *my* dream? - LOL). This student doesn't like academic school work at all; but, eventually, they manage to get through the rigorous training and achieve success. Now what if another person says to them, “Oh, you're a nerd, so you work hard because you *like* to!”; is that a fair assessment?

Here's what the Bible teaches us. The “liking” part of working hard comes *after* we accept that God wants us to work hard. When we obey Him, He blesses us with a joy that transcends the work, itself. In the back of our minds, we cling to the simple fact that it's the right thing to do. The driving factor

isn't that we like to work, it's that we like the Lord.

**Liking doesn't drive the hard work; rather, the hard work drives the liking.
The prior is worldly viewpoint; the latter is godly.**

*If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge,
he must use more strength,
but wisdom helps one to succeed.*

— Ecclesiastes 10:10

Who Am I?

In the famous play, *Les Misérables*, based on the book by Victor Hugo, the lead character, Jean Valjean sings a song titled, "Who Am I?". He sings this heartfelt song as he reflects back upon his rise from the depths of slavery to social prominence, all while remembering a tremendous, life-changing act of mercy by a bishop who learned of his stealing from his church. When the authorities brought him handcuffed to the church, the bishop didn't press charges, but rather gave him even more valuables! In that moment, Jean Valjean was changed forevermore, though he never forgot where he came from. Here's an excerpt from the lyrics:

Who am I?

*Can I conceal myself for evermore?
Pretend I'm not the man I was before?
And must my name until I die
Be no more than an alibi?*

Must I lie?

*How can I ever face my fellow men?
How can I ever face myself again?
My soul belongs to God, I know
I made that bargain long ago
He gave me hope, when hope was gone
He gave me strength to journey on!*

Who am I?

— Lyrics from "Who Am I?", *Les Misérables*

I've seen the play multiple times now and each time I am moved to tears at this scene because it reminds me of how small and undeserving I am, particularly in light of the fact that from eternity past, the Holy God of the Universe *chose* to save me, electing me to eternal life. Who am I that He would show me this mercy? That single reality is the very basis for my hope in this life. Like Jean Valjean when faced with the prospect of owning up to who he truly was, I don't ever want to forget where I came from. "*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (**Romans 5:8b**). God's love for me is beyond my ability to fully grasp, even now. I'm utterly humbled by it.

*Blessed be the LORD, my rock,
who trains my hands for war,
and my fingers for battle;
he is my steadfast love and my fortress,
my stronghold and my deliverer,
my shield and he in whom I take refuge,
who subdues peoples under me.*

*O LORD, what is man that you regard him,
or the son of man that you think of him?
Man is like a breath;
his days are like a passing shadow.*

— **Psalm 144:1-4**

Life is short. If we compare a lifetime on Earth with eternal life in Heaven, our lives become less than minute. We are infinitesimally small compared to God. Yet, He decided to reach down the annals of time and pluck us from the throes of certain death and eternity in Hell. What kind of mercy is this, I ask? Who am I to receive it? On the grand stage of life, each of us is insignificant by comparison; yet, God has made us significant to Himself. As the Psalmist wrote, "*O LORD,*

what is man that you regard him? ...man is like a breath" (v3-4). The truth is humbling.

What is our significance in this life? I don't have this all figured out yet. I fear that if I say much more I might somehow rob you of the immensity of what the Spirit's trying to convey to you in this moment. I think I'll just step back now, having been used as a "[vessel] of mercy" (**Romans 9:23**) to stir your thoughts a bit. After all, how does mere man suppose he could ever adequately make those kinds of connections in the soul of another? It has to be the work of God, Himself. We call this sanctification, theologically - being made holy for the pleasure of the Holy One.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 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. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

— **Romans 12:1-3**

Who am I? The best answer is the same one that Paul gave two thousand years ago. "*But by the grace of God I am what I am*" (**1 Corinthians 15:10a**).

What say you? Who are you?

Individuality and Self-Examination

God has never created a duplicate person. We are all unique. Even so-called “identical twins” aren’t exactly the same. Why? Because, in the grand scheme of things, God has a purpose for each of us that begins with a desire to save us. As we know, not everyone that is born will be saved. This is the great divide between the wheat and the tares (**Matthew 13:30**), but it hardly ends there.

[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

— **1 Timothy 2:4**

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!

For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

— **Romans 9:14-24**

The Word of God teaches us that we are wonderfully made, that God knows us intimately and has ordained every aspect of our lives from before we were even born, down to the days of our birth and death.

*For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.
How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!*

— **Psalm 139:13-17**

Since we are unique, we need to treat ourselves as such. This means we cannot make the grave error of looking to our left or to our right for guidance. We must look up to Heaven, to our Lord, the One who saved us.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

— **Colossians 3:1-3**

Self-examination requires humility (see previous chapter titled, "Humility"). Jesus prompted those stuck in arrogance to look first at themselves before judging others, lest their viewpoint be warped from the start.

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

— **Matthew 7:5**

The greatest form of self-examination occurs within our own salvation. Each of us is required to consider our own faith to see if it is genuine.

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

— **2 Corinthians 13:5**

Believers are called to look intently at themselves in the mirror of Truth. God encourages us to do so for the sake of our own sanctification. He wants us to understand our own individuality in the context of His plan for our lives. The fruit of this labor is revelatory - we see things about ourselves that we didn't even know existed, both good and bad. Such is the glory of the Light of life in our lives; it shines into the darkness, revealing the truth, *"for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true"* (**Ephesians 5:9**).

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

— James 1:2-27

In v16, James wrote, "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers." May we never be deceived about ourselves. Amen?

Best Dressed!

In high school I was nominated for six superlatives. I remember saying to myself, "Wow, that's more than anyone else in the class!" I was pretty happy with myself at the time. I mean, who wouldn't be? You might be asking, "How do you even remember such things?" My answer is simple. Back then, such accolades really meant something to me. I'd play them off in false humility as if they didn't really mean anything, but they did - trust me - so much so that for years afterwards, when I was feeling blue or my self-esteem was low, I'd draw upon my high school reputation for a sense of reassurance that I wasn't all that bad. It's hard to forget such things, even when they are ungodly.

One of the superlatives I received was Best Dressed. To this day, my family teases me about it because my choice of clothing back then was questionable. I'm not sure how to describe what I wore, but suffice to say that I followed the trends very closely, even set some. My efforts got even more extreme when I lived in Hawaii for a few years afterwards. Looking back, I can't help but giggle; but only about the styles I wore, not the underlying motivation. The latter makes me sad.

What *was* my motivation, after all? To be totally transparent, it was to be accepted by my peers. I lacked the one thing that really would have delivered me from this bondage. I lacked Christ. I was dressed up in all of the latest fashions, using copious amounts of Dippity Do hair gel, and prancing around school grounds like a fool, all to establish my self worth among a group of people who were striving for the same things. I was king of the hill, governor of the mansion, and, oh yeah, I also received Best Personality, so I was well-liked to boot! Little did we know that I was the poster child for a type of social cancer. I know that now. Sadly, many of my classmates still don't. They are still living under the curse of what might best be called 'the law of the land,' where citizens are deemed upstanding by their adherence to an economy based on self-righteousness.

In the world, superlatives make you righteous - they add to your account. And since you are the one primarily adding to your own account, we call this *self-*

righteousness. Everyone's keeping score, you see. The more points you have to your name, the more worthy you are to hold your chin up in the company of others. Superlatives recorded in high school yearbooks memorialize our self-esteem. It's all an awful trap.

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.

— Philippians 3:1-11

I, like Paul above, denounce the superlatives I received back in high school. Is it fun to reflect on such things? I guess if we keep it superficial, then making fun of my goofy style back then is OK. However, it's not fun at all to think about the motivation behind it. Instead of dressing up for the world, I should've been dressing up for Christ, *with* Him, to be precise.

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

— Romans 13:14

The Greek word for “put on” is *enduo*, which means, “to clothe, in the sense of sinking into a garment.” In high school, I had a wardrobe at my fingertips, and an apparent sense of style that garnered a lot of attention. Today, I only have one outfit that is worth wearing. And you know what? The world doesn’t give me any more superlatives. I guess it no longer approves of my style; or shall I say, Christ’s style.

[In] reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on [enduo] the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

— **Ephesians 4:22-24**

In my basement, there’s an old jean jacket and some other duds I have kept over the years as reminders of my former self. Once in a while I sift through the rack, try on some of the items, and without fail, I laugh out loud to myself. Heck, the stuff doesn’t even fit anymore, not just physically, but most importantly, the garments don’t fit who I am anymore. Christ has changed me from the inside out. The best dressed Man of all time has given me access to His pristine wardrobe.

He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.

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 3:5,18**

I’m not sure exactly how I fare today in terms of dress, but I don’t really care like I used to. Sure, I want to look nice, but that’s just a vestige of my own flesh at work in me. I guess being presentable is the more accurate goal nowadays when

it comes to my clothing. I suppose I just don't want to make anyone else stumble - LOL. All joking aside, to be honest, if a person stumbles over my "*putting on*" Christ, then I'm good with that, for that is one of the ways by which He wakes up unbelievers to the Gospel. I'd wear anything to achieve that end.

The Best Dressed people are those who have put on Christ.

Confessing Someone Else's Sin

My wife and I had a good chuckle the other day while studying our Bibles together. Somehow, after discussing **John 1**, we ended up in **Romans 2**. That's one of the things I enjoy most about studying the Bible in groups, even if it's just two of us...you always end up meandering through the scriptures, talking open-endedly about things you hadn't set out to discuss. You could open your Bible to just about any chapter and verse and the Spirit will lead you anywhere He so desires!

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 have said to you.

— **John 14:26**

Well, on this particular day, the Holy Spirit brought us all the way from the last Gospel to the first epistle of Paul in order to point out something truly peculiar. Let me give you the passage first, and then I'll explain myself a little more.

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?

— **Romans 2:1-3**

Romans 1b presents one of *the* most poignant insights on the topic of judgement. Mind you, there is room in godly living for righteous judgment (e.g., murder is wrong and it's OK to say so - I just wanted to get that out of the way before any

guilt-ridden folks began protesting, “Don’t judge me!”). Believe it or not, Paul is actually writing about someone who discerns correctly regarding the sinfulness in others. But, he has a bone to pick (his audience was riddled with arrogance).

First, let’s establish what Paul was really saying here. He wrote, “*For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself.*” Why? Because in showing an ability to judge correctly against God’s divine law, a person establishes themselves as an expert. When a person understands the law, they are able to make sound judgements against transgressors of it (e.g., it’s wrong to lie). So, in typical Pauline fashion, the trap is set for the arrogant judge who judges not themselves. Jesus called this hypocrisy, and He despised it as much as just about anything else mentioned in the Bible. In fact, to see this all you have to do is read **Matthew 23**, where Jesus used the term “hypocrites” to rail against the scribes and Pharisees, who were famous for acting the way Paul describes in **Romans 2:1-3**.

Jesus taught His disciples (and us now) to judge rightly, for that is a good thing. We’ve been given the Word of God and a good conscience to do so. I’ll say it again, don’t ever fall for the contemporary lie that *all* judging is wrong! People who spout such lies are merely stuck in their own guilt and condemnation. It’s with proper judgement that we must hold up ourselves and others to the divine standards of God. We often fail in this endeavor, as Paul described, by holding others up to God’s standards, but not ourselves. This makes us hypocrites...and, to be honest, we *all* do it!

*Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You **hypocrite**, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye.*

— **Luke 6:41-42**

The Greek word for “confess” is *homologeō*, which means “to say the same

thing” (in context, “as God”). Why is it that we often find it so appealing to confess the sins of *others*, but not our own? Have you ever noticed this tendency in us? I have. We’re so quick to point a finger, putting others down while silently elevating ourselves, to our flesh’s delight...all while persisting in our own sin.

You might be scratching your head at this point, saying, “But there’s a tension between doctrines; on the one hand it’s good to judge matters righteously, but on the other hand, we are warned against judging others before ourselves.” I’m going to give you the key to unlocking this “paradox” (it’s not really a paradox, though - I speak as a man - God’s never confused about any of this).

The key to judging rightly is twofold. First, you must ensure you have Holy Scripture backing up your every thought. Second, you mustn’t become haughty. It’s likely we have enough of the Word of God in us to discern right from wrong in most circumstances, so that tends not to be the real issue (it’s not the one Paul wrote about in **Romans 2:1-3**, either). The issue is the second point, which is captured here:

*There are six things that the LORD hates,
seven that are an abomination to him:
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked plans,
feet that make haste to run to evil,
a false witness who breathes out lies,
and one who sows discord among brothers.*

— **Proverbs 6:16-19**

The very first mentioned sin that the Lord hates is “*haughty eyes*” (v17). These are the eyes that look down on others from a position of arrogance. The scribes and Pharisees embodied this type of evil - Jesus despised them for it.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

*And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let **him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.**"*

— **John 8:3-7**

As the story goes, the adulteress's hypocritical judges walked away when challenged by Jesus. This ought to be a visual aid to the rest of us whenever we find ourselves judging others. While it's legitimate to judge correctly, we must do so in humility. With perfect integrity, Jesus judged *both* the arrogant group and the woman, whom He said to, "go, and from now on sin no more" (**John 8:11b**). We can learn a lot from **John 8:2-11** (hint, hint).

Integrity is the key here. If we understand God's divine standards, let us judge rightly all people by them (beginning with ourselves). If we confess the sins of others, but not our own, we prove ourselves hypocrites. Jesus had harsh words for hypocrites, and for good reason. Let us confess our own sins to God and if there's ever a time when someone else's sin is before us, let us approach them with the dignity of Christ, Himself, the most humble man to ever walk this Earth.

Embracing Your God-Given Niche

“So, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Did you ever get sick of being asked that question as a youngster? I did. As an adult, in retrospect, I see it as a loaded question. What I mean is that the implications are twofold. First, at what age is it appropriate to *stop* asking someone this question? Is it insulting to ask a person this when they are beyond, say, their teen years??? Second, what if they are already satisfied with their lot in life? Does such a question imply that the need to grow up still exists? In both cases, the one asking the question is, by implication, supposing another person has some growing up to do before they become who some third party intended them to be.

So, this got me thinking...

Who are we to question another person's lot in life? If this audacity exists in us, is it fair to say that it may very well be the cause of our own insecurities? Are we anxious about our own success, or perceived lack thereof? I guess what I'm saying is that the older I get, the less I like the opening question. However, instead of just throwing stones, allow me to propose a solution.

Find the niche God intended for you and be happy. Be satisfied.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing.

— **Philippians 2:14**

Tah-dah!!!

It's really *that* simple as far as the Word of Truth is concerned. The Bible tells us that God has created each one of us unique. Since God never makes mistakes, knowing that we are “*wonderfully made*” (**Psalm 139:14**) means we can rest assured that, regardless of our talents, God is pleased as long as we're grateful for whatever grace we've been shown.

In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:18

Sadly, this is a complete change in perspective for many believers. It begins with recognizing that God has made each of us just the way He wanted. Regardless of what others may think or say about us, we must cling to this fact. Our peace depends upon it; for if we adopt what others think about us as true, we are now in bondage to their opinion. No one should have that power over us (except God, of course, since His opinion is the only one that matters).

Self-esteem is never really a function of what others think (well, it shouldn't be). Heck, the word "self" is contained in the expression, implying we are the de facto person involved in esteeming ourselves, not others. As long as we agree with the Lord's assessment (e.g., we are "*wonderfully made*"), then we abide in peace. It isn't until we are duped into allowing others to have influence over our self-esteem that we suffer.

Let's take this one step further...

We humans have a propensity for tying our self-esteem to our niche in life. Some cultures, like in Hindu society, maintain a structured caste system, which is described by Google as classes "*distinguished by relative degrees of ritual purity or pollution and of social status.*" I've been to India multiple times in my life and the effects of the caste system are pervasive. I'm not picking on the Hindus, just making a point that man's flesh always tends towards social stratification.

Again, such things are counter to God's will for His creatures. Indeed, He has made us all different. However, the righteous response is to embrace each other, for we each have a unique purpose!

Diversity is one of God's greatest gifts. Yet, man, in his flesh, has managed to pervert it, making it a cause for stumbling rather than celebration!

I'll give you a good example of accepting one's God-given niche. Until God says

to me (He likely won't ever) that He wants me to be a billionaire, I don't want to be. Sure, we all fantasize about what we'd do with all that money, but the truth is that without God's blessing, it's a curse! I really enjoy *not* being cursed - LOL! In this sense, I like my God-given niche just the way it is! I don't want to ruin the peace I have by longing after something the world might call a "blessing" but my God calls a "curse."

This is all well and good, but *accepting* it requires a little something called faith.

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.

...

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;

...

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.

— **Romans 12:3, 6, 9-10**

OK, let me make my point here...

God gives each of us just the right amount of talent to function in whatever niche He has created for us. We are "*wonderfully made*" to enjoy a life of peace, but it very much depends upon our acceptance of who we are. For example, some of us have been given tremendous faith to face rejection through evangelism and never lose heart. Others may see people suffering and, without fail, lend a helping hand. Still others may exercise spiritual gifts that some might even question as being a blessing at all. To each their own!

If we abide in God's viewpoint, we have the same love He has toward His children. Does He love one child more than the next simply because society esteems one social class over another? May it never be - "*Let love be without*

hypocrisy” (v9)! In fact, we are called to pursue unity in the Body of Christ, embracing diversity, for this is God’s will.

Those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

— 1 Corinthians 12:23-25

Let’s consider the practical side of this now. Over- and under-achievement take on a whole new meaning once we embrace diversity through a divine lens. We no longer strive to elevate and/or separate from our peers, but rather we strive for grace (reminds me of the song *By Your Side* by Tenth Avenue North). We strive for love void of hypocrisy, which means to accept ourselves as well as others as they are, in Christ. We begin by understanding that God has placed us into a life where success brings glory to Him, and this is accomplished “*according to the proportion [of] faith*” He’s chosen to give us, as individuals. Therefore, something like over-achievement (stepping outside of one’s niche) becomes an aberration, not something to be celebrated.

We rightly posit that success in God’s eyes is identifying with and then living in our own niche. If our self-esteem is influenced by anything, it ought to include the proximity of our lives to that which God has willed for us. To whatever degree we’ve wandered from this reality, it is to that same degree that we lose peace.

Embrace diversity knowing that you are an elemental component of it. Without you being “you,” and others failing similarly, where does this leave diversity, for diversity’s sake? Find your niche and find your peace!

What do I want to be when I grow up? Pleasing to the One who created me and gave me this beautifully unique life to live.

Identity Politics and Sports Fandom, Too?

Politics make people crazy. Instead of respecting one another's opinions, people take things personally, as if a different opinion is a direct attack against one's character. Why are people so darn sensitive all the time? Whatever happened to respecting the fact that people have different opinions? It's one of the things that supposedly (by design, anyway) makes a democracy like America serve its citizens well.

One observation is that due to the fact that most people in this country are lazy thinkers, they remain ignorant about the topics they choose to fight about. One of the strangest phenomenons is that people spend more energy defending their borrowed beliefs than actually maturing their own through education.

If people spent more time learning and less time disrespecting the opinions of others, maybe, just maybe, our beloved American democracy would function a little better than it has been. Instead, the average citizen is relegated to dependence upon others to do their thinking for them. This dependence implies an abandonment of personal convictions. Why? Laziness. The result is opposing groups of people ganging together, wielding torches and pitch forks (figuratively speaking, of course), casting truly denigrating aspersions at each other...but for what reason?

The whole idea of a democracy is that voting takes into account an *individual's private opinions*. This is a basic tenet. Yet, most citizens form their opinions through emotional ties to social groups. We call this "identity politics." It undermines the premise of democracy.

Identity politics are political positions based on the interests and perspectives of social groups with which people identify. Identity politics includes the ways in which people's politics are shaped by aspects of their identity through loosely correlated social organizations. Examples include social organizations based on age, religion, social class or caste, culture, dialect, disability, education, ethnicity, language, nationality, sex, gender identity, generation, occupation, profession,

race, political party affiliation, sexual orientation, settlement, urban and rural habitation, and veteran status.

— Wikipedia

I have to ask, “Why do identity politics even exist? Why are people so ready to abandon their own convictions in favor of adopting surrogate convictions held by some social group or organization? Is there an underlying issue worth considering?”

Before I give some Holy Scripture on this, I need to address the second half of this blog title...“identity sports fandom.”

Have you ever been watching a sporting event and things get out of hand? Maybe it’s just a little personal jab here or there, or maybe it escalates into something terrible, where friendships are damaged. The question remains on the table, “Why does this happen?” Case in point, I recently was watching a game where the team I was rooting for was entrenched in battle with the more commonly rooted for team (I live in New England, so you can draw your own conclusions - wink, wink). My team was well behind, but trying to make a comeback, and I received a text saying, “This is your moment right now!” My response was, “Not mine...but [insert name of team]’s :)”

“My team” lost at the buzzer that night, but who cares? I care more about the “identity fandom” that I had encountered. All I could think about was how engrained, and therefore natural, it was for this other person to assign my self-worth to the success of a professional sports team. In that perverse moment, it wasn’t about two teams, it had become personal (at least for the person texting me). I wonder if they would’ve texted me had “my team” been in the lead.

OK, so let me get to my point on all of this...

Identity politics, and likewise identity sports fandom, are merely symptoms. The base issue is that people aren’t confident enough to stand on their own convictions. Why? Because they have placed their self-esteem in group thinking, like a mob does when they riot. During heightened moments of conflict, instead

of buckling down into their own convictions, they seek reinforcement from the group. Now, if a group happens to consist of truly like-minded, educated individuals who arrived at their own opinions prior to agreeing with others (**Acts 17:11**), therefore becoming active members of said group, that's great! However, if a person identifies with and, therefore defends, that which they do not understand, they prove themselves a liability to the group, themselves, as well as to the "rules of the game."

What are the "rules of the game," biblically speaking? Simply put, God desires each of us to form our *own convictions*. I have preached this tirelessly from my pulpit over the years. I'd rather have a well-educated individual disagree with me than argue with someone who's merely defending a religious organization for reputation's sake alone (aka because of "identity religion"). I can respect a person who's taken the time to read the Bible in earnest, but the "identity" phenomenon is truly grotesque.

The solution, whether we're discussing politics, sports, and/or religion is simple. We need to encourage people to arrive at their own convictions through personal education. No one is responsible for this but the individual, themselves. This is how God has designed it, so we ought to respect, not judge or cast aspersions, at those whose opinions differ.

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.

One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks

to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

— Romans 14:1-8

I really want you to know that this blog is not about politics or sports. As I mentioned earlier, it's the phenomenon regarding the "identities" that people assume within the sphere of these battlegrounds that is my point of focus. I believe it's wonderful when individuals arrive at a common ground after heartfelt, earnest discovery has taken place, resulting in personal conviction - isn't that the very nature of Christ's Body, the Church? Indeed. However, this tendency to depend on the convictions of others is garbage, and it proves the underlying slothfulness of the human flesh. Nothing good ever comes from the flesh, *"Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above"* (James 1:17a).

Learn to have and encourage education in every realm of life, especially when it comes to Holy Scripture. Your personal convictions and, therefore your "vote," count in this world; for God, Himself, has given this right to you. If you really want to be specific, He's actually *commanded* this.

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

Lies Produce the Opposite Of Advertised Results

I recently told someone that my favorite pastime is learning. It doesn't really matter what the subject is, just that I have the opportunity to learn something new. To me, knowledge is the most wonderful commodity of all (along with its mature cousin, wisdom, of course); and, for the most part, it's totally free! If a person desires to learn something new, there's *always* an opportunity. Heck, my second favorite subject (after God) is people, so I spend a lot of my time learning about others. How hard is it to ask someone how their day is going? When they answer, you know what process just occurred? You learned! Seeking knowledge and understanding, really, is the simplest thing of all.

Why learn in the first place? I mean, is it just something you do like needlepoint or playing solitaire to pass the time away, or are there real benefits? Well, if we are to generalize said benefits, we might say that learning leads us to truth. At the end of the day, it's truth that sets us free, so says Jesus, Himself (**John 8:32**). We can conclude then that wisdom and understanding are the basis for freedom.

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever!*

— Psalm 111:10

*To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,
to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;
to give prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth—
Let the wise hear and increase in learning,*

*and the one who understands obtain guidance,
to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles.*

— Proverbs 1:2-6

*For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.*

— Proverbs 2:6

Who doesn't want to be free, I ask? When I learned the answer to this question years ago, I was stunned to find out that humans often prefer bondage to lies over freedom in truth! You might ask, why would they ever choose to live in lies rather than truth? Let me describe the malady this way: a lie is a lie because it diverges from the truth at some point in what it *proposes* to be true (that's the very nature of a lie, it is easily thought of as a counterfeit to truth). So, when a person is living in a lie, they often *believe* they are living in the truth. This is why Jesus made monumental statements like:

For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit.

— Luke 6:43-44

Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

— Matthew 7:20

Have you ever seen a person being transferred from one prison to another? I recently was on a cross country flight where three armed Marshals were transporting a prisoner. The situation was obvious due to the plain cotton clothes and the hand, waist, and foot shackles worn by the prisoner. Suffice to say that this man was clearly in bondage to his chains. Jesus stated on several occasions

that we would also be able to see such analogs in the spiritual realm. Once you know the truth, having been delivered unto freedom, you have a clearer perspective to discern the bondage that besets others.

Knitting this together now...

The Word of Truth encourages us to learn from it and enjoy the wisdom that it produces. As we do this, we begin to see God's good intention for us. It's truly a beautiful thing to behold. To learn something as primitive to the spiritual life as 'there is freedom in truth' is indeed priceless.

Here's the crux of this blog: the Truth is self-authenticating. This means that truth promises to validate itself by its own fruit. That is the way God designed it and Jesus described it. We ought to make it a habit to examine the fruit of whatever we believe to be true. It's never enough to cling to doctrine for the sake of clinging to something (the reasoning being that it's better to cling to something, even if errant, than nothing at all). We must cling to the *truth*. The Bible says there is a massive difference. If there are inconsistencies between what we believe and our own fruit, something isn't right, because God's not in the business of trying to confuse us!

For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints.

— 1 Corinthians 14:33

How confusing is it for the person who's living in a lie (but believes they are living in the truth) when their fruit is bondage? How confusing is it for the person whose religion oppresses them? How confused is the person who prays to a god that never answers, never fulfills its promises, never assures them of their faith? Contrarily, how encouraging is it for the person whose truth sets them free? How validating is it when their changed heart desires to reach out to the needy, that being their religion (ala **James 1:27**)? How secure is the person

whose God makes good on all of His promises?

Lies entice people into adopting them on the premise that they will deliver the same fruit as the actual truth. Their “oxygen” is deceit. Lies always produce the opposite of the results they advertise. Just ask the person who bought the lie that sex outside of marriage is good as long as it feels right or is somehow coupled to some expressed form of love (if that’s even the appropriate word - it’s most likely lust). Ask the person who’s in spiritual ruin because they bought the lies of false religion. Ask anyone, for that matter, who festers in chains and bondage. What’s the issue? They lack truth.

Truth is the only reality that delivers on its promises. It is self-authenticating. All we have to do is look at our fruit and discern whether or not the fruit confirms what we believe to be true. If our “truth” fails this simple test, the first thing we need to do is open up our Bibles and begin seeking. Jesus spoke a parable for our encouragement:

And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything’?

I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell 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 the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly

Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

— Luke 11:5-13

Pursue the truth at all costs, for it is the key to your freedom! If you find your fruit is bad, then read your Bible and get to praying. Never be afraid to step back and evaluate the estate of your peace and contentment in this life. Lies will make promises they cannot keep - you will forfeit the very thing you seek if you cling to them. Only truth will set you free!

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

— James 1:5

Looking In the Mirror

Most people spend a fair amount of time in front of a mirror each day, especially in the morning. Unless you're a spy or an automotive mechanic who's trying to peer around corners, you typically look in a mirror to examine yourself. You are front and center. Some of us also spend time in front of the mirror in the spiritual sense while reading our Bibles. This, too, is a good morning habit. The mirror, then, has great utility in both the literal and figurative senses.

The Bible speaks often about the value of self-examination; hence, the mirror analogy in teaching myriad holy doctrines. For example:

On the topic of the Lord's Supper:

*But a man must **examine** himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.*

— 1 Corinthians 11:28-29

On the topic of salvation:

*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

On the topic of self-deception:

*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

On the topic of seeing what God sees in us:

*For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who **examines** our hearts.*

— 1 Thessalonians 2:3-4

On the topic of purpose:

*But **examine** everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good.*

— 1 Thessalonians 5:21

The Bible certainly prescribes “looking in the mirror” as the means of examining ourselves, with the intention of being sanctified experientially by grace through faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. We must stand in front of said mirror with humility. “*GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE*” (1 Peter 5:5). There’s a primitive snag to this good work, though.

It’s easy for us to become *preoccupied* with the person in the mirror. Fair enough? As is often the case with a literal mirror, we become distracted by our own beauty (however one defines it for themselves), even though we had no part in putting it there. We stare at our faces, our hair, our bodies, our clothing, etc. Why? We’re always looking for reasons to idolize ourselves. We don’t *always* do this, of course, but we do it enough that it becomes an area of weakness, a pitfall of sorts. The Bible refers to this kind of self-adulation as vanity. It’s obvious in the literal sense, but it takes a little digging to identify our vanity in the figurative sense.

We see all the good work that God has accomplished in us, just as He has promised, “*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**), and we inevitably fall into the pit. Ugh. The pattern we see in the literal sense becomes the one we realize in the figurative/spiritual sense.

We tend to focus too long on ourselves. We are vain, by nature.

The Bible instructs us to the contrary.

*Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 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 2:1-4**

The purpose of “looking in the mirror” is to examine ourselves (more accurately, to allow the Word of God to reveal to us the truth about ourselves) for the sake of sanctification, admiring all that God has done in us. If we look at the image in the mirror with the intent of seeing Christ, we are blessed. If we’re in an idolatrous mood, we focus on ourselves too long, at the expense of clear Biblical instruction to “*regard one another as more important than [ourselves]*” (v3). God is not glorified by this behavior.

So here’s my suggestion, and I’ll do my best to put it into visual form. Imagine looking into the mirror and, instead of focusing solely on yourself the whole time, you look over your shoulder, where the rest of the people are. If the mirror is God’s perspective (what God sees when He looks at you and your life), then there are a lot of other people He sees in your periphery - others that you, too,

could see if you stopped focusing so much on yourself. Are any of them sad or in need? How would you know if all you ever see in the mirror is yourself? Is it possible that your preoccupation with your own beauty has distracted you from your servitude towards others? Has God sanctified you for the purpose of your own adoration or for the purpose of loving others? *“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).*

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 6:10

But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

— 1 Timothy 5:8

When we look in a mirror, we see what God sees. The stumbling block for us is that when we hold it up, we are, by default, front and center. Might we do well to consistently tilt the mirror so that we are no longer in frame, transitioning our focus on what we see in ourselves to what God sees in others? Is it possible that in doing so your perspective becomes His? Isn't this the whole point of living for others...that we do so in accordance with God's will?

We are quite often our own worst distraction. When asked to think about a mirror, even in a figurative sense, we habitually think about beauty and presentation, attributes that often hardly stretch beyond mere superficialities. We can learn an awful lot from a mirror; however, humility is the key to unlocking our education.

Two Kinds Of Practicing Believers

I was thinking about the individuals in my congregation the other day and something occurred to me. Some of them are growing like weeds while others are stunted. Being the loving pastor that I am (I'm being serious), I began to ponder why this is so. I'd like to share my thoughts with you and then back them up with a little scripture.

First, let me say that I adore my congregation, every person in it. So this blog isn't meant to call out certain people, for better or for worse. It's simply me sharing an observation, and I'm going to oversimplify for the sake of brevity. With that said, here we go...

There are two kinds of practicing believers. Ultimately, we can tell which category a person falls into based on their rate of spiritual growth. Humility is the key. It always is. The first type of believer is what I'll dub "the doer", the second type is what I'll call "the hearer." Of course, I'm borrowing from Jesus' brother, James.

*But prove yourselves **doers** of the word, and not merely **hearers** who delude themselves. 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.*

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 1:22-25

The "doer", as James describes him or her, is the person who comes to church and actually takes all that they hear to heart and prayerfully, in humility, receives the Word implanted, setting aside their ever-looming flesh, giving way to the Holy Spirit. The results are wonderfully seen, as Paul described it.

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 2:21-22

The “doer” is the person who not only allows the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit to take root, but also confesses their weaknesses and exhibits a heartfelt desire to be pleasing to the Lord. They might receive a Sunday morning message so deeply that their immediate inclination is to go home, open up their Bible, and do as the Bereans did, “*Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so*” (Acts 17:11). I know for a fact that there exists a number of individuals in my congregation who exhibit this kind of thirst for truth. However, not all are like this, even among believers.

The “hearer” is the person who walks away from a convicting pulpit message and responds by simply leaving said conviction *inside* the four walls of the church. In other words, this is as far as they allow the conviction to take them. Strangely, they may even be the ones talking it up with other congregants afterwards over a snack or coffee, sharing how wonderful they thought the message was. Yet, when they go home, the last thing they are inclined to do is open up their Bible.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification.

— 1 Thessalonians 4:3a

God’s greatest desire is that His children be sanctified. To be sanctified means to be set apart for His special purposes, to be holy, “*because it is written, “YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY”* (1 Peter 1:16). In humility before God, the “doer” abides in this; however, the “hearer” merely understands it (if at all), but never really takes the steps necessary to see it through. This is why there is such a distinction in spiritual growth among practicing believers. Some of them are *all in*, while others simply aren’t. The prior are showcases for God’s grace, while the latter are setting themselves up to be walking proverbs.

But it shall come about, if you do not obey the LORD your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you...

You shall become a horror, a proverb, and a taunt among all the people where the LORD drives you.

— **Deuteronomy 28:15, 37**

My prayer is that everyone becomes a “doer” in time. It pains me to think about the delusions most “hearers” live under. Granted, such things are self-induced (frankly, they reap what they sow), but it doesn’t mean I can’t possess a real hope for them, because I do. Call it a shepherd’s heart. Whatever the cause, I’ve spent many a day hoping and praying that the “hearers” in my congregation join the “doers,” and sooner rather than later, for their own good. In fact, I’m often heard preaching about such things.

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**

Whenever the Spirit uses my pulpit to deliver convicting messages, my hope is that conviction turns into action, and action into righteous fruit that brings glory to God. We’re all practicing Christians, by definition...and as they say, “practice makes perfect,” right?...so, we might as well practice what we preach. Rejoicing over conviction is good, but it mustn’t die on the vine; rather, the objective is to bear fruit, that is, to grow.

Peter was very astute in the way he described our time here on earth and the opportunities we have to be “doers” rather than “merely hearers.” I’ll close with the following:

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.

Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins.

Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

— 2 Peter 1:2-11

What Is A Good Name?

*A good name is to be more desired than great wealth,
Favor is better than silver and gold.
The rich and the poor have a common bond,
The LORD is the maker of them all.*

— Proverbs 22:1-2

What *is* a good name? That's a big question, isn't it? What is good, after all, and who gets to define it? That's the name of a series I taught from my pulpit not so long ago. What we learned was that God is good. Man, on his own, is not and must be stripped of the latter notion and given wisdom to know the prior. Such is sanctification in Christ's good name.

May we propose that a good name is a name which others deem acceptable? Is this a good enough definition? What about if the people defining good are evil? *"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" (Isaiah 5:20)!* The Bible clearly states, through a multitude of passages, that unregenerate man is inherently evil, *"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" (Romans 6:6)*. We also know from Holy Scripture that evil man assures himself, and others, that evil is actually good.

If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.

— John 15:19

We may rightly conclude that since the unregenerate world is evil, and since it loves its own, that it will supplant godliness (God's version of good) with evil and simply call it "good". In other words, everything is backwards. This means that a "good name" by world standards is actually not necessarily a good name by God's. Even if you're the most likable person on the planet, it means

absolutely nothing. Consider Jesus. He was perfect in His incarnation and most people despised Him to the point of murder. So, we might add that likability has nothing to do with having a good name by God's standards.

A perfect example of a person with the wisdom to know such things is Moses.

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.

— **Hebrews 11:23-27**

Moses epitomized a person in possession of a good name (ala **Proverbs 22:1**). He went so far as to reject a name that would've carried great power and prestige with it, namely "*the son of Pharaoh's daughter.*" He "[considered] *the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt.*" That is the very essence of a Biblically good name - it is wholly dependent upon faith in the name of Christ (hence our being called "Christ-ians").

A good name stands in stark contrast to those whom the world esteems. I believe many Christians have lost sight of this and need to be taught the truth of the matter. While the Bible says, "*If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men*" (**Romans 12:18**), it doesn't ever equate said "*peace*" with compatibility, likability, or friendship with the world. In fact, it warns us of something very different.

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**

The Word doesn't want us believers to be confused about any of this. We mustn't allow the world to define "good" for us, for it will always mislead us, keeping us in bondage to sin. If we suffer for having a good name by God's standards, then so be it. *"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 3:17). Standing up for what we know to be right is foundational to a good name. Let us do that, minimally, and let the chips fall where they may.

Integrity and Obedience

Integrity and obedience are sister concepts in the Bible. Integrity implies a certain adherence to what is held as true. Obedience is the fruit of this. In other words, we might summarize the relationship as follows: a person of integrity walks in obedience to the Lord. To know the truth and walk in it defines the person of integrity. This person is compelled by their own good conscience to obey the commands from the Spirit of Christ, *“having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame”* (1 Peter 3:16). A person who lacks integrity is, by nature, disobedient.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

— Romans 8:5-8

The standard for integrity is Christ. *“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’”* (John 14:6). Jesus said, *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments”* (John 14:15).

*Whoever walks in integrity walks securely,
but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out.*

— Proverbs 10:9

*The integrity of the upright guides them,
but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.*

— Proverbs 11:3

*Better is a poor person who walks in his integrity
than one who is crooked in speech and is a fool.*

— **Proverbs 19:1**

*Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity
than a rich man who is crooked in his ways.*

— **Proverbs 28:6**

It's often said that integrity is doing the right thing when no one is watching. That's a pretty good test of our own proclamations regarding our own integrity. Do we obey God's will when no one is there to keep us honest? Arguably, one of the greatest tests of our integrity is regarding money. *"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs"* (**1 Timothy 6:10**). We can tell a lot about ourselves by the manner in which we make and spend our money.

"One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much." If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

— **Luke 16:10-13**

Thankfully, we aren't expected to have complete integrity upon the moment of our salvation. We have to learn the truth before we can abide in it. As we learn, we are sanctified to whatever degree we do so in humility. This takes time. We are not made holy overnight.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

— **1 Peter 1:14-16**

Holiness implies integrity and obedience to the Word of Truth. This is what holiness looks like:

Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

— **1 John 3:24**

Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

— **John 8:51**

The Beauty of Submission

Obedience is the fruit of submission; the former being the action, the latter the motivation. To understand the absence of obedience requires an honest interrogation of one's submissiveness to the Lord.

I fear most Christians do not understand what Biblical submission is and, as a result, they suffer unnecessarily in darkness. Jesus said, *"and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* (**John 8:32**). Let us cling to this fundamental Truth, always, for it is among the greatest targets set upon by the kingdom of darkness. *"For the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true"* (**Ephesians 5:9**). Given the nature of our relationship to the Lord - we are His servants - submission must be understood in order for us to enjoy the freedom, the very life, that Christ purchased for us, *"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery"* (**Galatians 5:1**).

The Lord desires that we abide in submission the same way we abide in love and forgiveness. These are not merely transactional artifacts that God bestows upon us whenever we do this or that; these are embodiments of His own virtues that we are meant to possess. In other words, to say we may only enjoy love when it is shown to us is to shortchange love in an infinite way. To say that forgiveness may only be realized through an act of mercy is yet another grave error we temporally-minded creatures often make. Love and forgiveness are a part of the sphere of God - they are ever-present and transcendent, not transactional. Submission is the same. We find our proof in Jesus Christ, Himself, who is both God and man. *"But I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father."* (**John 14:31a**).

Jesus is the ultimate example of a life lived impeccably inside the sphere of God. *"In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"* (**John 1:4-5**). His life on Earth revealed to

mankind the fruit of abiding in Truth. For the sake of this blog, let us remember that He was perfectly submissive and, therefore, obedient to His Father, “*he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (**Philippians 2:8b**). He was also blessed beyond measure even though He was routinely abused, mistreated, and even unloved. Again, He is our prototype. He said so Himself.

Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.

— **John 14:21**

Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him.

— **1 John 3:24a**

But he said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”

— **Luke 11:28**

If we sum up Jesus’ life and counsel, we rightly conclude that keeping His Word (e.g., submit, obey, love, etc.) results in blessings. Freedom and peace immediately come to mind, but you can tally up as many blessings as your little heart desires! The point is that to whatever degree we reject the Biblical concept of submission, to that same degree we eject ourselves from the sphere of God, experientially, which is tantamount to saying that we miss out on the aforementioned blessings. **Psalms 119** is a wonderful read on this topic. Here are a few highlights:

*Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD!
Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
who seek him with their whole heart,*

*who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways!
You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.*

— Psalm 119:1-4

*It is good for me that I was afflicted,
that I might learn your statutes.*

— Psalm 119:71

*I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous,
and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.
Let your steadfast love comfort me
according to your promise to your servant.*

— Psalm 119:75-76

*If your law had not been my delight,
I would have perished in my affliction.
I will never forget your precepts,
for by them you have given me life.*

— Psalm 119:92-93

*I hate the double-minded,
but I love your law.
You are my hiding place and my shield;
I hope in your word.*

— Psalm 119:113-114

*You spurn all who go astray from your statutes,
for their cunning is in vain.*

*All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross,
therefore I love your testimonies.
My flesh trembles for fear of you,
and I am afraid of your judgments.*

— **Psalm 119:118-120**

*Your testimonies are righteous forever;
give me understanding that I may live.*

— **Psalm 119:144**

*The sum of your word is truth,
and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.*

— **Psalm 119:160**

*Great peace have those who love your law;
nothing can make them stumble.*

— **Psalm 119:165**

Believe it or not, all of that information was necessary to get you in the right frame of mind to digest what I'm now about to write. It's critically important that you understand that when it comes to obeying God's commands, it's the *motivation* that counts (your level of submissiveness), not the transactional nature of obedience. This is the truth that will ultimately set you free. Merely following rules never results in true freedom or the life the writer of **Psalm 119** referred to in **v144**. Allow me to reiterate:

Obedience is the fruit of submission; the former being the action, the latter the motivation.

Love and submission are intrinsically bound in the life, the Light, of Christ. In

Him, also, are all things good, all blessings. Therefore, we are given certain guidance:

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

*Therefore do not be foolish, but **understand what the will of the Lord is.***

*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.***

***Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.** For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*

— **Ephesians 5:15-24**

There is a four-part progression here that I'll summarize for you. "*Look carefully how you walk*" (v15) piques our attention, warning us there are pitfalls in life. In order to avoid them, we must "*understand what the will of the Lord is*" (v17). The Lord's will is that we "*[submit] to one another out of reverence for Christ*" (v21); this being the guiding principle for living with other believers. Finally, we are given an example, "*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord*" (v22). I'd like to focus your attention on the last two quotes because this is where I believe most Christians veer off course.

Submission never implies inferiority (Jesus Christ submits to His Father, yet they are co-equal). Submission glorifies God. Remember that. When believers

submit to one another, we are revealing the fruit of the Spirit, being “filled” with Him (v18). When we abide in this godly submissiveness, we perform acts of obedience, which pleases the Lord.

Arguably, one of the most hotly contested verses in the Bible is v22. At this point, I believe the Spirit’s been given enough ammunition to make His point with you; but, just in case you need a little more help, I’ll give you two points to ponder. First, wives are commanded to submit to their husbands. This is something they are to do out of love, not under the compulsion of the husband. Some Christian husbands I’ve met do not understand this; rather, they impose an iron rule in the home, contorting the beauty of submission, which is a God-given right granted to their wives. This is precisely how resentment grows and festers, which isn’t beautiful at all. Second, is the unique direction of the wife’s submissive intent - notice that the husband is the woman’s possession in v22, “*Wives, submit to your own husbands.*” The Greek word translated “*own*” is much stronger than the simple possessive pronoun “*own*”; it means uniquely one’s own, private, personal. A wife submits to her husband, not because *he* is necessarily worthy (only one Husband is, Jesus), but because Christ is worthy and He has commanded she do so. So, this hotly contested verse, though often used as an ironclad weapon of choice by weak men who try to dominate their wives, really isn’t about the husband at all; it’s about the love a woman has for her Lord and Savior spilling over into the lap of an unworthy man. This is what makes it beautiful.

Submission is something that exists prior to any outward manifestation of obedience, as fruit. In fact, it is something God desires for us as a source of blessing. The true beauty of submission is also reserved for, and revealed through, our relationship with God. Others may benefit from our submissiveness from time to time; however, *we* are the ones truly blessed by abiding in it. Commandments to submit and therefore obey are never meant to be used as weapons by others.

Submission is ugly if it has to be whipped into existence. Willingness is what makes it beautiful.

The beauty of submission is that it is a privilege of ours to abide in, bringing glory to God. It also reveals our love for our Lord. With Christ's perspective on the matter, we are set free.

Church Ordinances

People seeking the truth are looking for facts. In a “perfect world” (I write as a man) that would reward all of our fact-seeking efforts, any time we had a question about something, we could simply open our Bibles (maybe go to the back where someone has painstakingly organized doctrines by category or has included an abridged concordance of sorts), look up the topic in question, find the page(s) in Holy Scripture, read the passage(s), and discover our sought after answer. This “perfect world” doesn’t exist. As thick and informative as the Bible is, it varies greatly in its disclosure of God’s will. There are some doctrines, like soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), that are baseline primitives for all other doctrines so there is much said on those topics, specifically. However, to our human consternation, not all topics we encounter in our lives are described in such detail.

Where does this leave us? I mean, how can a well-intentioned believer live a life that is glorifying to God when there exists little or no specific guidance in particular areas of living? An honest believer certainly understands the import of walking in a manner worthy of the Lord; holy writ is clear on this.

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

— **Ephesians 5:15-17**

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.

— Colossians 1:9b-10

The point of tension I'm presenting in this blog exists between specific commands to obey the Lord, for that is what pleases Him, and any lack of specificity when a situation arises requiring particular obedience. Has the Lord God commanded us to perform a duty in the absence of the grace provision to do so? May it never be! Since all things are accomplished by His grace (ala **Ephesians 2:8-9**), a confused person might be missing something vital (and they are). Let's take a specific example now. I'll call it "church ordinances," which for our purposes here refers to the manner a church leadership team governs and administers the local congregation of believers. In lay terms a person may refer to these details as, "The way we do things here" or "Our bylaws say this or that."

What does the Bible have to say about church ordinances? Frankly, not a whole lot. Should this be disconcerting to a believer earnestly seeking to do the will of God? Not at all. In fact, with the right perspective, this same person may consider it a test of faith. I think we sometimes lose sight of how simple faith is.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

— Hebrews 11:1

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 4:18

For we walk by faith, not by sight.

— 2 Corinthians 5:7

So, in the case of church ordinances (one of those areas where specificity is

limited as far as the Bible is concerned), we must then turn to the doctrine of authority-orientation. In other words, if the Bible doesn't specifically lay out the details of how a local assembly is to be run, the authority lies in the hands of the leadership team, which is headed up by the pastor(s). Members of the congregation are commanded to submit to the authority of these leaders (**Romans 13:1; Hebrews 13:7**). This means that faith in God, specifically His choice of leadership, becomes the primary concern of the sheep. As I've told my own congregation regularly over the years, if you don't have faith in me and my delegated authorities (e.g., the deacons), then you need to go find a church that you *can* have faith in - otherwise, simply submit. "*Do all things without grumbling or disputing*" (**Philippians 2:14**).

Too many Christians concern themselves with church ordinances (some place higher value on this than seeking a good pastor): details like how many pastors lead a congregation, how many deacons there should be, what days of the week should Bible studies be held, how many times a month should we celebrate the Lord's supper, or how many times a year should we schedule baptisms (if scheduling is even the right approach at all versus ad hoc). None of these everyday issues are disclosed specifically in the Bible, leaving such choices up to the leadership team that God has ordained in place.

The key question for any church-goer is, "Did God, Himself, ordain this man as a shepherd?" If/when the Holy Spirit answers in the affirmative, obedience becomes the primary concern.

As a leader, I know from Holy Scripture (and also from experience, after a decade in full-time ministry) that there will always be those who spend inordinate amounts of time picking, grumbling, and stirring up doubt, but it's nothing more than a lack of faith in the Lord God they are showing. Sadly, these are the ones I see as the most miserable in the church. Why? Simply put, it's because they are disoriented to the will of the Lord, concerning themselves with duties not assigned to them instead of simply submitting to the delegated authority in the

church. Does this mean a person can never bring up a concern or make a suggestion to leadership? Not at all - those lines of communication should always be open. In the case of my own church, congregants are asked to follow the "chain of command," going to the deacons first (except for sensitive personal issues that only a pastor would be privy to). This helps tremendously and it also reveals to me that whoever honors the chain of command is showing their faith in those subordinates of mine (e.g., the deacons). Members who disregard my deacons and register complaints and/or concerns directly with me have broken the ordained chain of command, revealing a lack of faith. I will typically inform them of both of these truths. A humble sheep always responds with, "Oops, sorry!" while an arrogant one responds with, "But..."

I know this may seem like a roundabout way of making my point, but church ordinance is a good "stick in the mud" representative of other topics dealt with in the Bible because of all the unspecified aspects of it (e.g., minimum age for baptism, age ranges for prep school, salaries, church expenses, fund-raisers, etc.). The issue is never, "Oh, let me see if I agree with divinely ordained authority... and if I do, *then* I'll obey." The correct attitude is, "God ordained this authority in my life for *my* good. I may not always understand where his decisions are coming from, but I will honor God with my obedience." Do you see the difference in perspective here? The prior is concerned with self, the latter with the Lord. The prior lacks faith, the latter trusts the Lord (and His delegates). The prior is a potential stumbling block to others (including leadership), the latter is encouraging. Above all other considerations, the prior shows a greater love for self than for others, for in the grand scheme of things, God knows best and *He* is the one who ordains all authority on Earth, especially those leading His flock.

Learn to obey for obedience's sake. This is what pleases the Lord, your Master. If you ever find the dastardly emotion of malcontent percolating up from your flesh, step back, take a deep breath, and remember that God chooses wisely, for *your* benefit. His decisions include those in church leadership who choose on His behalf the kinds of church ordinances which are best for their congregation. Do

not take the bait from weaker individuals, taking issue with authority - that temptation is very appealing to the rebellious human flesh. Whichever church ordinances are in place in your church, thank God for His grace in putting them there. Sow this attitude and reap your peace. Oh, and by the way, your leadership team will be very grateful, maybe even inspired by you! Have a little faith and enjoy the fruit of it.

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

— Hebrews 11:6

The Cold Shell Of Obedience

There are two kinds of obedience: that which is done in love and that which is not. The litmus test is how we treat others. If our obedience forms an impenetrable outer crust, we have failed. If our obedience is a light that guides the way for the lost and the weak, then we have succeeded.

Throughout the Bible, God makes mention of the above distinction. Some have missed the point completely and remained alienated from their Creator, even died and been judged to an eternity in the Lake of Fire. Others have embraced God's wisdom and lived incredibly fulfilling lives, knowing the truth that set them free. Love. God is love. *"We love because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19).

To unfaithful Israel, the Lord God said:

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

— Hosea 6:6

To the Pharisees of His time, Jesus said:

"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 9:13

"But if you had known what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,' you would not have condemned the innocent."

— Matthew 12:7

Sacrifices in the Bible are results of, not causes of, spiritual wisdom. When man

inverts this truth he disorients himself from God's good intention. We must be careful not to fall into this trap, as it is quite a slippery slope, indeed. I'm a pastor, and I have to check myself regularly. Any injustice to my flesh (I speak from the flesh's perspective) must be set aside for honest examination. If we are simply going through the motions, we are failing, no matter how magnificent our labors might appear outwardly, or even superficially to ourselves in the mirror (we can convince ourselves of an awful lot when we put our minds to it - the human mind is especially adept at counterfeiting).

What good is even reading this blog if your heart's not in it? Are you doing so merely at the request of your pastor? Has "blog time" become so routine that the best part of it is the coffee in your hand? Familiarity is death. Satan and the kingdom of darkness utilize familiarity just as a military organization uses a FOB (Forward Operating Base). It's the tip of the spear for so many casualties in the faith. What begins with a seemingly benign "meh" in the soul, degrades into something insidious.

Check yourself for familiarity. Regularly. Ensure you haven't become a cold shell of obedience.

If you don't know where to begin, I'm here to help you. Begin the way I often do, appraise your heart for others. For example, are you cold or warm towards those in need? If your show of love is merely an act, you are cold - let's just establish this up front. The apostle Paul wrote that if he didn't have love, he would become "*a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal,*" or "*nothing,*" even - ouch (**1 Corinthians 13:1b, 2b**)! Furthermore, he wrote, "*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*" (**1 Corinthians 13:3**). To echo Jesus' words, "*I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE*" (**Matthew 9:13**).

God desires inviting warmth, not repulsive coldness. After all, we represent Him, right?

Is it possible to concoct routines that fool others, that look good, but lack substance? Of course, we do it all the time. It's one of the primary things I look for in my own congregation. Are they merely putting on a good show? Can I see it in their eyes that they'd rather be somewhere else than in church learning the Word of God? These are the red flags that appear like clockwork before a person fades even further. I'd argue that some people are so bewitched by whatever's caught their affection that the rest of us see the malady in them before even they do. We are masters at deceiving ourselves, aren't we? The Word of God warns us:

Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise.

— 1 Corinthians 3:18

*But prove yourselves doers of the word, and **not merely hearers who delude themselves**. 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 [e.g., read this blog then go right back to your old habits?], he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty [of love], and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be **blessed** in what he does.*

— James 1:22-25

This passage summarizes what the Spirit's inspiring in this blog. There's no blessing in being a cold-hearted person. The blessing is in abiding in love. "[Love] does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful" (1 Corinthians 13:5). Sacrifice is about others, not self. When God demands we sacrifice ourselves (ref: Romans 12:1), He does so to ensure our own blessing along with those we serve. As Jesus stated, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

It's never enough to simply go through the motions of sacrifice, whether

ritualized and commanded by the Bible specifically, or not.

The quality of sacrifice is measured by God. We don't have the right to set the bar. Every time man has attempted such a feat he has failed miserably and suffered dire consequences as a result (consider those in Hell who metered righteousness to themselves - ala **Matthew 7:23**). *"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap"* (**Galatians 6:7**).

*A just balance and scales belong to the LORD;
All the weights of the bag are His concern.*

— **Proverbs 16:11**

*Differing weights are an abomination to the LORD,
And a false scale is not good.*

— **Proverbs 20:23**

False religions set their own boundaries for righteousness, supposing, as the Pharisees did in Jesus' time, that keeping rituals and performing sacrifices with hard, cold, merciless hearts is sufficient service of worship. Individuals who teach false doctrines are among the antichrists in this world.

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**

Some of you reading this blog need to step back, as former members of false religion, and examine your own hearts for purity's sake. I guarantee if you look close enough you'll find remnants still there, cancerous roots still pulsating with

lies. If you spend enough time, you'll begin making appropriate connections as to your own familiarity with God's grace and love. Maybe you've been reading your Bible half asleep, or you've rushed it, like you would a chore. Maybe you've become familiar with your church family, skipping days when the doors are open and the Word is being preached. Maybe you've forgotten to count your blessings. Worst of all, maybe you've become familiar with Christ's work on your behalf... forgetting that you've been purchased with a price and that your life isn't yours to keep.

Wake up; your familiarity has made you bitter.

The cold, uninviting shell of counterfeit obedience cracks under the weight of Truth. While such a breaking down of long-held beliefs is painful to go through, the exercise is both fruitful and freeing. Sanctification isn't always pleasant as its happening, but the results always produce a greater peace.

I'll end the way I began...

There are two kinds of obedience: that which is done in love and that which is not. The litmus test is how we treat others. If our obedience forms an impenetrable outer crust, we have failed. If our obedience is a light that guides the way for the lost and the weak, then we have succeeded.

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 5:14-16

Compromise Isn't Compassion

I grew up in a household with an alcoholic parent, as did my wife and so many other people I know. I speak this truth without a hint of wrongful motivation or judgement. I speak plainly because, as Jesus once said, “*and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*” (**John 8:32**). To this day, drunkenness has a visceral effect on my wife and me because it draws us back to the times when we were children having to endure the awfulness of a parent dominated by the flesh. With that said, I believe that God ordains all situations for a reason; so, if we gather our thoughts about the evil things in this world, we can always see God working in us, somehow, for good (**Romans 8:28**).

One of the things children of alcoholics learn early on is to forgive. Without forgiveness, there'd be no hope for a relationship with those we love the most. Without forgiveness, all would be lost. As unsettling as it is to see someone we love drunk (and often mean-spirited), a deep, familial compassion extends to the one injuring us. As believers, we are reminded of the simple fact that we are all flawed from the start, so we mustn't judge wrongly. We are commanded to “*put on*” (the Greek word, *enduo*, means to don like clothing) “*compassionate hearts*”, and so we do:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

— **Colossians 3:12-13**

I was wrangling with a drunk person not so long ago and was accused of lacking compassion, refusing to make excuses for them. As I calmly sat there, filled with the Holy Spirit, I allowed this person to rail against my character. They yelled,

spit, and pointed fingers at me. I just sat there and listened. My heart was breaking, not because any of the fiery darts were penetrating my soul, but rather that this person whom I love dearly was wallowing in misery. My knowledge of alcohol's effect on people reduced the aggression to mere white noise, allowing me to see the root cause of the issue. This person needed to lean on Christ more than ever - that has been my prayer since that day.

Dealing with episodes like the one above leaves us contemplating lots of things. But in this case, it left me thinking about compassion. Here's what I know to be true about compassion, based on Holy Scripture:

Compassion in the absence of integrity is a ruse.

In fact, every show of compassion from Jesus was grounded in integrity.

To meet with someone's flesh with compromised integrity is to sacrifice any hope of godly compassion in that moment.

As you read the beautiful passage below, consider the compassion Jesus has for the adulteress. But don't leave it there. Add to that His integrity to truth with *all* parties involved.

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."

And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

— John 8:2-11

Did Jesus show compassion for the woman? Indeed, He did! But, did He say, "Since you're being picked on by these bullies over here, I'm going to overlook the fact that you're an adulteress?" Nope. He said, "***from now on sin no more***" (v11). What we see is a man who functioned compassionately without compromising His integrity. Furthermore, what about how Jesus dealt with the scribes and Pharisees? He could've skewered them a hundred different ways on the spot, but He didn't. Instead, He offered them food for thought, "*Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her*" (v7). Imagine that, huh? Makes sense, considering He's the same person who said, "*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*" (Matthew 5:44). The point is that Jesus *always* functioned compassionately **and** with integrity, simultaneously. Here's another brief example of the same:

*Afterward Jesus found [the man He healed] in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! **Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.**"*

— John 5:14

This man was apparently a sinner to the point where he was physically debilitated. Instead of leaving him that way, though, Jesus showed compassion and mercy by healing him. He also said, "*Sin no more.*" Again, we see compassion and integrity to truth (this man needed to hear that he was indeed suffering because of his own sin). Jesus never accommodated human sensibilities.

Do you think the scribes and the Pharisees in **John 8:3** would have ever admitted to Jesus' compassion for them? They being fleshly, I think we know the answer. Likewise, do you think the fleshly people (e.g. the drunks) we have to deal with would ever admit that our absorbing their abuse is compassion, even if we remind them, "*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit*" (**Ephesians 5:18**)? Is quoting Holy Scripture in times of need too harsh? Are we lacking mercy when we give someone the one thing that's able to deliver them?

Fleshly people prefer to define compassion in terms of compromise (e.g. the more one compromises the more compassionate they are). The same trickery exists with those who like to define grace as all things accommodating to the human flesh (e.g. supposing God bends His own will to meet a person in the middle). When a person stands up for what is righteous and good, in opposition to ungodly definitions, with integrity to the Word of Truth, they must not grow weary. For the same One who showed us how compassion and integrity coexisted perfectly in Him, said:

Remember the word that I [Jesus] said to you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.

— **John 15:20**

One thing I've learned in the ministry, after a decade-plus as a full-time pastor, is that we who stand firm in Christ are often accused of lacking all kinds of things (not just compassion or grace) because we refuse to compromise our stance on truth. The attacks are always rooted in the same error and they are usually cast at us from fleshly people spun up in emotionalism. Drunks are a perfect example. The Apostle Paul, who wrote **Ephesians 5:18**, wrote this as well as:

I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be

loved less?

— 2 Corinthians 12:15

It takes a lot more love and compassion to stick around long enough to share godly wisdom with someone who's reeling in their flesh than it does to simply walk away.

The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.

— 1 Peter 4:7-8

My encouragement to you is this; if you look behind the curtain of human flesh, past the ferocious accusations, and you function with clarity and integrity, you will see the truth. Do not condemn another when this happens, for that is left up to them and the Lord. Never, ever compromise your integrity in order to meet someone's flesh with some perverted notion of compassion. Is it compassionate to enable someone to live in sin or is it destructive? If it is destructive, how can it possibly be "compassionate"???

Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.

— 1 Corinthians 16:13

Compromise isn't compassion. May it never be.

It's the Little Things

“It’s the little things, huh?”

This is typically an invitation to share how, as we mature, it is often the things most commonly overlooked that we learn to appreciate. In doing so, if we’re grace-oriented, we attribute their very existence to the holy, loving, merciful Lord. This exercise is most welcome when we feel wrought with disappointment or life, itself, is weighing heavily upon our souls. We are bombarded with fresh ideas as to what the “next big thing” ought to be in our lives and, yet, as the proverbial saying goes, it’s really the little things that add up, keeping us contented.

The so-called “little things” really aren’t “little” at all when we step back and realize how they, typically being superior in number to larger things, carry the most weight and influence in our lives. While we tend to focus on the nature of positive little things, the question is whether this weight equation holds true with sin and evil. In other words, though our natural inclination is to focus on the so-called “big” sins in our lives (ones we’ve committed or are currently living in), could it be that it is actually the “little” sins that carry more weight?

I’m going to take a moment here to challenge you. More specifically, I’m going to challenge the religion in you (the part of you that assigns weightiness to what natural, earthy man considers big sins). I want to take pause here and draw your attention to the fact that the Bible teaches us that this phrase, “It’s the little things,” is a two-way street, a double-edged sword, if you will. First, let me take you all the way back to the Fall in the Garden of Eden.

The first three chapters in the Bible (**Genesis 1-3**) disclose, with incredibly efficient precision, exactly how and why mankind sinned. It also describes the immediate results and perpetuity of sinfulness in this world; hence, our need for a savior. What’s really interesting is the manner in which God put His creatures, namely Adam and Eve, to the test. We all know the story about the forbidden fruit. Those who mock our faith in the Bible might accuse us of believing in

something unfair or unjust. They argue that the punishment of spiritual and physical death doesn't fit the crime. I mean, they only ate some otherwise innocuous fruit, right?

STOP!!! Therein lies the key to understanding something the serpent of old, Satan, himself, doesn't want you to know. The Bible never says there's anything special about the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In fact, what we may rightly conclude is that God *purposely* used something with very little material value to it. We have no biblical reason to conclude that the forbidden fruit looked or tasted differently than the same kind of fruit from other similar trees in the Garden. That, my friends, is the *whole* point!

In the absence of any distinction, man's natural desire, his curiosity and, fundamentally, his temptation to investigate it to its ends, doesn't exist. In other words, because the forbidden fruit carried little weight, it represented no real temptation, in and of itself. What is left is the prohibition assigned to it by God, "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 3:3). God chose an otherwise unremarkable, unweighty object as the vehicle to mankind's self-inflicted demise. He did this, presumably, to prove a point beyond the shadow of a doubt - to show man that the real temptation was to disobey (to seek something outside of God's will), the command, itself, was the focal point, not the fruit.

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

God could've chosen a different object to test man...say, something much more tempting, like another woman for Adam to gaze upon. When Adam fell (which he would have), he might have argued that the real reason for his disobedience, his wandering eye, was because the second woman was attractive to his natural senses. Adam's constitution, not being equal to God's, being fallible as he was, would equip Adam to argue that it was the *object's* fault for tempting him. You get the point. God didn't want to give the first two humans a reason to deflect

blame.

This establishes a very important principle. Righteousness is a function of obedience. Any transgression against a known law is sin, “for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20b). Neither the object nor the act is the real issue. Every sin has one common component to it - it represents a departure from God’s will. The point I’m trying to make in this blog pivots on this one principle. I ask that you contemplate it and allow the Holy Spirit to retrain your religious mind, your natural tendency to assign weight to objects and/or actions rather than to the level of disobedience in view, especially in the absence of substantial temptation.

Here’s a quick example. Have you ever noticed how adolescents will, at times, disobey their parents for no other reason than to assert autonomy? As I’ve taught in a recent blog titled, *Awakening the Sleeping Giant*, sin becomes excited in us whenever it has the opportunity to assert itself against authority (“*But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment*” - **Romans 7:8**), namely God, since He ordains all authority on Earth. You see, it’s not the object or the action so much as it is the *opportunity* to oppose God that comprises the real test. This is precisely what we see in the Garden.

The morality of an action does not depend upon its abstract nature, but upon its relation to the law of God. Men seem often to judge of actions as they judge of material substances—by their bulk. What is great in itself, or in its consequences, they will admit to be a sin; but what appears little they pronounce to be a slight fault, or no fault at all.

— The Total Depravity of Man by A. W. Pink

Allow me to make my point of encouragement now...

Some of you have to live with the fact that you’ve sinned terribly in the past. As most of you will attest, some sins leave their mark in our lives until the day we die! As a result, we assign a certain “weight” to sin based on the apparent severity of it. Here’s the challenge that I promised you at the outset of this writing:

Which is more offensive to God, sinning in the presence of more or less temptation? What's more offensive to God, a person who stumbles under great temptation or one who stumbles in naked disobedience? Remember the adolescent who bucked authority merely for the sake of asserting themselves? Is this more offensive than say when the same adolescent stumbles because of peer pressure or sexual tension?

To put this all into perspective, God allowed a benign piece of fruit to be the vehicle for man's utter desolation. Was this fair? Absolutely! In the absence of any distinguishable temptation, the only temptation is disobedience in its basest form. So, what does this mean for all of us, so many years later?

We sin a lot. We must admit this. Subsequently, we routinely categorize our sins on a continuum between "big" and "little", and we assign weight, and therefore perceived severity, based on where our sin falls on this continuum. We *suppose* that if we can just keep the "big" sins to a minimum, God will be more pleased with us. Likewise, we *suppose* that maybe God doesn't care as much about the "little" sins. But, my friends, I think we might have this all backwards!

Is it possible, given that God imposed a death sentence upon all of mankind because he ate a piece of unremarkable fruit from an otherwise harmless tree, that punishment for the crime of sinning is based on the degree of blatant disobedience in the absence of real temptation??? I've already picked on adolescents twice here, so I'll turn my attention to adults...

Suppose a married man sees a physically attractive woman and he lusts after her. He shakes it off, continues down the sidewalk, and then refuses to confess it as a sin to God, even though he knows it is. Which is a "bigger" sin in your eyes? The first involves serious temptation, the second merely disobedience. Suppose a woman cheats on her taxes. She sends in her tax portfolio, then reads the Bible and is convicted by, "*render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's*" (**Matthew 22:21b**), but she says to God in her heart, "Well, I'm only saving a few hundred bucks so what does it matter?" Which is a "bigger" sin in your eyes, the one with the temptation to cheat or the one that tries to reason with God about being disobedient? I hope you're seeing the pattern here.

Why do I find this so encouraging? Well, for starters, over the course of my own life, I've had to live with some pretty "big" sins. And yet, all along, the Lord has kept reminding me that He has been pleased with my life (relatively speaking, of course). I mean, I generally live a godly life, making decisions based solely on my desire to obey Him. I, like Paul, never fully succeed (ala **Romans 7**), but my heart is always aligned with obedience. If I compare the number of times I obey in all the "little" things to the number of times I fail in a "big" way, what I conclude is that in the absence of real temptation, when it's only just an issue of obedience, I fare very well. I believe this is the same root of righteousness that Jesus spoke of in the *Parable of the Minas* (**Luke 19:12-27**).

And he said to him, "Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, you are to be in authority over ten cities."

— **Luke 19:17**

Jesus assigned a tremendous amount of weight to "a very little thing." Take a moment to let that sink in. He was using the very same standard of measure that was used back in the Garden of Eden! God's integrity demands that disobedience precipitates cursing (ala Genesis 3) while obedience results in blessing (ala Luke 19:17). Mankind has historically made the mistake of assuming his definitions for "big" and "little" are congruent with God's, but they aren't (until we learn better). Our sinful nature wants us to have our definitions backwards because it is able to rule over us with greater ease as a result! As the Lord God told Cain, "If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7).

Sin's base desire is to assert independence from God. Its purest expression is when it does so with all the "little things" in our lives. For it's all the little things that comprise the vast majority of living. On average, we make over thirty thousand decisions a day! That represents a lot of opportunity to obey or disobey God.

I'll summarize this way...

Man wrongly assigns relative unrighteousness (the weight of sin) to the “size” of it, rather than recognizing that any breach of authority is equally wrong. In fact, it is when we stray with the little things, in the absence of significant reason for temptation, that reveals the greatest level of disobedience! Every one of us must be retooled in order to thwart sin’s desire to master us - we must accept the Bible’s definitions for “big” and “little” and, in many cases, find our encouragement in the fact that we are, by our new nature’s standard, obedient children, as a result of being saved by grace!

“It’s the little things, huh?”

Indeed it is, my friends!!!

Name That Tune

You may remember the popular TV show that ran from the 1950s to the 1980s called *Name That Tune*. Obviously, given its prolific span of running time, the show was a great success. I can understand why, too, because it was one of those game shows that people could play along with from their own living room. The objective of the game was to be able to name the title of a song in the fewest number of notes possible, using what is called a “sound bite.” There was also a hint given about the song itself, for the sake of context. The best contestants were able to rightly name the song in one or two notes. Incredible. Thank God it was just a game, huh? Imagine if we had to discern things that really mattered in life on such little data?

In general, sound bites are used to summarize something previously recorded. A key benefit of sound biting is that it can be used as an advertising “hook,” enticing listeners during commercial breaks to tune into an entire program later on. A common application of sound biting is in politics, where speeches are analyzed and then chopped up into myriad pieces, summarizing specific points made by the orator. For example, “Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country.” Most immediately recognize this quote from President Kennedy’s inaugural address on January 20, 1961. This “hook” might persuade you to listen to Kennedy’s famous speech. Sound bites like this one can be very powerful communication tools; however, there are caveats.

Sound bites are great if the audience has an idea of the context. In the absence of context, sound bites can be easily misconstrued. Even worse, in the presence of evil, this may be done on purpose! Have you seen the way American politicians and their pet media outlets use sound bites against their opposition? It’s disgusting. But, you know, it’s *still* only politics. It’s a proposition requiring careful consideration when it comes to spiritual ministry. Allow me to explain...

As a pastor with good, honorable intentions towards God's children, my end goal is as Holy Scripture states, "*But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith*" (1 Timothy 1:5). That's right, the goal of my instruction is *love* (the rest of the verse describes the origins of this love). The key to this love is that it can only emanate from a heart that has been washed clean, purified. It is expressed from a conscience that is good by God's standards and a faith that exists without hypocrisy. Given the natural estate of mankind, born in sinful flesh, depraved to the core, this love is indeed a lofty goal. Thankfully, it isn't mine to impart - only God can do this good work in a person. But He tells me that I can play a part, nonetheless.

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

— 1 Corinthians 3:7-9

My heart has been touched, forever altered, by the love of God. Here's a sound bite for you: "*We love, because He first loved us*" (1 John 4:19). If there is any way, at all conceivable, to partake in another person's deliverance unto this godly love, I desire to be a part of it. As "*God's fellow worker*," there's nothing sweeter for a man in possession of my spiritual gift. A person abiding in godly love is immovable, resolute, unflappable. What a gift! "*Love never fails*" (1 Corinthians 13:8). The shepherd in me only wants the sheep, especially those under my charge, to abide in love. If you are to know anything about me, you should know this one unerring truth.

Don't just take the sound bite. Know that this amazing love comes at a price, namely death, to be precise. Death to self. It is painful at times, confusing, and yet absolutely necessary for sanctification.

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

— **Galatians 5:24-25**

And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. 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 9:23-24**

To be purified is to be sanctified, set apart for God's purposes. This means to be set apart for love; for love encapsulates the will of God, "*love is the fulfillment of the law*" (**Romans 13:10b**). "*Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law*" (**Romans 13:8**). We are not born lovers of the law of God. In fact, we are born antagonistic to it. Therefore, the aforementioned purification process (ref: **1 Timothy 1:5**) requires time and energy. The Bible also teaches that we will suffer while it occurs in us. Suffering is a fundamental part of sanctification. As in the case of metallurgical purification, extreme heat must be applied in order for the slag to be scraped off and cast away. We might consider the "slag" in our spiritual walks as remnants of our sinful lifestyles, as Peter described:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were 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."

— **1 Peter 1:14-16**

Holiness and godly love (and byproducts, like happiness) are *simultaneous* experiences. A person cannot have one without the other. To state it more practically, from a shepherd's perspective (ala **Ephesians 4:11-12**), the good work

of holiness/godliness must be wrought in a believer *before* godly love is fully amplified in them. Once produced, there is contentment in life, "*But godliness with contentment is great gain,*" (1 Timothy 6:6). What I'm trying to convey to you, my beloved, is this:

I just want you to know the love of God. That's the sound bite of my choosing. The greater context is that I'll do anything, sacrificing my own life, to reach this end. I just want you to be happy knowing the love of God. This cannot happen unless you willingly go through the purification process.

Please don't sound bite me carelessly along the way, as some have done in the past, taking snippets of heavy-handedness out of context. Please don't misconstrue my purpose just because you are suffering the typical throes of purification, especially when it is painful. Remember, "*A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher*" (Luke 6:40). I've been and continue to go through the same suffering, my friends. Don't fall victim to the lies about men who stand behind pulpits simply doing as they are led by the Spirit. Resist the temptation. "*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*" (1 Peter 5:9).

I don't ask these things on my own behalf, but yours. My fear is that some of you do not see the forest through the trees; rather, you focus on the man, catching a mere sound bite of a message or a blog like this on occasion, never truly committing to the curriculum the Holy Spirit has authored through this ministry. My fear is that you forget my heart, that I love both the Lord and you in such a way that I only wish to *serve*, Him and you, as well. If I'm miserable, cranky, and apparently ornery from time to time, then exercise a little compassion and understanding. Remember, we all bear a cross; mine can be particularly heavy at times. I know yours can, too, and I respect that. I seek unity, in love. If that means for a time I'm irritating to you, then feel free to grind your teeth at me - just don't quit like so many have over the years, pointing to this or that sound bite for the

sake of ill-conceived justification. “So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth” (Galatians 4:16)?

*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

Name That Tune was a lot of fun. But, it had its place as a game show. Sound bites are fine, but only in the presence of context and knowledge. Sound biting a pastor like myself is risky business, my friends. The evil among us will use this device to discredit the Lord’s good work through me. In the absence of sound thinking, is it possible your own flesh might do this to you? Is it possible that you, as a matter of convenience to your flesh, only catch the first or last few “notes” of a key message? Is it then possible that you become like the evil ones among us, judging wrongly the name of my “tune”, spreading strife rather than unity in our faith? All of this would be to your own demise. Please be careful of the vector you find yourself on. Always seek context. I love you, remember that.

Saying Thank You For Discipline

When is the last time you took the opportunity to say “Thank you” to someone for disciplining you? In my experience, such gratitude is rarely, if ever, expressed. It seems more often that a person keeps this kind of sentiment to themselves. Is it pride? I’m not sure, but whatever precludes a warranted show of thankfulness certainly isn’t godly.

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

— Proverbs 12:1

There are those who are too immature to even realize that a loving person is one who makes the effort to discipline those under his or her charge. Parents are a perfect example. “*He who withholds his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently*” (**Proverbs 13:24**). Those are strong words that we all can live by, and because they are part of the Word of God, they remain irrefutable for all time. A mature person, even when on the receiving end of discipline, appreciates the correction. In the case of children, in my experience, it isn’t until they grow up and have children of their own that they begin to realize that the discipline they received was a gift.

Our Father in Heaven desires that we know His love. He also wants us to know that being disciplined by Him is an absolute expression of His unerring love for us. Discipline is a grace gift, nothing less.

*“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.

— Hebrews 12:5b-11

It seems nonsensical that peace is directly related to discipline. Moreover, it seems irrational to say that it is a *direct result* of discipline. Yet, this is what the Word of God tells us. As the writer of Hebrews expressed in the verse above, “*for the moment [all discipline] seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful.*” This is because, “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,*” declares the LORD” (Isaiah 55:8).

I find it interesting how many people want peace in their lives (is it fair to say everyone?), yet so few are willing to accept the *instrument* that God uses to guide them to this destination. It’s as if people say, “Give me the peace, but do it on *my* terms, not yours, God.” The audacity of man is stupefying at times, isn’t it? No one has ever, or will ever, love us more than God, yet we reject His mode of sanctification. What’s truly asinine is man expecting to find peace while *disoriented* to God. Even more so is man expecting to find peace on his own terms, in the absence of God’s reorienting power.

*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.*

— Proverbs 3:12-13

The very best thing we can do when we realize we are being disciplined is examine ourselves very closely and then repent. Remember, the key value of

discipline is to wake us up to our being disoriented, and therefore displeasing, to our Lord. In the absence of discipline, we'd never know. This would be analogous to placing our hand on a hot iron without any pain. The damage would be horrific. It's no different in the spiritual life. We should thank God for the pain and suffering from discipline because it keeps us from destroying ourselves. The Bible reveals this truth to us, hence the Lord's advice to purchase as much of it as we can.

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 3:18-19**

So, the original question remains on the table. When's the last time you thanked someone for disciplining you? And don't reserve your thankfulness to God alone, for God uses instruments, such as the one writing to you here, to administer discipline, itself. The same goes with your parents, the police, the courts, etc. There's no better time than the present to eat your own ridiculous pride and show a little gratitude, in both word and deed, to those who have loved you enough to discipline you. You wouldn't be where you are today in the absence of the precious gifts you've received.

Two Ways Of Approaching the Truth

There are two ways to approach the truth...

The Word of God is truth (**Psalm 119:160; John 17:17**); “*And the Word became flesh*” (**John 1:14**). There are two ways to approach the Truth, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ: humbly or arrogantly. In both cases, there is a fixed result. As I wrote in my last blog, *Grace, Works, and Indifference*, the truth never leaves a person unchanged, especially when it concerns the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus said:

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

— **Luke 14:11**

I tell you, this [humble] man went to his house justified rather than the [arrogant] other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

— **Luke 18:14**

Jesus clearly explained the “fixed results” I mentioned above. All would be well and good if man inherently agreed with Jesus. But he doesn’t, at least not in his flesh. Man presumes his self-righteousness is something the whole world should appreciate. The Lord says it’s disgusting, however, like a filthy menstrual rag (**Isaiah 64:6**). To an arrogant person, this is jolting news (think of the Scribes and the Pharisees in Jesus’ day). To a humble person, this is the best possible news because it relieves them from trying to work for their own salvation.

Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you. 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

God's not looking for our abilities; He's looking for our attitude. If we approach His holiness believing we might earn His approval on the basis of our self-righteousness, we end up walking away with our tail between our legs. If we approach Him naked, conceding our wretchedness, He exalts us. These are the two fixed results I write about here.

King David had the right attitude. His humility was foundational to his motivation, as revealed in the four "*I wills*" in the following passage:

I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart;

I will tell of all Your wonders.

I will be glad and exult in You;

I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High.

— Psalm 9:1-2

The Apostle Paul shared this same attitude with David. He knew that God's grace alone was the source of all righteousness in him.

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

David and Paul are perfect examples of how to rightly approach the Word of Truth, namely our Lord. Satan, on the other hand, revealed his evil attitude through five abominable "*I wills*":

But you [Satan] said in your heart,

*"I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne above the stars of God,
And I will sit on the mount of assembly
In the recesses of the north.
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High."*

— **Isaiah 14:13-14**

The Bible teaches us how this will end for Satan and anyone else who attempts to usurp God's holiness. *"Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit"* (**Isaiah 14:15**). Death awaits those who mimic Satan's folly.

So there you have it, the two approaches and the two fixed results. Approach the truth in humility and God exalts you; approach it in arrogance and He strikes you down. It's that simple. If you read your Bible through this simple lens, what you recognize is story after story of individuals facing the Word of Truth and falling to one side or the other. It's worth noting also that there's no in-between. If you're wishy-washy, the Lord counts you among the transgressors and you ought to expect to receive nothing from Him (**James 1:7-8; 4:8**). This means that no one will be able to say at the Judgement Seat of Christ that they are "undecided." The Gospel is designed to force a decision.

In America we are prosperous. While being born into wealth has its advantages, it also implies a host of challenges. Material prosperity is so powerful that it becomes the demise of many, as Jesus taught His disciples.

*And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus *answered again and *said to them, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!*

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich

man to enter the kingdom of God."

They were even more astonished and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?"

*Looking at them, Jesus *said, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."*

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. But many who are first will be last, and the last, first."

— Mark 10:23-31

Jesus characterized the "rich man" as someone with a considerable problem. This is the exact opposite of American cultural ethos. Little do most Americans, even Christians, realize the quandary they are in. If they do like their neighbors and swim in the love of money, they are cursed (**1 Timothy 6:10**). If Jesus had any insight into this plight (He did, of course), then being an American has serious stumbling blocks when it comes to salvation, proper! In other words, being an American actually works against the spreading of the Gospel. Why? Because the average citizen is arrogant and puffed up due to the so-called advantages of wealth. The Lord had something to say about this to the church at Laodicea.

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.** Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me."*

— Revelation 3:17-20

So, again, there are only two options to choose from when facing the truth and their outcomes are predetermined by God. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the tip of the spear, leaving no one uncut, not a single person remains unaffected. *"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**). Man's response to the Holy God of the Universe decides his own fate. Will we sing the praise of a repentant sinner or dance to the tune of our own self-righteousness? Hear now the Word of Truth from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

*I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; **for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.**"*

— Luke 18:9-14

Love

Love is often the most difficult topic to teach because it has been so perverted by the world. Read a romance novel and you walk away thinking love is about being wooed and enjoying a passionate sex life involving trips to Fiji on private jets. Watch a Hollywood movie and you're encouraged to think that love blooms almost instantaneously in a coffee shop over a Frappuccino. It's all garbage, according to the Word of God, and, as a result, a *lot* of people are disenchanted by the very mention of the word love.

Meanwhile, there are those of us who diligently seek the Truth in the Bible and come away with a transcendent viewpoint on love. We realize that love is a grace gift, "*We love because he first loved us*" (1 John 4:19). "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). We must first learn what love truly is if we're ever going to express it to another human being. Sure, love exists between unbelievers, but that's not the love I'm writing about here.

And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

— Colossians 3:14

Love is the hallmark of a believer, which is why if we examine ourselves and don't see it, we might just have a bigger problem than originally suspected (2 Corinthians 13:5). Jesus stated that our love will be obvious to others.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

— John 13:34-35

The “Apostle of Love”, John, wrote a lot about this topic. In particular, it’s worth noting that to know God is to know love, and vice versa. God and love are one and the same.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

— **1 John 4:7-12**

The beauty of love is that it pervades all aspects of who and what we are in Christ Jesus. Love becomes us; we become love. Love is the launching pad for our daily labor for others; it’s what energizes and motivates us to do as Christ did. I like to call this “abiding in the sphere of God,” something Jesus describes perfectly in His discourse to His disciples.

By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

— **John 15:8-13**

When we abide in the sphere of God’s love, we are blessed and those around us are blessed as a result.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at

wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

— 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

If You Could Read My Mind

“If you could read my mind right now!”

Have you ever had someone say that to you? Have you ever said those words to someone else? It's a funny proposition, isn't it? I suppose in many ways, the fun is in the speculation, as the exclamation is like an invitation to make guesses about another person's intimate thoughts. I think back to all of the times I've said it to someone and the common thread is that there's something I sort of wish the other person could know, but there's a secondary force restraining me from articulating it to them. I've tended to say this phrase when I'm stuck in a quandary. I think we use it to express that a certain desire exists in us that simply cannot be formulated into words, for a variety of reasons, including social constraints or taboos.

The Spirit woke me up early this morning and put this blog on my heart. It wasn't a complete thought until I began reading **Psalm 139** over my morning coffee. You'll see why later. For now, the opening statement got me singing an old tune from 1970.

*If you could read my mind love
What a tale my thoughts could tell
Just like an old time movie
About a ghost from a wishing well
In a castle dark or a fortress strong
With chains upon my feet
You know that ghost is me
And I will never be set free
As long as I'm a ghost you can see

If I could read your mind love*

*What a tale your thoughts could tell
Just like a paperback novel
The kind the drugstore sells
When you reach the part where the heartaches
Come the hero would be me
Heroes often fail
And you won't read that book again
Because the ending's just too hard to take*

— *If You Could Read My Mind*, by **Gordon Lightfoot**

Based on Wikipedia's description of the song, Mr. Lightfoot cited his divorce as the inspiration for the lyrics. I imagine divorce as being one of the most difficult times a person can go through. I've had people tell me how awful it is to reach such an impasse in a marriage where the only perceived relief is ending it. My guess is that the words, "If you could read my mind," are often expressed in frustration and distress during those times. It makes me really sad.

The good news is that we believers have a Husband that actually *can* read our minds!

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

— **Ephesians 5:25**

*Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready.*

— **Revelation 19:7**

We never have to wish that Jesus Christ, our Husband, could read our minds. Our Husband has always known every thought we've ever had or will have. In

fact, He knew all of them while He was hanging on His Cross to pay the penalty for some of them, just so He could marry you! Even though certain thoughts may be a bit embarrassing, or even a cause for consternation for some of us (let's face it, we have some unholy thoughts floating around in our heads), He still sees them and not once has He ever uttered the words, "I want a divorce." How's that for love? His love is so extraordinary that it's never once been deterred by the severity of our thoughts. He's never at a loss for words the way Mr. Lightfoot apparently was when he wrote that famous song. To me, that's wonderful news. Having a person in my life that understands me implicitly the way Jesus Christ does is a great comfort.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

you discern my thoughts from afar.

You search out my path and my lying down

and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue,

behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.

You hem me in, behind and before,

and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

it is high; I cannot attain it.

Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Or where shall I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there!

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

If I take the wings of the morning

and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,

*and the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.
For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.*

*My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.
How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
I awake, and I am still with you.*

*Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!*

— Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24

How awesome is it to be filled with this knowledge? How incredibly edifying it is to know that the One who *chose* to marry us knows every thought we've ever had, without exception! We never have to utter the words, "If you could read my mind," to Him; it's implied that He already has. We don't have to become

frustrated the way we do with others, and we don't have to worry about Him ever turning His back on us because He's confused about our feelings for Him. He knows every time we've ever been angry with Him while maintaining full knowledge that we never have a righteous cause to be so. There's no guessing with Him, only with us, which is why the Psalmist in **Psalm 139** prays for light and guidance through truth. It's almost as if he was saying to the Lord, "If I could read Your mind love, what a tale Your thoughts would tell."

We have an intimate relationship with our loving Husband in Heaven, who's already gone before us to prepare a place for us, His Bride. He's done so and He's read each of our minds perfectly for as long as we have and will live. If that's not love, I don't know what is.

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going."

— **John 14:1-4**

The Lion and the Lamb

God's ultimate desire is to love. This is His objective. There's nothing more honorable, noble, or fulfilling to think about than this. Love is so pervasive that it embodies the entire law, *"love is the fulfillment of the law"* (**Romans 13:10**). In fact, God is described as love (**1 John 4:8**) and, because God is omnipotent, *"love never fails"* (**1 Corinthians 13:8a**).

Whatever edict we might come across in the Bible, we must remember that it is forever constrained by love.

While God abides in love absolutely, man struggles with it. Oddly, in my experience, believers who mean well are often the ones who lose sight of this divine objective of God, to love. They forget that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is nothing more than a gathering of God's children unto eternal 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**). Eternal life and love are one and the same since they are both aspects of the divine, indivisible nature of God; therefore, to receive eternal life is to experience divine love.

When Christians struggle with these things, they become confused about how and when God intends to exercise His power. It's all too easy for flawed humans to misappropriate His divine intentions, cut to the quick, judge others, and condemn them to the fierce wrath of God. Hell exists, but it must be presented in context. Our exuberance for Christ sometimes gets ahead of us. We love Him, so we feel the need to protect Him, the Lion. The Bible warns us, *"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"* (**Romans 12:19**).

Humans seem more ready to smash anyone opposed to God than even God, Himself! Whole religions calling themselves "Christian" have been built on this error. The results are tragic.

While it's a good thing to be a *"soldier for Christ"* (**2 Timothy 2:3**), a believer must

follow their Leader. Consider how Jesus, *the Lion and the Lamb*, responded to the apostles, James and John, below.

*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

Jesus' intention was not to crush those still lost, even though they remained antagonistic to Him. Weren't we *all* this way at one point in our lives, as unbelievers? Isn't the human flesh inherently so? Then why are we so inclined to express ourselves the way James and John did above? The answer is that we are weak. Jesus wanted to save unbelievers, not destroy them. That is a far greater display of power.

It takes much more strength and conviction to walk directly into a fire to save someone than to simply extinguish the fire and lose the individual in the process. At any point in time, Jesus could've exercised divine power to wipe out those opposing Him. "*Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels*" (**Matthew 26:53**)? But He didn't do that. Why? His plan is ultimately guided by love, not wrath. Wrath is the Lord's divine response to evil, something He deals with Himself at the right time. When He does, we see the Lion.

*For I will be like a lion to Ephraim
And like a young lion to the house of Judah.
I, even I, will tear to pieces and go away,
I will carry away, and there will be none to deliver.*

— Hosea 5:14

*For thus says the LORD to me,
“As the lion or the young lion growls over his prey,
Against which a band of shepherds is called out,
And he will not be terrified at their voice nor disturbed at their noise,
So will the LORD of hosts come down to wage war on Mount Zion and on
its hill.”*

— **Isaiah 31:4**

At specific times in human history, the Lion is evidenced through the wrath of God. However, man does not have the wherewithal or self-restraint to wield such power, so, except in very unique circumstances, God never bestows it upon him. Imagine if man did have God’s power, even for one day. How many lives would we destroy? Untold amounts, presumably, because of one simple fact...

Omnipotence without perfect love spells disaster - death would reign instead of life.

Consider the end of human history. Love, God’s ultimate intention, will be on full display at the coronation of Jesus Christ as the victorious “*King of kings and Lord of lords*” (**Revelation 19:16**). After millennia of human existence, God’s plan will be revealed, the truth plain to see. God’s plan is not a plan of wrath, but of love. Wrath is the byproduct in a world where people reject His plan. God draws humans to Himself (**John 6:44**) by revealing His love (**1 John 4:8**). As ambassadors of Christ (**2 Corinthians 5:20**), we ought to deliver the same message to others who are still lost.

If our audiences stand opposed to Christ, let us be surefooted enough to present them with both the Lion and the Lamb, for they are the same Person. Let us inform them that the One who can crush them is choosing not to, and that the One who has every right to annihilate them would rather love them for all of eternity.

Should people fear the Lord? Absolutely. The question is, are we administrators, personally, of His wrath? The answer is emphatically, “No!” Should we teach

others about why they should fear the Lord? Sure, but that's where it ends for us. Our job is to love. *"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**). I suppose our uncompromising stance on the truth found in the Word is our greatest expression of the Lion; but even then, the Word can protect itself.

A great many learned men are defending the gospel; no doubt it is a very proper and right thing to do, yet I always notice that, when there are most books of that kind, it is because the gospel itself is not being preached. Suppose a number of persons were to take it into their heads that they had to defend a lion, a full-grown king of beasts! There he is in the cage, and here come all the soldiers of the army to fight for him. Well, I should suggest to them, if they would not object, and feel that it was humbling to them, that they should kindly stand back, and open the door, and let the lion out! I believe that would be the best way of defending him, for he would take care of himself; and the best "apology" for the gospel is to let the gospel out. Never mind about defending Deuteronomy or the whole of the Pentateuch; preach Jesus Christ and him crucified. Let the Lion out, and see who will dare to approach him. The Lion of the tribe of Judah will soon drive away all his adversaries.

— Charles Spurgeon

I'll close the way I opened.

Whatever edict we might come across in the Bible, we must remember that it is forever constrained by love.

Love and Humility

Love and humility. What a pair. To abide in the first is to know the second. To know the second is to respond with the first. The dynamic is divinely orchestrated as a blessing for believers alone, a harmonious sphere of godliness.

In the beginning [before Creation] 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.

— John 1:1-4

In the Gospel after his name (the passage above), the apostle John, the so-called “Apostle of Love”, wrote about the *deity* of Christ. In the opening verses of his first epistle (the passage below), he wrote specifically about His *humanity*. Together, they stand complementary as to describe the *fullness* of Jesus Christ, the God-man. John makes sense of this union, “*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).

What was from the beginning [from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry], what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life — and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us — what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.

— 1 John 1:1-3

If I’ve ever felt like a failure as a minister it has consistently been regarding this

one subject. I find it increasingly difficult to adequately describe the incomparable Christ Jesus. The more I know about Him, the more difficult the task! I guess none of us should feel bad, though, even Paul conceded Christ as God's "*indescribable gift*" (2 Corinthians 9:15). John Calvin gives us some sound perspective on the value of John's words to our faith.

"[An] obvious aim of the apostle in his introductory sentence was to confirm the assurance of God's children, and show what a firm foundation has been laid for their fellowship with the Father and with His Son. These words 'which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes,' etc. serve to strengthen our faith in the Gospel. Nor does he, indeed, without reason, make so many asseverations; for since our salvation depends upon the Gospel, its certainty is in the highest degree necessary. And how difficult it is to believe, every one of us knows too well by his own experience. To believe is not lightly to form an opinion, or to assent only to what is said, but is a firm, undoubting conviction, so that we may dare to subscribe to the Truth as fully proved. It is for this reason that the apostle here heaps together so many things in confirmation of the Gospel."

— John Calvin

John wanted his disciples to know that the Gospel wasn't invented by man. It was the announcement given through personal witnesses of Jesus Christ in the flesh. God wants us to know that Jesus is *real*. We all know how famously the world likes to talk about the "stories" in the Bible, alluding to fiction, or the "noble teachers" therein, such as Jesus, ever so craftily subverting who He truly is. The intent, of course, is to denigrate the Gospel.

"John commences his epistle by setting before us God manifest in flesh, because He is the grand Subject of the Gospel, the Object of our faith, the Foundation of our hope, the One who brings us to and unites us in fellowship with the Father. The Gospel is no mere abstraction, but is inseparably connected with the Lord Jesus. As Levi Palmer so beautifully expressed it, 'As the ray of light depends upon the sun, and a wave of sea upon the ocean, so Gospel truth is but the acts, and words,

and glory of Christ.' As it is impossible to know and receive Christ apart from the Gospel, so we cannot receive the Gospel except from Him."

— A. W. Pink

It was John's intention that we be assured of our faith in the Gospel, believing that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone, and that He is as real as any of His disciples. In context, it's also helpful for us to remember that during John's time there were some (e.g. the Gnostics) who denied that Jesus was a real human, rather proposing that He was a spirit only, a phantasm. Jesus was neither imaginary nor part of a dreamscape. In other words, the apostle wanted us to know that our faith is in someone *real*. Luke was inspired to assert the same:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

— Luke 1:1-4

Now, with all of this indescribable truth set before us, allow me to make my point...

The apostle John was tasked with presenting both the deity and the humanity of Christ. This task is so magnanimous that it's impossible to fully comprehend. Nonetheless, you get the sense that John felt supremely honored and dignified as he wrote about His Lord and Savior. He was so enamored with the very Subject of the Gospel that he lost himself in it. John never allowed his position of import to carry him away. John was so in love with Jesus that he retired into the background, only lit by the Light Himself, to whatever degree was contextually necessary for his readers. This kind of love is what manifests in true humility -

that is John's example for us even today. John was humbled by Christ's love, for he was, *"that disciple whom Jesus loved"* (**John 21:7**). He understood that even his own love was a product of Christ's, *"We love, because He first loved us"* (**1 John 4:19**), making love, itself, a humbling experience.

To love is to have received abundant grace. Love is the pinnacle of fellowship with God. The more we understand the depths of this, the more humble we become. Such is God's design in sanctifying us. In the end, all we'll ever want to do is worship Him the way the angels do in Heaven, saying day and night, *"HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME"* (**Revelation 4:8b**). *"Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created"* (**Revelation 4:11**).

Real fellowship - that which the Apostle of Love sets out to describe in his first epistle - so engages the heart with its Object that it loses sight of self. Love and humility, hand in hand for all eternity.

Love Is Faithful

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

My congregation may not know it, but most days I preach from behind my pulpit, my heart is breaking. It's the same love that compels me to serve/teach that incites this pain. Thankfully, without fail the holy, sovereign, faithful Spirit of the Lord God braces me and reminds me that I am doing His bidding by administering the healing ointment of His Word to the souls of the needy. Without His love's presence in me, there's simply no way I'd continue on with any of this. It's just too excruciating at times; yet, almost paradoxically, I have a very real joy set before me, and I want to share it!

I thank God for the joy He has set before any of us, for it is this joy, made manifest through the faithfulness of love, that assures our fellowship with God is genuine. "Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:8).

The "Apostle of Love", John, understood the depths of divine joy. To this day he teaches us about where it is that we find this transcendent fruit of the Spirit (ref. **Galatians 5:22**). In his first epistle, he describes this holy estate as *fellowship*. The base Greek word translated "fellowship" throughout **1 John 1** is also translated "partner" in **Luke 5:10** and **2 Corinthians 8:23**, revealing that this idea extends beyond just being a receiver of divine grace and love (in a passive way), and enters into the realm of personal communion, where each party enjoys things in common with the other (in an active way). This is what John quoted Jesus as saying in the Gospel after his name, *"The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one. I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved*

them, even as You have loved Me” (John 17:22-23). Paul expressed this same type of love-borne communion by using the same concept of “unity” that Jesus referred to above. *“Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity” (Colossians 3:14).* This is where we get the word “comm-unity” (com = “with” + “unity” = singularity). Few things are sweeter to a shepherd than for his flock to be unified in the faith, bound by love. Such is the essence of true fellowship with the Lord, as we are His sheep whom He called especially to Himself, *“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27).* John was counted among the first such followers of Jesus *“from the beginning”* so he wrote:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life — and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us — what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.

These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

— 1 John 1:1-4

John’s love was truly faithful, evidenced by his unerring desire to clarify the only true way of fellowship with the Lord God. This is the loftiest goal of redemption, after all. We have been purchased with a price, not to be regarding the Lord from a distance thereafter, but to be brought close to Him, personally. This was God’s will in Christ Jesus (**John 3:16**).

Love didn’t fail on the Cross, nor has it failed in unifying us through the gift of faith. Love itself is faithful in every way, incapable of failure, as its preeminence is in God (1 John 4:16). It has brought every believer in Christ close to Him, fostering a “joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8b).

*Your words were found and I ate them,
And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart;
For I have been called by Your name,
O LORD God of hosts.*

— **Jeremiah 15:16**

*How blessed are the people who know the joyful sound!
O LORD, they walk in the light of Your countenance.
In Your name they rejoice all the day,
And by Your righteousness they are exalted.*

— **Psalm 89:15-16**

*Let my meditation be pleasing to Him;
As for me, I shall be glad in the LORD.*

— **Psalm 104:34**

*I love the LORD, because He hears
My voice and my supplications.*

— **Psalm 116:1**

*This is the day which the LORD has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

— **Psalm 118:24**

Love is faithful. Love never fails. These are words to abide in, my friends. My work here in this blog is consistent with that which pours from my pulpit. My hope is always the same, to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2). When the messages become particularly difficult to swallow, remember the Apostles

and their unapologetic defense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Know that a good heart is revealed through good works. *“O LORD, who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy hill? He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, and speaks truth in his heart” (Psalm 15:1-2).*

Love expressed righteously may not always be palatable, but it is always necessary, hence its faithfulness. *“But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). “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).*

These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

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 1:4-7

John’s love never splintered; it was always impartial. I appreciate his words so very much because he wanted what I want this very day, your fellowship in Christ. My heart aches for those who are deceived even though such news may be offensive to them. They may even tell me to spend my prayers on someone else who needs them. Ugh. *“There is a kind who is pure in his own eyes, yet is not washed from his filthiness” (Proverbs 30:12).* The goal of my instruction is that my *“joy may be made complete,”* in the spirit of the apostles who have preceded me, that you enjoy true fellowship with God, and are confirmed in it through your faith and the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit.

It’s love that motivates all of us, and so very faithful it is. Love has never failed, not once.

True Love In Action

Love is transcendent. Maybe the greatest revelation of love is when it rises above self-preservation. Most people will say that they have love, but when it is put to the test, it usually defaults to love of self, at least more than love for others. This is why today it isn't uncommon for a mother or a father to abandon their children. If you were to ask them if they had love for their own, they'd likely answer, "Yes, of course, how dare you even ask." However, as J. Vernon McGee once said, "Your actions speak so loud, I can't hear a word you're saying."

If there's one thing the Bible teaches us about love, it's that, if it is truly from God, it bears remarkable fruit in the lives of others. Do you see that last word in the previous sentence? *Others*. True love (I'll refer to it plainly from here on out as simply "love") expresses itself in a way that is never void of sentimental affection towards those around it.

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.

— 1 John 3:16-18

If you require more detail on godly love, I encourage you to stop here and return after reading **1 Corinthians 13**. The Word of God reveals that love is not as the world portrays it. The world treats it with disregard, as nothing more than a bargaining chip. Love in the world is devoid of intrinsic care for others. In fact, the human flesh's version of love is completely selfish. But here's the thing...we may never be able to differentiate between the two until that moment in time when it is put to the test. Talk is cheap, as they say.

You might be asking, “Well, what’s a good example of love?” Luckily for us, the Bible is chock-full of examples. Let’s begin with David’s love for the brethren.

Then David lifted up his eyes and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, with his drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, covered with sackcloth, fell on their faces. David said to God, “Is it not I who commanded to count the people? Indeed, I am the one who has sinned and done very wickedly, but these sheep, what have they done? O LORD my God, please let Your hand be against me and my father’s household, but not against Your people that they should be plagued.”

— **1 Chronicles 21:16-17**

Love takes responsibility for itself. David was less concerned about his own welfare than the welfare of those he loved. Love is protective of others. It strains to ensure their well-being, even if it means a stricter punishment on itself. The Apostle Paul was the same way.

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

— **Romans 9:1-3**

Guilty people have earned their judgement and any punishment that goes along with it. It is righteous to expect that God will administer justice perfectly, cursing those who have offended His holiness. Love seeks to stand in-between the guilty party and their Judge. It seems almost audacious to ask the holy, sovereign God of the Universe to regard such a request as acceptable; yet, He does just that. It’s the same pattern He enacted within Himself when He sent Jesus to stand in our place. “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).

This love is unmistakable, not because it rolls off of the tongue so effectively; but rather, because it’s selfless, even when unspoken. Under extreme duress, the average person saves themselves. It is the uncommon person equipped with godly love who sees past the chaotic threats of personal harm and seeks to save others. Perfect evidence of this, of course is the Cross of Jesus Christ. For us believers, it is revealed in our hearts.

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.

— 1 John 3:19-20

Stephen was an early disciple of Jesus, *“full of grace and power, [he] was performing great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8).* The Spirit of Christ was with him, encouraging him through the love that was in his heart - a profound love for others. As is often the case, worldly lovers rejected his love because it was threatening to them (You might be able to recount times when your love was rejected - this is why: selfless love is like a bright lamp that reveals the ugliness of selfish love. So, selfish lovers will try to extinguish your love, even when it is seeking to help them). Case in point, unbelievers killed Stephen.

They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.

— Acts 7:59-60

Stephen is what we call in theology, a “type” of Christ. A type is a prophetic symbol representative of some quality of something or someone else. Stephen revealed the very heart of Jesus while he was being murdered for speaking the

truth by saying, *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them”* (v60). Sound familiar?

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.

— Luke 23:33-34

Jesus Christ is the greatest illustration of true love in action. He was perfect; and yet He placed Himself under such intense pressure for the sake of others that He literally sweat blood (Luke 22:44)! He knew that He was born to die, and He chose to become a man anyway. *“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”* (John 10:17-18a). His life is a testimony to God’s love.

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

— John 15:13

Others. Love always accounts for others. It protects, it serves, it lays down all that it has for others. True love is selfless. It seeks to heal, to edify, to make right. It is righteous always. It is the purest of all emotions, though it is never dominated by emotionalism. It is divorced from the world and yet it dives headlong into the lion’s den to share The Good News with it. It is fearless, *“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear”* (1 John 4:18a). It is bold before God, ready to sacrifice, willing to substitute itself to save another. It has no boundaries, no reservations about how to express itself. When called to action, *it simply acts*, transcending all human reason and venturing into the divine.

Perseverance, Patience, and Faith

Who can say that this life has only been kind to them? No one I've ever met; definitely not a true believer in Christ. This makes sense, based on Christ's proclamation, "*Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours*" (**John 15:20**). We believers can depend on the fact that we will be persecuted - it's not a matter of if, but rather when. We are blessed when we persevere under pressure.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

— **James 1:12**

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

— **Romans 5:3-5**

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

— **Romans 12:12**

One of the greatest blessings of perseverance is the faith we receive as a result. Over time, we realize that, while none of us enjoy the suffering itself, we do have a joy set before us in the sense that we see the end goal, namely sanctification. The Bible tells us that that our faith, in fact, *must* be tested for it to be consummated.

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

— **1 Peter 1:6-7**

We ought to be encouraged, therefore, whenever we are called to suffer. We do so to bring glory to God, who knows best.

And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

— **Galatians 6:9**

Faith that endures the test of time is that which glorifies God because it's proven itself to be true. Counterfeit faith never holds up under pressure. Paul wrote, *"The righteous shall live by faith"* (**Romans 1:17b**). Having our faith put to the test is a good thing. The more mature we are in the faith, the more we concede this basic truth. In fact, as we are sanctified, we give thanks to the One who ordains our suffering, knowing the outcome. We learn to pray for deliverance through divine perspective, not necessarily relief from physical or emotional anguish.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

— **Philippians 4:6**

Faith gives us the ability to rest, regardless of circumstances. This, in and of itself, is a grace blessing.

*For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence,
for my hope is from him.
He only is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.*

— **Psalms 62:5-6**

The Gift of Faith

*How blessed is the man who has made the LORD his trust,
And has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood.
Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders which You have done,
And Your thoughts toward us;
There is none to compare with You.
If I would declare and speak of them,
They would be too numerous to count.*

— Psalm 40:4-5

The Psalmist reveals a heart that we'd all do well to emulate. He begins by saying that a man is blessed if he has what follows in this discourse, namely, faith and humility.

As of late, I've been tasked with teaching profound truths regarding the sovereignty of God. In particular, the Holy Spirit's had me teach what the Bible has to say about God's sovereign election. The doctrine of election is intrinsic to salvation, which means that unless a person has been elected by God (something that occurred before human history even began), they cannot possibly be saved. God saves the elect.

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.

— Romans 8:29-30

The Bible teaches us that God is the One who chooses believers. In fact, Jesus stated very clearly that *"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me*

*draws him” (John 6:44a). Paul wrote, “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). He also wrote, “[God] has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (2 Timothy 1:9).***

So, if God is the one to choose who will ultimately be saved, where does that leave mankind? Are we robots? May it never be! The Bible is very clear on this topic as well.

*“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They said, “**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.**”*

— Acts 16:30b-31

Wait a minute! What’s this we see here? Is this a contradiction? Not only does the Bible dogmatically state that God alone chooses to save a person, but it also states that man is responsible for believing in order to be saved? By faith alone, we can answer, “Yes!”

*When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” And looking at them Jesus said to them, “**With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.**”*

— Matthew 19:25-26

As I mentioned earlier, I’ve been tasked with teaching the profound truths regarding God’s sovereign right in election. I cannot depart from what Holy Scripture states so very clearly, whether teaching about election or the free will of man. If the unerring Word states that God saves by grace through faith alone in Christ alone, then that is what I need to teach, even if I fail to put all of the details into words (I believe many err in trying to do so). **Deuteronomy 4:2** warns me against attempting to add or subtract from the inspired Word of God, regardless

of how noble it might appear. I certainly do not have the right to give voice to the Word when it is purposely silent.

We need to accept what we are given. For starters, we have the immutability and veracity of the Word of God establishing that God alone has the keys to salvation. However, that's not all verbal plenary scripture has to say on the subject ("*Verbal plenary inspiration means that every word found in the Bible is given to us by God (verbal), everything in the Bible is authoritative (plenary), and every word is also divinely directed (inspired).*" — CARM.org). We cannot, as honest disciples of Jesus Christ, take portions of the Word of God out of context in order to accommodate our lust for answers. Every passage, every verse, every "*jot and tittle*" (**Matthew 5:18**) must be preserved on the basis of integrity to Truth. This means that, while on the one hand we have to accept the truth regarding sovereign election, on the other hand we must accept wholeheartedly man's responsibility regarding his own salvation. Both doctrines exist. Both are true statements. God is not confused about any of this - remember that.

AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.

— Acts 2:21

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

There exists a natural tension between the two aforementioned doctrines concerning salvation. Because the stress is natural, the natural mindedness of mankind seeks his own resolution to this distress. As expected, manmade solutions run the gamut of polar opposites to everything in-between. In order to

foster his own brand of peace, man strives exhaustively in his quest to “fill in the blanks.” The problem with this is simple: **no manmade solution pertaining to salvation has ever worked.**

The solution to every so-called paradox in the Bible is *faith*. Have you ever considered that God purposely left out details about Himself in order that faith shine through? Have you ever considered that the vast majority of pontification over such things is merely speculation? Do you think it's possible that man, with his natural tendencies to problem solve, actually creates more tension in his soul when he skirts the solution standing right in front of him; that is, faith?

Faith reconciles otherwise incomprehensible Truths in the Bible. Among the greatest examples is regarding God's sovereign will in election and man's God-given responsibility in his own salvation. If you're mind aches when you think about such things, then join the club. The good news is that there's a relief valve labeled “faith” that, when activated, releases all the pressure we feel when we can't make sense of things on our own.

My advice is to step back and take a deep breath. *“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand” (Proverbs 19:21)*. Accept the following crucial reality: you aren't supposed to be able to explain every detail you've learned in the Bible (certainly not in the absence of faith). In fact, the purpose of faith is to provide you with peace whenever such a thing arises in your soul. God's purpose in Christ is *“to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross” (Colossians 1:20a)*. Dwell on the phrase *“to Himself.”* Can any of us possibly understand all that this means??? I think not. How could we when we struggle with much lesser things?

I've learned that if I teach strongly on the topic of God's sovereign election people (sometimes my own sheep, even) begin supposing I'm teaching that man doesn't have a free will. If I teach strongly on the topic of man's free will

for a time, these same people suppose I've abandoned all I've taught regarding election. It's a lot like riding a seesaw at times, no kidding! The truth is that I teach whatever the Bible says is true. In the case here, both are true. The fact that natural mindedness struggles with it makes total sense and so I expect such folly, even in a congregation as well taught as my own. My advice is to make the same request as our predecessors did, "*The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith'*" (Luke 17:5)!

Faith is a grace gift. Learn to live by it, as Paul wrote in **Romans 1:17**. If you find yourself overanalyzing Holy Scripture to the point of exhaustion and confusion, step back and remember that God does not want you to know every detail of His plan for His creation. "*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,*" declares the LORD" (**Isaiah 55:8**). There are a lot of things we aren't privy to, and that's perfectly fine and acceptable. Hasn't the Lord God given us more than enough to rejoice over?

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 3:4-7**

I believe that perspective accounts for so much in our own happiness here on Earth. I've learned that it's OK not to conquer every last so-called paradox regarding my life in Christ, and it's good not to even try. I've been humbled to the point of faith, which may just be among the greatest gifts of all. I respect God's sovereign right to choose some for glory and others for destruction (ala **Romans 9:22-24**). I also understand that we all have been given a right to believe, being held accountable to our choices by the Giver, Himself. While this may cause me brain cramps at times, I've learned to love the simplicity of my own

ignorance, for this has become the very basis of things I speak of so confidently.

Let all the earth fear the LORD;

Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.

For He spoke, and it was done;

He commanded, and it stood fast.

The LORD nullifies the counsel of the nations;

He frustrates the plans of the peoples.

The counsel of the LORD stands forever,

The plans of His heart from generation to generation.

— **Psalm 33:8-11**

God's Patience Has Purpose

I remember the first time I read about Job's wife in the **Book of Job**. She has such a small part in the Holy Bible, yet her legacy is profound; sadly, not in a good way. I have to admit that I was like, "Whoa, lady, that's no way to support your husband in time of distress!" Before I go any further with my thoughts, here's the excerpt that I'm referring to (the context is that Job had just lost his health, wealth, and family at the hands of Satan).

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

— Job 2:9-10

I would like to list a few things about Job's wife here:

- Job, the "blameless and upright [one] who feared God and turned away from evil" (**Job 1:1**), married this woman, so chances are she was a virtuous wife (recall, also, that she had just lost everything alongside Job).
- Unfortunately for her legacy, the Bible only records one statement from her made in a time of weakness (think of how many repulsive things you've said over the years).
- The Word of God uses her for the sake of contrast to amplify Job's faithfulness to God (the conversation gives us proof of the depth of Job's resilience and "obedience of faith" - ala the bookends of the **Book of Romans, 1:5** and **16:26**).
- The exchange in **Job 2:9-10** gives us perspective on godly patience (this is the point of this blog).

As the Spirit continues to train us to think with a godly perspective, we discover

that things are not always as they seem. For example, when I first read the **Book of Job** as a new believer, I suffered a knee-jerk reaction to the statement made by Job's wife. I'm not going to lie; I judged her wrongly for many years. Isn't that the hallmark of immaturity?

Immaturity always judges wrongly, except for those times when, by chance, it happens to align with godly judgment. As the old proverb goes, even a broken clock is right twice a day!

The truth is that Job's wife was having a moment of obvious weakness and, for purposes of edifying generations long afterwards, her awful words are recorded in Holy Scripture. I'm supremely confident that, if she's in Heaven, she has no objection to those words remaining on full display. Why? Because she knows the value of them to folks like us, who continue to learn from her mistakes, as well as our own. She happened to play the fool in that moment. So be it. Who among us can say we've never been that person??? Why doesn't God just throw up His tremendous arms and say, "You are wretched, I'm taking you out!"?

Patience.

It's possible that patience is one of the most misunderstood facets of our God. In our immaturity, we can be nearsighted and think of God's patience only in terms of tolerance or mercy (as transactional, not transcendent). While these things keep the righteous wrath of God at bay, upon closer inspection, through a godly lens, we discover that God overlooks our sinful thinking to accomplish a greater purpose. From His perspective, patience brings glory to Him because His purposes are ultimately met. The greatest example of all is regarding salvation. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about this very topic.

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted

ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

— 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Paul wrote, “*for this reason*” (v16), to anchor this passage to the fact that God uses patience in order to accomplish His will. If He didn’t, we’d all perish, as Paul wrote of himself.

My grandmother lived into her nineties and clung to a religion that blasphemes the Word of God. She had a stroke that kept her bed bound for the last two years of her life; she remained nonverbal for a time, as well. When we weren’t sure if she was going to survive, my mom asked me to come with her and pray over her. I would like to believe that the Gospel I gave her that day planted a seed that bore righteous fruit unto salvation, but God only knows. Before she had her stroke, she asked me, “Why am I still here? I’m so old.” I was too weak then to tell her that I thought God was keeping her alive the same way He did with Paul, to give her time to believe the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. Whenever someone asks me about her nowadays, I say that she is a testimony to God’s patience.

We mustn’t slight God’s patience by thinking of it only in terms of mercy or tolerance. From God’s perspective, it’s there to bring about something even greater, beginning with salvation, “*but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8). Without His divine patience,

we'd all be in Hell by now.

Let's consider our opening thoughts regarding Job's wife and how we might relate to her, specifically, through our own failures. The objective of sanctification is to transform our minds (**Romans 12:2**) in such a way that our perspectives shift from ungodly ones (e.g., Job's wife) to godly ones (Job). Job's wife was awfully nearsighted, self-righteous, and wrongly judgmental in **Job 2:9**, just like every immature believer is. Job, on the other hand, stood aligned with God, like the mature believer he was. He knew that God always has a purpose, "*And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD'"* (**Job 1:21**).

God's patience has a purpose. Thanks be to Him that He doesn't take on our knee-jerk reactions to life's circumstances. In His omniscience and forbearance, He looks beyond the distractions we create for ourselves and seeks, tirelessly, to save us from every harmful way that is in us. May we appreciate His patience, even now as His Spirit knits the contents of this blog together in our souls, further sanctifying us to His glory.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!*

— Psalm 139:23-24

"I do believe; help my unbelief."

I've been thinking a lot lately about the patience of God. More specifically, I've been thinking about Christ's patience as the One who became a man and has the definite ability to empathize with His sheep. Sometimes we forget this about our Lord and Savior, that He personally suffered temptation and the sharp edge of human weakness. I believe the Bible discloses such things for the sake of our encouragement.

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**

We believers struggle; and as I mentioned from my pulpit recently, the struggle is real and lasting. It's an imposition that none of us really want in our lives but, nonetheless, it persists, and will continue to do so until the day we die. One of the great struggles is with doubt. Doubt, by nature, is undermining, insidious, and even debilitating at times. It keeps us from doing the things our hearts desire to do (**Romans 7:15**). We may even sin as a result, "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin" (**James 4:17**) - doubt is that strong. We ought to be encouraged, though, for even the disciples who walked with Jesus struggled with incapacitating doubt.

They brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth. And He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. "It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!"

And Jesus said to him, "If You can?' All things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, "I do believe;

help my unbelief."

When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again." After crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, "He is dead!" But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up.

When He came into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, "Why could we not drive it out?" And He said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer."

— **Mark 9:20-29**

The boy's father reveals so much to us, doesn't he? Yet, we'd be remiss if we didn't focus our attention on the words of Jesus first. Jesus clearly indicates that He is calling upon His own faith to cast the demon out of the boy. This incredible act of faith should never be overlooked. I think it's easy to write off Jesus' faith simply because He is the God-man. Yet, as Holy Scripture describes in detail, He didn't use the power of His deity to perform miracles. In fact, He became a man in order to show us how faith actually works, in its perfect form.

Upon seeing the perfect faith of our Prototype, Jesus' disciples began to query Him about their lack of power to do as He did. Jesus responded in a way that we ought to listen intently to, *"This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer"* (**Mark 9:29**). Now, granted, we may not be faced with exorcising demons anytime soon, but this isn't the only application for faith, obviously. The pattern is the same; for the one who doubts is riddled with failure.

Doubt weakens us because it is fundamentally antagonistic to faith. "But [the one who lacks wisdom] 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" (James 1:6).

So, then, what are we to do? It seems helpless. This would be absolutely true except for the fact that we have access to godly power through faith. Therefore,

when we doubt and subsequently fail in some way, we are to respond the way the demon possessed boy's father responded, *"I do believe; help my unbelief"* (Mark 9:24). Since Jesus isn't here on earth anymore, our greatest provision is prayer, ala Mark 9:29. In other words, in our most trying moments, **our first and best option is to fall to our knees.**

God is merciful, kind, and patient. May we never forget this. When we struggle with doubt, we must do as Jesus suggested, go to God in prayer. Although our instincts often tell us to do what is natural, we must avoid what is natural, turning to the supernatural, so that healing may commence. We are going to fail from time to time but that is to be expected.

Learn to expect the inevitable. For example, we doubt and we fail. God created us knowing that we'd be imperfect and in dire need of His power to work through us by means of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). If we spend our time beating ourselves up because we have doubts, we miss the mark that God has set before us and begin wasting our time. Instead, we ought to go to Him in prayer, in humility, and fragility, crying for Him to, *"Increase our faith"* (Luke 17:5). Our flesh may despise this forgone dependence on another, but that is precisely how we bring glory to God.

"Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

— 1 Corinthians 10:31b

My Aching Back!

My secretary told me the other day that I never mention her by name in my messages like I do others. You have to know her, personally, to understand why this is so funny. In any case, I'm not only going to mention her here, I'm going to use her current ailing condition as the basis of this blog! Take that, Monica! :)

Monica works in a job that requires physically assisting the movement of elderly people, many of which are in the rehabilitation homes she works in due to physical incapacitation. As a physical therapist, she's often tasked with assisting very unstable, insecure folks with common tasks that we all tend to take for granted, like getting up out of a chair or walking to the bathroom. It's not uncommon for her patients to outweigh her twofold. This puts her at a disadvantage when the nervous unpredictability of an elderly person strikes without warning. The result is often an injury of some sort, which is exactly what happened recently. Now she's holed up in her home for a week or two with a back injury, tolerating minimal activity. Ugh.

A few days after the incident, I called her up to see how her recovery was going. She's a trooper, but she's not trying to be a hero by going back to work right away. Her wisdom has won her over, which is what I wanted to hear. It was during that conversation that she said something that made me want to write this blog. She said, "I don't want to take pain medicine, even though the doctor repeatedly offered to prescribe it, because *I want to feel the pain*. Pain is what tells me about my injury and where I stand regarding my healing." I immediately said, "That reminds me of the pain we feel in the spiritual life." She agreed. So, I'm sharing our thoughts here.

The Bible teaches us that God uses suffering to sanctify us.

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces

endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

— **Romans 5:3-5**

*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus **will be persecuted.***

— **2 Timothy 3:12**

*And **after you have suffered a little while**, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.*

— **1 Peter 5:10**

Living for Christ *guarantees* we will suffer. In fact, the Bible teaches us that if we attempt to skirt this aspect of our lives we are thwarting the very means by which God sanctifies us (sets us apart for His good purposes)! My friends, that's the very last thing we want to partake in. The glory is in sanctification, something God allows us to play a part in. But, we must endure this crucible - our life is a blessed opportunity to glorify God. We may not ask for pain, necessarily, but when it comes our way, we must do as Monica does with physical pain - accept it, endure it, and ultimately *give thanks for it*.

Before we hung up, we wrapped up the phone conversation with one final thought worth sharing here. We imagined what life would be like in the absence of pain, whether physical or spiritual. We reflected upon a blog I wrote years ago about CIPA (congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis), a disease which renders a person incapable of feeling pain, resulting in unintentional self-mutilation. As much as we don't like experiencing pain, it's a blessing in disguise. As with anything, with proper perspective, we learn to give thanks to God for it.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

— James 1:2-4

I really couldn't summarize the point of this blog any better than James has done above. I'll leave you with this, though. Receive pain the way God intended. It's the hallmark of illness, whether physical or spiritual. It indicates to us that something is wrong. In the absence of it, we'd surely self-destruct, not only injuring ourselves, but also those around us. We are called to endure pain to the glory of God (makes me think of the Cross). Attempting to architect an existence void of it is missing the point altogether - self-medicating isn't the answer (I'm not suggesting we never take meds, so please don't miss the point).

God never gives us more than we are capable of handling, by grace through faith. My encouragement to you is that you stand up and face the pain you're experiencing with divine perspective. Grit your teeth if you must, but just know that God is working something out in you that you may not even be able to put into words - you might be so blinded by the pain in the moment that simply clinging to faith in His promises is your salvation (this should always be enough - it is if you trust Him).

God loves you more than you know. You are His child, after all. A good father may cringe at the thought of it, but his love allows suffering to take its course, to the benefit of his beloved children. How much greater is our Father in Heaven than any we've come to know on Earth? How much greater is His love? If you're in pain, there's a reason for it. Embrace it, endure it, and be sanctified to the glory of God.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

— Romans 8:28

Time Will Tell

At the time of this writing, my congregation has been taught seventy parts on a series titled, *The Lord Is Our Confidence*. I have no idea how much longer the Spirit will persist in His teaching on the topic, but I'm certainly not complaining, neither as a teacher nor a student. When a series goes on this long, it inevitably crosses several micro eras in our lives. What I mean to say is that given the dynamics of life, with the one constant being change, a teaching series that spans months and months results in multiple opportunities to apply what the Spirit's saying to the Church in real time.

We humans tend to think temporally, for that is our nature. We are bound by the construct of time, our memories being sequenced and filed away chronologically in our minds. To us, life is an array of circumstances that we reflect back upon. We define words like "growth" in terms of time. Even biblical terms, like "sanctification," are used in light of this construct we know as time. There are myriad implications as a result of our being bound by time. Let's investigate.

When we're unsure of something, we say we lack confidence. Alternatively, we might express this as insecurity. Hold that thought and add to it the following: with time as our frame of reference, we are infinitely less wise than God since He sees the end from the beginning. In fact, it's more accurate to describe God as transcending the construct of time.

*Listen to me, O Jacob,
and Israel, whom I called!
**I am he; I am the first,
and I am the last.**
My hand laid the foundation of the earth,
and my right hand spread out the heavens;
when I call to them,*

they stand forth together.

— Isaiah 48:12-13

Although it's impossible for us to fully understand life the way God does, it helps with our confidence if we are at least able to conceive of it. For example, if we suspend our normal thinking for a moment and consider how God views life, we realize that our insecurities simply don't exist outside the construct of time. To Him, everything that has and will happen in our lives is already perfectly known. We don't have that insight, but He does, which is why we lack confidence but He never does.

Time is a primitive for humans that gives life context. I recently heard someone say that we don't remember days, rather moments. These moments are nothing more than slices of time stamped with unique circumstances, making them worthy of remembrance. We reflect back on our lives the way we look through photo albums, allowing captured moments in time to sweep us away with whatever emotions are bound up in them. To God, there's only one picture in the photo album and it contains every moment any creature has ever and will ever experience. That's the effect on a person's viewpoint when the construct, and therefore the context, of time is removed - everything collapses into a single viewpoint. Brain cramp, right? It's OK, you don't need to be God to understand the point I'm making here, thankfully.

"Time will tell" is an old proverb that we often recite when we're unsure about our futures. We then use words like "patience" to keep our surging anticipation in check. I think in some ways, when the dam breaks and our emotions take over, we are showing our lack of trust in God. Sure, we'd like to know the outcome of certain situations before they happen, but are we really equipped to handle such knowledge? Furthermore, doesn't time afford us the opportunity to have our faith tested? Isn't that one of the reasons God has put it in place? Indeed, for without testing, how would we know that faith even exists? Faith, being a grace gift from God, when tested and shown to be real, brings glory to God, as Peter

wrote, "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" (1 Peter 1:7).

Time will tell what, exactly? Well, minimally, it tells us whether or not we have real faith.

Does God doubt what He sees in His version of the photo album? Nope. There's only one picture, so He sees everything all at once. We, on the other hand, must flip pages and compare pictures. The "proof of [our] faith" (ala 1 Peter 1:7) exists when we look back in time and see the changes God has made in our lives and the promises that have been fulfilled. Time, then, gives us the benefit of reflection. Interestingly, what we see has been known by God all along. To summarize, when we look back, we catch glimpses of divine viewpoint; however, when we attempt to look forward, we must lean on a different faculty to maintain confidence - faith.

God has perfect faith. We don't. Our faith increases over time, as does our confidence in the Lord.

Think back now to a time when you were completely unsure about your future. Maybe you were terribly insecure and even worrisome. From your current perspective, do you see how God delivered you from that situation? While *you* were riddled with doubts, God wasn't. When your viewpoint coalesces with God's like that (e.g., your time-bound perception catches up with God's eternal one), your faith increases and God is glorified. Looking backwards in time like this makes sense, but looking forward adds a wrinkle to the equation, doesn't it? Time bound creatures like ourselves cannot see the future, so we must depend upon faith alone, trusting that the One who saved us will continue to do so daily. This is where we find our confidence in Him.

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built

up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

— **Colossians 2:6-8**

I like to say that deliverance is but a change of perspective away. Thankfully, perspective is often changed in the blink of an eye. Truth has the power to do that. In fact, Jesus said, *“and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”* (**John 8:32**).

When we say things like, “time will tell,” maybe we ought to finish the sentence. Time will tell us of all the wondrous things that God has known all along. Life is revelation.

Prayer

Maybe one of the most misunderstood aspects of prayer is that it's not just a time to ask for stuff from God. Prayer should never be viewed as a trip to the piggy bank. God gives grace to the humble (**James 4:6**), which implies a certain readiness to accept whatever He reveals to a person seeking His grace. It's true we are to go boldly to the throne of grace, "*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*" (**Hebrews 4:16**); however, we must do so with utter respect for the One who answers, one way or another. We mustn't disrespect Him with religious drivel, that's for sure.

But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

— **Matthew 6:6-7**

In a sense, prayer is more of a time for consultation than anything else; where we talk to God openly, confessing what we believe to be true about ourselves, life, and even Him. In these most intimate times of fellowship, the Holy Spirit is there with us, which ought to provide us with that sense of confidence described in **Hebrews 4:16**.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

— **Romans 8:26**

It's good to know that, in our ignorance, we have a gracious God who prods us to continue plugging along in our prayer, even when we risk the chance of

offending Him. We have a loving, generous, patient God who desires to sanctify us. The process might be slow, but He's never failed. *"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ"* (**Philippians 1:6**). While we are encouraged to go to Him in time of need, it's the manner in which we approach Him that counts; that is to say, we must approach Him with all due respect. He's neither our "sugar Daddy" nor is He merely a shoulder to cry on as we arrogantly persist in our folly. God is a Person of absolute integrity who is willing to point out both our successes and our failures with equal emphasis. We must accept His judgment.

Prayer, then, becomes an altar of truth; the place we go to consult with God one on one. He promises to reveal the truth to those who humbly seek it. *"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"* (**Matthew 6:33**). Prayer is a grace gift that we ought to be so very grateful for; not because we receive goodies (e.g., we ask for a million dollars and we win the lottery), but rather because we receive wisdom from the Holy God of the Universe, truth that sets us free (**John 8:32**).

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, 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 understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

— **Philippians 4:4-8**

When we begin functioning properly in prayer, we have promises to cling to. For example, Jesus said, *"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours"* (**Mark 11:24**). How's that for inspiring confidence? Incredible.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will

be done for you.

— **John 15:7**

The very thought of prayer becomes a source of joy for us. Why? Because we realize that it is actually among the greatest gifts ever given to mankind. When put it into proper perspective, we quickly realize that a direct line to our Father in Heaven is a stupendous act of graciousness, patience, and love. We are bumbling, selfish, egocentric fools who have been invited to fellowship with perfection. To visualize this is to laugh about it. But, it's no joke. It's real and it's precious.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

— **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

As we mature, we realize that, through prayer, we are able to live for others. Through intercessory prayer, we are able to consult with God about their welfare. As with the case with praying for ourselves, we humbly accept whatever light God shines on them. Since He is impartial, we must strive to be also for the sake of understanding. The way we find unity with each other is through understanding the Truth, that is to have the very mind of Christ.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

— **Philippians 2:1-5**

You have a friend above all others in God. He's invited you to fellowship with Him whenever you want. He's willing to impart perfect wisdom to you. All you have to do is remain humble and confess what He reveals to you as truth.

The Things We Pray For

“How are you?”

“Oh, you know, same ol’ same ol’.”

“I know you’ve been struggling lately and I’ve seen how morose you’ve been. You know, it almost seems cyclical, huh? Just know that I’m praying for you.”

“Thanks so much, my friend. This cross I’ve been called to carry gets pretty darn heavy from time to time. I just keep praying for relief. It hasn’t come yet, but I’m assuming that God’s leaving all the pain for a reason. I like to think I’m a witness to the angels, like Job.”

“I understand,” says the concerned friend. They choose to say no more.

God sees two different hearts here. First, He sees a good friend reaching out to another for the sake of encouragement. He also sees this person’s earnest prayers and He favors them because they seek deliverance, through intercession, for the well-being of one of His other children. He doesn’t favor the prayers of the so-called “cross-bearing” individual because their prayers are always the same, seeking relief rather than deliverance.

Some people boast about “carrying a cross”, praying for strength to “press on,” using all the right biblical language, quipping phrases from Holy Scripture, though often grossly out of context. *The cross these people speak of is a counterfeit, and their prayers for relief from their suffering are against God’s will. They like to call upon God’s mercy as if it were a relief valve of sorts; but it isn’t. If God were to bend towards man’s will like this, He’d be enslaved to him (I suggest you read the chapter in my book, *Covert Arrogance - Hiding Out in Plain Sight*, the section titled *Mercy Demands*).*

God possesses and exercises perfect justice. There’s never a time when He doesn’t. This justice is a fundamental aspect of His integrity, which includes His

righteousness also. What this means is that if a person sins, God is perfectly right to judge them. He hates sin because it is antagonistic to His plan to deliver His own children (believers) experientially from the power of it. Therefore, if a person continues in sin, what do you think the holy God of the Universe is going to do for that person? How will He answer their incessant prayers for relief from the guaranteed fruit of sin (e.g., pain, suffering, anguish, etc.)? Will He grant them relief without fail, thus *enabling* their dysfunction to continue, or might He, in integrity, rightly refuse to grant said relief because He loves them? On the flip side, what is the righteous response from the one praying? Should this person presume Job-like responsibilities to the grand stage of angelic host, or might they be better off pondering the root cause of their pain?

“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.

— **Hebrews 12:6-13**

Mankind seldom enjoys looking “behind the veil,” as I like to phrase it. He’s not all that fond of digging too deeply into himself because of fear of what he might find there. Yet, the Bible exhorts us to examine ourselves consistently. If a person fails in this way, the result is a claim to innocence that fosters the presumption

that God has given them a certain cross to bear, and that any suffering endured is a direct result. What this false thinking has done is effectively boxed out the possibility that they may have manufactured their own suffering through sinful behavior (past, present, or planned). Once this thinking becomes foundational, a person rarely, if ever, re-examines it.

Ask yourself, why do our doctors instruct us to examine our body parts for disease more regularly the older we get? It's because our bodies are decaying, aging, getting worse, and therefore are more susceptible to disorder. Why would we ever think that the same isn't true in our spiritual lives, at least in part? The human flesh gets worse over time, not better; more toxic, not purer; more dangerous, not more benevolent. All the more reason to examine its influence in our lives! Like many diseases, its power to overcome us is based on its ability to deceive us into thinking nothing is wrong. We might go years popping pain relievers, praying the pills cover the pain, when all along the root cause goes unaddressed.

Case in point, the opening dialogue. The suffering person was praying for relief, while their friend prayed for deliverance. These are entirely different prayers. The prior seeks to avoid the righteous pain of reaping what is sown through sin, while the latter seeks the righteous will of God, that is, to deliver a person from the thing producing the sin in the first place.

*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

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

— Revelation 3:19

God desires to sanctify / deliver us, not spare the rod just because we wince when we reap rightly what we have sown in sin (e.g., granting a prayer for mercy while on a counterfeit cross - this is the opposite of true mercy!). *"The rod and reproof give wisdom"* (**Proverbs 29:15a**). In God's perfect timing, He may choose to alleviate some of our self-inflicted pain, but that's His sovereign right alone.

Our prayers are often the greatest indicator of where our hearts are. Are we praying for relief or deliverance? There's a difference. Do we seek band-aids or healing? Do we wish to continue in our sin or do we truly desire deliverance from it? Are we just playing games, in the weakness of our human ingenuity, substantiating the need for the Spirit's intercessory prayer?

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

There are a few simple questions we all need to ask ourselves. What is our motivation when we pray? Are we willing to accept, in humility, whatever the Spirit reveals to us? Are we willing to re-examine the foundation of our lifestyles, to challenge the bedrock of our longstanding beliefs? Is it possible we've been deceived for a very long time and the cross we bear is in the shadow of darkness? Sin veils itself in order to gain control. We have to seek what's behind the veil, what's been pushed back into the recesses of our soul, no matter how painful the exercise, for this is where deliverance lies, my friends. To reject such a notion is to frustrate the sanctification that God desires for you.

Seek not relief in the absence of deliverance. Pray likewise.

Here's a short parable for the tenacious folks reading this blog...

Two high school students party on the weekends. They both get drunk regularly. One never gets a hangover, while the other suffers awfully the next morning, without fail. The first one becomes a raging alcoholic and dies from cirrhosis of the liver at thirty-five years old. The second learns his lesson young and lives a healthy life, dying of natural causes at the ripe old age of eighty. Pain saved the second person's life, delivered them. The end.

When Blind Arrogance Trumps All But Our Prayer

God made us for Himself: that is the only explanation that satisfies the heart of a thinking man, whatever his wild reason may say. Should faulty education and perverse reasoning lead a man to conclude otherwise, there is little that any Christian can do for him. For such a man I have no message.

— A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*

Without a smidgen of self-aggrandizement or arrogance I submit the following to you: I'm an engineer by trade who almost became a medical doctor (this, of course, all before God called me to my pulpit). I'm a sensitive person who aches whenever I perceive pain in others. I am tortured by the fact that so many people persist (may I suggest *insist?*) in hurting themselves through self-destructive behavior. The pinnacle of these emotions occurs within me when someone I love, personally, is driving at very high speeds towards their own eternal death. The engineer in me wants to "fix" them and the medical doctor in me wants to "heal" them. I want to hoist them up the way I do vehicles on my car lift in my garage and tighten a few loose bolts. I want to dissect their souls and perform a little surgery to root out the disease. But I can't do any of this, for it is not my job.

This feeling of helplessness is exacerbated when I know a person has heard the Gospel truth, particularly from my own mouth. There's no greater jolt to the human ego than the good news about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. There's also no other necessary fix or operation available to those of us heaven bent on saving souls. The Gospel is sufficient. The control I thought I might have was never mine; it was only an errant notion borne of earnest desire in accord with God's, "*Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (1 **Timothy 2:4**). I'm not strong enough to overcome blind arrogance. At some point in my tenure as an evangelist, I must concede, lest I be injured.

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**

There is relief from this sense of futility after all. Thank God. I can't say that my heart doesn't still ache terribly, but at least I can sleep at night, knowing that God is manifest integrity, void of plans to send anyone to the Lake of Fire without just cause. Still, my heart breaks, especially for those whom I love. This isn't a novel concept, for even Paul intimated similar despair.

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

— **Romans 9:1-3**

As is often the case, the closer we are to another person, the more difficult it can be to evangelize them. It seems we'd have an unobstructed inroad, which is sometimes the case, but we quickly realize that the hardest people to evangelize are often the ones closest to us! Jesus can relate to this, personally.

For not even [Jesus'] brothers were believing in Him.

— **John 7:5**

[Jesus] came to His hometown and began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household." And He did not do

many miracles there because of their unbelief.

— **Matthew 13:54-58**

Jesus' own brothers didn't believe in Him until after His resurrection. Interestingly, we don't see Jesus spending all of His time on evangelizing His immediate family. Rather, He went out to others, leaving His brothers and His townsfolk with the Gospel truth about Himself. We must do the same. There are times when enough is enough and any more pressure contributes to hardness of heart.

So what are we supposed to do when those we love reject the Gospel? We seek divine perspective, for that is always the purest pathway to deliverance. Divine perspective relies solely on divine Truth. For starters, Jesus said, "*He who is not with Me is against Me*" (**Luke 11:23a**). All unregenerate people are reprobates, "*enemies*" of God (**Romans 5:10**). This may be a difficult pill to swallow, as it means that some of our loved ones are indeed "*enemies of the cross of Christ*" (**Philippians 3:18**). What shall we do, then, when we are relegated as discarded spectators, having spent our reserves on presenting the Gospel to our loved ones, only to be rejected, left with this righteous conclusion about their opposition to God? There is one last duty left to our charge.

*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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

— **Matthew 5:43-48**

Pray. When all else fails, pray. When someone spits venom in your face, pray. When someone backhandedly disregards your precious heart, pray. When your love is trampled under foot, pray. When your spirit is crushed and the only thing left standing is your anger, pray. Pray for more opportunity to pray for those you love. *“Pray without ceasing”* (**1 Thessalonians 5:17**). God will handle the rest.

Spiritual Economies and the Sphere of God

There are two spheres in which humans abide in. Within those spheres exists all the makings of a functioning economy. They are like their own little planets, only the distinctive feature isn't physical like Earth, it's spiritual. In other words, there are two separate realms, each with its own economy. In order to merchandise in either of these economies, a person must acquire currency. In Satan's economy, that currency is creature credit, a summary term borrowed from **Romans 1:25**. In God's economy, the currency is grace. The prior requires constant, exhaustive, futile labor on behalf of its supporters; whereas, the latter simply requires humility.

I'm describing the natural estate of mankind prior to salvation when I write about Satan's economy and mankind's estate after salvation when I write about God's. An unbeliever is relegated to abiding in Satan's economy because of the limitations of the human flesh. A believer, on the other hand, is privileged with access to God's economy because, upon spiritual rebirth, they have been given the supernatural ability to receive God's grace.

But there's a wrinkle which we believers must understand, and it can be large or small, depending upon our humility (or arrogance). Even though we are saved and designed to glorify God, the vestiges of sin remain in our earthly bodies and, as a result, we are constantly tempted by our flesh.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

The truth is that even though the distinction between the two aforementioned spiritual economies are clear, we believers are able to spend time in either, depending on whether or not we're being arrogant or humble. If we invest in Satan's economy, we might receive a return on investment (e.g., a pat on the back and an "attaboy!"); however, based on Holy Scripture, this is a short-lived, counterfeit blessing. *"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he 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"* (**Galatians 6:7-8**). If we invest in God's economy, we are truly blessed. *"But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it"* (**Luke 11:28**)!

We believers must be ever aware of our spiritual condition and in which economy we are currently merchandising in. As we are sanctified, we become more adept at identifying this. We may become discouraged at times, but we mustn't grow weary. Remember that even Paul, the great apostle of Jesus Christ, struggled in the same way.

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

— **Romans 7:14-25**

All Your Eggs In One Basket

If you've ever heard a financial analyst or planner speak about money to a layperson, the term "diversification" most certainly came up. They usually advise amateur investors to spread out their investments so that if one of the investments performs poorly, the others can pick up the slack. This protects the investor from losing everything if one stock tanks in the market. The idea is to have a diversified investment portfolio where, on average, the return on investment (ROI) is positive, even if one of the stocks turns out to be a bad investment by itself.

In finance, diversification is the process of allocating capital in a way that reduces the exposure to any one particular asset or risk...The simplest example of diversification is provided by the proverb "Don't put all your eggs in one basket". Dropping the basket will break all the eggs. Placing each egg in a different basket is more diversified. There is more risk of losing one egg, but less risk of losing all of them. On the other hand, having a lot of baskets may increase costs.

— *Wikipedia.com*

Most amateur investors will opt for this kind of financial strategy because it makes the most sense. In the world of finance, diversification is the smart thing to do for most people. The "don't put all your eggs in one basket" rule of thumb can also be applied to several circumstances in life. Do we purchase one nice car or two mediocre ones? Do we invest all of our time in building a single friendship or less time building several? Do we exercise one way and risk injury or cross-train? Do we become a specialist at work or a jack of all trades? The list goes on and on. In most cases, diversification is a sound strategy.

But what does the Bible say about this? Let's narrow our focus on one specific investment decision we all have to make, especially as believers. Unbelievers

technically do not even have the option I'm about to describe. I'm referring to the two different spiritual economies: God's versus Satan's. The Bible has a lot to say about this one decision.

The Word of God teaches us that diversification is a terrible idea when it comes to spiritual economies.

What do I mean by diversification in spiritual economies? Simply put, I'm describing those situations where believers invest in two economies instead of one. When they do so, they lose in two fundamental ways! First, whatever time and energy is spent merchandising in Satan's economy is lost - the ROI for believers in Satan's economy, though it promises to perform incredibly, is always negative. Second, the opportunity to gain larger returns in God's economy is lost because this person isn't all in. Paul wrote about his experiences with investing in Satan's economy versus God's.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

— **Philippians 3:7-8**

Paul understood that the ROI for him prior to being fully invested in God's economy was, "counted as loss" (v7).

Obviously, the best ROI for a believer is one-hundred percent investment in God's economy. If this is the case, then why do believers still invest in Satan's economy? Jesus spoke very plainly on this topic, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (**Matthew 6:21**). I cannot think of a single believer I've ever met that doesn't have a diversified investment portfolio, spiritually speaking. I believe personal reasons do differ, but the common thread is that their affections, their hearts, are divided between the grand promises they receive from the world

and those they read about in the Bible. The result is a diversified portfolio and an inevitable pair of losses. The parallels between financial and spiritual investments aren't novel to my writing - not at all. Paul used finances to illuminate this issue long before I ever considered it.

But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.

— **1 Timothy 6:6-11**

If a believer attempts to abide in both Satan's and God's economies, they suffer a twofold loss. In order to maximize their ROI, a believer must place "all their eggs in one basket," namely, God's economy. While this is inadvisable in the financial realm, it is the absolute best possible strategy in the spiritual. This amounts to a believer abiding in "undivided devotion to the Lord" (**1 Corinthians 7:35**) - "[taking] every thought captive to obey Christ" (**2 Corinthians 10:5**). Paul wrote about the dangers of listening to the various satanic agencies pitching us investment advice, "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ" (**Colossians 2:8**).

Investing in Satan's economy is a really bad idea. While you might increase in worldly wealth, you will miss out on heavenly riches. Cut your losses and invest everything you've got into God's economy and be blown away at the ROI. Does

this mean you cannot be in possession of a financial investment portfolio? Not at all. As I've taught over the years from my pulpit, "It's not the blessing, it's what you *think* of it that matters most." If your self-esteem increases as your bank account does, you've got a problem. If it doesn't, you don't. The simple truth is that God wants all of your affections aimed at Him, not your wealth, or anything else for that matter.

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

— 1 Timothy 6:17-19

God's after our hearts. Our investment portfolios are evidence of where our hearts truly lie. Where and how we spend our precious resources matters to God, and therefore it ought to matter to us. The last blog I wrote was titled, "Who Am I?". In that blog the Spirit had me write, "On the grand stage of life, each of us is insignificant by comparison; yet, God has made us significant to Himself." Our lives matter to God - isn't that enough reason to make them matter to ourselves? It's true, we have been given but a little wealth for a little while during our pilgrimage on Earth. Let us invest it wisely and bring glory to God.

One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?

No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other,

or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

— Luke 16:10-13

Be Like a Wise Birdie

Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, John Lennon, Mark Zuckerberg, Katharine Hepburn, Neil deGrasse Tyson: all of these people have denounced our Father in Heaven (Jesus said, *"If you knew Me, you would know My Father also"* - **John 8:19b**), and yet they are heralded as among society's elect. Let that settle in and do not be dismissive. Step back and consider the big-picture. These people are venerated. Heck, when Steve Jobs died not so long ago, people were pouring over his memory as if he were divine. Granted, he was likely an intellectual genius and, obviously, he was super wealthy, but what does his Creator have to say about Steve and the rest of the elite?

*Those of low estate are but a breath;
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.*

— **Psalm 62:9**

I love that phrase, *"those of high estate are a delusion"*. The New Living Bible translates this phrase as *"the powerful are not what they appear to be."* If we're going to marvel at anything, it should be at the efficiency of their trickery, their counterfeit authority that often stretches far beyond their realm of expertise. They are antichrists and the world seeks their counsel for deliverance. *"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"* (**1 John 2:18**). Antichrists cannot save themselves, never mind uphold the expectations of their idolaters. Because they *"lean on their own understanding"* (against God's will - **Proverbs 3:5**), they do not truly know God - *"the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so"* (**Romans 8:7**). Since they don't know God, they cannot reason with Him, nor

do they desire to.

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.

— 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

In **verse 21**, our Creator (the Creator also of the aforementioned social elite) explains the delusion of those still blinded by the lies of the kingdom of darkness: *“the world through its wisdom did not come to know God.”* Dwell on this statement, for it explains everything being examined here. Allow me to paraphrase:

Never assume social status implies wisdom. The world is full of wealthy fools and educated idiots. Natural man possesses his own theology (whether or not he uses this term isn't important), where he is god of his own domain. Nothing is more foreign to a believer in Christ than this foul supposition which rejects God's dominion. Therefore, without a consensus on the sovereignty of God, there is no intersection for reasoning.

Again, in **1 Corinthians 1:21**, we have “*the world through its wisdom did not come to know God.*” The principle here is human wisdom *never* produces godly thinking. In fact, because of the utterly depraved nature of the natural heart, human wisdom is borne of antagonism towards God. Not only is the natural man unwise, he is absolutely *stupid due to his lack of divine wisdom*. Can you imagine if I walked up on stage with Elon Musk (the founder of Tesla and a self-described atheist) and publicly stated that he is stupid. Which of us would be promptly mocked and escorted off of the stage? And yet, *I’m the one* standing up for eternal wisdom, for the Word of truth. I don’t mock for the sake of mocking, but for the sake of the Gospel, I will contend. In general, I become the stumbling block whenever I speak up for the truth because it exposes the darkness, where idols thrive. “*So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth*” (**Galatians 4:16**)? Maybe Mr. Musk would, in the presence of his loyal disciples, sit me down with a mic to discuss God. Therein lies the trap...and the core reason for this blog. Consider me like a wise birdie...

Indeed, it is useless to spread the baited net

In the sight of any bird;

But [sinners] lie in wait for their own blood;

They ambush their own lives.

...

How long, O naive ones, will you love being simple-minded?

And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing

And fools hate knowledge?

— **Proverbs 1:17-18, 22**

The bird in **v17** represents a person with righteous wisdom. For example, if that scenario with Mr. Musk and me were to ever play out, I’d likely refuse the seat on stage, the baited net, so to speak, preferring to let the Holy Spirit work the crowd supernaturally in ways I could not. I may seek an opportunity to present

the Gospel, but that'd be about it. In setting a snare for the righteous, the antagonistic elite make traps for themselves and then walk right into them, while the wise birdie flies away. Hence Solomon's scornful remarks in v22 regarding man's affection for wisdom being infinitely beneath God's (that's right, worldly intellectualism is called "*simple-mindedness*" in the Bible).

Why would we ever esteem the simple-minded? Furthermore, why would we ever entertain reasoning with someone who speaks of fantasy and delusion amplified by unfounded self-esteem? These are the same people who crucified Jesus Christ because, not only did man not esteem *Him*, they resented Him for siding with His sovereign Father.

*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

Let us not be too quick to throw stones, though, we believers can become delusional ourselves if we aren't careful. We might lower our guards regarding the basic truth that unregenerate man is unreasonable, when in fact, he's not only unreasonable, but *insensible*! Because man is born dead in his trespasses and sin he is completely unaware of his desperate state. Why do you think unbelievers often seem so secure and happy? It's because they have no sense of feeling, no response mechanism, when it comes to God's perspective on their vileness. It's a bit like spiritual sociopathy in the sense that there's no horror or remorse associated with even the highest academic understanding of man's fall in the Garden. Without God's helping hand in terrifying them, they remain unaffected, pleased with their own work for themselves.

If this is the estate of natural man, how does a believer reason with them? If a person can't feel the pain we feel, how do we express the deeply felt need for

repentance? We can only explain what the Bible has to say, nothing more. God teaches man about his offensiveness and need for repentance. We'll never excite or revive a dead soul; that is God's work in the conversion process. Both repentance and saving faith are grace gifts from God - it's a miracle that He saves any of us, but He certainly has. It'd be easier for us to teach a donkey advanced calculus than illuminate an unbeliever's soul with divine wisdom - only God is able to accomplish the latter. If man is unreasonable, then do not try to reason with him on his own ground, lest you be seduced into the trap.

The collective jeering of the antagonistic elite has reached a fevered pitch in America. I encourage you to not be influenced by numbers or by the oppressive nature of our society. We are afloat with a ship of fools - so foolish that they hate without cause. Attempting to reason with them will only stir the pot of hatred in them, exciting the flesh to rear up in defiance.

"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 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. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.

"He who hates Me hates My Father also.

*"If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well. But they have done this to fulfill the word that is written in their Law, **'THEY HATED ME WITHOUT A CAUSE.'***

"When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the

Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, and you will testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning."

— **John 15:18-27**

It may come as a shock to some that unregenerate man hates Christ without a cause. But, this is what the Bible clearly tells us. An unregenerate man chooses this hatred, for he is wholly wretched, depraved from birth. What are we ever going to accomplish by arguing with such a person about things eternal? Doing so is like kicking a hornet's nest - you're bound to get stung. They are blind, lost, reprobate. Only God can bend the will of mankind. How can a man even say the words, "I believe in Jesus Christ" without divine intervention, without the will of God somehow inserted in him, by grace? He cannot. G. H. Bishop of the Dutch Reformed Church rightly said:

Man can no more turn to God than the dead can sit up in their coffins. He can no more originate a right desire than he can create a universe. God the Holy Spirit alone, by sovereign, special interference, calls dead sinners to life and creates within them "the desires of their hearts" — the first faint fluttering of a breath toward holiness.

There is nothing special about social elitism other than the special blindness to Truth that predominates it. We ought never presume divine wisdom exists on a scale set by world standards. There is no correlation between social status and divine wisdom. If the Bible shows us anything it's that man tends towards inverse proportionality on the subject. *"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**). This is why I sometimes ask my congregation, "Where are all the doctors, lawyers, big business men/women, and the local celebrities? Why are they not interested in our messages?"

I suppose all of this is just a long-winded way of repeating what Jesus has already 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). James, Jesus’ brother, warned us of our natural tendency to give honor to those exalted by society.

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.

For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?

Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?

— James 2:1-7

Do not waste your time or energy trying to navigate carnal reasoning, whether privately or in conversation with unbelievers. Toss carnal reasoning in the trash with authority. If it makes said company stumble, then you know you did it correctly. *“Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13).* If it was appropriate for Jesus to behave this way in the presence of all, then it is appropriate for His disciples. *“For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7).* Exercise this discipline on the authority of Jesus Christ, who said:

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**

To Hell with the idols of this age.

Heaven on Earth

We have all heard the phrase “Heaven on Earth” used to describe immense pleasure, often associated with emotions such as peace and joy. What is it, really, though, according to the Bible??? If we hold fast to the tenets of peace and joy being the transcendent qualities, we are left with a discussion focused on that which induces such things. While the world postulates that an earthly experience (e.g., hot fudge sundae, massage, romance, sex, etc.) is the key, the Bible reveals something distinctly different.

I once taught a nine-part series titled, *The Peaceful Fruit of Righteousness*. You might know that the title, itself, is a ripoff from Holy Scripture.

*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 12:11-14**

What we learned in that series was that the “*fruit of righteousness*” is the **cause** for “*peace*.” This being an elemental facet of sanctification, itself. I think it’s easy to overlook such details and miss the cause-effect relationship between peace and righteousness. We might summarize as follows: **righteousness produces peace in the soul**. Not only is this true, but if we synthesize this with other passages in the Bible, we may add that joy is fruit of righteousness as well.

Let’s consider the intrinsic relationships between righteousness, peace, and joy. We ought not expect peace or joy in the absence of righteousness. The inverse is also true - we ought not expect righteousness to exist without resultant peace and joy. This triad is bound, each part to the other, on Earth

and in Heaven.

Righteousness gives us solidarity with God. It is characterized by holy, obedient living. *“Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Ephesians 6:14).* Righteousness gives us the ability to *“stand firm,”* an imperative for peace to exist, for who finds peace in the absence of proper footing? Righteousness establishes our posture before God, allowing us to boldly live out our convictions, *“having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:11).*

Peace is what settles us. It’s increasingly rare nowadays. To find it, nay even *see* its presence in this world, is like finding a five carat diamond. Yet, the Word promises us that we have access to it, as fruit of the Spirit of Christ. *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, **peace**, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23).* Whenever I think of peace, I immediately think of Heaven - finally, freedom from earthly concerns. As elusive as it may seem in time, it is given to the righteous, as fruit.

Joy transcends the noise, the friction, and the troubles that the world poses. In the absence of such obstacles, we are free to fulfill our purpose in life, as our Lord and Savior did, *“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).* Joy renders world forces powerless against us, for within the sphere of righteousness nothing is able to derail us from our purpose; that is, to bring glory to God in the midst of a perverse generation. *“You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:6).*

As a whole, the Bible depicts righteousness, peace, and joy as end goals of sanctification. If Heaven is where we’ll experience consummate sanctification, then “Heaven on Earth” must be the foreshadowing. Fair enough? This is why whenever we read about righteousness, peace, and joy, the context always

directs us to God's ultimate purpose for His children. In other words, His intention is that we be delivered from the vestiges of our former sinful lives to the sphere of salvation, that is, namely, the Kingdom of God. *"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"* (**Matthew 6:33**).

Since we cannot produce peace or joy on our own, our occupation ought to be with that which *produces* righteousness, namely obedience. We mustn't truncate our thinking, though, the way religious folks do. We have to remember that for obedience to be acceptable, it must be properly motivated, for *"the Lord looks at the heart"* (**1 Samuel 16:7**). Obedience requires humility. *"The reward of humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, honor and life"* (**Proverbs 22:4**). Humility opens the door to salvation and deliverance, e.g., access to the kingdom of God. Experiencing "Heaven on Earth" is a function of this.

For the kingdom of God is...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

— **Romans 14:17**

Christ's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, empowers us to enjoy the blessings of God's kingdom, even while still here on earth. This is God's desire for His children. Humble obedience is the key. In this, our hope of deliverance from our daily toils is established. We rightly conclude that deliverance into the kingdom of God (not a hot fudge sundae) is equivalent to experiencing "Heaven on Earth." Selah.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

— **Romans 15:13**

Let Freedom Ring!

“During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.”

— George Orwell, 1984

If you've read the above book by Mr. Orwell, you know that the premise of the book is, what might be called, “normalized evil,” where an evil system of thinking replaces a good one. Anyone in the book who chose to speak out against these “norms” was quickly and violently confronted. The prophet Isaiah warns us of such things, and his writing, unlike Orwell's, is nonfictional.

*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!*
*Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine
And valiant men in mixing strong drink,
Who justify the wicked for a bribe,
And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!*

— Isaiah 5:20-23

I'm writing this blog at dawn on the beloved American holiday, The Fourth Of July. I have mixed emotions about this day because, while I understand and embrace the idea of celebrating freedom, I wonder how far we've used that freedom to place ourselves in bondage.

Take a long look around you today and consider if what you see reflects the original spirit of the U. S. Constitution. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that there has been a reversal of core values. We tout our country as the global beacon and protector of freedom and yet, in many ways, we enjoy fewer freedoms than some suffering extreme poverty in, say, India. You might be

thinking, “How can that be?” Easy. A person can be governmentally free but in complete bondage between their two ears, and vice versa. The freedom that Christ has set us free to enjoy has nothing to do with what country you live in, at least not fundamentally, nor the overt freedoms it maintains.

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.” 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 5:13-16

It’s true that we Americans celebrate The Fourth Of July for good reason. Furthermore, we are indeed global leaders, so it’s fair to say that our culture is universally accepted as good by many, at least it has been over the past few hundred years. So how dare an insignificant little pastor write such a blog, huh? “The audacity,” some might add! Listen, I love my country, but I love my Lord infinitely more. I served her for the sake of freedom (something only 7.3% of living Americans have done), but I live for Christ. I speak out against my beloved homeland, from time to time, when the Spirit forces me to ponder how she’s become a prostitute to evil. You might say, “Wow, for a veteran and a citizen of America, those are pretty strong words!” I repeat:

“During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.”

— George Orwell, 1984

Don’t worry, I’m not going to find a local parade today and picket it in some misguided protest. What would that accomplish? Besides, there are still a lot of things to celebrate on a day like today. I’m not disjointed from my neighbors, only increasingly sore in my own joints. I praise the fact that we still have the freedom to write blogs like this one. Hooyah! Although, the sobering truth is that there may come a time when this kind of writing could land me in jail. It happens in other countries as I write this, akin to Mr. Orwell’s famous

aforementioned book. In fact, some are killed for writing such things, deemed revolutionaries and threats to peace.

I'm a patriot, but I see what I see. I'm not protesting my country's independence on the very day we take pause as Americans to celebrate it - may it never be. I'm stirring the conscience of my brothers and sisters in Christ to see past the veil of deception that thickens with each passing year. The truth is that our beloved country, while still sweet to the tune of social freedoms, has lost her way in terms of true freedom. Some might argue that we have more freedom than ever, especially historically underrepresented minorities, and even women. I get that, but that's not the kind of freedom I'm speaking of. I refer to a freedom that exists in the soul of a believer. When I hear the words, "Let freedom ring," I immediately think of the only One able to truly afford it to any human being, regardless of what nation they reside in.

Our country, and the whole world it seems, is accelerating away from the only freedom that matters. Unfortunately, most people vehemently disagree with me. The fabric of evil has become so thick that most people do as Isaiah warned against, calling "*evil good, and good evil*" (**Isaiah 5:20**). Sadly, I'm the one who's become the "sinner" against his own country. I'm the one who needs to be silenced. I'm the one whose convictions are antiquated and in need of modification. Am I a revolutionary? Not today, I pray, but who's to say that twenty years from now this kind of communication wouldn't get me in some real trouble, even in this country?

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.

— **Hebrews 3:13**

Managing Debt

A few years ago I wrote a blog titled, *“The American Dream Is a Trap,”* which raised a few eyebrows, I’m sure. Nonetheless, I stand by my convictions (said blog is now a part of my book titled, *“Diary Of a Journeyman - Volume I,”* which is free for download on the North Christian Church website). The gist of the blog was to challenge mainstream American thinking regarding home ownership (and debt in general). While politicians entice citizens of our beloved country with dream-fulfilling promises, I challenge if said dreams are even viable or just a ploy to garner votes in upcoming elections. The simple truth is that not everyone has been ordained by God to own a home. To be honest, unless a person has no lien against their home, do they really own it, or does the bank (I speak in practical terms)?

If a person unwittingly buys the lie that every citizen of America “deserves” to own their own home, they are much more likely to follow in the footsteps of their neighbors, who previously devoured the same lie and now find themselves “house poor” (a term used to describe someone who works hard to pay their mortgage but has very little money left over to enjoy other things in life). In pursuit of this lie, people have gone so far as to abandon traditional, biblical family values, when both parents work full-time while someone else raises their kids (what are these parents teaching their children about values??). No matter how beat up the parents are at the end of the month, though, the mortgage payments arrive like clockwork, as faithful as ever to their singular purpose. To a person who has overextended themselves, this drudgery becomes a form of slavery.

Debt may just be one of the most common forms of slavery today. It is a cruel taskmaster with unerring precision. The Bible warns us against finding ourselves in debt for this very reason and provides us with a better perspective.

*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 13:7-8**

What's the one debt that God encourages? "**Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another**" (v8a). I'm not making unnecessary blanket statements here regarding a "zero-debt" existence, for in its rightful place, debt is a useful financial vehicle. However, most people that I know do not have the financial acumen to capitalize on said advantages, so they are better off avoiding debt altogether. It's best for most people to simply abide in the wisdom we see in the Bible. Stay away from debt that enslaves you. Focus on what God says you owe others, namely, to *love* them!

It's wise to live within your immediate means. If this requires that you drive a jalopy for a car, then so be it. If it means you avoid all impractical spending, then so be it. Too many Americans have debt that has got them in a real jam. The pressure becomes so great that depression often sets in and a real sense of giving up results. All because they bought a lie about a life they thought they were born entitled to. God never says that we are entitled to any form of prosperity in this life, other than in the spiritual sense for us believers. In fact, His Word teaches us to keep our wits about us, to be smart about managing our households, and never become a slave again to the world system.

If we incur a short-term debt (e.g., we owe a plumber for some work he completed recently), then we ought to make it a priority to pay it. After all, in this example, he earned his wages, right?

Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.

— **Romans 4:4**

The Bible teaches us that a person who works is worthy of their wages. Well, if we are the one paying said wages, then it is a good thing to pay what is due. This is fair to the worker and smart for us, the client. It's also a show of integrity that brings glory to God.

Debt is oppressive by nature (except for those financial wizards that are so astute that they manage to make money in the minutest margins of our financial system - it's their profession). Few things are more debilitating than oppression. Have you ever really felt it? It's asphyxiating when it becomes seemingly too large to escape. Over time, it makes life increasingly less enjoyable.

Anything that robs us of the blessing of freedom should be earmarked for extinction. Debt is a killer. It's kill or be killed for us. As I've taught my two sons growing up, "Stay in front of the wave!" What I mean by this is that it is a good thing to spend your early years ensuring that any looming debt (e.g., school loans, car liens, etc.) is paid off as soon as possible. Better yet, whenever possible, avoid such debt altogether by considering "less prestigious" routes that end in the same place, land the same job, etc.

A wise person once said that television programs are nothing more than the space between commercials, implying that television programs exist as a decoy for product marketing. Think about that for a moment and I'm sure you'll agree. So, I say, "Turn your TV off before you begin buying the lies!" The truth is that you really don't need to go into debt just to get the latest HDTV, diamond earrings, automobile, etc. You might say, "But I need it!" The reality is that you just want it. Are you going to die without it? Nope. But, since you eventually have to pay for it, you've not only purchased fleeting joy, but its ugly cousin, long-term suffering.

Shiny new things guarantee one thing; you have to pay for them, one way or another. As my high school freshman political science teacher once stated,

“There’s no such thing as a free lunch.” If your only option is to exercise a line of credit in order to purchase something, your best option is to avoid the temptation and move on. No one needs so-called “nice things.” In fact, nice things are often wolves in sheep’s clothing, posing as blessings, but are nothing more than evil devices designed to keep you distracted by debt. That’s right, the kingdom of darkness has an investment strategy, too; only in its case, the return on investment is your misery.

And [Jesus] said to His disciples, “For this reason I say to you, do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

“Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds! And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life’s span? If then you cannot do even a very little thing, why do you worry about other matters?

“Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass in the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more will He clothe you? You men of little faith! And do not seek what you will eat and what you will drink, and do not keep worrying. 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 12:22-31

Owe nothing to anyone in this world but to love them.

Post-Season Expansion

According to *NFL.com*, the website for the National Football League (NFL), in 1970 football overtook baseball as America's favorite spectator sport. As a spectator myself, I can understand why. To give this phenomenon some context, data journalist Noah Veltman stated, "Nowadays, if you're 6 foot 3 inches and 280 pounds, you're too big for most skill positions and too small to play line." The physical scale of players in the NFL has increased from William "Pudge" Heffelfinger being the dominant lineman of his era, the late 1800's, at a mere 6'3" and 200 pounds, to an average of 6'5" and 312 pounds today for a lineman. Economics 101 says that this is what Americans want to see on the gridiron - giants.

The evolution of the NFL (and, in general, most professional sports) doesn't stop there. Not only does its supercharged economy demand increasingly impressive physical specimens on the gridiron, we also want to see more and more of them! In 1943, the regular season was only 10 games long. Today, it is 16 games. That's a 60% increase in games for regular season play. From 1933-1966, the post-season was comprised of a single championship game. In 1967, the post-season expanded, where four conference champions would meet at the NFL Playoffs, a two-round playoff. Today, there are 12 teams invited to the NFL Playoffs and 11 games are played. That's an 1,100% increase in the length of the post-season.

Phew, that's enough...I hope you get the point. America has demanded bigger players and more games. This essentially amounts to more awe-inspiring feats of physicality and more time spent in front of a television, or playing ESPN fantasy football, or betting, or...you get the point. There's an entire economy built around the NFL, and not just a financial one (hence this blog). And this is just *one* professional sport we're talking about here!

Have you ever been to a busy airport during football season? How about one

which boasts a professional football team (or any professional team for that matter)? It's like a sea of team colors has beset the crowd - hats, team jerseys, stickers, handbags, t-shirts, you name it. America loves its professional sports teams.

But why? This is the question I've been asking myself. Here's what the Spirit has revealed to me.

The human flesh is bound to something I'll dub "creature-credit". *"For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever"* (**Romans 1:25**). Creature-credit, as I'm describing it here, is the currency of the world's economy. This economy is led by the "god of this world" (**2 Corinthians 4:4**), Satan. Just like a financial economy, in order to purchase, one must possess a sum of currency. Here's where it gets tricky...

In Satan's economy, people "earn" creature-credit by selling their core product, themselves. How much creature-credit a person is awarded depends upon what the demand is at the time they choose to put themselves up for sale. The NFL is a perfect microcosm of this. Have you ever seen the NFL pre-draft goings-on? It looks like the slave trade of old (I speak not of race here), grown men being paraded half-naked in front of potential buyers (not just team scouts, but since it's televised, every fan sitting in an armchair at home). If a particularly impressive physical specimen walks on stage, you can literally hear the audience gasp. It's utterly grotesque, but it fits perfectly into Satan's economy. And, to be frank, those posing on stage are there because they want to sell their wares to the highest bidder.

The chances of the average person being awarded the same level of creature-credit as an NFL athlete is very low. So, the guy sitting at home with his beer belly watching all of this transpire says to himself, "Man, I'll never measure up." This is the critical point of the blog. People with the most creature-credit in Satan's economy become idols. By definition, an idolater never measures up

to their idols. The result is a concession in the soul that ought never take place. Instead of simply enjoying the sport, this person walks away with a large dose of insecurity; after all, they've been visually assaulted with, "You'll never be as highly esteemed as your idols!"

So, what's the next best thing for a person whose self-esteem has been decimated by their idolatry? What hope does the armchair quarterback who's in bondage to this unholy economy ever have of enjoying some creature-credit of their own? Well, it turns out that glomming onto a professional team (or even an individual player on that team) is the next best thing. By simply associating with a team, especially one that is winning, a person can cling to something greater than themselves, like a parasite. Only instead of sucking blood, they lap up whatever creature-credit their idols and their handlers offer up as scraps.

Don't "see" it yet? The next time you go to a public place of gathering, look around. In New England, when it's football season, New England Patriots jerseys can be seen everywhere. My first question is always the same, "I wonder if that person is saved...I truly hope so." With so many people supporting the NFL's economy, is it fair to say that some of them, at least, represent Paul's words, *"For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator"* (**Romans 1:25**)?

To answer my own question regarding the post-season expansion in the NFL... why? Well, it's obvious, isn't it? It's economics 101 all over again. In any economy, if there's a demand, suppliers will find a way to fulfill it. America demands idols on the basis of Satan's economy, where creature-credit is the currency. We say stupid things like, "That's *my* team!" Listen, unless you're Robert Kraft, you have zero ownership of the New England Patriots. The best a person can ever hope for is a smidgen of creature-credit as other idolaters in this unholy economy nod their heads with respect, as if simply choosing a team and purchasing some fan paraphernalia is worthy of such things. That's the pathetic nature of Satan's economy; it's filled with a small number of fat cats surrounded

by millions of starving feral cats.

The truth is that if we dwell too long on all of this, it can bring our spirits quite low. Don't feel alone, it had the same effect on Jesus Christ, Himself, when He experienced the wretchedness of this world.

*When He approached Jerusalem, **He saw the city and wept over it**, saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. "For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation."*

*Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling, saying to them, "It is written, 'AND MY HOUSE SHALL BE A HOUSE OF PRAYER,' but **you have made it a ROBBERS' DEN.**"*

— Luke 19:41-46

Two key things are noteworthy in this passage, relative to this blog. First, Jesus wept over the depravity of Jerusalem. His heart was broken, having seen firsthand the effects of merchandising in an economy given to the affections of the devil. Second, when Jesus busted up the trade market in the temple, He provided a picture of the Lord's general response to an unholy economy. Think about what God might have to say this coming Sunday (it's football season at the time of this writing) when vast majorities of so-called "Christians" forgo attending a church service or spending any time giving thanks to God in order to secure their position in front of the television. Consider what God must think of this scene.

One last thought:

It makes total sense that we've seen a huge expansion in the NFL. The NFL Playoffs is merely a symptom, an answer to a demand. You see, a shorter season (e.g., one without the extended post-season) means there's less for an insecure person to grab hold of, less for a fan to leach off of to feed their own insecurities. You may be saying, "Whoa, slow your roll, there's nothing wrong with watching a football game!" I agree, there isn't. That's the excuse that everyone uses to cover up the truth, though. The truth is that man is always looking for an idol to cling to. It gives him a false sense of security for a time (no worries, in addition to football season, there's baseball, basketball, soccer, etc...wash, rinse, repeat year after year). In fact, the more superior the idol, the more secure he feels. Just ask a Patriots fan (since 2001, the Patriots have won 6 Super Bowls). Tom Brady, the starting quarterback, is like a demigod in Massachusetts. Man asked, Satan delivered (I'm not positing Brady is from the devil, only that the promotion of him is).

As this world drifts further and further away from Christ, I fully suspect that it will continue to figure out ways to capitalize on the demands of the human flesh. Professional sports teams are only one identifiable area where Satan's economy is thriving (e.g., new fads). The post-season expansion in the NFL is an indicator of a much larger issue, my friends. People have become increasingly dependent on alternatives to Christ. The more this occurs, the more backfilling is required.

To flee from Christ, our Creator, is to abandon any sense of security we might ever hope to have in this world. To become a member of the throng of idolaters painting their faces and wearing idolatrous game jerseys is to become a fool. What has the NFL post-season done for you, really, besides take more of your money and usher you further into the bondage of creature-credit? It's a fair question we all need to ask ourselves, regardless of which sport (or fad, etc.) we might favor. Satan says, "Choose your poison!"...and poison it is.

The Three Pillars of Satan's Unholy Economy

The Bible speaks a lot about three particular forms of evil. I'm going to call them the three pillars of Satan's unholy economy. I know that's a mouthful, but my hope is that it makes complete sense once you've finished reading this blog.

Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

— 1 John 5:21

Keep your life free from love of money.

— Hebrews 13:5a

Flee from sexual immorality.

— 1 Corinthians 6:18a

Did you catch the trilogy of evil? The Bible very clearly lays out three key prohibitions for us: idolatry, love of money, and sexual immorality. Each is a major theme in the Bible. Each represents an integral component of Satan's antichrist economy, which is predicated on lies. *"When [Satan] lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies"* (John 8:44b). Each pillar tempts us with empty promises meant to draw us away from our confidence in the Lord God.

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.

Experientially, the three aforementioned pillars are dynamically linked, never too distant in relation from one another. At any given time, at least two of them represent an intentional interplay which Satan uses to tempt mankind with. For example, sexual sins are very often an expression of idolatry (a person often lusts after their idols - think of Hollywood). Another example is that money can buy sex to satisfy fleshly desires (whether directly or indirectly). In the case of all three functioning in unison, idols are often those with the most money and apparently (according to the media, at least), “enjoying” the most sex.

Idolatry is the great evil (“*You shall have no other gods before me.*” - **Exodus 20:3**).

Money is the great enabler (“*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.*” - **1 Timothy 6:10a**).

Sexual immorality is the great perversion (“*Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*” - **Colossians 3:5**).

The more I read my Bible, the more obvious the above statements become. I concede that one could argue for the inclusion of other forms of sin and evil; but, I truly hope you get what the Spirit’s trying to convey here. At the foundation of every imaginable temptation are these three pillars. As a result, there’s an entire functioning economy (some call it “the world system”) designed by Satan for the sole purpose of supplanting God’s holy economy.

Economies require two basic things: a scale of values and currency. In God’s perfect economy in Heaven, “*A just balance and scales are the LORD’s; all the weights in the bag are his work*” (**Proverbs 16:11**) and grace (the expression of divine love) is the currency. There’s no sinning in Heaven because every

sanctified creature is bound to His economy. However, as the Bible tells us, Satan broke that bond and subsequently corrupted the first two humans in the Garden of Eden with a lie, introducing a second economy to human existence, an evil one.

Do you remember what the lie entailed, exactly? Let me refresh your memory:

*But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and **you will be like God**, knowing good and evil."*

— **Genesis 3:4-5**

In other words, Satan's temptation was for the first man and woman to reject God's sovereignty and strive for equality with God. This is consistent with Satan's own original sin, *"I will make myself like the Most High"* (**Isaiah 14:14**). Here we have the first pillar, idolatry, beginning with making oneself an idol (a god). It's been the driving force of all forms of evil ever since the original sin, hence the very first of The Ten Commandments we noted already in **Exodus 20:3**. Every sin we ever commit in this world can somehow be tied back to this one, the basic desire to defect from God's sovereignty in favor of an idol.

A few hundred years ago, you could argue that the second pillar of the three in Satan's unholy economy was money, based on the exposure children and even young teens received back then. However, with the proliferation of advanced communications technology, even pre-teens are exposed to sexual perversion. Immoral sexual behavior is everywhere, and it is not only acceptable by mainstream cultures, it is encouraged! People spend thousands of dollars per year to access Satan's mouthpiece on the topic, the media, be it television programming, movies, or the latest sensation, the Internet.

It all begins with idolatry. Money affords a person greater access to and enjoyment of their idols. Since this endeavor remains unfulfilling, sex is

added to the mix as an emotional crutch. People in this economy are miserable because they wallow in the futility of empty promises. The only thing that can set them free is the Truth.

I challenge you to ponder these pillars of Satan's unholy economy whenever you read your Bible: idolatry, the love of money, and sexual sins. You will discover that the Bible is filled with warnings about them. The epistles to the church at Corinth stand out, for certain, but they are hardly the only proof points. Read the OT, God was constantly having to forgive the Jews of idolatry and just about every form of sexual sin imaginable, with money-loving never too far behind, if not in the lead. Go ahead, read your Bible and see if what I say is true! Then look around you...look at the world at large...look at what motivates it...you'll see.

Once you're convinced I'm right, do the thing that matters most...look in the mirror. What say you of idolatry? Do you have any idols of your own (maybe the one staring back at you)? How about sex? The only godly form of sex in God's eyes occurs in marriage. If you're married, are you lusting after your idols? And, finally, what say you of your affection for wealth? Most of you are American, which means you've been born into wealth. Do you even understand what I just wrote? Maybe not. Do you give your first fruits to the Lord's work, or is support of His ministry a distant second, third, or fourth, even? These are all fair questions we must ask ourselves in order to rightly confess to what degree (hint: it's always greater than zero, so don't lie to yourself) we are partaking in Satan's economy. Do not be deceived, my friends.

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.

But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light.

— Ephesians 5:6-14

Tragic Irony

When my sons were young, we took them to a Disney On Ice show at the Dunkin' Donut Center in Providence, Rhode Island. One of the skits was Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. As the plot thickened and the evil queen prepared the poisonous apple for her stepdaughter, the audience became deathly quiet (not easily accomplished when it's chock full of pre-teens). As Snow White picked up the apple, enticed by its scrumptious looking appearance, the little girl next to me could no longer contain her angst; her jaw agape, brow furrowed, back stiffened - she was visibly upset, on the verge of tears. As Snow White raised the apple to her lips, a crescendo of cries bellowed out of the little girl. "No...no...NOOOOOO!!!" Maybe this was the girl's first exposure to tragic irony. When the dastardly deed was done, she buckled into her father's embrace.

Tragic Irony: the use of dramatic irony in a tragedy (originally, in Greek tragedy), so that the audience is aware that a character's words or actions will bring about a tragic or fatal result, while the character is not.

— *www.collinsdictionary.com*

When someone is blind to the truth, it's only a matter of time until they are somehow injured, as was the case with Snow White. In the spiritual life, we are all born totally blind. We are so utterly depraved that we don't even realize how incapable we are of seeing the truth. *"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned"* (1 Corinthians 2:14). This is why, as believers with divinely imparted spiritual sight, existing in this world is akin to watching myriad tragic ironies play out before our eyes. We can see the danger before a person, but the person can't. We try to point it out, or yell in the spirit of the little girl above, but an unbeliever can't see or hear us, either! It's so frustrating - it's like watching a car wreck in slow motion and there's nothing we can do about it.

Until an unbeliever is humbled to the point of repentance and receives saving faith by the grace of God, they remain in this tragic condition. What we believers have to remember is that, as odd as it may seem, an unbeliever must *actively* (as in daily) suppress the truth about God, and, in turn, the truth about their depravity, exchanging the truth for a lie.

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness **suppress the truth**. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. **So they are without excuse**. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

— Romans 1:18-21

It's important to understand precisely what the Word of God is asserting when it uses the word "*suppress*" in v18. Exegeting the original Greek reveals that this word is in the present tense, active voice, implying an ongoing, personal choice. In other words, they are held personally responsible for rejecting God's will (and ultimately His salvific purpose ala **John 3:16**) and, therefore, "*they are without excuse*" (v20). Once we wrap our minds around God's integrity towards unbelievers, it all begins to fall into place. What seems odd is actually what we ought to expect!

You might ask why anyone in their right mind would ever reject God's graciousness in the first place. The answer is simple: God's grace is *offensive* to an arrogant, fleshly person. Why? "*Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator*" (**Romans 1:25**). In semi-theological terms, we call this system of thinking, "creature credit." I often teach and write about this topic because it is ancient, tracing all the way back to

the Fall in the Garden of Eden. I like to refer to creature credit as the currency in Satan's unholy economy.

For someone abiding in Satan's economy, the more currency the better - makes sense. What also makes sense, then (and this may require some thinking on your behalf), is that Satan's economy is mutually exclusive from God's economy (where the Creator receives all the credit). *"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other"* (**Matthew 6:24**). Therefore, we rightly conclude that an unbeliever *hates* the currency in God's economy, namely grace. This is the linchpin - do not leave this paragraph until you understand this! If you still don't get it, write me an email and I promise to respond and answer your questions.

What we conclude is that anyone functioning in the flesh is offended by the grace of God. By default, this includes every unbeliever; however, even we believers can catch ourselves behaving like unbelievers (ref: **1 Corinthians 3:3**). Don't believe me? Have you ever responded to someone's generosity with an immediate desire to pay them back or return the favor? Sounds benign, but that's your flesh rejecting grace. We do this to God every time we act religiously, so don't be arrogant, my friends.

Grace is to creature credit as light is to darkness - it overcomes its adversary with such ease that the very presence of it causes extreme discomfort in those trying to abide in Satan's economy. The response is a hatred for the thing that threatens its very existence, namely grace. This is something extremely difficult for a believer to comprehend at face value. However, once we understand a few Biblical principles (e.g., those outlined above), we completely understand and our agitation, thankfully, subsides (though our sadness remains).

Like the little girl who cried out for Snow White's safety, we, too, cry out with empathy, having once been blind ourselves, and with a love that wants everyone

in this world to be saved. Sadly, our voices aren't always heard. It's a painful irony, one that stings, bruising our hearts. Like I witnessed that day at the Disney On Ice show, our Father consoles us when we collapse, feeling defeated, sometimes even weeping, into His loving arms. Oh, how I wish I could get through to the lost! What a tragedy...

Spirituality and Spiritual Warfare

We are at war, albeit an invisible one. This is the longest recorded war in human history. In fact, it predates our existence; beginning with the fall of the angels, firstly, Satan, the “*anointed cherub*” (**Ezekiel 28:14**). When the disease of sin spread to mankind at the Fall in the Garden of Eden, this war was brought to our doorstep. To be totally accurate, it wages on, in and around us, to this day. We have three identifiable enemies, according to the Word of God: Satan, the kingdom of darkness, and the human flesh. We are assaulted daily by these enemies. In order to defend ourselves, God equips us with faith.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.

In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

— **Ephesians 6:10-18a**

An intoxicated enemy is an easy one to conquer. Satan knows this and so he propagates lies to make us drunk with false thinking, designed to disorient us. We must keep on taking in the Word of Truth in order to combat this strategy. We

must remain vigilant “to stand against the schemes of the devil” (v11), as we are, in fact, Satan’s prey.

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

— **1 Peter 5:8-11**

Remaining sober means being a dutiful soldier of Christ. We don’t want to be taken captive by our enemies, so we must maintain a clear mind during battle. We orient all that we are with the Word of Christ.

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

— **2 Corinthians 10:3-5**

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

— **James 4:7-8**

We have armor that cannot be overcome because darkness cannot overcome light. Good always wins. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (**Romans 12:21**).

For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

— **1 John 5:4**

*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."
For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence.*

*He will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
You will not fear the terror of the night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.*

*A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
You will only look with your eyes
and see the recompense of the wicked.
Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—*

*no evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.
For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.*

*You will tread on the lion and the adder;
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.
"Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;
I will protect him, because he knows my name.
When he calls to me, I will answer him;*

*I will be with him in trouble;
I will rescue him and honor him.*

*With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation."*

— Psalm 91

The Complexities of War

Peace is a simple concept, war is not.

Growing up was scary at times. I remember turning on the TV, watching the news, even seeing grainy footage of absurdly named bombs, *Fat Man* and *Little Boy*, being dropped on the Japanese, and being *really* afraid of nuclear war. Looking back, the so-called “Cold War” produced fear on steroids. To a young child with little exposure to the restraining elements of governmental common sense, World War III seemed inevitable. As is usually the case, Hollywood didn’t help either, producing movies like *The Day After*, an apocalyptic type film depicting graphic nuclear detonations in American suburban communities. At the height of this terrifying era, people had gone so far as to build fallout shelters containing a year or more supply of food and water. There was almost a maniacal obsession with surviving weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

A weapon of mass destruction (WMD) is a nuclear, radiological, chemical, biological, or any other weapon that can kill and bring significant harm to a large number of humans or cause great damage to human-made structures (e.g., buildings), natural structures (e.g., mountains), or the biosphere.

— Wikipedia

I often think about the cascading effect this threat of annihilation had on people in America. It was oppressive at every level of society. I remember the cartoons on the back of newspapers, the creepy caricatures of the Soviet Union’s Nikita Khrushchev, and the American propaganda machine all proclaiming that we were fighting real monsters; yet, so few had ever met them, personally. I remember praying that our enemy never chose to “push the button,” that big red one that mirrored the one I had imagined was somewhere on the President’s desk, the one labeled “Nukes.” Nuclear warheads were attached to rockets, fully

capable of reaching my front doorstep!

An intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) is a guided ballistic missile with a minimum range of 5,500 kilometres (3,400 mi) primarily designed for nuclear weapons delivery (delivering one or more thermonuclear warheads).

— Wikipedia

Uh oh. “Inter-” means between, “continental” implies country. Between countries. ICBMs today travel at speeds over eleven thousand miles per hour, reaching targets six thousand miles away in approximately thirty minutes. This makes intercepting one of these missiles extremely difficult, causing vulnerability to rise exponentially.

ICBMs were the nightmares movies were made of. Now, an enemy was able to launch a WMD called an ICBM pointed directly at *ME!* The smartest people on the planet pooled their talents and created new and improved breeds of monster weapons that, even if they remained in their silos forever, the very threat of their existence was enough to strike fear in the bravest of men. Even more troubling was that while ICBM’s were the pinnacle of scientific achievement, they immediately demanded an even greater response. Think of how difficult it is to throw a stone at a soda can from one hundred feet away. While we rarely consider all that the brain calculates/executes in order to hit the target, the fact remains that it is an incredible neurological orchestration of scientific application. Now imagine how difficult it would be if a second person was charged with using another stone to knock the first one out of the air, mid-flight, as a defense against the soda can being struck. The second challenge becomes significantly more difficult than the first, agreed? The same goes with ICBMs. A whole new breed of missile defense needed to be created called Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) technology. This latter technology was even more complex than the first!!!

Defense systems are often more complex than their offensive counterparts.

As I previously stated, peace is a simple concept, war is not. Peace presumes tranquility, ease, and no fear. The threat of personal injury, though, demands a response, upsetting said peace. The greatest injury of all, however, isn't an ICBM hitting its target, but rather our enemies hitting their target in the spiritual realm.

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.

— Ephesians 6:11-12

We have enemies whom we know about but cannot see. Ugh. This is worse than the Cold War! They have “WMDs” all their own, too, designed to destroy the souls of mankind. While fellowship with God is a peaceful affair, stepping out on the battlefield is riddled with violence, chaos, and confusion. Our enemies have taken the moral equivalent of scientific technologies (aka doctrines) and twisted them into complex weapons against our peace. These are the “*doctrines of demons*” (1 Timothy 4:1). In order to defend our “home soil” from the “*flaming arrows of the evil one [spiritual ICBMs]*” (Ephesians 6:16), we must first understand the “technology” the kingdom of darkness uses to construct its weapons. This is often a complicated endeavor - certainly a departure from the placid form of thinking we enjoy when basking in God’s love.

[Working together] in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left.

— 2 Corinthians 6:7

For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.

— 2 Corinthians 10:4

Satan's primary target is always the Gospel of Jesus Christ, though not all of his weapons are created equal. In traditional warfare, there are short-range weapons used on the front lines, such as guns. While such weapons may inflict damage, it is insignificant, relatively speaking. This is analogous to the small spiritual skirmishes we experience throughout our day. However, an "ICBM-level" of weapon is a different story because it threatens the entire base of operations, including headquarters. If we each stand as our own "nation," so to speak, our base of operations is the Gospel and our headquarters is our innermost self. A weapon that is able to make its way all the way to headquarters must be complex due to the layers of defense we are given in the Bible (presuming a defense exists as per the following, of course).

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 6:13-17**

We are promised fellowship with the Lord God that is simple, pure, divine. Violent disturbances are the schemes of our enemies, meant to distort the Gospel and upset our fellowship with God. These disturbances are engineered to destroy our peace and are launched at us incessantly. We must send up our own "ABMs" to intercept incoming "ICBMs." We can't be ignorant and expect to suffer no losses.

When I think about what spiritual warfare looks like, practically speaking, I can't

help but think of the Apostle Paul, who was entrenched in it. For example, Paul had to write in such a way that even Peter describes as “*hard to understand*” (**2 Peter 3:16**), implying a certain complexity. Does this mean that the Gospel is difficult to understand? May it never be! However, when a genius such as Satan perverts it, the required defensive response implies not only an understanding of the perversion, but also a response to preserve the “home soil” (akin to shooting an ICBM out of the air with an ABM). The *Book of Romans* is a perfect example of this, where the doctrine of justification by faith was under attack. Since justification by faith is a lynchpin of the Gospel, Paul’s fight was brought to the very doorstep of headquarters. This mandated a complex dissertation from Paul in order to intercept the attack before it blew up the Gospel in the souls of his disciples. This is why Peter wrote what he did below.

*Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, **in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.***

You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

— **2 Peter 3:14-18**

I often feel the same way Paul apparently did when he wrote his epistles. While it’s infuriating that anyone would ever wish to attack the Gospel, the truth is that the Gospel is the greatest target of all for our enemies. While it’d be wonderful to live in a world where our enemies slept, it’s just not the case. So, we must gird our loins and prepare for battle daily. As Sun Tzu would say, we must know our enemies. While our relationship with God is pure and simple, our relationship

with our enemies is complicated, convoluted, and tricky. If we are unable to identify the schemes of our enemies, we risk personal injury, or even worse, injury to the good name of our Lord and Savior. We must fight the good fight, always (**2 Timothy 4:7**), never losing heart.

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

— **Hebrews 12:3**

The Entertainment Trap

Let's be honest. Who doesn't like to be entertained?

Entertainment is something most people pursue without end, to exhaustion, even, which is sort of ironic if you really think about it. The whole idea behind entertainment is that a person gets to sit back, relax, and "enjoy the show," as they say. The appeal of entertainment is obvious. However, is there a downside to it? I mean, if we step back and consider the Devil's strategy in this world, what might we conclude?

The Bible tells us that we are at war. The genesis of this war was the fall of Satan and his demons. Sometime before human history even began, the highest ranking angel of his time, Satan, decided to defect from the righteousness of God, convincing one third of the angels to follow him. This is the same creature dubbed "*the god of this world*" in Holy Scripture (**2 Corinthians 4:4**). Most entertainment in this world is promoted by this same dubious being. Hollywood is wrought with satanic doctrine, as evidenced by the filth it produces. People lap it up like dogs - many are so-called "Christians." "*It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT,' and, 'A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire'*" (**2 Peter 2:22**).

Am I suggesting that one of the greatest visible conflicts of all today is occurring between our eyeballs and our television, computer, and smartphone screens? Absolutely. Arguably the most efficient assault ever waged on mankind presents itself as "entertainment." Satan is a genius. I think we forget this simple truth sometimes.

"OMG, I love <fill in the blank with your favorite actor / actress>!"

I've heard the above statement countless times. Heck, to be honest, I've said it,

too. We don't really know our entertainers, though, do we? We purchase a lie and fantasize about actually knowing someone based on what we see on a screen. Sadly, there are a million other delusional people thinking the same thing about the same person. The whole construct is folly. But we go on deceiving ourselves, wanting and willing to believe that our entertainers are good people, that their intentions are godly, and that our lives are enriched because we supposedly "know them." The truth is that we don't know them, not at all. They are merely idols. They lie to our faces and we slop it up like the dumb sheep we are.

*His speech was smoother than butter,
But his heart was war;
His words were softer than oil,
Yet they were drawn swords.*

— Psalm 55:21

We cannot play the fool, either - let's be honest, we *choose* our idols, don't we? We excitedly sift through them with a trained eye and find the one(s) that we might fantasize about the most, that we can emotionally cling to as our deliverer(s) from boredom. We love our entertainers, don't we? Whether they are singing, dancing, wearing a football uniform, or maybe even preaching a false message on a Sunday morning, we spend more time pursuing a destructive relationship with them than we do a healthy one with Jesus (when I say "we" I mean people, in general - it's good to keep this personal because we're all guilty).

Man loves to be entertained and he loves his entertainers. The Bible tells us that these things are trojan horses for the Devil. It's a lot easier for our enemy to infiltrate us if we extend an *invitation*. This malady takes root when we give him unattended access to our souls. It becomes a severe disease when we allow him to establish counterfeit doctrines there. What ought to be cause for instantaneous red flagging is met with a welcome and a smile. Would you ever greet someone intent on stealing from you the same way? Would you say, "Come on in and take whatever you'd like!?" I think not. And yet, we invite the most evil creature in

human history into our living rooms, our offices, and even our bedrooms. Media entertainment might just be the greatest ruse of all time.

Call it “entertainment” when it’s really an act of war! Paint it pretty and call it good. Appeal to the lusts of the flesh and you can call it whatever you like. You don’t even have to spend a lot of time deceiving people because they are quite adept at deceiving themselves!

Entertainment as we know it today is a trap. Our enemy sells us empty promises and fantasies. In America, it’s not uncommon for a single household to spend upwards of five hundred dollars per month on television, Internet, and smartphone access. Am I wrong in calling this borderline obscene? I mean, how much media do we need to consume in a day? We might as well just strap ourselves naked to a medieval torture device and scream, “I’m ready...go ahead and rip my soul apart as you will!” You may think I’m being overly dramatic here; but, my friend, I am only being brutally honest.

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.

— **Ephesians 6:11-13**

Entertainers are idols. Consumers are idolaters. *“Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).*

We are at war and most of us have happily invited our enemy into our souls. We call it entertainment, but it’s one of the greatest trickeries ever played and with a success that folks a couple of hundred years ago wouldn’t have believed possible. The proof is in the pudding, as they say. Look at the centerpiece of your

living room, or in your back pocket, or on your lap. Is the media syringe the dominant feature? Do you hear the voice of some sports- or newscaster more than your pastor? Do you lend your attention more to your favorite singer than those in the church choir? Are you more inspired by “courageous” acts of social justice or the sovereign will of God? What do you choose to talk about with friends? Where do you go when you have free time? Most importantly, what do you let into your soul?

*Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life.
Put away from you a deceitful mouth
And put devious speech far from you.
Let your eyes look directly ahead
And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.
Watch the path of your feet
And all your ways will be established.*

— Proverbs 4:23-26

Be careful what you call entertainment. It’s likely the very instrument your enemy uses to seduce you. The result is misery.

The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

— Matthew 6:22-23

If you find your enemy lurking in your soul this day...if you’ve given him entrée via personal invitation...if you’re just seeing the truth in this moment... then act now! You can’t change yesterday, but right now is fully available for consideration. Kick your enemy out!

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**

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 4:8**

Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals."

— **1 Corinthians 15:33**

Every Circumstance In Life Is a Spiritual One

Do not allow temptation to fracture your thinking.

Anytime we begin a thought with, “Well, it’s only natural,” we need to take pause and consider if we haven’t already set our course on a vector of thinking that will lead us away from “*the mind of Christ*” (1 **Corinthians 2:16**). Just because we have access to the Truth doesn’t always mean we take advantage of this God-given right. In fact, our flesh would prefer that we hold fast to a worldly scale of values and the wisdom that precipitates from it. We must be vigilant against such folly for it is easy to be lulled into darkness, if only for a time, even for believers.

A perfect example of this is something I brought up from my pulpit recently. The principle set before my congregation was, “Every circumstance in life is a spiritual one.” I speak mainly to believers in this blog because it is they who experience the most damaging effects when misunderstanding this basic truth. My guess is that the vast majority of believers still don’t understand what I’m conveying here. There are myriad reasons why; for example, the vestiges of religion. As much as we’d like to immediately shed all remnants of our former religious ways, it simply doesn’t happen overnight. Sanctification takes time. New wisdom must displace the old, and to the degree this occurs, to that same degree we will find peace through deliverance.

Every circumstance in life is a spiritual one. Let that sink in...

Consider Jesus. Was He ever not filled with the Spirit, perfectly? No. Even under the most terrific stress, He never faltered, never lost His bearings, never compromised His integrity to Truth. Even when Satan tempted Him to think fleshly, He didn’t.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, "'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you,' and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"

Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

— Matthew 4:1-11

This passage is incredibly edifying for us believers because we see the representative "heads of state" in combat - Satan versus Jesus. We see the very best that Christ's enemy pitted against Him. The key point for the sake of this blog is to observe what Satan attempts to do to Jesus. All three temptations shared a single goal, to divide His thinking.

First, he knew that Jesus had been fasting for forty days and was surely physically hungry. Jesus was spiritually aligned with His Father, but Satan wanted Him to separate, mentally, to focus on earthly hunger. Jesus' magnificent response was essentially, "No, I shall remain spiritually focused." What if Jesus had done what many believers do and said, "OK, let me put aside my spiritual priorities and tend to this thing outside of my Father's will"? That fracture

would've been the opening Satan was looking for and would've proven Jesus a farce by His own account, based on words spoken later to His disciples, "*Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work'*" (**John 4:34**).

The second trial Jesus was tempted with was to put His Father's perfect will to the test. In other words, Satan tempted Jesus to perform a vulgar display of power. Jesus knew His position in the Kingdom of Heaven but He wasn't looking for reassurance. He *is* power, He knew it, so He had no reason to prove it. The flesh demands tangible proof, but spiritual wisdom is an issue of faith. "*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*" (**1 Corinthians 1:22-24**). Had Jesus failed to maintain a consistent, spiritual mindset, His thinking would've been fractured and He would've failed the test.

The third, and final, trial Satan afflicted Jesus with concerned the pride of life. "*For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever*" (**1 John 2:16-17**). Satan was, in effect, trying to destroy Jesus' impeccability by tearing Him from spiritual purity (e.g., perfect obedience to His Father). Pride is often called the "original sin" for good reason. It's the baseline for all other sin and likely why Satan's last-ditch temptation focused on it. Have you ever had a good day going, passing this or that test, and then, BAM, you fail the test of pride? I have, countless times. It's the whopper that we'll never really ever completely conquer in this lifetime (only Jesus is flawless).

Some might argue that Jesus isn't a fair example for one to consider, since He is God. That, though, is merely the human flesh's attempt to deflect personal responsibility. The fact is, "*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as*

we are, yet without sin" (**Hebrews 4:15**). Jesus Christ's humility included His renouncing of His godly privileges in multiple ways (**Philippians 2:7-8**). Based on Holy Scripture, we rightly conclude that Jesus was, indeed, temptable; yet, He never sinned. His allegiance to spiritual purity never cracked.

The "secret" to Jesus' success was that He never allowed Himself to become "double-minded" or "double-souled" (ala **James 1:8**). He never allowed the Truth to escape His grasp. He was unflappable, "full of grace and truth" (**John 1:14b**). He accomplished this by never allowing Himself to be anything *but* spiritual. This is tantamount to saying that every circumstance in Jesus' life was a spiritual one, whether tempted by physical needs, worry, or pride. He is the very anchor of our faith and the proof point of its effectiveness in this life. We are encouraged to follow His lead by living *one life (aka holding one perspective)*, not two (one worldly, one spiritual). The mind of Christ is our single base of operations.

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**

When our thinking becomes more and more like Jesus', we call this sanctification. It's sort of like recovering from double-vision in the sense that as time goes on, instead of having two viewpoints, the spiritual overcomes the worldly, resulting in a single, freeing perspective akin to the one Jesus has in its purest form. When faced with trials, the objective is to pass them by maintaining this singular perspective throughout, that is, "the mind of Christ" (**1 Corinthians 2:16**). This stable mindedness gives us peace, no matter the circumstances.

*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. **And let steadfastness have***

its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a **double-minded man**, unstable in all his ways. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. **Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial**, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

— James 1:2-15

Every circumstance in life is a spiritual one. Do not allow temptation to fracture your thinking.

How To Digest Social Injustice

For over a decade, the Spirit's been teaching my congregation the value of "seeing it all as truth," as I like to say, which is a summary phrase derived from Paul's words in the **Book of Ephesians**.

But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light.

— **Ephesians 5:13-14**

The value of "seeing it all as truth" is being able to grasp the big picture. Context matters - a *lot*. Without context, life can become very confusing. Sadly, I believe a lot of people spend most of their time living "in the weeds," as they say, never taking the time to step back, take a deep breath, and wonder at how gloriously God has orchestrated life, itself. While we can never fully understand God's thoughts or actions (**Isaiah 55:8**), He does grace the humble with discernment. This spiritually inspired vision delivers us unto peace and understanding that sets us free.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for 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, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens

to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

— 1 John 4:1-6

Step back and see the big picture, then you'll understand why there have always been social injustices. This will allow you to rest while the world rages against itself. Deliverance is yours to receive; but you have to learn to transcend circumstances. Do not get sucked into the fleshly fray.

*If a wise man has an argument with a fool,
the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet.
Bloodthirsty men hate one who is blameless
and seek the life of the upright.
A fool gives full vent to his spirit,
but a wise man quietly holds it back.
If a ruler listens to falsehood,
all his officials will be wicked.*

— Proverbs 29:9-12

Proverbs 29:12 is indicative of most political systems on Earth today. It appears that most politicians do more to stoke the fires of social unrest than to put them out. Why? Because they don't actually speak of or act on behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's interesting that, in America, our highest elected officials are often sworn in with their left hand on a Holy Bible. Yet, I don't see the kind of ruling wisdom I expect to see when Christ rules in the Millennial Reign. I fear most "rulers" (v12) possess poorer spiritual eyesight than most of you reading this blog. I'm not casting stones at my leaders, just expressing one of the reasons why there's so much social unrest, along with the natural result of it, namely injustice, in this world.

Social unrest is a symptom. It's like a tickly nose with a common cold; you sneeze violently as a result. Social injustices are like this in the sense that they are violent reactions to underlying illnesses. Our society is very ill because it continues to stray from the One who can heal it, Jesus Christ, the Great Physician (Mark 2:17).

When's the last time you turned on the television or the radio and heard someone in mainstream politics or news mention the total depravity of man? When have you ever heard an elected official blame sin for social injustices? Why are the symptoms always attributed to trigger words like "racism," "sexism," or "homophobia"? If you're wise to political strategy, you know that it plays upon the sinful human flesh, starting fires and then rushing in to put them out. Politicians are false heroes. If all politicians suddenly were endowed with biblical wisdom and then acted upon it, we'd live in a very different world. That's never going to happen, so the best a believer can do is transcend. *"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves"* (Matthew 10:16).

Social injustices cause real pain and, by all means, ought to be dealt with swiftly. Murderers ought to face stiff judgement from the courts; same goes for looters and other lawbreakers. There's no justification for breaching the moral standards of God. We believers are called to exemplify this.

*When the wicked increase, transgression increases,
but the righteous will look upon their downfall.*

— Proverbs 29:16

*A man of wrath stirs up strife,
and one given to anger causes much transgression.*

— Proverbs 29:22

The world will always be filled with social unrest and plagued with social injustices. That makes me very sad to write. Let us never dismiss these realities, for they are very real and very painful; however, anger over them shouldn't incite further violence or hatred (those are fleshly responses to the realities of life). *"See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone"* (**1 Thessalonians 5:15**).

Here's the ointment for social injustice. *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"* (**Romans 12:21**). Given that the very infrastructure of our society is rotting away, and the leaders we elect are representative of this, we ought to look to our own King for answers, for He is the *"King of kings and Lord of lords"* (**Revelation 19:16**) and we are His subjects. *"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself"* (**Philippians 3:20-21**). Amen? How's that for perspective that sets you free?

If you understand what's transpiring around you, you're less likely to fear it. When you "see it all as truth", you gain precious context that alleviates the grating pressure of living in a world that specializes, even thrives on, devouring itself. Sinful creatures are *expected* to be vile. The awfulness that we witness on the news is symptomatic of a deeper, spiritual issue. Don't let the depravity of others rob you of your God-given freedom.

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

— **Galatians 5:13-16**

Do not fear. Do not look anywhere other than to your Lord for deliverance. Life

is short, God is good, and people...well, you know.

*The fear of man lays a snare,
but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.
Many seek the face of a ruler,
but it is from the LORD that a man gets justice.
An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous,
but one whose way is straight is an abomination to the wicked.*

— Proverbs 29:25-27

Running and the Spirit Life - Guest Blogger: Tammy Collins

This edition of the blog is unique in the sense that it's comprised of a letter my wife, Tammy, wrote to herself about 5 years ago, sort of like a diary entry. She was fishing through old folders on her laptop computer recently and came across this letter. When she shared it with me, I said, "Hey, that'd be an encouraging read for the congregation, don't you think?" Without any pressure or coaxing, she agreed. I hope you appreciate her willingness to share, as it really is quite personal.

The only modifications to the original document are the scriptures I've indented and italicized.

Date: April 16, 2014

It's funny, but my running and my spiritual life have many parallels. They both require me to get out of the way. The first step to that is being humble. I started running 4 years ago in April, which is about the same time my self-life hit rock bottom. When I first started running I really couldn't run more than a third of a mile without being totally wiped. A very sad truth, but I kept at it every day and was able to go a little farther as the weeks went on. Simultaneously, my Lord was working something out in me every day, a little bit at a time. It is funny because my running time also became a time I spent with my Lord. He was with me every step of the way.

*Fear not, for I am with you;
be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

— Isaiah 41:10

With running you can have a bad run or an amazing run, just like in your spiritual walk. Some days you rejoice and bask in His amazing grace and other days you cry out to him with the desperation of a lost child.

*He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.*

— Psalm 147:3

I decided to run my first 5k without really training specifically for it. I had been running 7 days a week for about a year and thought it would be a nice challenge. I was so nervous the week leading up to the 5K. On that day it was just me and the other runners. I was taking on this 5K alone. I really didn't want anyone there cheering me on. I had all sorts of fears like, what if I couldn't do it, or worse, what if I came in last? Since I was still what I considered new to this running thing, I was unsure of myself. The same thing was happening in my spiritual life. He had just allowed me to break and was in the process of rebuilding me. I was still very fragile and would fall back on my foolish fears instead of trusting completely in Him.

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your path.*

— Proverbs 3:5-6

Well, as it turns out everything went well and my fears were just me getting in my own way once again. Now, fast forward to the winter of 2014. I had started training during the previous summer for a half marathon but never got further than 10 miles per run. It just wasn't the right time. Just like in the spiritual life, I

was pushing myself to do something that wasn't right for me at the time. It was probably because my motivation was wrong. I was trying to prove something to my flesh, which never amounts to anything but wasted time and usually disappointment.

*Hear my cry, O God,
listen to my prayer;
from the end of the earth I call to you
when my heart is faint.
Lead me to the rock
that is higher than I,
for you have been my refuge.*

— Psalm 61:1-3a

Since I had learned that I could run longer than 5 miles during my summer training, I upped my mileage both during the week and on my long weekend run. I spent more time with my Lord the longer I ran. Running was becoming something I just loved doing. It wasn't always easy to get out of bed before the sun was out or when the temperatures were sometimes single digit, but I had a desire to. It is just like those days that are busy, you're tired, and you know that Bible class is at 7:30pm and you aren't really motivated to go, but you do because you have a desire for Him and want to know Him more. Frankly, you love him.

Well, each week of training for a half marathon pushes you further than you thought you could go. I discovered the secret to it. Just take it mile by mile. I stopped looking at the enormity of it and tackled it step by step instead. Although it was tough, it was also amazing at the same time, that feeling I got when I would turn onto my street knowing that my body was able to go that extra mile. Wow! I believe my Lord was giving me a glimpse of what happens in life when you just stay focused on where He has you right now. Sometimes it's hard and other times easy, but when you get to where He is taking you, WOW!

Sunday, March 16, 2014 was the New Bedford Half Marathon. I knew I had put in the training and was so excited for this run that I was about to share with 2 other amazing women of Christ. I received a text on Saturday that shut out any fears that may have been popping up. The text read, "Tomorrow is your personal race with God. He will 'mount you on wings like eagles'. Keep your focus on Him." That is just what I did and the run was amazing. My Lord ran with me every step of the way. He was the power behind me.

*He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.*

— Isaiah 40:29-31

Temple Invasion

I'm going to ask you to imagine something so reprehensible that you may be inclined to stop reading this blog. But, please allow me to preempt that knee-jerk reaction by preparing you for it before it happens. I'm telling you, what I'm about to ask you to envision is something none of us are really prepared for, wholly; however, the exercise is a fruitful one. (Just because something is offensive doesn't mean we are to turn a blind eye to it. Consider how awful the world must've been for Jesus in His incarnation, being perfect among a brood of vipers, lost souls, murderous fleshs, unholy activities, and a general population that rejected Him, as a person.)

Here's the scene...

Imagine that you lived while Jesus was walking this earth. At some point you joined His group and considered yourself one of His sheep, a disciple willing to follow Him. One day, when you're feeling a bit rebellious, you handcuff Jesus to yourself, drag Him away from His ministry to others, force Him and a prostitute into the Temple, and have sex on the altar. As offensive as it is to Jesus, He is shackled to the situation because of you. I warned you, right? You might be asking, "Why in the world would a pastor ask me to envision such a scene?" The answer is quite simple.

Sexual sins invade the temple that is your body, defiling the very place where the triune God indwells a believer. This place is a holy place; therefore, any unholy intrusion is utterly grotesque. Do you agree?

Jesus cleared the way for us by removing the veil to the Holy of holies. We became the new temple of God. We ought never lose sight of this reality.

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one

which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

— **Hebrews 6:19-20**

If you've read the Old Testament, you know how venerated the Jewish Temple was. And just think, it was made by human hands. Consider that God has made your body as the new temple for His presence. Consider how perfect His work is, and that He is willing to indwell said temple, personally. Now consider which scene is *actually* worse, the physical one I described at the outset of this blog, or the spiritual violation that occurs every time you sin against your body, sexually. And you thought my "imagine this" scene was difficult to digest, huh?

The Bible describes sexual sins in a very unique way because for us believers in the Church, when we commit them, we involve Christ, the Messiah, Himself, with a harlot. The very *last* Person in human history that would *ever* involve themselves with sexual immorality is dragged into it by someone He laid His life down for, someone He purchased from spiritual death, someone He loved enough to save. The thought of it in plain language like this is nauseating, is it not? How could we ever treat our Lord this way...and yet, don't we? While we can't fester in condemnation over past sins, having been washed clean by the blood of Christ, we ought to wholeheartedly seek to understand the facts about sexual sins, not just for the sake of learning from our mistakes, but also for the sake of our future!

Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!

Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with

her? For He says, "THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH." But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.

Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. 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 6:13-20

I think it's easy for some people to discard sexual sins because the world tells us they are a response to "natural feelings" and that abstinence is "unnatural" and therefore harmful. Such lies are so acceptable in our culture nowadays that we have to be extra careful to not allow our virtue to be diluted by them. The truth is that we profane Jesus Christ, personally, with sexual sins because at salvation we are made one with Him (**Romans 6:3**). For the sake of gravity, let's remember that Jesus is perfect. Imagine now if someone you're betrothed to decided to handcuff you, drag you into church, and have sex with another person while you remained present, by force. Why is it that this lesser scene is more visceral to us in some ways? Is it the physicality of it, or is it just that we don't enjoy being the *innocent* party?

Am I trying to get some kind of emotional rise out of you? I suppose, to some degree I am, for that is often the one thing that can snap you out of a fog and rip you away from all the other emotional devices the kingdom of darkness has ensnared you with (May I suggest you have been a willing party all along? You have a free will, after all, right?). I don't mind being the one having to bring up topics that make you uncomfortable (just imagine being the one tasked with writing this stuff).

I'll close with the following thought: fornication, adultery, homosexuality, and

bestiality are all specifically listed in Holy Scripture as sexual sins. Do not play games here, either, my friends, like President Bill Clinton did, claiming oral sex isn't really sex. If you're looking for excuses, you've already missed the mark, "*For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body*" (**1 Corinthians 6:20**). I'll take it one step further and say that *anything* of a sexual nature performed outside of marriage is a sin. This includes romantic kissing or touching. Sticking your tongue in another person's mouth is, by definition, a form of intercourse. Too graphic? Too bad. I wish I didn't have to write this stuff down, but apparently I do, given the lies people tell themselves. Would you kiss your grandmother that way? I didn't think so. Guess what, *anything* of a sexual nature performed outside of marriage is a sin which drags Jesus Christ personally through the foulness of it. Stop it. Stop *all* of it, not just some of it!

One last thought for you to chew on. Why do you think just about every form of entertainment and commercialism is sexualized? Why do you think the world has normalized illicit sexual practices, encourages it, even (ala **Romans 1:32**)? What might be the easiest way to drive a splinter between a person and someone literally indwelling this person, considering the original two are already sharing intimacy through spiritual intercourse? What is the only sin mentioned in the Bible that is able to accomplish something so unholy as this between The Husband and His bride? Ask Satan, the genius behind the media...or look for him in the cheering section the next time you drag Jesus into the temple with one of Satan's prostitutes.

Stress

Stress kills. It's a medically proven fact. To qualify this for a believer in Christ, we might add that stress is something God uses to sanctify us. This stress is not deadly, at all, for us. In fact, we are guaranteed to have our faith stress-tested for the sake of consummating it.

*The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold,
and the LORD tests hearts.*

— Proverbs 17:3

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

— 1 Peter 1:6-7

Life is a crucible for us believers. God allows the kingdom of darkness to turn the heat all the way up in order to prove to us that our faith is lacking. We all have a melting point, and it's often at a lot lower temperature than we might think. The value of the crucible is that once our weaknesses are exposed, they can be surgically removed. Depending on how deep the tendrils of our weakness reach, it may take several operations to extract it for good; and even then, due to the inherent propensity of our flesh for sinning, we may still be haunted by certain weaknesses for the remainder of our lives on Earth. In any case, the Bible tells us that we will be placed under constant pressure from the world.

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they

persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.

— **John 15:18-20**

Perspective is key. I often say that deliverance is but a change of perspective away. It's true. Stressful situations can be dealt with quite readily by simply recalling Holy Scripture. Hence the value of reading the Word of God regularly. Relief from stress exists in the pages of the Bible. To know the Bible is to know Christ, Himself (**John 1:14**). To know Christ is to know peace, which easily overcomes any form of stress we might encounter.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

— **Matthew 11:27-30**

Abuse and the Fight or Flight Response

The fight-or-flight response (also called hyperarousal, or the acute stress response) is a physiological reaction that occurs in response to a perceived harmful event, attack, or threat to survival.

— Wikipedia.com

I was sick a few weeks ago and bedridden for a few days. When this happens, I know that God has me right where He wants me, even though, as was the case this time, I may not be a *willing* participant in His desire to immobilize me (I'm not speaking about the obvious drag of being sick, but about sitting still long enough to have a deep, meaningful conversation with Him about particularly painful subjects). God used this time of sickness to work through a few things that were long overdue, apparently. He also used it to reveal some new things to me, one of which I will share here.

For the most part, I've always considered myself a member of the "fight club" (no, not the movie), although the older I get, the less this is true. I'm not as wired as some people are, but I'm certainly never accused of being a "laid back" kind of guy. On most days, all five of my senses are sort of trigger happy, if that makes sense, ready to "fire" at even the slightest provocation. It's like being on high alert all the time. It got me thinking, "Why am I like this?" If there is a correlation between my childhood and this particular personality trait, I'd really like to know about it. For the record, I don't go around picking fights; it's more defensiveness than anything, which is challenging as a pastor because you're constantly under attack. Add to this a very strong sense of protecting others and you get an idea of how I get out of bed in the morning.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the

spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

— **Ephesians 6:12-13**

Yup, that about describes it. I don my armor and I thank God that His Word and Spirit protect me - God knows how much I need it! I get exhausted some days.

While I laid there in bed, I began to wonder about others I know who might see similar traits in themselves as I do, and then realized that many of them have a similar background as my own. I'm not a psychiatrist or psychologist, so take what I'm about to say with a grain of salt (I'm just sharing an observation here), but the common thread is we all endured chaotic and/or abusive childhoods. I'll stick with the latter here, where said "abuse" can be physical, emotional, or spiritual, or any combination of the three. An abused child is conditioned very early on to be on the defensive. When personal rights are violated over and over again, the child begins assuming a defensive posture or outlook on life, itself. They are so used to having the things held most sacred to them destroyed or taken away that their first response to any kind of stress is fight or flight.

These kids grow up with this learned behavior. To them, it's sink or swim, nothing less. Situations are dealt with at a higher level of intensity than what is actually required since every interaction represents a potential loss of something held dear. *Trust* is the key issue, which is why when given a reason to distrust someone, the response is multiplied by some factor over a "normal" response (I don't really believe "normal" is definable, per se, but I hope you get my point).

When under stress, for us "fighters" in the group, our first response is for our hackles to stand straight up, one foot steps back, and we assume the fighting position (I'm speaking figuratively, in my case, although some people will fight physically at the drop of a hat). We're going to defend our ground or die trying. For the "flighters" in the group, their response is to run away at the first sign of

conflict. Abused children tend to congregate to one side or the other when faced with stress.

Now, here's the difficult realization that must occur in any of you who may be able to relate to what I'm talking about. This may not be popular to say given the "blame everyone else and seek enablement" culture that we live in, but here goes: *this is our problem, no one else's*. Please repeat that to yourself. We must approach such things from God's perspective, not the world's. The world will encourage us to point fingers and deflect taking personal responsibility for our own lives. It'll give us a hundred and one reasons why someone else is responsible for our current condition. Therein lies the trap, my friends.

If you need to forgive someone, then do it and be set free. Do not allow this world to convince you that wallowing in self-pity and pointing fingers is the pathway to your deliverance. It isn't the way. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6a). If you play the victim your whole life, you'll remain a victim of your own bad decision to do so. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). That is the winning strategy.

For me, it's been a lifelong process of being sanctified in Truth like I write about here. I forgave those who wounded me years ago, and I seek to forgive immediately whenever someone wrongs me nowadays. I'm certainly not perfect, but I fully expect that God will continue as promised, *"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ"* (**Philippians 1:6**). As I've been teaching from my pulpit as of late, life is good because God says so. It's not good *or* bad depending on our childhoods. Life has been good since before mankind was even created. God is life and He is good. That's the perspective we need to cling to. As believers, we've been given this precious life to enjoy in time. Let's grab hold of it, then, shall we?!!

I honestly don't mean to go into long diatribes about how awful people were to

me as a child (I had plenty of good times, too) - that's not my intention at all (it's not really even your business, anyway, but the Spirit has me share for the sake of context). What I want to do is encourage you to accept who you are in Christ Jesus, remembering that God loves you so much. Abused or not, fighter or flighter, it doesn't matter when your eyes are squarely locked onto Jesus. In fact, one of the great blessings in this life is to watch God's sanctifying work in ourselves. Sometimes I can't believe how far He's brought me.

I'm not as trigger happy as I once was. I still harbor latent trust issues now and then, but I'm not sure it's too far off from the "norm" nowadays. And to be honest, in some ways it serves me well as a pastor, given the fact that it keeps me on my toes against the constant onslaught of attacks against me, my family, and my congregation. I'll always be a fighter; however, by God's grace, I know better which battles to fight and which to walk away from in prayer.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

— 2 Timothy 4:7

Preoccupation With Being Happy

A woman says to her young daughter, “My dear, to find happiness in this world, you must find a good man to marry, preferably one that makes decent money, so you’ll never have to worry about things.” If I’ve heard this once, I’ve heard it a hundred times described to me by jaded women, including Christian women. There are analogs for men as well, of course, but this one illustration is enough to get us situated.

What are the trappings here? For starters, the mother in this scenario has set up her daughter for a life of disappointment by telling her to focus on so-called “happiness” as a function of some ungodly formula. Can a woman find happiness (more importantly, peace and contentment) within a godly functioning marriage? Of course, but that isn’t the point I’m making here. I’m weeding out the instances where ultimately the young daughter grows up wondering, “When is Prince Charming going to arrive so I can be ‘happy’?” This person learns about disappointment with every failed relationship, often growing disenchanted. Eventually, she’ll conclude that either men today aren’t worth the effort (and possibly consider homosexuality as an option) or that she simply is undeserving of a so-called “good man.” Again, more lies propagated in the soul of this poor person. Neither of these conclusions would be the result if she simply possessed the right perspective.

For the record, while it’d be convenient, we can’t blame our misery on those who invite us to join them on the aforementioned treadmill (e.g., the mother in the above scenario) for, ultimately, God holds us individuals responsible for ourselves. We’ve all had others lie to us. It’s expected. They’re human. People lie. In fact, being flawed, *we even lie to ourselves*.

The above is only one example of why I’m writing this blog. I suspect millions of people are in bondage, suffering at the hands of a much more basic lie. What’s

the lie, you might ask? Listen closely, your freedom depends upon it.

Preoccupation with happiness is akin to running on a treadmill - continual striving while never reaching the goal.

Look around, most of your neighbors are in hot pursuit of some new and improved form of happiness, many of them spending the vast majority of their time strategizing, laboring, then rejoicing over small indicators that the prize is close at hand. But why are they so miserable *today*? Why do they keep the local liquor store in business, or the drug dealer, or the Internet porn sites? What kind of so-called "happiness" demands such an investment from a person? How can a person be "happy" if they spend all of their time *chasing* happiness; and then, in their disappointment, pushing harder and harder? It's truly paradoxical to a person who isn't fooled, like me (and hopefully you - if not already, then soon, for freedom's sake). What's truly astounding is that many of them call themselves "Christians."

Case in point, Christians are among the most competitive people I know - sounds strange, but it's true. As this perverse system of attaining happiness develops, it becomes about showing others who has the most happiness in order to establish who's the most spiritually mature. In other words, so-called "blessings of happiness" are denominations of currency in an economy based on, what I like to call, "creature credit" (**Romans 1:25**). In this economy, proof of happiness in this world (e.g., proving that you've got more than your neighbors) is something "worth" all of the sacrifices one makes, including fabricating and living in lies. But what happens when the thing sacrificed is also the end goal? Case in point, happiness. The ungodly solution is to redefine happiness itself. This is most commonly done by stripping it of its core components, namely peace and contentment. In effect, those chasing worldly happiness do so having sacrificed their own peace along the way. Look around. People are striving after the wind, living to work rather than working to live. Solomon tried his hand at the prior and had some wisdom to share.

So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.

— Ecclesiastes 2:17

We each must ask ourselves daily, “If I’m working this hard, is it to God’s glory?” Is it possible each of us has been infected by lies like the ones I describe above? Duh!!! Of course. ’Tis why at the writing of this blog my congregation has received thirty-five parts of an ongoing series from the pulpit titled, *The Deceitfulness of Sin*. Lately, the Spirit has expressed His distaste for Christians in bondage to “happiness.” We’ve learned that one of the greatest, most pervasive and effective lies ever propagated is that Christianity is a *formula* for happiness. This is what the world has agreed upon and unabashedly, even authoritatively, attempts to press into our minds as fact. It’s a lie.

Christianity is not a formula for happiness. While a believer in Christ may experience happiness in their lifetime, for it to be godly fruit, it must sprout from a core of peace and contentment. A better job, relationships, homes, pets, clothes, reputation, et cetera mean nothing, strictly speaking. However, to a person on a religious treadmill, it is the proof they seek, the spoils of their labor. But doesn’t the Bible teach us that the Lord God is the One who gives grace? “But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE” (James 4:6). Doesn’t the Bible teach us the true pattern for blessings in this world? I mean, if we’re going to contemplate sacrificing something, shouldn’t we be sacrificing our time/energy in humility for Him, not some so-called “Christian formula for happiness” that the kingdom of darkness encourages us to adopt?

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.

— 2 Corinthians 9:7-8

There are way too many Christians still running on that treadmill, still pursuing happiness with all their might, still striving after the wind. They are very disappointed, often downright depressed. They gnaw at their neighbors, coveting what they perceive as more happiness, more currency in this perverted economy. The remedy to their woes is a *change of perspective* that only the Word of Truth can offer.

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

These are good questions, aren't they? Jesus asked them in order to push His audience back on their heels, for the sake of their deliverance. He loved to challenge people's current form of thinking. Why? It was necessary to foster a change in perspective. He saw people tied up in their self-made religions, in bondage when their souls thirsted for freedom. This is the reason for great sadness, even today. Time has moved forward but, as Solomon wrote, "*There is nothing new under the sun*" (**Ecclesiastes 1:9**). Man is a master at planning his own demise. He sets his goals and spends a lifetime pursuing them, to the point of exhaustion. Yet, "*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' declares the LORD*" (**Isaiah 55:8**).

It's incredible that a believer in Christ would share in this disease, but it happens to the best of us, hence our often-expressed disappointments in life. Christianity is *not* a formula for happiness. 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**). This peace is a grace gift given to the humble, not to those striving after the wind. We reap what we sow (**Galatians 6:7**). Sow human exertion and reap exhaustion, even if the end goal is something the world deems

noble or gratifying.

There's one more dangling thread here. What about happiness? Shall we expect none? If we are to reject the worldly definition for Christianity, what ought we expect in this lifetime? The best place to find our answers is in the Holy Bible, of course, which describes our Prototype (**Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2**) as follows:

*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**

Hold on. The Bible describes the One in whom our faith rests, in whose likeness we are being transformed into, as the One described personally as “A man of sorrows?” You need to let that sink in, your freedom depends upon it. The truth is that true Christianity, something reserved for believers in Christ alone, implies an ever improving experiential relationship with Jesus (btw, this is way better than any form of happiness resulting from kinship with the world). Search the Bible for all the accounts where Jesus is depicted as smiling because he got a new home, or mode of transportation, or relationship, or a better job, or a greater standing in His community. Then search the Bible for all the times He was persecuted, weeping, and lamenting over those He came to save. You tell me which is the predominant feature of His life. “*Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple*” (**Luke 14:27**). So then, what about you, CHRIST-ian? What pattern do you find yourself living in? Are you on a treadmill for happiness, competing with others along the way; or have you surrendered yourself in obedience to God's will the way Jesus did?

“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the

world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 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 15:18-20**

Sobering, huh? But, absolutely freeing! There's nothing sweeter than being pulled out of bondage, courtesy of grace.

Step back and ponder which part(s) of your personal religion the world has defined for you. Don't call your Christian friends, either - they may be in greater bondage than you are. Read your Bible to find your conviction. If you find yourself asking, "Why am I not happier? I feel like I'm 'doing' things right.", chances are you've got some things to pray about. You're infected. Call on the Great Physician, the Word of God (**John 1:14**), knowing that you're sick. "*It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick*" (**Matthew 9:12b**). Allow Him to reset your expectations about living the spiritual life and enjoy the peace and contentment that comes with it. Shed all of the unfounded disappointment by getting off of the "Christian formula for happiness" bandwagon. Jesus didn't suffer and die for your sins so you could tally up so-called "blessings of happiness," counting them as results of "doing" Christianity so fantastically. That's treadmill thinking, and there's no peace in it. Perspective is what matters here.

*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.***

— **Philippians 4:6-7**

The Stress Experiment

When we were kids, my friends and I used to find silly experiments to perform for the sake of entertainment (that's what we did before cable TV and the Internet took over). I especially loved the ones with unexpected results. Unfortunately, some of these experiments caused pain, which meant that one of us in the group had to be the guinea pig. We'd agree to some kind of tribal election process to figure out whose turn it was to be the test subject. The rest of us would exhale a sigh of relief when someone else was chosen and then quickly don our "scientific" thinking caps (I mean, this was serious scientific experimentation, my friends - LOL).

I'll share the two "experiments" that immediately come to mind. The first, which I share for the sake of humor and a little context, is when we'd make a sharp bend in the second knuckle of our middle finger and slam it into our forearm (if we didn't have the guts to do it to ourselves, we'd ask another in the group to strike us). Somewhere along the line, we'd heard that when a muscle is sharply impacted, it will spasm and contort, which, at the time, sounded entertaining. Born skeptics, we were compelled to find out whether or not this hearsay was truth or myth. Sure enough, when struck just the right way and with the proper amount of force, the forearm would project a small bump where it was struck. The "lab rat" would sit there in pain with his mouth agape while the rest of us "gathered data." The lump would only last for a second or two and then it'd subside. The victim would wear the resultant bruise like a badge of honor for days, a walking myth-buster.

The second experiment involved standing in the threshold of a doorway. The narrower the doorway, the better (again, these were serious scientific pursuits, my friends - LOL). Since there was really no pain involved, we'd all participate, making this a group experiment. Standing in the doorway, with the palms of our hands facing our thighs, we'd push out against the doorframe with the backs of

our hands, as hard as we could, for about ten seconds or so. Then, we'd step forward and relax. Without any conscious effort, our arms would "magically" rise up from our sides. We'd swear to each other that we weren't faking it. This was truly an unexpected outcome; therefore, a favorite among kids like us.

Do I write these things to make you giggle? A little. But the second experiment makes me think about stress. After about ten seconds of pushing on the doorframe, we'd get really tired. Naturally, you'd think when we stopped consciously pushing, our bodies would want to collapse into a restful state with our arms straight down by our sides. But that's not what happened. Our bodies somehow "wanted" to go back to the stressful state, at least for a time. I think real stress, in the psychological sense, is a little like that. First, some statistics:

According to the article, *How Does Stress Affect Us?*, written by Michael Ashworth, Ph.D. for the online publication *psychcentral.com*, the following are the results of unmanaged stress:

- Over 43 percent of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress.
- Somewhere between 75 to 90 percent of all physician office visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints.
- Stress is linked to the six leading causes of death: heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide.
- The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has declared stress a hazard of the workplace.

Yowza! Dr. Ashworth continues, *"We all pay a 'stress tax' whether we realize it or not. And one in four people in a 2014 poll say they've taken a 'mental health day' as a result of work stress."* We've all heard the statement, "Stress kills!" Well, it appears that this is an accurate statement. So, why in the world do people persist in their stress? Why don't they find better ways of avoiding it? And, like the silly doorway experiment above, why in the world would anyone go right back to it once they've experienced it for a time? I mean, stress isn't comfortable, is it? Not

really. In fact, it deforms us, threatening our bearings. Are we that sick in the head that we'd normalize such a thing? I think so.

We humans have a primitive fault. We often prefer routine over health. We fear things that alter our lifestyle. We suffer daily as a result. We stress out because, deep down, when faced with the opportunity to change, we somehow find a reason to reject the idea. So, we wallow in what can only be called self-induced misery.

What kind of "change" are we talking about here? Well, as I've been teaching from my pulpit for years, a change in perspective can often eject us from a stressful situation in the blink of an eye. Take reading the Bible, for example:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

forever.

For most believers, this chapter in the Holy Bible works like magic against stress. It puts the world in its rightful place and gives us instant peace. Do our circumstances change? Nope, our perspectives do. That's the kind of ointment for our souls that snaps us out of unhealthy places. If there's no impetus for doing so, there's no telling how long we might stand there with our "arms sticking out," deformed and befuddled.

We are constantly put under stress. That'll never change while we live in a world that's antagonistic to us. *"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"* (2 Timothy 3:12). We believers ought never think our relief from stress is going to come from the world. Furthermore, it doesn't do us any good to spend our time pointing fingers at others, or even situations, as the source of our stress. Our relief, our deliverance, is in Christ Jesus. He, the Word, is our healing salve. *"Then turning to the disciples [Jesus] said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see" (Luke 10:23)!*

I'm not a psychoanalyst, so I can't list all the so-called reasons why a person chooses to persist in a state of stress. I only know that they do, and that it's a choice for believers. The Bible teaches us, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God"* (Philippians 4:6). The phrase, *"do not be anxious,"* is a command, not a suggestion. The practical implication is that we are commanded to seek a way out of stress, not excuses as to why we ought to stay in it. We have daily access to freedom, right? *"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery"* (Galatians 5:1).

The remedy for our woes is Jesus. If we're stressed out, we are to turn to Him first. *"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds"* (Psalm 147:3). If we're stuck in some bad habits, He has the strength to break them. Rejecting change leads us right back to our place of stress and, ultimately, if the statistics are

correct, right back to the doctor's office. Perspective is everything - learn to love having it changed by the Word of Truth.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, 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 understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

— **Philippians 4:4-8**