

# Diary of a Journeyman

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

*Volume I*

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## Introduction

The vast majority of the contents of this book are gleaned directly from almost two hundred blog entries over the course of roughly two years. Each blog entry has been categorized based on primary topic of interest and has been preserved in its original form. Each category is a chapter. Each chapter has a short introduction that expands upon its name, alluding to the individual blogs within the chapter.

Reading tips:

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

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

Happy reading!

Love in Christ,

Ed Collins

## Discipline and Priorities

Preparation is key with any endeavor. Discipline and priorities are the lifeblood of preparation. Like our coaches used to say, “Practice makes perfect!” It’s true, one must practice, train, and dedicate themselves, for we believers are, after all, enlistees in Christ’s army.

*Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier. Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules.*

— **2 Timothy 2:3-5**

There are no shortcuts in the spiritual life. The training is demanding, requiring sustained focus and energy. God’s grace is ever sufficient, it’s true, but believers aren’t reborn to slothfulness; rather, they are regenerated with the ability and the taste for grace. However, God has also provisioned each believer with a conscience and a free will, implying choice. With the presence of the flesh and sin, a believer must *choose* to receive His grace at all times.

*“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).* God has set our priorities straight. We simply must obey, train hard, and bring glory to our Creator in the process.

## **A Waste of Time?**

"Don't waste your time on them, they're hopeless!"

Ever heard something along those lines? I have, plenty of times. But here's the issue with the statement - it's all about perspective. It's a relative statement that is dependent on who's saying it to whom.

Imagine if someone said that to Jesus and He actually agreed with them? Where would we all be?

*For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*

— **Romans 5:6**

**Godly things done in faith are never a waste of time.**

*To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

— **2 Thessalonians 1:11-12**

**Faith is the key. However, faith must be that which is given by the grace of God for it to animate the promises of God in the life of an individual.**

You must have faith in the face of the extreme negativity of this world to press on with the Gospel. It's the only thing powerful enough to accomplish this good work. Ungodly faith won't cut it.

James speaks of a faith that IS a waste of time: *"For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead"* (**James 2:26**). What James is saying is that if your faith never animates godly fruit in your soul (e.g.:

peace, happiness, contentment), then you need to reevaluate that which you believe.

I've often taught from the pulpit that everyone has faith in something, even unbelievers. So, there are indeed different types of faith in this world, that which is truly given by the grace of God and that which is merely intellectual. If we ponder man's faith we might quickly conclude that anything that is not the fruit of godly faith is rightly deemed a waste of time.

Now back to our opening comment, "Don't waste your time on them, they're hopeless!" How ought a believer carrying the Gospel respond to this?

*For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption [waste of time, dissipation], but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life [time well spent, filled with the Spirit]. Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.*

— Galatians 6:8-9

**Pursuing good things amidst a crooked and perverse generation, such as our own, is never a waste of time. It may be horrifically trying and painfully difficult, but it is NEVER a waste of time!**

**We waste our time when our lifestyles are the fruit of ungodly faith. The root cause of ungodly faith is believing in the promises of the flesh over the promises of God. The cold, hard truth is that most believers still love themselves more than they love God.**

The things we have faith in are what guide us. Like a compass, it's important that we know true north (aka godliness). What good is a mission through this wilderness called life if our compass is broken? Seems like a

waste of time to me, yet most believers, even, are lost. Why? They possess faith in the wrong things (e.g.: they believe in their own abilities for deliverance more than God's).

Both the apostles Paul and Peter allude to this waste-of-time-lifestyle as "dissipation". The Greek word is *asotia*, which literally means "wantonness, profligacy (wasteful in the use of resources), wastefulness" - Strong's concordance. In other words, a lifestyle of dissipation means a person is wasting their time.

*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. And do not get [habitually] drunk with wine, for that is dissipation [reckless living, waste of time], but be [habitually] filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.*

— Paul, Ephesians 5:15-21

Paul was essentially telling the local churches not to live like the unbelievers were. In other words, don't adopt their lifestyle as your own, for God has bigger plans for you as a believer.

Oh, and expect to receive grief from the world for following Paul's advice.

*Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries.*

## A Waste of Time?

*In all this [their lifestyle of wasting time], they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same essences of dissipation [reckless living, waste of time], and they malign you; but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.*

— **Peter, 1 Peter 4:1-5**

There are most definitely things God deems a waste of time, but they do not include the following good work:

*Go therefore and make disciple 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 [Jesus] command you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*

— **Matthew 28:19-20**

May the words of our Lord be ever encouraging to you, especially to those of you who feel like some days you're just wasting your time with the folks in this world. May you be strengthened in your understanding that God's promise of walking in a manner worthy of your calling means suffering. Christ never veered off course and He suffered more than any of us.

*Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

— **Hebrews 12:1-3**

**Believe in Truth, namely the Word of God, and God promises to deposit godly faith to your account. Listen to the Spirit as He works with that**

**faith. Avoid a lifestyle of dissipation by following your good conscience. Do these things and your time will be well spent.**

One last bit of perspective...and this is the doozy. Would you consider it a waste of time if the crux of your life were to evangelize a single soul on your death bed?...your earthly struggles were for someone else's eternal salvation? If you said "no," then consider likewise that each day is worth every breath that God has given you by grace...that you might take that time to spread the good news.

## **The American Dream Is a Trap**

I've heard more than one politician in the United States either directly or indirectly make the statement, "every U.S. citizen deserves to own a home." They paint a family scene that includes 2 kids (national average), who when they grow up are "entitled" to a college education simply by being citizens of the United States of America. They put a big bow on it, call it the "American Dream," and then expect a warm "thank you" for the "enlightenment."

The painting is a counterfeit.

**This so-called "American Dream" has proven to be one of the greatest sources of misery in our country.** It's a cancer. If adopted, even in part, it becomes one's preoccupation...one's "life-goal," often consuming the owner of it. There's nothing wrong with having something to focus on and strive for, but if you're going to chomp on a bit, make sure it's the right one. Otherwise, you will be led astray.

Before jumping in any further, let's do some back-of-napkin math. According to the U.S. Census of Housing, roughly 60% of all homes in the U.S. are single-family detached (aka the traditional single-family home - you know, like the one in the aforementioned painting). That means roughly 40% of all homes are "falling short" of the picture-perfect "dream" alluded to earlier. Hmmm...

The point? - for starters, it's mathematically impossible for every U.S. citizen to live the so-called "American Dream"...and we haven't even considered the financial impossibility of all of this. It's all part of a scheme (**Ephesians 6:11**).

Just thinking aloud here...I've never met a single person who loves the idea of being strapped to a mortgage payment. I'm not arguing one's right to do



so, but who truly enjoys signing a contract that says they're in debt for the next 30 years? Truthfully, only about 1/3 of homeowners actually OWN their home outright (no mortgage), which really means that if 2/3 of homeowners stop making payments, their "American Dream" receives a notice of foreclosure.

Gee, better not let THAT happen or society might call you a "loser" ...better work even harder then, huh?...and next year harder than that...and so on...who has time for the Word of God??? The treadmill welcomes you, little hamster. Offensive? - well, now that's interesting considering:

*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

Listen, I'm not one of those pseudo-news anchors who stirs the pot with ulterior motives. I'm an honest pastor whose good heart breaks every time it contemplates such things. I'm not trying to discourage anyone from pursuing a single-family detached home and raising children - I've done it myself.

The issue is that people are in bondage to "dreams" that are literally impossible for all to achieve - yet that's the sales pitch. Math doesn't lie - politicians do, unfortunately...and so do most Christians to themselves, even.

Instead of buying a pre-packaged, bogus lie, may I suggest folks talk to God about their very own, tailor-made "American Dream?" Heck, you don't even need to call it that - just call it "Your Dream" or "God's Dream" for you. It's unique. It's special. It's yours.

**There's literally no better life for you than the one He's ordained.**

## The American Dream Is a Trap

If you buy the "sales pitch" from the world (and I don't suppose the U.S. is the only country with this problem), you are entering into an evil contract. The Lord God would NEVER want to put you into bondage to things that have ZERO eternal value...that's Satan's counterfeit plan. Does the so-called "American Dream" have eternal value??? - I don't see that in the Bible.

Here's what's in the Bible (for the sake of contrast):

*For the poor will never cease to be in the land.*

— **Deuteronomy 15:11a**

Even Jesus, Himself, made this statement:

*For you always have the poor with you; but you do not always have Me.*

— **Matthew 26:11**

Jesus was saying that there's no cure for poverty, regardless of what politicians might try to sell you - so focus on ME! The god of this world (the devil - **2 Corinthians 4:4**) HATES when you focus on Jesus because it strips him of his means of controlling you. The "American Dream" is one of his favorite levers! Focus on Jesus Christ and you experience freedom, regardless of circumstance. Isn't that what Paul wrote about?

*Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.*

— **Philippians 4:11-12**

Does the Bible suggest you become artificially poor (e.g.: asceticism)? Of

course not - God ordained your life for a reason. The Bible says work hard as unto the Lord (**Colossians 3:23**); you are worthy of your wages (**Romans 4:4**). However, the Bible also states that earthly wealth is nothing more than a variable amongst God's children. After all, it's His will to see His grace working through ALL walks of life - this is His plan, remember.

**God's scale of values and His definition of success are not tied to man-made "dreams."**

So throw out the "American Dream" and embrace "Your Dream," which is really "God's Dream" for you. Loose the chains of failed expectations. Jettison the baggage and cut your losses now before you wake up with regret each morning. Keep it simple. Maybe you're rich, maybe you're poor - the point is that it doesn't matter in the end.

Misery loves company so there will never be a shortage of invitations back into bondage. Most people are utterly lost, looking for compliance, even imposing it, as they peer out over their picket fences. Let them see how content you are without their proposed "American Dream." Show the world that His grace is sufficient for you (**2 Corinthians 12:9**).

**Remember, what others think of you is none of your business!**

Close the shades if you happen to have them (if not, improvise!). Whatever it takes, find a place to sit down with the good book. Learn what true success looks like. Discover the differences between your goals and God's goals for you.

*Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.*

— Revelation 3:17-18

If you're stuck chasing the carrot that is the "American Dream," you're going to miss out on "God's Dream" for you:

*[But] just as it is written, things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.*

— 1 Corinthians 2:9

And if you're one of the vast majority that don't actually own a single-family detached home (1 / 3 of 60% = 20% <-- that's about how many people in the U.S. actually satisfy this facet of the so-called "American Dream")...if you're one of the majority that the world says is "failing," then just remember the following scripture:

*As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, 'I will follow You wherever You go'. 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 9:57-58

Boy, oh boy, I guess lucky for Jesus that He didn't live in the United States nowadays, huh?...otherwise, He'd have risked being dubbed a "failure," having not lived up to the "American Dream." :o

**Enjoy your freedom, my friend. Christ went all the way to the Cross for it.**

## The Best Part About Going On a Diet

*My son, eat honey, for it is good, yes, the honey from the comb is sweet to your taste.*

— Proverbs 24:13

Honey is a gift from God. The Bible speaks of it often as a treat...something good for us...something available to make us happy. Does that mean we should eat too much of it? Of course not, it'd be unhealthy to do so.

### **Moderation is the key to healthy living.**

I have put myself on a multitude of diets over the years. Seems my body demands such things the older I get, so the frequency of these self-made programs seems to be increasing. Oh well, guess I'll occasionally join the fray of MILLIONS who get out of bed each morning with that same crushing feeling, "Ugh, I'm still on a diet!" My favorite diet is the "seefood" diet (and no, that's not a typo). "See" + "food" means that I get to eat any food that I can see - woohoo! LOVE that diet!...but I digress. :P

In all seriousness, diets typically mean refraining from one thing or another. And, as my youngest son often laments, why are the best foods always the worst ones for us? - ugh! Maybe a purist nutritionist would disagree with my agreeing with his sentiments, but I'll side with my son here. In our early twenties, my wife and I would go to the ice cream parlor and drink tall frappes (milk shakes made with ice cream - oh yeah, pile on the calories and the fat - LOL). They were so yummy that we'd drink them 3-4 times a week!

Inevitably, we'd end up on a diet. Surprise, right? We'd go months without drinking a single frappe. After making our first milestone (typically some amount of weight lost), we'd finally go and grab a frappe.

WOW!!! Frappes never tasted so good! Given the fact that the ice cream parlor hadn't changed their recipe, it must've been the simple fact that we hadn't HAD one in a while. It seriously tasted SO good! In retrospect, drinking 3-4 frappes a week had diminished their yumminess. Same goes for anything that we enjoy, it seems.

**Too much of a good thing isn't always healthy.**

By denying ourselves access to some of our favorite tasty things for a time, diets bear an unexpected fruit - a bonus! Diets remind us of why we love certain things so much by simply creating a distance between us. We Americans have a love affair with our food, it's true, so dieting is a good example. We perseverate so much over things sometimes that we have to take "time-outs" (aka diets) for our own good health.

**Distance makes the heart grow fonder. This tends to hold true with most things we love...even food! :) A helping of our favorite dish after a long diet is better than most things for sure. It's in that moment that we rediscover our appreciation for the thing we've missed.**

**The idea is to find a happy medium somewhere between gluttony and dieting. That's moderation.**

*Have you found honey? Eat only what you need, that you not have it in excess and vomit it.*

— Proverbs 25:16

**Wisdom is sweet, but believe it or not, even its excessive intake may cause one's "belly" to ache. Solomon warned us against trying to overstuff ourselves with knowledge; for everything, even the bread of life, requires a period of healthy digestion.**

*But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless,*

*and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body.*

— Ecclesiastes 12:12

It's funny because if I happen to take a little time off from reading my Bible, when I get back to it, there's always an "I missed you!" moment. I suppose that's a blessing in and of itself, isn't it?...to rediscover something you appreciate...to have that flame rekindled by a little yearning.

**So, you see, dieting not only addresses the primary issue of shedding a little fat, but in the process of going without, we are given the blessing of rediscovering how much we appreciate the things we love.**

Also, I haven't mentioned this yet, but in both realms, physical and spiritual, we are meant to employ exercise in our daily living. The things we digest are meant to be metabolized through exercise, building muscle and such. Otherwise, what we eat is even more likely to be stored as fat.

**Without exercise we become bloated. That's unhealthy, too. We don't have to be fitness gurus, but a moderate exercise program coupled with a moderate diet gives us an appropriate, healthy lifestyle. Through moderation, we learn to appreciate all aspects of living even more.**

Sometimes it's the simplest of things that make us smile. I can't say I've ever known anyone that thought diets were fun, but with the right perspective, we might find another morsel to munch on that's just as sweet. Some might disagree with my giving this little blessing top billing as the "best" part about going on a diet, pointing at their newfound ability to fit into their old clothes. I'm fine with that.

**I don't need to be a rock star with a Hollywood body, just grateful to Him for all the little things. :)**

## God's Definition of Promotion

I've often told my congregation that it's not WHERE we worship, it's THAT we worship.

I remind them that in the early church, local assemblies were literally the homes of members of the congregation, which meant "going to church" meant going to the Joneses (can't say for sure if there were any Joneses back then, but you get the point :). Some people lived in caves back then...not the prettiest local assemblies ever constructed, but that's the point.

When did "church" become associated with 100' steeples and stained glass windows? When did it begin meaning high ceilings and shiny altars? Why are so many in our society impressed with the glamor of the average church or the "magnificence" of the mega-churches with their mega-stages and mega-bands and their mega-everything?

The first church I was commissioned by Him to open was in Rehoboth, MA. We converted a 1,200 square foot strip mall space from a sewing and fabrics shop to a chapel, a prep school, a mothers room, and a tiny audio-visual recording room that doubled as my "office". We made a little stage just large enough to contain my pulpit, a screen, and an area for musicians over in the corner. There were lolly columns and low ceilings, but you know what?...we LOVED it! It was our home. We were grateful.

When we outgrew that place, we moved to a place that was about 3,000 square feet. We converted a warehouse within a beautiful antique dealer complex into a sizable chapel (high ceilings, no lolly columns), an ample stage, an office for me, a conference room, 2 foyers, a prep school, a mother's room, a full kitchen and two bathrooms. This place was truly grand compared to the first church. Boy, was the congregation excited! I was too, only I watched them very closely just the same...to discern their overall attitude about it...to ensure they remained humble about what



most (myself included) were calling a “promotion”.

He has since opened my eyes to the concept of “promotion”. I’ll get to that in a moment. For now, consider the fact that any worthy promotion in this life is the result of first being tested. Keep that in mind.

Truth be told, we thoroughly enjoyed our stay at the “big church” in Seekonk, MA. As is the case with most things, our stay there wasn’t meant to last forever. Here’s where my own testing came into existence. The Spirit, for a multitude of obvious reasons, but in retrospect now, a multitude of unknown reasons, began nudging me to prepare the congregation for another more. All I could tell them at the time was that He had a plan. And He certainly did.

We found our next location in a strip mall down the street in Rehoboth, MA. It was about half the size of the church we were in. It was a nice, adequate space by all mean...just not so “glamorous” compared to the “big church”. Not so surprisingly, this news did not go over all that well with the congregation. We even lost a few members (test failed?). I’d often lie awake in bed and wonder where all the exuberance that followed the news about the “big church” had gone. To their credit, most accepted it and followed my lead, although many wore quizzical smiles on their faces when I’d say from the pulpit, “Folks, this is a promotion!” Their countenance conveyed something different was stirring in their souls...I could tell.

You see, that was the test - could my congregation “see” His grace in a situation that the flesh would deem a demotion? Could they “see” the promotion? You might be asking, “What promotion???...how can going to a building half the size and grandeur be a promotion, silly?” Listen up.

I alluded to this earlier. Promotion follows a test. If you pass ANY test, to some degree, large or small, you ARE promoted. The most meaningful promotions in the spiritual life occur between your two ears! Repeat that to

yourself...often. Most believers need to redefine their concept of promotion, from something based on worldly values to something based on eternal ones.

Learning to run against the world's definition of success and being satisfied in His lot is, in itself, a grace gift. It's invaluable to the individual whose intent is to lay down their lives for Him.

After about a year and a half, we were presented with a "fire drill" of sorts...an unexpected move. The Spirit had orchestrated yet another test for the congregation. This time it was a beautiful, stand-alone church on a hill in North Dighton, MA with all the fixings already in place, no conversion necessary. I knew the church and whenever I'd drive by it, I'd say to Him, "Someday, your will be done, it'd be nice to see the congregation in a place like that." I'd also say to myself that He wouldn't do it, if ever, until we were ready for the test. We were ready.

To summarize:

In the case of my congregation, we obviously needed to grow in this area. So, He presented us with a test. First, move us to a bigger church, then move us to a smaller church, and then finally consummate all of it with a move to the grandest church we've worshipped in so far. Every move was a test. Those who stuck around and passed them, have been promoted every time! My heart soars for them - truly. My heart aches for the others who failed.

At our first gathering at this church, and as I've since said many times, I stood before the congregation and said, "PLEASE do not misconstrue this situation. The fruit in this so-called 'promotion' is in how well you receive it...that's the test at hand." My fear, as their shepherd, is that the tendency to make an issue out of the building will satisfy their flesh. However, if that happens, they have failed the test and so this "promotion" isn't really a promotion at all. Something beautiful would have become a stumbling

block to them. That'd be a tragedy...one that I've lived through multiple times already.

May I submit the following to all of you, whether you're a member of my congregation or not. Think about God's promotions as always following a test. Learn to identify the test before you allow the flesh to overcome you with its desire to celebrate for all the wrong reasons. Learn to see exactly what the Lord's trying to deliver you from, seeing the forest through the trees.

The test precedes the promotion always. Promotions are not as the flesh sees them, rather they are as God sees them.

*'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor 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'.*

— **Isaiah 55:8-9**

This means that God can and does promote individuals when not another living soul understands it or even sees it. But that's no matter to the omniscient God of the Universe. The promotion is a function of the test. If you don't understand the test, you don't receive the promotion, regardless of what your flesh has to say about it.

## Execution

In my 2 decades in the high-tech industry, I spent the lion's share interfacing with customers. During that time, I learned a very valuable lesson. But before I share it, let me set the stage a little.

I'm a good guy, truth be told. I care about people. I listen. I respond with compassion. I work hard for others. I'm intelligent, savvy, and reliable. Above all, I have integrity. These are all grace gifts that I thank God for, therefore, I list them here to His credit, not mine.

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

— 1 Corinthians 15:10a

These grace gifts are wonderful characteristics to bring to the table in business. I've done it. However, without one critical element, most of these things die on the vine.

Here's the big lesson I've learned, particularly in marketing and sales. It doesn't matter what actually goes into making a deal happen if you can't close the deal in the end. In other words, there are certain choices you have to make that can make or break an entire year of good, honest work. You could be THE best salesman up until that point, but if you can't actually get the job done in the end, none of it really matters (at least not to the bottom line).

**If you're in business to close deals, how successful are you if that never happens? Will a good personality or a high IQ pay the bills?**

Some of the best salesmen I've ever known were barely tolerable as human beings. Honestly. Some of them disturb me to think about even to this day. Repulsive is a good word. Some people just rub me the wrong way, but in business, that shouldn't matter. And it doesn't, assuming they have

integrity, at least. At the end of the day, good salesmen got the job done. That's why they are called "executives". They earned their paycheck even more than the so-called "nice guy" who couldn't make his quota and was putting the company in jeopardy.

What's the difference between these two individuals? Execution. One lives up to his "executive" title, while another doesn't. The one closing the most business is the one that is willing and able to execute at the most critical times. I used to run into guys that knew products, technology, systems, customers, etc. better than the rest, yet lacked this one critical quality - the ability to execute when it mattered most.

It's like the basketball fanatic that can't make a basket to save their life. Or the person who wears army fatigues around town but was a draft-dodger. Know what I mean? They never DO anything.

The same goes in the spiritual life. There are lots of folks out there that have a lot of Bible doctrine stored up in their souls, but when push comes to shove, they are spiritually incapacitated.

*But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.*

— **Hebrews 10:38-39**

**Faith motivates execution. Without faith a person will eventually shrink back.**

What's interesting is that the folks in the spiritual life that find the most success aren't always the most educated or the most polished, rather they are those with the most faith. Even the super-educated Jewish leaders confronted this reality with the apostles. Of course like most "talkers" they were threatened by the "doers":

*And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved. Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.*

— Acts 4:12-13

**There's a reason, and often it's the simplest and most rudimentary of reasons, why some folks get things done while others flap their wings and go nowhere. It's called execution.**

Like the failed businessman, what good is going through all the motions if you can't ever close the deal? Seriously.

I've observed a lot of unhappiness in this world within the ranks of Christianity. Why? Most people with Truth don't know how to apply it. They are like untrained mechanics...they have the right tool but can't seem to find where to use it.

**Such is the modern plague in Christianity. All talk, no execution.**

And please don't think for a second that I'm throwing stones. Most things I write, I write from personal experience, as I'VE been guilty of such things! I write these blogs, knowing that people will be stung by them, out of love.

Always love. Funny, even that requires execution, huh? If I'm to practice what I preach, then I must press on in writing blog entries such as this one, right? :)

God is our prototype executive.

*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**

## **Interview Series: Locker Room Chat With Coach**

"Adversity...No pain, no gain!" This has been stated by many well-respected coaches, athletes, trainers, sportscasters and professionals in the muscle world out there, almost to the point of overkill. However, it is so very true." I asked him to give me something to write about. This was Coach Jim's initial response, a man heralded with "Coach of the Year" honors in both high school and college basketball arenas. With Jim, one has to go fishing for details of his accolades. You won't find him volunteering details about being on ESPN while contending for a national college title, either. It seems all he ever wants to talk about is Jesus Christ nowadays, and how He made his coaching career possible. I like that. :)

From here on out, I will refer to him as I do when I see him face-to-face as just "Coach".

I asked Coach to help me understand a few of the things that he's learned over the years, relating them to spiritual truths contained in the good Book. "As an old coach, the popular terms I used in my craft now hold a different meaning, thanks to years of wear and tear, and some suffering, thank God. He's kept me humble," says the 6'5" gray-haired star coach in a calm that is unmistakably Christ's.

**"In the sports world, it is a fact that adversity is expected, stress is an option, and panic gets you nowhere."**

Coach emphasizes the value of preparation and training, even so far as to attribute the attention to such labor as the critical element of success. Before game day, "we can prepare via many training and situational practice techniques and sessions. Weight training, play books, and solid coaching are a part of a unified approach to success." Coach believes in drills, scenario planning, and execution-type training to prepare a team of athletes...with an emphasis on 'team'.



**I get the sense that even though he'd be the first to point out a superstar, his priority is teamsmanship. I like that - a LOT.**

He sees a coaching parallel to the pastor and his congregation, but even more so with the relationship between the God and His children.

"The same holds true in our spiritual journeys. We utilize our B.I.B.L.E. (Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth) as a guide, with Christ and the Holy Spirit as our superior coaching staff. Winning is a function of being at peace while under pressure on the court. When we doubt, we look to our coaching staff for guidance. When we're shaken, we remember our play books. We learn to execute under pressure. That's how we win the game. Undisciplined, unprepared players are uptight, nervous players who can't make a basket to save their lives." Well said, Coach.

**Coach quotes, *"Exercise daily in God - no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever"* (1 Timothy 4:10 - Message).**

"We've all experienced a time when we were hit with uncertainty, danger, or pain...and we fell to our knees and cried out to God. He can, and will, use adversity to bring us closer to Him - which is where we often experience the greatest blessings in life." Coach expresses these things with a certain wisdom typically reserved for more 'seasoned' believers - he's almost 70 years old now, and admittedly the most peaceful he's ever been. He frequently injects quips that encourage this interviewer to praise the Lord along with him. He's easy to be around. Genuine. Direct. Loving. You know, like Jesus. :)

**C.S. Lewis wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."**

The psalmist said, *"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey...Your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees"* (**Psalm 119:67, 71 - NIV**).

**Suffering is good if received with the right perspective.**

I see Coach as a big-picture guy in the end, as someone I can relate to, as a leader who's served in the trenches with many others who undoubtedly looked over their shoulders for that reassuring nod...the kind that coaches seem to impart at just the right times. I think of **Proverbs 20:29** when I think of him, *"The glory of young men is their strength, and the honor of old men is their gray hair."*

If he had an MVP trophy to give, he says he'd give it to the apostle Paul, who uttered these words, *"Concerning this [suffering] I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 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 12:8-10**).

"Paul, from my playbook, was the first 'blue chipper' in the Bible. This modern day sports term is used by scouts for a top performer headed for a Division 1/NCAA college with potential superstar status. Even though Paul flew under the radar, being handicapped and not a flashy speaker, his scrappiness and heart would have been detected by even a blind scout in the stands. Paul would've been highly touted. He endured and suffered with the main goal of serving his Lord, to His glory. Translation: a real team player destined for 'Final Four'."

**I asked Coach how all of this applies to him, personally. "Suffering can strengthen us, if we let it. It can make us more like the Lord. When a**

**Christian suffers and gives glory to God through it all, it reassures the rest of us that there never will be a valley so deep that God won't get us through it."**

No wonder Coach has had so much success in life and career - he "gets it". He's retired from professional coaching now but, as I see it, once a coach, always a coach. At the close of our interview he shared how his coaching style, even before he recognized it as such, paralleled the 'coaching' principles laid out in the Bible.

We're all in this game. We're teammates "in Christ". Some are coaches, some are players, some are alternates awaiting their time on the court. The thing is this: spiritual growth is about suffering, putting in the workouts, executing under pressure, playing as if to win.

"Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Playing 'freely', without fear, breeds confidence. Practice and study hard, repetition builds trust and faith in your abilities." Thanks Coach!

## The Lender's Slave

A few years ago I saw an interview of Warren Buffet whose net worth, as of today, is over \$70 billion (Forbes). I'll never forget it. He's a so-called "self-made" man who's worked hard his whole life. I don't know if he's a believer or not, but I do know that he knows how to make money and keep it. I'm not proposing this become our pursuit in life, just focusing for a moment on something he said that I believe is both wise and, as it turns out, Biblical.

The interviewer asked him (I am paraphrasing), "Warren, if you could share some wisdom with the children of our country regarding finances, what would you say to them?" He responded with the same Biblically based advice I've tried to impart to my own boys. I'll share that and some scripture in a moment.

**Buffet responded (I am paraphrasing), "I'd tell them to stay away from credit cards and always invest in their education."**

I wonder what life for the majority of U.S. citizens would be like if they followed his simple advice.

Not that I give perfect advice 100% of the time, but here's what I've tried to teach my own children:

- **First, if you can't purchase something with cash then you shouldn't purchase it, unless it's for a basic human need (e.g.: food, shelter, etc.). If you do choose to carry a credit card, do so for the sake of convenience, but NEVER carry a balance. Always pay the full balance at the end of the month. Credit cards are a trap for most.**

- **Second, invest in your education as nobody can ever take it away from you. And I always add that "education" only sometimes has to do with formal schooling (e.g.: college). The greatest investment you will EVER make is in the Word of God, of course. That's your greatest**

**return on investment.**

Some of you might be saying, “What, do you think you’re father-of-the-year now? You’re going to teach me how to counsel my kids on finances?” My answer is, “I’ve never thought that, but I DO think that my Father in Heaven rightly holds that title.” And here’s what HE has to say on the subject:

*The reward of humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, honor and life.*

— **Proverbs 22:4**

As I stated as the capstone above - the greatest investment is in one’s Biblical education, as its return is eternal. That portfolio belongs to the person who possesses both a “fear of the LORD” and “riches, honor and life.”

However, as most will readily attest, we must also learn to navigate the waters of life in the practical sense. Satan’s schemes are there to trip us up every step of the way. One of his absolute favorite ways is to get us focusing on acquiring “stuff”. And being flawed, impatient creatures, we give into the temptation to purchase said stuff on credit. This is a trap.

*Thorns and snares are in the way of the perverse; he who guards himself will be far from them.*

— **Proverbs 22:5**

I believe that Buffet’s advice is very sound advice - maybe not for the reasons he would personally cite, but for Biblical reasons.

*Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

— **Proverbs 22:6**

Now, don't miss the proximity of this concept, that a parent ought to train up a child in Truth, to the very next verse! God the Holy Spirit inspired this passage to read this way, remember.

*The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower becomes the lender's slave.*

— Proverbs 22:7

There it is, the great financial trap and the TRUE issue at hand. While Buffet might argue it's all about the science of finances, it's the Lord's words that must be added here for clarity:

*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. You cannot serve God and wealth.*

— Jesus, Matthew 6:24

As **Proverbs 22:7** states, "*the borrower becomes the lender's slave.*" In other words, the person who consistently falls prey to the temptation of borrowing (e.g.: on a credit card) to purchase things they can't afford is a slave.

**If you're a slave to money then, as Jesus said, you CANNOT be a slave of His!**

If you're a slave to money, as Jesus stated, you will end up despising Him for asking you to give your allegiance to Him. The worst mistake believers make is in thinking that they CAN serve two masters. Not only does that thinking imply Jesus is a liar (read Matthew 6:24 again) but, in the practical sense as it manifests itself in the life of its possessor, "*all sorts of evil*" arises as fruit of it.

*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.*

— 1 Timothy 6:10

**If it's borrowed money, guess what? It's not really your money. The trap is to pretend it is and "enjoy" its perceived power for a time. After the "honeymoon" phase is over you might find yourself suffering the consequences, diverting precious time that SHOULD be spent investing in the Word just so you can dig yourself out of a hole. Satan mocks you.**

Learn to step back every so often and evaluate your financial posture. Most Americans purchase things they don't need. I suppose that's why yard sales, thrift shops, and eBay are so popular. Our Lord wasn't lying when He made the plain statement that we can't serve two masters. We can't. Never. Satan lies and tempts you into thinking you can...but you can't.

**Stop borrowing and start investing in your education, particularly your Biblical one.**

## My Fitness Band

*I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
Wonderful are Your works,  
And my soul knows it very well.*

— Psalms 139:14

“Oh...there goes Pastor again!” I hear some giggling over my shoulder as I pass by the church kitchen. My mom’s in there with my head deacon before the rest of the church family arrives for class. They enjoy ribbing me whenever they get the opportunity (just like I with them, of course : ) ).

I respond, “Gotta walk off these little red bars on my fitness band...says I’ve been stagnant for too long...gotta keep my metabolism up!” These are the things I’ve learned since purchasing my fitness band, perchance, in a bundle off of Amazon. At the time, I was really focused on finding a new heart rate monitor for my workouts. God must’ve known how much I’d appreciate this little contraption once I donned it on my wrist. I wasn’t looking, but I’m glad I found it.

**Oftentimes our greatest “finds” in life are happenstance. However, with God, there are no coincidences. He ensures lots of things in our lives that we fail to categorize properly. Heaven is going to be lots of fun, spending time learning about all the little things He did for us that we were clueless about. In any case, I know He wants me physically healthy.**

This fitness band is an unexpected gift from Him. Aren’t such things often the best kinds of gifts? I suppose it’s because I didn’t spend any time offering my “opinion” on the subject, muddying the purity and the perfectness of it in any way.

Medical research has shown that if a person sits for longer than an hour, their metabolism actually transitions into a different phase. CNN recently



published an article titled, *"Sitting Still Will Kill You, Even If You Exercise,"* pointing to the fact that good health is a constant endeavor, not hyper-concentrated, animalistic bouts with gravity at the local gym. Good health is proven to extend one's life, God willing, of course. It also contributes to a more physically pleasing life, while alive on earth.

Long life is presented as a blessing in the Bible. *"A gray head is a crown of glory; it is found in the way of righteousness"* (**Proverbs 16:31**). Job also knew of the blessing of longevity, which is why he was perplexed by the fact that the evil sometimes are granted it, *"Why do the wicked still live, continue on, also become very powerful"* (**Job 21:7**)? We might quickly respond to Job's confusion with, *"Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance"* (**Romans 2:4**)?

**When God keeps a righteous person alive, it's a blessing; however, keeping an evil person alive is a demonstration of divine patience, minimally.**

My son's fiancé bought him, her dad, and herself matching fitness bands for Christmas. My wife has been wearing one for much longer than all of us. I've also encouraged the church's techno-guru to invest in one, claiming, "You're investing in your health...and what's more important, after spiritual health, than physical health?" He bought one :). "It's like having a motivational coach, albeit electronic, on your wrist," I say.

**The Bible doesn't want us to be stagnant. Even when we learn to "be still", we are moving, growing, training in God's plan.**

Nowhere does the Bible imply we ought to contribute to our own unhealthiness - not in any sense. Just the opposite, actually. There's a reason why the Lord, our Master, said to His slaves in the parable of the ten minas, "'do business' with My grace." There's a reason why He chastised the slave that failed to comply, calling him a "worthless slave."

Truly living implies movement, being “alive” ...always “doing” as James alludes to in **James 1:22**.

**Sophomores might argue for their slothfulness with, “If God wants me alive, He’ll keep me alive no matter how physically unfit I am!” And that is a true statement, however, choosing to sit around and exacerbate poor health is putting God to the test. Jesus refuted the devil on this very point regarding physical health:**

*Then the devil \*took Him into the holy city and had Him stand 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,*

*SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.’”*

*Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.’”*

— **Matthew 4:5-7**

A lot of good people spend ample time exercising their spiritual muscles, which is wonderful, given the eternal advantages of spiritual over physical health, “*for bodily discipline is only of little profit [comparatively], but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come*” (**1 Timothy 4:8**). Unfortunately, many believers refuse to take care of the physical body they’ve been given by God. Some make a habit of putting God to the test by jamming chemicals into their already degenerating bodies, whether smoked, ingested, or even shot up intravenously.

*Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in*

*you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.*

— **1 Corinthians 6:19-20**

I'm in no way the most physically fit man on the planet, just ask my family - LOL. However, through experience, here's what I can say for sure. Being physically healthy assists me in being a better pastor, husband, father, friend, and so on. A healthy body coupled with a healthy spiritual life makes for a powerfully robust ministry. If that means I wear a little reminder on my wrist and a strap around my chest when I work out, then so be it. All these things are grace gifts from God - who am I to refuse ANY of His good grace???

**Physical health is a blessing - that's a fact. Pursue it and watch how our Creator pours out His grace in your life.**

*Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.*

— **3 John 2**

## Spiritual Minutemen

*Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.*

— **2 Timothy 2:3-4**

During the American Revolutionary War, in the British colony of Massachusetts Bay, all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 60 were required to participate in their local militia. As early as 1645 in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, some men were selected from the general ranks of town-based "training bands" to be ready for rapid deployment. Men so selected were designated as minutemen. They were usually drawn from settlers of each town, and so it was very common for them to be fighting alongside relatives and friends.

*But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, **my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier**, who is also your messenger and minister to my need.*

— **Philippians 2:25**

Some towns in Massachusetts had a long history of designating a portion of their militia as minutemen, with "minute companies" constituting special units within the militia system whose members underwent additional training and held themselves ready to turn out rapidly ("at a minute's notice") for emergencies, hence their name. Other towns, such as Lexington, preferred to keep their entire militia in a single unit.

Members of the minutemen, by contrast, were no more than 30 years old, and were chosen for their enthusiasm, political reliability, and strength. They were the first armed militia to arrive at or await a battle.

*Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.*

— 1 Peter 3:13-17

The militia typically assembled as an entire unit in each town two to four times a year for training during peacetime, but as the inevitability of war became apparent, the militia trained three to four times a week.

Interestingly enough, my church literally meets “three to four times a week”. I’ve been suggesting for some time now that the Spirit is preparing us for battles still unknown to us, specifically.

Most Colonial militia units were provided neither arms nor uniforms, and were required to equip themselves. Many simply wore their own farmers' or workmans' clothes, and in some cases they wore cloth hunting frocks. Most used fowling pieces, though rifles were sometimes used where available. Neither fowling pieces nor rifles had bayonets. Some colonies purchased muskets, cartridge boxes, and bayonets from England, and maintained armories within the colony.

Rather than fight formal battles in the traditional dense lines and columns, they were better when used as irregulars, primarily as skirmishers and sharpshooters. Their experience suited irregular warfare. Most were familiar with frontier hunting.

*When our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his*

## Spiritual Minutemen

*work. From that day on, half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows and the breastplates; and the captains were behind the whole house of Judah. Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon. As for the builders, each wore his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter stood near me.*

— **Nehemiah 4:15-18**

Strictly speaking, we may not “look” like soldiers, but we most certainly are! We have been enlisted into Christ’s army with the intent that we are always at the ready, always prepared, always motivated to defend our Lord’s good will and good name! Our willingness to fight in the “trenches” together is evidence of His leadership and our common belief that we are fighting the good fight of faith.

And may we be encouraged by all of those soldiers, great and small, who have gone into battle before us. Paul is a wonderful example of the “spiritual minuteman’s” attitude:

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.*

— **2 Timothy 4:7-8**

## **Taking One for the Team**

"...almost there, man...I ache all over...my heart feels like it's about to burst out of my chest at any moment...why'd I let coach talk me into running this damn half mile again?" Those were my scattered, painfully realized thoughts as I recollect them. And they would occur just about every time I ran the half mile on my high school track team.

"I'm not a half miler, I'm a pole vaulter! I'm built to run about a hundred feet and jump over a high bar with a little assistance! What am I doing out here? I hear people cheering but I think it's for my buddies up there who are threatening the school record...man, they seem far away..." This inner conversation would continue pretty much until the finish line, where I'd stagger off towards the center of the infield. Nauseated. Doubled over. Cursing.

"Phew, it's over!"

I'd hardly waste any time making my way over to my coach, stopwatch still in hand, who'd have that grin pasted on his face, as if to say, "Thanks, Collins, I know that was painful for you, but we really needed the point to win this track meet." He didn't even have to verbalize the thought. I knew. He knew.

This was about taking one for the team. I knew there was no way I'd win the event, but coach would tell me to try to scrape out a third place or something...just to earn a single point, as that often was the deciding factor between closely matched teams.

Sometimes, the team depends on you even when you're far outside of your "element" or your area of expertise. I became the MA all-class, all-state champion in the pole vault that year, but such accolades were FAR from being realized in the half mile. Thank God I didn't have an ego...well, at

least not one big enough that would preclude me from running that horrible race and then collapsing in public. I knew the outcome, so I just accepted it...for the sake of the team. We all had that same 'esprit de corps'...that desire to lay our individuality aside and arrive at our meets as a unified team.

That's one of the things I loved most about my high school track team. We were individual competitors, each with our own PRs (personal records) to contend with. But even more so, we were a team. That was the culture that our wonderful coach fostered.

**You know who our greatest coach is? Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He's our "great shepherd" (Hebrews 13:20). We've also been given team captains in Paul, Peter, John, and the rest of the apostles.**

**We are all part of a team, but individual contributors (1 Corinthians 12:20, 27).**

**We ought never accept petty arrogance and pride as excuses to not put forth our very best, even when called to run a race we cannot possibly win. We are called, in every way, to run whatever race as if to win!**

*Run in such a way that you may win.*

**— 1 Corinthians 9:24b**

The scripture doesn't say, "run in ONLY those races that you know you're going to win", does it? Nope.

**In a nutshell, the Word tells us to run with the right ATTITUDE! For God sees the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).**

To be fair, the good Lord has a habit of aligning us to our strengths (see previous blog entry titled, *Golf Series #11: A Variety of Courses*), so we can't



complain about always having to run races with a monkey on our back. Sometimes, that's just the way it goes.

**If you're part of a team, which you certainly are as a believer in Christ, as a member of His Body (1 Corinthians 12:20, 27), then you need to have a sense of responsibility to that team. That sense ought to put the needs of the team at a higher premium in your soul than your own personal desires.**

*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.*

— **Philippians 2:1-5**

**We have a plaque somewhere posted in the church by Charles Osgood called, *The Responsibility Poem*:**

*There was a most important job that needed to be done, and no reason not to do it, there was absolutely none. But in vital matters such as this, the thing you have to ask is who exactly will it be who'll carry out the task?*

*Anybody could have told you that Everybody knew that this was something Somebody would surely have to do. Nobody was unwilling; Anybody had the ability. But Nobody believed that it was their responsibility.*

*It seemed to be a job that Anybody could have done, if Anybody thought he was supposed to be the one. But since Everybody recognized that Anybody*

*could, Everybody took for granted that Somebody would.*

*But Nobody told Anybody that we are aware of, that he would be in charge of seeing it was taken care of. And Nobody took it on himself to follow through, and do what Everybody thought that Somebody would do.*

*When what Everybody needed so did not get done at all, Everybody was complaining that Somebody dropped the ball. Anybody then could see it was an awful crying shame, and Everybody looked around for Somebody to blame.*

*Somebody should have done the job and Everybody should have, but in the end Nobody did what Anybody could have done.*

**One of THE best ways to miss out on your own blessings is to skirt your personal responsibilities to the team.**

Instead of citing all the reasons why you think you shouldn't take one for the team, maybe you are better off, "*fixing [your] eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross [took one for the team], despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*" (Hebrews 12:2).

**I believe that if Jesus were a member of my high school track team, He'd have gladly puked in the infield after running His heart out in a race His body wasn't designed to run, if it meant His team would win. :)**

## **There Is a Lion In the Road!**

*The sluggard says, 'There is a lion outside; I will be killed in the streets'!*

— **Proverbs 22:13**

So they don't go out...hardly ever...at least not to labor. That is their excuse, though the lion isn't real - it's just a device. It seems to work for them, but God deplores it.

## **The Bible is chalk full of counsel against laziness.**

Ever asked a lazy person why it is they are so? I have. They typically have a canned litany of excuses as to why they can't get off of their behinds and do a little work. And to top it off, their finger pointing is typically towards someone else. "Yes, THEY are the reason I haven't been able to work!...go talk to them and leave me alone!" But God is not fooled by man's feeble excuses or his playing dumb, as if he doesn't actually know better.

*If you say, 'See, we did not know this,' Does He not consider it who weighs the hearts? And does He not know it who keeps your soul? And will He not render to man according to his work?*

— **Proverbs 24:12**

I believe there exists a HUGE glut of sluggards in America. Most of them are equipped to the hilt with excuses, some of which are tidily handed to them by the government (but I digress). In my own experience, some will get downright violent when challenged, even if inadvertently. I posted the following on my Facebook account recently, "Why didn't Robin Hood get a real job and give some of his earnings to the poor instead of ripping people off and prancing around in tights with a hero complex?" The response was interesting.

Stealing is a sin, no matter how one chooses to spin it. There's nothing noble about supplanting hard work with thievery. As my aforementioned Facebook post went, it seems I had struck a nerve, so one person lashed out. I'm not surprised. Truth makes evil folks very insecure.

**I guess some people simply prefer to play dumb and make excuses. But again, they aren't fooling the Lord. "All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives" (Proverbs 16:2).**

The Bible warns us about laziness. Also, it isn't just related to formal work...it carries into the household (I think of the **Proverbs 31:10-31** "virtuous woman") as it carries into ALL aspects of life: parenting, friendships, community service, etc.. Sluggardness is a "disease" akin to drunkenness, not in the scientific sense, but in the practical.

**Sluggardness tends to slowly consume a person. It's work ethic's great slanderer.**

Speaking of slander - enter Satan and the kingdom of darkness - you have a creature doling out sweet tasting excuses like fortune cookies. "Take another," he says grinning, "Go ahead, I've got plenty where that came from!" People munch them down as they spiral away from honorable things such as working hard as unto the Lord, taking care of their families, giving charitably to their communities. These things are becoming pastimes...things we see manifest in old black and white photo albums. What a shame.

**So many excuses. So many otherwise intelligent humans playing dumb. Why? Laziness!**

**Give the sluggard a few good excuses and you may never see them again...well, at least not where there's work to be done. Present them with a challenge and be sure to step back, lest you risk being attacked. Oh well, the truth always offends someone.**

*The sluggard says, 'There is a lion in the road! A lion is in the open square!'  
As the door turns on its hinges, so does the sluggard on his bed.*

— **Proverbs 26:13-14**

## **There's Always Time For a Cup of Coffee**

A Vanderbilt University professor presented his class with the following metaphor on the last day of class before finals:

When the class began, wordlessly, he picked up a very large and empty mayonnaise jar and filled it with golf balls. He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was.

The professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured it into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The pebbles rolled into the open areas between the golf balls. He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

The professor next picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else. He asked once more if the jar was full. The students responded with a unanimous "YES".

The professor then produced two cups of coffee from under the table and poured the entire contents into the jar, effectively filling the empty space between the sand. The students laughed.

"Now," said the professor, as the laughter subsided, "I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life. The golf balls are the important things – God, family, children, health, friends, and favorite passions. Things, that if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full. The pebbles are the things that matter like your job, house, and car. The sand is everything else — the small stuff," he said.

"If you put the sand into the jar first," he continued, "there is no room for the pebbles or the golf balls. The same goes for life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are important to you," he told them.

“So...pay attention to the things that are critical to your happiness. Worship with your family. Play with your children. Take your partner out to dinner. Spend time with good friends. There will always be time to clean the house and fix the dripping tap. Take care of the golf balls first — the things that really matter. Set your priorities. The rest is just sand.”

One of the students raised her hand and inquired what the coffee represented. The professor smiled and said, “I’m glad you asked. It just goes to show you that no matter how full your life may seem, there’s always room for a couple of cups of coffee with a friend.” - The End.

This is a great analogy and one that I've remembered ever since the day I first heard it. It screams PERSPECTIVE! So much of life is an issue of perspective.

**Perspective is one of the few things that can be adjusted in the blink of an eye and your whole outlook on life is changed!**

The beauty of studying the Word of God is that it gives us **eternal perspective**. *“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Colossians 3:1-2).*

You might say in light of the above analogy that the Lord holds the mayonnaise jar (your life) in His hands, ala *“...and [He] upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3b)*. For all of eternity, even before the jar, the golf balls, the pebbles, the sand, or the coffee even existed, He held these things in His heart - such is eternal perspective. And He desires for all of us to share it.

However, life seems to pelt us nonstop with "time is of the essence," or "let's get a move on," or "hurry up, we're going to be late!" Such things take our focus, which is like a rudder on a ship - eventually it steers us away from

the things that truly matter.

As a society, we're so engrossed in managing our time.

**However, time, or even how much we're given on earth, is never the real issue - it's how we spend it that matters most.**

We humans spend billions of dollars to virtually slow the hands of time. We stuff our schedules. We strain at efficiency. We are task-masters. Expensive technology keeps us on track. It's an awful illusion.

And at the end of it all, as if it were God's purpose, we raise toasts to those who have squeezed the most out of their time. They look ragged, but darn it, they did well for themselves...didn't they??? They boast about their accomplishments, yet they are holding up a jar full of sand.

*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**

Life is simple, or at least it's supposed to be. "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (**Matthew 11:30**). When Jesus made this very statement, He possessed eternal perspective. When He went to the Cross, He possessed the same.

*Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

— **Hebrews 12:1-2**



You see, it's rather simple. Make sure the "golf balls" go into the jar first. Take deep breaths and enjoy the process. Listen in humility. Never fear reprioritization or a change in perspective. And don't forget the coffee. :)

*But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from **the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.***

— 2 Corinthians 11:3

## **You Can Never Unsay Something**

*For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

— **Hebrews 4:12**

I recall my freshman year in high school. In particular, one teacher stands out. For the sake of his privacy, let's call him Mr. Smith. He made two statements that I remember to this day, and that was about 30 years ago! The first of his statements that I recall was, "There's no such thing as a free lunch." He was essentially postulating that no matter how "free" someone claims something to be, there are always strings attached. Except for God's grace, I'd say it was a fair statement. However, it's the second statement that serves as the genesis of this blog entry.

**Mr. Smith made the statement, "You can never unsay something." In other words, once something rolls off of your tongue, you can never take it back, no matter how much you try. I agree.**

I'm sure many of us, when we hear such a statement, immediately think of something awful we've said to someone we love, wishing still today that we could retract those words. I'm confident also that many of us are familiar with the repercussions of such things, and how forgiveness never seems to wipe clean one's memory. Even I must admit that there are statements still resonating in the deep chambers of my soul that others have said (likely regretfully) to me in a moment of fury or despair.

**I've certainly forgiven such things, but I will not lie and proclaim that I've forgotten them. I wish I could sometimes, but I can't...it's not a conscious choice, really.**

The human mind is funny like that - the more we try to forget something, the more we think about it! The very act of isolating said 'something'

implies a certain focus on it. It's a paradox.

**In any case, WE are the ones responsible for the things that come out of our mouths. The Bible has a LOT to say about the power of words, and also their origin.**

*The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.*

— Luke 6:45

The Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is our Creator. His word is so powerful that it upholds the universe in its station. *“And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power”* (Hebrews 1:3a).

**Because the Lord is perfect, His words never miss the mark. They are never void of goodness, never tainted with evil. His words are so aligned with His omnipotent will that whenever He speaks, it is done. He has the power to create and destroy by simply speaking. His words are likened to a sword, able to cut through all things.**

*From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty.*

— Revelation 19:15

**In a much less perfect and therefore much less impactful way, we also have words that may indeed cut to the soul of others. Unfortunately, our words may be misplaced, misspoken, and/or misaligned with His will. Because of our own imperfections, we often destroy things that ought to remain standing. Sometimes we even THINK we're saying the right thing but time proves to us that we are wrong.**

**We must measure our words very carefully, for they are often the most powerful, lasting contributions we make in the lives of others.**

Words tend to linger. A good person will forgive us our trespasses, however, it's unlikely their scars will ever allow them to forget. The Word commands us to forgive, but He, being our Creator, doesn't make us forget. You see, there are great lessons to be learned as a result of our God-given memories.

As my freshman high school teacher, Mr. Smith, would say, "You can never unsay something." The flesh is quick to react subjectively to outside stimuli. It loves to speak up before we've had a chance to think. If left unchecked, that which fills the heart will spew forth venom, regrettably.

**Learn to step back and take deep breaths before you respond, especially if you have the old "foot-in-the-mouth" problem like the Apostle Peter sometimes did. Learn to recognize the telltale signs of your flesh becoming your mouthpiece.**

**Words spoken in love are the most powerful means of revealing Christ in this lost and dying world. Words spoken otherwise misrepresent Him, disfiguring His public image.**

*In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.*

— James 1:18-20

## Economics

One doesn't need to have a PhD in Economics from M.I.T. in order to manage their household finances. In fact, the Bible gives believers more than ample guidance on the subject. Above all other tenets is that man must work for his own food.

*For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.*

— **2 Thessalonians 3:10-12**

The Word of God also instructs us in the area of charity (not socialism, which is “enforced charity”). *“In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35).*

We learn how to share when we are children, however some adults seem to have forgotten. *“And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:16).*

Jesus teaches us a tremendously important lesson on how He sees giving.

*And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. And He saw a poor widow putting in two small copper coins. And He said, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on.”*

— **Luke 21:1**

Economics is a simple concept to the person who's willing to adhere to the Holy God's counsel on the subject. It's only difficult to those wrestling with the flesh. *"Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver"* (**2 Corinthians 9:7**).

## **40 Hours a Week - Says Who???**

In a recent *Farmers Weekly* article, researchers asked 2,000 farmers about their work. On average, a farmer works 80 hours per week during peak season, which can run for 3+ months straight, and 52 hours during an average week the rest of the year. Most farmers know what they are getting into when they prepare for their careers. The farmers I've met wouldn't want to do anything else for a living. Somehow, while the rest of America is convinced that 40 hours per week is "appropriate", these hard working individuals plug on.

I've often wondered how this "40 hours per week" bar came about (8 hours for 5 days). I think it's absolute bunk, and I'm convinced I share my Lord's sentiments, but we'll get to that. Without digging my heels into the history books, I'm supposing it has something to do with shift-work, likely established or at least cemented as "normal" by the industrial period in the country. Three shifts of 8 hours each makes for a full 24-hour day. That's just sound engineering when trying to maximize a manufacturing plant's usefulness.

**For a time, this "40 hour week" construct seemed to work for many... enough at least, and for a long enough period of time, where in America it has become a sort of benchmark for setting expectations. There has since developed what we might call a "time-clock-oriented" mindset. But the question I raise here is this - is it a good thing or evil? Where in the Bible does it EVER mention such a thing? It's not stated because the Biblical perspective is much different.**

Sure, there may be times when a person works 40 hours per week, but that should be merely a coincidence, not a goal. Jesus, as have been all of His true disciples, was a "mission-oriented" laborer. If there was work to be done, He accomplished it, regardless of how long it took Him. If there wasn't, He rested. *"There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a*

*time for every event under heaven*" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). This "mission-oriented" mindset stands opposed to the "time-clock-oriented" one.

**Laborers with a "mission-oriented" mindset fare much better over the long haul than the "time-clock-oriented" mindset laborers. Why? Simply stated, it's because our Lord has a "mission-oriented" mindset. Just read your Bible and you'll see it clearly.**

Mission-oriented laborers aren't preoccupied with things like overtime or working for the weekend. Those aren't concepts necessary in constructing their work ethic. Likewise, they aren't preoccupied with grinding through a 40-hour workweek and living for the weekends - as the old *Loverboy* lyrics go, "*everybody's working for the weekend.*" What an awful way to think about work.

**Time-clock-oriented thinking is insidious. Now I'm not saying that an hourly wage job that is assigned a 40 hour workweek is somehow evil... what I'm saying is that it's one's MINDSET that matters. You can certainly be in such a situation and possess a mission-oriented mindset. It's not about the circumstance, it's about the perspective! With the right perspective, a person can find joy in any situation.**

A person's life may never change fundamentally, however with a little scripture under their belt their perspective regarding their work can. Because of this, a person can be delivered from "the grind" to a place of true "freedom". A person is also more likely to work longer hours because what was once unbearable is no longer so.

**Anyone can put in a day's labor, but the good laborer, the blessed one, is the one who possesses the godly mindset while accomplishing their work. "Good" work, then, is more about mindset than accomplishment. If you have the right mindset, the work ethic and the accomplishments will follow. If you need to work 25 hours in one week and then 80 hours the next, so be it. If it's a steady 40 hours for a time, then that's great too,**



**as long as your mindset is good. Good labor is tantamount to good perspective.**

*There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight.*

— Ecclesiastes 2:24-26a

**You see, the amount of hours you work as unto the Lord has nothing to do with your resultant happiness (only the time-clock-oriented person would construe this statement as a license to work even less). As a matter of fact, if your perspective is godly, the work itself becomes a thing of joy. Your work has purpose! *“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 6:7-8).**

I like the farmer analogy. God must, too, because it's illustrated ALL OVER the Bible! At salvation, we're all asked to harness into His yoke and ready ourselves to plow the fields. There are crops with great yields awaiting us. *“The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops. Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything”* (2 Timothy 2:6-7).

Here is one last perspective for those interested in securing a “mission-oriented” mindset. Consider Who the real farmer is. Consider Who it is that has rightful claim to the crops' yield. *“So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's*

*building*" (2 Corinthians 3:7-9).

**God is the true farmer. We are His fellow laborers, but any produce ought to be gleaned by Him first, as first fruits, for "the hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops" (2 Timothy 2:6). Who's a harder working "farmer" than God??? - no one!**

*I am the true vine, and My Father is the [farmer].*

— **John 15:1**

Imagine if our Father said, "I only work 40 hours a week and never weekends"? LOL - that just made me giggle. He is the furthest Person from the "time-clock-oriented" mindset. He, like His precious Son, our prototype laborer, has a mission-oriented mindset...just think of the Cross and I think you'll agree, yes?

If you have them, drop your foolish expectations regarding work. Work hard. Period. Keep working hard always, no matter what your circumstances are. Be grateful you have work. If you don't, go find some, leaving your so-called "pride" behind. Thank God for the abilities He's given you to do so. Do whatever it takes to complete the mission. Have that mindset and the elusive things like peace, happiness, and contentment may just sneak up on you when you least expect them to...that'll be God saying, "Glad to see you've finally figured it out...enjoy My promises."

## A Righteous Economy - Part 1

Being an American citizen my whole life, I've lived in what is widely considered the bastion of capitalism. Capitalists believe that profit incentive promotes the greatest innovation and that the inherent inequalities that this system produces is necessary to encourage innovation. Businesses are primarily owned by private, or non-governmental, organizations.

**Capitalism seems to fit within the scope of Christ's heart and within the operating envelope the Bible gives us regarding "doing business". The fundamental issue as I see it is integrity, which seems to be in short supply these days.**

I suppose I could sign up and try to get my face on some TV show to argue the pros and cons of capitalism versus socialism, but what I'd have to say, I'm pretty sure nobody would be interested. To me the issue is simple. I like the way the Bible covers the topic much more than some famous economist might.

*Ill-gotten gains do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death. The LORD will not allow the righteous to hunger, but He will reject the craving of the wicked. Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully.*

— Proverbs 10:2-5

**Firstly, no economy can function without laborers. So the first "big" consideration is the individual worker ethic. In capitalism, the general concept is that if you work hard, you will succeed. This is a godly concept.**

*"Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men,*

*knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve” (Colossians 3:23-24).* Furthermore, akin to capitalistic thinking, *“If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either” (2 Thessalonians 3:10b).* Socialism undermines this Biblical premise by supporting individuals unwilling to work.

No manmade economy is perfect since man’s flesh is involved in the endeavor.

**Secondly, is integrity to the system. “A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is His delight” (Proverbs 11:1). If the individuals in an economy are unwilling to play by the rules, then the entire economy becomes perverted.**

*The wicked earns deceptive wages, but he who sows righteousness gets a true reward...The perverse in heart are an abomination to the LORD, but the blameless in their walk are His delight. Assuredly, the evil man will not go unpunished, but the descendants of the righteous will be delivered.*

— **Proverbs 11:18, 19-20**

In every economy there exists both capitalism and socialism, whether at the macro- or microeconomic levels. So there’s no such thing as a “perfect” economy today (we’d have to look forward to the Millennial Reign of Christ to picture that). Therefore, all economies, regardless of discipline, are at the mercy of the integrity of those who comprise it.

When it comes to God’s viewpoint on economy, I could argue in favor of capitalism, but I don’t think that’s precisely what the Lord wants to convey to us in the Holy Scriptures. I believe He has kept things very simple...and if everyone in this cockeyed world were to instantaneously adjust to His righteous economy, we’d see some pretty welcomed changes.

**Allow me to simplify:**

- **God wants us to work hard, always.**
- **God wants us to be fair in our dealings with one another, that's integrity.**

Imagine if just those two things were present in every individual on this earth. How different would things be? Individuals are the building blocks of any organizational structure, including an economy. If the integrity of the building blocks is in question, how confident can we be in the overall structure???

This blog entry, *Part 1*, speaks to the individual. Look for *Part 2* next time, where we'll see what the Lord has to say about heartbeat of a righteous economy.

## A Righteous Economy - Part 2

**If you haven't already read Part 1, please do so now...it's important.**

There have been innumerable scholarly papers written on the subject of economy. The subject has been so deeply scrutinized and analyzed that there exist advanced college degrees within finely organized subcategories such as macro- and microeconomics. I can appreciate that, but frankly, I don't want to pretend to be an economist, nor do I propose to bore most of you with details on the subject. Rather, this discourse is to help the layperson understand God's viewpoint on the topic.

Part 1 resulted in the following simple tenets. They are the basis of a righteous economy:

- God wants us to work hard, always.
- God wants us to be fair in our dealings with one another, that's integrity.

Simple, right? I think so. You see, God's not interested in burying us in academic endeavors. Our Lord said in His parable: *"So He said, 'A nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return. And he called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas and said to them, "Do business with this until I come back."'"* (Luke 19:12-13).

**To "do business" implies movement, flow, and dynamics...the basis for a properly functioning economy. Ask an economist what the worst thing is for an economy...they'll say stagnation. That's why whenever our economy slows down, we infuse it with a "stimulus package" to get it churning again. The Lord, too, likes a moving economy...hence His aforementioned command in Luke 19:13.**

If all the contributors to an economy decide to hoard their wealth, the economy comes to a screeching halt. That's really bad. It's also ungodly.

This brings up an important principle in our quest to understand a righteous economy. First, there's nothing wrong with being wealthy. The Bible is full of examples where exceptional wealth was ordained by God. A perfect example is Solomon.

Notice that Solomon's wealth is described in terms of livestock, shipping fleets, and such. These were critical to the economy of his day. Solomon, being the wisest man of his time, had the God-given **capacity** to "do business" rightly with his wealth.

**Solomon's great example to us is NOT that he was able to acquire great wealth, rather it was how he righteously went about "doing business" with his wealth. THAT's the key to a righteous economy!**

The world tells us to stockpile silver and gold. As one magnate famously pronounced before he died, "He with the most toys in the end wins!" To this person, compiling things the world esteems was the ultimate goal. He wasn't a responsible steward of his wealth. He was the antithesis of Solomon.

**To the righteous person, wealth is a responsibility. It is viewed as an opportunity to generate the power behind an economy. It is considered a privilege to employ others, to create and maintain work so that all may eat, at least those willing to work, that is. A righteous economy is filled with righteous individuals that share Solomon's heart. True wealth, then, is not WHAT a person has to their name, rather it is HOW they use it. The functional word being "use" here. Wealth isn't meant to be hoarded, it is designed as a vehicle for God's grace. In this sense, the righteous person is much more of a vessel than a keeper of wealth.**

*There is one who scatters, and yet increases all the more, and there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it results only in want. The generous man will be prosperous, and he who waters will himself be watered. He who withholds grain, the people will curse him, but*

*blessing will be on the head of him who sells it.*

— Proverbs 11:24-26

Wisdom teaches us God's will is to "sell", a fundamental part of "doing business", as Jesus alluded to in His parable of the Ten Minas. If people who have goods refuse to sell, the economy tanks. Therefore, it's not about how MUCH a person has to sell, it's THAT they choose to sell it! That is what is pleasing to God - to trade, to merchandize.

You don't have to read very far in the Bible to know that the Lord has ordained both rich and poor. Jesus, Himself said, "*For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them*" (Mark 14:7a). Jesus wasn't a socialist trying to equalize wealth. That's folly for the simple fact that most individuals do not have the capacity for more than what they already possess.

**God's will is to give wealth to those who will manage it for HIS profit, not their own. "I tell you that to everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away" (Luke 19:26).**

**Good stewardship is the key to wealth, not possession. It's also what comprises a righteous economy.**

It's true, Solomon was exceptionally wealthy, but his greatest asset was his wisdom, with which he stated, "*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 3:13-14).

**Perspective is everything. The Biblical principles of economy are actually very simple.**

**As individuals, we are to work hard and function in integrity always. We**



**are the building blocks of any economy. A righteous economy promotes fair trade without hoarding. True wealth is wisdom, not possession, so says the richest and wisest man of his time, Solomon.**

**A wise person assumes responsibility for his wealth and rejects the temptation to boast in it - after all it was given by the grace of God.**

## **I'd Love To Help, But...**

"I'd LOVE to help, but I don't have any money."

"Oh yeah, why is that?"

"Well, I have bills to pay, mouths to feed...you know how it is...nothing's cheap anymore."

"Well, good seeing you, my friend."

"Same here - send my best to the family!...gotta run." And they drive away from the liquor store parking lot with their pocket full of scratch tickets. They crook their lip and shrug their shoulders, blaming the lottery commission as they walk past the tin-cuppers trying to collect for a good cause.

**People are "funny" like that, aren't they? Seems nobody saves anything for a rainy day anymore.**

**Charity has been stymied by irresponsibility.**

That's OK, though, right???...either the lottery or the government will pay out eventually...or maybe their rich uncle will finally kick the bucket and they can get their inheritance...at least they hope. No need to be responsible anymore, I guess...well, that seems to be the sentiment nowadays.

*Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, which, having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer and gathers her provision in the harvest.*

— Proverbs 6:6-8

Even an ant without any leadership knows well enough to put something

aside when the going is good...you know, for those inevitable times when things are just the opposite...or when there's a legitimate need. Even an ANT knows!

**A person doesn't have to be rich like King Solomon was, but they ought not put the Lord God to the test, either. "Jesus said to [Satan, who was testing Him], 'On the other hand, it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST'" (Matthew 4:7).**

**It's one thing to be caught off guard, it's another thing to be irresponsible with His grace. The latter is putting the Lord your God to the test.**

In an article from CNN Money, titled *76% of Americans Are Living Paycheck to Paycheck*, the author states, "*Fewer than one in four Americans have enough money in their savings account to cover at least six months of expenses, enough to help cushion the blow of a job loss, medical emergency or some other unexpected event, according to the survey of 1,000 adults. Meanwhile, 50% of those surveyed have less than a three-month cushion and 27% had no savings at all.*" By all indications, this trend is continuing.

By the way, the tone of this blog would be significantly different if the average person's heart was like that of the woman that Jesus speaks of so fondly, "*And He said, 'Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on''*" (Luke 21:3-4).

I'm confident that before I even quoted **Luke 21** above, some were already contemplating the widow giving her mite. Frankly, we don't know what her life was like outside of that scene. Even so, she teaches us a lesson about faith and sacrifice. But as is the case with every doctrine in the Bible, there's always a counterbalance. Besides, most people that claim to relate to her precious heart have a pocket full of "scratch tickets".

**Most people do not give of their first-fruit. And they certainly aren't "struggling" because they have given all of their income to godly causes. No, this is something entirely different the Holy Spirit is getting at here. This is about responsibility to God's grace. This is about "doing business" appropriately (Luke 19:12-27) so that there's a return on investment to His glory. Even an ant could teach most believers a thing or two about that last statement.**

There seems to be two camps out there, neither being appropriate for the average person.

Some throw caution to the wind, putting God to the test. They claim they have a greater faith, but I wonder how much "faith" they'd have if they were jobless in some destitute third world country. No, most of these folks live plush American lives. As Ronald Reagan might have said, "they can AFFORD to speak such things." They speak from a position of privilege, relegating the "widow's mite" example foreign to their own. They are attempting to cling to something noble...but they have no right to it.

On the other end of the spectrum are the hoarders, whose hearts are hardened against any and all needs they see in others. They live in fear, in bondage to their savings accounts. They say, "It's OK, look at the kings in the Old Testament, they were very wealthy, so what I'm doing can't be wrong." But they don't understand that the wealth of the godly kings was ordained by God. They are not kings. The true issue is that they don't have the heart the Apostle John described. *"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)?

**Balance is the key to managing your income...or shall I say, "managing His grace"? That's what we see in the Bible. The "money manager" in most households today is the flesh. It takes the first fruits for itself and often the remainder, too. It also speaks volumes through the vessel it dominates by helping formulate the words, "I'd love to help,**

**but..."**

"But" what?...it's a fair question we ALL need to ask ourselves time and again. And btw, scratch tickets are never a good investment.

## Work Hard, Enjoy Your Own Bread

"Hey, you, get to work!"

This echoes a scene played out in many a comedy, including one of my personal favorites, *The Three Stooges*. Those guys were hilarious. It seemed like every episode found them trying their hands at a new job. Inevitably, while getting caught up in their antics, the boss would come around and see them accomplishing very little, or in most cases actually perfecting the art of anti-productivity. The boss would shout, they'd look stunned and even disgruntled, and they'd scurry back to work.

As goofy as these guys were, at least they sought work. And they didn't seem to have any elevated standards, rather they worked at whatever was available to them.

**There's always work to be done. It may not be glorious work, but there's definitely work to be done. Even the Three Stooges knew this.**

When my oldest son, Joey, was in high school, he worked at a fast-food restaurant. He was 17 years old and would often be on a shift with a 40-something year old. Same job title, same pay scale. He mentioned how this man was working three jobs to support his family. You know, I don't recall Joey ever mentioning this guy grumbling about working. He just got up every morning and went to work - not glorious work, but work just the same. I'm sure he vented from time to time, but the point is that he didn't stop.

Joey ran into a similar situation at his next job also, as a bus boy at a restaurant. One of his co-workers was an older man, about my age, who was bussing tables. This man had a family he was supporting. You know, I don't recall ever hearing about this man complaining or grumbling about working either. He pressed on. I suppose he was grateful to have work.

I recall being overseas, in third-world countries, where good, honest work was truly very scarce. People resorted to all kinds of things, including thievery, begging, and prostitution. Whenever possible, I would try to grab the attention of these individuals, if even for just a moment. I wanted to have a glimpse into their person. There was a certain honesty to their despair, something I rarely saw in my own country.

**Most self-proclaimed "desperate" people are actually being dishonest about some things. Their desperation is a manifestation of their arrogance. They are too proud to work at jobs they consider beneath them. Their desperation is a farce.**

My conclusion is that there are a LOT of people out there that WANT to work, who WOULD work very diligently, if ever given the opportunity. Unfortunately, they were born into destitution, where the concept of 'opportunity' is more like a fantasy to them. Regular work would be a dream come true.

Today, I turn on the television and hear my fellow citizens complaining about the lack of work in the country. C'mon, seriously? That's followed up by a litany of politicians saying, "Hi, my name is Robin Hood, vote for me and I'll force those willing to work to pay your bills!"

For the so-called 'desperate', is it truly a lack of work or are there artificial boundaries in place? I mean, why is one person flipping burgers at a fast-food restaurant that can't seem to keep enough workers on staff, and another watching a football game on television, collecting unemployment for some obscene amount of time? One's eating by the sweat of their brow, the other by the sweat of another's brow.

Am I missing something?

I live in Massachusetts where housing prices are relatively high. I hear of

folks complaining about not being able to pay the bills. Then shut up and move. Or cut back on your expenses. God never promised you cable, coffee, and designer jeans. And if moving is your only option, don't complain about missing your family when Abraham was asked to leave his behind, and so were Jesus' first disciples, to name a few. Maybe it's time to downgrade your lifestyle? Does any of this make sense?

**I can't sympathize with the majority of those I've met that aren't working. And btw, I STILL am 100% convinced that God is much less sympathetic than me.**

I do often wonder what God thinks about all of this. On one side of His earth is a person chomping at the bit for work, ANY work will do! On the other side of the earth is a person unwilling to take a job and even go so far as to say there aren't any. Scratching my head.

All I have to go on is the Word of God. That reveals God's heart on the subject of work. Here's a good place to start:

*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 6:7-8

**There's nothing I can find in scripture that says part of God's blessing for every person is to have their "dream job". Nor can I find where it says that every person will have a job that is esteemed by their neighbors. Heck, even Jesus wasn't highly esteemed by His contemporaries:**

*For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. 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 53:2-3

**I firmly believe that if Jesus had to work at a fast-food restaurant to put food on the table, then He'd do just that. He'd do what He always did in His life, whatever it took to fulfill His duties. Paul was the same way. Neither of these men were too proud to function in a lowly manner in society.**

So, again, I must go back to the scriptures to find some answers. And it never takes long, does it?...well, it doesn't if we're open to seeing the truth, that is.

*or even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: **if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.** For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their **own bread.** But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.*

— 2 Thessalonians 3:10-13

The first key phrase is "*not willing to work*". We cannot mangle this into something it isn't. God sees the heart and therefore a person's **willingness** to work, even if there's no work. In that case, then there's room for charity, etc. However, if there IS work, and a person is unwilling to put their hand to the plow, that person ought to go without. That's what scripture says. Sound harsh? Take it up with God.

The second key phrase is "*eat their own bread*". This means that a person ought to work and purchase their OWN bread, not look for handouts from others willing to work. Voting for socialistic agendas that force the welfare state is just as bad. The issue in our privileged society is that most are unwilling to work at jobs that don't suit their tastes.

**I haven't found a single verse in the Bible that states every person will work a job that "suits their tastes". The last time I checked, statistics say that 85% of the population would rather be working another kind of job. What makes those unwilling to work so special???**

Why do most believers I know that aren't working fall into the wrong camp on this? Where did their sense of entitlement come from? It certainly wasn't from God.

**Having a job, any job, is a grace gift.**

There are millions of people out there who want to work, who want to earn a living, yet cannot find a job, any job. Then there are those who read newspapers full of jobs that skim right over them because their self-esteem is tied to their work. "Oh, I could never do THAT kind of work!" they say. Why not???

**Good, honest work isn't always that hard to find. It may not be a dream job, but if you perform your duties as unto the Lord, then the Bible says you ought to eat and be merry. Some need a big ol' reality check so they can do themselves, and the rest of us, a big favor and get their priorities straight. Who are they living for anyways???**

**Work hard. Enjoy your own bread.**

If you think my words here are harsh, too bad - take it up with God. I've got too many friends and family busting their humps out there, some with highly-esteemed jobs, some without. In every and any case when their heart is right on this, the job doesn't matter because their self-esteem is locked into their relationship with Jesus Christ.

## Emotions and Sensitivity

God created man in His own image. “*God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them*” (**Genesis 1:27**). God also gave man emotions. Emotions aren’t bad, only emotionalism is. Sensitivity is a gift, especially when it comes to others, but hypersensitivity can be the bane of a well-intentioned believer’s existence.

There’s a balance to be struck between thinking and emotions. A person minus emotions is a cold lover. A person minus thinking is a basket case.

Polarity isn’t godly, balance is.

When we read our Bibles, we must read for balance, not just seek out those passages that tickle our fancy or appeal to our sensitivities. That’s heading off integrity by inserting a personal agenda into God’s will for our lives. There are commands for judging and commands for loving. As Solomon says:

*There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven —*

*A time to give birth and a time to die;*

*A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.*

*A time to kill and a time to heal;*

*A time to tear 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 throw stones and a time to gather stones;*

*A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.*

*A time to search and a time to give up as lost;*

*A time to keep and a time to throw away.*

*A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;*

*A time to be silent and a time to speak.*

*A time to love and a time to hate;  
A time for war and a time for peace.*

— **Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**

Each have their rightful place in the Word of God. Our objective, as obedient servants, is to realize *all* of His will through the study of His Word.

*The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.*

— **Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**

## Guest Blogger: Contentment

As I was driving the other day, listening to a Christian radio station, I heard something that was meant to be encouraging. It was some catch phrase like, "You must find the joy in spite of your circumstances". It got me thinking about not only those words, but related sentiments like, "It's going to be OK... it will get better". My conclusion? All of those originate from a system of thinking that is W-R-O-N-G. They may sound encouraging, even pious and holy, but they are the exact opposite. The attitude behind them is OPPOSED to what God desires for us.

Paul said *"Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength"* (Philippians 4:11-13). Please note that he did NOT say, "...with whatever I *don't* have", nor did he say "*in spite of* any situation". He said, "...with *whatever* I have" and, "...in *every* situation...". Do you see the distinction? Do you understand the difference? Paul did, he had contentment. He did not plod through life, head hanging down, singing "nobody knows the trouble I've seen...". NO!!! To the contrary, Paul lived His life and was grateful for every single situation he found himself in. The tougher it got, the more he thrived, because he relied on the eternal wellspring of strength, which is Christ, Himself. He understood God's objective for his life because He knew God. He embraced His cross, as did His God before him.

*Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

— **Hebrews 12:1-2**

What do we say to God, to the angels, and to our fellow man- our “so great cloud of witnesses - when we cry out “woe is me” and “I’m suffering for Jesus”? We say this - we consider ourselves martyrs and that, somehow, it is all about us. Isn’t it funny how we, ridiculous creatures, always find a way to make the things of God all about us? Not really, it’s actually pretty disgusting. How about these sentiments, “Haven’t I suffered enough...what more could He need to teach me”?

Jesus Christ was the trailblazer for the spiritual life, yes? Well, check this verse out. *“Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8)*. Let me remind you that Jesus Christ was the only human being who never sinned - and He still had to learn obedience. What does that say for us sinners? I’m thinking, we have had enough and have learned enough when **God** says so! I have a funny feeling that will be when we die. Of course, then we will continue to learn about Him, just without the need for suffering. Read that sentence again. We **NEED** suffering, whether it be for discipline - *“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?” (Hebrews 12:7)* - or for the strengthening of our faith - *“In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:6-7)*.

Am I insinuating that we, as humans, are not permitted an emotional response to a difficult time? Of course not, we are not robots and God does not expect us to be. How you feel about a situation, though, is not always the indicator of what you think about it. And, yes, these are very different things. You may be sad that your loved one died because you will miss them, but you know they are in the place of eternal bliss and your thinking is one of joy for them. Our emotions tend to be selfish, while our thoughts tend to align with His, assuming we have taken the time to learn how He

thinks, of course. So, I am not saying that we will not cry, feel pain, or feel the pressure in certain situations. I am saying that when we mature in this area of life - we will understand that... it's ok - RIGHT NOW and we'll have joy - WHILE under pressure. We will understand that every single moment, whether it's raining or sunny, is PERFECT and necessary for the completion of God's work in us.

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

— James 1:2-4

I believe the Word says it best, as it always does. So, this is where I'll leave you (bolding is mine).

*Rejoice **always**, pray **continually**, give thanks in **all** circumstances; for this is **God's will** for you in Christ Jesus.*

— 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

## **I Like Technology, Too, But...**

Way back in the 1890's (but relatively recently if considered against the span of human history) Nikola Tesla experimentally demonstrated the transmission of radio waves, proposing that it might be used for the telecommunication of information. By the early 1900's commercialization of radio had begun. By the mid-1900's radio was a staple in the news & entertainment diets of many Americans as well as Europeans. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Commercial television followed a similar track after John Logie Baird demonstrated televised moving images in 1926. Today we have 70+ inch flat-screen HD televisions that connect to a small wire that pipes in hundreds of channels.

And then, of course, is the monster of all technological inventions, the transistor, which was the basis of the modern day computer.

The University of Manchester's experimental Transistor Computer was first operational in 1953 and it is widely believed to be the first transistor computer. Connect a bunch of modern day computers together and you have the Internet. Voila - welcome to the digital age.

Here's the thing - I REALLY like technology. Not "kind of" - really.

I guess this makes me like most of my contemporaries these days. I like it so much that I spent over 2 decades in the high-tech industry in engineering, marketing, and global business development. During my tenure I witnessed technological advances that were simply astounding. Just before I left the industry for full-time ministry I watched the CEO of my company give a speech on a stage in Asia with a couple of his vice presidents - the only things was, the vice presidents were in California! They were holographically projected standing next to my CEO and they



looked real, so much so the CEO commented on being able to see the perspiration on their foreheads.

But why the history lesson?

Mankind has engaged so deeply with technology that there exists a fundamental historical shift from relating to people to relating to devices. This bears ungodly fruit. Mankind has in effect fallen in love with technology and its offspring. This in lieu of real relationships with real people. There's even a virtual reality world called SecondLife.com where in November 2010 it boasted 21.3 million registered users. People aren't even who they say they are anymore - rather they have avatars representing them in these virtual realities. But I get ahead of myself...I warned you I was a propellor-head :).

Here I sit typing this blog - so it can't be all that bad, right? So what's the deal?

Technology is a blessing if you perceive its value correctly. Whenever God ordains something, it can be either a blessing or a curse, depending how man engages with it. For example, the Jewish leaders in the early Church had an unhealthy relationship with the Law yet the Law is perfect and spiritual (**Psalms 19:7; Romans 7:14**). Even the apostles mangled the privilege of being Jesus' first disciples - they concerned themselves with "who's best?" (**Luke 22:24**). Man falls in love with money every day - yet there's nothing wrong with money, only the love of it (**1 Timothy 6:10**). Likewise, there's never been anything inherently wrong with technology, just man's relationship with it.

So, as Solomon wrote in **Ecclesiastes 1:9**, "*there is nothing new under the sun,*" I suppose when Paul and the other writers of the Bible were writing to the churches, "high-tech" to them was having papyrus to write on. By the way, papyrus' main rival in the first century AD was something called parchment, which was prepared from animal skins. Technology has come a

long way, huh? :) Yet, regardless of the era, technology has always posed the same challenge to man.

Technology represents a double-edged sword, so to speak. On one hand, it assists well-intentioned ministries in getting the good news out to a lost and dying world (Paul used papyrus, I use a computer). On the other hand, it assists the kingdom of darkness in propagating lies. In the middle stands the you and I. We find ourselves trudging through piles of garbage and wading through sewage just to find a God-fearing blog like this one.

We mustn't hold hands and go on romantic walks with the world through a perverted intimacy with technology (**James 4:4**). We mustn't forsake assembling together for the sake of encouragement (**Romans 1:12; Hebrews 10:25**). The Holy Trinity is three PERSONS. We, too, are persons created in His image (**Genesis 1:27; Colossians 3:10**). We were designed to relate personally to God through Jesus Christ and to others.

I like technology as much as anyone, but...

I fear that man's love affair with technology is broadening the chasm between humans, choosing a counterfeit over the reality that is God's love. Even within the Christian ranks, I've seen some use technology to relate more to written doctrines than to other people - those same people are cold, distant, and gawk at others with their haughty eyes. I guess I fear the way Paul feared when he wrote in **2 Corinthians 11:3**, *"But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ."*

*"This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you"* (**John 15:12**). I'm pretty sure Jesus never said we ought to love our technology...just sayin'...

...maybe we send a real flower next time instead of an e-card, or rush home to catch a hug rather than a game on television, or shush the radio instead

of our kids, or shut the smartphone off to spend some time with the elderly, or maybe we do like they did in the early church - we sit around the kitchen table and read our Bibles together and enjoy the sweet fellowship of being alive, I mean REALLY alive, in Christ Jesus. Food for thought.

## My Kindle

It was only a matter of time before the dam burst.

I LOVE my new Kindle Paperwhite! There you have it - it's out.

Now you might be asking, "What in the world does this have to do with anything spiritual?"

Well, you might as well ask why you pray at the kitchen table before dinner (assuming you do)...or why you thank God after scoring at the buzzer in the big game...or why a wave of gratitude sweeps over you when you find the perfect pair of shoes on sale.

My new Kindle has EVERYTHING to do with spiritual things because it has everything to do with **gratitude**.

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

— 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Still got that grin on your face regarding my new Kindle?

If you were standing here right now, I'd be extolling its virtues to you. I would. I'd don my old product manager hat, and describe how well it's designed and how many engineers fail to build things that meet form with function like this. Yes, maybe you'd roll your eyes and say, "Pastor Ed, it's a silly little electronic device, worth a little over \$100" (actually, it's \$119.99 at BestBuy right now while supplies last - LOL :) ). Maybe you'd be looking to your left and to your right to see if you could find some support in your humor over this. But I stand firm...me and my Kindle. Let me explain.

If you knew this man, then you'd know that for him to read a book from cover to cover is literally a miracle...an act of God. When I was younger, I

believe I suffered undiagnosed ADHD, which in brief means that I couldn't sit still for longer than 5-10 seconds at a time, never mind read a book! My mind would run races that didn't even exist.

Books and I used to have a complicated relationship. I SO wanted to drape myself with whatever was on those pages, but my faulty, short-circuited, hyperactive brain wouldn't allow for it. In a sense, books used to tease me, taunt me, haunt me even. The front covers with their graphics and the backs with their summaries...oh, so inviting! I'd RSVP "yes!," but it was, somehow, never received.

I'd pick one up at the library like a "normal" person would. I'd get excited and say, "this is the one!...I'm going to do it...woo hoo!" I'd take it home, wishing, hoping, praying that my focus wouldn't betray me...trying to build some momentum. No matter the strategy, though, eventually my brain would drift...to vanilla ice cream...or birds...or sneakers...or anything, really. I'd find myself reading the same sentence 5 times in a row to try to reengage my mind. I was willing, but unable...and so I'd resolve the inevitable - close the book. :(

Fast-forward...

I've read many, many technical books...studied them, highlighted them, adored them. My relationship with technical books has never been strained. I'd have never made it through engineering school otherwise. However, my attempts at literature were always nullified by my aforementioned "handicap."

Then there's the Bible, both technical and literary perfection...a bridge, if you will. The Bible is the most amazing book ever written. I guess that's why it's always been the first addition to any Kindle I've ever owned. Studying it has opened so many doors in my soul. The Bible has always been free and clear of any hinderances my "issue" may have posed. I can't explain its role completely, but it's certainly been with me through this

transition.

In any case, I'm not sure exactly when it happened, but somehow I'm able to read non-technical literature now. Eureka!

Again, YOU may not think this is a big deal, but to me, the kid who only dreamed of exploring the immensity of literature, it's a very big deal. To be able to sit down with a cup of coffee in the morning, snuggle into my recliner by the picture window, and actually read a novel...well, it truly is a miracle to me. You may think it's a stretch (I hope not an offensive one), but to me, this activity is equivalent to a crippled man standing up out of his wheelchair and walking around. And I'd argue the profundity of emotion isn't all that different, either.

To a man who wasn't able to read, who was left out in the dark while others soaked in the classics, who felt betrayed by his own mind all those years...to THAT guy, his Kindle represents something truly wonderful. I won't be gold-plating it and building an altar, but you get the point. :)

So, when it comes to being grateful for my newfound reading ability, I look up. My greatest praise is reserved for Him always. "Thank you, Dad - I know You know how much this means to me. This ability has come much later than I ever desired, but I trust You had Your reasons for that. But it's here now, and for as long as I can sit still long enough to breathe in another book, I am so very grateful. PS: thank you especially for the backlight on my new Kindle Paperwhite - as You know, I can now read sitting up, laying down, or rolling around. :)"

**Our greatest sources of joy are often in the little things. God doesn't have to give us such things, but He does, and it's truly rewarding to realize such things always. It also amplifies our gratitude in knowing that not everyone shares in every facet of His grace.**

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be*

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

— **Philippians 4:4-8**

My life can be draining for long stretches of time. Sometimes, I just need an "escape". I consider it a privilege to read a whole book, something so many others have never struggled to do.

As the morning sunlight peers through the window and warms my cheek and my Kindle, too, with the scent of freshly brewed Starbucks Blonde coffee in the air, there's only one place I imagine I am - on His lap. And I'm truly comfortable. Grace.

Thanks, Dad - I appreciate this. I love You.

## **Perception Is Reality...For Some**

"Image is everything!", said this 24 year-old medical student I once knew. He was convinced of it. Me? I was dumbfounded when I heard it because I had never actually "seen" a person who literally believed it. I mean, I've had countless people in my life say these words, but behind the 'mask' I could always see that even THEY weren't convinced of it at the time. This young man was convinced that his public persona was the fabric of his existence. It's taken me years to finally reconcile how a person's convictions could be so shallow.

First, this person was an unbelieving Jew. No matter his thoughts on the subject, I've got to go with my Jewish Lord & Savior's counsel, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me"* (John 14:6). This means that this young man's life was void of a relationship with God. I suppose as a Jew he was raised up to relate TO God, but without salvation, it's impossible to relate WITH Him.

**Saved people are encouraged by the Lord to base their self-esteem on being "in Christ". Unsaved people don't have that option, so they must base their self-esteem on something else.**

For the young man in view, he decided that his public image was going to be the basis of his self-esteem. I recall the first time my mom came out to visit me at college. I had this person give me a ride to the hotel. He walked in, having never met her before, and said, "Hi, my name is XYZ, I'm a med student." I just rolled my eyes as he redirected the conversation towards the development of his public image. He was fond of dominating little microcosms like that one.

Today, that scene and many others make me very sad. I still see the vast majority of people trying to build up their self-esteem by grooming a public persona. Their happiness seems to rest on it...or so they believe.



Unbelievers aren't the only ones doing it, either. Most people that I spend any real time with nowadays are believers...and I'd argue some of them are even better at the charade than the unbelievers I've known! What a tragedy, given the facts about their being "in Christ".

**The issue with tying your 'reality' to perception is that it is intrinsically fragile. There's no basis to it other than what others think of you. Could there be a worse bet in life? Seriously. Could there be a greater source of insecurity ever devised than to base your self-esteem on what others think of you?**

**What others think of you is none of your business.**

I've taught that principle many times behind the pulpit. Why? Well, I suppose it's because most people struggle with self-esteem issues their whole lives. Satan has done a great job at keeping people focused on others for the sake of themselves...this opposed to focusing on others for the sake of others. The prior places your self-esteem into bondage, the latter sets it free.

I think the most psychotic thing I've seen, and it's not at all that uncommon with otherwise totally sane folks, is the lying that occurs. People flat out LIE to themselves all the time...that their public persona is actually who they really are. They then peddle that lie to others, seeking validation. All this effort to build and protect an image...an ungodly one at that.

**Instead of admitting to themselves that they bear a weakness, they fortify their public image to further 'hide' that weakness. They shout, "Preach it, brother!" when I teach a convicting principle, as if their agreement somehow deflects the truth about it applying to them, specifically. It's a game most people play, I've found, which is why most people's spiritual growth is stunted.**

And when I say "ungodly" in reference to these folks, I'm not suggesting

that they are monsters. No, not at all. Most of the people that come to mind are sweet and kind and smiling most days. But that only lasts for as long as their image isn't threatened. I've seen it first hand - once their image is under duress, all bets are off. That's when you see how weak they really are. They are facades.

Some are so impressed with their public image that they've convinced themselves that it is reality. Sounds a little like the Pharisees to me. *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness"* (**Matthew 23:27**). Now, I'm not trying to demonize believers who struggle with all of this...I am merely illuminating that hiding behind a phony image is no good.

**Perception is NOT reality. Perception is flawed. Jesus Christ saw right through the "whitewashed tombs" because He had integrity to Truth. I believe anyone who shares that integrity often shares this ability, which is why most insecure, image-conscious people cannot stomach to be around people with Biblical integrity. The very presence of integrity is like a mirror that reflects their inner parts, bypassing their "image".**

**The interesting thing is that people with integrity, the ones that are hissed at, are also the same people who aren't interested in judging others...but that's another blog entry.**

I just wish believers would stop and take a deep breath. Drop the charade - God already knows how pathetically weak you are...and frankly so do the rest of us that share His integrity to Truth. Stop padding an image that will die at the grave. If you need to start all over, then invest in that project now by letting go.

For some, my encouragement above will fall on deaf ears. "Too much invested in my public image to let it go now," will be their 'hidden' response. My opinion of you really doesn't matter...I say that for BOTH of

our sakes. But, I'm here to tell you, my friend - our LORD's opinion of you DOES matter. And I can assure you that He wants you to jettison the facade, at least when it comes to fellowshiping with Him - that's a good place to start. Maybe eventually, you'll have the strength to greet the rest of us the same way...as YOU, in Christ, confident, self-assured.

May Jesus Christ, Himself, be the source of your self-esteem. May He increase in you while you decrease. *"He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it"* (**Matthew 10:39**).

If you're preoccupied with your public persona, drop it, you're in bondage. Even if you've managed to reach the heights of human acceptance, remember, man's opinions don't matter.

**Polish doesn't make real; it only makes things shiny enough so that others can't see the real you.**

**It may seem like a tough road to take, but it won't be nearly as difficult as the one Jesus took for you.**

*"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 5:10**). The Greek word for "establish" here means "to lay a foundation of - establish, firmly established, founded, grounded". This appeals directly to one's sense of identity, their self-esteem.

**Jesus Christ is your foundation, not some public image you project.**

As believers, our 'reality' ought to be founded on the simple fact that we are "in Christ", that He indwells us even now, and that we have already been given the greatest source of self-esteem - Him.

Nowadays, whenever I hear that phrase, "image is everything", I cringe, unless the "image" is His. *"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a*

## Perception Is Reality...For Some

*mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).*

## Sensitive Isn't the Same as Emotional

For years I thought that “being sensitive” meant being emotional. Given the definition I was handed by the world at a young age, it makes sense. Heck, how often do we hear folks saying favorably, “Wow, he’s such a sensitive guy” when they see him being emotional, shedding a tear or two. I learned in high school that being “sensitive” had its perks, too! “I love that in a man” was commonly stated in my presence. Light bulb! - LOL. So, as you might have already concluded, I thought that as long as I wasn't afraid to show a little emotion, that made me “sensitive” ...and this more virtuous characteristic carried some street value! Disclaimer - I really wasn't that shallow, just plucking something out of context to make a point. I was a pretty good guy overall, I swear! :P

This was all before I began truly learning the Word of God, of course. I laugh about such things now, chalking it up as ignorance. I’m sure some of you are chuckling, too. Regardless, I hope you see the key issue with this. But before I state it bluntly, let’s look at a dictionary definition and then a little scripture first.

*Sensitive (adjective) - 1. endowed with sensation; having perception through the senses. 2. readily or excessively affected by external agencies or influences. 3. having acute mental or emotional sensibility; aware of and responsive to the feelings of others. - Websters.com*

**The fundamental characteristic of sensitivity is being aware, receptive, and responsive to outside stimuli. In the case of people, it’s fair to say that, based on the ACTUAL definition of ‘sensitive’, it really means to be aware, receptive, and responsive to other people.**

Should we presume that a sensitive person will always emote? I mean, is it fair to assume that when someone senses something in another that this person will respond overtly? Is it possible that a sensitive person just may

not be demonstrative in the least? Is it possible that they are actually sensitive enough to choose NOT to emote because it'd just make things worse? Should the fact that others never see certain overt things give them the license to assume a person is somehow insensitive?

**In my personal experience, and this seems to be increasingly amplified the longer I spend time around maturing saints, THE most sensitive people are often the LEAST emotional. I believe there's a basis for this in the Word, also.**

Let me put it this way, and then we'll get to Paul's example. There are some people that just bleed all over the place, all the time - they are emotional basket cases. Sure, they have a certain sensitivity to life, but it's often unbalanced and unstable. If that's "sensitive" then I don't want it, nor should anyone for that matter. Some people just like drama, so that's their modus operandi.

**Emotional drama should never be confused with objective sensitivity.**

So, let's hand the perverted definition of "sensitive" over to the world and let them keep it for themselves. It's not Biblical, therefore it can't be virtuous, so let's throw it out.

So what IS Biblical sensitivity?...since it's not tantamount to emotionalism. Maybe it's best now to go to a primary example in the Bible - Paul. To say, or even imply for a moment, that Paul wasn't sensitive is an insult. Besides the Lord Jesus Christ, you'd be hard pressed to find someone more sensitive in the Bible than Paul. Yet, by reputation, it seems he's often written off as a fanatical, "I'll run you over if you get in my way" type character. Granted, he had his moments where that may have been true out of necessity, but I'd argue that scripture reveals that even during his apparently aggressive moments, he was ultra-sensitive. You just have to learn to see his heart, reading "between the lines".

**Paul, like all mature believers, was very sensitive, but not dramatic. Drama ruins the start of something good. It robs sensitivity of its godly fruit, rendering even the soundest perceptions useless. Sensitivity must be coupled with integrity, not emotionalism, for it to bear good fruit.**

Too many people get roped into drama. Some are so accustomed to it that it's become their "norm", so they seek it out. If they can't find any, some even create drama! On the flip side, the Word conveys that it's ENTIRELY possible, and surely encouraged, that a person be exceptionally sensitive without becoming all emotional. Paul was an expert at this.

See if you can "see" Paul's heart here. He had a long, tumultuous, but loving history with the Corinthians:

*Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. Make room for us in your hearts; we wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one.*

*I do not speak to condemn you, for I have said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together.*

*Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction. For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.*

*For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it — for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while — I now rejoice, not that you were made*

*sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.*

*“For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.*

*So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the offender nor for the sake of the one offended, but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God.*

— 2 Corinthians 7:1-12

Read the passage above a few times over, each time concentrating on Paul's heart. Notice his true sensitivity to all aspects of the situation and the balanced approach he uses - ever-sensitive, but never dramatic. In light of this, if you know anything about the Corinthians, you know that they were just awful in many ways, always straying, creating drama and so on. Paul, being the perceptive man he was, often had to firmly admonish them (which he did without apology). Yet in his own words, he loved them dearly.

**Sensitivity is best served without all the drama. It often goes unnoticed, but it's the only way a person can sustain enough clarity to act with integrity in a situation and not be overcome by their own emotionalism.**

Sensitive isn't the same as emotional - read your Bible, you'll see.



## The Sun Is Out

Not everything in life has to be profound.

Not every day needs to be filled with emotional highs and lows to be noteworthy.

Life doesn't have to be romantic to be enthralling.

If we stop and ponder life for a moment, isn't life itself absolutely amazing?

My routine in the morning begins when the bustling in the house commences. Most days I am awoken to the sound of my wife preparing for her morning run and the dog preparing, in her own way, by pacing around the hardwood floors in the next room. About 20 minutes after that, I can hear the faint sound of my youngest son's alarm clock building to a crescendo, at which time I'm begging him to shut it off and get up (most days he hits the snooze button and we go through this routine again 5 minutes later). :o

If I'm feeling rested, I'll get up shortly after that, make a coffee, grab my Kindle, and set myself comfortably up on my recliner near the picture window in the living room. As I read my Bible, I am often greeted by the sun coming up over the trees. Its rays beam through the trees magnificently and onto my lap. It's those times that I stop and say, "Thanks, Dad, I appreciate this."

**I believe one of THE greatest battles we fight is that of familiarity. I pray I never stray so far as to lose sight of this. Familiarity breeds malcontent. Malcontent is a petri dish for a whole host of spiritual diseases.**

I suppose it's natural for man to slowly tune out repetitive things over time. Heck, our physical bodies do that automatically. For example, when you

first put a cap on your head you are hyperaware of how the band feels...is it snug enough?...is the bill straight?...is it pulled down correctly? All these little events occur within a brief moment of time, where your physical senses are heightened, until we decide all is well. Then that hyperawareness dissipates. And if you're like this aging man, you sometimes even ask others, "Where'd I put my cap?" when it is right on your head where you put it! LOL :)

In the case of a cap, it often isn't until it's blocking the sun for us that we remember it and express a little gratitude for it. Seems like a sad waste of potential. The Bible speaks of **LIVING** in gratitude for all the little things, even when they aren't serving their primary functions. Might we stop and smile about all the things postured at-the-ready? Seems like a good use of time to me.

**Learning to appreciate all the little things is a boundless wellspring of joy.**

**I believe the wealthiest people on this planet are the ones that are the least familiar with life. They are the ones that remain in awe over God's creation...all of it, regardless of how mundane some parts of it may seem. They are the ones whose childlike admiration and sense of wonder never cease.**

Isn't that what Heaven's going to be like? I think so. Perpetual gratitude, amazement, and love.

So those days when the sun pours through the trees onto my lap, I hope I always realize that the Word that warms my soul is simultaneously warming my lap. And although He never forces my gratitude, He loves me for noticing the little things.

**The Lord shows me that He loves me. He loves you, too. He hugs us every single day we're alive, yet most of us roll our eyes like bratty little**

**teenagers do when their parents give them hugs.**

*The Lord's loving kindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.*

— **Lamentations 3:22-23**

What's funny is that whenever I sit down to write a blog entry, I pray about what to write. And I often catch myself, just like I did today, thinking that I've got to write something with some profundity. But that's just "me" getting in the way. Life is profound enough.

The Lord doesn't need man to reveal His magnificence. He's already installed the detection system in the spirit of man. He's already equipped us to appreciate Him. Sometimes our biggest problem is the easiest to fix. Sometimes it's a simple change of perspective, something that takes a split second, that's enough to turn our lives around.

**The sun came out today and I'm really glad. I had gotten familiar, but now I'm not.**

**I'm going to spend today focusing on staying in the moment. I'm going to appreciate all the little things that He doesn't have to do for me, yet still does.**

I'm going to follow Paul's lead:

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

— **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

I hope you join me. :)

## Why So Torn Over Prophecy?

Ever get a twinge in your stomach when you read the Book of Revelation? I mean, are you ever unsettled by what you read and/or know about concerning prophecy? I am...and for good reason, I believe. It turns out the Bible lets us know that it is normal, even as believers who love and seek God's justice, that we become grieved by the thought of *anyone* being cast into Hell.

I sometimes catch myself playing games with God, saying, in moments of weakness and human frailty, things like, "Well, Dad, I think I'd be less upset with the unbeliever's destiny if it had some sort of a time stamp on it...You know, like a prison term." I know, I know, that's just plain silly talk given that every creature in Hell deserves to be there. I'm just openly admitting here (and others have intimated similar sentiments, so I'm not alone in my emotions) that from an imbalanced perspective, though it never lasts too long, thank God, I feel a bit of sympathy for those who end up spending all of eternity in "*the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*" (**Matthew 13:42**).

Is it righteous that both unbelievers and the fallen angels end up there? Of course - they all had a choice. But even so, a compassionate soul is affected by the reality of it. If you can relate to this, my oft-felt lament, know that you are not alone.

**"Jesus wept" (John 11:35) for He was a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus wept because He felt the fullness of God's righteous judgment on the unsaved. We simply cannot fathom the depths of His heart on this, but we can certainly relate in some small way. He has given us access to His own heart, after all...and we ought not quench it; rather may we learn to use that heart as motivation in our own ministries.**

How does one *not* agonize over the fact that “*the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it*” (**Matthew 7:14**)? And don't be crass and say something stupid and indifferent like, “To Hell with them, they deserve it!” It's true, they do deserve to go to Hell, but so do YOU! A person who abides in that kind of sentiment ought to take less time pointing fingers and examine their own faith. Seriously...it makes one wonder.

**Am I openly saying that I don't understand the perfect integrity of God and that He is just in sentencing some to Hell? May it never be! I'm simply admitting, for the sake of encouragement to all reading this, that it is not a sin to feel this way about those who are perishing.**

The apostle John is the one whom God chose, by way of John's personal revelation from Him, to pen the Book of Revelation. This book is chalk full of prophecy, much of which is unpleasant as it pertains to unbelievers. John's innards were undoubtedly troubled by the thought of the unbeliever's destiny, so we have yet another person we can certainly relate to.

*Then the voice which I heard from heaven, I heard again speaking with me, and saying, 'Go, take the book which is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the land.' So I went to the angel, telling him to give me the little book. And he \*said to me, 'Take it and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.' I took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it, and in my mouth it was sweet as honey; and when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter. And they \*said to me, 'You must prophesy again concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings'.*

— **Revelation 10:8-11**

John was asked to digest the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments on sinners and it turned his stomach. He was forewarned, implying the holy angel

## Why So Torn Over Prophecy?

knew how John would react. However, as is the case to all pious souls, the judgments are righteous and therefore good news. *"Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart"* (Jeremiah 15:16a).

**It truly is a dichotomous thing to ponder, that is God's judgment. There may be times when we are emotionally overwhelmed at the thought of even one creature spending all of eternity suffering. There may be other times when we focus on the perfect justice of God and rejoice. These are two sides of the same coin, experienced by the "author and perfecter of faith" (Hebrews 12:2), Jesus Christ, as well as others, like the apostle John...and even you and me. We ought to be encouraged, knowing that prophecy, while ordained by God, may rightly invoke a variety of emotions in a God-fearing believer...and that's just fine.**

## Encouragement

*Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.*

— **1 Peter 5:8-10**

Encouragement comes in all shapes and sizes. It originates with a variety of sources, not just human beings (although, arguably, most encouragement is from others). Even circumstances can be encouraging if understood correctly. For God often works in mysterious ways, testing our faith with purpose.

Faith must be tested for it to be consummated in the soul of a believer. Once that activity is completed, the believer is the possessor of supernaturally imparted confidence. This is the pattern by which God chooses to strengthen the faith of His children.

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

— **1 Peter 1:6-9**

One of the greatest contributions we can make to another believer's

account is the gift of our witness. Few things bear a greater impact than one person seeing another person's faith in action, *"that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine"* (**Romans 1:12**)...*"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"* (**Colossians 2:2-3**).



## A Leopard and Its Spots

"A leopard never changes its spots."

Being a "cup-half-full" kind of guy, I generally don't like to think this old secular proverb as true. However, experience has forged quite a deep gorge in my soul, indicating that there is some truth to it, less one disclaimer.

I believe God can do anything He wants with anyone. The only issue is if the believer is willing to accept His will in their lives.

*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*

— **Philippians 4:13**

**Try to change your spots by human power and you will fail every time.**

Such an endeavor is like painting and repainting an old, increasingly dilapidated home in hopes that somehow its infrastructure changes in suit. That home is built on a foundation that will never hold up under pressure. It doesn't matter how much you improve its curb appeal, it still rests on something insecure.

*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 7:26-27**

Meanwhile, the scriptures tell us that we have a new home, we are new creatures - we just need to accept the keys to unlock the front door. There we shall find rest.

*Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.*

— **2 Corinthians 5:17**

Most believers struggle with the finality of this statement from Paul. Why? - most are too busy paying attention to the Satanic influences holding up old pictures bearing their old spots. They accept that the person in the picture is who they are and will always be. But they are very wrong. Believers are regenerated, born again in Christ. Most simply don't believe it, so they are stuck.

**For believers, a leopard really CAN have its spots changed. By grace through faith they are able to experience who/what they truly are in Christ. Only God has this power to change man completely. Man attempts to work from the outside-in. God works from the inside-out.**

One of the great stories in the Bible regarding this topic is found in the Book of Philemon. Philemon was a slave owner. One of his slaves, Onesimus, had stolen from him and run away, only to be evangelized by Paul, becoming a new man. The context of the letter was that Paul was appealing to Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a brother in Christ. This appeal was based on Philemon's faith that a man truly can be changed as a believer.

*I [Paul] appeal to you [Philemon] for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart.*

— **Philemon 10-12**

It seems often the case that whenever we have a fallout with someone, particularly as the carnage of fleshly battles, and that person returns to us seeking reconciliation, we remain untrusting. However, God may have in

our time apart worked salvation out in the soul of our contender. We, like Paul, ought to accept that God can/ will change a man's heart wholly if that man is open to it.

*For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

— **Philemon 15-16**

Sometimes, we might be in the likeness of Onesimus, seeking to return to someone we've wounded in the past. Sometimes, we might play the part of Paul as a mediator of reconciliation. Other times, we might play the part of Philemon, knowing God's power to work all things together for good for those who love Him (**Romans 8:28**).

As sturdy as the secular proverb stands ("a leopard never changes its spots"), and as often as man's flesh affirms it, we must accept the fact that God isn't confined by man's inadequacy. God is not an existentialist, either, rather He is sovereign, able and willing to change a man's heart on a dime, if only they repent.

**A good friend, of the Lord first, and towards others in love, is always willing to see the goodness of God working through others. A good friend never holds up old pictures of believers wearing their old spots. A good friend has faith that all can be changed regardless of our past.**

**A leopard truly can have its spots changed. What's impossible for man is absolutely possible for God.**

*Looking at them, Jesus said, 'With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God'.*

— **Mark 10:27**

Just one final bit of encouragement for those of you who relate mostly to Onesimus, the runaway slave. The world likes to remind us of our failures, doesn't it?

**The world is bent on convincing us that our spots can never be changed. But the Word conquers all things, reveals all things, shines light out of darkness, sets us free. We merely need to believe it.**

*He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.*

— Isaiah 40:29-31

**Faith is a beautiful thing.**

## Every Goliath Has His Day

**Our enemies often project themselves as monstrosities so that we might never even consider tangling with them. If they can scare us into hiding, we are defeated before we even allow God to deliver us!**

*Then a champion came out from the armies of the Philistines named Goliath, from Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span [about 9'9" tall]. [He had] a bronze helmet on his head, and he was clothed with scale-armor which weighed five thousand shekels of bronze [about 125 pounds]. [He] also [had] bronze greaves on his legs and a bronze javelin [slung] between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and the head of his spear [weighed] six hundred shekels of iron [about 15 pounds]; his shield carrier also walked before him,*

— 1 Samuel 17:4-7

*The Philistine came forward morning and evening for forty days and took his stand.*

— 1 Samuel 17:16

Even the king of Israel, Saul, was afraid of this giant Philistine.

But the young shepherd David was not. When David hears of all of this, he responds with faith, "*For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God*" (1 Samuel 17:26)?

**David had tremendous courage in the eyes of man. I get the sense, though, that David could've cared less about receiving such accolades. Courage is a word man clings to when describing the activity of faith in the face of danger.**

**Those without faith are often impressed with courage such as David's.**

**They ought to be since such courage is borne of faith that is given by God. Those with said courage seem to care much less about being perceived as having it.**

**Sometimes the courage of one person confounds the rationale of another.**

*Now Eliab his oldest brother heard when he spoke to the men; and Eliab's anger burned against David and he said, "Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your insolence and the wickedness of your heart; for you have come down to see the battle.*

— 1 Samuel 17:28

How many arrogant assumptions and allegations can one man make in such a short speech? Wow!

**The fact is that Eliab lacked faith and, therefore, was a coward. However, David was full of faith and therefore spoke plainly and courageously. His courage was a function of his humility. Humility always crushes arrogance. David's older brother, Eliab, saw a true warrior, something he was not, so he did what most threatened cowards do - he attempted to belittle David.**

Even the giant made the mistake of misjudging David and the source of his courage.

*When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him; for he was [but] a youth, and ruddy, with a handsome appearance.*

— 1 Samuel 17:42

**As is the case with any true warrior of God, his opponent's estimation of their fighting abilities has no bearing on their convictions. The humble person of God believes that God's will be done, regardless of what**

**human rationale has to say about it.**

**That is faith. David stood alone in it back then. Maybe someday you will, too.**

*Then David said to the Philistine, 'You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted. This day the Lord will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you.*

— **1 Samuel 17:45-46a)**

David's heart was right. The Philistine giant fell that day at the hand of the Lord.

*Thus David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, and he struck the Philistine and killed him; but there was no sword in David's hand.*

— **1 Samuel 17:50**

David's victory was but a manifestation of the power of humility in the life of a saint. This episode in David's life was one of many. *"David was prospering in all his ways for the Lord [was] with him"* (**1 Samuel 18:14**).

*As the story goes, "David behaved himself more wisely than all the servants of Saul. So his name was highly esteemed"* (**1 Samuel 18:30b**).

How about you?

Do you believe that the Lord goes before you in every battle that is His? Do you believe the battles you engage in are holy? Do you have confidence before the Lord that you are seeking His will? Are you humble enough to accept that fear is often an indicator of an unfaithful heart?

Do you have courage by God's standards?

Who or what is YOUR "Goliath"? Are you afraid of that person or situation? Why or why not?

**Faith is the foundation of courage. Chest beating and bravado are weak substitutions for true courage. Humility always trumps arrogance. Arrogance is weak and incapable to stand up against the Lord.**

**Every Goliath has his day before the Lord!**

Have this same courage when it's YOU the Lord commands, as His chosen instrument, to destroy whatever "Goliath" exists in your life. Maybe your "Goliath" tromps around the workplace, or in the neighborhood, or on the school ground, etc. Wherever he may be, he's nothing before the Lord.

**There's an old secular proverb, "The bigger they are, the harder they fall." Sometimes, this may be the case when you stand firm against those who stand opposed to God's will.**

**Be encouraged [en="in" + courage="in faith"], for all things are possible with God, even when it's just little old YOU that He's using to shame the wise!**



## Failure Isn't the Issue, Fear of It Is

I recall when I was younger always being intrigued with the ultra-successful. To this day, I have a certain fascination with the consummate professional. I will watch someone at the top of their game do just about anything, whether it's a musician, a mechanic, a plumber, an engineer, a doctor, a waitress, a truck driver, an athlete, etc.

When I was younger, I was crippled by something. Fear of failure. I had this ridiculous notion that if I couldn't master something in a really short timespan, then I mustn't be cut out for it and, therefore, I was a failure. Geesh - what a horrible manufacturing plant for fear!

I wanted to be like those I admired, a true professional, but I was mentally blocked. Ugh.

Here's why in a nutshell. Instead of enjoying the process of learning, which ALWAYS includes failure, I'd evaluate myself against the professionals and make a decision that I was either cut out for it or I wasn't. That's a tragic way of thinking...idiotic, actually, given the fact that those individuals failed hundreds, even thousands of times on their journey to mastership. I admired the end product, but missed the work put into it. I think a lot of people make this mistake.

Today, I'm almost the polar opposite, although not like some people I know that are such risk-takers that I'd categorize them as "cowboys" - LOL. I'm not a 'throw caution to the wind' type guy, but I am no longer afraid to fail. In fact, I 'like' to fail. It's true, I am sick in the head (**Isaiah 1:5**), but not this time. :)

Did I just write that? I did. And I am telling the truth. I 'like' to fail because I always LEARN something. And when I learn something, that means that I won't make that mistake again (well, you know what I mean :) ).

Therefore, each failure means I'm one step better than I was the last time I failed trying.

**I have drilled the following proverb into my sons' heads growing up: "The greatest risk in life is not taking one." Ask them, they'll tell you.**

I believe that wholeheartedly. The worst thing that a person can do in life is get stuck in fear. 99% of the time, fear is unfounded anyways. Besides, the only real thing to fear is severe personal injury and, for we believers, even that isn't anything to fear since death in our "Book" is a promotion! Now, I'm not advocating putting God to the test (**Matthew 4:7**) by taking stupid, life threatening risks.

**What I'm saying is that you should always take risks. Seek them out if you have to! That's living.**

Most life changing things would never happen without some risk being perceived at the outset. Do you remember the first time you went to church? To some that came to Christ later on in life, even that was a calculated risk ("what will I learn?", "will this be like the last church I went to with the charismatics?", "will I get struck by lightning for even walking through the front doors?" - lol). To some, even going to church for the first time was a risk, but just look at the dividends it paid (assuming we're pondering a righteous institution, of course).

**Risk means there's a good possibility that you're going to fail. So what? What's worse, that or being on your deathbed regretting that you didn't experience more, learn more, grow more??? Give me the large heap of failures and I'll take the progress, too, please.**

I think about Simon, whom Jesus called Peter (*petros* (Greek) = "a small rock"), as if to say he was a "chip off the old block (*THE Rock, Jesus Christ*)".

*But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the*

*waves; for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.'*

*Peter said to Him, 'Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.' And He said, 'Come!' And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!'*

*Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind stopped.*

— **Matthew 14:24-32**

**Of all the apostles, it would appear that Peter was the greatest risk-taker. Just look at what he was willing to risk (his own life) to find out if it was truly his Lord in this passage.**

As is often the case, risk requires continued conviction, resolution, and execution. In the story above, Peter took the initial risk, but then lost faith in his decision and ended up failing. It was a good lesson for him and for all of us as we recount the story.

I believe that Peter's desire to risk it all (this is the same man that dropped his fishing nets and followed Jesus, remember) for his Lord is why Jesus said what he said to him below:

*And Jesus said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. **I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the***

*kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven'.*

— **Matthew 16:17-19**

**Peter, the risk-taker, was highly esteemed in the end. He was a model for the masses, highly respected by Jesus' disciples, and feared by the Jewish leaders. He learned through failure. He kept failing, but he kept learning.**

I believe that Peter was more interested in succeeding than failing. That sounds like an odd thing to say, but I believe too many believers are paralyzed by fear of failure, and that this fear trumps their desire to succeed.

As Jesus said to Peter when he failed, "*Why did you doubt*" (**Matthew 14:31b**)? Ask yourself that very question the next time you're on the precipice of failure. Just go for it! So what if you fail. Laugh it off and get back in the saddle! :)

**Life is too short to live in fear of failure.**

The weak individuals in this world will plague you with doubt. They will ridicule you when you fail because they are projecting their own issues on you. Who needs those kinds of friends??? They are insecure and pathetic. Contrarily, the strong will encourage you to take risks. They will watch you fail, extend a hand to help you back up, dust off your backside, and say, "Ready for round 2?" They will also respect you for trying.

**Who's the strongest Person you know? Jesus. I believe He has a certain respect for those willing to take a risk, try and fail. He'd rather see you do that than do nothing (Luke 19:20-23).**

## Finding Encouragement In All the “Wrong” Places

I suppose if we listen to the world's opinion about where one ought to look to find encouragement, we may on occasion find something. However, in my experience, those "places" are all too often riddled with strings attached. That's bondage.

**The natural man doesn't understand grace. If he did, he'd be encouraged simply by being alive. That'd be just the start of it, too.**

What I've found over the years is that the more I understand God's grace, the more I am finding encouragement in the very places the world tells me I shouldn't look for it. It's gotten to the point nowadays that when something unexpected, maybe even potentially challenging, arrives on my doorstep, my spiritual senses pique. I have learned that with the proper perspective, especially understanding that with God all things are possible, encouragement is at the ready in Christ.

*Looking at them, Jesus said, 'With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible **with God**,*

— **Mark 10:27**

In brief this means that the world is full of dung. After all, Satan is behind a system of thinking that consistently steers people away from truly encouraging situations. His encouragement is laced with an ungodly agenda and it's always fleeting. Yet, he's such a mastermind that he's got the world ever-tapping the same well for things that just aren't there.

*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case **the god of this world [Satan] 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.***

## Finding Encouragement In All the “Wrong” Places

— 2 Corinthians 4:3-4

Grace, on the other hand, demolishes any preconceptions we might have regarding when, where, how, why, and from whom encouragement may come.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see. T'was grace that taught my heart to fear. And grace, my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.*

—Amazing Grace lyrics

My natural mindedness made me ignorant to the Gospel and yet God found a way to heal me through salvation - how encouraging is that?!!! Then why would I ever expect to find His grace and encouragement from a different source, namely the world? I mean, why would I take the advice of an unbeliever on some talk show or of some carnal believer who writes self-help books? These are the folks that think like Satan thinks! Sure, they appear sweet and "well-meaning" on the surface.

**However, since their advice is based on human rationalism, it is like venom to us believers - it paralyzes us, ensnares us, frustrates us, and ultimately discourages us!**

The past few years of my life have been really putting my thoughts here to the test. The ministry, though consistently rewarding in some ways, can be quite challenging in other ways. The Word has taught me to grab hold of His perspective and, as odd as what I'm about to say may sound, to be encouraged when the world attacks me.

*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

**We ought never expect to find lasting encouragement from a world that opposes our Creator, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Instead, we ought to rightfully expect discouragement cloaked in the garb of encouragement. The world is full of liars.**

*Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

— Matthew 7:15

It is these very "false prophets", even in our contemporary world, that infect the minds of the unsuspecting and the lost. They entice them away in shackles, back into bondage. They keep them there with empty promises of deliverance that appeal to the flesh. Their encouragement is phony. This is the same tactic the serpent employed in the Garden at the Fall.

When will we ever learn?

*As Paul stated, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?"*

— Romans 7:24

Some days seem flat out futile - I say this from experience. But I also contend that over time things get much easier. For me, being a "type A" personality, the struggle is in staying out of the way of grace. I was not put here on earth to impress anyone with my human ingenuity, contrary to my own flesh's belief!

**We are not left here on earth after salvation to seek encouragement from our host country (for we are ambassadors for Christ - 2 Corinthians 5:20). We are not to expect anything from the world, for it stands opposed to**

## Finding Encouragement In All the “Wrong” Places

**righteousness. It props itself up against our Lord, our true Deliverer, the One who has already overcome the things of this world.**

In this we may be sufficiently and perpetually encouraged:

*These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.*

— John 16:33

Stop seeking encouragement from the world - you won't find anything worthy of your time in it. Rather, be open to the simple fact that God may introduce His encouragement in the most unexpected ways. Live by faith (**Romans 1:17**). Even those days where the world is on your back, remember WHY that is the case.

This world doesn't understand the first thing about grace. Therefore, it doesn't know the first thing about how to encourage you. The Lord does. Seeking encouragement from the world is literally more futile than expecting a swine to march up to your front door, ring your doorbell, and offer you a cone of ice cream. I'm not kidding.

Under grace we see the Lord's fingerprints everywhere around us, finding encouragement in everything, even the so-called "wrong" places. Come to find out, most of the "wrong" places are the right places - it's simply a matter of perspective.



## God's Promises Make Us Laugh Sometimes

**God is the author of fun.**

**Once you get to know Him, you quickly realize His sense of humor. He's hysterical, though not in the traditional sense of the word. Most people are unrightly related to God, so they don't find Him humorous at all. Too bad, really - I think He's the funniest Person in the universe!**

Let me give you an example. If your Aunt Sally got pregnant at 90 years old, what would be your honest reaction? Me? - I'd laugh my butt off! Seriously, I would! If dear Aunt Sally were rightly related to God, she'd be laughing, too - guaranteed!

*Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah (~90 years old) said, 'God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' And she said, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age'.*

— **Genesis 21:5-7**

Now THAT's funny, folks! Imagine your 100 and 90 year old uncle and aunt announcing the birth of their new baby boy - LOL! Who's going to believe the family photos comprise zero generation gaps? Seriously. Tell me the Sears photographer wouldn't have to hold back a little laughter! I bet all would laugh while being opened up to the power of God. Laughter's like that, isn't it?...it can overcome defensiveness.

**God's promises are so ridiculous by man's standards that they make us laugh sometimes!**

Don't ever be ashamed to laugh with God. There's, "*A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance*" (**Ecclesiastes 3:4**). Those are

## God's Promises Make Us Laugh Sometimes

king Solomon's words, the man with the greatest wisdom of his time.

God fulfills even the most outlandish promises simply to reassure you that He's in control. "*A joyful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit dries up the bones*" (**Proverbs 17:22**). If you forget to laugh in this life, you'll be a shriveled up little prune of a person.

Yuck!

**Only God knows when it happened, but somewhere along the line, I suspect with the advent of organized religion and such, Christianity lost its sense of humor. What a shame!**

Our Creator made us in His image and created joy and laughter as blessings. Why in the world would any one of us buy the lie that God is so somber that we ought to perpetually wear the face of Burgermeister Meisterburger, the Mayor of Sombertown?



If Heaven is the ultimate sanctification of all things in Christ, as He is the fullness of all things good, then I doubt we'll see any faces like the one above. :) Are you with me??? Can I get an "Amen!"??? I hope so!

The name "Isaac" actually means, "he laughs". His brother's name, "Ishmael", means "God hears". Ishmael was the result of an ungodly scheme concocted by Sarai, which means "contentious", and agreed upon by Abraham. To this day, Ishmael's progeny, the Arabs, are the traditional enemies of the Jews. "*[Ishmael] will be a wild*

*donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone” (Genesis 16:12a).*

Ishmael was God's way of teaching the principle, "Be careful of what you ask for". Isaac was God's way of teaching the principle, "Wait on My timing for My promises!" Once Isaac was born, Sarai's name was changed to "Sarah", which means "princess".

**I suppose, looking back on their mistakes, Abraham and Sarah, like many of us nowadays, were able to laugh...at least by the time all the dust settled regarding childbirth. We all need to laugh more at the lessons we've learned over the years. Do you have a better suggestion?**

If you're missing my encouragement here, then maybe you'll listen to a gifted woman who submitted the following essay to The Lincoln Republican newspaper back in 1905:

*“He has achieved success who has lived well, laughed often and loved much; who has enjoyed the trust of pure women, the respect of intelligent men and the love of little children; who has filled his niche and accomplished his task; who has left the world better than he found it, whether by an improved poppy, a perfect poem, or a rescued soul; who has never lacked appreciation of earth’s beauty or failed to express it; who has always looked for the best in others and given them the best he had; whose life was inspiration; whose memory a benediction”*

— Bessie Anderson Stanley's *What Constitutes Success*.

## **Just the Right Word At Just the Right Time**

Ever been at the very end of your rope?

Ha!...what am I asking??? We've ALL been there, haven't we? Those times when the world seems like it specializes in oppression are those times when we cry out most for relief. Sometimes it comes the way we ask for it; often times it doesn't. Regardless of the case, our Lord is with us.

The beauty in the spiritual life is recognizing that God has everything under control, even when we haven't a clue as to how our deliverance will arrive...we just ask that it be sooner, rather than later. Sometimes life hurts...a LOT!

*The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil.*

— Proverbs 16:4

That's right - you read that correctly. Even the evil things the Lord, Himself, has ordained to pass in your life. Why? Because, as the scripture says, everything has its own purpose. Whether you realize it or not is not the issue.

**The last time you were on your knees begging for mercy, you were EXACTLY where you needed to be - so says the Lord God. You might say in retrospect, "His plan worked." :)**

Maybe it's your boss at work, or your children, or your spouse, or your friends, even, that push you to your limits. So be it. It's all part of a grander plan. Perseverance builds character remember. *"And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that **tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within***

*our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:3-5).*

**Always remember that whatever you’re going through, the Lord ordained it. Embrace that perspective.**

How sweet is it when we receive encouragement just as the last strand in the rope is about to snap? How precious is it to have the “lights turned on” in the midst of sorrow, as the darkness of depression envelops us? How encouraging is it, then, to realize that HE is the one motivating ALL of it? How beautiful is it when we realize that He orchestrated the whole affair?

We pray for answers in our times of need. It's often at these times when the Lord's heart shines through others the most. Sometimes it's as simple as a friendly reminder that you're loved. Other times, it's as refined as a wink or a quick smile in your direction. The method doesn't matter when you recognize Who just sent it your way.

*A man has joy in an apt answer, and how delightful is a timely word!*

— Proverbs 15:23

As many of us will attest, the kingdom of darkness, whose god “*prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*” (1 Peter 5:8b), is also aware of our down times. And like a true enemy, it may exploit our situation, seeking to build negative momentum. “*A perverse man spreads strife, and a slanderer separates intimate friends*” (Proverbs 16:28).

Who's your most intimate friend? I hope you said, “Jesus”. Well, whom do you think Satan is trying to separate you from? Who do you think is slandering His good name in your presence? Who do you think is casting doubts when you're at your weakest???

Words are the most powerful vehicle for good and evil in this world. The tongue is like a syringe, injecting that which fills the heart into the lives of

## Just the Right Word At Just the Right Time

others. *“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” (James 3:9-10a).*

### Words.

**Learn to appreciate the encouragement that comes from a heart aligned with Christ. *“Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad” (Proverbs 12:25).***

For me, the delicately placed words of a true friend reveal the unmistakable timing of the Lord. Sometimes it's the words of someone very close, but often times it isn't. I've learned to receive His grace in every circumstance in life. I dare not put Him in a box.

Encouragement is a very special gift. The need for it is without question. Our Lord loves us so He encourages us with words...not just those we read in the Bible...but also through His chosen vessels of mercy...His sheep. For me, that's you, my friends. For you, it's others and me.

**Just the right word at just the right time can make all the difference in the world! Find the time to encourage each other and be encouraged yourself. Never underestimate your impact in this life.**

*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

## The Least of Them

*And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.*

— **Matthew 10:42**

Jesus was adamant about encouraging His disciples to care for one another. He knew, being the foremost unjustly persecuted individual in all of human history, that this world, the one that Satan currently is the “god of” (**2 Corinthians 4:4**), stands opposed to us children of God. He knew, and therefore He prayed earnestly to His Father in **John 17**, that if this world persecuted Him, it was certainly going to persecute His disciples.

*“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**).* The kingdom of darkness is truly unrelenting and will remain as such until Christ’s return. This reality calls for special consideration of one another in the faith.

### **Let us not forget how far encouragement can go!**

Paul also made a point of reminding his disciples that they ought to take especially good care of others in the faith. *“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**).*

We are certainly called to treat others the way we desire to be treated (**Luke 6:31**), but we ought not apologize for taking especially good care of our brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of whether or not it is considered “PC” (politically correct) in our society.

**We have the right to choose who shall receive our affection in time. Christ, our Lord, asks that we skew our attention towards His own.**

***“One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, and He will repay him for his good deed” (Proverbs 19:17). Jesus echoes Proverbs 19:17 by intimating that if we follow His heart in helping others in the faith, we ought to think of it as helping Him, personally.***

*Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me’.*

— **Matthew 25:37-40**

We Christians aren’t always esteemed by society. Actually, I’d argue that we are increasingly discriminated against. Why? Because we stand for Truth. The world despises Truth because it is Light, and the Light illuminates the simple fact that the world, and especially its god, is wretched. *“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).*

**We in the faith are rapidly becoming the “least of them”, even in those parts of the world that USED to be positive towards Christ. Even those precious areas have been eroded with false doctrines and speculations designed specifically to lead people away from the Gospel truth - that Christ is Lord.**

As the pressure mounts, let us be encouraging each other, each by the other’s faith (**Romans 1:12**). May we take action towards one another’s welfare, even when it isn’t the popular thing to do. We are family, after all. And may we be ever encouraged by the inevitable truth that Christ shall return soon to collect His own out of this world.



*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.*

— **2 Thessalonians 2:16-17**

## Like Speaking Two Different Languages

It's a good night. The moon is out; the air is crisp and clean. You're breathing easy, both literally and figuratively. Seems life has finally given you a reprieve. You're out with loved ones, maybe sharing a little light conversation over an ice cream cone at the local creamery after a nice, satiating meal. Life is good.

Along comes an associate from work - it is a public place after all, so it's not uncommon that you run into someone you know. A conversation sparks, obligatory introductions are made, small talk commences. The conversation turns to something you have little to contribute to, so you get squeezed off to the side with another non-participating party. At the risk of avoiding awkward silence, you do the cordial thing and start up a sidebar conversation. So far so good.

"So what do you do?" Never fails. The perfect icebreaker. You share, they share. The conversation gains a natural rhythm and the two of you are off and running. The only issue is that before long, their speech and their obvious goals in life seem to quickly depart from your own. Tension brews in your soul. They seem focused on achievement, social status, and worldly goals. You, on the other hand, find yourself in a pickle... "Do I share my own thoughts about how I work as unto the Lord and how His grace is ever-sufficient for me? Or do I simply stick with the small talk, grin at the warped sense of reality this person possesses, and play the charade?"

You watch as your fellow converser picks rotten fruit off of the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil' (**Genesis 2:17**) and persistently tries to feed it to you. With a forced smile, unbeknownst to them, you reject it, secretly hoping the other conversation in the group ends soon so this one can, too. Yours is growing more uncomfortable by the minute. They are oblivious. The Tree of Life beckons you now...

You understand Truth in the moment, *“but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness”* (1 **Corinthians 1:23**). You want to shake this person and counsel them on how very far away from the love of their Creator they have ventured. You want to stomp your foot, halt the proceedings, and proclaim what’s on your heart...that you couldn't care less about impressing them or their attempts to impress you...that you couldn't care less about how they idolize themselves, or their kids, or their reputations, or whatever. WHO CARES!!! *“Are you saved or not??? If you’re saved, do you know the love of God or not???”* Your eyes gloss over as your thoughts drift further away from their words...lips are moving, but the sounds become muffled.

In your relative silence, you “earn” the reputation in the moment as the simpler one. The game is over as far as your counterpart is concerned. Their flesh claims a small victory. But the truth for you is as Paul intimates, *“And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified”* (1 **Corinthians 2:1-2**).

Maybe the floodgates have opened on you in the past and you’ve blurted such sentiments in their faces, only to find out that it’s one way to end a conversation prematurely for sure. You contemplate it again in the moment, knowing that, for the most part, whatever you say will likely draw a quizzical look from the person standing before you. You’ve seen it a hundred times. It should be comical by now, but it isn't - it's heartbreaking.

You go for it, saying to yourself, *“The ‘worst’ that can happen is I’m labeled a ‘Jesus freak’ and they avoid me in the future”*. You decide you can live with that. So you pull the trigger and that's when it happens...right on cue...the proverbial record scratches and you imagine watching a video of milk spilling out of a cup being played in reverse. They clam up, gather themselves, throw a few extra niceties out, and now apparently realize they

## Like Speaking Two Different Languages

are late for something.

Been there, done that, right??? I know, my friend, me too...countless times, only it's typically a lot quicker for me once the other person discovers I'm a pastor. May I submit the following:

**Don't be offended by any of this. Please. It happens to all of us whose lives are being laid down for Christ. It happens all day, every day. Be encouraged, knowing that it's not your fault that others struggle to understand you...or shall I say more accurately, Him. It's not your fault that others seem foreign to you, and that their very language and the manner in which they communicate are offensive, sometimes even repulsive. It's OK, it's not you...it's them.**

*An unjust man is abominable to the righteous, and he who is upright in the way is abominable to the wicked.*

— Proverbs 29:27

Please be encouraged, dear friends. Please know that you're never alone, not ever. Christ, Himself, has paved the way. He's able to empathize with you because He's been tested and suffered such things before you. *"For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin"* (Hebrews 4:15).

We have the privilege of suffering for Him - let's embrace it with reckless abandon. Let's learn to enjoy the process. Let's not judge the lost, rather let's pray for them. Let's suffer the ridicule and the misconceptions, holding our chins up high. *"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).

**It's true. We speak a very different "language" than the world does. It's going to cause division between the world and us, but do not become anxious about such things. Life is short, but exceptionally sweet with the**

**right perspective.**

*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

**The world will never "keep [His] word"; rather it keeps its own words, ones that carry different definitions, constructing its own language. To the wise believer, a conversation with the world is like speaking two different languages.**

It can be frustrating, even to communicate the simplest of things. The Lord understands what you're trying to say...and so do some of the rest of us...so find ample time to talk to us instead. Take a load off. Let's talk about eternal life, shall we? :)

## Stay Active!

**The greatest moments in time are “activity” moments.**

*“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So **choose** life in order that you may live, you and your descendants” (Deuteronomy 30:19).* Even choosing is an activity.

It's not when we realize the facts about a person, place, or thing that our senses are excited, it's *activity* that brings life to any circumstance. Scripture is swirling with activity! Nouns and adjectives are great, but verbs are what make life truly exciting.

The Bible is chalk full of nouns and adjectives, such as God and His attributes, for starters. These are the fundamentals of learning the Word of God - totally necessary since we must know the characters, the plots, and the truths that form the structure of Holy Scripture. For example, we must understand the difference between the holy God of the Universe and the “god of this world” (Satan). However, the Word is “alive” with activity. *“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).*

Think about how exciting it would've been to see the Word (**John 1:1, 14**) in action during the creation of the heavens and the earth. God is exciting. He created life in a way that it would stimulate our hearts, our minds, and our souls. He created us in His image so that we'd rejoice in the same things that He does. It's been this way from the beginning.

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, “Let*

*there be light"; and there was light.*

— Genesis 1:1-3

**God didn't create passive creatures. Man *chooses* to be passive. He gave us humans the ability to partake in His divine activities, not just observe them from afar. Our activities are governed by our free will. Every one of us has this faculty, which is the very basis of human activity.**

Stagnation is the death knoll for the living. For some, waiting around until all the "data is in" on a subject has got them waiting for life to "begin". For those stuck in this "analysis paralysis", they are waiting their lives away. Sometimes a leap of faith is the only prudent option. God willfully and purposely forces our hand to see if we'll act according to faith. He tests us so that when we collect ourselves on the other side, we realize what faith can do.

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

— 1 Peter 1:6-9

**It's impossible to experience the power of faith if one never exercises it. Stepping out into the unknown should not be the exception to the rule. Remember, to God, nothing is unknown. Even if you "fail", the activity itself teaches you something.**

Choose life...and live! Remain active. Keep your mind sharp. Nothing is a risk if it's done in faith. *"But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put*

*on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation” (1 Thessalonians 5:8).*

**Risk is a ‘human’ word, with real limitations.**

Human choice progresses life itself...it pushes people forward. Choices, in most cases, aren't even an option, so why not seek the leading of the Spirit while making them? Making good choices brings glory to God...and *“the righteous man shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17b)*. Analysis paralysis relegates the probability to zero.

*Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 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 1:13-16



## **Where's All This Guilt Coming From???**

For years I lived in a subtle, oppressive kind of guilt. I can't put my finger on any one period in my life where this guilt rushed towards something that ultimately became oppressive, but it's safe to say that it was the result of my flesh, religion, and a lack of Truth in my soul. I don't count myself unique in this by any means, either. As a matter of fact, being a pastor means I'm often on the receiving end of some fairly intimate revelations... something I'm so very grateful for, for so many reasons not meant to be articulated here and now.

**Most people, Christians especially, live frustrated lives. Maybe it's better to say, unfulfilling lives...or lives that lack a certain fervency for Christ. Somehow, somewhere, it seems obvious that Satan's schemes have infected most believers. And this is a real tragedy because, last time I checked, God's will for us doesn't include oppression of any sort...just the opposite, actually - FREEDOM!!!**

*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

I believe the primary culprit for the aforementioned oppression is misunderstanding something fundamental to the spiritual life. Religion, being more popular than truth, has infiltrated most aspects of our lives. Religion focuses our attention on sin, while Jesus Christ focuses our attention on salvation.

**Focus on sin the rest of your life and even a whiff of it, while it's still a temptation, will weigh you down.**

Here are a few indisputable facts in the Bible: we have a flesh (**Romans 8**), Satan and his army of fallen angels exist (**Ephesians 6:11-12**), we will be

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tempted as even our Lord, Jesus Christ, was tempted (**Hebrews 4:15**), temptation is NOT the same thing as sin (**James 1:13-15**). I invite you to read the passages mentioned here before you even read any further.

**Identifying something perceived as unholy, even if it's tempting you, is not a sin.**

As I alluded to earlier, for me, ANYTHING unholy that crossed my mind was perceived as something to feel guilty about. Given the mere number of opportunities for temptation, both encouraged by the flesh and the kingdom of darkness, it's silly to expect that somehow after salvation all such things will magically cease to exist. It's even sillier to suggest that God expects such a thing. Our Creator understood our struggles long before we were even born...yet, He creates us flawed anyways.

It's true, we may suffer at the hands of temptation, but that's a drastically different issue than actual sinning. One of the greatest mistakes believers make after salvation is thinking they can fight off temptation...and I mean in the sense that they expend vast amounts of energy trying to eliminate temptation BEFORE it ever shows up and introduces itself. That's futility at its best because lots of the time, for instance, it's not even US, rather it's being slung at us from Satan and his goonies, *"in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one"* (**Ephesians 6:16**).

**Do you really think that our Creator would create us, place us in this fallen world, and then condemn us for being tempted? May it never be! The truth is that it's a blessing to be able to identify temptations as they arise, but to feel guilty about their presence is bondage. We're going to be tempted until the day we die, so get used to having tempting 'images' flashed up on the big screen of your soul. Get used to the kingdom of darkness trying to insert splinters into your faith. But don't waste your time or your God-given contentment on the religion of feeling badly about it.**

Freedom is the result of understanding these principles. Hyper-analyzing things we have ZERO control over can cripple a person, yet the Bible says, "WALK"! The fundamental activity in the spiritual life is to walk in humility. Humility will accept all that it sees, but won't get bogged down with the existence of ungodliness still looking for a place to grow roots in the soul. A temptation doesn't need to be confessed, only a sin does...so don't sweat it. Dismiss it.

*For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.*

— Colossians 1:9-12

Temptation is like an elastic band trying to pull us back into the bondage of spiritual death (aka separation from God). If our focus remains on Christ, even though we may feel some back pressure, we are able to keep on walking. If we stop every two seconds to deal with the 'guilt' of temptation, we'll never achieve the goal of simply walking in "a manner worthy of the Lord". It's 'funny', the more we understand such things, the less temptation's power in our lives.

**Temptation is nothing more than a "wannabe" sin. Treat it for what it's worth - something dismissible. Ignore it and keep walking. The only way it'll ever gain power over you is if you stop and concern yourself with it. Heck, it's in those moments that it's often able to set its hooks into your flesh and get you to sin after all!**

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And don't worry about the temptations themselves...if they are something God doesn't want in your life anymore, then He'll eradicate them for you, effectively delivering you...but that's His good work, not an effort of yours. He may allow certain temptations to remain your whole life because He wants His grace amplified uniquely as you press on through. Enjoy life, my friends. We suffer as it is - no need to unnecessarily add anything like guilt over temptation to the heap. If you do end up sinning, then confess it and remember the blood of Christ has you covered. Wash up and KEEP WALKING!!! Humility utilizes grace every chance it gets... and God is glorified as a result!

## Evil

There are many forms of evil, of which moral evil exists as a subset. *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* describes evil, "what ethicists term physical evil (or, natural evil) is often connected with the activities of God, and thus demonstrates the importance of defining these categories before discussing the subject further. An ethicist may distinguish these two types of evil thus: (1) moral evil, which is real if any intellectual being knowingly does anything he or she ought not to have done without being compelled to do it; and (2) physical evil, which is real if some beings have suffered in situations caused by nonrational beings, or through actions of rational beings acting nonrationally."

King David's humility led him to peace, regardless of the type of evil he faced. He understood that the Good Shepherd (the Lord) was his ultimate protector and deliverer. May we all learn to rest this way.

*The LORD is my shepherd,*

*I shall not want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;*

*He leads me beside quiet waters.*

*He restores my soul;*

*He guides me in the paths of righteousness*

*For His name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

***I 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 have anointed my head with oil;*

*My cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life,*

*And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

— Psalms 23

Using Baker's definition, we conclude that moral evil is the sin-producing area in the greater spectrum of evil that man has a "say" in, due to his God-given free will. The emphasis of this chapter is regarding moral evil. Baker's adds, "*moral evil finds its roots in disobedience, whether deliberate or accidental, premeditated or unpremeditated, cultic or ethical, to the revealed will of God, and as such, becomes associated with generic sin and virtually synonymous with wickedness.*" The word translated "wicked" in the New American Standard Bible appears in 300 verses. This makes sense, given the fact that God is good and His opponents are evil.

*How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,  
Nor stand in the path of sinners,  
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!  
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
And in His law he meditates day and night.  
He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,  
Which yields its fruit in its season  
And its leaf does not wither;  
And in whatever he does, he prospers.  
The wicked are not so,  
But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.  
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.  
For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
But the way of the wicked will perish.*

— Proverbs 8:13

## The Avengers

### Merriam-Webster Internet Dictionary:

**Avenge (verb):** 1) to take vengeance for or on behalf of; 2) to exact satisfaction for (a wrong) by punishing the wrongdoer.

**Revenge (verb):** 1) to avenge (as oneself) usually by retaliating in kind or degree; 2) to inflict injury in return for <revenge an insult>

**“I’m gonna make them PAY for what they’ve done!”**

I wonder how many times that phrase has been spewed out of the mouths of so-called “avengers”. What IS an avenger, anyways? Is that a good thing? Hollywood would certainly like us to believe so. There’s actually a blockbuster series CALLED “The Avengers”. I’ve seen all of them...not sure what to say next... :o

There’s a TV drama series titled, *Revenge*, in its fourth season as I write this blog. It’s a very successful program that millions ‘enjoy’. The premise? A young woman infiltrates a group of wealthy conspirators in order to avenge her father’s murder. Sadly, any form of compromised morality is assumed ‘acceptable’ in order to achieve this person’s revenge. The storyline postures revenge as a worthy reason for exacting all kinds of punishment, often even on innocent bystanders. The main character’s venom is so powerful that once a faithful viewer becomes entranced with her cause, they become numb to the myriad, ungodly, ever-so-deliberate actions this little vixen takes.

**Take away ‘cause’ for revenge and most avengers are downright despicable human beings. Instead of being bamboozled by amazing cinematography and high-fidelity sounds, try this experiment the next time you watch an “avenger” movie. Remove the precept that vengeance warrants everything you’re seeing on the screen. Consider the fact that**

**vengeance isn't even theirs to claim. What does that leave? - lawbreakers in capes and shiny shoes?**

**Is there anything really admirable about revenge? Anything consistent with Christ's heart? Any deliverance for the "avenger"?**

**There's no closure in revenge. If anything, it keeps existing wounds undressed and continues to open up new ones! Sounds like more harm done than good to me.**

*Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,' says the Lord. 'BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

— **Romans 12:17-21**

The flesh is inclined to take its own revenge. This is why some of the greatest blockbuster movies of all time have been of the revenge genre. Whether it's Sly Stallone, or Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, or even Emily VanCamp in the aforementioned *Revenge* TV series, their characters are WAY out of line. They are glorified lawbreakers. The movie *The Avengers* may seem like righteous retribution, but for as long as its basic premise is revenge, it is nothing more than a group of "beautiful" actors pretending to be something they aren't - good. Since when is breaking the law the righteous thing to do?

There's no righteousness in exacting revenge. What is it that an avenger hopes to achieve in the end? Most of the time, an avenger's rewards are deepened lines on their faces, more wear and tear in their minds, and more



scars on their souls. That doesn't leave a whole lot of room for the one thing that truly sets a person free - LOVE.

**It's not man's place to hate. We might hate a sin, but we aren't called to hate a person. "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1John 3:15).**

**The Word of God, the very mind of Jesus Christ, tells us to love one another as He has loved us. "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12).**

**There's no love in revenge. Our hearts must be purified from hate, as hatred darkens us, makes us like our enemies. Our enemies like the concept of revenge because they are actually very weak. We are called to be lights to the world!**

*Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom **you appear as lights in the world**, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.*

— **Philippians 2:14-16**

Our children are growing up in a world that is drifting further from God and closer to self-righteousness. Where's the line drawn with self-righteousness? If a person plays judge and jury between their two ears, what's to keep them from 'justifying' their own revenge? What's to keep them from aspiring to be like their 'heroes' on the big screen?

As my mom used to tell me as a child, **"Two wrongs don't make a right."** Seems like she was right. I'm yet to find scripture that proves this old adage wrong.

If the Lord says that it's His business to deal with wrongdoers, then we ought to leave it to Him. There are many good ways to deal with a transgressor, but revenge isn't one of them.

**Revenge, though glorified by man, is an awful trap. It's a guaranteed way to walk oneself back into a lifetime of bondage.**

**Revenge does accomplish one thing for sure - it doubles the number of guilty parties in the mix and then swathes everyone in misery. That doesn't sound ANYTHING like the life my Lord and Savior intended for any of us to have.**

## Forbidden Fruit

This blog entry is directly related to the last one titled, *“If It Ain’t Broke, Don’t Fix It!”*. Even if you’ve already read that one, I suggest you read it again so that its content is fresh in your mind...it’ll be worth the extra 5-10 minutes of your time.

Most people, even unbelievers, understand the reference to “forbidden fruit” because most people in this world have at least heard of the Garden of Eden and the sin that occurred there. Said fruit is literally the fruit that God explicitly instructed Adam and Eve not to eat, lest they die two deaths, spiritual and physical (**Genesis 3:3**). Satan incited what we may rightly call “human rationalism” as the basis of temptation, starting with Eve and then on through to Adam...for they saw that the forbidden fruit *“was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise”* (**Genesis 3:6a**). The rest is history, as they say.

The crux of the aforementioned blog entry was to highlight the uncommonly thought of tactic that Satan has employed ever since the fall in the Garden. It’s possible that he used similar rationalism to sweep away one third of the angels even before human history began, but those details aren’t specifically disclosed in the Bible, only hints of it in **Ezekiel 28**, **Isaiah 14**, and **Revelation 12**. It’s not my job to speculate, so I won’t; but suffice to say that Satan’s good at exploiting the weaknesses of others.

We no longer have a tree in a garden that we’re not supposed to eat from; rather, we now have “forbidden fruit” from other “trees” in this “garden” called the world. We, too, have been given explicit commands in the Bible that forbid us to partake in the figurative fruit all around us. Human rationalism, however, is trained to question God’s commands. It even attempts to explain away supernatural phenomena in order to accommodate its mode of natural thinking (aka fleshly thinking). *For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which*

*produces good fruit*" (Luke 6:43). Human rationalism applied to scripture bears bad fruit.

**Human experience ought never interpret the Bible; rather, the Bible interprets human experience. The forbidden fruit may have changed form over the years, but the pattern for justifying eating it has remained the same. The flesh's affinity for its consumption is undeniable.**

Think about the phrase "forbidden fruit". At the top of most lists are sexual sins. The Bible is chalk full of accounts where God's commands regarding sex have been blatantly violated. Why? - human rationale, of course, which says, "How can sex be bad if it 'feels' so good and right?" The Corinthians during Paul's time, like many folks today, believed that sex was no different than eating, so their sins were great. Paul corrected them, "*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*" (1 Corinthians 6:13).

Couple human rationale with the rebellious, lustful flesh and add a sprinkle of encouragement from Satan and the kingdom of darkness...bam! - you're the "proud" parent of a newly born sin! "*Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death*" (James 1:15). Heck, we had a whole era in the U.S. wrapped up in "sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll", which promoted doing what "felt" right. You're an idiot if you think we aren't still paying the price for that garbage. How many unplanned pregnancies and broken families have resulted from all of that???

**Listen closely - it doesn't matter how "good" breaking one of God's commands "feels" ...it's still a sin and all sins have consequences. "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). That's why pop songs are commonly either about "hook-ups" or "break-ups". Hook-ups are the temptation, break-ups are the consequences. Will man ever learn? - nope.**

**Man has never eaten forbidden fruit and not paid a price for it.**

Most people don't like to be told what to do unless the directive conforms to their own selfish desires. Why is that? It's simple, the human flesh is a strong willed rebel. Its base desire is to master you, *"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 [teshuqa (Hebrew) - a desire to rule over] is for you, but you must master it"* (**Genesis 4:7**).

**"Tell me NOT to do something and I'll want to do it all the more!" says the honest, fleshly person.**

That's the person who realizes the power of their flesh's assertiveness in their life. Ask them in their moment of clarity how well that mantra has treated them and they'll be compelled to show you their "scars". All too often, due to the intimate nature of sex, the stories tell of the irreversible consequences lived out by those who have immorally violated themselves with others. For believers, that violation includes Jesus Christ, given the simple fact that He indwells you. Think about that the next time (if ever) you're considering illicit sex. Christ is right there with you. How vile is that???

**Natural desires, like eating and even having sex, are not evil in of themselves. It's likely that the flesh wouldn't "think twice" about such things. However, here's the true insidiousness of the flesh - it isn't until the command to NOT do something becomes known that the flesh desires all the more to do it!**

**Get this, scripture reveals that the flesh desires forbidden fruit, not because of its inherent attractiveness, but rather because it furnishes an opportunity to assert one's self will. All you married folks out there remember that the next time someone that isn't your spouse pursues you! Being married, you are forbidden fruit, making you all the more**

**attractive to your pursuer. It's not even about you, it's about your pursuer's flesh.**

*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

You see, the flesh is an opportunistic rebel. Its great desire is to assert itself over God, to become lord over you, even though, if you're truly saved, your Lord is Jesus Christ. When the Lord commands, "Don't eat that!" the flesh screams out, "Eat and be merry...you are captain of your own destiny!"

**Don't allow your sinful flesh to rationalize sin in your life. Know your enemies and their tactics! "Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it" (Psalms 37:4-5).**

One last word. For those of you who LIVE a life of antagonism to God, whose sole diet is forbidden fruit, you may want to consider Paul's corresponding counsel, "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). Only an unbeliever is able to eat forbidden fruit all their life and not be upset by it, repulsed by it, and desire to vomit it out.

## The Greatest Salesman – Part 1

"Hey, mom, look at this letter I found in grandpa James' desk," little James, III said with a mixture of excitement and investigation in his voice.

"Oh, let's read it," she responded as they both took a break from preparing the house for the upcoming estate sale.

It read:

*July 10, 1933*

*It has been a few years since the so-called "great depression" has grown roots in our beloved country. Buckling down has become a way of life for us these days. I've learned that it's true what they say, "you don't really know someone until times get tough." It's been interesting to say the least. So many people on eggshells, crippled by a plague that cannot be analyzed under a microscope.*

*Case in point. I was having coffee with my neighbor the other day, consistent with our pre-depression tradition of sitting on the front porch and watching the wind blow. The wind was directing a dance concert consisting of maple leaves at the base of the stone wall towards the edge of my property. When the leaves would take a well-deserved break, we'd uniformly redirect our attention to passersby on the street, whether riding in the rare automobile, or on a bicycle...or maybe slow poke walking. If it was potential fodder for chatting over a warm cup of goodness, then it would become our entertainment for the moment. "This is as good as it gets," is what our posture has historically alluded to. Although, on this day, my otherwise calm, self-assured friend seemed a bit unnerved.*

*He said to me, "Hey, I had a salesman come to my door yesterday. I thought, 'this is comical, given the state of the union.' I figure this guy's got to know*

*that I'm broke just like the rest of our neighborhood, right? Even so, he didn't seem dissuaded by any of it. So, I let him in, sat him down at the kitchen table, and gave him the floor. He proceeded to inform me of the upcoming shortage of food and how the government was failing so miserably that even job rationing was going to be a thing of the past. He scared the living daylights out of me, frankly. I'm not even sure how or when it happened during his presentation, but it did, and I've been a mess ever since! I ended up buying something from him, but I'm not even sure what it is...a sense of security?...I just felt compelled to buy it at the time as it was the only cure for the mass of anxiety that had built up by the end of his sales pitch."*

*I was a bit taken back, as this was my good friend, who has been a real trooper throughout all of this...an inspiration to me, personally, even. He was typically very astute at seeing right through people. What could this salesman have been peddling? Odd.*

*What really struck me at the time was that it was the third time I'd caught wind of this salesman's success in the neighborhood. I wondered why he hadn't stepped up to my stoop yet. I wondered what had been keeping him away from my home. What was this guy selling, anyways? Whatever it was, his sales strategy was certainly working because he'd gotten people to purchase it while wallowing in destitution.*

*Knock-knock.*

*Finally.*

*I opened the door to be greeted by a genuinely attractive man. I mean this is the type of man you want to listen to...his face was that inviting. His presence was real, his confidence undeniable, and his eagerness apparent, but not overstated. I "liked" him immediately, even knowing what I knew about his dealings with my neighbors. This guy was dangerous.*



*After a little small talk through my dilapidated screen door, I invited him in. I shook his hand and offered him a seat at the kitchen table. "This ought to be interesting," I thought. Everything about this man was engaging. He wasted no time establishing trust, either, spinning a believable yarn of compliments, empathy, and kindness. He was relatable.*

*He had a dozen anecdotes at the ready, too, involving my neighbors. "If your trusted neighbors bought what I'm selling, then why wouldn't you?" was what his eyes were conveying as he carried on, metering out smiles and concern for good measure.*

*He spent whatever time was necessary engendering my trust. By then, it seemed I'd buy just about anything from him - yes, he was that good. He didn't know it for sure, but I suppose he'd learned to suspect that even though I was "broke," I probably had a little cookie jar tucked away somewhere that had emergency cash in it. After all, my neighbors had done a fine job at revealing such secrets.*

*Can you believe it?...my cookie jar is now empty. I contemplated this as I watched this salesman's confident gait take him down the street and into neighborhood lore.*

*I, like my coffee-drinking buddy, can't even tell you what it is that I bought into...I mean, there's a piece of paper with both our signatures on it to prove I paid for something. What I do know is that I felt more compelled to give up what little life savings I had than to endure one more moment of the FEAR that I felt that day.*

*I'm not adept enough at analyzing social interactions to fully understand how this man completed such an unlikely task. I'm not equipped, I guess. I was obviously grossly outmatched. In retrospect, it seems obvious. But, boy oh boy, I'll tell you what - at the time, there seemed no other option. I mean, how else was I going to make the anxiety go away...the overwhelming fear... and where in the world did it even come from??? My problems, though I*

*wasn't aware of them prior to this man showing up, seemed obvious... ominous, even. And HE was the only person with the solution. Sold.*

*I sit here now, scratching my head. I invite you to ponder with me, my friend...was it his product or was it HIM that I bought???*

*I write to you because you are only a few neighborhoods away. It's just a matter of time before you hear that knock on the door. I want you to be prepared. I want you to resist him. You'll be fine when he shows up for as long as you don't let him induce that ungodly fear in you. You see, that's his strategy. He's so good at it, that you won't even blame him for it...you'll blame others, yourself, even, before you suspect him in that moment.*

*But he's lying...somehow I know it...reminds me of a serpent...*

*...and he's slithered away with everything I had to my name...*

*I've got to send this now...didn't realize how late in the day it was, shoot - I can see the mailman coming down the street. I at least want to get this warning to you as soon as possible...will write more later.*

*Sincerely,*

*-Jeb*

"Wow! That was interesting, huh, little buddy?" His mom's thoughts were spilling over verbally. "I believe this was a letter to your great grandpa John, grandpa James' daddy. Grandpa must've kept it for a reason."

Little James was thinking about a lesson he had learned recently at church and said, "It sure was, mom...you know, the salesman reminds me of Satan."

"You are wise beyond your years, my son," she grinned. "Do you think you would've bought from the salesman?"

"No way, mom, not me!"

"...but not too wise just yet," she concluded. "I love you."

**NOTE: the above is obviously a fictional story...stay tuned for Part 2 :)**

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made.*

— **Genesis 3:1a**

*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'.*

— **Genesis 3:13**

**Satan is the greatest salesman of all time. He often uses fear, that which exists outside of the sphere of God's love, to "make a sale." We see this strategy in politics, legalistic churches, even in our own relationships.**

**Fear is a very powerful tool for manipulation. Beware - the only healthy fear is the fear of God.**

*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear.*

— **1 John 4:18a**

## The Greatest Salesman – Part 2

Little James, III couldn't wait to show the letter to his dad when he got home.

"Hey, son, how'd cleaning out grandpa's old farmhouse go today with your mom?" his dad called from the foyer, craning his neck a bit around the corner towards the living room. "Did you sneeze a lot from all the dust?... haha!" he chuckled, feeling that tension he often felt while out in the world dissipate in favor of the calm of his own home, the one with the sign above the door that reads:

*But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*

— Joshua 24:15

James, II was a good man, but certainly not a perfect one. Who is? His heart was set on the virtues of his Christian faith, and he was a good leader over his family. These were traits handed down from his father, and were since being handed down to his son. Such a lineage is sadly becoming increasingly rare.

Without even shutting off the TV like he is supposed to, little James, III came tearing around the corner, having to catch himself a bit as his socks began slipping on the hardwood floor. His dad could see a piece of paper dangling at the end of the arm that was currently serving as a counterbalance...for a moment, it looked as if his son was riding an imaginary bull.

"Dad, look at what mom & I found at grandpa's house!" He handed his father the letter.

James, II sat down at the kitchen table, breaking his normal routine of hanging his coat in the hall closet first. His son could see a bit of fascination

and even a little something else that he couldn't quite place on his father's face. 'What an odd expression,' little James thought.

"That was awesome!" he said when he finished reading the letter. "My dad was wise to keep this letter...do you know why, son?"

"Ummm...I think so, but I'm just a little confused, dad, about what the salesman was even selling...this Jeb guy never really said." Little James wanted to have an answer for his dad, but he couldn't muster one up in honesty.

His father, understanding this, realized he had upon him an opportunity to fulfill the wishes of his deceased father. He already knew why his own dad would've kept such a letter. It was real, something tangible, something practical to set some of the Word of God against. It was the screwdriver to open a can of wisdom. He and his own father had shared a certain rapport that way...a unity in their faith. His father had kept that letter as an instrument that might transcend generations. It held a very important lesson. And James, II wasn't about to let this moment pass by without teaching his own son.

"Go get us a couple of cookies and I'll tell you a story about my own life, son," he said as he leaned back in his chair, formulating his own thoughts.

Little James arrived quickly with the goods from the pantry, with eagerness still painted on his face.

"Son, do you know what daddy does for a living?"

"Yes, dad, you work on computers...for one of the greatest companies in the world!" He smiled.

"I sell computer software. I sell it to very large companies so that they can compete with one another and stay in business. It's very important that

these big companies install this software, otherwise they may find themselves out of business."

"I understand, dad," little James hadn't even taken a bite out of his cookie yet...he so adored his father.

"Here's the thing, son, and I don't want you to think any less of your pops, here. I also sell security software that is designed to keep computers from being infected by things like worms, viruses, malware, phishing attacks, trojan horses, spyware, spam, etc. Do you know what I'm talking about?" His father already knew the answer, of course.

Little James' face sagged a bit because he really wanted to show his dad that he knew his stuff, "no."

"Don't feel bad, son, neither do the people I'm selling the security software to! All they know is that there is a real danger to their company. But if you were to ask them to describe what it was exactly, they couldn't really tell you. They'd only tell you that they feel that they need a solution." He paused to let little James' young mind catch up. "Oh, and by the way, our best selling software is our security software."

"You see, they are afraid. And I'm not going to lie to you, son. My company sells the things that take that fear away for them. We remind them of the danger and then we offer them a solution. Easy, right?"

"But, dad, they don't even really know what the danger is...only that it exists???"

"Yes...sounds a little like Jeb in your great grandpa's letter, huh?"

"I'm confused," little James had a quizzical look now.

"Don't be. You see, son, nothing has really changed. FEAR sells just about

everything in this world - it always has. People don't like being afraid. They fear losing their job, their business, their loved ones, their reputation, their social status, respect, adoration, physical appearance, intellectual superiority, you name it! In general, people are afraid of just about everything.

"And I'm going to let you in on a little secret. You ready?..." His son nodded, gripped. "The older people get, the more afraid they are in general." He said this and watched for his son's jaw to drop. It did.

"People spend their whole lives investing in things that don't matter. Most people don't have what you and I have, which is a relationship with Jesus Christ...and I am including Christians, even. Most people are convinced that the greatest things in life, love, happiness, and peace are somehow tied to the list of things I just mentioned. And because they believe this, they are in bondage to the fear of losing ground or even not gaining enough in each of these areas of their lives." He paused again to assess his son's understanding.

OK.

"Son, adults who live without a relationship with Christ are easy prey... sitting ducks, even. They live in fear. So you can imagine how easy it is to control someone like that if you have the solution to their fears." He grinned as he watched the lightbulb go off, but only on the notion that his son was learning - the reality of what he was explaining to his son was actually painful to him.

Little James finally responds, "So fear sells solutions...and it doesn't even matter if people understand WHAT they are afraid of...they just want the fear to go away, so they listen to anyone that they think they can trust who says they have a solution...is that correct, dad?" The son's face was resolute, though more aged...heavy, even.

"Yes. And this isn't a new concept, either. Fear has been a salesman's greatest tool from the dawn of time. And guess who the greatest salesman to ever exist is?" Now to really shore up this lesson, he waits for the right answer...he wants his son to see it...to embrace the painful truth that comes with this godly perspective.

"Satan...it's Satan, isn't it?"

"Yes, son - you are correct. He convinced the first two humans in the Garden of Eden that they ought to be afraid of not knowing the things of God. And then he turned around and sold them a *solution*, the forbidden fruit - he said, 'eat and your eyes will be opened!' **Satan is surely the master of fear, and he's used it ever since. If we look, we can see traces of fear-selling everywhere.** For example, the next time you see a TV commercial, see if you can identify the fear they are using to sell their product - it's there, trust me.

"Son, this is also why we ought never try to *sell* the Gospel. We shouldn't try to evangelize people by saying, 'if you don't believe, you're going to hell!' That's the wrong strategy. We ought to say, 'admit that you need a savior and accept the free gift of salvation in Christ Jesus.' Do you see the difference?"

"I do, I do!" His son's eyes began lighting up and some of the color in his skin was beginning to return as if to indicate that all hope isn't lost. It surely is not.

**"Satan may be the greatest salesman of all time, but without the institution of fear, he is powerless."**

"Wow, dad, that IS the same as what we read in the letter, huh? I mean, that salesman scared those people and got them to like him at the same time. So when he offered them the solution, they bought it from him. Wow. Fear is pretty powerful, huh, dad?" Little James was lost in a swirl of expanding



connections by this point. He was also contemplating how fear and false trust are used jointly to form a single weapon.

**"There's one thing that will always be more powerful than fear, son. Love. That's our source of hope."** His eyes trained on the bright face of his only son, whom he loved beyond words.

His son's countenance flushed when he realized the value of this kind of love between father and son, and he relished it, felt like exploding from the inside-out, was overwhelmed and grateful. And he understood all that his father was teaching him.

"Well, I love you, dad...and I never seem to fear anything in your presence." His son felt small again...and it felt right.

"I'm glad, son, because I love you and want nothing more than for you to know my love for you. Now just think about our Father in Heaven, Who sent His Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ as the ultimate expression of His love for us. Should we live in fear, son, knowing how much He loves us? Should we let others control us or try to get us to buy things because we are afraid?"

Little James shook his head...and he finally took a bite of his cookie.

**NOTE: that concludes this short, fictional story. As the story alludes to, Satan's been at this since the dawn of mankind.**

Jesus said, "*[Satan] was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is not truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar, and the father of lies*" (**John 8:44**).

Satan is always "selling" something to someone, somewhere. Such is the "*abundance of his trade*" as seen in the Bible's description of him and the cause of his fall:

*You had the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering: the ruby, the topaz and the diamond; the beryl, the onyx and the jasper; the lapis lazuli, the turquoise and the emerald; and the gold, the workmanship of your settings and sockets, was in you. On that day that you were created they were prepared.*

*You were the anointed cherub who covers, and I placed you there. You were on the holy mountain of God; you walked in the midst of the stones of fire. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created until unrighteousness was found in you.*

***By the abundance of your trade** you were internally filled with violence, and you sinned; therefore I have cast you as profane from the mountain of God. And I have destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor. I cast you to the ground; I put you before kings, that they may see you.*

*By the multitude of your iniquities, in the **unrighteousness of your trade** you profaned your sanctuaries. Therefore I have brought fire from the midst of you; it has consumed you, and I have turned you to ashes on the earth in the eyes of all who see you.*

— Ezekiel 28:12-18

**Our greatest weapon against fear is our love for God. We ought always remember His love for us, highlighted by His Son's work on the Cross.**

*Jesus said, "I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has the authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him" (Luke 12:4-5)!*

## **If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It!**

My father-in-law, when he was still alive, was an excellent mechanic. He had that innate aptitude for mechanical things that some are just gifted with. Because of that, most people in his periphery would consult with him when it came to their automobiles. Before we were married, my wife's car blew an engine. I had the privilege of changing out her engine under the direction of her dad (I felt a little like a monkey fetching wrenches at times, but I was enthralled in the process, so I was thrilled to be included).

On a separate occasion I remember asking him about his thoughts on changing out spark plugs. My first car was a 1973 Oldsmobile Delta 88 with a 350-Rocket engine. It was one of those old-school engines that you could still work on yourself if you were so inclined to learn. It was my foray into learning how to work on cars...partly out of necessity, given the fact that we were poor growing up. That kind of thinking has persisted to this day...the do-it-yourself attitude. I learned early on that performing maintenance is just as important, if not more so, than even knowing how to fix something, once broken.

OK, fast-forward to the spark plugs scene. I asked my father-in-law, "How often should I change my spark plugs?" He said, "I never change them unless there's evidence of a problem." Quizzically, I responded, "But I've always thought that we ought to change them after a certain amount of miles." The man who had rebuilt motors, the "hot-rod greaser" whose old pictures I'd seen and stories I'd heard, responded, "Not me...if it ain't broke, don't fix it, I say!" Other than absolutely necessary maintenance issues, like oil/fluid changes, I've since clung to that advice...and it's proven sound.

**If it ain't broke, don't fix it...hmmm. I wonder if Satan, being a genius, says that to his demons.**

***“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Jesus was telling His disciples to think like their enemy (“be shrewd as serpents”) so as to identify his schemes, lest they become victims. Let's allow history to teach us more on this, shall we?***

*Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die’.*

— **Genesis 2:15-17**

Most of you are fully aware of how this story ends, but this time, when you read of it, pay special attention to HOW Satan (the serpent of old) was able to tempt Eve to sin. Keep a keen eye on his method...it's arguably his most effective tactic. He's been using it ever since!

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Indeed, has God said, “You shall not eat from any tree of the garden”’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, “You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.”’ The serpent said to the woman, ‘You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’*

*When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin*

*coverings.*

— Genesis 3:1-7

**What we see here is the original pattern of temptation. We may rightly call it out as “human rationalism”. It was Satan’s appeal to Eve’s fleshly mode of thinking (some today call this “critical thinking”) that tripped her up. God’s Word stated plainly that if she ate from that one tree, she’d die two deaths (physical and spiritual). Does that make "natural sense" to a human being? Not really...but we're talking about supernatural things here...we must always remember that.**

All was well until the serpent infected her mind with the seed of human rationale. In essence, the serpent said, “C’mon, look at it...it’s a FRUIT tree...and fruit is good to eat, right? You know it from experience. You eat from all these other trees and you don’t die, do you? Fruit is good! Eat!” Eve agreed, obviously, breaking God’s command as a result of applying Satan’s suggested human rationale. And she died, just like God said she would...and it doesn't matter what our human rationale has to say about the "punishment not fitting the crime" or whatever.

**The lesson for us is simple. Regardless of whether or not God’s Word (e.g.: His commands, statements, revelations, etc.) makes human sense to us or not, we should NEVER disregard it. I’d argue that human rationale is at the root of many sins throughout human history. Heck, it’s why most unbelievers will be going to Hell. They ask questions in the face of divine revelation like, “How could one being be responsible for creating the Universe and all that is in it?” Human rationale says it’s impossible, but with God, anything is possible.**

*And looking at them Jesus said to them, ‘With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’.*

— Matthew 19:26

**So the next time you're being tempted, remember this lesson...the lesson of old. Remember that Satan's been tripping people up for millennia by simply getting them to ponder what I like to call "bad questions" ... questions that are designed to challenge God's veracity, to dispute His Word as it is plainly revealed in scripture.**

Unfortunately, it seems most people haven't learned of Satan's little 'ace in the hole' yet because most aren't properly trained. *"And He gave...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"* (Ephesians 4:11-12). But now you've seen it. Thanks be to God!

**Satan proved to himself from the start that human rationalism makes mankind easy prey. I haven't read C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* in a while, but I'm sure Mr. Lewis was wise enough to call the demons out this same way. I can just imagine the restless ones querying their master, Satan, "Should we try something different to trip these creatures up?" ... and Satan, the genius, saying simply, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!"**

*Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.*

— Ephesians 6:11

## **I'm So Sorry...**

“Tell your sister you’re sorry...now!” His mother was losing her patience with five year old Sammy, the one who just assaulted his four year old sister with a broomstick he had discovered in the hallway closet. “NOW, I said!” If his mom were a tea kettle, she’d be whistling.

Sammy pivoted on his heel, back stiffened, and faced his sister, Tabby, whose tears had dried but left still noticeable stains underneath her puffy eyelids and down her adorable little flushed cheeks. Crossing his arms he muttered, “I’m soooooo sorry...but don’t try to take my magical sword next time...there...sorry!” Neither the little girl before him nor the woman behind him was convinced...maybe it was because he slung his apology at her like an accusation. It took three more iterations of prodding from his mom to arrive at a semi-heartfelt “I’m sorry, Tabby.” Still not a complete victory, but his mom resigned with a silent thought to herself...“baby steps...he’s just a little boy...God, I pray he learns selfless sorrow someday soon.”

Sammy was a “good” kid, a typical one. Most of us with siblings can relate to such an incident as the one above. We’d also agree that our hearts and our words were often unlinked. Even after ‘satisfying’ the authorities, we’d often stew about it. But the question is, what exactly were we upset about? Hurting someone else or getting caught? If we’re honest, with the exception of extreme damage, it was the latter. Has anything changed as we’ve grown up? I hope so, but it’s not a foregone conclusion, is it?

**There’s a distinction between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. The prior leads to repentance, the latter unsanctified remorse.**

**There has to be an honest, humble confession before God can heal us from the sting of death that comes with the presence of sin in our lives. A regurgitated prayer or “I’m sorry...there, I said it!” won’t cut it with Him.**

**He's our omniscient Father and He cannot be placated with fleshly remorse.**

**God, like Sammy's mom, is a parent that won't allow His children off the hook without impressing His will upon them. He accomplishes this through His Spirit's convicting ministry. He uses the Word to substantiate said conviction.**

Paul wrote to the Corinthians several times over the course of his ministry. One letter dubbed the "severe letter" is presumed lost and not included in the Holy Bible; rather, it is alluded to by Paul. We don't know the contents of that letter, but we do know Paul's sentiments regarding it, and that he understood the necessity of it. As a matter of fact, God used his integrity in order to prod the church, to remind them of the aforementioned distinction between godly and worldly sorrows.

*For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it — for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while — I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.*

**— 2 Corinthians 7:8-11**

**Godly sorrow is produced by the Holy Spirit in a person. It is first produced in a person at salvation such that it leads them to repentance. Furthermore, since true repentance is a promised gift to believers, one of the hallmarks of being saved is a consistent, godly sorrow over sin...a**



**sorrow born of confession (agreeing with God that something is a wrong). The apostle John explains this in his first epistle.**

*If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.*

— 1 John 1:6-10

**On the flip side, ungodly sorrow is produced by the flesh in a person. It is sometimes produced at the hearing of the Gospel such that a person is never led to true repentance. Furthermore, since true repentance isn't promised to unbelievers, they are relegated to bearing the only fruit a bad tree can produce in light of sin: guilt, shame, despair, depression, self-pity, hopelessness, etc. Wounded pride and unfulfilled lust are the sources of ungodly sorrow. This is what Paul means when he says, "*the sorrow of the world produces death*" (2 Corinthians 7:10). The regret can be overwhelming, sometimes even leading to suicide, as was the case with Judas after he betrayed Jesus.**

*Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to that yourself!" And he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself.*

— Matthew 27:3-5

It seems we all go through stages in life. We grow up, from the likeness of

little Sammy to the likeness of Christ (it's God's will to sanctify us this way). However, our flesh guarantees the presence of sin in our lives. As believers, we may not be subordinate to it anymore, but we most certainly can be tempted by it. *"Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death"* (**James 1:15**). If we fail, we feel the breath of death on the napes of our necks, whispering in our ears, reminding us of all that we've been delivered from. *"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift"* (**2 Corinthians 9:15**)!

**Let us show our gratitude to our Father in Heaven by accepting the Spirit's conviction when we sin. Let us always be grateful in light of His mercy upon us. When we pray to Him, may our hearts be humble in our confession, may our sorrow be found to be true, and may we embrace His promise, "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).**

Consider the humble words of King David:

*Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;  
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my  
transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity  
And cleanse me from my sin.  
For I know my transgressions,  
And my sin is ever before me.  
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.  
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
And in sin my mother conceived me.  
Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being,  
And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.*

*Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
Make me to hear joy and gladness,  
Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.  
Hide Your face from my sins  
And blot out all my iniquities.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from Your presence  
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation  
And sustain me with a willing spirit.  
Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,  
And sinners will be converted to You.  
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation;  
Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.  
O Lord, open my lips,  
That my mouth may declare Your praise.  
For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;  
You are not pleased with burnt offering.  
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.*

— Psalms 51:1-17

**When we say, “I’m sorry”, let us mean it...for the sake of our own sanctification.**

## **The Interesting Thing About 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**

I spent 4 years earning an undergraduate degree in computer engineering from Case Western Reserve University...a place where many leaders have arisen, be they technologists, businessmen or businesswomen, politicians, or what have you. I had the opportunity to be around some pretty intelligent individuals. That experience continued for 2 decades in the high tech industry.

### **All have faith in something.**

Unfortunately, it appears to me that Satan has the lion's share of faith pointing towards his doctrines. You see, scientists and engineers are often too smart for their own good. Sure, they have faith, only it seems most often in things explainable through science alone. Most stop there, "satisfied" with an untethered faith.

When it becomes frightened, science manufactures words such as "entropy" (the universe is spiraling towards chaos) in order to control the uncontrollable. However, there's nothing to fear since the Lord has everything under control. Entropy is His will, perfectly justifiable and planned, though man fears it.

### **What seems like chaos to man is order to the Lord.**

*And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and **upholds all things by the word of His power.***

— Hebrews 1:3a

**Scientists depend on science to proceed. However, science depends on the Lord. The prior is a function of the latter. Therefore, it's silly for any scientist to lack faith in God. Their own methods demand that they acknowledge His presence, yet they arrogantly deny Him.**

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who [willingly and persistently] **suppress the truth** in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*

*For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations [inventive imaginations], and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools.*

— Romans 1:18-22

Without His faithfulness to the fundamental doctrines of science, engineers like myself would never be able to build anything with any confidence. So I, for one, am grateful that the Lord provides us with tools and materials that we can depend upon. But how silly it is to propose we can build things so great so as to rise above the Creator...dare I say disprove His existence - yikes!

**Some have faith in self. The Lord created man.**

**Some have faith in science. The Lord created and upholds the laws of the universe.**

**Some have faith in all the above AND in God. Amen.**

*For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (He is the God who formed the earth and made it, He established it and did not create it a waste place, but formed it to be inhabited), "I am the LORD, and there is none else.*

— **Isaiah 45:18**

So, the interesting thing about faith is that regardless of where an individual's faith begins or ends, ALL matters of faith are decided by the Lord, our Creator. Why? - whether material or immaterial, all things were created by God. Even the fallen cherub, Satan, whose greatest desire is independence from God, was created by Him. Therefore, those who worship his doctrines are eternally inferior.

**All faith is inferior to the one true faith in the Creator.**

Oddly, those who denounce God's existence do so on the basis of evidence that God has created. To be silly for a moment, how would those same people "prove" that God doesn't exist if He decided to remove all that He's created? On what grounds would their theories expand upon? If the laws of science were suddenly loosed, how would they even measure and compile data?

**It's a circular argument to proclaim God doesn't exist. Success in such an endeavor would require conclusions based on things minus His creation, which is impossible.**

The really savvy naysayers propose things like the "big bang theory". I ask simply, well where did the matter come from and where was it suspended before it went, "bang! "? Their own science fails miserably, taking their faith down the tubes with it.

I suppose that's irritating to folks like Stephen Hawking, but that's too bad.

God created fools like that to prove to the rest of us that human IQ at its greatest heights is still infinitely inferior and dependent on God. I'll gladly play the "fool" to Hawking's genius:

*But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong.*

— **1 Corinthians 1:27**

Take away the Lord's creation and what is left? Nothing.

*Creatio ex nihilo* - is Latin for "creation out of nothing". Only God can do such a thing. To accept any other argument is to accept something untethered. Even a "Big Bang" requires a material beginning that nobody has ever been able to explain.

Good luck with that kind of faith.

## Out of the Wicked Comes Forth Wickedness

*As the proverb of the ancients says, 'Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness'; but my hand shall not be against you.*

— 1 Samuel 24:13

Before David was king of Israel, his own king, Saul, hunted him in an effort to kill him. David was completely innocent with nothing but abiding respect for his king. Yet Saul, out of jealousy and paranoia, sought David's death. This is evil manifest at the highest level of authority within man. It's not unique, but it surely is ugly.

Can you imagine David's temptation to take revenge after Saul threw a spear at him? If you were David, being the exceptionally faithful servant to Saul, would you seek to preempt him by killing him first? If presented with a pristine opportunity, would you succumb to the temptation?

**David had the opportunity on multiple occasions to kill Saul and yet he chose not to return evil for evil. Rather, in a way that confounded Saul, he begged his king to repent from his ways. David revealed his own mercy towards Saul from a position of goodness.**

David refused to act on the temptation to return evil for evil. David was a man after the Lord's own heart, remember (**Acts 13:22**). He preferred to abide in grace, love, and mercy rather than subject himself to the wickedness of evil.

**Trading evil for evil is like a snare. One event leads to another and so on. It's often never a single thought or act. Evil is "sticky".**

We may never have someone pursuing our head, but we all experience evil from time to time. I'd argue that since evil persists in all aspects of the world, we are inundated by the pressure of it and the endless temptations



born of it. In a sense, we have the world seeking our "heads"...or at least trying to lead us back into the captivity of death. We are constantly tempted, for the world is relentless in its pursuit.

If that's the scene played out countless times, even today, the question then becomes, "How do we respond to evil? Should we stand toe-to-toe with it or is there a better way?"

The answer is simple:

*Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. 'But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

— Romans 12:17-20

The worst thing we can ever do in this life is jump ship from a position of goodness and well-intentions (aka godliness) to join the fray in the evil camp. Even if it appears that we have found success in the latter, there is NO success for ANYONE who partakes in evil, even the so-called victors.

**Victory in the arena of evil is never really a victory at all. It is a trap. To the victor goes the spoils, right? But what if the spoils are evil, too? What have you won?**

**Therefore, the key to deliverance from evil and those pursuing your "death" by means of it is to simply reject the temptation to tangle with it on its terms. If you fight evil on its turf you will always lose because you have no power in that arena. However, if you fight evil with good (sound Biblical wisdom), you will always win because the Word is omnipotent!**

So rather than returning evil for evil, stop, take a breath, and proceed with goodness.

*We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.*

— 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15

You might be saying to yourself, "Pastor Ed, that sounds super-duper on paper, but my life is so much harder than that! You don't understand." Really? That's your response to the WORD? Remember, if the Lord says all things are possible through Him, then it is true! If He promises that goodness will always be victorious over evil, then it is fact. Learn to exercise a little patience while evil goes about tempting you and see what He can do in your life.

Just because the world raises the fists of those victors in the arena of evil does not mean that their victory has any value to you. Don't let your competitive juices fly, either, for Satan is depending on it!

One of my favorite secular proverbs is: *"He that fights with a dunghill, whether conqueror or conquered, is sure to be defiled."*

As is the case with any secular proverb worth its salt, this one has its foundation in scripture: *"When a wise man has a controversy with a foolish man, the foolish man either rages or laughs, and there is no rest"* (Proverbs 29:9).

**In other words, success or failure in the sphere of evil is always failure by God's standards. So why waste your time contending in that arena? Reject the temptation to lower your standards, take the high road, seek goodness always, and enjoy your freedom.**

*To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. 'The one who desires life, to love and see good days, must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit. He must turn away from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil'.*

— 1 Peter 3:8-12

**If you stand knee high in the sewage of evil, no matter how well you fare in battle, you will be a filthy mess in the end. If you demand the battle be fought on higher ground, with Christ, the living Word as your strength, there is no enemy that can overcome you!**

**Learn to take the high road...always. Let wickedness lie in its own filth and misery.**

## Poetic Justice

Esther was a beautiful young Jewish girl who was chosen by Ahasuerus, a Persian king, to succeed his former queen, Vashti. Mordecai, her cousin had adopted the orphaned Esther and maneuvered her into this position of power so that she might affect the Jewish plight through the king. He also foiled a plot to murder the king, unbeknownst to the king, himself.

Mordecai had a riff with Haman, a high standing nobleman in the kingdom of Ahasuerus who plotted to destroy the Jews exiled in Babylon. King Ahasuerus was influenced by Haman, *"Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, 'There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of all other people and they do not observe the king's laws, so it is not in the king's interest to let them remain. If it is pleasing to the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who carry on the king's business, to put into the king's treasuries'"* (Ester 3:8-9).

As is most often the case with manipulating situations, fear is introduced into the equation. Ever notice how whenever someone is trying to manipulate you, they often employ fear tactics? Fear is a very powerful thing, especially when it hatches in the soul of someone in a position of power.

Except for the healthy fear of God, fear ought never be the impetus for our decision-making. Ungodly fear is always laced with evil, even when it is unidentifiable to the possessor of it.

When Haman realizes that Queen Esther garnered favor from the king for Mordecai, he even goes so far as to construct a gallows so that Mordecai could be hanged on it...at the seedy advice of his wife, nonetheless.

Evil tends to run in packs.

*'Yet all of this does not satisfy me every time I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.' Then Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, 'Have a gallows fifty cubits high made and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it; then go joyfully with the king to the banquet.' And the advice pleased Haman, so he had the gallows made.*

— **Esther 5:13-14**

Our enemies will often go through great preparation to destroy us. However, we have the Lord God on our side, Whom no man can overcome. *"If God is for us, who is against us" (Rom 8:31b)?*

As this story progressed, King Ahasuerus discovers that Mordecai had saved his life. Without revealing Mordecai's name, he asks Haman what he thinks is befitting such a man. *"Then Haman said to the king, 'For the man whom the king desires to honor, let them bring a royal robe which the king has worn, and the horse on which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown has been placed; and let the robe and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble princes and let them array the man whom the king desires to honor and lead him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him, thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor'" (Esther 6:7-9).*

Imagine how very different Haman's response would've been had he known it was Mordecai the king was asking about!

Eventually the web that evil weaves snares the weaver!

God's chosen instrument, Esther, who really was only fairly interested in preserving her people, held Haman's fate in her hand.

*Esther said, 'A foe and an enemy is this wicked Haman!' Then Haman became terrified before the king and queen.*

— **Esther 7:6**

Now here's where we see a bit of poetic justice. The very gallows that Haman had constructed to hang Mordecai were used to hang him! Haman had, in fact, built the instrument of his own destruction. Such is often the case with evil individuals. They scheme, they plot, they recruit others into their evil plans. However, righteousness always prevails.

*Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs who were before the king said, 'Behold indeed, the gallows standing at Haman's house fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai who spoke good on behalf of the king!' And the king said, 'Hang him on it.' So they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai, and the king's anger subsided.*

— **Esther 7:9-10**

Evil has a certain fate - death. The lies and deceit borne of evil are the snare of the liars and deceivers.

*Let death come deceitfully upon them; Let them go down alive to Sheol, For evil is in their dwelling, in their midst. As for me, I shall call upon God, And the LORD will save me.*

— **Psalms 55:15-16**

Whether it's constructing an evil plot or even something more physical, like Haman's gallows, eventually, that old secular proverb rears its head - what goes around comes around! Unfortunately for the evil, they are too blind to see that every nail they hammer is in their own coffin. Instead of setting up their target for destruction, they are in fact, digging their own grave.

*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.*

Diary of a Journeyman

— Galatians 6:7-8

## Putting Shame In Its Place

There is a place for shame, but it is not on the shelf where the world has placed it.

Shame is one of those feelings that the world has grossly abused. It has become something of a branding for those who make mistakes. It has given others a license to look down upon sinners, of which we all are, btw.

**The shame that most people struggle with is something unholy altogether.**

**The world assigns shame based on its own standards. It has devised an entirely separate system of judgment outside of the holy Word. It imposes its judgment and subsequent rulings upon anyone willing to listen.**

**The worst thing any believer can do is allow the world to shame them!**

Consider that the world told Jesus and His disciples that they ought to be ashamed of themselves:

*Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our 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

**As the "author and perfecter of our faith", Jesus set the true standard. His standards were holy and righteous. However, since they stood opposed to the controlling, religious minds of His day, He was subjected to the imposition of worldly shame. He did what we all should do - He despised it. He cast it off as something profane. He transcended it because it wasn't from His Father in Heaven.**



Man imposes shame on others in order to control them. Our shame, if any, ought to be reserved for God. Our shame, if any, ought to motivate us to orient to God's standards, not man's.

**Biblical shame has a real function in sanctification, worldly shame has a function in bondage.**

Ultimately, the believer who trusts in Christ need not be ashamed in anything.

*I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.*

— **Philippians 1:20 - NIV**

*As the scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in Him [Christ] will never be put to shame.'*

— **Romans 10:11 - NIV**

**What exists today are two mutually exclusive doctrines of shame; one is godly, the other is worldly. The prior is motivation for repentance towards God, the latter is motivation for repentance towards man. The prior leads to freedom, the latter to bondage.**

If we are to absorb shame in any way, it is to be in our representation of Christ (or lack of).

*"Because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace" (Hebrews 6:6b - NIV). To proclaim Christianity and then disgrace His good name is truly shameful...yet the world could care less about such things.*

## Putting Shame In Its Place

The world suggests that you represent IT before others, adhering to ITS standards. To do so as a believer is to renounce Christ and therefore blow the opportunity to reveal His heart to the world as a vessel of mercy. We are Christ's ambassadors after all.

*Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.*

— **2 Corinthians 4:2 - NIV**

**So, we believers essentially have been given a choice in the matter...and it's a simple one. Bear the shame before the world by representing Christ or bear the shame before God by representing the world. Oh, and we can't choose "neither" as our answer.**

*What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!*

— **Romans 6:21**

No matter how "real" your so-called shame may seem before the world, it isn't - it is but a fleeting abrasion from a malcontent world that is perishing. In the end, the world will be set straight. In the meantime, we believers are called to keep a clear conscience about our convictions.

*Keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*

— **1 Peter 3:16**

Oddly enough, the world that is ever-hoping to oppress God's children with its own ideas about shame, as it puffs its chest out and makes endless bold statements about its own virtue, is in all reality a shame unto itself - so

says the Word of God!

*Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.*

— **Philippians 3:19**

**Never accept what the world has to say about your shame. If you have any, it is an issue between you and the Lord. Believers are not here on earth to curry the favor of the world in hopes they avoid its judgment. If a believer is going to be ashamed of anything, it is abiding in the world's judgments.**

*I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire [Truth], so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.*

— **Revelation 3:18**

If you sin before the world (and you will), confess it before God and press on. If your sin was against another, then seek forgiveness and press on. The real shame is in not doing these things. The real shame would be in forgetting Jesus Christ's work on the Cross!

**There is no shame in disappointing the world, for it is truly sick with ill intentions against Christ and His disciples.**

Learn to expect the shame the world will undoubtedly cast at you. Despise it. Your freedom relies on it.

## **Test the Spirits**

Making difficult decisions isn't always easy. Sometimes it is downright agonizing - well, it used to be, anyways, at least for me, before I found Truth, before I started listening to the Spirit.

I've taught my congregation many times that being Biblically trained disciples means they are "thought leaders". Leadership comes in a variety of form factors, not all of which consist of managing people. The most common form of leadership is thought leadership. Nowhere is this more greatly amplified than in the spiritual life.

**Thought leadership simply means the ability to make decisions and execute them with conviction.**

If either the decision-making or the execution phases of the process are lacking, to that degree the person's leadership abilities also suffer. These are nontrivial activities, which is why most individuals prefer not to lead, at least not in any weighty manner and certainly not when it comes to controversial issues.

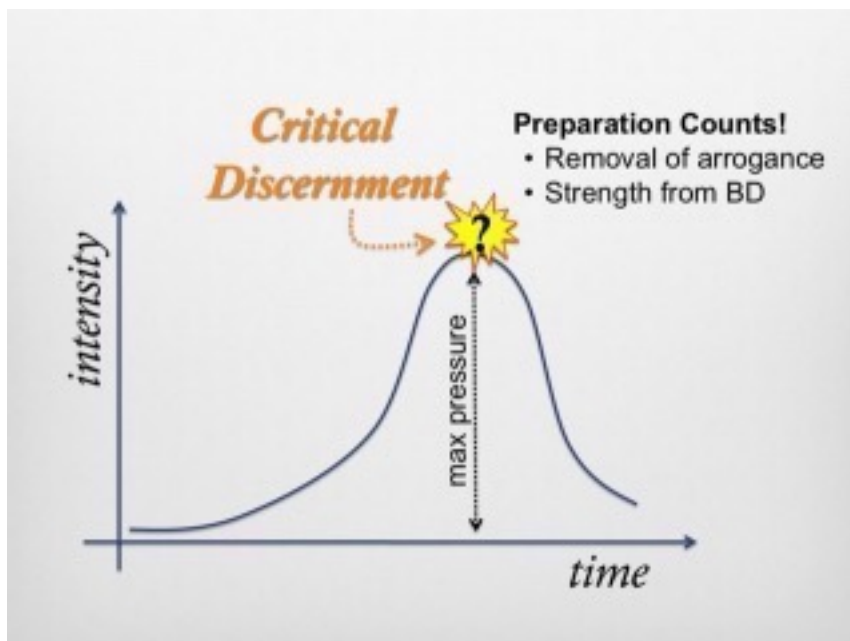
True leadership is a function of faith. Without faith, there's no conviction. Without conviction, there's no execution. Much of the substance of leadership is in the early stages of assessment and judgment. Once something becomes clear, if a person is convinced of it, execution becomes nothing more than putting one foot in front of the other, with confidence.

"Success is 90 percent preparation and 10 percent perspiration." So goes the old proverb. Note the emphasis on **preparation**. That is the key.

**Learning to trust your resources is also critical. The two we have available to us, as believers, are the Word and the Spirit. These are the primary influencers over the good conscience.**

I've had many folks ask me, "How do I know what the right thing to do is?" Most often, these inquiries are the result of being faced with a leadership decision. I've called this the "critical point of discernment in the soul" from my pulpit. It's that point in time when a decision **MUST** be made, where all efforts to stall any further have become impossible.

This is how pressure forms in the soul (BD = Bible Doctrine in the graphic):



**Pressure is something leaders must be acclimated to. Pressure can be a magnificent thing or it can be something horrific. Leaders embrace the prior and dispel the latter. In any case, for pressure to be truly useful, it must be handled with grace and love.**

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

— 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

Even though Paul's words are masculine in tone, the principle applies to

all. "*Act like men*," refers to our ability to assess and make sound decisions, especially under pressure. Not every decision carries the same weight in this world.

**The distinction of leadership is that it is wrought with difficult decisions. Leaders are willing to make the decisions that no one else wants to make. This is what sets them apart. As a balance statement, good leaders never make arbitrary decisions, either, meant solely to set themselves apart artificially for personal gain.**

The emphasis here is on the ability to make decisions, not necessarily whether they end up being good or bad, although good is the objective for believers, of course. Good leadership implies a solid track record of decision-making, but leadership by definition is not dependent on that, strictly speaking.

For example, King Saul, who at the time was trying to KILL the future king of Israel, David, consistently claimed to be doing things in the name of the Lord as he led others. "*Saul said, 'May you be blessed of the Lord, for you have had compassion on me'*" (1 Samuel 23:21). This was in response to King Saul asking servants of his to find out where David was hiding so that he could murder him. This was obviously NOT from the Lord, yet Saul continued to lead by his own conviction.

In Saul's case, the Bible clearly explains the cause of his poor leadership. "*Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord terrorized him*" (1 Samuel 16:14). Once Saul began listening to this evil spirit, he began to transition from an instrument of righteousness to one of unrighteousness. In his unrighteousness he tried to kill David, his ultimate successor, the man after the Lord's own heart (Acts 13:22).

**John addresses testing the spirits so that we might lead appropriately. We must assess our resources always.**

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*

— 1 John 4:1

The only way to "test a spirit" is to query the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit indwells every believer, giving us supernatural abilities when it comes to exercising our good conscience. The conscience is that faculty given by God to stir up conviction, knowing right from wrong. Therefore, to be a good leader, one must obey the Holy Spirit, one's heart must be filled with Him.

*For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.*

— 2 Corinthians 11:4

Leadership requires effort. Testing the spirits does also. The Bible never states that leading would be simple, only that it would be possible, even for us flawed creatures.

**Leadership is a privilege. The greatest leaders are servants of Christ. The Word and the Spirit testify of Him in us.**

Like the trendy little bracelets say, "WWJD?" - what would Jesus do? I suppose that's a fair question to ask, especially at that critical point of discernment in the soul, huh?

## Who Decides What Is Good and What Is 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

Consider for a moment that God's reality is infinitely wider than our own, that His perspective is infinitely greater than ours, and that His love is equally magnanimous.

These facts alone ought to shrink wee little mankind to jaw-dropping veneration. But they don't, do they?

Rather, these facts, when aggregated in the limited mind of man are most often mangled into nothing more than adaptations of what man WANTS to believe about God. Men are inventors, by nature...creators of realities. They are also effective salesmen, peddling concoctions, panaceas, and witches' brew. Independence from God demands such activities, you see.

Man says to one another, "he with the greatest theories shall be listened to!" And like the ghastly crowds back in the days of the Roman colosseum, the rest of humanity cheers on the loftiness of man's self-promotion.

**The race to 'he who is wise' is arguably the cause of the greatest bead of sweat to ever emerge on man's brow. For he who wins the race gets to proclaim the differences between right and wrong, good and evil.**

'Tis why governments exist, even...to administer to their people the doctrines of good and evil through theory, philosophy, and ultimately practice. Man elects other men to lead them...nay, to quiet the voice of eternal reasoning, to calm the storm of discontent that emerges whenever one's good conscience fights its way out of repression.



God gave man a conscience for a reason. Most sell out for what amounts to a few joy rides in the cosmos...on a roller coaster named "independence". Most revel in the sentiment of Esau, *"When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; and Esau said to Jacob, 'Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished.' First sell me your birthright." Esau said, 'Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?' And Jacob said, 'First swear to me'; so he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright"* (**Genesis 25:29-33**).

In that moment, Esau agreed that trading his birthright for a bowl of soup was fair and good, though our own hearts may stumble a bit at what seems to be a swindler getting one over on his own brother, something evil. How could Esau be so stupid? Funny you should ask...look in the mirror the next time you sell out an eternal thought for a worldly one. Patience is often the culprit, but that's another blog entry for another day :)...

*Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*

— **Colossians 3:2**

Ever since the fall in the Garden of Eden, man has eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which has poisoned his mind, enticing it towards independent thought, separate from God's. As inventors, man has effectively, with the prodding of Satan and the kingdom of darkness, sought life outside of God, which is really just another name for death.

For believers, God has given us of His life through His Son's death on the Cross, so that those who have accepted the free gift may enjoy it even this day, while alive on earth. Yet the average believer demands a role in defining their own reality, including good and evil. When God says "no," even though it is from a root of love, they distance themselves from Him,

## Who Decides What Is Good and What Is Evil?

manufacturing a reality that suits their desire for independent control.

**Independence from God is tantamount to self-mutilation. The scars may be invisible, but they are deep and wide and often injurious to others, also.**

*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 6:23**

So the question is simple - who gets to decide what is deemed good and evil?

The answer is most simple - only God.

The chasm that exists between options has been the cause of man's strife ever since the fall. Man has railed endlessly against God, but only when the things they deem "good" are threatened and/or when the things they deem "evil" endure. Fear. Man is expert at justifying what he WANTS to believe is true, even in the face of godly evidence that proves otherwise. The struggle itself is the cause of endless pain.

**Fear is the cruelest of rulers. It exists as the antithesis of love.**

*"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love" (1 John 4:18). Ever since the seed from the tree of knowledge of good and evil was planted, man has lived in fear, confused about true good and evil, off balance, leaning on his own understanding...so much lost in the Garden...so much gained through Christ! "So also it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living soul.' The last Adam became a life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45).*

The finite cannot contain the infinite. Only the infinite can contain the

finite. Likewise, man's limits cannot contain God's limitlessness.

And for the record, it's never been God's fault that awful things like murder, rape, abuse, or any other offense has ever existed. Man's original, and since perpetuated, desire for independence from true good (that is God's reality) has resulted in this mess of evil that plagues him. That's HIS fault, not God's!

**How dare man willingly separate himself from all that is good (God) and then blame God for his woes. THAT, my friends, is true evil.**

**In the absence of light is darkness. In the absence of good is evil. In the absence of love is fear (the basis of hate). These are the same concepts, just different modalities - for God is light, good, and love.**

Trust in Him. Live in freedom. Love Him. (**Proverbs 3:5; Galatians 5:1; 1 John 4:19**, respectively)

## The Flesh

Of the three qualifiable enemies believers must deal with (Satan, the world, the human flesh), the human flesh is the most persistent. Why? Because it abides in the unresurrected body. As Paul laments, "*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death*" (**Romans 7:24**)?

The flesh is utterly hateful, opposed to the fruit of the Spirit:

*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. 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.*

*Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 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. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.*

— Galatians 5:13-26

Satan would love nothing more than for believers to identify with the flesh; however, the Bible instructs believers to identify with the eternal parts of self, namely the *“new creature”*. *“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come”* (**2 Corinthians 5:17**).

## **Creature Double Feature**

As a kid growing up in the 1970's, I recall having three good TV channels in the VHF (very high frequency) range and two "scratchy" ones in the UHF (ultra high frequency) range. Later on I learned that the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) had allocated the prime channels in the VHF range and my favorite channel, channel 56, in the UHF range. The "scratchiness" in the UHF range was due to an inferior transmission property (I'll spare you the gory details :)).

In any case, my favorite channel growing up was channel 56 because on Saturday afternoons my brother and I would watch *Creature Double Feature* (*CDF*) in black and white. As the title implies, there were LOTS of fictional creatures AND unlike its predecessor, *Creature Feature*, *CDF* was DOUBLE the running time - woo hoo! :P The scratchy broadcast quality was part of the aura of watching the show. I suppose watching a pristine broadcast now would diminish its authenticity...at least to me, anyways.

**The basic premise of any monster movie is simple: big monster, small slayer.**

Typically, the monsters on *CDF* were either some archaic remnant of an earlier time on earth or a transplant from outer space. Both situations were ridiculous, but that's part of suspending one's reality in any fictional setting. So there we sat, the two of us, perched in front of a console TV on the floor, our mom reminding us not to sit too close to the TV, rooting for the little creatures to figure out a way to slay the larger ones fully intent on ruining their peaceful towns. Why? We'll never know - anger issues, I'm guessing. :)

**Early on in most of our lives, we are introduced to the concept of "monsters".**

I've often contemplated this word at length as it fascinates me how one person's "monster" is someone else's "hero". For example, Godzilla was the ultimate *CDF* villain, a massive creature maxing out at 40 stories tall and 60,000 tons. However, whenever another creature was introduced, Godzilla somehow became the "big brother" to those he formerly spent all his time squashing under foot. So, even as kids, the context of the movie would dictate whether or not a given creature was a true "monster" or not.

**Likewise, context in life often dictates who's deemed a "monster" and when.**

How often have we watched a movie with only "human creatures" and within the span of 90 minutes, the lead character goes from being a total monster to being the unsung hero? How often have the unique skills of the villain been turned to good, if just for a moment's time, to save someone innocent from third-party harm? In that moment, we are "grateful" to that individual, aren't we? Strange dynamic, but certainly not unique to cinema.

So what does this mean, then? Does it mean that we are all confused (some might make a good argument for that, but let's save that for another day :) )? I'd say that the term "monster" is contextual. It must be.

Otherwise, how else could the same creature be a "monster" one day and a "hero" the next? Can you relate, personally? Have YOU ever been both of these things in the span of a single day...or week...or month? I have.

**I don't EVER want to be a "monster" to anyone, but I'm not so arrogant to think that I haven't been.**

**Godzilla's power was in his size. That was his unique demonstration. It's what allowed him to destroy the peace of his victims. However, power has many forms.**

**We ought to consider our power as relating to our relative "size" in our relationships.**

In some cases, we dwarf others (think about parents over children, not just in physical size, either). In other cases, we are dwarfed (think about a first line manager at a business meeting with their CEO). If the parent or the CEO decides to squash us, belittle us, and even abuse us, in many ways they can. Within that context, we might quickly dub them “monsters”. However, in another setting, maybe inside the same span of a day, they play the “hero” to someone else. Maybe the parent cuddles their newborn and the CEO righteously promotes someone.

**The flesh is a monster. We all have a flesh. We all have a little “Godzilla” in us.**

*So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.*

— **Romans 7:17-20**

We will seldom label someone with very little power over us as a “monster”. Why? It’s because they don’t pose any threat to our welfare. For example, Godzookie was Godzilla’s little son. He was about the size of a small human and actually made to be cute. Even his mannerisms were non-aggressive and adorable. He posed no threat so we viewers accepted him as a friend. Strange dynamic considering his pops was off smashing things in the background.

Babies have a flesh and yet we’d be hard pressed to call them a “monster”. Why not? Because their power over us is so piddly. But, babies grow up and grown-ups have flesh that run rampant, both inside and outside of their bodies. Even when a person desires to do good, they often find



themselves trampling others.

**In our relationships, the flesh has the power to destroy things, even as the new creature looks on in horror!**

*I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.*

— Romans 7:21-25

**To this day, monsters intrigue me. Not because I enjoy being one or being attacked by them, but rather because they are base to our existence. The flesh is a monstrosity, bent on destroying the good things of God. Satan and the fallen angels are monsters, too, all being creatures opposed to our Lord's heart.**

And just as was the case in *CDF*, the monsters were eventually felled. In real life, all monsters will be crushed by the Word of God, all threats extinguished for all of eternity. The larger the monster, the greater the fall in the end. Godzilla used to make a BIG thump when he was toppled! Like Godzilla, the flesh typically gets back up for another round. But someday that'll all be stopped by the Word of His power.

**Before all is said and done in this world, there will be a multitude of very large monsters making some pretty loud thumps when they are ultimately defeated. It's not going to be pretty, either. Life isn't cinema...there'll be no reruns.**

## Creature Double Feature

*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 7:26-27**

**The bigger they are, the harder they fall! True fear ought not be charged to the so-called "monsters" in our lives; true fear is reserved for God.**

## Self-Control and Flaming Arrows

Tip. Splash. Curse.

Yup, that about sums up my “Let me get an earlier start than normal...I’m feeling extra motivated...woohoo!” morning that I had the other day. I said that around 5:30am, before I sprung out of bed and allowed my Keurig to deliver up a piping hot cup of Starbucks Blonde coffee. Things were looking up...and I was glad because, phew, the previous week had been “one of those weeks”. That week hadn’t ended yet; I just wasn’t aware of it at the time...

I sat down in my usual spot, my recliner near the window. I propped up my elbows with matching couch throw pillows to keep my arms from fatiguing (I hold my Kindle up high for long periods while reading my Bible)...all part of the routine. I placed my extra large coffee mug on the sill and settled in. Life was good.

I opened my kindle and it faithfully illuminated. I swiped along the bottom of the screen and up popped where I had left off reading - **The Book of Revelation, Chapter 13**. I began reading and my soul was immediately agitated. I was unexplainably distractible to the point where I sometimes found myself having to read sentences two to three times just to let them sink in. “What’s going on?”, I asked myself. I resolved that it was just more of the same garbage I’d had to deal with all week, probably “*flaming arrows of the evil one*” (**Ephesians 6:16**). I said to myself, “Boy, the demons really don’t want me reading this book, huh? Well, too bad!” I said this triumphantly...but it turns out that they weren’t through with me yet.

My situation got worse. Serenity was fleeting. I was shifting in my chair, changing hands more frequently than normal. What was going on???

I took a sip of my beloved coffee, still only two-thirds down so there was

lots of “sweet nectar” left to enjoy. I missed the sill on the return trip and the contents dumped all over the side of my recliner and onto the floor. I was livid. I exploded out of my chair, a crazed shadow in the dark, cursing, tearing open the space underneath the recliner to stop the mess from spreading any further. My wife turned the lights up and was there somehow, silently, within seconds, holding a dish towel in her outstretched hand (when did she become so stealthy?). We took turns getting paper towels and she finished cleaning up with a wet mop. I was pretty crabby so I can’t even remember if I said “thank you” to her - ugh.

I restored the pre-disaster configuration of chair, carpet, magazine holder, etc....pouting. This all happened around 6am. Yeah, good idea getting that early start, huh?

**It occurred to me that there must be a lesson God was trying to teach me...there always is.**

I settled back in, minus my coffee, and got back to reading **Revelation 13**. It started again and then it struck me. I had been teaching the *Gospel, Salvation, and Sanctification* series from my pulpit for almost two months by this time (can you say spiritual warfare?). There I sat reading, *“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near” (Revelation 1:1-3).*

Duh?!!! No *wonder* I’ve been under attack. Everything I’ve been learning and teaching is focused directly on the Person and work of Jesus Christ, our Savior, the Redeemer, the King of kings, Lord of lords, the Mighty God, the Creator of the heavens and earth...the Master of demons, including Satan (oooooh, those be fighting words right there...“argh!!!” - yes, that was a pirate imitation).

Was it the demons' doing that spilled my coffee? No, just my clumsiness; but they were certainly there, I'm convinced of it - irritating me before and inflaming me during and even for a time afterwards...anything to distract me from the *"Revelation of Jesus Christ"*. They, along with my flesh, were tempting me to lose my self-control, to stomp out the fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:23**). That's what *"flaming arrows"* are designed to do, right?... *in-flame!* Both parties failed a little, it seems...the demons in their attempts to derail me completely and me in my attempt to remain fully calm during a small crisis (when you love coffee and peace and quiet while reading as much as I do, yes, it is a "crisis" - LOL).

**Self-control is often the target for flaming arrows. If self-control were a warm summer breeze, loss of it would be a tornado. If it were a flickering candle, loss of it would be an inferno. Self-control is godliness. The things that are pleasing to God are done with composure. *"Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable"* (1 Corinthians 9:25).**

The Bible speaks of a variety of applications for self-control, all of which are antagonized by the kingdom of darkness. The *"sons of disobedience"* (**Ephesians 2:2**) are notorious for lacking self-control. *"But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, **without self-control**, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these"* (**2 Timothy 3:1-5**).

Arguably, some of *the* most damaging losses of self-control are regarding sex. Married couples are warned not to deprive one another of sex, lest they be tempted to stray. *"Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that*

*Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (1 Corinthians 7:5).*  
A spouse that habitually denies the other of sex is contributing to the temptation.

**The so-called “heat of passion” is good so long as no one gets burned. All participants in extramarital sex are scorched without fail. Why? Lack of self-control.**

Satan scoffs at man. Such easy targets, it seems.

**I hate that there are ever times that I lose my godly self-control, especially because of silly little things like spilled coffee. But, it happens. In the moment, it’s like being temporarily intoxicated and having my enemies pour me another drink or two just to see how drunk I’ll get. It’s horrible because even during the episode I can “see” what’s really going on. There’s no justifiable reason for it, no matter how tempting the circumstances, so I’ve learned to deal with it quickly. “Take a deep breath,” I say to myself, “and pray now!”**

**Ahhhh...self-control surely is a gift from God, for He faithfully answers my prayers. The quicker I can get to Him in prayer, the better off I’ll be... I just need to remember that when my blistering flesh sees an opportunity to stoke a fire.**

*Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.*

# Golf

Golf is a tremendous visual aide to those who play it. Not only is it an internal, hole-by-hole, shot-by-shot struggle, it is also emotionally charged, though it demands self-control at the most pressing times. It's a dichotomy of pressure. In one sense, a golfer has his eyes on the tournament prize; however, if he makes the mistake of losing focus while standing over each shot, he risks losing that prize in the end.

Championship golfers aren't always the most naturally talented; rather, they are the ones with the greatest intestinal fortitude. Albeit a "gentleman's game", the competition and the whirlwind of emotions on the course are fierce in ways other sports cannot contend. In addition to all of this, there are no referees, implying that golf is played under the honor system. What other sport is there where athletes are expected to, and regularly do, call penalties on themselves???

*Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things.*

— 1 John 3:18-20

As with the spiritual life, golf is played over an extended period of time. Good shots are reminiscent to prosperity testing; whereas bad shots are reminiscent of pressure testing. An accomplished golfer, like a mature believer, is able to handle all situations gracefully.

*Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having*

*abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*

— **Philippians 4:11-13**



## Golf Series #1: We All Have Our Own Swing

I can't lie - I got a little emotional as I watched Ben Crenshaw hunched over his knees on the 18th green at the close of the 1995 Masters golf tournament. He shouldn't have won. He was too old. He was too emotionally drained. His lifelong mentor & teacher, Harvey Penick, had just passed away the Sunday prior. Crenshaw had just flown back to Atlanta, GA from Austin, TX the day before the tournament started.

In golf you're allowed no more than 14 clubs in the bag. In his post-tourney interviews Crenshaw stated, "I had a 15th club in my bag" (referring to Penick) - something the 2nd oldest person to ever win the Masters considered an advantage. Crenshaw spoke so tenderly about his mentor afterwards, not as a golf instructor, but as a human being, that it prompted me to discover who this Harvey Penick was. That was 18 years ago.

I found what has long since been the best book I've ever read on golf (besides the Bible - yes, I believe this to be true - more on that later) - Harvey Penick's Little Red Book. A few pages deep, and I immediately understood Crenshaw's heartfelt sentiments. Penick's teaching was simple. His chapters were often only a single page long. He spent little time on the physicality of the golf swing, rather he shared his discoveries on that most important asset in golf, the mind. As the late Bob Hope once stated, "competitive golf is played mainly on a 5-and-a-half inch course, the space between your ears." I agree.

Harvey Penick possessed that gem of all gems - **perspective** - and I sopped it up, every ounce of it. He wasn't trying to change my swing. He wasn't trying to make me a carbon-copy of some model student of his. He wasn't focusing my attention on the mechanics of the golf swing, rather he was teaching me how to work with what I had been given at birth. He gave me perspective and it changed me.

## Golf Series #1: We All Have Our Own Swing

The same goes in the spiritual life. Quick tips and fixes relating to mechanics are what religions focus on - they seem to work for a time, but then it's back to old habits. That fruitless cycle continues indefinitely. However, change your perspective about who you want and/or expect to be in your mind (Christ's mind imparted - **1 Corinthians 2:16**), and everything begins to settle in - you find YOUR swing, and it's magnificent. Every swing has its own personality - every personality has its own swing. Be yourself.

**This life isn't about trying to make your "swing" look identical to the next person's, rather it's about taking the swing that God blessed you with and learning to win with it.**

*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**

*For the body is not one member, but many.*

— **1 Corinthians 12:14**

*But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.*

— **1 Corinthians 12:18**

**Discover your own swing.**

**Love it because it is truly unique.**

**Your swing was a gift, not only to you, but to the rest of us.**

It may look goofy to others in this world, but heck, even arguably the

greatest golfer to ever live, Jack Nicklaus, had a "flying elbow" (a so-called "no-no" in golf). Ever seen Arnold Palmer, Lee Trevino, or Chi Chi Rodrigues swing a club? - it looks painful - LOL! They are all tremendous champions that look NOTHING alike on a golf course.

**We may all be on the same "course," but none of us were designed to play it with someone else's swing.**

Play away, my friend. I'll see you out there. And let me apologize in advance if you hear my voice yelling "fore!" :)

## **Golf Series #2: The Choke**

Johnny Miller is my favorite professional golf announcer. He says regularly, "there are many who contend, but only a few true contenders." He's brutally honest, but he's right. And he's never shy about injecting that dagger of a word, "choke," into his commentary.

What does it mean to choke in golf? I think people choke for different reasons. Let me share a time when I choked (ouch, that still hurts to say - LOL).

I stood frozen, locked, helpless. It was done. I had just sent what could've been my best round in competitive college golf sailing over the out-of-bounds stakes. How did I just manage to squander a tie for the lead on the 18th hole? I was more unsettled than angry - although the anger would arrive in full force a bit later - trust me.

All day I had felt great - at ease. I had nothing to lose - this was a "real" tournament with "real" players, after all. And by "real" I mean this was a tournament where guys were regularly shooting sub-par rounds (par in golf is typically 72 for 18 holes). Given the fact that I was a pre-med engineering student at CWRU, there wasn't a whole lot of time to dedicate to practicing this game - academics were my priority. All that said, I still wanted to win! :) And I knew that as is the case with mere probability, once and a while a full round of good golf would materialize. At the time I was thinking, "this is it!"

I had won the "Engineer's Cup" that year, but the competition was significantly greater in this tournament. The greater the tournament, the more the pressure. Pressure for me has always induced impatience.

**As in life, patience is a virtue in golf.**

Back to my drama on the 18th... :)

The out-of-bounds penalty is "stroke and distance," which means I had to hit the same shot all over again. Only this time, I was teeing off on this par-4 finishing hole already 2 strokes behind my co-leader. I managed to stripe one right down the center of the fairway. "Where was that tee shot the FIRST time, knucklehead???"

As I walked down the 18th fairway, knowing that I had virtually just blown my chances at a win or at least a playoff, my head was a flood of emotions. Emotions are NOT good when it comes to golf - at least not the ones that take a player's focus somewhere it needn't be. My emotions had betrayed me...their cohort, impatience.

**Golf is about fighting to stay in the moment. Often a golfer's greatest competition is won or lost between their two ears.** Most golfers that compete at the collegiate level possess the physical ability to win, however, physical ability fades quickly as the determining factor as the quality of a field increases. The most successful golfers are the ones who win that dogged competition that rages on within themselves.

OK, back to that day on the 18th hole...

My opponent and what little gallery had formed on the edges of the fairway could see it all transpiring right there in front of them. I'd lost the tournament even though we hadn't finished yet. Anyone standing there not even knowing our tallies could've chosen the winner just by our countenance. That's golf. That's life.

What started at the tee snowballed a bit (not uncommon when emotions are involved). I ended up shooting a 7 on a par-4 to lose by 3 shots. My opponent went on to win the tournament. Mixed amongst his joy was that indescribable, gentlemanly sadness that competitive golfers share whenever they witness a fellow competitor in self-defeat. He was a good

fella - this was my problem, not his. He didn't choke. I did. I congratulated him wholeheartedly, cap in left hand, outstretched right hand for the shake.

That was many years ago, but the lesson has stuck with me all this time.

**Success in golf, just as in life, is a function of our ability to remain focused under pressure.**

I've taught from my pulpit that pressure is a good thing because it has the unique ability to identify our "breaking points." When the chips are down and the pressure is on - can you still make the shot? I'm with Johnny Miller - most can't.

In my youth, the thought of winning the aforementioned "real" tournament derailed me. I had walked up to that 18th tee saying to myself, "Ed, you can win this thing!" CRASH!!! - that's where I lost the tournament...and I hadn't even hit that dreadful shot yet.

**We often lose "tournaments" in life before we even tee it up, before we even hit the shot.**

My focus went from hitting my driver down the last fairway (like I had done all day up to that point) to imagining myself holding the trophy. Pressure had found my weakness. It had squeezed out the truth - I was contending, but I wasn't yet a true contender. I understand that now...and I'm a bit more patient, too.

**Focusing on things that don't even exist yet means it's impossible to focus on the things at hand.**

Sound like life? It does to me.

Life is a lot like golf. There are many shots, many holes, many tournaments, and a variety of courses to play. What really matters, though, if you're to

ever find success in any of these venues is that you stay focused on the current shot...not the last one nor the one you haven't hit yet...the one you're standing over right now.

Golf wasn't invented until the 15th century in Scotland. I'd be willing to bet that if golf existed back during Jesus' time, we'd have a few parables written about it. :)

Speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ, read His words of wisdom:

*For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? "Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?*

*And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.*

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

***So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.***

— Matthew 6:25-34

### **Golf Series #3: The 19th Hole**

The "19th Hole" in golf lingo is the name of the bar at a golf course. It typically abuts the 18th green and often has a worn out pathway from the green to the door. It is appropriately named as such since it serves as the final "watering hole" for golfers above the legal drinking age. It is also the place where golf lore is born. Tournaments fill it with men beating their chests about something, usually it's of the flavor, "man-that-was-like-300-yards" stories where multiple assenting men are slapping another on the back...who's soaking it all up while it lasts. It never lasts long.

Don't get me wrong, there are other much less exuberant folks gathered around for more quiet affairs, outside of the spotlight, licking each other's wounds...yet even they can't help but eavesdrop on the goings on with the "rowdy" group (whether they choose to share in said exuberance or not is an entirely different story). With ever-increasing volume and liquid encouragement, the man at the center of the spotlight crowd embraces his legendary status for the day. Tomorrow it'll be gone.

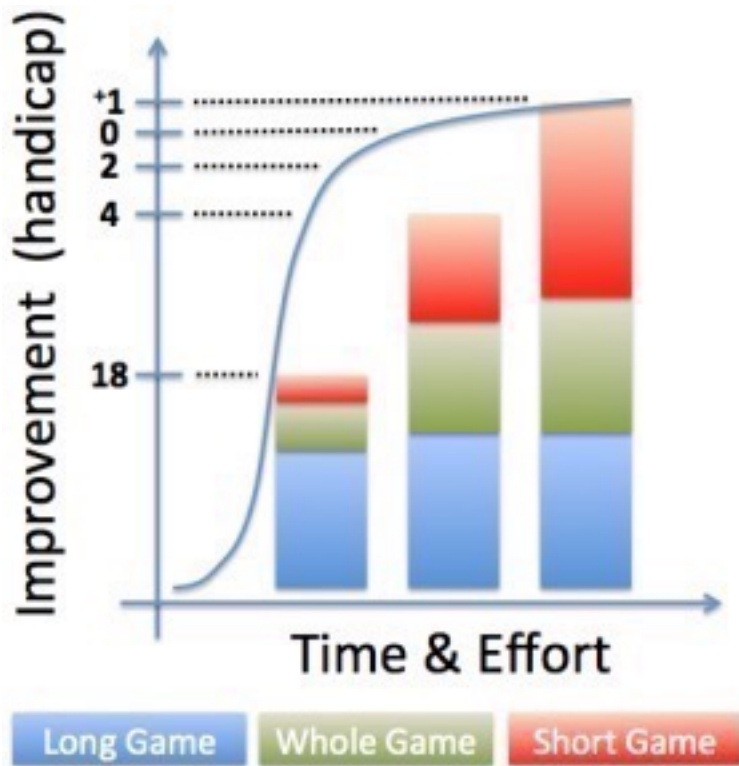
I've played to around a +1 handicap for some time now, which means I'm a little better than "scratch" out there. I ONLY mention this here to make a point and to establish credibility. Two-to-three years ago, I was a 2 handicap, and a few years before that I was somewhere around a 4-5 handicap...a little less effective than I was back in college 2 decades ago. I've oscillated over the years. I do remember also what it was like to be an 18 handicap. I remember it all, and as an avid "studier" of the game, I have mental notes and milestones packed away as lessons. I'll share some insight.

**Like most things in life, golf handicaps are a function of work ethic.** It's not quite a linear mathematical postulate, but it's pretty close.

Here's what I've learned in golf: since I'll always be an engineer at heart, let



me draw what I've seen (I don't get to draw and/or whiteboard much anymore, so live with it - ha! :) ):



According to Golfsmith, the average male golfer's handicap in America is 16.1, the average female handicap is 28.9.

Here's what I've learned. You can be an average golfer by spending a good portion of your practice time just learning to keep that little white ball in the fairway, avoiding major hazards and/or losing balls along the way. This means that long shots and course management ("Long & Whole Game" on graphic) can keep you doing pretty well. Relatively speaking, it usually doesn't take too much effort to get to somewhere around "average" status.

However, as you see in the chart above, it takes a LOT more effort to improve beyond average. But in order to do this, a golfer must shift their focus and energy towards the short game. For me, if I want to improve my

game, I practice my short game. That's it. It's those little chip shots around the green, or the bunker shots, and MOSTLY the putting that makes a difference.

Watch the post-tournament interviews of any PGA championship and the predominant concern voiced by the players themselves is how well they putted. Most champions attribute their win to good putting...you know, the little 5-footers as opposed to their long drives. Oh, for ratings, the TV networks loop the amazing drives and the "shot of the day," giving the couch potatoes something to talk about. But the reality is simple. It's the short game, the "little things," that matters most to the accomplished golfer.

Now back to the 19th Hole at the club. What's everyone talking about??? The winner of the long-drive competition - LOL! "Dude, you da' man!!!... you're a rock star!!!" Yet the same guy 3-putted 5 greens and 4-putted another (btw - 2 putts are what is allotted for par on all greens). Oh, and the rest of his "massive" drives were never found as they were lost in the woods or in a pond.

There's an old, yet VERY accurate golf adage coined by Bobby Locke, a South African touring professional a few years back - "*You drive for show, but putt for dough.*" Locke was an outstanding putter even by professional standards. He attributed his success to putting. Yet by the measuring tape, putting accounts for the smallest distances per shot to the hole. I remember hitting one of THE best shots I've ever hit in a college tournament...and then 3-putted from 2.5 feet - OUCH! What a lesson.

**Perspective: a small putt counts just as much on the scorecard as a 300 yard drive.**

**Likewise, in the spiritual life. The small stuff is JUST as important as the big stuff...sometimes much more so...especially as we mature. Hence, this analogy.**

In Jesus' parable of the talents, He lays out a fundamental principle for us. *"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things [aka the "little things"], I will put you in charge of many things [aka much "bigger things"];* enter into the joy of your master'" (Matthew 25:21).

**Want to "win the game"...or at least the current hole you're playing?  
Learn to focus on the little things.**

Golf has 18 holes. There are no shots tallied at the 19th Hole...unless, you start counting shots of whiskey...but I digress. ;) The 19th Hole is a place where creature credit is amplified, legends-for-a-day are made, and golfing lore is etched...well, at least until the party's over...then it's back to reality.

Likewise, our "shots" are tallied while playing the 18 holes called "life"... and it's not always the 300 yard drives or the 185 yard trap hooked 6-iron from under a pine tree to 2 feet that matter most (it's ok if I just lost you - I was describing an impressive mid-length shot :) ). What good are either of these shots if you 3-putt from 2 feet? Does the scorecard know the difference?

**God looks at how each of us finish out each "hole" in life...how much attention we devote to each shot, individually.** We are to finish the things we've started, not just stand on the tee and blast drives to secure a few bragging rights at the 19th Hole. We weren't put here on earth to sound our own trumpets anyways:

*Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.*

— Matthew 6:1-2

**Long drives and nifty iron shots are fine for average players. But if you truly want to improve your "game," put the things that "legends" are made of away for a bit and focus on your "short game."** Maybe you walk around the 19th Hole and practice your putting next time?...just a thought.

*He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much.*

— **Luke 16:10a**

If there were a 19th Hole in Heaven, the celebrity would always be Jesus Christ. He played this game perfectly - He's the only one ever to do so. I can't wait to toast Him. :)

## Golf Series #4: The Gimme

There's a funny commercial where a couple of guys are out playing golf and as the scenes progress, they are seen conceding putts to finish holes. They say "good, good?" to each other as if to say, "I won't make you finish putting into the hole if you won't make me (we'll assume we'd both make them anyways)." In golf, we call this a "gimme". The commercial is hilarious because they start out on the first hole with legitimate gimmes (a pair of short putts). However, each hole represents a more unlikely never-going-to-miss scenario. By the end of their round, they are standing on a tee box about 400 yards from the hole and they say "good, good?"...and they nod at each other - LOL.

In theory, a gimme is a putt that a person would practically never miss. In other words, there's a concession by the others in the group that this is the case prior to a person picking up their ball and recording their score for the hole.

Now this brings up a couple of interesting issues that we can relate to in the spiritual life. First, there's the issue of subjectivity. In order for a gimme to be granted, a person's playing partners must believe that said putt wouldn't be missed. It's also a courtesy that speeds up play, so most of the time golfers are agreeable to gimmes. However, in competition, the awarder isn't always going to be so "courteous". Short putts for someone with the "yips" can be unnerving, adding stress, which works in favor of their competition. So there's a whole dynamic that forms in a round of golf from hole to hole...a strategy, even.

Even if someone's not a golfer, per se, they might see the immediate value of not granting gimmes in certain competitive scenarios. However, it's not that black and white for the truly astute competitive golfers.

Without getting too involved here, let me give you a scenario. Say I'm

playing a round of golf with a friend and we are playing for a hot dog and a beer - loser buys. I may do something odd for the first half of our round like grant my competitor gimmes even when NEITHER of us are fully convinced that they'd make all of those putts. And for as long as we remain close in score, I may stick to this strategy.

Now, most people might say, "why in the world would you do such a thing?"

Why? - because my strategy would be to passively set them up for future failures, when the game is on the line. How? - by keeping them from putting shorter putts, I am effectively keeping them from developing a certain "feel" for the putting greens. So, when it comes down to that time in the round where they MUST make all putts, I begin making them putt EVERYTHING, even the ones I'm confident they'd never miss. Why? - because now they are simultaneously void of "feel" for the greens, they are under pressure to make the putts, AND they are agitated that I am now unwilling to concede any gimme putts. Sounds a bit sinister, right? - well, it's a game, and strategy to win is fair. And before you go thinking I'm a real stinker, in my defense, I've only done this maybe a couple of times in my life - more to test the strategy than anything - honestly. :) I actually picked it up from Jack Nicklaus, so blame him! :)

Consider now how Satan might employ such a strategy in your own life. Might he be finding ways to give you "gimmes" when God is saying "no"? Might Satan's strategy be to keep you from finishing the things you've started in life (e.g.: a commitment) so that you never develop a full "feel" for life? Might he be doing this so that when the right time presents itself, the gimmes stop?

**Much of life is preparation. Much of preparation is finishing what you started. Much of finishing what you started includes those times when you suffer through a real knee-knocker situation.**

Suffering IS a part of God's plan for believers. The Bible profoundly reveals this.

*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

— James 1:2-4

**Endurance means finishing out each "hole" in life, even when you might think it's a gimme. There's real value in finishing.**

Sometimes we look for others to tell us something's a gimme so we have an excuse not to carry on. That's a temptation that works against us in the end.

*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

Just because you are unnerved by a short putt doesn't mean you shouldn't prepare for it and putt it out. Make it or not, that's not even the real issue here. Maybe you've had the "yips" your whole life (you miss the short putts you ought to make)?...well, there might be a reason for that. The only way to get better is to PUTT the short ones. Maybe you're cocky about the short putts? - uh, oh.

Either way, the temptation is to take all gimmes.

**Taking the easy way out may alleviate a little stress and suffering in the short-term, but in the long run, you will be ill-prepared for those times when you REALLY need to make the putt!**

Remember, Satan is a genius. But God is smarter - He wants you to finish the hole.

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.*

— 2 Timothy 4:7

There is great value in finishing the things you've started in life. Gimmes are great once in a while, but that cannot be the norm. If it is, then when the time comes to make a truly critical putt, you may be out of practice, stressed, and agitated - these are the things that work against you.

**Learn to finish out each hole. And be wise to Satan's strategy. Sometimes the easy way out isn't what God wants for you at all. Sometimes, strategically exercised gimmes can amount to a much greater loss in the end.**

I've learned on the golf course that unless my playing partners are in a hurry, it's worth it to putt out every hole. I've learned the analogous lesson in the spiritual life by applying His Word to my life all the way through to closure.

For a man with A.D.D., the short putts are quite a challenge, both on the golf course and in life. I have to really concentrate more than most it seems. The only way I've managed to become a better putter is to putt every putt I am presented with. If I want to win, that is what I must do - finish every hole. It requires a bit of self-control, but I have a bigger picture in view.

*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things.*

— 1 Corinthians 9:24-25a



And let's not blame Satan and his demons for everything! Even when we're out there playing a round alone (with nobody watching), let's finish out each hole, let's keep a feel for the greens, lest we be robbed of a greater victory in the end...by ourselves, even. :o

## Golf Series #5: Catch Me If You Can't

*Unlike athletes in other sports golfers accept that there's no difference between the letter and the spirit of the rules.*

— The New York Times

Golf is unique. In order to even call oneself a golfer, one must exercise a form of integrity that other athletes simply are not challenged with. True golfers do something that would seem unthinkable in other, more popular sports - they call penalties on THEMSELVES!

I wonder how many times an NFL football player has run up to an official demanding that he be charged a penalty for holding?...or an illegal block?...or unsportsmanlike conduct? I wonder. Yet, even at the highest level of competition, golfers call penalties on themselves.

Imagine you're a pro golfer, up and coming, but without a win under your belt. It's been a struggle. The momentum alone from a PGA Tour win would be enough of a psychological boost to propel you to the next level. Imagine you're about to win \$1,026,000.00 for first place...

...and then during one of your final shots, you think maybe you broke a rule. You think you noticed something out of the corner of your eye, but you're not sure. Certainly nobody else could've seen it. But you did.

Oh, MAN! - there's nothing like first place...and there's a \$411,000.00 difference between first and second place. Oh, MAN! - that's a lot of dough!

Doesn't matter. Nope. You're no longer a golfer if you compromise your integrity. If you succumb to the temptation, you're just a guy on some grass whacking a ball around. The rules are there to protect the game. It must remain pristine. It's one of the reasons you play this game - you love what it stands for. It has survived despite man's appetite for dishonesty.

**Golfers play by the same rules, even when no one else is looking. That's integrity.**

*Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules.*

— 2 Timothy 2:5

**A trophy and a paycheck does not comprise a victory. Victory is something that occurs between your two ears.** Every true golfer knows this.

So you call the penalty on yourself. And you get to sleep at night, knowing you're STILL a golfer.

Oh, and btw, this story really happened back in 2010 at the Verizon Heritage, Hilton Head Islands, SC. The up and coming pro was Brian Davis. And he really did call a penalty on himself. And he really did lose the tournament. And he really did miss out on an extra \$411,000.00 as a result.

Davis had found himself in a hazard, where the rules state that nothing can be moved during the backswing. In his own words, he recounts, *"It was one of those things I thought I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. And I thought we'd check on TV and indeed there was movement."*

As CBS Sports describes it, *"Davis' error, a violation of rule 13.4 against moving a loose impediment during a takeaway, was **indiscernible** but for slow motion replays."*

Tournament director, Slugger White, who was responsible for assigning the official penalty, said, *"What Davis lost on the course will be regained in his reputation for his honorable act. That will come back to him spades, tenfold."*

Such is the beauty of golf.

**While other sports employ the "catch me if you can" mentality, golf stands alone in the "catch me if you can't" mentality.**

**If you don't have your integrity, what do you have?**

God's plan for you includes free will. There are many times in our lives when we find ourselves in a "hazard" - the result of a poor "shot". Poor decisions and mistakes are part of life, hence, God has given us rules on how to proceed. So, the issue is how we handle those situations. Do we look around to see if anyone saw? Or do we call a penalty on ourselves and accept the righteous repercussions? Well, that depends on our integrity.

*But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged.*

— 1 Corinthians 11:31

**If you sign a scorecard after cheating, you have lied to the field. You have lied to the game. You have lied to yourself.**

*Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices.*

— Colossians 3:9

Eventually, all evil makes its way back around to the source. Proclaiming a false victory eventually becomes a curse.

*But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good. If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.*

— 2 Thessalonians 3:13-14

Be encouraged, knowing that God's plan is the righteous plan. Your spiritual life is a fragile thing. Your integrity is there to protect it.

**A trophy cannot substitute for a good conscience.**

*Fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.*

— 1 Timothy 1:18b-19

Sign an honest scorecard each day. If you break a rule, then call the penalty on yourself - don't wait for someone else, or God, to have to do that work for you. Better to lose a tournament than claim a false victory.

**The sweeter victory is in being honest and enjoying the good reputation you have within yourself.**

Play on!

## Golf Series #6: It's Still Too Cold for Golf...

Yesterday's low temperature here in MA was 11 degrees fahrenheit...brrrrr.

I can recall the days when I first started taking golf seriously. To be honest, that didn't happen until after my military service ended. Before that I thought it was for pansies in pink plaid pants - guys that weren't actually athletes, but rather highfalutin cast-offs that were also a bit queer. Given the objective of the game is to hit a little white ball hundreds of yards into a 4.25 inch hole, can you blame me?...ok, maybe a little arrogant...ok, a lot. Forgive me for being an ass. I've since changed, thank God. :)

So, back around 1991, I started to golf. And, boy, did I golf! Can you say addiction? Didn't look anything like a golfer (still refused to wear the pants), but I was golfing every chance I could get. I was so addicted for the first 5 years or so, I'd play in the dead of winter! I remember playing a colored ball so I could play in the snow!

The problem with this addiction? Golf is not a winter sport in New England (except to addicts, of course). Case in point: I recall on multiple occasions nursing splits in my fingertips. That's right, open wounds as a result of playing golf in the freezing cold weather. It was so cold some days that the torque of the grip in my frozen hands would tear my skin. Sounds like a boxing match, huh?...golf is a vicious sport...just kidding - LOL! :)

After my addiction ran its course, I stopped playing golf in the winters. My fingers are grateful. I have since learned other tactics for keeping my game "on par."

The challenge then is what, if anything, does one do in the "off-season"? If one can't actually play golf, how does one prepare for the upcoming season? Are there things a serious golfer can do that'll reap benefits come spring tee time? Of course. On those years where I've vowed to have a

"good year" in golf, I've focused on physical training (especially my core muscles), stretching, reading books (e.g.: Extraordinary Putting, Penick's Little Red Book, etc.), and putting indoors.

Thomas Edison coined the phrase, "*Success is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration.*"

I'd like to submit this variant here, "*Success is 10% perspiration and 90% preparation.*"

Few things irritate me more than having to listen to a whiny golfer who loses and then insists that bad luck is the culprit. Now granted, there may be some credence to that on occasion, but you know the guy...he's the same one that used to stomp away with his ball after he lost a game, leaving his buddies stranded. Yeah, that guy.

The great scientist, Louis Pasteur, coined the phrase, "*Chance favors the prepared mind.*"

One of my favorite engineering professors in college gave me some unsolicited (at the time, but now I'm grateful for it) advice upon my entering into his office and complaining about a test I had just struggled with. Because I was an older, nontraditional student, he and I were actually friends, even golfed together. So on that day when I stormed into his office to vent about this test, I didn't expect his response, which was, "*sometimes the putts fall, sometimes they don't.*" Years later, I realize that if I had just prepared a little more, the test wouldn't have made the top of my list of suspects as to why I failed.

As a function of preparation, well struck putts are center-hole, not dependent on luck to fall in (or so-called "bad luck" to keep out). :o

Ok...back to the point..."Success is 10% perspiration and 90% preparation."

Golf is like the spiritual life.

**God will never ask us to think, say, or do something that He hasn't already first provided grace for. God is integrity. If He desires for us to live by grace alone, then He considers it HIS burden to provide the means necessary to do so. Otherwise, He'd be a trickster out for kicks and not the loving God He is.**

*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

In the spiritual life, as in golf, so much of success on the course is a function of how much preparation a 'contender' has put into that season...BEFORE the season has started (emphasis on before). Too many Christians, just like too many golfers, show up to the first "tee" unprepared. And when they finish their first few holes at "umpteenth" over par, they begin to realize that they are unable to compete at an acceptable level.

*You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. **All good athletes train hard.** They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally. I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! **I'm staying alert and in top condition.** I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.*

— 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 - Message

**Preparation is the key to success in life. It doesn't get any easier than grace, yet so many won't even show up for training. That's not humility, that's arrogance. The arrogant person thinks they can show up without**



**any practice and go on to win.**

Far too many believers are grossly underprepared for life. The odd thing that I've witnessed first hand is that when they begin making triple- and quadruple-bogies, they look to blame everyone else, including God.

Without fail, every time I've set my mind to having a good golf season, preparing in the off-season, I've had a good season. The same thing has transpired in my own spiritual life. If I'm prepared, I fair well under pressure. If I'm not, then I fail miserably, squirm a bit, and figure out the real culprit is staring back at me in the mirror.

**I know that God is faithful. I know His grace is all I need. If I'm too lazy to receive His best, then why would I ever be surprised at having a poor season?**

And as far as my being a shepherd is concerned. Well, then, I'm here for my flock also. I am the trainer at the gym. I am God's grace working through a vessel of mercy for others. So in that sense, I have a double-portion of responsibility to keep in shape, to train hard, to be prepared - not just for my own spiritual welfare, but also for my sheep.

*Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction.*

— 1 Timothy 4:2

If you, personally, are in the throes of your off-season, make the commitment to train while you can. Take advantage of His grace NOW instead of trying to scramble to save par out on the course. I'll be here along with some other faithful servants of God. The choice is yours.

**Preparation is key. It may be too cold to golf, but it's never too cold to train.**

## Golf Series #7: Dirty Clubs

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, **having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.***

— Ephesians 5:25-26

**Water washes things. It's been used since the dawn of man, both literally and figuratively, as a cleansing agent.**

"Dude, what the heck is that?!!!"

"What?" A quizzical grin began to creep out of the corner of my buddy's mouth.

Shaking my head, beginning to giggle, I asked, "How in the world can you play with your clubs being that caked with dirt? There are effectively no grooves on the face of your irons." I began to laugh even louder.

"Does it really matter that much?" What a question to ask an engineer on a golf course!

I won't bore you with the details of the conversation, but I explained to my buddy that golf clubs are designed to grip the skin of golf balls at impact, imparting spin. The physics behind this is absolutely fascinating (well, it is to a dork like me, anyways :) ). Even if you aren't excited about the nitty-gritty of all that goes on in the milliseconds where a golf club meets a golf ball, if you want to play better golf, you **MUST** allow the club at least a **CHANCE** at serving you well...and if not well, per se, at least consistently.

**Anything that inhibits a pure ball-strike is detrimental to the intended result of the golfer. Golf is difficult enough without the added uncertainty of a foreign obstruction destroying the one thing a golfer**

**CAN depend on when making a good swing - science.**

I recall being so baffled (and slightly disturbed - lol - yes, I'm a bit of a purist) that I offered to wash my buddy's clubs for him, just so he might experience golf with physics on his side. I really wanted that for him because, to me, there are few things more majestic in sports than a pure golf shot.

My advice was that golfers need to keep their golf clubs clean always, for the dirtier they get, the less pure the ball-strike. The reality is that just about every shot in golf results in some dirt or debris sticking to the clubface, therefore they require constant cleaning.

**The spiritual life is very much like this in the sense that every day we walk in the world, every "shot" we take, there's the potential of picking up grime. Therefore, we need to inspect our clubs regularly, "washing" them as required so that our next shot has the purest chance of landing where we intended and where God desired.**

*Then He [Jesus, the living Word] poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, 'Lord, do You wash my feet?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter.' Peter said to Him, 'Never shall You wash my feet!' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.' [the Word is salvation, both positionally and experientially]*

*Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.' Jesus said to him, 'He who has bathed [saved] needs only to wash his feet [with water (the Word)], but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.' For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, 'Not all of you are clean.'*

*So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at*

*the table again, He said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you [do you understand the symbolism]? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet [the living Word washed them], you also ought to wash one another's feet [serve others the Word]. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.'*

*'Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them'.*

— John 13:5-17

**At salvation you became like the golfer and were admitted onto the golf course called "life". And as God promises, if you continue to make pure contact with life's challenges, His promises are just as dependable as the physics of striking a golf ball with a clean club face. However, if you're filthy from trudging around in the cosmos, you need the Word to wash over you, to purify you.**

**The Holy Spirit will convict you of this need for washing, for this is His ministry working with your conscience. He may also move another to encourage you with the Word at just the right time, to turn you around, to clean up your life, to repent from the things that are defiling you.**

And as the Lord commanded, "For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you" (**John 13:15**), we ought to be ready and willing to serve our brothers and sisters in Christ by washing "their feet" with the Word. This is a lesson that the apostle Peter never forgot, as is evidenced in his later writing:

*For if these [godly] 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 [in need of a reminder]. 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. [Peter is "washing their feet"]*

*Therefore, I will always be ready to remind you of these things [Peter is following **John 13:15**], even though you already know them, and have been established in the truth which is present with you [you don't need a whole bath]. I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder [he's refreshing them with the Word].*

— **2 Peter 1:8-13**

**Peter is a perfect example of a man "washing the feet" of others by serving them the Word of God. He was following the example that Jesus (the living Word) had given him symbolically, which is that this water (the Word) washes away the grime we pick up while walking through life. It cleanses us, purifies us.**

**Don't believe me?...pick up your Bible and read it - you will be refreshed, trust me.**

Peter's example is analogous to my wishing to wash my buddy's clubs so that he might experience improved play. We ought to want nothing more than to see our playing partners (the brethren) succeed on the course. Sometimes, like my inexperienced buddy, the less mature in the game need the more mature to serve them by washing their clubs for them. That is a privilege, frankly, for the mature believer. And furthermore, what greater joy is there than rejoicing with another when they hit a pure shot? It's priceless.

**The Word is the ultimate refreshment to our souls, our very sustenance,**

*"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).*

As is the case with golf, some days are more fruitful than others. Nonetheless, we are all out on this course called life, swinging away, seeking magnificent shots so that we might point back to His glory. If we hit a bad shot and find ourselves hacking it out of the weeds, we may need to wash our feet with the Word, lest we become the disgruntled, emotionally flailing golfer whose game goes from bad to worse.

And if you see a fellow player struggling, offer to help them out. Wash their feet with the Word, reminding them the way Peter did back in the day. Clean their club faces for them so that they might enjoy their next shot as something pure...something you both might rejoice in. :)

## **Golf Series #8: Difficult Tournament Conditions**

After winning the U.S. Open, Jack Nicklaus was asked how he'd been able to win so many major championships. He responded by saying that he simply considered a major no different than any other tournament. Most of his competitors would fall away under a pressure that he never experienced. In other words, he never let any tournament, no matter how difficult the course was playing, psyche him out. Nicklaus has also stated that winning major championships was relatively the easiest of tasks because everyone else crumbled while he simply plodded along.

Golf tournaments typically range from two to four rounds. The PGA Tour plays four rounds to decide a championship. The Champions Tour (formerly the Senior PGA Tour) and LPGA contests run three rounds. A local private club might decide a championship in as little as two days.

The average tournament course is a par-72. Therefore, two rounds means 144 strokes, three means 216, and four means 288. That's a LOT of shots to decide each championship. This also means that even though there are good and bad breaks out there, the laws of probability dictate that the best player will be identified in the end.

Nonetheless, if you hang around the course after a tournament played in really difficult tournament conditions, you'll find someone complaining about how they could've played so much better had the conditions been better. Some even go so far as to say that they likely would've won had conditions been different.

Can you say egocentric? I mean, didn't everyone else play in the same conditions?

I played tournament golf in college and caught myself, on more than one occasion, murmuring about course conditions. Afterwards, I'd get down on

## Golf Series #8: Difficult Tournament Conditions

myself, as the team captain ought not be spewing excuses about his own poor play. What does that teach the younger players? - nothing good, I assure you. It's embarrassing to think about now, but that's how we live and learn - we make mistakes.

In the spiritual life, each day or period of days is like a golf tournament. We wake up and there we stand on the "first tee". We observe, we analyze, we stretch, and we prepare mentally for what lies ahead. The worst thing we can do is perceive difficult conditions and begin looking for excuses. It seems that's the "norm" nowadays - everyone's looking for excuses as to why they are about to play so poorly. They are defeated before they've even teed off! They fear the course will make fools of them.

**It's almost as if people would prefer to project an inflated image of someone that isn't actually them.**

**A challenging "course" has a habit of revealing the heart of an individual. At the end of the day, the arrogant person is at the ready with excuses as to why their score doesn't reflect their true talent. The humble person concedes that the best person won that day under difficult conditions.**

Like I tell my own sons, "life will chew you up and spit you out if you're not mentally prepared for it". If a person begins making excuses on the "first tee" and then continues to do so throughout life, they never learn. As a result, they never gain that peace that surpasses all human comprehension (ala **Philippians 4:7**).

I often think of the manner in which God has called out the "champions" throughout human history. I think about the Jews and the things that God put them through so that they'd be truly set apart for His purposes.

*For the Lord your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to*



*them. Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and inquire from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything been done like this great thing, or has anything been heard like it? Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard it, and survived?*

*Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown that you might know that the Lord, He is God; there is no other besides Him.*

— Deuteronomy 4:31-35

**Historically, and even to this day, the Jews have endured the most difficult conditions. Those that have persevered are true champions.**

**To the humble, difficult tournament conditions are a blessing in disguise meant to forge new and better attributes within them. Tough conditions are meant to test their mettle, to reveal their status, to force self-examination. To the arrogant, difficult tournament conditions are a curse simply meant to remind them of their weaknesses and to damage their fragile self-esteem.**

The humble have it correct.

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

— Romans 5:3-5

Sometimes the greatest test on a golf course is putting a so-called "bad

break" behind you.

**No one ever said that golf was always going to be fair. Come to think of it, no one ever said life would be fair, either.**

So what are you going to do about that? Are you going to moan and groan about how good you COULD'VE played or are you going to take the bad breaks today with the same acceptance as the good ones tomorrow?

As a golfer, I prefer to play the most difficult courses I can find. And when I get there, I always tee off from the back tees (most difficult). Am I a masochist? - not at all. I want to know where my game stands at all times. And in the case of a tournament, I want the best man to win, even if it's not me.

**The ONLY way a championship can be decided is by being difficult enough to sift the players. Make a course too easy and the best player may not be identified. Why even hold a championship, then?**

**Learn to embrace the most difficult of times in life. Before you even tee off, ensure your perspective is good. Stay humble, desiring to know nothing more at the end of the day than the truth.**

Life will smack you around unfairly at times, but remember that it's doing that to everyone all the time. Roll with it, for tomorrow is a new day and who knows, maybe you'll get a favorable bounce and end up right near the hole for a gimme. :)

With the right perspective, playing difficult conditions will always result in a better you.

## **Golf Series #9: 72 Puzzles Per Round**

A round of golf takes roughly 4 hours to complete. That's 18 holes. An expert golfer will complete their round in approximately 72 strokes (even par on most courses). During a round, 90% or more of the time a golfer is merely walking to their next shot or waiting until someone else in their group plays their next shot.

That leaves a LOT of time to think. This reality is a double-edged sword.

On days when I'm just out there with friends or spending alone time with my best Friend, my Lord, I take all of that time between shots to think about other things, things that have nothing at all to do with golf. It's nice, but I don't expect much in terms of a final score.

However, on tournament days, it's very different. All that time between shots becomes an opportunity to plan my next shot. All that down time becomes part of the overall round. It's more strenuous due to the sustained concentration, but that's how you elevate your game in competition. You stay "in the moment".

**Let your mind drift too far off and you might miss making the right decision about your next shot.**

Golf is a game of infinite options. Fluctuating physical and mental conditions demand a variety of considerations. Since these variables change from shot to shot, a competitive golfer must approach each shot as a unique puzzle. The challenge is to solve the puzzle by using as many clues as are available in a given amount of time. Yes, golfers are "on the clock" and cannot take too long or else they are penalized.

Supposing we are talking about the aforementioned golfer, this means that they must literally solve 72 unique puzzles per round. If they fail to solve a

puzzle, they may need to solve 73, and so on. Unlike other time-based sports, like basketball or hockey, a round isn't finished until the little white ball has found the bottom of 18 different cups!

Some days are so bad that you just feel like picking up your ball and walking to the next hole. But in competition, you can't. You must finish the hole. You're never allowed to give up on a puzzle like you can on the Mensa Quizzes in those magazines that are stuffed behind commercial airline seats. You can't cheat and go to the back and get the answers, either. The number you write in the box on your scorecard must be something you've earned. You can't skip ahead and come back later, either. In golf, if you do any of these things, you're disqualified.

**Every shot is a puzzle. You can't opt out of it. It is a sequential process of evaluating your skill on that day.**

**Sound a little like life? It should. Every day is full of challenges, just like with every round of golf.**

When faced with a serious challenge, there's no getting around it. We must make a decision. It may be a shot you've hit in the past, from approximately the same place in the fairway, to a similar pin location on the green, yet this time the weather conditions are different. This time, you're a better player, or maybe worse. This time it's to win a tournament! Pressure.

**Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Pressure. Life is impatient.**

If you spend all of your time between shots goofing off, when it's time to play the shot, you're rushed, frazzled, and out of sorts. You won't possess the necessary confidence because you haven't taken the time to fully assess the data. There are variables left unassigned, so you're insecure as you stand over the ball. Your swing is reserved, your mind plays tricks, even on the downswing, guessing whether or not this is the right play. These things

riddle execution with tightened muscles, a swing's worst enemy. If you're lucky, it won't be catastrophic, but you're flirting with disaster.

**You get out of golf what you put into it. Sound like life? It should.**

*For as he thinks within himself, so he is.*

— Proverbs 23:7a

**For a believer, the "time between shots" is a grace gift. It ought to be used, at least in part, for preparation.**

If it's your turn to putt and you haven't read the green, how likely are you to make the putt? Unless you get really lucky, you might as well chalk that up as an extra stroke on the scorecard.

*Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave.*

— 1 Corinthians 9:26-27a

**Let's face it, life CAN be difficult at times, but it isn't difficult all the time. There are times between critical "shots" that God gives us time to plod along, to prepare, to gather data. Learn to discipline yourself to take advantage of that time while NOT under pressure. We don't synthesize under pressure, we execute. The time to assess is "between shots", not during a shot.**

Remember, God promises to provide the means necessary to make a good swing:

*All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; He'll never let you be pushed past your limit; He'll always be there to help you come through it.*

— **1 Corinthians 10:13b - Message**

God is there with you every step of the way, even during those times between shots. He'll teach you all you need to know before He asks you to take the next shot. He'll point out the variables, raise your awareness of the elements, and encourage you to press on, even when you're having a bad round. But you've got to learn to receive His grace when He provides it. Otherwise, you may find yourself in a hazard following your next shot.

The nice thing about golf and life is that each shot, each puzzle, is unique. If you happen to butcher a shot, well, it's over, it's done, it's behind you. There are many other puzzles to solve still in front of you. Every day's a new day and every morning His faithfulness is renewed.

Learn to share in His joy.

*The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.*

— **Lamentations 3:22-23**

## Golf Series #10: It's Just a Game!

The mics were everywhere, stuffed in this young Columbian's face. Camilo Villegas - still not 100% sure how to pronounce that. I felt a little bad for him as he struggled to get the right words out regarding his PGA Tour victory. English is obviously not his native tongue. These global athletes are under such scrutiny. I thought how some of them pay beaucoup bucks just to learn how to respond to media so that they don't inadvertently step on the toes of their sponsors, their adoring fans, or whoever.

I looked over this young man's shoulder and there were corporate signs glistening behind him, some strewn across the grandstands, some splashed upon very expensive high-definition flat screen monitors. "This whole affair," I said to myself, "is like a petri dish for ungodly things."

It occurred to me, as I was laying on the gurney in my hospital room (having then watched WAY too many hours of television, but what choice did I have?), that though I was sore from my appendectomy, this scene, though heralded as glorious by the world, was making my heart sore, more sore than any physical pain I was dealing with.

Look, I'm a golfer myself. I've played in many tournaments, received trophies, medals, even golf equipment and a little cash along the way. Those are the tangibles that accompany the back patting and the "attaboys" when you win. Big deal. It's fun, however:

**It's JUST a game!!! Tie my self-esteem to my trophy case and I've got a BIG problem on my hands. Yet that's just what the world would have me do. It encourages it. But I'm not buying the lie.**

The way people carry on, you'd think winning a golf tournament was equivalent to saving a life or something. There's certainly a LOT more hoopla over some PGA champion than the guy down the street that just

resuscitated his neighbor. Or, how about the doctor that just performed emergency surgery to save a pastor (me) from a life-threatening ailment? Or, how about all the nurses, their assistants, the administrators, and the wait staff in the hospital? What about them? Where's all the hoopla for them?

**I mean if we're going to celebrate stuff, let's at least get our scale of values straight!**

**How about we celebrate the greatest victory we could ever know - a soul being won? Now THAT's a victory worth celebrating as if it were life or death...because it IS just that!**

**You know what I think of whenever I see such a scene as the one I opened up with? I say to myself, "I hope he's saved." I hope that Camilo is saved.**

What else IS there to celebrate in this lifetime? Someone needs to tell me... and STAT (that's my medical jargon that I just picked up during my stay in the hospital - tight, huh? I know. :P )!

*And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.*

*For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.*

*I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.*

— 1 Corinthians 2:1-5



You see, that's all Paul the apostle ever wanted in this life - to know that the Gospel truth had been spread to a lost and dying world, to know that people were being saved. That's all I want to know, too, frankly.

It's a lot of fun to celebrate professional sports and carry on and fellowship over a beer or a coffee after said victory. I enjoy that as much as the next person. But c'mon, folks, seriously? Compare that with:

*For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*

— **Romans 5:6**

OK, so here are the competing headlines:

**"The World Cheers as World's #1 Golfer Wins Again!"** versus **"Another Soul Has Found Victory in Jesus!"**

Sadly, the prior gains a much larger viewer rating than the latter. And the world is not keen on mixing the two issues, either. Makes sense given Satan's agenda. Heck, if a professional athlete even mentions their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ nowadays, they are putting their sponsorships in peril.

**The world wants Satan's heroes, not God's. The world is happy to celebrate temporal victories, just not eternal ones.**

Dunno - maybe it's just the long-term effects of anesthesia causing me to ramble on here...or maybe not. Maybe I see this world for what it is, Satan's (**2 Corinthians 4:4**). He runs his little experiments, each one glorifying creature over Creator, each one ratcheting in another demographic or social group, each one tightening the noose. He's efficient.

Of course God, being the impeccable Gentleman that He is, allows this to continue on the basis of His respect for free will.

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

— **Romans 1:24-25**

From the pulpit, I like to call this "creature credit". The world bathes in it. Creature credit is like currency, exchanging hands, invested, sought after, stolen, even...just like real money. It's a grotesque display of the very worst features of humanity.

***"They shouted back, 'Crucify Him'" (Mark 15:13)! The world has been shouting this ever since, maybe not verbally, but with its actions. I see the world increasingly choosing "Barabbas" over Christ.***

You might think I'm being fanatical. Maybe you're right. Maybe I am. But I'm good with that. I'm good with being a fanatic for Christ.

I'm not intent on robbing anyone of their victories here on earth. I say, "Tee it up - enjoy a good round!"

But, I simply cannot find it in myself to lose sight of what really matters in this life...salvation.

The rest is mostly white noise to me. Nothing else matters, really.

**Partaking wholly in the world's celebration of an unbeliever's "amazing" victory is like sharing cake with Hitler on his birthday. How can I celebrate?**

**Show me a street evangelist at the top of his game and I'll show you a pastor in tears celebrating.**

## Golf Series #11: A Variety of Courses

To many, Tiger Woods is the greatest professional golfer of all time. Some go so far as to say that he's the greatest athlete of all time. He certainly has won his fair share of golf tournaments over the years - 79 to be exact.

But here's a statistic that few people may know. His 79 wins on the PGA tour have come at 25 tournaments. He's only won 8 individual tournaments one time. He's won the Arnold Palmer Invitational at Bay Hill Club & Lodge in Orlando, FL a staggering 8 times! That's more than some PGA professionals win throughout their whole career, all tournaments combined! It seems obvious that Tiger has an affinity, moreover has proven it, with this tournament.

"Once we figure out what courses we like, we tend to play those," Woods says.

The same goes for most golfers. We have our favorite courses. And let's be honest here - most of the time our favorite courses are those we tend to play well. They "fit" our eye, as golfers like to say. They "suit" our game.

**Winning a golf tournament correlates to one's strengths. In other words, if a course puts a premium on a certain facet of your game, and that premium aligns with a strength of yours, your chances of winning increase. Vice versa, of course. For example, if you're a short-ball hitter and you're playing a monstrously long course, your chances of winning are diminished.**

**Every golfer is different.**

We each have our strengths and weaknesses. Even Tiger Woods will admit that there are plenty of golfers out there that have better parts of their game. Nobody has ever been the best in every category of shot-making.

A PGA golf tournament is decided by the aggregate score over 4 rounds of golf. There's typically one tournament played per week during the season, each at a different location. Each course represents a different test of skill, ensuring that a variety of champions possessing a variety of strengths and weaknesses wins.

**The same goes in the spiritual life. We have each been afforded certain strengths and left with certain weaknesses. Faith is what provides a believer with strength, but it is only given by God's sovereign grace. It isn't something that we can earn or manufacture on our own. So we must accept all that God's given us, and be grateful always.**

*For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.*

— **Romans 12:3**

This is precisely why, although we may identify "great champions" like Paul, God's children have each been given a "tournament" to shine in. We've each been allotted a set of skills to bring glory to God in time. Those skills differ greatly, so it makes sense that there are a variety of "champions" crowned each day.

*Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

— **1 Corinthians 12:5-7**

We all have unique callings on our lives, though we are all playing for the same team. Reminds me of the spirit of the Ryder Cup, but I digress. :)

**Like any humble champion, Paul would've been the first person to admit**

**that he didn't have every skill necessary to dominate every aspect of the "game". Paul was so humble that he LIKED to see others win tournaments that he couldn't. You see, Paul aimed to encourage those with different spiritual gifts to exercise them for the greater good of the Body of Christ. That's how WE ought to be.**

*For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body.*

— 1 Corinthians 12:14-20

**I suppose that's what makes the Body of Christ different than the members of the PGA Tour, huh? At the end of the day, we aren't trying to "beat" one another in a tournament (well, at least the grace-oriented believers aren't).**

God has laid before us a variety of tests so that His grace might be magnified. It's when a believer wins a tournament by grace that we cheer the loudest. We aren't preoccupied with who's holding the trophy.

*If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.*

— 1 Corinthians 12:26

Learn to embrace your strengths as well as your weaknesses. You don't have to 'like' the latter, but it's good to leave space for others to exercise their strengths on courses that don't suit your "game". Maybe you sit a tournament out and cheer your fellow "players" on from outside the ropes.

**That's what it means to recognize your own weaknesses. It means you're perfectly fine with others being "better" at something than you are. God decided that fact before either of you were even born, remember. Part of the "strength package" is understanding our weaknesses.**

*Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.*

— 1 Corinthians 12:27

My dad used to tell me, "Eddie, variety is the spice of life!" I think he was onto something. :)

## The Gospel

The Gospel is much larger than a single statement, much greater than a single passage of scripture, and is, in fact, eternal. The Gospel is grace and truth, things embodied in Jesus Christ.

*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. John \*testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.*

— **John 1:14-17**

To understand the Gospel is to understand Jesus Christ, Himself, and visa versa. He is our "*indescribable gift*" (**2 Corinthians 9:15**). He is the unique God-man, "*And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*" (**Hebrews 1:3**). As the 24 elders in humility say, "*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**).

The apostle Paul speaks of the Gospel through a practical lens:

*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**

The Gospel summarized:

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.



## Commitment Issues

I don't travel outside of my "cave" as often as I used to.

By my "cave" I mean to say, my office, where I exercise so much of this spiritual gift...studying, preparing, contemplating...loving, essentially. My love for others goes mostly unnoticed, which spawns a variety of challenges in my own soul, but we'll leave that for some other day...some other blog, maybe. These days I tap into a wellspring of memories.

When I was stationed at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii back in the late 80's, early 90's, I had the privilege of traveling to many foreign locations, mostly westbound as far as India, even, and several places in between. What an eye-opening experience those times were and still are in my memory. After college, God graced me out with a global position that took me from my home in Massachusetts to many locations eastbound, as far as Europe and some surrounding countries. I've also stayed in forty-something of the United States. In effect, I've been around the world.

I can't imagine a substitute for these experiences, which is why I am convinced that my life before the ministry was to provide me with something invaluable. My worldwide travel has given me perspective. It's one of those things that you don't realize until you see it all in hindsight.

It's from that base perspective that I relate to this world today. I thank God for it. It's value is stupendous. For example:

Whenever I get complacent, I think about those in India who would literally do anything for work. I gave a man \$5 once for shining my sneakers and he was so grateful he almost kissed me. I had money to burn at 19 years old and here's a man 2-3 times my senior on his knees, polishing sneakers to feed his family. After I had given a beggar woman holding a baby some money, my friend told me that it wasn't uncommon for a

woman to break her own baby's arm and leave it mangled, healing crookedly, because it was better for begging...and incited more sympathy from the "rich Americans". Perspective.

**I never really thought I was rich...until I saw true poverty.**

**I never thought I was fortunate...until I smelled misfortune.**

**I never understood the vastness of this world...until I drowned in its diversity.**

My congregation has an ordained evangelist in it. As I write this, he's out on the mission field in India, not far from where I stood 25 years ago, shocked, learning, weeping. And he's learning perspective, I know he is, while he's sharing the Word of God with those there. He sends pictures back, and I can see the thirst in the eyes of his audiences. They cling to the message he carries - the message of freedom. As I see it, freedom to them is purer in a sense than it is for others in this world. Why? - because they've got so little else to cling to.

**Their hope, the very means of their reason to carry on, floats on top of the good news of the Bible.**

So, it's inevitable for me to ponder my own fellow countrymen. I love my country - served her willingly and gratefully, and have since watched my oldest son do the same. However, in integrity, I can't help but admit a distinction in their eyes. They are less desperate in many ways. They are more successful...so they think. They are very distracted by worldly pleasures.

I wonder if this is why most of my brethren in America are so uncommitted to the Lord. Is it because they simply don't realize how silly it is to cling to things temporal? I have my thoughts, but I've learned to lead people to a place where they can realize things for themselves.

**If I try to pound my own wisdom into the souls of others, I risk damaging them. Perspective is a tender thing. A believer's commitment must be something born inside of them, not handed down to them. Commitment is like that - it cannot be conveyed, even from the sincerest of hearts (even Jesus couldn't do that).**

Commitment isn't a word or a contract - it is an inescapable resolution. Dare I say that it transcends human understanding the way love does? Might I suggest that it seals a certain joy in the soul of its possessor? Do I need to propose such thoughts? No - the Bible already has.

*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**

Who is more committed than Jesus? No one.

On those days when we forget to be grateful and begin to become familiar with our blessings, and we begin to think there's just too much wealth to give up in order to fully commit to Him...may we remember how much wealth HE gave up for us because of His commitment to us:

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, **yet for your sake He became poor**, so that you through His poverty might become rich.*

— **2 Corinthians 8:9**

Commitment is a "funny" thing because for you to be fully committed to another, you can't be fully committed to yourself. You must relinquish who you are. Yet that's exactly what your Savior did for you, to a much greater degree already.

**He gave up everything so that He could honor His commitment to you. He knew what kind of an "adulterer" you were when He agreed to marry you. He willingly bore that shame while others scoffed at Him. You are an unfaithful, ungrateful, undeserving bride...yet He chose you. And His commitment has never wavered.**

Drop your self-serving, self-absorbed, self-righteous life. Commit to the One who loves you enough to marry You...to the One whose love makes no sense to human understanding...to the One whose Father crushed Him for your sake.

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!*

— **Philippians 2:5-8 NIV**

Open your eyes. Please quit making excuses. Commit.

## **I Play for the New England Patriots!**

That's right - I play for the New England Patriots professional football team! It's true - I am the new quarterback for the team. Tom Brady's getting old anyways, so it's about time, right? I've already purchased the uniform, so it's official.

What's the matter?...don't believe me?

Why not?

Oh, is it because you've NEVER seen me actually ON the gridiron on game day? Is it because you've NEVER heard of my name being connected to professional football? Is it because you KNOW that I'm a 44 year old pastor with bad hips and knees? Why won't you believe me, darn it?!!!

Obviously, my being a member of the current New England Patriots football team is ludicrous - I, of all people, am in full agreement. :) Trust me - I don't want to be out there on that gridiron any more than any real fan of football wants to witness it! - LOL

Let me ask you this question, though, in all seriousness. What's a bigger stretch of reality: my proclamation that I'm a member of the New England Patriots, or a person with ZERO heart for Christ, ZERO fruit, ZERO anything the Bible speaks of proclaiming they are a Christian? Why is the prior so offensive to most, yet the latter not? Furthermore, I wonder what the actual players on that team would have to say about my showing up on game day in uniform.

Let me say this a different way. Why is it acceptable that anyone can claim to be a Christian, yet if I make a silly claim like the one above, people immediately dismiss me as a lunatic? In other words, why should a simple proclamation establish a person as a member of the body of Christ, even

I Play for the New England Patriots!

when they have ZERO God-given abilities to reveal such a thing?

I may not be a member of the New England Patriots team, but I AM on the Christian team! And I see a LOT of people proclaiming they are on the same team, and the world says "I believe you," but their "abilities" say something entirely different.

Listen, Jesus Christ, Himself, wasn't too fond of people showing up proclaiming to be on His team, either:

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

***Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.***

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

*Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be*

*compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.*

*Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell — and great was its fall.*

— **Matthew 7:13-27**

Those are the words of our Lord at a time when many were proclaiming they knew God. As a matter of fact, these same people were telling everyone else around them, sounding from the rooftops that they knew the way to salvation, even praying in public to validate their false claims, *“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full”* (**Matthew 6:5**).

**In other words, if you claim you're a player, but you can't ever be found on the gridiron, then you're not actually a member of the team.** Heck, you can even be a "fan" of Christianity and not be a Christian, right? - it's true. I've met many a person who think Christianity is swell, but they are unbelievers.

If I walk around my hometown with my last name sewn on the back of an official New England Patriots jersey, does that make me a member of the professional team? If I throw a football around, or kick field goals, or call plays from a huddle in my back yard...does that make me a player? If "yes," then why hasn't Bill Belichick (N.E. Patriots head coach) put me out on the gridiron on game day?

You know why not? Because I'm NOT a member of the team, no matter HOW much I scream it, or run plays like they do, or throw a football, or

I Play for the New England Patriots!

pretend I am! Maybe season tickets will help? - sorry, that just makes me an interested spectator, putting me in company with fallen angels, even.

*In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that - and shudder.*

— James 2:17-19

At the end of the day, we Christians ought to be offended by the reality that there exist in the churches (not the Church, the Body of Christ) those who proclaim to be on our Christian team, but they are not. If they were, they'd be on the gridiron alongside the rest of us that wear a uniform stained with His blood. But they are not. They are posers. They are spectators wearing jerseys they purchased from the world system. The colors and the insignia may look the same, but Christianity is a heart issue, not a uniform one.

*Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.*

*Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.*

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

— 1 John 3:4-10



Oh, and btw, you literally have a better chance of seeing me playing for the New England Patriots than you do at seeing a phony Christian on the gridiron...just sayin'

## **Jesus, the Man**

Jesus is peerless. He's special. As odd as this may sound, He's so unique to me that I sometimes catch myself treating Him as a separate category of human being. What happens when I do that is He becomes less relatable. This is my fault, not His.

### **If there's one person we want to relate to in time, it's Jesus!**

Granted, He is the God-man, so it's not entirely unexpected that anyone would suffer this issue that I'm sharing. He is all God and all man, all the time, all in one magnificent package. If you're like me, contemplating that can give you brain cramps. Thank God for faith! :)

I have to remind myself, now and again, of the simple fact that He is a human being, just like me. This means that when He was on earth for those thirty-three years, He experienced what we all experience in life. Things like joy, pain, discomfort, relaxation, stress, love, encouragement, grief, work, etc. were all things that He experienced, personally, first hand.

**This makes Him unique even in the Trinity. It facilitates a unique ministry with man.**

I've been reading a wonderfully written book by Alfred Edersheim called *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. It's been a wonderful journey because Edersheim gives so many details about when, where, and how Jesus and His family lived. He writes from the perspective that I sometimes miss out on (hence this blog). Besides the obvious supernatural aspects of Jesus' life, if you didn't know that he was writing about Jesus, you'd settle into the book as if you were reading about 'just another man', so to speak. As a result, Jesus becomes more relatable.

Jesus needs to be thought of as an authentic person, not JUST God-who-

became-man. This may sound like splitting hairs, but it isn't, at least not for me. He was sent as a mediator between God and us.

**If we can't relate to Him properly, then we lose out on our relationship with God.**

*For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.*

— **1 Timothy 2:5-6**

Jesus didn't just look and act like a man. He was wholly a man. He made conscious decisions about His life. He had to learn, not just scripture (**Luke 2:40**), but also obedience through suffering.

*Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.*

— **Hebrews 5:8**

He certainly took the time to relate to all of us as human beings. We ought to make the effort to relate to Him as a human.

I guess what I'm really trying to convey here is that it's a real shame that I would ever lose sight of the pure humanity of Jesus. Sure, I understand such a thing academically but, like many biblical truths, it's one thing to know something, it's a very different reality to live in it.

I WANT to relate to my Lord as a man. I WANT to remember that He was challenged and tempted. I WANT to know that His love was that of one person to another, even as He cried out on the Cross and took His last breath.

**I want to live in a reality where this man, my Lord, is wholly real to me,**

**as a fellow human being. I want to live as if He showed up tomorrow at my front door I'd greet Him like an old friend, my best friend. I wouldn't want to be starstruck, unable to relate to Him. I don't believe that's what He wants for me anyways.**

Jesus desires to relate to us, human-to-human. He wants to be friends with us. I'd like to believe that if He really did show up at my front door some day, that He'd be totally comfortable coming in and sharing a pot of coffee with me, and that I'd be just as comfortable.

*No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what is master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all the things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.*

— John 15:15

**It's truly impossible to be friends with someone that you cannot relate to at a personal level. I can understand God, but I can't relate to Him the way I can relate to Jesus, the man. If I can manage that relationship, then I have something with God.**

*All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.*

— Matthew 11:27

## My Lord, Not Just My Savior

*Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ — this Jesus whom you crucified.*

— Acts 2:36

A lot of folks, it seems, myself included, refer to Jesus Christ as “Lord and Savior” ...almost like the phrase comes as a package deal. “Lord and Savior” seems to roll off of the tongue with an acceptable piety. However, I wonder if the twice-mentioned phrase isn’t sometimes relegated in practice as nothing more than an alternative name. In other words, I wonder how often we stop and actually contemplate the terms within the phrase. “Savior” seems easy enough, and most have a ‘feel’ for it due to the profundity of salvation and eternal life. However, “Lord” is questionable... at least as I’ve seen it in my lifetime. Allow me to explain.

**Lord (Merriam-Webster.com):** *1) one who has power and authority over others; a) a ruler by hereditary right or preeminence to whom service and obedience are due; ...d) obsolete: the male head of a household.*

Do you find it interesting that “the male head of a household” entry has been made obsolete? I do. It makes sense because, as I see it, this world is being overcome by feminism. And before all you ladies get all up in arms, finish reading (btw, chances are that the very reason you may have had that inclination is that YOU have been conditioned to claw at masculinity whenever it is smack dab in front of you...but I’ll save that for another blog).

Jesus Christ is the head of the household of the faith. He is the Head and we, the Church, are His Body. He is Lord. Our marriages are meant to be a reflection, *“Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the*

*wives ought to be to their husbands in everything*" (**Ephesians 5:22-24**). Maybe someone ought to call Merriam-Webster and let them know that they obsoleted the ONE definition entry for "lord" that had the truest right to remain. I wonder what their response would be...maybe, "Tag that phone number and block it".

You see, the degradation of the family structure is the mirror image of the degradation of lordship as a functioning aspect of sainthood. Except in churches like my own, which are rare nowadays, women wear the pants in the family. It's obvious as the men shuffle around behind their wives like puppy dogs. I've had a few come through the doors, but they're all gone now. These women choose the church, the times the family will attend services, and even which seats they will occupy on a regular basis. Think I'm imagining things???...take a close look around.

**Lordship has been granted to women in most marriages. Feminism is trying to build another tower to Heaven as I write. Jesus Christ is between the crosshairs.**

We are supposed to be subservient to our Lord. However, like the domineering wife in most marriages, we, His Bride, desire to rule over Him. Sure, we'll publicly call Him our "Lord and Savior" but, in all reality, most of us trample Him, ignore Him, and even try to emasculate Him with our actions (women do the same in marriage). He says, "Let's do this, my love" and we say, "Not a chance, dear, we'll be doing this other thing today...maybe later, if I decide we have the time". How disgusting, right? Are you surprised given the erosion of respect in earthly marriages, even?

And don't merely listen to the words being cast about, observe the activities. "*You will know them by their fruits*" (**Matthew 7:16**). Feminism is wise enough to cloak itself in a facade that's palatable enough for most unconcerned Christians...but not me...and certainly not Jesus, my Lord.

True lordship, designed by God as a magnificent, beautiful thing, has been

squashed by feminism (and a lack of masculinity)...even removed from our dictionaries. Just look at the average marriage now - be honest - who's typically wearing the pants in the family? Who WANTS to and who doesn't? Most men wear a disheveled 'man-uniform' without honor and dignity, so the primary culprit is man. Most men don't even know how to dress themselves spiritually, never mind address their families as head of the household.

Many are too busy donning sports jerseys or playing golf...only so much time in a day, right? Ugh.

**In the absence of something to respond to, a woman's own nature will take over. Some women have been burned so severely in marriage or by their own fathers that we've "lost" them for good, it seems...they are the "man-haters" as I've dubbed them, some more verbal than others. But nonetheless, respect for men is merely a formality to them, a maneuvering device they use now, hardly a heartfelt thing.**

**Most men are utterly disengaged so I'm not surprised by their absence of vigor. But Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior is forever interested in His Bride and is FIGHTING for His rightful place as Lord, even today (hint, hint: this blog - whose heart do you think I'm representing here???)**

Corner a man over a beer on all of this and he'll proclaim he is the "master of his domain", but it's just chest beating...he's merely a shell in a football jersey that smells like beer and cigars...or maybe he's the suit type - it doesn't matter. It's why he finds as many things to do OUTSIDE of the home as possible. "I work 80 hours a week!" they say...yeah, and why's that? When your family needs you, you're hiding out at your job...pretending you're something you're not. Ask his wife at the house and she might be kind enough to concur publicly (there's that "formality"), but behind closed doors, she'll be whipping him "back into shape". Sadly, there's often no longer a need for any "whipping" as most men willingly hand over the reins as soon as they walk through the door. I guess hiding

out is exhausting...hmmm. I'm spiritually nauseated right now...can't imagine what my Lord thinks about all of this.

The point of this blog is simple. Most people love the idea of a Savior, but, truth be told, could do without the Lord part. As I say, it certainly does roll off the tongue with a pious reverence, albeit phony. And that's typically where it remains, floating in the ether as something that no longer has a real home in our society (just ask Merriam-Webster, for starters). Most people have other gods and other lords they are far more interested in idolizing. For example, some folks get married JUST to be idolized. How's that ever going to happen if they marry a person who's already got a Lord?

**Sure, most believers appreciate being saved, but by their actions they prove their infidelity to their true Lord, Jesus Christ.**

*For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.*

— 1 Corinthians 8:5-6

**God the Holy Spirit, the One I'm filled with right now as I bang away at this ergonomic keyboard, won't surrender and neither will I!!! Jesus Christ IS LORD!!! He is my Master, yours too! He is "the MAN"! Real men stand up for what is right, beginning in their homes. We all are of the house of faith, where Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, is meant to rule our hearts. The sin of insolence is crouching at the door for you. Its desire is to rule over you, just like the woman desires to rule the man (*teshuqa* - Hebrew), but you must master it!**

*Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus is accursed'; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the*



*Holy Spirit'.*

— **1 Corinthians 12:3**

Is it fair to Him that many call Him "Lord" but treat Him like an awful wife treats her husband? Would it be more appropriate for most to just call Him "Savior"???...and in doing so relegate their so-called "saving faith" inept?

*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**

Food for thought...

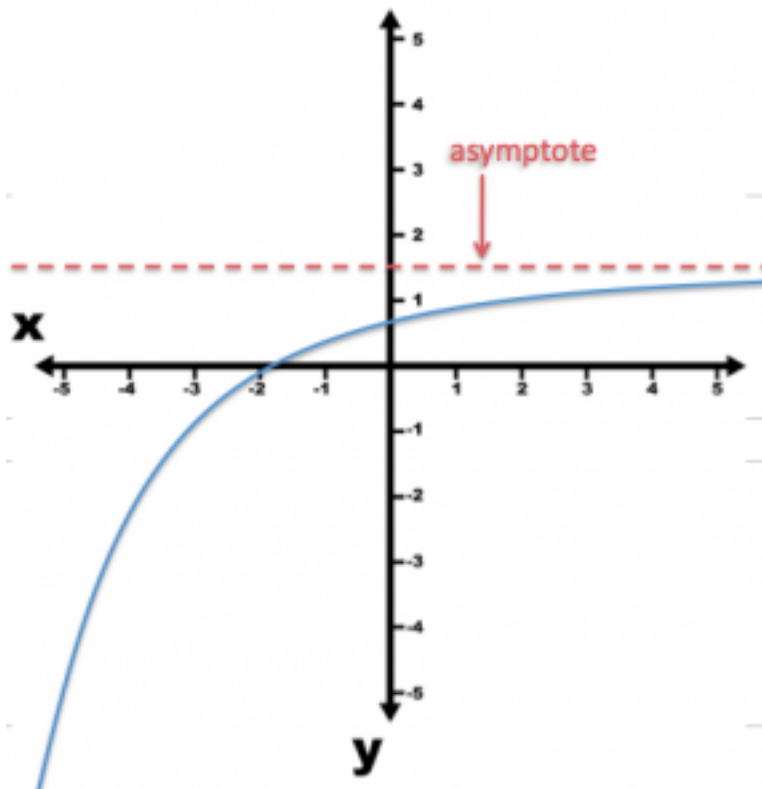
## Our Asymptotic Existence

*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**

**Asymptote:** a straight line approached by a given curve as one of the variables in the equation of the curve approaches infinity.

In layman's terms, an asymptotic function is when one thing gets closer and closer to another but never actually touches it. Here's what it looks like:



In practical terms, it means to become **increasingly exact**.

OK, that's enough advanced math concepts for now - LOL! Yes, the

propellor on this engineer's head is spinning wildly now and I may be experiencing a slight decrease in pressure on the seat of my pants. :)

**Consider God's desire for His children as the asymptote. In other words, His desire is for all of us to be perfected. The Bible often uses the words "complete" or "perfect" to describe God's ultimate goal for man.**

For example:

*Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you **be made complete** in the same mind and in the same judgment.*

— **1 Corinthians 1:10**

*Finally, brethren, rejoice, **be made complete**, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.*

— **2 Corinthians 13:11**

In both of the instances of the Greek verb for "complete" above, the passive voice is used, indicating that it is by God's grace alone that one is made complete. Yet, practically speaking, for as long as we are in our current estate, in this body, failing as we do so often, this work is never fully completed. This is why we often refer to such passages as pointing to man being "matured." There's a big difference that will save you a lot of frustration if you understand it.

In this way, God's divine standard of perfect righteousness is the asymptote to us, at least for as long as we live. This reality of approaching but never reaching the goal experientially continues until physical death (or rapture).

**God never lowers His divine standard for man, but rather over the course of a lifetime, by grace, He matures a believer so that he approaches it asymptotically.**

So, when we see statements like the one below, we need to understand the expectation that God has towards us regarding it: *"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 5:10).

For believers, the issue of frustration typically arises out of one's misunderstanding of how the Bible presents man against God's divine standards. Some have attempted to prove themselves fully complete and/or perfect, boasting sinless perfection in this lifetime. That is an impossibility. It sets the stage for frustration in the hearts of others who buy the lie yet remain humble enough to realize they'll never make it there in time.

**God knew in eternity past that you and I would never be perfected experientially until we get to Heaven. Nonetheless, He has made His will known in the Bible, that all man be perfected eventually. That is the trend He affects in us.**

**To trend towards something, there must always be an established, perfect standard.**

So, for as long as we are here on earth, in this life, even though it's impossible for us to be 100% sanctified experientially, the divine standard remains pristine. We approach it through spiritual maturation, but we never become perfectly righteous in this lifetime. Only one man was perfect in His flesh - Jesus.

We trend.

*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

Most of us run a long distance in this life. Life is like a marathon. We endure it. There's a reason for it.

*And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be **perfect and complete**, lacking in nothing.*

— James 1:4

Once we understand the nature of God's expectations against His own perfect righteousness, we mature to a place where we begin to realize the true nature of His commands. I don't have the real-estate in this blog entry to address this right now (maybe sometime soon, in a future entry). Suffice it to say for now that once you understand WHY God has authored so many commands in the Bible, even in the NT, you'll understand that they are freedom, not bondage. Food for thought. One step at a time, right?

*But prove yourselves **doers** of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.*

— James 1:22

**It is critical to man that God has given Him a view into His own perfect righteousness. That standard needs to be understood for it is what makes God holy. For now, we must accept that His will is for us to be holy like Him even in practice. However, given our current situation, in our current bodily estate, we can only approach doing His perfect will asymptotically.**

This should not bother any of us one iota. This is the design of HIS plan. We are play-actors on a stage that are being sanctified by grace. Time is a construct that God transcends, which means that it's only we who struggle digesting these things. That's where faith comes in.

## Our Asymptotic Existence

*Not that I have already obtained it or have already become **perfect**, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.*

— **Philippians 3:12**

Be encouraged. Ultimately, we shall live in perfection, experientially, in the eternal state. God's got a few things He wants to do first...some of which involves the angels, even. :)

In the meantime, learn to relax by understanding key topics such as the one presented here. Understand that your Creator knew in eternity past that you'd be the very person you are this day. He loved you still, so much so that He chose to die for your sins.

**Never lose sight of the Gospel. It is everything to us, the lynchpin to our faith.**

## **Our Best Days Are the Simple Ones**

I'm not a simpleton. Some may argue otherwise, I suppose, but if you're one of those people, please suspend that thought, at least for this blog - LOL.

**I'm not a simpleton, but I thrive on simple things. And I really wish everyone would.**

Why? Well, for starters, simple isn't complicated. Duh-uh!!! I mean, simple isn't complex, or convoluted, or difficult to hang on to. It doesn't manufacture unnecessary pressure or create distances between friends. Most of all, simple is easy living.

*Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*

— **Matthew 11:29-30**

I guess I'm not alone in my "simple" sentiment, huh? :)

**You see, Jesus gave us the secret to life - it's simple (pun intended).**

If you're looking for more than that, you've just missed the point. Go back and read that sentence again...and keep doing so until you get the point. Please.

The same Person that spoke the words in **Matthew 11:29-30** is the same Person that created the universe and everything in it, including life itself, including you. That pretty much puts Him at an undeniable advantage regarding the long-asked question, "How should I live my life?". I think it's fair to say that the Creator has given us the answer.

## Our Best Days Are the Simple Ones

Speaking of creation, consider how simple life was before the fall in the Garden of Eden. That was how the Lord intended life for humans to be - simple. It wasn't until the fall and the introduction of sin and evil that man began to make life complicated for himself.

**When man fails to keep it simple, he becomes estranged with life itself. He feels pressured, sometimes unable to even pinpoint the cause. He feels alone, ashamed, jealous, vindictive and unloved. These are not the sentiments that the Lord desires for His children; rather they are the natural complexities of man in his fallen state.**

Now think of Heaven. Simple, right? (Yet another pun intended!) That's because eternal life IS simple! That's how the good Lord designed it, my friends. God, you, fellowship, love.

**Eternal life is beautifully uncomplicated.**

*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**

We might be able to reminisce about how our distant relatives, Adam and Eve, enjoyed a simple life in the Garden, but we can't go back. We can only look forward, to the future. That's our hope. And as **John 3:16** states, the simple life, eternal life, is ours to enjoy, even today. It's a gift. We just need to open it every day and live in a reality that shall some day be consummated in Heaven. Our Creator wants this for us, though our adversary hates the thought of it.

*But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the **simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.***

— **2 Corinthians 11:3**



Consider what Paul was afraid of. He was afraid that the serpent would steal the keys to freedom away from those he loved. He was afraid, as I am even this day, that those with the keys to the kingdom of Heaven would overcomplicate their lives, so much so that they might lose those keys and never find them again until they die. How heartbreaking. :(

**Consider Jesus. He lived a simple life; a life filled with self-awareness and awareness of His own creation, both the good and the bad. And through it all, He was filled with a transcendent joy. Sure, He wept. Who wouldn't knowing what He knew, seeing what He saw, enduring what He endured uniquely. Yet His desire for those He loved was never complicated. "Follow Me," He'd say. Simple.**

**Understanding the existence of sin and evil doesn't mean we have to be infected by it. Infection implies complications with our spiritual health.**

**True wisdom is simple...she says so Herself:**

*[Wisdom's] ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and happy are all who hold her fast. The Lord by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens. By His knowledge the deeps were broken up and the skies drip with dew.*

*My son, let them not vanish from your sight; keep sound wisdom and discretion, so they will be life to your soul and adornment to your neck. Then you will walk in your way securely and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.*

— **Proverbs 3:17-24**

That's what Wisdom has to say, but man likes to argue, doesn't he?

## Our Best Days Are the Simple Ones

And where has that ever gotten him? A prison cell with a bunkmate that claims, "It's not so bad in here." Liar. If you're in prison, prison rules apply. Life can become quite complicated, unsettling even, if you buy the lie. How very evil.

*How shall we who died to sin still live in it?...for he who has died is freed from sin.*

— **Romans 6:2b; 6:7**

Waking up every day and living a life that isn't yours to live seems like a really complicated route to take, doesn't it? Then why did you do it yesterday...or the day before that?

*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**

**The Lord says, "Keep it simple!" Those will be your best days, God promises.**

## Recalibration - I Die Daily

Something's missing. A pulse? A vigor? A tenacity? Something. Believers aren't as excited about life as they ought to be. They appear beaten and abused, not physically, rather spiritually. They look like a bunch of folks that have tried to live but have all but surrendered. They look "like death". People are leaving the churches in hordes, our country is spiraling downward, and everything seems to be gloom and doom nowadays. Death is upon us and has overtaken the masses, even though most still pretend to be alive. The good news is that not all "death" is the same.

**Death isn't scary, truth be told, for a believer. It's not a final escape as some posture it. It's glorious. But you've got to share in Christ's perspective to understand such things. Life is good when you do.**

*Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.*

— **Romans 6:3-7**

Paul asked the Roman church that question in v3 because he understood that life has a tendency to steal away the fullness of what I'll call "the Gospel reality". That reality includes dying daily.

I once taught a series from the pulpit titled, *Living In the Gospel Reality*. The primary goal, as the Spirit revealed, was to remind my congregants that salvation is a **daily** consideration, not a one-time event, as most would

have it. The Gospel promises eternal life TODAY (**John 3:16**). If we lose sight of this, we will migrate slowly away from it in our daily experience, opening the door to death. Spiritual death is tantamount to separation from God. To lose the daily experience of living in the Gospel reality, which is abiding in Christ, is to lose out on the true joy of living. No wonder so many believers "look like death"...they must've lost sight of the Gospel!

*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**

**The phrase "from faith to faith" refers to saving faith and sanctifying faith, respectively. Notice how saving faith is the anchor, the absolute starting point, of sanctifying faith...there is no righteous faith prior to saving faith. We might rightly say that the Gospel is the 'post' that we are tethered to. If the 'post' is uprooted in our soul then so is any faith that follows...life is unsecured. The Gospel, the basis of our saving faith, is the "anchor of the soul".**

*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**

Now I don't know about you, but I am pulled in a thousand different directions every single day! As it is, even as I go to the throne of grace in prayer, I am often distracted...it's awful to admit, but it's true. I like to deaden such blows by blaming my A.D.D., but deep down, I know that's not the issue. My issues are no different than anyone else's...I have a flesh and it isn't fond of being tethered to anything, certainly not the Gospel! My

flesh wants to live and claim a stake in my life, even though its lifeblood, sin, is dead to me. *“Even so **consider** yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11).* The Greek word for “consider” here is in the present tense, denoting a continuous, daily activity.

**As believers, we have died, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20). We must “continuously” live as much in the reality that our flesh is dead as we do in the reality that we are alive in Christ. And if you’re anything like me (and you are), then you realize that this is a daily consideration, not something that’s magically wiped out at salvation.**

Paul said it plainly. *“I affirm, brethren, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily” (1 Corinthians 15:31).*

**To “die daily” is to be recalibrated by the simple Gospel truth. Christ is our all-sufficient Savior, not just at salvation, but EVERY day! We are to be delivered from the throes of death daily. To lose sight of the Gospel is to lose sight of Christ, the Person and His work on the Cross. Since our personal identity is by the worth of Christ, to lose sight of Him is to lose sight of ourselves. There’s nothing more unsettling in this life than to live in the kind of insecurity that promotes, “Who am I?”**

*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. However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.*

## Recalibration - I Die Daily

*If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*

— **Romans 8:5-13**

Go ahead and surrender your life to Christ...not just today, but every day. Die daily and you shall live daily. *“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it”* (**Luke 9:24**). We ought not "look like death" when we have been given eternal life in Christ!

## Safety First!

*In peace I will both lie down and sleep, For You alone, O LORD, make me to dwell in safety.*

— Psalms 4:8

When's the last time you read the "Caution - Read First!" section of a user's manual? Do you even know what I'm talking about? - LOL! It's typically stationed at the very front of the user's manual, often adorned by a multitude of stop and yield traffic signs...anything to grab your attention. Unfortunately, technical writers still haven't found a good way to accomplish that.

**Arrogance is a powerful force. It often assumes it doesn't need to consult precautionary instructions.**

**The more dangerous the apparatus you're working with, the longer the "Caution" section of the user's manual.**

I own a tractor. The user's manual is riddled with caution notes. The same went when I used to work on large aircraft. If you work with anything that could potentially cause you harm in the workplace, you likely have heard about OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) guidelines. Whatever the case may be, there's a reason those safety precautions are there. They are there for our own good!

Back in the 1990's I worked for Texas Instruments, Inc (T.I.) up in MA. At the time, they were manufacturing metal products. Exceptionally large reels of metal, literally weighing tons, would be spooled up and fed through massive stamping presses. Walking down the neatly rowed manufacturing line was like being in the presence of 20 or more oversized pounding woodpeckers. Tat-tat-tat-tat...these ridiculously powerful machines would cut out thousands of pieces an hour. Impressive, but

dangerous at the same time.

It was easy to identify the long-time employees working the line, as they'd have a certain air about them. I'd often make a point of speaking with them whenever I could, happily giving them the time to wax on about the "old days" on the line. I love that stuff...would rather listen to an experienced person than read a history book any day of the week. Inevitably, in part due to my morbid curiosity, the conversation would find it's way to some kind of a safety issue. After all, a workman's longevity on a manufacturing line like that one was intrinsically related to safety, whether the employees wanted to accept it or not.

To keep their employees safe, T.I. would mandate lots of instructor-led, video, and online training courses. NOBODY liked them. "Boooooorrrinnnggg!!!" was the general sentiment. It wasn't uncommon to see folks nodding off during said training. Instructors would drone on, fully aware of the lack of interest in their audience. Safety was paramount.

**I wonder what those who were seriously injured over the years might say to those rolling their eyeballs at the thought of safety training.**

Put a stick of butter in a microwave for 30 seconds and then push a sharpened steak knife through it. That's about how easy it is for one of the aforementioned stamping presses to sever a human finger. I've had friends that have lost fingers that way. The danger is very real and it only takes a split second disregard for safety to be the new owner of a nub.

**The more dangerous the situation, the greater the value of the safety training.**

How critical is it that a heavy equipment operator knows the safety limits of a 20-ton crane? How dangerous would it be for a commercial airliner pilot to sleep through a safety video? How important is it that a 16 year old passes a motor vehicle operator's exam? Are you comfortable with any one



of these safety issues being overlooked? I'm not.

Ask yourself, what's the most dangerous thing you operate in the spiritual life? If you ignore the safety instructions, is there a good possibility that you might harm yourself or possibly others? Then why do most people ignore the "Caution: Read this First" sections of the Bible? Is there something in particular that involves life and death?

**How about the Gospel? Might we consider it "heavy equipment"? I think that's fair, given the gravity of operating it unsafely.**

*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. For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.*

— 1 Peter 3:17-20

What if Noah had decided to skip the safety issues when building the ark? How important is it that the ark didn't leak? How critical was it that he followed the WHOLE set of directions that God had communicated to him? If he had "fallen asleep" while receiving his directions, would other people and creatures have suffered?

**A person in the dark about their own safety is destined to destruction. It's very possible they jeopardize the welfare of others, too!**

**Nowhere is this more critical than in terms of one's salvation. Spiritual safety and all things relating to our sense of security in this life relate back to this. To sleep through this "safety first" lesson is to remain in the**

**dark forever.**

*For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.*

— **1 Thessalonians 5:2-6**

What good are all the more minor precautions (aka commands) in the Bible if a person remains spiritually dead? What good is being able to safely operate the aircraft lavatory on a jumbo jet if you're on final approach and you don't know how to put the landing gear down?

**Turns out the Gospel is THE heaviest piece of equipment we'll ever operate. It's critically important that you understand it, not only for yourself, but also for the sake of those around you!**

*Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*

— **Philippians 1:27a**

## **There's Always Hope**

**The very presence of hopelessness is crushing. It's antithetical to being "in Christ".**

Hopelessness leaves encouragement very little to work with. It's like one of those horrific dreams where you are trying to run away from a monster but your legs are stuck in molasses, only in this case the monstrosity is your inability to catch up with the hopeless person to give them the good news. It can be so very frustrating and heartbreaking, too. Nonetheless, I submit the following Truth:

**There's no such thing as hopelessness with God.**

It's only in the perceived absence of God's grace that one might rightly stake a claim to hopelessness. There's only one general case where hopelessness is goodness and that's in humility. It's in that moment, when they realize that self-reliance is a garbage doctrine peddled by the world and even many religions, that a person experiences the spiritual drought of hopelessness. That thirst is meant to lead a person to Christ (or back to Him).

**God designed life to remind us of how very hopeless and helpless we are without His grace.**

*And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*

— Romans 5:3-6

What a wonderful perspective to cling to as a believer. It seems so simple, yet so many individuals are stuck in the mire...miserable, insecure, anxious, and confused about their exit strategy. They abide in hopelessness for one reason - they are ignorant of God's grace. Guilt facilitates this.

**A 'hopeless believer' is an oxymoron. Guilt is guilty of manufacturing all kinds of paradoxes, isn't it? The inspired Word of God states, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1), yet most believers cling to things addressed 2,000+ years ago on the Cross, namely their sins.**

Jesus Christ didn't die on the Cross, utter "*It is finished!*" (**John 19:30**) in His final breaths, only to have you violate His good work by being a walking, talking, self-loathing oxy-MORON (emphasis on you being moronic - no offense intended whatsoever).

**There's ALWAYS hope. It's simply a matter of where one expects to find it. Now, if you continue to seek for deliverance through self-reliance, then I retract my statement with unapologetic ferocity...for there truly is no hope for you. However, if you seek Him first, then you shall be secured in everlasting hope...of peace, joy, love.**

Some might be saying to themselves right now, "But you don't know me! I've been in this rut for decades...it's all I've ever known. I grew up in a family, a spiritually malnourished one, that has draped my life with a sense of inherent hopelessness. In my house, 'Christ' was most often mentioned as the preamble to a lengthy expletive. I've been conditioned to believe that my illnesses are my fate. I am heavily bonded." I understand. Christ understands infinitely more so. But please listen...

**If you're willing, then He's open to receiving you into His loving arms...just as you are - always! He was intimately aware of all of your "baggage" as He hung on the Cross...and still, He did what???...He stayed there...for YOU, personally! He knew how messed up you'd be,**

**even this day, as you read this blog. He knew how you'd be buried under an avalanche of guilt. He knew then what He wants you to know now - that none of that matters. You are loved.**

**All that matters, all that has EVER mattered, is His grace. Nothing is impossible for Him, even "you". You are like clay in the Potter's hands:**

*The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD saying, 'Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will announce My words to you.' Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make. Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, 'Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?' declares the LORD.*

*'Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it'.*

— **Jeremiah 18:1-8**

That's the Lord God saying to the nation Israel that if they turn away from the self-life, He will deliver them on the spot. As is the case with any form of repentance (even our own today), the onus falls on people to make a decision for or against God. Grace was the answer then, as it is to this day...as it's always been.

*But they will say, 'It's hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart'.*

— **Jeremiah 18:12**

**Do you see what just happened there? It's awful...I see it all the time and**

**it breaks my heart. Those who do not TRUST in the Lord lose hope. Without hope, what's left? There's not much left to draw a person back to Christ if there's no hope. So man's habit is to place their hope and trust in self. It's the natural order of things. It's death.**

**Grace delivered us from death at the Cross. It also delivers we believers by sanctifying us in time. Believing is the key to being filled with hope...and *"hope does not disappoint"* (Romans 5:5).**

**My hope is that you believe...so that YOUR heart is filled with all joy and peace!**

*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**

There's always hope.

## What Have You Got to Lose?

"Hey, Ed, thanks for buying your new car from us - we really appreciate your business." Just at that moment, "Oh, hey, there's our general manager. Let me introduce you to him," says the salesman who just pocketed a nice commission.

"How are you, sir?" I say politely to the hurried man.

The man standing before me is shorter than average, somewhat polished in that car dealership sort of way (no offense intended). He's obviously on the move, as I'd bet he often is. From what I understand about that business, it's quick inventory turnover or death. Being the GM means he's a master at moving and shaking to make things happen. I once had a flight instructor that had to quit being an automobile sales manager because as he once intimated, "The stress almost killed me!" He said he'd rather fly jumbo jets full of people.

The GM stopped at my inquiry and I could immediately tell by his body language and cadence of speech that the conversation would be cordial, but rushed.

"Hello! Congrats on your new vehicle...same color scheme as the one I drive. Nice choice. And thank you for your business. Here's my card. Feel free to contact me at any time." Indeed the conversation was going as I had suspected. Meet. Greet. Gone.

The salesman then does something unexpected that catches both the GM and me a little off-guard. He says, "By the way, Ed's a local pastor."

Without a hitch, the GM says, "Good for you! We have a lot of spiritual folks in our dealership - Christians, Muslims, etc. Great to hear of your spirituality as well!"

What does the established local pastor say?...something profound or unraveling or at least something that refutes the obvious error in this man's viewpoint about truth? You'd think, "Of course!" right?

Nope.

I say, "Thanks. Nice meeting you." And the GM walks away with a victorious gait. Quick turnover.

Ugh.

Why didn't I ask that man for a moment of time and give him the Gospel? Why didn't I stop and defend my Lord's good name from being muddied by that ugly concept the world has dubbed, "spirituality"? That's the kind of garbage that Oprah peddles - yuck! What's wrong with me? I'm a PASTOR for crying out loud! If I love my Lord so much, WHY didn't I step up and say something at least a half grade above moronic? "Thank you"?... seriously, Ed?...for what, exactly?...for publicly agreeing with this passive-aggressive attack on my Lord? I repeat - UGH!

Why did it go down that way? Now here's where I could get all intellectual and weave a tapestry of potential causes and bore you with psychobabble. But I'm not going to waste anyone's time, especially not my Lord's.

**The simple answer is that I'm weak. I got spun up in the moment. I missed my cue. It happens.**

On the drive home, in the new car nonetheless, I had a heavy heart. I knew before the GM had even taken ten steps away from our little pow-wow that I had failed. As is usually the case, I combed through the ordeal forensically, assessing where my head was. Here's what I concluded.

I was stricken by fear. Fear of what, though? Fear of losing rapport, mostly.



Fear of confrontation. Fear of a lot of stupid things that mean NOTHING to Christ but everything to the world. The world fought for what it clings to and I didn't. It won that battle and I lost. Bummer. It's not the first time, nor will it be the last, I'm sure. It's painful to write that, but I'd rather be honest than pretend to be perfect.

*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.*

— 1 John 4:18

Instead of abiding in the sphere of love, I shrunk back in fear, which effectively squeezed out whatever love I should have expressed that day. It's the fundamental pattern most of us fall into when the flesh rears its ugly head and derails us.

**Fear is a nasty opponent. It's the root cause for our enemy's victories. In my specific case, fear ambushed and imprisoned whatever love I had for this person and for Christ, even.**

**Was rapport with a couple of strangers really so important that I failed to love them? Seems to be the undeniable case, doesn't it? That may sting a little, but as I've taught my congregation over the years, the first step to any recovery is to call a spade a spade.**

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*

— Romans 1:16

I've learned to look squarely in the mirror as often as possible. When I set down to pray, I do so with an open heart, no matter how raw I may walk away from the ordeal. At least I'll be fellowshiping with the One who shows me the truth about myself.

## What Have You Got to Lose?

**If I stiffen my neck and harden my heart with a steely, fleshly resolve, I frustrate His intention...I miss my cues to step out on the big stage (life) and reveal Christ's love for all.**

He is the potter, after all, and I am the clay (**Romans 9:20-21**). He desires for me to remain open to progressive transformation. That's the only way. Otherwise what good thing can He accomplish in me after salvation?

**So the answer to the question before us, "What have you got to lose?" is very simple. When it comes to presenting the Gospel, the answer is "nothing".**

You may think you've got something to lose, but just think about how much the unbeliever stands to lose. They have the free gift of eternal life set before them. What do you have to lose in presenting that fact before them? ...nothing.

**The things that preoccupy man's flesh in this equation have no value in the Kingdom of Heaven.**

**Victory in Jesus means we've already won. We've got nothing to lose when we focus on Him...well, except maybe our great captor, fear. I'm good with that. :)**

## Growing Up

God's will is for His children, once saved, to learn from His Word and His Spirit. His will is for each of us to "grow up" in Christ.

*For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.*

— **Colossians 1:9-12**

When a believer matures in the faith, certain preordained fruit will become evidenced in them, fruit that only God can produce, such as, "*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**).

Growing up in Christ isn't something a believer can will into existence, for it is God who gives each of us a measure of faith. He tempers our growth in such a way to guard us from ever taking credit for His good work. "*For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith*" (**Romans 12:3**). The more mature a believer becomes, the more reliant they are on the grace of God. These are the types of lessons that must be learned, and is why God leaves His own on earth long after salvation.

Growing up spiritually is as big a miracle as any man has ever witnessed - it is truly supernaturally wrought.

*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**

## A Little Boy Searching

“Mom, may I go look for rocks?” says the little boy with the gutsy band-aid clinging to his knee and the seemingly unending vigor for all things adventurous.

“Sure, baby, but only keep one, OK?...we don’t have the room for more than one at the house...and...”

The boy cuts his mother off, “I know, I know, and don’t go too far where you can’t see me...BYE!” And he’s off, looking like Sherlock Holmes in a size 7 bathing suit, with every bit of earnestness as Holmes, himself, dominating his appearance. His mother smiles and shifts her chair just in case her beloved son forgets about his promise.

Still within earshot, the boy turns around and says, “WOW, Mom, look at this one!” as he holds up a rock that has been smoothed over by years of being tossed around the ocean floor. Actually, at second glance, he realizes that it’s not a rock at all, rather it’s a piece of old sea-worn glass. His mom looks to him and smiles, conveying her approval as the boy retracts, “Never mind, it’s just a piece of old glass.” He decides to make use of it anyway by leaning sideways and skipping it across the water... “Buh! - I’ve seen better.” Undeterred, he presses on.

This is a familiar scene, though it’s possible that only the mother realizes it; the newness restarting in her son’s tireless youthful mind with every trip to the beach. Nonetheless, over the years, as his inquisitiveness has soared, she’s never once discouraged her son’s quest for “THE rock”. She’s just secretly hoped that he find it before he’s out of the house; otherwise, he’d better become a geologist or something. She chuckles.

He’s too far from his mom’s lawn chair to share his latest discovery, but boy is he excited about this one. The colors are magnificent - pale blue with

brilliant white streaks and a few specks of green. "This is a keeper," he says to himself. However, being the world-renowned explorer he is (in his pretending), he feels obligated to a higher calling, the mission, and so he trudges on through the terrific dangers of quicksand and tsunamis (this is how little boys play adventure on a beach...well, I can only truly speak for myself).

This goes on and on for what seems like a long time (in reality, it's only been 15 minutes by his mom's watch). He finds his next greatest discovery, compares his bounty and makes the difficult decision of which to keep. Whatever attachment he had to the previous find is immediately overshadowed by the glory of the next. In theory, he figures that by the time he returns to his beach blanket, he'll have found the best rock the beach has to offer! For as long as time permits, he is intent on seeking! Carry on, wayward son (yes, that's a *Kansas* reference).

The story never ends because it shouldn't. Well, it does when the young boy dies an old man, but the point of the story, at least for the sake of this blog, is the journey. The beauty is in the boy's tenacity and the mother's encouragement, and that they coexist in a wide-open space worthy of a lifetime of investigation. These are the things that remind me of the spiritual life. I hear my Lord's voice, "Seek..."

How often do we set out with fine intentions and find something wonderful to behold? How often do we hear the Spirit's voice prodding us on, encouraging us, even though, being God, He knows we haven't yet found the very best He has to offer us? Nonetheless, He encourages us to hold on to what we believe is the "best" for as long as we perceive it as such, doesn't He? And we should! In that moment, we are right where God wants us to be, we are as wise as He meant us to be, even if we haven't yet found the perfect truth yet...though we keep on seeking for it!

**What we have is perfect for the moment, and it is good. There is divine rest in understanding this simple fact. Sanctification is a process, after**

all.

**God created us believers knowing that it'd take years to mature us. And even when we might adorn ourselves or others with the title "mature", God knows we aren't perfected. Yet, the paradox for many believers, and it's the source of one of the most commonly asked questions I receive, is that God also holds us responsible to His divine standard. How is it that we can produce anything good and acceptable, being imperfect?**

**The short answer is, believers do. How do we know this? - because the Bible tells us we will.**

We aren't born knowledgeable of Christ's mind, therefore, we must endeavor (like the little boy) to seek it out for our own possession. *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened"* (Matthew 7:7-8). The greatest "rock" we'll ever behold is THE "Rock", Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4).

**The penalty for sins has been paid for on the Cross. However, the consequences of sin are still very real in the lives of believers; God using them, in part, to sanctify us in time. Any work of God is good. "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).**

**We cannot allow ourselves to get bound up in "how this" or "how that". If how God chooses to sanctify us is acceptable to Him, then it ought certainly be acceptable to us. "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use" (Romans 9:20-21)?**

God knew all the gory details about each of us before He even chose to create and elect us to His family. We are held responsible to that which He has revealed to us while sanctifying us to His glory. *“And that slave who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more”* (Luke 12:47-48). In other words, individuals are judged differently, depending on what they know about God’s law.

Let’s put this to practice.

**How is it that we ought to relate to the young boy scanning the beach, always looking for something better? *“Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 18:4). The simple answer is to love what we are doing...or more accurately, love what He’s doing in us! It’s HIS beach, HIS rocks, HIS time spent with each of us as we look back to Him saying, “Dad, look what I just found!!!” No one is happier in that moment than God is, even knowing that our latest discovery has a shelf life and will be replaced with something even grander in the future. But, ‘one step at a time’ is the foundational principle in sanctification.**

*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

My encouragement here is that you learn to embrace whatever “rock” you have in your pocket, for as long as it’s a chip off of THE “Rock”, Jesus Christ. You may not have all of it down pat (relax, none of us do), but God sees your heart (1 Samuel 16:7) and is pleased with your childlike seeking



and your love of His commandments. *“And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it” (2 John 6).*

**Learn to focus on what you DO have instead of what you don't. Express the same towards others, too. You'll find you'll appreciate your life more when you do these things.**

If you're ever unsure of the decisions you're making, go to Him in prayer and seek your answers in the Holy Scriptures. If time is of the essence, and your latest “expedition” seems to fall short of what you were looking for, then default to the greatest law of all - love. Ask yourself in those moments, “Is what I'm about to do in the sphere of God's love? Is it selfish or selfless? Is it arrogant or humble?” We ALL can answer those questions, can't we?

*‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And He said to him, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.*

— Matthew 22:36-40

**Human nature looks backwards and criticizes what we used to believe was the best God had to offer. It's easy to throw stones once enlightened, even become self-condemning regarding our past “foolishness”. But to do such a thing is to question the method by which God sanctifies us. Some even fan the flames of their own mistrust by asking, “Where was the Spirit's ministry during all of this?”, and then concluding that He must've somehow turned a blind eye or that the effected were somehow not filled or walking by His power. Those are dangerously placed human arguments that lead folks right back to bondage. That is certainly not what God wants for any of us.**

We are commanded to “*walk by the Spirit*” (**Galatians 5:16**) while knowingly carrying so-called inferior “rocks” in our pockets. The objective is to keep walking, NOT be crippled with “analysis paralysis” rooted in criticism coming from ourselves or possibly others. Human rationalism would suggest that we throw in our towels right now, however, “*Looking at them, Jesus \*said, “With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God”*” (**Mark 10:27**).

We are free to live in the confidence that the Lord has everything under control. Quit worrying about being imperfect and smacking your head saying, “Darn it, I should’ve known better!” As they say, “Everything’s twenty-twenty in hindsight.” Rather, seek to live a life of discovery, keeping your eyes on the prize (**Philippians 3:14**), and live a life that looks back and says, “I did the best I could with what I knew to be true at the time, as God ordained it so...and I know that God is pleased with my heart.”

*Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.*

— **1 John 3:21-22**

**If you can stand before God in humility, always seeking the truth, then He is pleased...and the opinions of others matter not at all. Opinions are like derrieres, everyone’s got one. Only one matters...God’s. Never allow Satan or his agents to convince you otherwise.**

*Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day — things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated*

*without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.*

— **Colossians 2:16-19**

**Be encouraged. Be excited. Be thankful. Pray...and never stop seeking with the heart of a child.**

*Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.*

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

— **Philippians 3:12-14**

## **“Don’t Sit So Close To the Television...”**

I remember snuggling up really close to the Zenith console television and hearing my parents say, "Don't sit so close to the television or you're going to go blind!" This seemed like a pretty common sentiment shouted across many a living room floors in the 1970's, mine being one of them. Were our parents really concerned about blindness? Probably not, but most assumed it was bad for their children's eyes so they insisted on a little healthy fear in the minds of the gogglers.

This seemed to go right along with, "don't go outside with wet hair in the winter or you'll get brain damage!" Or, "don't go swimming within a half hour of eating lunch or you'll get cramps and drown!" Or, "keep making that face and it'll get stuck like that!" Or one of my all-time favorites delivered up uniquely by my dear grandmother, "don't sit on a cold rock or you'll get piles!" (I never knew what piles were but the way she would say it - it was bad!) I'm sure we'd all get a good chuckle out of old wives tales, but I digress.

## **"Don't sit so close to the television or you're going to go blind!"**

Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but on more than one occasion I got SO close that I noticed little dots behind the glass that seemed to always be changing colors between red, blue, and yellow (the primary colors that make up all colors - that's right, I still remember my primary colors from grade school - ha!). These dots were like little colored light bulbs, only there were thousands of them! Yet, oddly, once you stepped back from being that close you couldn't see the dots anymore. Rather, by visually digesting hundreds or thousands of them all at once, you'd begin seeing a moving picture!

How intriguing an analogy this is to the spiritual life.

**It seems the first time we see Truth in the Bible, we see this tremendous vision - sort of like the first time we turned on a television and were amazed at the picture (even if the resolution wasn't all that great at first). And out of excitement to be more and more intimate with the figures on the "screen", we find ourselves stepping closer and closer until we begin to see the individual pixels (dots on the screen). In the Bible, we call these details "doctrines."**

For me, that meant years of analyzing the variety of colors and the frequency of occurrences and the various hues and their proximity to one another. I spent years looking for new ways to analyze the minutiae and would seek out viable methods from others enjoined in this same quest. This was all fine work - to a degree.

**What I found was that if I spent TOO much time analyzing "pixels", which really translated into spending too much time analyzing original languages, categorical doctrines, etc., I would begin to lose sight of the big picture.**

**In other words, by spending so much time focusing on the trees, I would lose sight of the forest.**

It's a real blessing to have Bible doctrines etched into the soul, but what good are they if I lose sight of Jesus Christ? What good is a notebook full of notes on Him if I can't relate to the Person in my spiritual walk? I can't fall in love with my notebook can I?

So, what I've learned to do is heed the words of those who used to look out for my precious eyesight, only I apply it to my spiritual walk.

**"Don't sit so close..." - only in the spiritual life it's, "don't sit so close to the doctrines or else you'll go blind!" Spiritual blindness is essentially the inability to see Jesus Christ.**

“Don’t Sit So Close To the Television...”

I have learned to step back always, the way an artist steps back from a painting every so often, in order to embrace the big picture and cherish the fact that I am able to see the preeminence of my Lord & Savior Jesus Christ.

I remain enthralled with discovering new pixels on the big screen as each one increases the overall definition of my Lord and His work on the Cross. There's nothing like beholding our Lord in super high-definition! :)

However, the end goal is a relationship with the Man, not His attributes. The end goal is to fall in love with the living Word (**John 1:14**), not the words that describe Him. After all, the big picture is the fullness of Christ (**Ephesians 4:13**).

*Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with incorruptible love.*

— **Ephesians 6:23-24**

## Dream But Don't Be a Dreamer

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

— Ecclesiastes 5:7

Until the latter years of my life, I always considered myself a dreamer. I suppose growing up below the poverty line for years as a child helped to cultivate that in me. To dream back then was to escape for a time. I'd spend hours contemplating the nuances of life...so much I didn't quite understand...so much pain around me at times that dreaming meant relief. I'm not saying I had the worst childhood or anything, just describing an environment that was conducive to dreaming.

If the energy was there, I'd often take the details of the dream and play pretend. I'd dream of possessing superhero powers. Superman and the Hulk were always my favorites...I think maybe because I was a bit of a runt as a young child. And if I ever forgot it, my older brother was there to "remind" me. He's a good guy now, just vented in his own way at the time.

Nonetheless, one time I attempted to 'fly' down a flight of stairs in the house wearing my hockey equipment...ON PURPOSE! I obviously needed a rush of "indestructibility" at the time - LOL...you know, to experience 'a little superman'. In another 'superman' moment, I jumped off a roof with an umbrella (not popular with parents, btw, if you're curious :o ). In yet another attempt to fly, I put my Superman Halloween costume on, complete with red cape, and leaped off the swing. I didn't fly.

When I got older, and a little wiser, I stopped trying to fly...though, my most popular sleeping dreams involved flying...and a swimmer's freestyle stroke...but this has been weird enough already, so I'm going to leave that one be. :P

My head was in the clouds. I literally tried to get closer to them, failing, of course; however, the experiences, though silly, are noteworthy. Learning that I COULDN'T fly kept me grounded. Learning that trying to live out certain dreams resulted in injury was another good lesson, albeit more concrete learning than what I intend to convey here.

**Dream but don't be a dreamer.**

*He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap.*

— Ecclesiastes 11:4

Dreams, as they are typically understood in the figurative sense, are often good to have. I believe God allows for them to exist as manifestations of His will. If nothing else, dreams are a function of hope. Hope doesn't disappoint for as long as it's godly. I don't suppose there's anything wrong with a certain comfort offered by dreaming's unique abilities. However, there's a fine line we mustn't cross.

**Pain and suffering are part of God's plan for all of us. To try to "dream" them away by being a lifelong "dreamer" is to thwart spiritual growth. The key is to dream, but not as a plan of escape, rather as a joy set before you as you endure life's tribulations.**

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

— Romans 5:3-5



Dreaming is good, but don't miss the season of "doing". As Solomon wrote, "*There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven*" (**Ecclesiastes 3:1**).

To the one who dreams without blurring the line between reality and dreaming - to that person goes the spoils of prosperity. "*He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers*" (**Psalm 1:3**). However, to the dreamer, the one who loses sight of reality - to that person goes a life of heartache and disappointment. "*The sluggard does not plow after the autumn, so he begs during the harvest and has nothing*" (**Proverbs 20:4**).

**I used to wish I was Superman. Not anymore. I want to be me, with my dreams intact...just not a dreamer. Someday, if my Lord doesn't personally come get me (ref: the Rapture), then I'm going to be ushered to Him in Heaven when I die. In either case, I'll have my dream of flying with my head in the clouds. That's my favorite dream now.**

## **Taking Full Responsibility**

*“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).* This scripture places the personal responsibility of every believer square on their own shoulders, no one else’s.

**As much as some would like to blame their upbringing, or their parents, or even their pastors, the undeniable reality is that God holds individuals responsible for themselves.**

This means that churches that have been functioning for years, centuries even, may not be blamed for an individual’s lack of good standing with the Judge, Jesus Christ. All will stand before Christ’s judgment and their deeds will be evaluated. Excuses have no place in Heaven, not now or in the future. This means that there will be many believers whose so-called “good deeds” will be burned up like wood, hay, and straw (ala **1 Corinthians 3:12-13**).

Not that long ago I received a scathing email from a person that expressed a deep resentment towards all pastors. Why? - because they said they had been burned one too many times and that they’d, “never trust another pastor again!” I knew this person well enough to understand that their tendency was to idolize men behind pulpits. It’s a telltale sign of a person who lacks a sense of personal responsibility. It was evidenced in their daily speech, as they’d speak more often of the doctrines of a man than actual scripture. So it was no surprise to me that when their pastor fell (most, to my knowledge, do not), their confidence, their very convictions, were shattered on the floor alongside the pieces of their broken shepherd.

**A person should never live on borrowed convictions. It’s dangerous. Christ expects, by grace, that we each receive our own measure of faith,**

**that we each learn to live on our OWN convictions. “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” (Philippians 2:12).**

The person whose confidence is “borrowed” from another person, even if that person is a wonderfully knowledgeable theologian or pastor, is the one who hasn’t yet learned the fundamental principle that they are a priest, representing themselves before God, “*and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father — to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen*” (**Revelation 1:6**). A priest’s role is to represent a person before God. We members of the Church represent ourselves before God.

The Bible clearly states that it is not another person’s job to save (deliver) you. There are spiritual gifts given by God “*for the equipping of the saints for the work of service*” (**Ephesians 4:12**); however, personal responsibility is never usurped by an office. It’s up to individual believers to investigate scripture and arrive at their own conclusions. I tell the members of my congregation to read their own Bibles, to sit down and dine on the “*bread of life*” (**John 6:35**), so that the Holy Spirit can minister to them personally with the inspired Word of God. That’s how they “*imitate my faith*” - they do as I do. “*Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith*” (**Hebrews 13:7**).

We have a wonderful example of all of this in scripture:

*The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 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.** Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.*

— Acts 17:10-12

If only ALL people would be so diligent in their investigations. But we know otherwise, that man in his rejection of God's grace would rather invent than investigate. *"For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations [inventions], and their foolish heart was darkened"* (**Romans 1:21**). It's no wonder that God hands some over to depravity...it's what they actually desire, regardless of what they might claim publicly.

A show of personal responsibility is nowhere more evidenced than when the Gospel is presented to an individual. In humility, the responsible person accepts their depravity with full force and with a contrite heart, yearning for our Lord and Savior for deliverance. However, in arrogance, the irresponsible person rejects the Gospel, skirting their responsibility to the Creator they KNOW exists (**Romans 1:21**)!

This irresponsible attitude is not an exclusive characteristic of unbelievers. Faithful shepherds such as Paul and Peter had to remind those they were leading of their personal responsibilities to seeking Truth after salvation. It's true, there's no such thing as a perfect pastor (warning: if you hear one make such a claim, run away quickly). There is, however, such a thing as God "perfecting" a pastor, which really means that He is maturing him over time (like He does with all believers). An honest pastor will understand and teach this truth. The one who doesn't is setting himself and his congregation up for a painful fall. The issue, then, is one of humility (again, this is part of *"imitating their faith"* - **Hebrews 13:7**):

*Not that I [Paul] have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to*

*you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained. Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.*

— **Philippians 3:12-17**

So where does this leave the sheep? I mean, sheep need to be led, right? Indeed (**John 21:15-17**)! However, there's a big difference between submitting to leadership, which is commanded by God (**Hebrews 13:17**), and blindly following. It's imperative that believers submit to a pastor, however, they mustn't ever lose sight of the fact that God holds them personally responsible for themselves. In the worst case, like the aforementioned example above, a person will submit to a pastor that "tickles their ears" (**2 Timothy 4:3**) with false doctrines designed to rob sheep of their priesthood (though many prefer that over responsibility for self - gives them someone to blame later, right?). "And He also spoke a parable to them: 'A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit'" (**Luke 6:39**)?

**Undisciplined sheep following and undisciplined pastor is a train wreck waiting to happen!**

**Simply stated, YOU are responsible for your own spiritual life. How many of us have been "burned" like the person in my story above? Yet, how many were TRULY seeking Him the entire time they were being led astray, if that truly were the case? How often did the Holy Spirit's "Berean" conviction go unaddressed? Who's to blame for their failures? How long will they remain in bondage as a result of their personal irresponsibility?**

Diligence is key. A person who's unwilling to seek Him won't find Him. "I love those who love me; and those who diligently seek me will find me" (**Proverbs 8:17**). Only a humble heart will seek Him this way. It's the same heart that gladly takes responsibility for itself.

We have so many examples given to us in the Bible of people who humbly submitted to the Word of God, not man. They are the blessed ones throughout human history.

One last example “for the road”:

*As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you **made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know** what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven — things into which angels long to look. Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*

— **1 Peter 1:10-13**

The Lord Jesus Christ said, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and **YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light**” (**Matthew 11:29-30**). The yoke analogy implies slavery, for we are all slaves of either righteousness or unrighteousness (**Romans 6:16**). Slavery implies labor. For believers, the fundamental labor is learning the Word of God under the perfect tutelage of God the Holy Spirit. Diligent, gifted men, such as myself, have been ordained by God to shepherd you, to lead you to such truths.

**Listen to the humble pastor, for humility is his strength. Imitate his faith, his authority-orientation, more so than his doctrines, even (for none of them have it completely down pat), knowing that the same God that leads them is the one that leads you through them. He’s the same God that desires to lead you every moment of every day, even in your pastor’s**

**absence. He is Lord of all.**

*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**

## **What You Think Is What You Get**

Ever notice how the things that irritate us the most in others are often the very things that we either have or used to have as weaknesses? I always get a 'chuckle' out of listening to people berate those around them regarding things THEY, themselves, are flawed at.

I hear the so-called successful turning their noses down at others, as if God's grace was something they earned. I hear formerly promiscuous women calling other women loose. I hear macho men pointing out all the "wimps". I even hear depraved men standing behind pulpits spitting venom at those in need of a little mercy.

**I hear the 'formerly' call the 'presently' all kinds of things. It simply reveals how 'stuck' these people still are in their own spiritual growth. Oddly, the very things these people are pointing out are the same things that they are insecure about being.**

This is a pit. The more dirt they sling out of the pit at others, the deeper they go.

**The issue is that most people seek deliverance from WITHIN the sphere of evil. Their frame of reference is based on a faulty scale of values. So they judge and are judged. They point out the faults and failures in others and their own misery increases. They seek self-elevation, but end up with self-denial and an even greater form of destitution.**

**'Projection' is the proper word for this.**

**Most people project their own insecurities on those around them. Meanwhile, THEY remain stuck because THEY are the ones functioning from within that perspective. The ones they are pointing at aren't even the real issue.**



I hear people say, "Who are you to judge me?! - you insignificant, insecure, loser! You're a nobody, anyways, everyone knows it!" Huh? Half the time the person being accused has no idea what the other person is even talking about. Why? Because it's not their problem. Now, maybe our language is more refined or the topic is different, but suffice it to say that we are often revealing our own struggles with something when we point it out in others.

It should come as no surprise that our Creator has inspired wisdom against such things. The Bible is filled with passages that speak of the issue of projection. It warns us against it, actually.

*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure - pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.*

— Luke 6:36-38

**There's an old proverb, "You are what you eat." Well, if you dine on the misery of others, you become miserable. If you eat of that table, you are metabolizing that which makes you ill.**

*Do not eat the bread of a selfish man, or desire his delicacies; for as he thinks within himself, so he is. He says to you, 'Eat and drink!' but his heart is not with you.*

— Proverbs 23:6-7

The temptation to jump back into that pit, the one that breeds projection, is a monster. The flesh desires to judge by man's standards. The trap isn't necessarily the judgment, but rather the system of thinking that induces it. The more indoctrinated we become, the further we separate ourselves

from the love of God. King David knew this intimately:

*With the kind You show Yourself kind, with the blameless You show Yourself blameless; with the pure You show Yourself pure, and with the perverted You show Yourself astute.*

— 2 Samuel 22:26-27

**This is a godly phenomenon, foreign to the flesh. Man's natural inclination is to suspect everyone else suffers from the same diseases it suffers from. However, God is not man, so the flesh's sense of rationalism is useless.**

To know God is to know the things of God. He promises to reveal His essence to those who step out of the sphere of evil and into the sphere of His love. When you do this, instead of projecting your own insecurities on others, you stare at a mirror. When you point, the finger in the mirror points back to you. The beauty of this is that Jesus is standing right behind you in the mirror, hugging you, propping you up, saying, "My grace is sufficient for you." Those who don't believe this are prone to projection in an effort to self-elevate.

*To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled.*

— Titus 1:15

**Defilement begins in the mind. What you think is what you are (ala Proverbs 23:7). Sow misery outwardly and you reap misery inwardly. The thing that you project towards others is the very thing that you wallow in.**

We are ALL wretched. "As it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one'" (Romans 3:10). We must learn to stop ourselves and consider the repercussions of our own thoughts. We must learn to dwell on the mind of

Christ, not our own. We need His mercy. If we want it, we must abide in the sphere of it.

*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

— Matthew 5:7

**If you seek goodness in life, then you must first abide in it. With God, to give is to receive. This is what it means to be truly grace-oriented. With God, giving is the great gift.**

With man, everything's "even-Steven" or "tit-for-tat", for better or for worse. Man likes to keep score. Make him insecure and he projects all kinds of things on others. With man, giving is gated by receiving. With man, receiving is the great gift.

What you think is what you get. A gracious, giving heart receives the great things of God (yeah!). A self-absorbed, 'projecting' heart receives the great things of man (ugh!).

# Holidays

*Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*

— **1 Corinthians 10:31**

Holidays are supposed to be an opportunity to stop and remember, to be grateful, to rest, to pray, even. Unfortunately, the world has hijacked just about every meaningful Christian holiday, be it Christmas, Resurrection Sunday, or even holidays that echo the heartfelt sentiments we find in the Word of God, such as Thanksgiving and Veteran's Day.

Holidays are about perspective and learning to keep it while Satan employs his strategy, which is designed to distract us. As Solomon said: *"There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven"* (**Ecclesiastes 3:1**).

No matter the holiday, Christ is the true celebration, the true Celebrity worth celebrating! Christ is our Passover, *"Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth"* (**1 Corinthians 5:8**).

## Christmas Lights

*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. In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.*

— **James 1:17-18**

As children, my siblings and I used to drive about 30 minutes to my dad's house. My grandfather would often be the one shuttling us back and forth - brave man! :) As rambunctious as we were, he had us preoccupied around Christmas time with counting the number of houses with Christmas lights on. We'd press our miniature noses up against the windows, stretching our necks out and "calling" each house as our own find.

I don't recall the final count, but some years it was over a hundred! There'd always be squabbling over who actually spotted a house first, but I suppose in retrospect that was better for whoever was driving than having us slinging our bodies over the seats, rolling around in the vast expanse of that old pea-green, panel-sided behemoth 70's station wagon. Good times (though I'll have to ask grandpa in Heaven if he agrees with that :P ).

In any case, lights are fun and festive, pretty to look at. However, nowadays I am preoccupied with counting another kind of light. The source of this light is THE Light:

*I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.*

— **John 12:46**

We believers are given the gift of "light", which means we partake in the one true Light, Jesus Christ. Maybe it's better to say that we have the

privilege to partake, though most pass up the opportunity to do so in time. Hence Paul's encouragement:

*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**

Nowadays, as I'm "driving" through life, I count lights. Christmas time reminds me of those still celebrating our Lord's birth, the one who was born to die for our sins. We, on the other hand, were born to proclaim the Light!

*What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops.*

— **Matthew 10:27**

In this way, in our fervent proclamation, we become lights to the world!

*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**

Christmas lights are fun, however they are merely electrified filaments that are but temporary. True lights to the world never burn out, or at least they shouldn't. In the grand scheme of things, Satan would prefer that we focus solely on the lights wrapped around Christmas trees and homes. I, on the

other hand, prefer to focus on those illumined by the Light sent to save.

*Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. 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 3:1-4**

Maybe the next time you see Christmas lights, as you drive by someone's home at night, you think of this blog. Maybe you think about revealing your gratitude and your love for Him, your Lord & Savior, so much so that the whole world is compelled to peer out its windows back at YOU, as you illuminate the whole street, putting their multicolored festivities in their rightful place.

## Veterans Day

I write this on Veterans Day (Wednesday, November 11, 2015). I am a veteran and I am working. I prefer it for the same reasons I prefer to give to others on my birthday rather than make a big deal out of “me”. I have never liked that kind of attention. It’s a personality thing, I guess. I’m not supposing my personality is in any way better than anyone else’s, but on each such holiday I tend to dwell on *why* all the celebration...shouldn’t we be doing this *every* day? I mean, in such a case as today, Veterans Day, shouldn’t we be thanking these servants every day?...just seems contrived somehow...at least sometimes.

In any case, today I’m thinking about all the veterans I know. I’m so very grateful for their sacrifices. Last night, my youngest son and I watched The History Channel’s *WWII from Space*. It was an hour and a half of strategic overview, the way the generals engaged in the war would have seen it... from above. The perspective was amazing and the material intriguing, but the Lord never let my mind stray too far from remembering that the massive numbers being flashed across the screen represented actual *people*. It’s easy sometimes to forget the personal loss while admiring the “chess game” the brass play in their war rooms, with their little figurines and to-scale table maps. A general nudges a front line a half inch and a thousand lives are shattered...a thousand families. Who cares what nationality they are? Shame on me for forgetting, however so briefly.

As the documentary unfurled, we just sat there betwixt and between our emotions. On the one hand, we were rooting feverishly and righteously, concurring with the public outrage spawned in the U.S. after the bombing of Pearl Harbor - our brows furrowed unanimously with each affront dealt by our enemies. Damn those killers!!! On one hand, battle cries; however, on the other hand, those large numbers kept panning across the screen...“6,500 soldiers lost”... “[hundreds] of ships sank”...and the numbers kept increasing as the war progressed. U.S. troops ballooned from 200,000



before the war to over 14,000,000. Before Pearl Harbor over 75% of the U.S. was for neutrality; however, afterwards the country stood united and ready to fight. "Hoorah!"...but then again, a *lot* of civilians were dying around the globe. How loud is loud enough a battle cry given the fullness of the situation?

I understand war is necessary. The Bible is chalk full of the Lord God's agents waging it, so there's an inherent goodness in it when we think strategically, eternally. It's preordained.

**Still, war is violent.**

I wonder how many people realize that the Soviet Union lost 25,000,000 people in World War II...and that roughly one half of all deaths in the war were civilian.

**War is ugly...really ugly.**

Hollywood makes movies portraying so-called "real soldiers" as one-sided warmongers, but they depict monsters instead of actual soldiers. Somehow it's considered "cool" to light up a smoke, look across a plain, and then shoot someone dead. How's that "cool", I ask? Necessary, maybe (less the cigarette), but hardly "cool", Mr. Hollywood. Is this what some might be celebrating on Veterans Day? Sadly, maybe.

My oldest son has actually *been* in battle, even lost some friends during his stint. He bears a tattoo on the inside of his bicep, where few ever notice it, "*Dulce Bellum Inexpertis*", which is Latin for "*war is sweet for those who haven't experienced it.*" That about wraps it up. Shut up, Hollywood...and quit selling your movies off as noble.

We can be sure that Jesus Christ, being God, understood full well the dichotomy of war. It's fair that He understood both His Father's meaning of it and the grotesqueness of it, also. We can only accept the fact that God

ordained it for one reason or another. That's faith. Even so, here are Jesus' precious words regarding our enemies, in particular, our spiritual ones:

*But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?*

*For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

— Luke 6:27-36

**War, as ordained by God, might be rightly seen as the hand of discipline reaching down and correcting some of His own. However unpleasant the exercise may be, we trust in its necessity...supposing this would be the healthiest way to consider the atrocities of war here on earth. We may not be able to stare awfulness in the face, but these are the byproducts that God ordained from eternity past. We must digest them as they are, no pretending - how dare we presume to dishonor the true reality of it. As Jesus intimated above, those on the wrong side of godliness ought to be prayed for, even in the midst of their own destruction.**

All of this reminds me of the old saying, when an earthly father must discipline his child, "This is going to hurt me more than it's going to hurt

you!” As the child rolls their eyes in disbelief and braces themselves, the father ekes through the agony of administering the discipline.

**When true love expresses itself, it often precipitates conflict with those confounded by it. If love demands it of us, then we ought to express it, regardless of the pain it might cause. That’s what God does.**

*For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.” It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?*

*But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*

— **Hebrews 12:3-11**

Veterans Day to me is bag of mixed emotions. Being a veteran, albeit one that never saw the front line of battle, I sympathize with the inner conflict so many have been left to cope with. The deepest wounds are undoubtedly invisible. I figure if Jesus understands such things, then I should be able to, also.

**It's difficult to be a good soldier without having a piece of your heart set aside for the casualties, I guess.**

The greatest war ever waged is invisible, spiritual, ongoing...something fought every day to exhaustion, ala, *"This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith"* (1 Timothy 1:18-19).

**The spiritual landscape is strewn with carnage...it's just plain awful... but, alas, necessary, too. Bittersweet.**

I pray that we all embrace a balanced perspective, lest we be thrown headlong into becoming either a monstrosity or a spineless worm. Neither is godly, regardless of the format of war.

Let's just be honest about our celebrations. Let's have the integrity to celebrate the right things the right way, with proper perspective. And why isolate our gratitude to one day a year?...it's a fair question.

## What Would Paul Say About Christmas 2015?

I like the apostle Paul...a lot. It's speculation to say this, but I imagine him as being so consumed with the Gospel that at times he was accused of being too single-minded, possibly insensitive, and oftentimes dismissive. Those things are to be expected, considering his commission in life. He had to stay focused...and focused he was.

*And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. **For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.** I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.*

— 2 Corinthians 2:1-5

I wonder how Paul would celebrate Christmas. Have you ever thought about that? What if he were plucked from the height of his ministry and sent forward in a time machine to 2015? How many of the concerns that contemporary Christians seem fettered to would Paul even spend a moment pondering? Would he scoff at us? Would he be angry with many of us? Would he be utterly disgusted? Probably, at least in some ways. Though, being a loving man, he'd endure the affront to Christ and go about rebuking, exhorting, reminding...fighting the good fight while many would murmur and complain.

He might even employ a Christmas tree (something unheard of in his culture) so that others might be apt to relate to him, giving him an opportunity to spread the Gospel. *"To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it"* (1 Corinthians 9:22-23). Paul was used to partaking in local

## What Would Paul Say About Christmas 2015?

cultural traditions for this very reason.

He'd have limits, though. He'd despise Santa Claus openly...I'm convinced of this. I suppose many Christians would accuse him of ruining the so-called "Christmas spirit", whatever *that* means nowadays. "So what's a little Santa or an elf on a shelf?...it's harmless," some might say to him. I'd like to see his countenance then...I'm sure I'd find much encouragement in it. "Shame on you!" is what I imagine him saying, among a slew of other colorful words. "Where's the Gospel?" he'd likely ask, "Are you ashamed of it?...where's the attention of your children, on Jesus or Santa???"

*For I [Paul] 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**

Paul may have been narrow-minded by the estimation of some, but he didn't let that stop him. He was focused. He knew that God gave him life and that He also saved him. For this he was eternally grateful and ever mindful of the rightful glory of God. So, it makes sense that he'd be viscerally upset by what contemporary Christians tolerate during and even celebrate as "Christmas". You might say he'd even be jealous.

*For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.*

— **2 Corinthians 11:2-4**

**Anything but a pure celebration of Jesus at Christmastime would be offensive to Paul, an abomination of sorts. I concur, even though I find myself straying in my own mind at times. I hate that it happens, but it does...and when I catch myself, the sorrow is overwhelming. Though my flesh disagrees vehemently, my heart desires to praise the Lord exclusively at Christmas...for giving me life and love...and for saving me when He didn't have to...when I didn't deserve it.**

Paul was so very grateful to God, especially in light of his personal history. He was motivated by His grace. May we share his perspective this season:

*For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.*

— 1 Corinthians 15:9-10

**Be grateful this Christmas, for all that He's done for you. You deserve absolutely nothing, but He's given you more than you could possibly even fathom. There are things He's doing in your life right now that you won't be grateful for until you see Him in Heaven and realize what He did.**

**The Lord God saves you every day...His Son guarantees it...be a living witness to this reality - the Gospel. If we're going to focus on anything this Christmas, may it be this.**

*"I, even I, am the LORD,  
And there is no savior besides Me.  
"It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed,  
And there was no strange god among you;  
So you are My witnesses," declares the LORD,  
"And I am God.*

## What Would Paul Say About Christmas 2015?

*“Even from eternity I am He,  
And there is none who can deliver out of My hand;  
I act and who can reverse it?”*

— **Isaiah 43:11-13**



## Humility Versus Arrogance

“Humility is the key to the spiritual life!” Those are the words that may arguably be *the* most commonly stated during Ed Collins’ tenure as a pastor. They are profoundly simple, yet equally important to understand. Jesus Christ set the standard of humility.

*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**

God favors the humble. The Holy Scriptures reveal to us that He gives grace to the humble. As Paul alludes to in **Romans 1:17**, “*from faith to faith*”, man is sanctified so that he may live by faith - something reserved for those humble enough to receive the Gospel, for starters. “*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**).

Arrogance is the antithesis of humility. It is the hallmark of evil, the root of every sin ever committed. God never considers sin favorably. “*Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness with favor*” (**Habakkuk 1:13**).

*But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “**GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.**” Submit*

## Humility Versus Arrogance

*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 4:6-8**

## Arrogance – Part 1

Ever met King Kong?

I don't mean the big, hairy ape in the movies...although depending on what he thought of you, that might be a pretty cool experience...LOL...just kidding, I don't really believe in fictional beasts.

When I say "King Kong" I mean the person who is often found beating their chest and bellowing pre-battle utterances, maybe even tumbling around a bit and then springing up for effect (figuratively speaking, of course). You know the guy. Yeah, THAT one. Walk into the room with a little confidence and it isn't long before this ugly ritual commences...what a joke. Let's just refer to him as "King Kong" for now since he displays similar, rudimentary expressions of bravado as with the fictional ape.

These types of individuals always make me chuckle because their arrogance, though very real, is often the thinnest of veneers. Since this brand of arrogance cannot be attributed to godliness, it is undoubtedly based on things of the world, be they material or otherwise. In any case, the issue with arrogance is that it always fails its possessor.

Overt arrogance is a facade. I liken it to a piece of lumber. If it's newly hewn, it is inherently pliable with less structural integrity than if it has had some time to mature in the lumber yard. As arrogance matures in an individual it tends to become more rigid and pronounced, giving off an air of strength and resolution. And in all fairness, there is a certain power to it, however it is very weak compared to God's power.

All arrogance has a breaking point. It's just a matter of time. My prayer is that arrogance is broken BEFORE a person dies. Why? First, there's the simple reason that a person needs to admit that they need our Savior. If a person refuses this, and takes their arrogance to the grave, they will find it

broken when they are sentenced to the Lake of Fire and it's too late. This literally makes me weep. Second, for believers, there's the reason that a person needs to admit to their weakness without Him, lest they live a broken life of bondage to the flesh.

*Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*

— Galatians 3:3

**Humility is always more powerful than arrogance. Arrogance always has a breaking point - it's just a matter of when that occurs, either in time or at the final judgment.**

Of the two types of arrogance, overt (this one) and covert (to be covered in Part 2), I'd argue that overt arrogance is easier to break. Why? Because overt arrogance exists on the assumption that it is able to puff its chest out more than its opposition. And depending on how mature the lumber is, it may hold up for a time, gaining a certain momentum over time. But I submit that since it survives on direct conflict, all one needs to do is hold up the Word of God and it is smashed to pieces.

**There is nothing in the universe more powerful than the Word. Face-to-face conflict with it assures defeat.**

Satan, himself, will learn this first hand in the future when the Living Word removes him and his agents. *"The lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming"* (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

**Arrogance to the Lord is like a cockroach under Andre the Giant's foot... and even that doesn't adequately describe the vastness between the limited power of a creature and the infinite power of its Creator.**

*And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked.*

— **Isaiah 11:4b**

Again, by comparison, overt arrogance seems to be the easier to root out of someone because it's a simple issue of a person realizing how futile their power is compared to the power God gives man through Christ.

For the unbeliever, when their arrogance is broken, they will find themselves on their knees. Again, it's going to happen, it's just a matter of when. *"For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God"* (**Romans 14:11-12**). Let's pray with the love of God that all are saved!

For the believer, *"It has been said that nature does not forgive. Physical, mental, and social consequences of human deeds work themselves out according to dependable processes"* (Zondervan). In other words, believers may depend on this fundamental truth, *"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life"* (**Galatians 6:7-8**).

I recall hearing a tremendous message about 15 years ago from Pastor Maurice Sykes, who stated, *"power succumbs only to power, and then reluctantly."* He's so right.

The truth about "King Kong" is that just like the fictional beast, this man is afraid of things more powerful than him. In his futility, he tries to overcome his fear through exertion. But this exercise is folly, for the Lord holds the keys to death, man's great fear, and also the keys to the kingdom of heaven, eternal life.

Chest beating has never gotten anyone any further than another step into bondage. Humility lives in the sphere of God's love, under His power, free of fear. There's a correlation, then, between the volume of one's arrogance and their fear. As with any ape, King Kong included, the more afraid they are, the quicker they are to rear up and roar.

**However, God sees the heart. He loves the arrogant just as much as He loves the righteous, just not the arrogance in them. He wants all to be set free through His beloved Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To receive faith that delivers us from arrogance, man must simply believe in Him, for salvation and for life.**

**God's power is manifest in His love. When we abide in His love, we abide in His power. It's this power that has the ability to overcome all arrogance. Trust in this and you shall not be afraid...you'll never feel the need to beat your chest again!**

*There is no fear in love.*

— 1 John 4:18a

## Arrogance – Part 2

*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'*

*Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

*A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.*

*If you make the Most High your dwelling - even the Lord, who is my refuge - then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent.*

*For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.*

*'Because he loves me,' says the Lord, 'I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation'.*

— Psalm 91 - NIV

Arrogance says, "I don't believe all that."

There are different brands of arrogance. Covert arrogance, as opposed to the overt arrogance described in *Arrogance - Part 1* of this blog, is the cause for much suffering in man. This arrogance is tucked away in the deepest recesses of the soul, making it the most difficult to identify and subsequently the most difficult to root out.

Ever come across a person who seems to be perpetually complaining about their hardships? - maybe their favorite attitude is, "me oh my." Yet, next door lives a person with triple the suffering and says, "praise be to God!" How could this be? What distinguishes the prior from the latter? Arrogance.

The truly humble person says in their heart, *"The Lord's grace is sufficient for me, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me"* (ala **2 Corinthians 12:9**).

Humility focuses on God's strength, not man's weaknesses. Humility is never disappointed with man's inability to perform or overcome life's challenges. It never seeks to set out on its own; rather, it is wholly dependent on the grace of God.

In contrast exists arrogance. Arrogance is just the opposite from humility. It focuses on man's weaknesses (which is realized through ongoing failed experiments with human power), not God's strength. Arrogance is consistently disappointed with man's inability to perform under pressure.

**Arrogance prefers to set out on its own, independent from the grace of God.**

Independence from God's grace is just another way of describing arrogance. Satan was the first to seek independence from God; therefore, he is described as the most arrogant of creatures. Man's flesh is after the



pattern of Satan. Cain was a perfect example. He preferred to sacrifice fruit by the sweat of his brow over that which was by grace, which is what his brother Abel sacrificed.

Covert arrogance doesn't beat its chest the way overt arrogance does. It is much more cancerous in nature, as it targets the innards of man, stifling the most intimate promises of God from taking root in the soul. I speak of believers here.

**Overt arrogance focuses on human strength. Covert arrogance focuses on human weakness. Both types of arrogance make the fundamental mistake of focusing on what man is able to do (or not do) for himself rather than what God can do by grace through Christ.**

Covert arrogance is difficult to correct because one doesn't approach it with a sledgehammer the way they do with overt arrogance. It requires surgical precision to locate it and then a retooling of one particular definition - **humility**.

Satan has done a tremendous job in redefining the concept of humility. "Aw shucks," isn't the basis of humility, though that is what most believe. Because of this, most believe that humility is one's ability to remain focused on their weaknesses. That's a lie that keeps many in bondage.

**Biblical humility refers to one's willingness to receive God's grace. This is what makes someone strong.**

If the Word informs you that you were born weak and you ought never expect to find success through human exertion, then in humility, you ought to believe it. If it continues on to say that deliverance from the pit of despair you've been swimming in is an issue of trust in His power to deliver you, then in humility, you ought to believe it. And if it continues even further to say that you were created just the way He wanted, regardless of how the world rejects you, in humility, you ought to believe it.

Finally, if the Word says that you have unlimited power through Christ (it does), then in humility, you ought to believe it.

The issue with covert arrogance is that it exists in the realm of disbelief, lack of faith. It is fed by worldly viewpoint, which is designed to remind us of how pathetic we are compared to those who have "made it" in this world. That's the trap that keeps so many in bondage to human weakness.

Covert arrogance seeks validation from the world. However, the world is a cruel taskmaster. It says, "do this and then that," and you'll be redeemed from your weaknesses! So a person chases the "carrot" and if/when they arrive, they realize there's another note from the world that reads, "now do this and then that"...and this continues indefinitely. Since success never comes, they exist as "failures". That person never finds peace.

Rescue from covert arrogance comes by means of redefining one's concept of humility. The arrogant person must learn to stop focusing on what man can do for himself and start focusing on what God can do for man by grace. This is as foreign to the arrogant as speaking on God's behalf was to Balaam's donkey.

**In humility, the covertly arrogant must learn to receive grace fully. They must quit basing their self-esteem on worldly standards. They must stop being disappointed by their human abilities.**

**It's a very strange thing to say to a person, "you must learn what it means to be humble," when they think they already are. The world teaches its own that to abide in one's weaknesses in the flesh is, by definition, humility. The Word teaches God's children that to abide in God's strength in Christ is, by definition, humility.**

Which definition will you cling to? One leads to bondage, the other to freedom. One abides in weakness and disappointment, the other in strength and satisfaction. One loathes itself, the other loves.

Life is trying enough for most of us. Solomon said that trying to live life without wisdom is like trying to cut down a tree with a dull axe (**Ecclesiastes 10:10**). It seems to me this describes the covertly arrogant - always exhausted, depressed, discontent...ever struggling to overcome.

In humility, we ought to let God's grace do all the heavy lifting. Yes, we're weak in the flesh, however we are infinitely strong in the Lord - believe it!

*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them - yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*

— **1 Corinthians 15:10**

## **The Axe That Thought Too Highly of Itself**

Imagine you are a woodsman, a good one. Each morning you rise to the chirping of little birdies in the forest. You're refreshed by the simple fact that you have the opportunity to do your honorable work among the trees, many of which you and previous generations of your family have planted over the years. You're in possession of many skills and, as you've grown up, the one you value the most is your love of the forest. You never used to consider something so abstract as a "skill", but as you've matured, you understand how precious an asset it truly is to living happily.

It's that love that appreciates the creation that surrounds you, including the ever-present frolicking of wildlife amidst it. You find the whole of it intoxicating...invigorating. It's that same love that bears an intense sense of responsibility to the forest, every aspect of it. You are its protector. You often sit back on your modest porch and marvel at what you see and smell. It's a glorious creation. Life is good.

You labor like this for a lifetime, all day, every day, never losing your sense of appreciation. You find contentment in your simple labor and true joy in the process. You find the choicest of stones and file them down into axe heads, strapping them to the end of wooden handles you've crafted from hewn lumber, complements of the forest.

Now imagine at the end of your life you find out that your beloved axe can speak (just go with it ;) )! This is the axe that you've wielded for decades, ever since you found that choicest tree and that beautifully shaped flint stone down by the shoreline. The axe is wonderfully made. Sound familiar?

*I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well.*

— **Psalm 139:14**

We'll get back to that...

So, being elated with your newfound speaking companion, you get to talking about life as an axe. Lo and behold, your beloved creation claims IT is responsible for doing all the work in the forest! It says to you, "Thankfully, I have strong fibers in my handle and exceptionally tough edges on my blade, huh? You'd have never done any of this without me. I am the reason for your livelihood." You sit dumbfounded, hurt, and confused.

Imagine how God feels when one of His creatures does the same to Him?

*Is the axe to boast itself over the one who chops with it? Is the saw to exalt itself over the one who wields it? That would be like a club wielding those who lift it, or like a rod lifting him who is not wood.*

— Isaiah 10:15

Sometimes we have to step back and consider our perspective on who's actually doing all the work here. Whose creation is this, after all? Who created US for that matter?...dare we say that we've become like the arrogant axe? It happens to the best of us. We begin to proclaim that our "sharpness" and our "strength" were our own creations...we lose our perspective.

**Anything good in us is the outworking of God's grace. God sharpens the axe.**

*I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.*

— 1 Corinthians 3:6-7

Some of you might be set back a little here on your heels, but that's a good

## The Axe That Thought Too Highly of Itself

thing. Do yourself a favor and avoid the reactionary temptation to buck the Spirit's good work in you. All He's trying to say is, "Remember where you came from." Seems cliché but it's not - it's actually critically important to maintaining a proper perspective about life.

**When you get up in the morning, before your toes even hit the floor, say to yourself, "I'm a sinner saved by grace. All glory and honor are His alone."**

Whatever God has in store for you this day or the next, learn to embrace it for what it is - a gift. You might be the "axe", you might be the "saw" or even the "club". Whatever your calling, learn to accept it for as long as He's given it to you...and NEVER allow your arrogance to trample God's judgment on such things. He created you - let's go ahead and agree to it that He also knows what's best for you...

**...and let's make sure we don't take credit for God's creation, including ourselves. We are not "self-made" anything, regardless of what the self-help bestsellers might propose.**

*For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written,*

***"LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD'.***

**— 1 Corinthians 1:26-31**

## **Catching a Good Night's Sleep**

In high school, I was one of the fastest runners around. I ran the anchor legs on both the 4x110m and the 4x440m relays. In all humility now, I was used to being able to catch up and maybe even overtake my competition, as required...at least in regular meets, anyways. It wasn't until the big meets, the all-state ones, that I often found myself behind and unable to catch up to my competitors. There were a couple of times where, in complete futility, arms pumping, legs stretching, I'd watch my competition slowly pull away from me, lengthening their team's lead. I couldn't catch them.

If sleep were my competition, most days in my life are like "regular" meets. I can usually "catch up" with my sleep at will, even if I find myself behind on the last leg of the "race". However, there are "big meet" days when sleep cannot be caught...at least not under my own power, that is. I'm simply not fast enough.

*Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have relieved me in my distress; be gracious to me and hear my prayer. O sons of men, how long will my honor become a reproach? How long will you love what is worthless and aim at deception? Selah. But know that the LORD has set apart the godly man for Himself; the LORD hears when I call to Him.*

***Tremble, and do not sin; meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah.***

*Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and trust in the LORD. Many are saying, "Who will show us any good?" Lift up the light of Your countenance upon us, O LORD!*

***You have put gladness in my heart, more than when their grain and new wine abound. In peace I will both lie down and sleep, for You***

*alone, O LORD, make me to dwell in safety.*

— Psalms 4

Given the complexity of living in this wretched world that's temporarily lent to a god (Satan), who's specialty is abusing his citizens, robbing them, stripping them, imprisoning them, we believers would do well to pray the way David did in **Psalm 4**. We would do well to remember who created the legs we're running this race with. We would do well to adopt His perspective on life. Under His grace, sleep would turn around and pursue us!

**Somedays, sleep seems as swift as a cheetah. Trying to catch it seems hopeless.**

The key to catching a good night's sleep is humility. Tell yourself that this is a race being run for HIS glory, not yours. Tell yourself that though you are a chosen instrument of His, a "competitor" as Paul would suggest, your ability is God-given. Stress is designed to test your abilities...often revealing whose power you are exercising. Stress is a thief to those whose perspective has strayed from 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

The ONLY way we can even be "competitive" in this race is by the grace of God. In that sense, we are but merely vessels, conduits of grace.

The more humble we are, the more grace we receive (ala **James 4:6**). The more grace we receive, the "faster" we'll be in catching that elusive little thing called "sleep".



## The Christian Police

The Christian Police force exists, although it's not really something ordained by God. Rather, it seems to exist in the minds of a small portion of God's children. The sophomores, mostly.

As I've taught my congregation many times, the word "sophomore" comes from "*sophos*" [wise] + "*moros*" [fool] in the Greek. We might say a sophomore is a "wise fool" or "wise moron". They possess just enough knowledge to be puffed up, but not enough wisdom to know that they are. Therefore, their so-called efforts in the name of Christ are misguided, antagonistic, and destructive to the unity of the faith.

*Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.*

— **Romans 12:16**

The individuals in this category of believers remind me of the little girls in the first grade that persist on "policing" the classroom and often the playground, too. They have somehow found it necessary to give the teaching staff a "helping hand" in keeping order in the ranks. My wife's a first-grade teacher. She tells me that she likes to inform her self-appointed "police" that she doesn't need their assistance and that they ought to focus their time on their own issues. Most of them, she says, recoil backwards, perplexed. Yup - that's the same response I get when I correct a sophomore. THEY'RE offended - almost comical, actually, if it weren't for the fact that they are misrepresenting Christ's heart.

*"Or 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 6:42).* A sophomore will say, "What log?" I respond, "The one that you just took a swing at ME

with!”

I suppose it's fair to say that such self-appointed individuals exist in just about any group setting. I know that grade school always had one or two. So did the U.S. Air Force that I spent 4 years in. I don't recall a lot of them in college. However, the workplace certainly had them, too...but by that time, their mannerisms were much more refined, sometimes more difficult to identify.

The most refined “policeman” are the kings and queens of passive aggressiveness. Their attacks are often laced with a smile and close with, “love you” or “my friend”. Yet, in that moment, they are worse than the enemy! It can happen to the best of us. But [Jesus] turned and said to Peter, “*Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's*” (**Matthew 16:23**).

Now, even though I'm not a big fan of social networking, I maintain a presence on Facebook. The primary reason I'm on there is to try to share whatever Truth from the Word of God as possible, to whoever may be open to it. Without fail, there's always a “Christian Policeman” there to critique my words or “correct” what I've written. Seriously? There aren't other fish to fry? Unless I've gone off the deep end, I HIGHLY doubt that God's intent for you is to actively police me, one of His anointed. I wonder if they realize that I'm not a member of the “Christian Police” squad for a reason... too blinded by their own polished badges, I guess.

*Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge. But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm.*

— **1 Corinthians 1:21-24**

I'm a humble man - truly, I am. I don't need the Christian Police to try to instill some false sense of humility in me by picking apart the things I say or do. It's difficult enough to face our common enemy head on WITHOUT having to be concerned about friendly fire from behind me. Putting your self-righteous little fingers on my rifle sights instead of digging your heels in beside me is a misappropriation of both our time.

To the "Christian Police" I say, "Pick up a gun and fight the TRUE enemy! If you spend any real time in the field, in the trenches, you'd quickly realize that uniform and white glove inspections are no longer the order of the day. Just ask a Vietnam vet. Oh, and I'm confident your fellow combatants would appreciate the help, too. Wake up, moron, you're missing the real war while you're playing with your little action figures!"

I'm not perfect, but neither were Peter, Paul, John, or any of His anointed over the years. If you think I'm NOT anointed by God, well, then that's a different issue altogether. In that case, say so and walk away...if for no other reason, to preserve your own precious soul from demise. However, if you DO think that I'm an anointed man of God, consider your posturing against me.

I've learned that arrogance is unteachable. I imagine the sophomores reading this blog will try to flip things around and proclaim I'm trying to establish "untouchable" status. But frankly, that's just because they're still too blind to recognize Christ's heart in me. They'll say, "Somebody's got to keep these shepherds in check...who will if I, the Christian Police, don't?" Gee, I dunno, maybe their commanding officer??? LOL

I don't like having to write such ugliness down like this, but I love God's children enough to do so. And I don't write it down for me - I'm already well-versed in this stuff as I deal with it every day...I write it for you. I'm tired of seeing this kind of garbage tear apart my Church family.

The so-called Christian Police squad are an interesting group. That's a

euphemism. God only knows their true intent, but I'll continue to view them as just another thorn in my side. I'll continue to answer to my Lord & Savior, my Great Shepherd, on things that pertain to my calling. I don't answer to man - if I did, this ministry would've collapsed a long, long time ago!

Christian Police - go pound salt!

## Confession Is For You

God is omniscient. That means that He knows past, present, and future details about you and everything in the universe. Always has.

One thing He's already fully aware of is YOUR agreement or disagreement with Him.

If you say, "I agree, God, Jesus Christ is Lord", then you have already experienced true confession. The word *homologeō* in the Greek means simply "to agree with". In the Bible, it is often used to describe something one is in agreement with God on.

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

— **Romans 10:8a-10**

Since God is always right, and He already knows to what degree every one of His children disagrees with Him, such a confession cannot be for His benefit, strictly speaking, other than, of course, that He wants His children to orient to Him so that they may experience all the promises that come with doing so.

Before human history as we know it comes to a close, all will be unavoidably compelled to confess the same truth. "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" (**Philippians 2:10-11**).

Most people seem to think that confessing something to God, regardless of content, is for His benefit, as if He is demanding compliance with His commandments because He is really just some exacting authoritarian who sits on high. Many further complicate this by artificially tying certain grace blessings, such as the very ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives, to confession. That implies that God's grace is "coin-operated". That's legalism and religion at its best.

Satan wants man to believe that God is "coin-operated" under the base principles of creature credit. He wants man to believe that God's grace is a farce and that grace is earned somehow. Confession has been one of his favorite perversions, keeping many in bondage.

If we understand the Biblical truth about confession, we learn that any resultant progress, movement, or sanctification from confession is applied to the confessor's account, not God's. No confession of man will ever change the immutable God. However, confession WILL change the individual. True confession is the heart saying, "I agree with you." When we say that to God, His pleasure is in seeing you grow.

Sometimes, confession is expressed between two people. *"Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much"* (**James 5:16**). When one person already knows they've been sinned against, it's the OTHER person that needs to move to an agreement on the facts. It's the same basic model described earlier. Someone forgives, someone confesses. These are heart issues, not religious ones...and certainly not meant to be ritualized.

It's truly sad that the word "confession" carries with it a stigma, as if making a confession is ever a "bad" thing. How can agreeing with God on anything, good or bad, EVER be a bad thing? To see something for what it truly is is to see it in the light. Regardless of what you see when you examine yourself, if you see yourself clearly, then that is a very good thing. *"But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything*

*that becomes visible is light*" (Ephesians 5:13).

From the pulpit I often use the phrase, "seeing it all as truth". That simply means that we want to be on the same page as God with everything. That's our based desire (or it should be). In eternity past, God saw it all as truth, including every bit of good and evil accounted to our person. He didn't demand that we confess before He poured out His grace and mercy on us. He didn't even demand it before giving us the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit. He gives all things without any strings attached. As we mature, we begin to realize this increasingly so.

If you confess the above to be true, then you are right with God on confession, itself.

Confession isn't about pleasing God so that He'll flip us a few more blessings, like placing a quarter in a gum-ball machine. It's about YOU seeing it all as truth, the good, the bad, and the ugly. If He didn't withhold His only begotten Son from His Cross, but rather was "*pleased to crush Him*" (Isaiah 53:10) for the unworthy, then He certainly isn't going to withhold Him now, or His Spirit, regardless of how disoriented we might find ourselves. If He did, Satan's accusations would be validated.

Only a person befuddled by Satan's lies will find my words here difficult to swallow. To the humble, confession is the first step in learning about oneself...calling a spade a spade. It isn't until one shares Christ's heart on this that they are set free from the bondage of sin.

## **The Downside of Intelligence**

I've had several people in my life make the statement, to my face, "You're the smartest person I've ever known". Mind you, I wouldn't be sharing this here and now if I actually put any value into such sentiments. What it means to me, nowadays, is that I've been given certain gifts to bring glory to God, nothing more. So when someone says to me, with a completely straight face, "I believe you are a genius," I say, "Why, thank you...pray that I use it for good". Some of you are saying, "I know you and I'd never say any of that!" - LOL - that's fine, too, as I don't really care about that viewpoint, either.

I am smart. So be it. I don't care if I'm the smartest. I'll leave such contesting up to the sophomores. In any case, I'm certainly not about to apologize for GOD'S sovereign will in making it so. To even feign apology would be insulting to God. To the immature believer (and definitely any unbelievers who might be reading this), I'm confident they are already struggling with, "Who does this guy think he is?...cocky man!". But only an immature person would suggest such a thing.

I'm confident that God wanted me to live out this life...and that He also wanted me to use whatever gifts He gave me at birth to execute His will for me. That's my faith talking about my God-given talents. If it's rubbing you the wrong way, you're missing the point. It's possible that you're accusing me of speaking from my flesh, for the sake of creature-credit, but you couldn't be further from the truth. Honestly.

**Intellect is just a tool in the travel bag of an "instrument of righteousness" (Romans 6:12-13). Gifts coupled with faith provide godly perspective.**

*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. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*

— Romans 12:3-5

**I have a high IQ. Cool. Does that make me “smart”, though? I used to think so. Heck, I used to leverage it in any way possible for the advancement of my fleshly purposes. And guess what - it worked in spades!!! Lucky me, right?...not really. Turns out that being an “intelligent” Christian is a bit of a challenge.**

I spent around 2 decades in industry with some really intelligent folks. All I can say now, in retrospect, is that there’s a definite correlation between intelligence and salvation. I see it now, even, in my own congregation. The seats in the chapel are disproportionately filled with folks that aren’t considered intellects by society (I mean NO offense whatsoever, of course, since the whole “IQ” argument is a moot point anyways).

**For whatever reason, intelligent people seem to be more difficult to evangelize than the rest. And as believers, they are often harder to teach.**

Intellect tends to be one of the key ingredients to worldly success, which is why Jesus said, “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*” (Mark 10:25). Turns out that worldly success (highly correlated to IQ) is an obstacle for most since it makes for an inflated sense of self-worth. This arrogance takes a person farther away from the humility required at salvation. The higher the IQ, the greater the obstacle, it seems.

God gave Solomon more wisdom than any man in his day. “*And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing*

*knowledge results in increasing pain” (Ecclesiastes 1:17-18). I submit a poignant quote from the Complete Biblical Library commentary: “Intelligence in all the branches of natural science gives no help to a right understanding of the Gospel. If Solomon with his mighty grasp of intellect could find no rest in earthly wisdom, who else can expect it? Let the glowing stimulus be given to the pursuit of heavenly wisdom. This wisdom stands out in striking contrast to every ‘vain show’: it is life eternal. ‘This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent’ (John 17:3)”.*

**What I’m trying to convey here is something very simple...that IQ, though useful in many godly ways, must be thought of correctly for it to be a true blessing. If not, it can be a curse. The same goes for other highly esteemed personal attributes, such as beauty, athleticism, artistry, etc. It doesn’t matter; man can pervert anything good into something evil.**

I just purchased my first welder...definitely NOT a toy. It required some training, especially in safety, before I was comfortable with operating it. It is magnificent and able to do unique, involved projects that otherwise I would be incapable of completing. If I’m a welder and you’re a hammer, what good is being the more “complex” welder if the job requires a nail to be driven into a piece of wood? That job requires a “simpler” tool. The hammer is perfect for the job and vastly more useful for the job, even though it’s “just a hammer” by societal standards.

**“Perfect” has nothing to do with IQ or complexity of task. The real utility of IQ has nothing to do with personal advancement in the world, certainly not a cause for boasting, but everything to do with the advancement of the Gospel.**

If you’re a ‘hammer’, then BE a hammer...that'll be truly beautiful. And never be duped into thinking you have to apologize for being “simple”. Likewise, if you’re a Java Developer's Toolkit (some of you just mumbled, “Huh?”, right? - LOL), don’t apologize for being “complex”. If God put you there, then be beautiful for Him by simply being YOU.

**God doesn't need "smart" people, He desires productive people.**

In the history of mankind, has a Java program ever hammered a nail? I think not. So, even though it is significantly more complicated, it's useless when applied incorrectly. So why boast? Has an Internet website ever been built with a hammer? - nope!

There's nothing worse than not having the right tool for the job...imagine how God must feel when we show up to the wrong job site because we listened to the world.

**For all you "smart" believers out there, be careful. Paul was a tentmaker and Jesus was a carpenter. Who's going to argue that they're "smarter" than either one of these fine gentlemen???**

*Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.*

— Luke 18:17

To me, possessing intelligence as an attribute is equivalent to being born with brown hair and brown eyes. Who cares, as long as I'm able to use whatever He's given me to His glory! Suggest I'm less than perfect and I'll tell you to take it up with God...He made me just the way I am. I hope and pray you ALL share in my sentiments about yourselves! - truly.  
Enjoy the freedom of being you. :)

## **Just Stop and Ask for Directions**

I've heard stories of people (admittedly, it's been mostly men) who have literally driven around cities or towns they are unfamiliar with...lost, but never stopping to ask for directions. This makes ZERO sense. If the objective is to make it to a destination, then why not just stop and ask for directions? Is it shame?

What's a greater source of shame: being lost or being too arrogant to ask for directions?

Furthermore, should there be any shame at all?...seriously.

I suppose this is the same issue with folks that refuse to read directions when putting something complex together out of a box. I speak from experience. I remember being around 12 years old and assembling a Huffy motocross bicycle with my grandfather on Christmas day - I was so excited. We were poor growing up so this was a BIG day for me - I had pooled all available resources towards the purchase of my new wheels.

I'll never forget it - we finished and there was this really odd looking, L-shaped part that neither of us could place. So what did we do with it?...shrugged our shoulders and then threw it over our shoulders - LOL. If only that were the end of this story.

Fast-forward to "the ramp". The ramp was a backyard fixture...most kids had hacked one together at some point in their riding career. It was typically ugly, made of various thicknesses of old plywood, sometimes employed lawn chairs, cinder blocks, and anything else with the appearance of sturdiness (I said "appearance," not "actual" - :o ). My buddy had built the one that relates to this story.

LIFT OFF - I pulled back on the handlebars as hard as I could to maximize

my chances of landing on my rear tire. My pre-adolescent legs had put in enough energy to guarantee a speed worthy of such a ramp. Only problem, and of course this was realized far too late, was that when I pulled back on the handlebars, they collapsed onto my lap!...and stayed there for the remainder of this tragedy. Yes, this all happened in that slow-motion facet of realizing doom as it's happening, which for me was about halfway up the ramp...just before departure. What was supposed to be my moment of glory on my new motocross bike, turned out disastrous...and painful.

As my buddies extracted me from my tangled bike, the physical pain faded to shame. My new bike had failed me...or as I learned later, I had failed my new bike. That little L-shaped piece that I couldn't place during assembly was the locking mechanism for the handlebars. Things were dandy until it was put to the test. Fail.

Why didn't I just stop and ask for the directions? Why didn't I force the issue and find where that piece was designed to fit? Why did I have so many bruises, not just physical, to show for this? Dah! - I was arrogant.

**Arrogance doesn't take direction very well. As a matter of fact, arrogance is unteachable.**

Unteachability - arguably THE greatest blow to growth of ANY form, be it academic, emotional, or spiritual.

The unteachable are stuck in a pit of arrogance. The walls of the pit are often highly polished. Good for admiring oneself, I suppose.

Truth lowers a ladder down, but arrogance says, "I'm going to find a way to climb out of this hole on my own." Or depending on the severity, it might even say, "I'm not in a pit, everyone else is" (**Matthew 6:23**).

Life is like a big bowl of problems awaiting solutions. While the arrogant are driving around for hours trying to find their destination, the humble

stop and ask for directions. By the time the arrogant show up, dinner's over and the humble are tucked warmly in their beds with full bellies.

As Solomon would say, *"If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success"* (**Ecclesiastes 10:10**). Well, wisdom is a function of learning, implying teachability.

As obvious as all of this sounds, most of us have to assemble a few things wrongly, suffer the pain of defeat (or the bruises in my case :)), before wearily succumbing to the truth:

**We need help. We need the ladder. We weren't born with full knowledge of how to navigate life. We must LEARN.**

But again, arrogance is unteachable.

Just consider the ramifications of such a reality. How limited the arrogant truly are. Oh, how the final destination eludes them. Oh, how it irritates them to see the "lesser person" (in their eyes) warm and filled with contentment. Tragedy.

**To the arrogant, humility is weakness. To the humble, it's their greatest strength!**

*And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*

— **2 Corinthians 12:9-10**

**Stopping to ask for directions is actually a sign of strength.**

**Learn to ask for help when necessary. You aren't being weak, you are being strong.**

The flesh will be screaming, "don't do it, don't do it!" But that's because the flesh is pure arrogance - what do you expect it to say? The flesh feeds off of shame...yet, Christ bore any real shame on the Cross already for you.

The flesh is afraid that others may finally figure out that you're imperfect, flawed...stupid, even. How stupid is that?...think about it.

*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.*

— **Matthew 7:7-8**

**Find ultimate strength through accepting your weakness. Sharpen the axe. Ask.**

Oh, and take it from me, find where that "missing part" fits before lining yourself up for a big jump. It may save you a few bruises ;).

## **The Last Frontier**

*Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, and trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but they do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the LORD!*

— Isaiah 31:1

**It seems one of the most difficult things to teach someone is that their human strength (perceived strength derived from their flesh) is actually often their greatest cause for weakness.**

I've been teaching behind pulpits for about fifteen years now and I've sometimes referred to this as the "last frontier" in terms of deliverance. I call it that because it's typically the last place a person considers as an area of weakness. Yet, it's because of this very reason that it often turns out to be their greatest area of weakness!

**The most insidious kind of evil is that which goes undetected. The more refined an evil, the more difficult it is to detect. Refined evil is covert.**

If your world esteems physical strength and you are a muscle bound man, then chances are you will fare well with others. If it esteems intelligence and you're among the brightest, or beauty and you're the prettiest, or wealth and you're rich...and so on...then lucky you, right?...hmmm...hold the presses...

**What if the Lord God desires that your sense of self worth be derived solely from what He thinks of you, in Christ? What if the grantor of muscles, beauty, intelligence, wealth, etc. has put before you a test? What if your greatest test turns out to be in the area of your life where you least expected it? What if the weightiest ball and chain around your neck all along has been what you've always considered your greatest asset? Is this possible? You bet - I'd argue, it's quite probable.**



Most of us have been trained to adopt the world's viewpoint on strength and weakness. The world pits creature against creature, attribute against attribute. Society votes and to whoever wins goes the spoils. A certain power is granted to the victor and until said creature is dethroned, they are encouraged, sometimes obliged, even, to wield it abroad. The more "powerful" a person becomes, the less likely they are to contemplate dismissing their position of "strength" in the world.

On the flip side is Truth. The Word describes the above perspective as completely backwards! "*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**)!

The true objective in the spiritual life is to realize the power of the Word in the soul. Self-esteem is meant to be, wholly, a function of your salvation, understanding what that actually means, and how very perfect you've been made in God's eyes, as a result of your position in Christ. And as far as power is concerned, "*greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world*" (**1 John 4:4b**).

If only it were that easy...if only the flesh wasn't so clingy and manipulative...the world, too.

In my experience, most people identify with weaknesses that are so defined by their worldly peers (not their areas of human strength). Being so willing and open to relinquish those areas up to Him, it's often where they first realize His power in them. We might dub this the "first frontier" for most. The perspective, and therefore the motivation, even, may be awry during that time, but God will turn anything for good for those who love Him (**Romans 8:28**). In retrospect, most mature saints realize how very gracious and accommodating God was with them while they were still young in the

faith.

**It isn't until a person matures a bit that their definitions of strength and weakness begin to flip-flop. It isn't until they learn what true humility looks like, that it isn't shrinking away from the world's lowly estimation of them, that they accept what can only be supernaturally imparted to them - strength through Him. "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" Philippians 4:13).**

Mature believers are repulsed by the very proposition that their flesh remain a part of their existence, tempting them back towards the bondage of leaning on human strength. They desire nothing more than to jettison it in order to make room for the true, glorious power of Christ. "*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death*" (**Romans 7:24**)?

Living less of a life is a perversion and an insult to their Redeemer.

*"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"* (**2 Peter 3:14-15a**).

**To a mature believer, human strength represents a legacy of bondage.**

The apostle Paul was born with, and developed, an area of human strength that the world esteemed quite highly. He was exceptionally intelligent. It had served him well until the day he was humbled on the road to Damascus. Even after his profound conviction came to him by way of the Lord Jesus, Himself, it took him a while (including three years in Arabia) to collect himself. We can only assume that the aforementioned "flip-flop" was quite a jolt, requiring a fair amount of concentrated meditation and adjustment to Truth.

All of this takes time. *"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he*

*ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith” (Romans 12:2-3).* Faith comes in doses. Vision, too.

When Paul crossed the “final frontier”, he was set free. He understood the trickery of his own flesh, the bravado that was actually profound weakness. He was so convicted, he wrote the following for our benefit:

*And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*

— 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

**Your greatest area of weakness may indeed be that one place that you've esteemed your whole life. It's there that, with a bit of humility, you'll have the opportunity to explore the last frontier.**

## Man's Appetite For Glory

**President Harry Truman once stated, "It is amazing how much you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit."**

As president of the United States, I imagine trying to get anything done is nearly impossible. "Gridlock" always strikes me as the appropriate term for such things. There are so many agendas, so many politicians jockeying for control, spending half of their time working out the details of their next reelection.

**By the very nature of a democratic government, any hopes of reelection depend on being able to point to one's accomplishments.**

So there's a natural tension between what President Truman said and politics, in general. It's a chicken and egg situation. To be elected to the highest office in the land implies a successful track record (typically, anyways). However, to get anything done in office, one must "not care who gets the credit". Hmmm...

**I deal with this reality in the ministry, also. Although in this realm, in the hearts of humble servants, we DO care who gets the credit...only it's not us, for the sake of our own promotion...it's our Lord & Savior, Jesus Christ.**

*Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.*

— James 4:10

Our part in this is simple - it's humility. Our motivation is simple - all glory and honor are His alone to receive. *"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**).

**Our true citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), which is ruled by the sovereign God. It's not a democracy. We are promoted, if at all, by His power, not by popular vote. Therefore, we are "relieved" of any thoughts about election or reelection. Our minds, and any resultant preoccupation with such things, may rest knowing that if we're saved, we've been elected already.**

*But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen [elected] you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

— 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

**We Christians are very different than our contemporary politicians. We are not strapped to the whims of democracy, to the casting of votes, or to the power of the people. There's only one vote we need - God's. When we have His vote, we ought to jettison any predisposition towards taking credit for anything good done through us, His vessels.**

*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

**To take credit for something He accomplishes through us by grace is to act as a thief. It's not ours to take. We are not politicians seeking reelection. We are merely vessels, conduits of grace, purpose-built and reborn to His glory.**

*Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;*

## Man's Appetite For Glory

*but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained. Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.*

*For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, **whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame**, who set their minds on earthly things.*

*For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.*

— **Philippians 3:12-21**

Amen.

## Smack Talk

*The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good. The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.*

— **Psalms 14:1-3**

On basketball courts around the country, little gods are born every day... just ask them. And just like little kings, opposing "gods" are staking claims to the court and the stadium with proclamations such as, "This is MY court, get off!" or "I own you!"

Ummm...God owns everything, including these two little "kings" last I checked.

Why not just play the game to win? Why the cockiness and grotesque displays of arrogance? Why do such things exist in ANY sport or ANY realm of life, not just on basketball courts? That's a great question. Why does smack talk even exist? I don't recall Jesus ever exhibiting such a thing...hmmm.

'Smack talk' is slang for 'talking trash', which is slang for expressing unbridled bravado and exuberance, often in the face of an opponent. It typically follows a good play in sport, but not always. Mostly, it's meant to intimidate opponents or "get under their skin". Unless you play an aggressive sport like basketball or hockey, you may never fully grasp these terms. I can tell you from firsthand experience that it can get pretty ugly on the court. I'd argue, at times, the psychological warfare trumps the physical.

Everyone's trying to establish themselves in the pecking order. There's

typically an identifiable 'king' of the court...someone like a Michael Jordan, who talked smack but was also able to 'back it up' with superior play. The king has his 'court', too, like a sovereign does. Back in the 80's and 90's the Chicago Bulls were led to multiple national championships by their "king", Michael Jordan. Few spewed more smack talk than him...maybe Larry Bird of the Celtics?

Maybe one could argue there's a place for friendly ribbing in a sporting event. I get it. However, when the Word speaks of the spiritual life, though likened to a race or a boxing match in the Bible, it never condones smack talk.

*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.*

— **1 Corinthians 9:24-26**

If anyone had a right to smack talk after Jesus, Paul would be a good candidate, yet he wasn't interested in such things. He ran to win, but not for his glory, rather for the Lord's. There was no place for smack talk with Paul, even though he was the undisputed 'king of the ring' during his era. Compare that to the smack talking Mohammed Ali, the famous boxer who consistently claimed HE was the king of the ring.

*And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.*

— **1 Corinthians 2:1**

Man has always loved smack talk, not just in sport, but in all competitive



arenas. Societal and political arenas are famous for brewing whole pots of it. King David wasn't a fan of smack talk, either:

*Help, LORD, for the godly man ceases to be, for the faithful disappear from among the sons of men. They speak falsehood to one another; with flattering lips and with a double heart they speak. May the LORD cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that speaks great things; who have said, 'With our tongue we will prevail; our lips are our own; who is lord over us?' Because of the devastation of the afflicted, because of the groaning of the needy, now I will arise,' says the LORD; 'I will set him in the safety for which he longs.*

*The words of the LORD are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times. You, O LORD, will keep them; you will preserve him from this generation forever. The wicked strut about on every side when vileness is exalted among the sons of men.*

— **Psalms 12:1-8**

If you're "winning", smack talk might be irritating at best. However, when you're "losing" and someone decides to denigrate you in your defeat, well, that's a different story. Smack talk when you're already pressed down is like plucking an exposed nerve.

*How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart all the day? How long will my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,' and my adversaries will rejoice when I am shaken. But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because He has dealt bountifully with me.*

— **Psalms 13:1-6**

In the end, it's David's faith that delivered him from those smack talkers in

his periphery. Such should be the case for all of us as well.

We must recognize smack talk for what it is - hot air. It's not necessary nor ever warranted in the spiritual life. It's born of arrogance and meant to psychologically damage an opponent. That's doesn't sound like Christ's heart at all to me.

*But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth.*

— **Colossians 3:8**

## Superstar Status

111.5 million people watched the NFL Super Bowl this year. Events that used to be reserved for those in attendance only are now available in high-definition to the masses. That's technology for you.

It may appear it's all upside, however, technology is a double-edged sword. Truly it is.

In one sense, it gives the world access to knowledge and experience that is unprecedented. The effects of this reality, particularly as a function of advanced communications technology, are stupendous.

How else would so many people have been able to watch the Super Bowl this year? Stop for a moment and think about how many people that truly is...all focused on a little pigskin being thrown around a 160' x 360' field. That field is where "heroes" are made or broken. Have a good game and the whole world knows about it. Even the ones who aren't even interested in football hear the names...Montana, Brady, Manning, now Wilson. Who would any of these individuals be without technology?...local celebrities, maybe?

So, in one sense, we get to enjoy such events as well presented and entertaining. No harm in that, I suppose. I, too, watched the Super Bowl this year. All would be well if that's where man left it. But the flesh never leaves an opportunity for stardom on the cutting room floor, does it? Never. The flesh is LOOKING for stardom, creates situations for it, promotes it any chance it gets. That's man.

**Man has already been given THE Celebrity, Jesus Christ, but he prefers a man in a football jersey, or on a stage, or writing his next best-seller. And he also prefers to pay handsomely for exposure to such celebrities. That's the creature-credit code, you see.**

I've witnessed this same phenomenon in Christianity, even. Technology wields its edges the same way amongst the sheep and the shepherds (including the pretend ones). Consider the fact that Paul dealt with this awful, fleshly tendency to create superstar shepherds even back during his tenure as an apostle, long before mass communications was a reality.

Paul, like any worthy shepherd nowadays, was never interested in superstar status...EXCEPT that of Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords! Even so, his disciples were prone to trying to make an issue out of men, trying to differentiate, attempting to stratify and rank their teachers somehow. Paul rejected such things because it accomplished nothing except creating divisions in the churches.

*Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, 'I am of Paul,' and 'I of Apollos,' and 'I of Cephas,' and 'I of Christ.'*

*Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one would say you were baptized in my name.*

— 1 Corinthians 1:10-15

**Paul despised the thought of being elevated because of something he received by grace. He rejected the celebrity that his disciples were attempting to impose upon his person, try as they might. Likewise, he rejected every other form of celebrity other than Christ's alone.**

**How dare anyone rob God's glory by accepting credit for the privilege of**

**delivering the Gospel...nay, how dare anyone capitalize on it!**

*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

**The human flesh feeds on creature-credit. It despises grace because grace leads inevitably back to God. Grace relegates the flesh to nothingness, which is appropriate.**

*For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not mere men? What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.*

*So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.*

— 1 Corinthians 3:4-7

So then why do I see Christianity becoming a "spectator sport"? Why is it that there are men and women out there peddling the Word of God for the sake of their own celebrity? Why do Christians cheer them on? Why are we not up in arms about this? Why do the masses support them in their quest by purchasing their books, attending their seminars, tuning into their broadcasts?

Are we propping up the global icons of Christianity in favor of the meek, local servants? How much is lost when milk without meat is the diet of the average Christian? Did God design the churches to fall under an increasingly fewer number of leaders...or does that trend suit Satan, himself? Consider the Tribulation period...there's your answer.

As in the professional sporting world, Christian celebrity breeds wealth, both in terms of reputation and finances.

Global communication means there's a war on for superstar status even within the ranks of Christianity. He with the greatest assets shall win the battle. He who is willing to step on top of Christ's shoulders in order to increase his own celebrity shall conquer the landscape. Oh, and of course, those at the top of the heap are reaping millions of dollars in the process.

**The wealthiest believers in the Bible made their money off of private businesses, but that business was never the peddling of the Word of God.**

Now here's the fly in the ointment to the superstar. Mass appeal does not correlate very well with Truth. Ask the average Christian about their faith and they'll respond with, "Oh, I'm a \*denomination\*," or, "I am of \*pastor's name\*." They hardly ever say, "I am of Christ." They hardly ever attribute all of this to Him alone - there's always someone else's celebrity clouding their view. This is their preference. This is what they pay for.

**There's a demand for celebrity, so supply has met it in increasing doses as technology has advanced. Global reach means there's a "funneling effect" of the masses towards a select few suppliers, typically those with the greatest means of projection.**

**Christianity is NOT a business, yet "packaging" the Word and selling it is a very profitable endeavor.**

**Those individuals that are out there selling the Word of God are abominations to the pristine objective of spreading the good news about THE only celebrity in the universe, Jesus Christ. To take it all the way to capitalizing on personal celebrity is simply grotesque.**

*For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.*

There is no place and no goodness in superstar status for the preacher. Merchandising the good news is just about as gross a product of self-made celebrity there is. Are you buying it?

Such is Satan's economy come alive in Christendom..."superstars" standing behind pulpits. Ugh.

## Teachability

*A rebuke goes deeper into one who has understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.*

— Proverbs 17:10

**Humility makes for fertile soil. Arrogance makes for just the opposite. The prior is teachable, the latter is not.**

One of the reasons why the Bible teaches us to respect our elders is because they have wisdom that we don't. As children, we are commanded to obey our parents because God intended that understanding be imparted to us through those with authority over us. Sometimes we are encouraged, often times we are rebuked.

Most people, regardless of where they fall on the spectrum of obedience, receive encouragement relatively well. However, rebuke is a different story. A humble person will receive it, though sometimes writhing in pain, whereas an arrogant person won't. The humble person understands that it is for their own good. The arrogant person doesn't.

**Earthly authorities are never perfect. Even so, God has ordained them all. Therefore, those who obey are those who grow in wisdom. The fool spends his time challenging authority, resulting in what??? What has the fool accomplished in their pursuit? Are they wiser for it? They are not. They are actually worse for it.**

**When arrogance refuses instruction, it must be taught a lesson. Even then, it often refuses to obey.**

*"Yet Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had said. Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go'" (Exodus 7:13-14).* The Pharaoh is a perfect example of



arrogance. And what did he accomplish, other than bringing extreme suffering on his people? Nothing.

**Nothing good sprouts from infertile soil...only weeds, at best. However, drop a single seed in fertile soil and godliness is multiplied. "[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4).**

**To possess truth implies teachability.**

Drop a seed of goodness on humble soil and watch it grow! Jesus, Himself, referred to this in His parable. *"He presented another parable to them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR come and NEST IN ITS BRANCHES'" (Matthew 13:31-32).*

**Does it really matter if the seed that is dropped on the soil is labeled "rebuke"? It shouldn't. It doesn't to the humble person. They just want to learn and grow.**

**Arrogance is unteachable. Therefore, if/when an arrogant person receives a rebuke, they harden their heart to it, missing out on the goodness of its purpose. As such, their spiritual growth is stunted. They have refused grace and, therefore, love. :(**

*And you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.' It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not*

sons.

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

*All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*

— Hebrews 12:5-11

## **When You Walk Into a Room...**

Do the people see a human being in love with Jesus Christ???...

...or do they see an attitude towards spewing knowledge bubbling at the surface - one with a hairpin trigger?

I am a pastor - a very diligent, honest one at that. I love Jesus - truly. And even I become COMPLETELY turned off by the second scenario above. I have had far too many such memories jammed into my soul than I care to recount. I believe knowledge is an important facet of growing up spiritually, but I don't ever want it preceding the person.

One of the largest, most powerful (and dangerous if he wanted to be) men I have ever met was an Olympic boxer I met over 20 years ago. He used to come into my mom's restaurant where I waited on tables while paying my way through college. He was a heavyweight boxer with physical features that dwarfed the standard sized chairs he had to fit himself into. His wife was rather petite, too, so his presence was amplified all the more.

I've also met men in the military special forces - trained killers, as well as third degree black belts. In brief, I've met many people in my life that were exceptionally capable of enforcing their will upon others. Their countenance alone let you know this. They knew it, and so did everyone else. They all shared something special.

**Individuals who have truly mastered something have nothing to prove.**

In the case of the aforementioned boxer, the dichotomy revealed while studying him as his server was that he was also one of the gentlest men I had ever met. He was kind and respectful, never arrogant or boastful. He taught me an important lesson by simply being himself. If I asked him about the Olympics, he'd share his thoughts, same with the art of boxing.

He was a fascinating, though meek, individual. He had my attention without really trying to keep it.

**Mastery exudes confidence, invites honest learners, and respects others. Without saying a word, it demands respect.**

**An individual can be an expert but never a master.**

Mastery implies physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual balance. If I'm the most talented athlete to ever live but am arrogant about it, I am not a master...I'm not "there" yet. I may never get there, either, if I never drop my arrogance.

Although I've met multiple Army Green Berets in my life, I've never met one that cued me into the fact - it was always someone else who let me know. They represented a pinnacle of military preparation, yet they often shied away from speaking about it when the topic came up. On the flip side is the multitude of cocky grunts all too willing to impress upon those around them how "dangerous" and "tough" they are. Go figure, right?

There's a certain "settling" that occurs in the soul as one approaches mastery. In the spiritual life, we often refer to this as maturity. Before that lies the great planes of sophomoric bravado. Btw - sophomore means "wise moron" in the Bible.

So the practical question at the end of the day is this: "When you walk into a room, what do you think Jesus wants those present to see first, your knowledge or His love?"

To prioritize the presentation of yourself as an expert at knowledge and possibly the doctrines of men is the way of the Pharisee:

*With everybody listening, Jesus spoke to his disciples. 'Watch out for the religion scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preen in the*

*radiance of public flattery, bask in prominent positions, sit at the head table at every church function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they'll pay for it in the end'.*

— **Luke 20:46-47 - Message**

To present yourself as a master of love is the way of Christ:

*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and **walk in love**, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.*

— **Ephesians 5:1-2**

**Mastery doesn't require an introduction. Neither does a mature believer.**

Those tooting their own horns about their superior knowledge of scripture are most often sophomores, and that's assuming that they even have their knowledge straight. Those pursuing such ends are merely revealing their own arrogance.

**Learning His Word was never meant to be a feather in one's cap. By grace, through faith, the humble person is transformed.**

Read your Bible and consider how Jesus typically entered a gathering. He is our Master. Those around Him first witnessed His heart for others. He had more knowledge than anyone, yet He metered it out only as a situation required, never more, lest He receive credit to His humanity by those surrounding Him. More often than not, those around Him announced who He was.

**Jesus, our great Master, was supremely confident, but never arrogant. When He walked into a room, He spent His time ministering to others, not boasting about His knowledge. He left the latter approach up to the**

Pharisees, whom He despised, calling them a "*brood of vipers*" (**Matthew 12:34**).

The next time you enter a room, consider how Jesus might do so. Paul wasn't perfect like Jesus, either, but he did make a statement that we might relate to, "*But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (**Galatians 6:14a**).

**First impressions are often the most important. Consider your presentation.**

*The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments [the greatest is love - Romans 13:10], is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected [matured]. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.*

— 1 John 2:4-6

## Idolatry

The very first of the ten commandments is, “*You shall have no other gods before Me*” (**Exodus 20:3**). In other words, God is utterly intolerant of idols. Yet, if one reads the Bible, one of *the* outstanding, recurring features is man’s propensity for idolatry.

The apostle John in one of his final writings closed with a warning against idolatry, knowing his disciples weaknesses.

*We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, guard yourselves from idols.*

— **1 John 5:18-21**

Some people are gravely mistaken regarding *what* an idol actually is. In brief, an idol is anything that supplants God’s rightful place in a believer’s soul. “*Therefore speak to them and tell them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity’*” (**Ezekiel 4:14a**). Idols, for most people even today, are intangibles.

## Guest Blogger: The “Art” of Music

*Nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps.*

— **Jeremiah 10:23b**

I would like to write to you about some parallels that exist between the study of music and the spiritual life. In order to flesh out your perspective on who I am and why I might be qualified to give such observations, let me fill you in on some of my background as a musician.

I am a conservatory-trained musician, an honors graduate and scholarship recipient of the Berklee College of Music. I've studied with members of the Boston and Pittsburgh symphony in addition to some of the finest and most accomplished jazz musicians. I toured the U.S. for about five years full-time, playing many shows and opening for acts like Skrillex, The Flaming Lips, Steel Pulse, Barrington Levi, Less Than Jake, Alan Jackson, Wu-Tang Clan, and Snoop Dogg.

I mentioned Jeremiah earlier because if you had asked me twelve years ago if I thought that I would have done all that, I would have told you that you were crazy. Even now, writing it down and seeing it in print surprises me. The whole mentality of that life seems very alien to the new life in which I find myself. I went from playing one hundred and forty to one hundred and seventy-five gigs a year to about ten, from being in the biggest bands on the east coast to jamming in my friend's basement.

So I reiterate: “*Nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps*” (**Jeremiah 10:23b**).

In a passing conversation, I mentioned to Pastor Ed that with the continued study of the Word, my perspectives have been changing. If you've been in this particular local assembly you know what I'm talking about. I had begun to notice it, not just in church, but in the study of music as well.



**You see, when you don't know anything about music it becomes abstract art. It's all about how particular sounds make you feel. A chord might sound "sad" or a voicing might sound "full" or "rich". Once you are educated and practiced up to a degree of proficiency, however, it becomes less about feelings and moods and more like nuts and bolts - components.**

Melodies and chord progressions, the underlying harmonic structures of music, must move in a particular way. If you want something to sound like x, y, or z you must have the exact necessary pieces in their exact place. Like machinery, you must fit certain musical information into a given space. A particular player will "sound good" because they are accurate with their pitch, well rehearsed in their execution, and measured in their phrasing.

**Even simple qualities of tone and timbre can be measured, identified, and evaluated mathematically.**

To the untrained, it's "Do I like this?" or "Can I dance to this?", but to the true musician, it's "Are ALL the right pieces in the right place?"

**Realizing these things and receiving the mental adjustments are first order blessings from Him, those blessings that are spiritually attained; the intangible. It is this change in perspective that sets the artist free.**

Solomon sums it up best. *"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. Is there anything of which one might say 'see this, it is new'? Already it has existed for ages which were before us"* (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 - Message).

Being young and having experienced some small success, I was a terrible student. It's horrifying to me to think about - truly. I had bought the world's lies that I didn't need guidance from more experienced players. I was going

to find the new shortcuts and revolutionary methods that would catapult me above my peers and predecessors.

**You see, an artist must be given the eyes to see that there is nothing new, realize that they cannot create anything, and understand that they can only become skilled assemblers, knowledgeable craftsmen in their field, with instruction from older, more accomplished craftsman-musicians.**

**The temptation from the world is to, by any means possible, make a name for yourself. This mindset, the idea that you have to "become" something, actually takes a student OFF the path of improvement and puts them directly on the world's treadmill.**

It comes down to TRUTH and the *"the truth shall set you free"* (John 8:32b).

Gil Evans was an accomplished arranger and pianist during the 40's and 50's. He gave a famous master class where he demonstrated the difference between the pianist who knew the true 'language' of jazz and those who had acquired a close-but-counterfeit language. The difference was quite apparent when played side-by-side. But if played quickly, you might not have noticed.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. ALL THINGS came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.*

— John 1:1-3

**He has created ALL THINGS. Well that must, by definition, include music. Combine that with Solomon's aforementioned statement in Ecclesiastes and you see that there is no room for humanity's manipulations of TRUTH.**

The best we can do is seek Him and if He's given you the love or the talent or the destiny to do or pursue something, then you should fulfill His desires for your life. Now THAT road looks much different from the ambitious, self-promoting, self-centered, self-directed one that the arts is so notorious for. It is a narrow, simple, humble road that requires hard work, patience, wisdom, and divine guidance...things found only in Him.

Love in Christ,

Bryan House

## Guest Blogger: Phototaxis

Have you ever wondered why insects are attracted to light?...why they will fly into those insect light traps, even after witnessing the deaths of all their "friends"? Well, the answer is phototaxis. This is the idea that nocturnal insects use the light from the moon and stars to navigate and fly straight in the dark. When they see artificial light, they confuse it for that of the moon and stars and head straight for it, towards a fruitless path or even to their demise.

Let's take this idea of phototaxis and apply it to the human race. I doubt it is a coincidence that our planet revolves around the sun, that earth is part of a SOLAR (relation to/determined by the sun) system. The center of our physical reality is, quite literally, the sun. In the same way, the center of all life, space, and time is, quite literally, the Son.

*For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*

— **Colossians 1:16**

*Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.'*

— **John 14:6**

**When people choose to live in the dark, without Christ, the Son, as their "guiding light", how do they navigate? Would you say that there is an artificial light that humans are drawn to?**

As you are well aware, the human race has a weakness for idolatry. We want something tangible to revere. We often lack the faith to follow that which we cannot see or connect with here on earth. So, we chase what we

can: money, approbation, power, and even those people who already possess these things. God warns His people, over and over, from Old Testament to New Testament to avoid this.

*You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate me.*

— **Exodus 20:3-5**

*Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.*

— **1 John 5:21**

Instead of obeying these commands, though, we become even more determined to establish idols in our soul. They may even seem "right", like putting your family as your #1 priority. This isn't right though, is it?

*Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*

— **Matthew 10:37**

**ANYTHING or ANYONE that comes before the Lord in your daily priorities is an idol and a false light in your life.**

In this way, we are subtly drawn away from Him and towards the "insect trap lights", even when we believe we are doing things correctly. We pray, go to church, give the Gospel to those we meet, BUT we still have idols in our soul, and...

*But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!*

— **Matthew 6:23**

On the other hand, if we are faithful in following His light, how do we help those who remain in the dark?

*You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.*

— **Matthew 5:14**

**When Jesus was alive, He was constantly surrounded by people. He was sought out by those who desired truth, desired healing, and, unfortunately, even by those who wanted to scoff and attack Him. But why?**

Why would the religious crowd want to attack the Perfect One? Why was He often misunderstood and even mistreated by His own disciples? Why do these same types of individuals attack those who shine like He did in the present day? Why are our Pastors constantly under attack by their fellow man? One of the reasons is this - light exposes darkness. The pure light and love, that is Him, illuminates everything that is not Him - nothing is hidden.

*But everything exposed by the light becomes visible - and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.*

— **Ephesians 5:13**

All creatures are drawn to light, instinctively. The sun, moon and stars and, more importantly, the Son, and those believers who reflect His light, are attractive to the world. As you grow in His grace and knowledge and are transformed into His image, you will become attractive to those around you. People will approach you, much like they did Christ. You will be sought out for wisdom, healing words, and you will also become like Christ, often misunderstood and a target for abuse from religion and those straying from the True Light.

But, be encouraged by the words of Christ, Himself.

*Remember what I told you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.*

— **John 15:20**

Oh, and one more thing. Stay away from the "insect trap lights"...they're a real "killer" to the spiritual live...just sayin'.

In His perfect love,

Monica Ledford

## Individuality

One of the greatest errors ever perpetrated by religion on Christianity is the loss of individuality in believers. One would conclude, based on the tenets of religion, that a believer must become a drone in order to prove themselves spiritual. The Bible says, “*walk by the Spirit*” (**Galatians 5:25**) and walk in a manner worthy of your calling:

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

— **Ephesians 4:1-3**

The Bible leads us to a unity in the faith, but while living very different lives. The last thing God wants is for His children to induce suffering upon themselves by trying to be like someone else. That’s like trying to jam a square peg into a round hole! Jesus Christ created us as individuals - we need to embrace this fundamental fact about ourselves...that we were made as He intended.

*For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.*

— **1 Corinthians 12:12-14**

It is critically important, as a part of maturing in the unity of the faith, that a believer accept and realize that God doesn’t make mistakes - He certainly didn’t make one with you! Be yourself, hold your chin up, knowing that God is pleased when you do so.



## A Beautiful Responsibility

*He has made everything beautiful in its time.*

— Ecclesiastes 3:11a

**Beauty is attractive, engaging, enrapturing, even. Few things are able to stop us in our tracks like beauty.**

To me, one of the most beautiful sights is standing behind my pulpit and seeing a group of otherwise disparate individuals all facing me, Bibles open, faces aglow, members of one Body. *“For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12)*. God has ensured this blessing to my account for years now...and I never tire of it. I’m so very grateful.

**Beauty is hardly a single form. In fact, the less rare something is, the less beautiful it seems to be (at least to mankind). So there’s a premium on uniqueness. And as if to frustrate aspiring “beauty queens”, the power to decide lay in the hands of one’s audience, regardless of the pageantry. As the secular proverb goes, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”**

Imagine being a woman and hearing the words of Solomon, *“You are altogether beautiful, my darling, and there is no blemish in you” (Song of Solomon 4:7)*. Where does something like that take you? Where does that leave a person? Where do they go from there? Well, it depends on what that person decides to *do* with the inevitable temptation to tie one’s self-esteem to it.

Since the dawn of human history, man has been enraptured with beauty. Human literature at its very best is beset by it, possibly its favorite topic. Man never seems to tire of it...beholding it...searching for it...even fighting for it. Some go so far as to claim they’ve found heaven in the arms

of those they are infatuated with, as the late country singer, Mel Street, sings in his song, "I Found Heaven":

*Your sweet lips invite me to heaven's front door  
Your arms pull me closer and offer much more  
It's easy to find reasons that make it seem right  
But darling I found heaven in your arms tonight*

Heaven?...seriously, Mel??? Get a grip.

Nonetheless, our world is transfixed with physical beauty. Most people have an insidious agreement with each other over the value of it. Most never even realize said agreement exists; they merely live by it, deceived, assuming it's just the way God created things. The altogether 'beautiful' person says to the 'lesser', "See, right there, you have nice pinky toes!", as if to concede some kind of consolation prize...a sort of, "You get the award that nobody cares about" thing...but be grateful that you now realize that everyone has "beauty" in some way. That's a garbage trajectory. The whole system of thinking is bondage...a trap set by Satan, himself, likely the most physically beautiful creature of all. Of course he sets up a scale of values where he always ends up on top...isn't that what most so-called "beauty queens" aim to do? That's creature credit at its best. It turns beauty sour for those who subscribe to the lie.

Meanwhile the Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of beauty, chooses to represent Himself as a man in the following way:

*For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,  
And like a root out of parched ground;  
He has no stately form or majesty  
That we should look upon Him,  
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.*

— Isaiah 53:2

He could've easily shown up as the most attractive person to have ever walked the earth, but He didn't. Ask yourself why that might be. Dwell on that the next time the local 'beauty queen' throws you a bone. How about considering this next time instead of expressing any form of gratitude for such entrapments? The greatest beauty man has ever known hung on a Cross about two-thousand years ago. Here's how that scene is described:

*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.  
Surely our griefs He Himself bore,  
And our sorrows He carried;  
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten of God, and afflicted.  
But He was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,  
And by His scourging we are healed.*

— Isaiah 53:3-5

The most beautiful Person also owns the most beautiful act of love ever witnessed by creation. By the end of His ordeal, physical beauty was nowhere to be seen. Yet, in Heaven, will not His scars be unique and beautiful beyond measure? Satan's scale of values (where physical beauty is leveraged for self) was never the focus of our Lord's Person nor were His activities. If anything, the Bible wipes that slate clean.

Even so, how many wars have been waged for the hand of a "fair maiden", in literature or in life? How many hearts have been broken over something so singularly shallow as physical beauty? How many self-esteems have been founded on it?...how many young souls emblazoned by it only to

crash heavily as old age overcomes them? How many books written to ensnare others?

**Beauty needs to be rightly defined before it can be truly appreciated. Discovering beauty is the great task here. The treasure map is the Bible.**

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

— **Proverbs 31:30**

Should physical beauty be appreciated? Of course, God has ordained its existence and our affinities for it, after all. However, like anything pure and godly, it can be perverted and abused. For example, Satan's beauty surpassed all of his contemporaries, making him the most beautiful creature of all (and yes, he is a male). Just look at how it contributed to his demise. *"Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor. I cast you to the ground; I put you before kings, that they may see you"* (Ezekiel 28:17).

**Satan's beauty gave him a false sense of self-worth that translated into a source of denigration towards others. There's no telling to what degree he looks upon we humans with the same bit of disdain.**

**Beauty can be oppressive if wielded the wrong way, for both the beholder and the possessor. Beauty has power...and as with any form of power, it comes with responsibility. By itself, beauty is a gift. In the hands of human flesh, it's as dangerous as any weapon ever conceived by man.**

**It's not beauty's fault, but it corrupts the weak.**

In many ways, beauty is described in the Bible as a test, not just for the beholders, but also for the possessors. Neither is meant to idolize it. If God

endows a person with beauty, man or woman, He also holds them responsible to it. Ask any honest person in the twilight years of their life, "Was tying your self-esteem to your physical beauty worth it in the end?" If they're truly an honest, God-fearing individual, they'll answer, "No, my self-esteem was misplaced and beauty's true scale of value was misappropriated in my soul." They may even add that they bought the lie for a time and have paid a dear price for it, missing out on so many truly beautiful facets of life while preoccupied with their own mirror.

*The grass withers, the flower fades,  
But the word of our God stands forever.*

— Isaiah 40:8

**Beauty is fleeting, at least as it pertains to a corrupt, degenerating physical body. While we have it, though, may we all remember the test and the responsibility which accompanies it. There's a fine line between appreciating God's gifts and appreciating oneself instead. Our self-esteem depends upon it.**

## **And the Best Supporting Actor Goes To...**

My son and I were talking about movies the other day and acting in general. He's going to be in his middle-school play this spring and his part is a small one. I don't use the language "but" or "just" a small part because that would imply something...it'd insert something wrong, something slighting. I encouraged him to enjoy the opportunity and the process the same as if he were the lead, for supporting actors are indeed much more critical than he might think.

The professional acting industry certainly understands such dynamics, which is why the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) bestows the Best Supporting Actor Academy Award annually.

Although I believe Hollywood, in general, is only a half-step above a sewer pipe (I'm being generous), I have a certain appreciation for the art of acting. Nothing fundamentally wrong with acting, just the acting "scene." I believe that acting takes discipline and dedication to really be good at it. However, there's much more to a movie or a theater production than just a single actor. There's a reason the credits are so long after movies.

Ever watch a movie with the soundtrack removed? It's eerie - so much is lost. Yet we don't focus on the music specifically while the movie is playing, do we?...except for maybe the opening/closing credits and a few crescendos during the climax of the movie. Without the music, scenes lack depth. The same thing goes for supporting actors...they are baseline substance. Without them, there's no depth. Even the superstar actor risks appearing vapid. Turns out, supporting actors are REALLY critical, yet most of us can't even remember their names. Should that matter to the supporting actor? Save that thought.

**Supporting actors can make or break a movie. Same goes for TV, books, and theater.**

Guess what? We are all on a stage right now.

*"For we have become a spectacle to the world [a show in the world's amphitheater] with both men and angels [as spectators]" (1 Corinthians 4:9b - Amplified Bible).* The Greek word for "spectacle" is *theatron*, which is where the English word "theater" comes from. It means we are all playactors in a theater - that's life. And even the angels long to see how this all comes together on the grand stage (1 Peter 1:12). So we have a captive audience, too.

In acting circles, there's a certain respect for supporting roles, however it seems most are still trying to "make the lead." Practically speaking, this means the vast majority of actors spend a lifetime disappointed - what a horrible thing. However, in the Bible, "supporting actors" are considered on equal footing with the main characters. This holds especially true for we believers in the Church age dispensation.

*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. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for common good.*

— 1 Corinthians 12:4-7

The award for "best supporting actor" is esteemed just as highly by God as the "best actor" award. BOTH are HIS good work, so crowns and rewards are not an issue of one's role, but rather of their **faithfulness** to that role which they've been assigned.

*I am coming quickly, hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown.*

— Revelation 3:11

And the Best Supporting Actor Goes To...

**Any good thing that happens on His stage is HIS good work, not ours. Nothing is ever wasted with God. All roles are infinitely good by design. We are but instruments.**

*Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done.*

— **Revelation 22:12**

We humans have been trained by the world to focus our attention on the "stars" in our society. We reward them handsomely, showering them with accolades. Many idolize them and expend their energy trying to be like them, all the while ignoring God's true purpose for themselves.

**Too many Christians are disappointed with the role that God has assigned to them. They don't understand that God is after their faithfulness not their celebrity.**

Some might argue that certain people have had a certain prominence, even in the Bible, and they'd be correct. For example, Paul the apostle was of great prominence for years...even penned the majority of the Books in the New Testament. However, Luke, the physician was by his side for medical care. Barnabas, the "son of encouragement" (**Acts 4:36**) was by Paul's side to exhort him to press on in the face of immense adversity. Both of these men were "supporting actors" to Paul...who, as a sort of understudy to Jesus, the true Celebrity, was center stage.

Shall we say that Luke and Barnabas were any less faithful to God's will than Paul? Did their roles somehow predetermine this? Of course not. **God sees the heart and a person's willingness to play their part, be it impressive by human standards or not.** Where would Paul's ministry be without his supporting cast?

*But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as*



*he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'*

*On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.*

*If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.*

— **1 Corinthians 12:18-27**

I sometimes think of extremes to help me get my arms around God's perspective. I imagine the person who spends a lifetime in disarray, making horrendous decisions, even. Somewhere in that chaos they are saved, but maybe it isn't until their last year of life that they realize the truth about God's will for them. And on their deathbed, with seemingly so little to point to, they share their life story with their caretaker. Openly thanking God for His patience, they amplify His grace, and they deliver the Gospel with profound empathy...something their audience can truly relate to, personally...and the caretaker is evangelized. What a victory! - what a closing scene that makes.

Is not even ONE soul evangelized worth a mere lifetime? Is not eternal salvation for one the greatest return on investment for another? Cannot God use the so-called least of us to share Himself with anyone? Better yet, DOESN'T He do such things on PURPOSE?!!! You bet.

And the Best Supporting Actor Goes To...

*Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.*

— 1 Peter 5:6

"And the award for the Best Supporting Actor goes too..."

You? I pray it does.

**Embrace your life always, your role, for it has meaning and it gives depth on the grand stage in ways that only our great Director fully understands.**

Never underestimate your impact in this world.

## Bookshelves

I primarily work from my home office nowadays, studying and preparing lessons for my sheep. I also have another fully-equipped office at the church. In terms of literature, they aren't quite mirror images, but they are very close. Over the years, I have accumulated many books - some purchased, some handed down. Honestly, I've read but a small percentage of them from cover to cover. Most sit there, staring at me. I sometimes notice them, but their greatest contribution seems to be to the decor of the offices.

I keep them for those times when I'm on a mission to study something out in greater detail. They are mostly useful to me for gathering alternative perspectives. But even then, I have my favorites, my "go-to" volumes.

This may sound a bit odd coming from a pastor, but I'm being transparent to prove a point.

*The wise King Solomon wrote, "And furthermore, because the Preacher was wise, he [Solomon] still taught the people knowledge; and he pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought acceptable words, even to write down rightly words of truth or correct sentiment. The words of the wise are like prodding goads, and firmly fixed [in the mind] like nails are the collected sayings which are given [as proceeding] from one Shepherd. But about going further [than the words given by one Shepherd], my son, be warned. Of making many books there is no end [so do not believe everything you read], and much study is a weariness of the flesh" (Ecclesiastes 12:9-12 - Amplified).*

Solomon was the son of King David, another exceptionally wise man. This kind of lineage means that the words written in the Book of Ecclesiastes are a sort of capstone of compounded wisdom over multiple generations of individuals who had seen both success and failure in life.

**Even so, wisdom cannot be borrowed for it to be effective. It must be possessed for it to precipitate true conviction.**

So the immediate question, then, is "how does a person go about 'possessing' wisdom?"

Well, **Ecclesiastes 12:12** is the third-to-last verse in the entire book of wisdom. Solomon essentially says that in the end, everyone has an opinion - some may write books about theirs. Nothing fundamentally wrong with books, however, they must be appropriately prioritized on your bookshelves.

**Why read lots of books about the Bible when you can simply read the Bible? Effective wisdom isn't shared, it is learned within the context of one's own existence.**

**Learn to listen to your own "voice," your own good conscience. God has given you His Word and His Spirit to convict you of the things that are right and wrong for YOU.**

Back to my bookshelves...

There was a time when I first began this journey as a pastor where I was fully intent on reading ALL of those books on my bookshelves. I was going to absorb ALL of it, darn it! Silly man. :) I've since learned that there's really only ONE book that truly matters - the Bible.

The myriad of books on my bookshelves spread across two well-appointed offices are filled with someone else's wisdom...someone else's opinions. Most that have "earned" a place on my bookshelves are very well written and I appreciate having them. As I said, depending on what I'm studying, I may pick one up now and then to catch someone's thoughts on a topic, a doctrine, or even a Greek word. It may come as a surprise to some, but not a single author (and there are hundreds represented on my bookshelves)

agrees with another on everything. That may be unsettling to some, but it's the truth. Even the so-called "great" theologians disagree on this or that.

So where does this leave me?...should I toss my library in the trash, dismayed by the lack of cohesive scholarship?...I mean, c'mon, right?!!! May it never be! I think if I DID see 100% agreement across the board, I might think some weren't being diligent. I expect disagreement and so should you.

**The only books that agree 100% with each other are the sixty-six in the completed canon of scripture.**

Man's wisdom, as in that which is encapsulated in the volumes on my bookshelves, is imperfect. Nonetheless, man is famous for sharing his wisdom with others. The most arrogant will insist theirs is superior and the rest should all fall in line behind them. But that's the root cause of so many problems in life.

**People need to learn to think for themselves, finding their OWN wisdom by investigating the Bible for themselves, firsthand, and then applying those things to the context of their own lives. Otherwise, they will be running on borrowed wisdom, void of true conviction. Such is the root of insecurity.**

I love how Solomon cuts to the chase and puts this issue to bed. Here are his closing statements in the Book of Ecclesiastes:

*All has been heard; the end of the matter is: Fear God [revere and worship Him, knowing that He is] and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man [the full, original purpose of his creation, the object of God's providence, the root of character, the foundation of all happiness, the adjustment to all inharmonious circumstances and conditions under the sun] and the whole [duty] for every man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it is good or evil.*

—Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 - Amplified

There's really only ONE book that matters on the bookshelf - the Bible.

The more time I spend in my Bible, the less I feel the need to consult the so-called "greats" on my bookshelves. They will always have a place in my studies, so their thoughts shall remain a few steps from my desk. However, the only book that now remains a fixture ON my desk is the Holy Bible.

**Besides, my Father in Heaven and my Lord Jesus Christ, Himself, sent me the greatest Teacher of all time to help me understand the infinite wisdom impregnated in His Word. His grace is truly sufficient.**

*But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My [Jesus'] name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.*

— John 14:26

*When the Helper comes, whom I [Jesus] will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me.*

— John 15:26

Combine the Bible with the Holy Spirit's ministry and the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher and you have the ripest possible combination for spiritual growth and understanding.

Consider that Jesus, the child, learned from His Bible. He never attended seminary. Neither did the apostles, except Paul, who had to unlearn much of what he picked up there. There wasn't even a need for lots of bookshelves because there weren't that many books in printed circulation, at least not in the homes of the apostles. Yet, who had more wisdom than

they?

Be encouraged, my dear friend. The Holy Spirit inspired Solomon to write his book of wisdom after a lifetime of trial and error. He said plainly in the end that trying to make sense of too many books is wearying.

Dedicate yourself to the sixty-six books in the Bible. Find yourself an honest pastor whose heart desires for you to possess your own wisdom, not his or anyone else's. And listen to the Holy Spirit, for He is your Helper. That's your winning formula...and it isn't found in commentaries or even in a seminary.

## Callouses

*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

When my oldest son was 14 years old and I was 35 years old, we built a house together, a beautiful one down by the water. Building a home was on my bucket list - check! Besides a few of the state-mandated sub-contractor specialists, like plumbers and electricians, we pretty much constructed our new home out of a seamlessly endless pile of lumber, nails, windows, doors, and roofing supplies. To this day, it's probably the hardest physical labor this aging body has ever dispensed. If my son hadn't since been twice deployed in the middle-east in the U.S. Army, I'd bet he'd say the same. I'd have to ask.

I worked for about 10 months straight, learning, often by mistake, as each 2x4 was set, each door jam measured out and raised, each of the thousands of nails were driven home by 100psi of compressed air. Most days were 12-16 hours long. I loved it. I lost about 25 pounds in the process, however, I think the greatest transformation took place in my hands.

Having been an engineer for years prior, and a non-practicing weightlifter, my hands were "soft". It was possible that there existed a few microscopic callouses from my computer keyboard, but I'm not about to brag about those. My fingers were deft, but not particularly noteworthy. I could type 60+ words per minute, which meant NOTHING the first time I picked up a carpenter's framing gun.

Up until that point, I had what most kind people would describe as "piano hands". I think that's just a nice way to say that I had scrawny fingers that were at least possibly good for tickling the ivories - LOL. Ummm...I can't play the piano. :o If I lined my hands up against a half-dozen manual laborers' hands, mine would have invoked memories of that old Sesame



Street song, "...one of these things just doesn't belong." :P

Why all this detail? Because the transformation that my hands went through was amazing. By the end of the build, they were different, covered with nicks, scratches, scars, and callouses. My forearms, when pumped, were grotesquely bulbous and disproportionately sized. Towards the end of the build, I was beset by temporary carpal tunnel syndrome as my forearm muscles expanded, stealing space from the less dominant nerves in my wrists. I lost feeling in my thumbs, pointing, and middle fingers...on both hands.

**So, on the one hand (no pun intended), I had these new "manly" hands, but on the other, I had lost my sensitivity. It was an interesting tradeoff. My fingers were three-fifths numb. Countless run-ins with wooden splinters and micro-abrasions had changed my ability to sense the world around me.**

The constant friction with my environment had left me heavily calloused. For a time, I had to train myself to 'watch' as my numb fingers fumbled with handling things, fearing I'd break them. I had broken enough things already, sometimes by mistake, sometimes on purpose out of frustration (don't judge ;). The last thing I needed was to begin breaking more things!

**Likewise, over time, our souls become calloused because of the constant friction with the world. We are God's fellow workers as He builds His abode within us, as He uses us as 'manual laborers' to help others out.**

*For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

— 1 Corinthians 3:9-11

**Our challenge is to keep from becoming so thick-skinned that we lose our sensitivity towards our environment, especially towards those we are commanded to love! In one sense, the Word builds us up, puts our hands to the plow and commands us to press on, persevere, overcome! In another sense, the same Word commands us to remain sensitive to the needs of others, to be on the alert, at the ready to lay down our lives for others. We are to be both, balanced.**

**We never want to become 'disconnected'.**

**For some, life has worn them silly. They've become numb, their senses dull. That's a tragedy.**

*Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.*

**— Hebrews 5:11-14**

Life can be challenging. There's a lot of friction for the maturing believer, a lot of back pressure from the kingdom of darkness. Abrasions tend to leave scars, build callouses. "Toughening up" is fine, however we mustn't allow ourselves to become senseless and numb.

**One of the greatest privileges in this life is becoming strong enough to remain completely sensitive to others.**

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies*

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

— 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

**'Grip strength' is a blessing, but clumsy meat hooks for hands can prove damaging to the tender-hearted person in need of a little comfort. The best "hands" are calloused enough to handle the strain of a hard day's labor, yet deft enough to convey an appropriate gentleness in time of need.**

**The best "hands" are those strong enough to reach out and hold on to another's without crushing them.**

## Good Does Not Imply Bad

"Why has God left me alone?"

"Why can't I have a wife that loves me like my brother does?"

"Did I do something wrong? Has God decided against me being married because I'm somehow unworthy?"

"Doesn't the Word of God say, '*It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him*' (**Genesis 2:18**)? If this is true, then WHY am I still alone? Does this mean I'm bad???"

These are the questions that over the years have been shared with me. They are often presented from the lips of a confused, and sometimes saddened soul. For years, I couldn't answer them and it used to break my heart. However, as time and wisdom has found their way to me, I have seen God's heart with much greater clarity. Please allow me to share some encouragement.

It turns out, these questions are symptoms of a more deeply rooted issue of misunderstanding. Before we get to that, let's run with the example above to help drive some things home.

Without getting too technical here, the originally inspired Word says that it is not good for "*the man* (ha adam - Hebrew)", referring to Adam, **specifically**, to be alone. Most theologians will agree that this is the generally accepted pattern for man and woman in the Bible. This pattern is also the means to propagating the human race through marriage and childbirth. In this way, it was good because it was necessary for Adam.

**However, what's necessary and good for one man may not be so for the next. Consider Jesus and/or Paul.**

**If we are to extrapolate this thought, we might rightly say that just because God says something is good doesn't always mean that the opposite is bad. To one person, one thing is good; to another, a different thing is good...yet these good things may be very different. Neither is bad.**

For Adam, being the very first human being, the only good option was Eve. But that's a context that doesn't exist anymore.

As the Spirit's been articulating from my pulpit over the past year or so, it is critically important that God's children possess their OWN wisdom and their OWN convictions regarding good and bad. The faculty in humans that provides decision-making is the conscience. We all have one by grace. At salvation, the Holy Spirit was grafted into the fold of supernatural inner goings-on that comprises the new creature, thereby influencing our conscience (don't ask me to draw this out or try to describe it beyond this - the Bible doesn't allow for it).

Consider Paul's singleness against the statement made by the Lord in **Genesis 2:18**.

*But this I say by way of concession, not of command. Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I.*

— **1 Corinthians 7:6-8**

Hmmm...before us lies two separate passages of scripture that SEEM to present us with different doctrines. This is often the time when many make the mistake of trying to 'hard-code' rules for life.

Please don't do that to yourself!

Man prefers things to be black and white and is typically uncomfortable with the idea that the Bible isn't a stepwise user's manual, but rather a dynamic source of wisdom. It seems most often, people desire to turn the Bible into a 'function box', like the ones I used to see in my math classes - 'put this in here and out comes that there, the same result without fail.' Well, that's not life.

If the Lord wanted rules-based robots, He would've created them, written a software routine to control them and called it a day. But He didn't do that. He created humans. He showed them love. He set them free to make their own decisions for or against Him. He gave them consciences to decide for themselves.

So don't make that awful mistake of going to, say the wisdom books in the Bible, and turning them into deterministic functions in your soul - 'do this and God promises that.' In doing so, you may miss the mark for your own life completely, leaving you confused and frustrated. For example, *"Proverbs [a wisdom book] does not give promises; rather, it tells us the best course to a desired end, all things being equal"* (Zondervan Study Bible).

**The Truths in the Bible are unfolded by way of CONTEXT. Every word, every interaction, and every scene described in the Bible can only be truly understood within its own context.**

This is why we ought never make a doctrine out of a single word and then try to blanket the rest of scripture with it. We ought never make a doctrine out of a single interaction and make the same error. I call that "hyper-doctrinalization" and it's evil.

Except for the rare cases of hapax legomena (a word used once in the Bible), the words in the Bible are used in a variety of ways to complement a greater context. However, a word's usage is ALWAYS contextual. For example, the word "good" may be used quite similarly under different

circumstances (e.g.: **Genesis 2:18 vs. 1 Corinthians 7:8**).

The Word of God uses words like "good" and "bad" to describe the lives and interactions of humanity within unique contexts. The very same thought ought to be applied to your own life. What's good for you is what God wants YOU to see.

Now, to synthesize all of this.

**If the Word of God says something is good, there is always a context, meaning God has deemed something good based on the situation. However, just because God deems one thing good does not mean the opposite is always bad. Good and bad are contextual realities.**

Consider the following. Do you believe the Bible says that you ought to respect and follow authority? - it does. If the authority says do this or that, you say, "no problem." However, if that authority asks you to denounce Christ openly, you say, "no way!" That's context.

One more example. Suppose you have 10 brothers and sisters at the dinner table, and as each of their children describe their successes in school activities, your parents say, "oh, that's very good!" But each one is doing something very different both in school and extracurricularly. Does the fact that one child is doing something good for them mean the next is bad? Of course not.

**There may be times when we all are doing good things, yet they are very different. Since we all share the right motivation, being set in our own good conscience, then there's room for goodness across the board. Just because Paul was single (as was Jesus, btw) doesn't mean he was breaking the Lord's heart as articulated in Genesis 2:18.**

I believe too many people read their Bibles, see something declared as good, and without taking into account the context, make the mistake of

## Good Does Not Imply Bad

assuming that since they aren't partaking in that same activity, their path is bad. This is a grave mistake.  
God sees your heart.

*For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit.*

— **Luke 6:43**

Are you a good tree (a good heart) or a bad tree? The context of your heart in a given situation is what dictates whether or not your fruit is good or bad. There is a definite uniqueness to the context of your life. The Holy Spirit is there to teach you how to apply the Word appropriately so that you find freedom when you read your Bible, not bondage.

God loves you. You love God, right? Indeed. Then you don't need rules and 'function boxes' - you're already doing well, my friend.

*Love is the fulfillment of the law.*

— **Romans 13:10b**



## God Created Diversity – Part 1

I spent two decades in industry before peeling off into full-time ministry. Whenever I'd entertain a new position with a different company I'd run across the standard equal employment opportunity statement. It essentially stated that there would be no partiality in hiring a person over another based on race, gender, age, etc. The fundamental underpinning of this is really a respect for diversity.

I love diversity, always have. I have also enjoyed the benefits of it countless times in industry, as well as in the ministry. To me, diversity is one of the greatest assets any organization can possess. Why? A unique perspective can open the eyes of an entire organization.

If everyone thought the same way about everything there'd be very little expansion, whether in thought or action. Even God doesn't promote stagnation through uniformity; rather He has proven Himself a God of diversity. From the very beginning He made a man and a woman, separate genders...diverse.

The "post-flood experiment" is a tremendous look into the heart of God on the subject of diversity. I say "experiment" because if you consider the goings-on prior to the tower of Babel you'd see a lack of diversity in the most powerful instrument throughout all of human history - the tongue. I believe God has allowed such events in history, knowing before they even unfolded that they'd prove disastrous, to give us wisdom.

*Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words.*

— **Genesis 11:1**

In context this is after the flood, where a mere eight humans had to repopulate the earth, so it makes sense that such a small group was best served by maintaining a common language. During that time uniformity

served God's purposes. However, as is often the case, once man became a much larger force on the earth, his inventive flesh began to entertain ungodly aspirations.

Communication facilitates the sharing of ideas. Historically, this has accelerated technological advances. Such things are often perceived as purely beneficial, however, history has proven them double-edged swords. Sometimes man perceives technology and its offspring as another rung on the ladder that leads to parity with God. Just think about all the atheists feverishly pursuing scientific discovery and the engineers standing on their shoulders to invent increasingly advanced methods of discovery. Many are out to disprove God's existence. In their minds, success means they are now gods.

After the flood, new technology looked like this:

*They said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.' And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. They said, 'Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.*

*The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. The Lord said, 'Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them [at least in their own minds]'*.

— Genesis 11:3-6

**The "post-flood experiment" reveals to us what man does without the proper measure of diversity. The Lord, Himself, describes how man becomes a danger unto himself in extreme uniformity.**

*'Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will*

*not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth.*

— **Genesis 11:7-9**

Diversity is something ordained by God. It is therefore inherently good since it keeps man's flesh from becoming too inventive in its desire to be like God. Consider Satan, who swept away a third of the angels before the dawn of man. His aspiration was to find parity with God (**Isaiah 14:14**) and he used **communication** with the other angels to corrupt them into joining in his scheme.

**The Tower of Babel represents the ingenuity of man if left to his own devices. Man likes to build things. He likes to create. Eventually, he figures he can usurp the role of "creator" from THE Creator. Left alone to communicate his lofty ideas to others, he is able to convince them to join in his quest. The "post-flood experiment" clues us into God's sentiment on such things.**

Now, before I close out Part 1, consider the one thing that has "shrunk" the world we currently live in. Do you know what it is?

**Communication.** Consider the Internet. Websites written in one language are now translatable, on the fly, into every other language. Communication gaps are shrinking rapidly.

**Man's flesh has never given up its ungodly tenacity. What was manifest at the tower of Babel has existed in the heart of man ever since the fall. Btw, Satan hasn't given up on his aspirations, either.**

Diversity has kept mankind from imploding upon itself under the weight

of its own invention. The Book of Revelation reveals what happens when the Spirit is no longer constraining man. He quickly runs towards a one-world government and an ecumenical church. It's just the same experiment run all over again. Except during that time, God will let it run its course.

Stay tuned for Part 2!

## God Created Diversity – Part 2

\*If you haven't read God Created Diversity - Part 1, I encourage you to do so now, here.

From that blog entry, we had, "**The 'post-flood experiment' reveals to us what man does without the proper measure of diversity. The Lord, Himself, describes how man becomes a danger unto himself in extreme uniformity.**"

*'Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth.*

— Genesis 11:7-9

The world today "enjoys" the inventive creations of man to degrees inconceivable to those individuals who were intent on building the Tower of Babel. Tremendous advancements have been made in the area of communications. In mere milliseconds, man is able to talk and even participate in video-conferencing from opposite sides of the globe! New technologies project real-time holographic images that receivers may interact with across the same distances!

**Advanced communications technologies have shrunk the world.** For years the buzz word in high-tech was "collaboration". Collaboration implies increased efficiency in sharing ideas, particularly in the areas of science and technology.

I often think about how all of this affects the churches (not the Church, the spiritual Body of Christ, specifically, although that is obviously a

consideration). I think about what I see happening in the churches. I see a funneling of God's sheep to fewer and fewer churches. The inevitable effect of this is the rise of megachurches.

The other day someone sent me a devotional from a pastor who I know very little about; only that he has a global ministry to his name. I liked what he wrote so it prompted me to investigate a little more. It took just a matter of seconds to find the thing that bothers me the most in today's ministries - charging for Truth. UGH!!!

*For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.*

— **2 Corinthians 2:17**

This particular ministry records pulpit lessons and then charges a fee to download them off of the Internet. I don't see anywhere in the Bible where individuals EVER charged for their lessons. Consider the basic facts that the Word is free, the spiritual gift being exercised to teach it is given for free, and certainly God the Holy Spirit, our true Mentor and Teacher, isn't about to charge for His labor!

*Freely you received, freely give.*

— **Matthew 10:8**

To my own broken heart and mounting irritation, I delved a little deeper into this ministry's leadership team. The pastor reports over \$600,000 annually as salary. Although his estimated income far exceeds \$1,000,000 annually, due to book sales and speaking engagements. This is NOT uncommon as megachurches go.

Now some might argue that King David and his son, Solomon, were very wealthy. Or maybe they'd cite Abraham or Joseph. Indeed they were, but those riches came through businesses.

**The Bible NEVER describes a shepherd of God's people as gaining their wealth from charging for teaching the Word of God. Never! Wealth was obtained through business dealings; legitimate ones.**

I alluded to some of this in the blog entry titled, "Superstar Status".

**More and more people are flocking to these megachurches and the oh so beautiful diversity that God has ordained in the churches is being lost.**

There's something to be said for what we see in the early Church. The Bible contains myriad local assemblies led by a variety of shepherds. Some were larger than others, of course, but NOWHERE does the Bible disclose anyone holy putting a price tag on a lesson.

**Seems to me that those individuals who put price tags on things received by grace to their account are tragically frustrating the plan of God. What if a person can't afford it? If a person has the heart for Truth, they ought to have access to it through God's anointed, unfettered by financial concerns. That's grace!**

*And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. And He saw a poor widow putting in two small copper coins. And He said, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on.*

— **Luke 21:1-4**

Jesus saw the widow's heart. Now what if that ministry was charging three copper coins at the door? Where would that have left the widow?

**Placing price tags on lessons reveals a lack of faith in this verse, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all**

*sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; as it is written, He scattered abroad, He gave to the poor, His righteousness endures forever” (2 Corinthians 9:8-9).*

Building megachurches and watching leadership make fortunes isn't orienting towards God's will - at least I, for one, cannot find justification for it in the Bible. Furthermore, as these institutions mature, motivation often becomes corrupt and diversity suffers increasingly so.

**The Bible depicts isolated local assemblies. Some of these megachurches remind me of the Tower of Babel, with steeples rising to the heavens. The pulpits are ornate and the teachers rich. Teaching has become more like a spectacle than a conveyance of sound doctrines. Sadly, people eat it up!**

The end result is a funneling of so-called Christians towards bloated ministries. This is the precursor and the preconditioning of the churches for the end times, where there will be one ecumenical church enforcing a strict diet of doctrines - no diversity means too much control!

People need to step back and realize the big-picture. Any institution that puts price tags on the things that are meant to be free ought to be roped in and set to reevaluate its priorities. Beware, my friends. Be careful what you seek and accept as godly.

God created diversity in the churches for a reason. Satan and man's flesh have been aspiring to overcome His will in every respect, including this one. I object.



**"I am, so I believe" versus "I believe, so I am"**

"I am, so I believe" versus "I believe, so I am"

"Life sucks, then you die!"

"Really???"

"Yup...I can't wait until this is all over with! My life has been just horrible. You have no idea."

"You're right, I don't have any idea as to how crappy your life has been, or what struggles you've had to face. But I do have a pretty good idea of how you've faced them by simply talking to you."

"Huh?"

There are two types of believers in this world - those that "get it" and those that simply don't, or refuse to, or are too arrogant to, or whatever...I've stopped trying to psychoanalyze people. I've traded all of that labor in for some simple tenets to live by. I now believe there are two types of people, generally speaking.

**There are the "I am, so I believe" types, and there are the "I believe, so I am" types. Allow me to explain my logic.**

Let's begin with the above scenario that, if you haven't already figured it out, depicts the "I am, so I believe" person. This is the person that, for a variety of reasons, has convinced themselves that they are what they are and that their lot is fixed. They believe that life wouldn't be so bad if they hadn't run into such bad luck...or maybe made all those bad decisions back in the day that they're still "paying" for. They've convinced themselves that this is their life, God chose it and therefore they are "stuck"

"I am, so I believe" versus "I believe, so I am"

in it until they die.

**The "I am, so I believe" types are convinced that because there's been a certain amount of misery in their life, that misery is "who they are". It's what they've known, after all, so that must be God's plan for them, right? Wrong!**

I believe there are 'prophets' in this world - they are the self-fulfilling prophets! They have locked their happiness away in an iron vault that they have long since forgotten the combination to. They perceive themselves as aliens to joy and happiness, though they don't deny that others might have it. Just not them. Not ever. This is who they are. This is their "crappy" life.

The "I am, so I believe" types have locked themselves in a prison. Though it's understandable how they might have gotten there, given some of the horrendous lives people are forced to live, they still have no one but themselves to blame for giving up hope.

**Without hope there's no motivation to live. That's the antithesis of eternal life!**

I'm confident there are folks right now reading this that are saying, "Oh sure, Ed, all of this is easy for you to say...you have a good life." How do you know what my life is like, or where I've come from, or who's hurt me the deepest, or anything for that matter? There's only ONE person in this vast universe that truly knows me and that's Jesus Christ. So I say, stop looking to justify your self-induced bondage. YOU are the only reason you're still in lockdown. It's true.

Jesus Christ said, *"So then, you will know them by their fruit"* (**Matthew 7:20**).

**If a person is filled with the Spirit of God, which really means they give Him the space to teach them the scriptures, to explain it to them, and to help them apply the precious Word of life to life, then they will bear**

certain fruit.

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

— Galatians 5:22-23a

The Bible states that reaping is a function of sowing, in general.

*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.*

— Galatians 6:7-9

So, for the “I am, so I believe” type person, this means since they are often sowing misery, they will undoubtedly reap misery. For as long as they believe that they are a miserable person, maybe in guilt having even convinced themselves that that is what they deserve, then they will be miserable. But those individuals should know that that is not from God. That pain is self-inflicted.

**Deliverance is but a change of perspective away. It may take a little time and some convincing, but I believe that God doesn't lie. And if His Word states, “*but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life*”, then I want to know what eternal life is!**

**The Bible tells us that eternal life is God's life.**

So, I challenge all the ‘self-fulfilling prophets’ out there to ask yourselves, “What is eternal life to me? Will I experience it in Heaven? If so, will I be happy then?” I hope that anyone that is saved understands enough about Heaven to know that they will be very happy there, forever melded with

"I am, so I believe" versus "I believe, so I am"

eternal life, with God. Ummm...doesn't scripture tell us that we have eternal life right now? Yup!

*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**

So, bear with my logic here. If the Word tells us that we have eternal life now, and we all agree that eternal life is that life we're going to experience in Heaven, and Heaven is going to be a place of perfect happiness, then if  $A=B$ , and  $B=C$ , then  $A=C$ , right (transitive property in math :) )?

**So, if God's not a liar (beware, Satan is!), then YOU, my dear "I am, so I believe" types are lying to yourselves! I'm not being harsh or insensitive; I'm just trying to get you to snap out of it!!! Life is too short and WAY too precious for YOU to be dictating the terms of your happiness!**

**Try this on for size instead, "I believe, so I am." Repeat that to yourselves as often as you can.**

The Bible says that if I believe, then God will apportion me faith! *"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"* (**Hebrew 11:6**).

If God gives me faith once I believe, then what does that mean for me? Specifically, as it pertains to happiness, it means that no matter what I think I should experience, or what I think I deserve based on my past, or even what others may think about my happiness...God can and will make me a happy person...if I only just believe. :)

*And [Jesus] \*said to them, '...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

If you believe, He gives you faith. If you have faith, nothing is impossible for you...even if your life has “sucked” up until this point. That doesn't matter.

**I believe that I am a sinner saved by grace. I believe that God has given me eternal life, His life. I believe that He's willing to share His happiness with me, even now - I have the faith and the happiness to prove it. I believe His Spirit LITERALLY loves to reap with me, every day.**

**I believe that God is glorified when He makes me happy. “I believe, so I am.” How about you?**

May I humbly echo Paul's sentiments, *“For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light” (Colossians 1:9-12).*

## **Jack of All Trades, Master of None**

"What?...what's that, Eddie?...hold on," he'd say in that time-worn voice of his. I'd watch my grandpa's wrinkled finger turn his hearing aid clockwise to turn up the volume. Interestingly, I'd often catch him turning it counterclockwise when my grandma was talking? - LOL, true story!

"Ok, that's better...so what's up, kiddo?"

I'd say, "grandpa, how do you know how to fix cars, bikes, chainsaws, and lawnmowers?...how do you know how to fix so much stuff?...you even build us bicycles out of junk parts you find at the town dump!" He was the first man I truly admired. His hands were like ancient relics to the little boy squeezed up against his shoulder...they had so much to say, so much to add to an adoring boy's wonder. I hung on his words.

He'd scratch his arm where the funny looking elastic was gathered near his elbow (to this day, I'm not 100% sure what those elastics were for - I think they were to keep his long sleeves from becoming unmanageable on that 5'2" frame). He reminded me of one of those old-school poker dealers.

Sometimes his dentures would come loose and he'd fiddle with them as he searched for the right words to answer. In his slowness, I'd inject another question...something like, "and how come you never drove the race car you and daddy owned?" Or, "what's the thing you are the very best at?"

When his more contemplative mind caught up with my ADD-riddled one, he'd answer. I remember him saying, "I'm a jack of all trades, master of none." He'd pause, knowing that this response would crank up a slew of new questions :). Thankfully, he was a patient man (a VERY patient one, I've learned since growing up, but that's another story for another day concerning his turning his hearing aid counterclockwise :) ).

Grandpa explained to me what he meant, and it was simple. He had acquired many skills over his lifetime (he was born in 1903). As a result he became the neighborhood "Mr. Fixit," a title a bit more revered back in his day. And he was kind to a fault, but I think he knew that about himself - even reconciled within himself that others might take advantage of his graciousness. Since he didn't give with strings attached, that never stopped him.

**He used his talents to serve.**

I believe even though I was just a boy, God had already begun a good work in me (**Philippians 1:6**). And He chose to use my grandpa as an instrument in raising me up to be the man that I am this day. He showed me a good heart, a humble heart. He showed me a man who was satisfied with never being a so-called standout, but rather a utility player. He gave me someone very early on in my life that I could adore that wasn't pushing me to be the next president of the United States, or a professional athlete, or a brain surgeon. No, my grandpa, with as genuine a warmth as a man might have, taught me a bit of humility.

I've since taught this from my own pulpit: **Humility is the key to the spiritual life.**

We don't have to be standouts or "heroes" by world standards to be good people. To think we must be is to buy a lie. That is bondage - something I see coursing like poison through the veins of various stages, amphitheaters, television & movie screens, magazines, and even books. And I see it all too often, even, from behind pulpits - people trying to make names for themselves instead of elevating the name of Jesus Christ, selling Him out and selling mangled doctrines for profit (whether money or reputation). I feel nauseous.

**Humility transcends such things, makes our being "in Christ" the only superlative that matters.**

*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.*

— **Philippians 2:9-11**

The only name that matters is His name.

**There's only one true Celebrity in this world - that's Jesus Christ!**

*Let them praise the name of the LORD, for His name alone is exalted; His glory is above the earth and heaven.*

— **Psalms 148:13**

There's only one true "hero" in this world - and it's not you or I.

My grandpa taught me that a good man doesn't have to be the very best at any one thing. Greatness is in serving others. He taught me things that years later, through deep introspection while immersed in the Word of God, Jesus, Himself, validated as Truth.

*But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.*

— **Matthew 23:11-12**

Humility accepts a name that reaches its highest elevation on the mailbox at the end of the driveway. Humility isn't preoccupied with a name cast in neon lights downtown or sewn above a number in a world series. Humility thrives on the simple opportunity to contribute in whichever way the Lord



God desires. It gladly submits. It openly greets. It loves.

*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 3:7-11**

My grandpa died at the age of 87. Three days prior, he could be found outside chopping wood for the wood-stove. He was the jack of all trades, master of none...and THAT is what made him special...and God used him just fine - trust me.

*For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.*

— **1 Corinthians 1:26-29**

## **The "Less Presentable"**

If I can't sleep at night, I'll sit on my couch in the dark and fire up some YouTube videos. Because I've always been fascinated by the human body, I have watched numerous surgeries. Frankly, some are easier to watch than others. I tend to stick to the more superficial operations, as the ones involving internal organs can make me a bit squeamish - too many fluids, not just blood, and alien-looking body parts in there - LOL. The thought of the foreign smells mixed with the sterility of the O.R. only exacerbates my discomfort.

It's true, most of us favor observing the more "presentable" aspects of the human body. I've never heard someone say, "Wow, Sally, what a beautiful spleen you have!" ...or, "Gee, Frank, you'll have to tell me your secret to keeping such a handsome small intestine!" We don't usually talk about our innards that way. In fact, most people don't seem to want to even talk about such things unless there's an illness that forces them to.

**Humans love to assign worth to the more presentable body parts. We learn to stratify based on what we see rather than what the Great Physician sees in His own Body.**

For example, we might say, "Wow, that supermodel on the cover of Cosmopolitan Magazine is gorgeous!" However, what we don't see is the awful condition of her gut. She might be a chain smoker, a bulimic, and about ready to croak from the stress she's putting on her heart...but darn it if she doesn't "look" good, right?

Well, what about the person whose pet llama could beat them in a beauty contest? You laugh, but I'm being serious. What if their general health is phenomenal from the inside out? What if their lungs are clear from living on a farm in Colorado, their bellies are calm and well from good diet, and their heart is strong and free of arteriosclerosis? Shouldn't we esteem them

equally, in some ways even more, since they are key contributors to the sustenance of our communities (compared to the runway model)? Aren't the healthy folks the "backbone" of society in many ways?

Even so, humanity favors presentation over backbone, faces over intestines, pretty eyes over sphincters. Yet, if our guts fail us, we are relegated to a colostomy bag. If our stomachs are diseased, we have trouble eating, threatened with malnourishment. If our hearts fail, we die. When's the last time someone was laid up in a hospital because they got a few wrinkles? When's the last time someone's well-being was significantly degraded due to an ugly face? When's the last time someone died from a fear of fat accumulating above their kneecaps?

**It's ridiculous, actually, to esteem the so-called "more presentable" body parts more than the so-called "less presentable" ones. In general, it's the less presentable aspects of the human body that are critical to human health! The apostle Paul used this same analogy to remind us that the "faces" of a ministry aren't any more important than the "guts". They may be more presentable, and even more attractive in some ways, but people are so "screwy" that the Spirit has to inspire a blog like this one to set people straight.**

*But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'*

*On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and 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.*

*And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.*

— 1 Corinthians 12:18-26

**Ministries must be consistently and diligently reset. Human flesh is hard-wired to compare itself to others, always looking for ways to “one-up” others. There’s no place for it in godliness.**

I ask you, how does an arm upstage a kidney when a person can easily live without an arm but not without a kidney? Likewise, should the kidney be overly impressed with a really strong arm? I think not...grateful, maybe, if said kidney were attached to a boxer and said arm were able to block a punch to it. Complementarily, the arm ought to be grateful to the kidney for keeping its blood supply clean while it tends to its primary business.

**Given the fact that we ALL have our own personal ministries in this world, we ALL need to take the lead as often as possible.**

Whether a “face” or a “gut”, whether comely or homely, whether more or less “presentable”, we need to encourage others of their importance to us, personally, and to the corporate Body of Christ. We mustn’t give the kingdom of darkness the joy of dividing us; for as Jesus, Himself, stated, *“Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand”* (Matthew 12:25).

**The next time you get a stomach ache, or irritable bowels, or heart palpitations, remember how easy it is to take our vital organs for granted. Remember Paul’s analogy in scripture, and be motivated to encourage someone, thanking them for simply “being them” and especially for playing their proper role, if they are indeed doing so.**

Who knows how much longer any of us have here on earth? Now's the time to congeal as family.

*Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.*

*But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.*

***Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.***

**— 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

## The "Me" Filter

We all live different lives.

It's implied that your experiences are significantly different than mine, and vice versa.

In the Spiritual life, this results in each of us advancing in different areas of His grace.

*"For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith" (Romans 12:3).* This means that we've each been given a unique opportunity to bring glory to God. What a wonderful thought, huh? I think so. :)

**The challenge is in remembering this same truth when it comes to others, the one that affords us the individual freedom to live our own lives as unto the Lord. Most things can be kept private, but by its very nature, life consistently forces us into collisions with others.**

*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 [own] 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, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.*

— **Philippians 2:12-16**

In **Philippians 2:12**, we are called to *"work out [our own] salvation"*, which

means we ought to always remember the boundaries of our own discernment regarding spiritual growth. WE are the only ones (besides God) that fully understand our own lives. Some of us even struggle with that. We each have this base concern regarding ourselves only.

The primary job of a filter is to sift out things that we don't want as ingredients in our mixing bowl. The size and shape of the filter determines what makes it through. There are also very different kinds of filters made to sift different materials, whether solid, liquid, or gas. If you've ever worked on a motor vehicle before, you know that if you use the wrong filter for say, an oil line, you can damage the engine irreparably.

**Application is key. The circumstance determines the filter required.**

**Over time, based on things we've learned and experienced, we develop "filters" in our souls. We sift through myriad data, all day, every day. We learn to filter out certain data immediately that we know isn't any good for us, personally. We allow other data through in order to give it our attention.**

**We all have different filters. They both protect us and make us more efficient as we assess our surroundings. However, we can't reach across to our neighbor and "borrow" their filter; nor is it a good idea to suggest they "borrow" ours. That's a tragedy waiting to happen.**

Unfortunately, it seems easier just to assume everyone else is using the same set of filters we are. Makes for less "work" ...less critical thinking. We humans have a bad habit of superimposing our own filters on the lives of others, assuming that we are able to sift through their experiences and arrive at a conclusion that is suitable for them. HOLD THE PRESSES!!!

In theology, proper, we call this "transference arrogance". It refers to those times when we suppose we understand another person's situation implicitly by simply applying our own filters to whatever data we've

managed to assemble. There are so many problems with this that I don't even know where to begin!

I prefer to save a little real estate here in this blog and simply cut to the chase.

**Learn to remove the "me filter" when observing others. Their life, their experience, their level of spiritual maturity are all facets of their personal walks that cannot ever be fully understood by you.**

I can't tell you how many times I've had to listen to someone tell me what I needed to do, as a shepherd, to overcome some obstacle in my life. Meanwhile, I have to bite my tongue because I know they are simply applying their own filters to my life, even though they are grossly misaligned! They assume to "know" me when they really don't. They assume to know what's "best" for me when they really don't. Some are so very confident that they get very frustrated and angry with me when they realize that I'm not about to take their so-called "good advice".

People are "funny" like that. A psychologist might call most of this out as egocentrism...and I can't say I'd disagree.

Whatever it is, or whatever you want to call it, just stop doing it! It is irritating to those on the receiving end, but MORE importantly, it's precluding you from actually relating to others Biblically.

**We need to apply the "Christ filter" always. Christ, though He of all people understood man's heart, gave people the appropriate space to apply their own filters to their own lives. He was perfect, but He understood nobody else was, so He spoke objective truth and let it settle into the souls of those willing to listen. That's our prototype.**

Jesus corrected Peter on this front, ensuring he didn't go meddling with John's calling: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to*



*gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.' Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He \*said to him, 'Follow Me!' Peter, turning around, \*saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, 'Lord, who is the one who betrays You?'*

*So Peter seeing him \*said to Jesus, 'Lord, and what about this man?' Jesus \*said to him, 'If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!' Therefore this saying went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but only, 'If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?'*

— **John 21:18-23**

By keeping our eyes on Christ, our field of view passes through Him first. He becomes our filter. It's righteous, objective, humble, loving, and true.

## Thoughts On "Old School"

The term "old school" carries with it a bit of an air of righteousness. That's why people are often reciting "old school" practices, traditions, and such to emphasize how good things "used to be"...you know, before these younger generations messed everything up (wink, wink).

**It's true, there are MANY things that seem to have degraded over the years, but sometimes "old school" isn't always what's best.**

Case in point:

Around 957 BC, Solomon commissioned the building of the First Temple in Jerusalem. It was truly grand, by all accounts, something to behold in size and beauty. Only the very best materials were used and only the greatest artisans were employed to build it. A "cubit" is roughly 1.5 feet, so when we read the dimensions of the First Temple, we immediately understand the scope of this project. *"As for the house which King Solomon built for the LORD, its length was sixty cubits [~90 feet] and its width twenty cubits [~30 feet] and its height thirty cubits [~45 feet]" (1Kings 6:2).*

This Temple was totally destroyed by the Babylonians around 586 BC when they sacked Jerusalem. This was a devastating blow to a people whom God had blessed with a foundational place of worship. Temple was at the very nucleus of Israelite society. It defined them in some ways.

Jews were very 'traditional'. Therefore, even long after the First Temple was destroyed, they clung to the memory of the way things used to be. Their very identity as a people was intimately tied to their traditions, many of which were consummated during a variety of activities occurring in or around the Temple.

News of building a new Temple would've rekindled wonderfully

foundational memories and stirred the people uniquely.

By 516 BC, the Second Temple in Jerusalem was built, authorized by Cyrus the Great and completed under Darius the Great, both kings of Persia, by the way (goes to show how God can use individuals outside of expected circles to enact His will - Cyrus was not an Israelite). *“In the first year of King Cyrus, Cyrus the king issued a decree: ‘Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered, be rebuilt and let its foundations be retained, its height being 60 cubits [~90 feet] and its width 60 cubits [90 feet]; with three layers of huge stones and one layer of timbers. And let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.’”* (Ezra 6:3-4).

**You would think that after the destruction of the First Temple, EVERY Israelite would’ve been excited at the prospect of a new Temple, regardless of size, shape, or grandiosity. That wasn’t the case.**

*They sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying, ‘For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.’ And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. **Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.***

— Ezra 3:11-13

The Jews suffered 70 years without their beloved Temple. That’s a LONG time to go without something so elemental to their way of life. Yet the “old schoolers”, the “old men who had seen the first temple”, wept when they saw the foundation of the Second Temple. *“Those painful emotions were excited by the sad contrast between the prosperous circumstances in which the foundations of*

*the first temple had been laid and the desolate, reduced state of the country and city when the second was begun...Yet the glory of the second far outshone that of the first temple in another and more important point of view, namely, the receiving within its walls the incarnate Saviour" (Jamieson-Faussett-Brown Commentary).*

### **The Lord God ordains EVERYTHING.**

Even evil things are allowed to occur by God. As the Bible tells us, God can make use of even the most vile of human decisions. Obviously, the hearts of the Babylonians were against Israel as they destroyed the First Temple, yet God used it to discipline His people. *"FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES" (Hebrews 12:6).*

In the greater context of God's sovereign plan for mankind, the First Temple was NEVER meant to stand even one day longer than it did!

**Likewise, anything that the good Lord decides to destroy in YOUR life was NEVER meant to stand even one day longer than it did! This means that sometimes "old school" isn't appropriate for the new classroom called "your life".**

**However, the greatest value in remembering the way things used to be is in the principles, not necessarily the circumstances. Stated differently, sometimes we simply need to focus on lessons learned rather than dwelling on the impossible challenge of trying to go back in time.**

One of my favorite secular proverbs is, "The one constant in life is change." I'm sure that's a Biblical rip-off, as all wisdom sprouts from Him. In any case, there's truth in that statement. While base principles never change, circumstances always do.

**If "old school" means you trying to live a life that is long gone, given to**

**previous generations, but now the good Lord has ordained as past history, then the best you can hope for is minimal frustration.**

The First Temple wasn't meant to be seen or worshipped in by those who were given the Second Temple, and vice versa. As far as the Lord God is concerned, His timing is perfect. The weeping of the "old schoolers" at the building of the Second Temple, though understandable, needs to be digested as a manward issue, not a godly one.

*'The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,' says the LORD of hosts, 'and in this place I will give peace,' declares the LORD of hosts.*

— Haggai 2:9

You see, as was the case with the Temples, peace is something that the Lord gives freely, divorced from any previous institution in our lives. We don't need to seek "old school" things to find His peace and happiness. These things are available to us right now, as they've always been, to every generation that's ever lived.

**We can learn lots of things from the past; however, we mustn't make the mistake of tying our happiness and our joy of living to the way things used to be. That's certain bondage since it's impossible for any of us to turn back the hands of time.**

## Why I'm Not a Fan of Superlatives

**Why can't we just be amazing people in Christ? Why the endless pursuit of identifying "the best"? It's a disease.**

We are obsessed with superlatives. The base evaluation of everything and everyone seems to boil down to some measure of superiority given to us by the world. "How good am I?" Well, before I can answer that, I've got to identify who the "best" is and compare myself to that person. That comparison may take place in a small room or even globally, depending on context. The human flesh is interested in such things, regardless of scale. I'm not...well, for as long as I'm not acting in my flesh, that is.

I've had many beauty-conscious women tell me that the first thing they do whenever they walk into a room, especially when it includes one or more "new" people to the group, is check out the "competition". Are they still the queen bee or has some other beauty 'stolen' their throne? Oddly, I've also learned that these things can be genderless, meaning a terrifically handsome man can make a beauty-conscious woman's self-consciousness spike. What an awful reality, huh? I'm not making this stuff up - like I said, I've learned this from women, themselves.

Ask men that follow sports who the best athlete is in a given sport, whether at the YMCA playing hoops or on TV, and you might be in for a long, heated discussion. Why? Man is confused about his own self-worth and sense of identity. An athlete becomes like an avatar...so he fights for his 'throne' vicariously.

**Regardless of gender or endeavor, superlatives are fundamental to our fleshly desire to compare ourselves to others. They are symptoms.**

Now here's a phenomenon that I didn't learn about until I was well into my adulthood and significantly matured in Christ. Assign the average

person a superlative and a couple of things typically happen AFTER the “joy” of being singled out as “best” has worn off: (1) even if they don’t agree with the title, they ‘become’ that superlative by taking on a new image (“I’m Best-Something Person!!!” ...cue Superman music); or (2) they feel pressure to maintain “best” status for as long as possible (almost like a sense of duty to their ‘fans’ and their own flesh).

Want to mess with the head of someone intentionally???...tell them they're the best you've ever seen. Really want to trip them up???...make the superlative a personal trait, like personality, or kindness, or giving. PLEASE don't do this!!!...imagine YOU are the one on the receiving end instead, and be honest about your gut reaction, short- and long-term. I've learned to be EXCEPTIONALLY careful how and when I use the word “best” when speaking to others. I may be totally convinced of the fact in my own soul, but that's not the issue, is it? No, it isn't. Unless it's an obvious “best” like a best round in a group of golfers, then I tend to refrain for the aforementioned reasons.

**I don't want to cause anyone to stumble by assigning a superlative to them. Most people cannot handle it. If a goldfish could speak it'd say, "Give me more food...more...more...more!!!" It'd literally eat itself to death. The flesh is like that with superlatives...it'd eat them until it became knotted and crippled by the imposition of being the “best” at so many things. The last thing I want to have on my hands is the blood of a “dead goldfish” (wink, wink).**

I still receive superlatives now and then, but I tend to simply reply with a warm “Thank you!” and I don't give it much thought. I mostly appreciate the fact that a person took the time to share something with me, about me. I do wonder, though, why a particular person would choose to present me with such a thing. Are they trying to purposely put me into bondage??? I highly doubt it - most people are being genuine and consider it a complement. In general, people simply don't think or see things the way I have explained them here. Many are too fixated on being ‘the person who

told me I was the best', purchasing them a place of adoration with my flesh...which, as it turns out, is really about them...but that's not a cause for surprise since, with the flesh, it's ALWAYS about self.

**I think superlatives are fine for sports and quantifiable endeavors like science (e.g.: the biggest atom). Beyond that, unless a conversation I'm having is about Christ, then I'm really not interested in who's the "best" whatever...too much arguing in the first place and too much stumbling afterwards for those 'crowned'. I say we ought to stop giving the flesh breathing room to stomp all over us. I say we refrain from comparing ourselves to others, in general, unless there's an absolute utility to it (e.g.: labor development).**

In all reality, it's irrelevant to say someone's the best (save Christ), NOT because "there's always someone better" as the old adage says (that's a subtle trap, btw...dwell on that), but rather because we've all been made perfect in Christ. If you're perfect just the way you are, then how can anyone be a better you? If you happen to be the tallest person in your high school graduating class, then fine, that's one "-est" that is a fact. However, to agree with the popular crowd that you are somehow "better" or even the "best" is a horrible lie. The writer of **1 Samuel** reveals Saul's assigned superlatives as actually getting him elected king!

*"He had a son whose name was Saul, a choice and handsome man, and there was not a more handsome person than he among the sons of Israel; from his shoulders and up he was taller than any of the people" (1 Samuel 9:2).* Israel elected Saul because he compared favorably to others by fleshly standards. Israel made a mistake of choosing him based on superlatives. It didn't end well for him. David, *"a man after [God's] heart" (Acts 13:22)*, was ultimately elected because he truly was the best man for the job, by GOD'S standards.

Some of you reading this might be saying to yourselves, "Hey, I don't like what he's saying here...I've been the 'best' at this and that and it's served me well!" But I challenge you to ask yourself, in 100% humility before the



Lord, "How has being the 'best' by man's standards served my Lord or others?" And I'm not talking about using God-given talents for the Lord... I'm talking about owning a TITLE or wearing a superlative like a crown... how has THAT ever served godliness effectively? Only God can ever say who's the "best" at anything...if He's even interested in such arguments. Those truly focused on Christ could care less anyways...they know a trap when they see one. *"If a bird sees a trap being set, it knows to stay away"* (**Proverbs 1:17 - NLT**).

**I believe that the very BEST is Christ. I don't much care about what additional superlatives man would like to add to the mix...they don't matter. Heck, even Jesus, the "King of kings", wouldn't have fared well against Saul, *"He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him"* (Isaiah 53:2b).**

I say to all flesh, "Take your silly superlatives and stuff them where the sun doesn't shine! I don't want to hear about your opinion of me or anyone for that matter...or who you think the best is or even if you think it's me...all it's doing is distracting this world from the one true Superlative, Jesus Christ!"

*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**

## Why I'm Not a Fan of Superlatives

**Don't let this world define who you are or who you aren't. The world's estimation of you doesn't matter. YOU are already the "best man for the job". God doesn't make mistakes. Don't ask others what all this means, pray on it and see what God tells you in secret.**

## **Your Opinion Is the BEST!...**

...for you!

I'm not sure what psychologists have to say about one's formative years and frankly, for the most part, I'm not interested (no offense intended). What I recall of my own childhood are what I refer to in my own soul as "eras". These eras are times when my life was truly being changed in remarkable ways. Sometimes, these are good memories, sometimes not. In either case, what I am also able to connect with even at the ripe age of 44 years old are the states of mind I was in, including the emotional highs and lows that characterize these times.

More often than not, I clearly recall doubting myself. Most of the time nobody knew because I had learned the defensive strategy of putting on a good face, a strong one, at an early age. Of course, that did just about nothing substantial for the person putting on the face, but it did keep otherwise intrusive outside influences down to a minimum. I'd receive fewer opinions this way, too. Thank God!

If others can't see what you're going through, they tend to leave you alone. If they do sense it, you get flooded with opinions...which, in my experience, are mostly about them rather than you. People like to hear themselves talk, I think. They also like to assume their opinions are superior when they shouldn't. That's just people. Opinions are like rear ends - everyone's got one...some more than others. :o

Thinking back to my early teenage years...the unfortunate thing was that once an opinion found its way into my soul, it always seemed to have some kind of an effect, whether I liked it or not. When it was negative, this would cause a whole host of things to spin up in me - doubt, regret, condemnation, shame...many things amplifying an already budding insecurity. In the rare case when opinions agreed, I was given a reprieve.

But now I see even that as a trap, as it encouraged my giving future opinions power over me.

**Opinions are never 100% equal, which potentially leaves a person with some form of doubt about their own. Insecurity is just another name for bondage.**

For the most part, I have been free from this plague for years now. Heck, with the number of opinions I get tossed at me nowadays, I'd be a train wreck if I were still listening! My secret? - encouragement from the Word of God. Actually, I have faith that since the Lord created me and He also has provided me with all that I need to make good decisions, then it's really up to me to have the confidence to trust in my OWN opinion.

Actually, the Lord's expectation is that I DO formulate my own opinions, consider them "right" for me, and then execute based on them. Otherwise, He considers it a sin. If another person isn't convicted to do the same as me, then it's not a sin for them - and visa versa, of course. That's a VERY important perspective that every believer ought to share.

*Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is a sin.*

— James 4:17

Here's what the Lord wants from His children - and remember He's a fair God.

**God simply wants you to do YOUR best based on YOUR opinion of what's right for you at any given point in time - not someone else's idea of what's best for you based on THEIR opinion.**

This requires a certain confidence, doesn't it?...a certain conviction, huh?... of course! The apostle Paul is one of our greatest examples of confidence

and security. Where do you suppose that confidence came from? How do you think he tapped into it? What did he depend upon? Whose help did he enlist? Paul had faith in convictions born of his own good conscience with the help of the Holy Spirit. He knew that was what God expected of him. That was Paul's best.

*In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.*

— Acts 24:16

When a person thinks this way, they quickly realize how powerful they are in this world. They quickly realize that as far as their own life goes, the only opinion that really matters other than God's is their own.

Even if in retrospect certain decisions seem like failures, chalk them up as learning experiences and press on. Now you know what NOT to do in the future. :) If you spend your whole life following others' opinions, you never learn - you lose out. You have to have a little faith in God's plan for YOU as an individual. Before you were even born, He knew all the mistakes you were going to make.

**But you know what? - if you're going to make mistakes, then He wants you to make YOUR mistakes, NOT someone else's! YOU** have to grow up by doing the best you can at any point in time. Who cares if you fall down and scrape a knee??? It doesn't mean you're a failure, it simply means you failed - there's a BIG difference!

*For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again.*

— Proverbs 24:16a

If you fall down after following your own opinion, then get up, dust yourself off, and press on! And don't apologize for doing what you thought was right. Those whose opinions you disregarded will often be right there,

## Your Opinion Is the BEST!...

arms folded, nose in the air, saying, "I told you so!" That's THEIR own pathetic weaknesses shining through, trying to get you to join in their misery. Transcend those times, keeping your chin up, knowing that you are right with God.

*For why is my freedom judged by another man's conscience?*

— 1 Corinthians 10:29b

In other words, why should we suffer loss of freedom because something we are doing isn't "right" in someone else's opinion? We shouldn't. We have God-given freedom to make our own decisions, for better or for worse in the end. If someone else doesn't understand that - too bad!

**What's good for you may not be good for the next person. What's good for the next person may not be good for you. It's impossible for one person to rightly judge what's best for another. God sees the heart and has sent His Spirit to guide each individual to formulate their own opinions.**

*Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.*

— 1 Peter 3:13-17

What's the secret to finding tremendous freedom in the passage above? - defining what is "right" for you and being comfortable knowing that others may disagree. Most people seem to assume that "right" includes others'

opinions. That's their downfall.

And never be afraid of failure. Fear is bondage. There's nothing to fear when the loving hands of our Lord are there to lift you back up. Others may peddle fear with their opinions and bondage with their "I told you so's," but God provides you with love and freedom.

Your opinion is a gift. You will know right and wrong for you because God has given you a conscience and His Spirit to convict you of such things. Have faith in these things and remember that your opinion is the BEST - for you!

## Integrity

Integrity is the hallmark of our just and righteous God. He *is* integrity. Jesus revealed what the grace of God can do through an individual with integrity. We “[fix] our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (**Hebrews 12:2-3**).

Paul, though imperfect, revealed imparted righteousness, giving credit to God. “*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me*” (**1 Corinthians 15:10**).

Integrity is a function of humility. An arrogant person will, under pressure, give priority to their own self-sanctifying objectives over God’s sanctifying ones. A godly person is a person of integrity. Integrity is often thought of as “doing the right thing, even when no one is watching”. The humble person abides in the simple fact that God is always watching.

*Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules.*

— **2 Timothy 2:5**



## **A Contract Is Only As Good As the Signatures On It**

*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. He does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend; in whose eyes a reprobate is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD;*

*he swears to his own hurt and does not change; he does not put out his money at interest, nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.*

— **Psalms 15:1-5**

I spent a couple of decades in the high-tech industry before being called into full-time ministry. I had the privilege of partaking in some very large, multi-million dollar business deals between Fortune 500 companies. From the outside looking in, a person might observe the "suits" swooping in and out of the deal. There was lots of wrangling, but after months of back and forth, the powers that be would sign a contract, sealing the deal. Lawyers were always involved along the way also to protect the interests of their respective party. Did you know that "satan" means attorney?...just sayin'.

I've also owned a couple of small businesses, worked for a family business, and dabbled in the real-estate market. To varying degrees, the pattern and fundamental tenets of closing a deal were roughly the same, regardless of endeavor. Contracts were always present in the mix.

After years of dealings with all walks of life, here's what I understand about contracts.

**A contract is only as good as the signatures on it.**

## A Contract Is Only As Good As the Signatures On It

Why do I hold this conviction? Because in every form of business I've ever been involved in, I've been burned. Sure, there may have been a contract in place...even signed and hands shaken. However, when the other party decided to change their mind, they just did. And it was difficult, if not impossible, to stop them.

**Today I avoid even engaging with people who I can't trust. It's impossible to trust someone who lacks integrity.**

Integrity keeps a person from being a self-serving ass...you know, like Judas:

*Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What are you willing to give me to betray Him to you?' And they weighed out thirty pieces of silver to him. From then on he began looking for a good opportunity to betray Jesus.*

— **Matthew 26:14-16**

A person without integrity will always find loopholes to break their promises. When it comes to formal contracts, attorneys will always be retainable to find and exploit them for their clients. Some even bend the law to pry open nonexistent loopholes just enough to allow their client to slip through. All of this is hogwash...dare I say, satanic.

**Assuming a piece of paper is going to be enough substance to enforce every detail in a contract is nothing more than an expectation waiting to be annihilated. Trust is the key.**

People will sign just about anything if they believe it will benefit them. Some will even sign things intending to breach the contract somewhere down the line. This sort of premeditation is foul, but for those without character and integrity, it's an effective means to an end; a chance to manipulate people and situations.

I recently taught the following principle from the pulpit.

*"It's impossible to commit to any marriage if you have a prenuptial agreement"* (**lesson on website dated 1/14/14**).

How much does an "I do" at the altar mean when one (or both) of the parties is already preparing for a divorce? Isn't that a premeditated breach of contract? - of course, specifically concerning the part about, "for as long as we both shall live." But that's people - promising things to others for as long as it suits them, but no longer. Why even sign a marriage certificate if your signature is worthless? Why get married if you're already open to divorce?

Now I'm not throwing stones here at anyone who's been divorced. That's an issue between them and the Lord. I'm making a specific point about integrity to your word.

I feel like I'm getting old when I say this, but it used to be that a handshake was enough - that a person's word was sufficient. But a steady decline in integrity in this world has forced our current hand. Heck, you can't even sell something on eBay without having first agreed to all the stipulations in some multi-page legal document typed in .00005 size font (lol - just joking about the font size - hee, hee).

In the end, there's one "signature" that represents perfect integrity - God's. He has signed your salvation, sealed it with the Holy Spirit. You are betrothed to His Son - this you can trust.

*He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose*

## A Contract Is Only As Good As the Signatures On It

*who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.*

*In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation - having also believed, **you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise**, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.*

— **Ephesians 1:9-14**

If you trust God (and you should), you never have to question His integrity to His promises. His word is truth, His contracts unbreakable, His integrity absolute. Satan, the attorney, is trying to prove otherwise, trying to find loopholes to sully His integrity and destroy your hope. However, in this case, it is folly.

God's way is always the best way. If He says, "stand by your word like I do," then do it...not just for the benefit of those you're engaged with, but for your OWN benefit.

*The integrity of the upright will guide them, but the crookedness of the treacherous will destroy them.*

— **Proverbs 11:3**

*A righteous man who walks in his integrity - how blessed are his sons after him.*

— **Proverbs 20:7**

*Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool.*

— **Proverbs 19:1**

A good name is a terrible thing to waste. When you sign your name to a

contract, you are putting that name on the line. Pause and ponder that the next time you sign something.

**As a Christian, the world sees that you have a co-signer, and His good name is now on the line, too.**

*To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, **so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.***

— **2 Thessalonians 1:11-12**

Exercise integrity. Live well. Live righteously. Hold fast to your good name and make your signature worth something.

**Bullseye!...Oops - Stop the Presses...**

"Son, what IS your major malfunction?!!!"

"Ummm...sir, yes, sir???"

Huh?

This was all transpiring a couple of firing stations down.

My fellow squad member was so rattled by this point that he was responding with barely intelligible babble...I mean, it sort of resembled human speech...there were familiar sounds spilling out. But the content, if there even was any coherency to it, wasn't quite impressing our training instructor (TI). And as was the case with all TI's, he was exuberantly forcing my buddy to chew on his displeasure.

Since the Air Force concerns itself with mostly non-infantry missions, we new recruits were essentially given one day of firing an M-16 assault rifle. And if we performed well enough, we'd earn our expert marksman ribbon - wow, now that was cool for guys with no stripes, no ribbons, no nothing to speak of at that juncture.

The weapons were a little beat up, but whatever. "Improvise, adapt, and overcome!" (yes, that's a ripoff from the 1986 movie *Heartbreak Ridge* - :) ).

"So, one shot at this, huh?" This was circulating in my head. My resolution to obtain said ribbon had been cemented back at the barracks when our TI announced the day's events. My crosshairs were already locked onto my target...well, at least mentally they were - LOL.

As I sat there, waiting motionless, magazine emptied, I listened in to other similar conversations. I laughed inside because these TI's were a brand of

funny that I had never encountered before. But I didn't dare make a peep as that'd be cause for some railing against me, too - not fun. So I waited... imagined the ribbon pinned to my otherwise naked breastplate.

I forget the distance and the number of rounds we shot that day for our final examination, but my confidence was pretty high that I had clustered my rounds pretty well. "Expert marksman, here we come!"

Ugh!

My rounds were indeed clustered pretty tightly...only the center of the cluster was about 4-5 inches northwest of bullseye. I was very consistent, but consistently off-target. I looked down the line to catch others' reactions to their own performances and noted one guy looking quizzically at his own target...he had more holes on his target than he had shot rounds! I think it was mr. discombobulated that I introduced you to earlier that had, in his state of disarray, actually fired all his rounds at his neighbors target - LOL! Well, at least my cluster was on my own target, so that was something to be happy about, I suppose, right? :) Thank GOD we weren't infantrymen - wouldn't want to be stuck in a trench someday with him covering my back. :/

**I was very consistent, but consistently off-target.**

As a result, I didn't end up getting my expert marksman ribbon. I received something much better - a seed implanted that sprouted years later when watered by the Word of God. I received an important lesson that day. Somehow, aside from my complaining about faulty sight-guages and crusty old M-16's afterwards (you know, the standard macho response to failure - always looking to blame someone or something else), that seed took root. It lay mostly dormant for years like so many life lessons do, until God animated it for good.

**Consistency in the spiritual life is a very good thing. However, what**

## **good is a cluster of rifle shots if they don't hit your target?**

What good is a rifleman with faulty equipment? A bullseye shot is the result of many variables coming together in unison. And what about the person that is shooting up someone else's target...not their own? How does that effect others around them?

The Bible speaks often about having the right firing system for the job. This means good equipment and good marksmanship. As a matter of fact, God has ordained certain spiritual gifts so that each Christian soldier is properly equipped for battle.

*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**

At the end of the day, you may have one terrific display of clustering. However, if the cluster isn't centered on the bullseye, well that's like missing the target of Christ's heart. Maybe it's the details of life...job, friends, hobbies, etc. Maybe you think your focus is noble, but it's really not...or important, but there's a whisper, *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD” (Isaiah 55:8).*

To hit the bullseye, you have to learn to focus on it. A bullet is stupid - it'll go wherever it's fired. YOU have to account for the system behind it, which includes equipment, marksmanship, and even environmental variables. Account for wind, even (**Ephesians 4:14**)!

*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**

And remember also that we are in the trenches together, you and I. We have been called for battle. I'll cover your back and you cover mine... 'tis the Christian code (**Philippians 2:3**). When assigned one, please shoot at your own target, lest we both shoot mine and yours breaks through our front line. Be a good soldier. I will do the same.

*Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier for Christ Jesus.*

— **2 Timothy 2:3**

Our engagement with the enemy is worse than any trench warfare this world has ever seen.

*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 6:12-13**

Accuracy counts. Consistency is great but it's got to be on-target. Unlike my Air Force experience, where we had a single day to qualify as expert marksmen, we have a whole lifetime to practice. Be diligent. Pick up ammo daily. Empty your rounds into that target down range. Enjoy the process (**1 Peter 1:7**)

*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**

Bullseye!...Oops - Stop the Presses...

May we all obtain our expert marksman ribbons. See you on the firing range!

## **Divine Discipline**

"I better cut this out or else God is going to smite me!" How many times have you heard something like this from a fellow believer? Too many, right?

The Bible is clear that discipline exists and that God, Himself, "administers" it. However, I'd argue that most people, even the educated believers in this world, have a warped sense of how He tends to discipline. Most, it seems have adopted some view from religion and or the media, fearing that if they stray too far off course, God will somehow injure them, even physically, as if that's the greatest threat He might pose. Most seem to assume that His discipline is related to tangible or physical things.

I've heard everything thing from, "What did I do to deserve this?" to "I don't understand why God would allow such a thing in my life, I wonder what I did wrong." These kinds of statements are often made from a perverted sense of reality - one that perceives God as a cruel taskmaster and not the God of love that He is. Abba! Father!

For some reason, believers cling to the stories in the Old Testament to formulate their thoughts on divine discipline. They flip through the pages and assume the physical pain, the wars lost, and the fallen leaders of Israel are the key to understanding God's discipline today. However, what most fail to understand is that in every case, God had warned them of their doom beforehand, and very specifically at that. Israel had a very "physical" relationship with God. His will for them was to keep them from intermingling with those around them. His goal was a certain purity through activity. He ultimately gave and enforced the Law to employ His will, simultaneously preserving a remnant as well as proving that no one except His Son could ever fulfill the Law.

**But we are no longer under the Law.**

*For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.*

— **Romans 6:14**

**We believers in the Church are not under Law, but rather grace.**

This changes things significantly, even the physicality of God's interactions with His elect. His promises to His elect people, Israel, in the Old Testament, whether blessing or discipline, were related to the Law. He promised physical discipline to those who broke it, which is exactly what is recorded in the Bible.

**However, Jesus Christ abrogated the Law by completely fulfilling it. Therefore, we don't share in the same promises of discipline.**

*Do you think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.*

— **Matthew 5:17**

The curse of the Law has been removed: *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us - for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' - in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith"* (**Galatians 3:13-14**).

The point is that since the Law of old no longer applies to believers today, neither does the associated discipline. Therefore, the inordinate fear that most believers carry around regarding physical discipline by the hand of God is unfounded.

**God works His will through a greater channel now. "Grace, mercy and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Son**

*of the Father, in truth and love" (2 John 3).*

We are under grace. We are indwelt by the Trinity. We no longer need the force of the Law and the external blessings and/or discipline to keep us "in line." These things have been written on our hearts!

The Law promoted an external relationship with God and so His dealings with Israel (including their discipline) were likewise externally wrought. However, with grace, His will is understood intimately, and so we relate to Him internally, even through discipline.

In this way, divine discipline is now administered from within each believer, unto themselves, even. Maladjustment to His will is revealed through a good conscience and conviction that comes by means of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

**Our bruises, therefore, are on our hearts rather than our skin.**

I think of times when I was a child and deserved some discipline. Given the choice, most times I would've opted for a physical lashing over a heartfelt one born of knowing I had hurt someone I loved. This is a very similar situation between our Father and His children today. We desire to please Him because we love Him. All of this is internalized, making it much more effective.

*You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

— 2 Corinthians 3:2-3

**You see, discipline is now an internal heart issue, not a Law-driven, external one. The same goes with blessings.**

These things were prophesied and so they are. Israel is spoken to directly regarding their own deliverance from the Law of old. Their conviction is internalized like every other believer's today.

*This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.*

— **Hebrews 8:10-11**

It seems most believers have adopted a lie about divine discipline... teetering on the precipice of "yikes! - I hope God doesn't get after me for my sins!" Such is religion, but certainly not grace. *"For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more"* (**Hebrews 8:12**).

**We are each a law unto ourselves through our personal love for God. We fulfill the law in one word - LOVE!**

We have been freed...making us free to relate to God intimately, without the binding of the Law. We stray, but we readjust because we abide in His love.

*For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'.*

— **Galatians 5:14**

**"Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:8a). It transcends all commandments.**

**However, we fail love sometimes, don't we? - and that is our greatest**

**disappointment in life. Is there any greater pain than that?...any greater form of discipline that might change our hearts on a matter? I say, "no."**

**There's no pain like a broken heart.**

God doesn't need to reach down out of the heavens and physically wound me to get me to adjust. The greater work is already set in motion whenever I am convicted of sin. Sin chews me up inside because His love won't allow for it...or should I say, as I grow in the grace and knowledge of Him, MY love won't allow for it.

That's all the discipline any of us really ever need.

## Finding Good Things Along the High Road

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,  
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.  
I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

— Robert Frost's *The Road Less Taken*.

If you were to apply this theme to your spiritual life, what say you? I'm assuming that if you're reading this blog there's a good chance you've already taken the road less traveled, at least at salvation.

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



OK, so you're saved, now what? Do you descend back down to your evil ways after the proverbial 'honeymoon' phase is over... "snap back to reality, oh there goes gravity" as one famous rapper says? Are you not going to spend any real time on the high road?

**Here's the thing - all the good stuff in the spiritual life is up on the high road. Some might say, "That just means that I'm supposed to forgive others and I don't always feel like it, so leave me alone!" It's true, forgiveness is a big part of it, but integrity actually comprises the greater portion. In either case, YOU benefit when you take the high road. Consider it like being set apart, separated for God's purposes (psst - that's the definition of holy, btw).**

To take the high road is to be holy. Walking the high road implies being sanctified. That's what some theologians call "experiential or progressive sanctification". Some might argue, "I can't see where I'm going on the high road!" But that's where the Holy Spirit comes in. *"If we live by the [Holy] Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. [If by the Holy Spirit we have our life in God, let us go forward walking in line, our conduct controlled by the Spirit.]"* (Galatians 5:25 - Amplified).

Living among other fleshly people guarantees conflict. It's a part of life, whether we like it or not. Because people are so mean and nasty, it can be difficult to navigate certain situations. We are at a loss sometimes.

**On the high road, we have a guide - the Holy Spirit. It is there, during conflict, that we abide in His love. Love is immovable, impenetrable, unflappable. It can't help but express itself, even under duress. That's the value of abiding in it. It's not aloof, rather just the opposite, it is eternally humble. This is where we find blessings...on the high road. It's a blessing to love your enemies.**

## Finding Good Things Along the High Road

*Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,' says the Lord. 'BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

— **Romans 12:17-21**

The “normal” thing to do, by society’s standards, is to seek ‘retribution’. I often think about how there’s no such thing as an accident anymore. “Someone must pay!” hollers the ambulance-chasing lawyer on the TV screen, inciting the flesh of the masses. Let me translate that - what he’s really saying is, “Take the LOW road!” It’s true. Satan means lawyer, btw...just throwing that out there.

**The low road is filled with self-absorption and contention...people scheming and devouring one another. And for what? They aren’t getting ahead; they are merely compounding their already impressively sized state of misery. “But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another” (Galatians 5:15).**

The Holy Spirit has inspired much scripture to encourage us to take the high road always. Not just for the sake of others, but for ours, as well! “*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Taking the high road requires strength, integrity, and conviction, things the Spirit gladly helps us with daily.

When you share Christ’s heart, your life is transcendent. You possess the ability to see a person’s weakness as they lash out at you. You feel

compassion as they take another swing, knowing that they are just miserable and that God's glory is being left far behind...except through you it shines, IF you take the high road.

**Love meets antagonism with compassion. Integrity ensures impartiality.**

*You shall not bear a false report; do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not follow the masses in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute. If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him. You shall not pervert the justice due to your needy brother in his dispute.*

— **Exodus 23:1-6**

It's true, the temptation to retaliate is overwhelming sometimes, but it's not impossible to overcome. "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (**Philippians 4:13**). Walk the road less traveled with Him and you shall find His strength...strength that delivers you and possibly your enemies.

Over time, the high road becomes the place where you find peace and serenity, for up there no evil can thwart you from the love of God. There, no person has the power to distract you from the prize. The apostle Paul was very good at taking the high road, not perfectly, but he got better at it daily...and it made all the difference.

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you;*

## Finding Good Things Along the High Road

*however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.*

— **Philippians 3:13-16**

**Walk the high road and you might be surprised at what you find along the way. There are blessings strewn all over it. And no worries, the Holy Spirit will point them out. :)**

## Here's a List of My Friends...

Liars, cheats, thieves, addicts (of all sorts, including drug, alcohol, sex... you name it), homosexuals, adulterers, convicts (both past and currently serving), abusers, the sick and pathetic, the so-called "losers" and many of whom were or still are cast-offs of modern society.

I can honestly say that I have multiple friends in each of the categories listed. I have even loved some of them, personally.

Shocked?

Why would you be shocked?

Might it be easier for some to pigeonhole a Christian pastor such as myself into some crusty, intolerant monster? I say from my own experience that people don't want to know that I am friends with the likes of those listed above. The big question is "why?"

Why do so many desire SO badly to label me this way?

Before we consider the answer, let me present you with some truth and then an analogy.

**God is immutable, which means His Word has never changed, and it never will (John 1:14; Hebrews 13:8).** And the closer a person stands beside the Word, the more the rest of the world perceives them as moving...contradictory, even, to norms and standards.

Ever been snorkeling next to something stationary, like a dock pylon or a reef? Ever notice how as the waves move in and out and up and down, the fish and your fellow snorkelers move in unison? Ever notice how stationary objects appear to move relative to the majority of your

Here's a List of My Friends...

environment? Well, imagine that the world is whatever is in the water and the stationary object is the Word of God (truth). If you float freely with the world, there's no relative movement with others and so there's no tension or friction with it. Some might say there's a certain "peace" with the world.

However, if you cling to the stationary object, you see the whole world swishing around you. You see your friends moving as a collective with it. And here's where it gets interesting - those not clinging to the stationary object now see YOU as moving! To them, YOU are the one disturbing the "peace." It's a matter of perspective, you see.

The more the waves shift and change, the more violent your opposition appears, even though you are actually stationary! As a result, it becomes more challenging to cling to the stationary object. This tension increases proportionally with the magnitude of change.

Well, our world is changing rapidly. Even the churches are compromising doctrines. These are the symptoms of a world leaving the true stationary God, the Father of our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ, behind.

The reality is that the majority is frightened by Truth. If you represent Truth, and therefore the way and the life (ala **John 14:6**), then where does that leave the rest of the world??? You pose a threat, albeit an unspoken one. Most are so engrained in worldly viewpoint that they can't even articulate WHY your viewpoint agitates them - but it does...and so they react.

Ok, back to my friends...

Turns out, my friendships are not the problem. It's EVERYONE ELSE that has a problem with friendships that frustrate their ability to assign labels. Turns out, my friends appreciate my honesty about the Word of God. Turns out, EVERYONE ELSE is uncomfortable with it. Why? I suppose it's because it'd make THEIR life a lot easier if I were a monster that they could

simply write off.

**No matter what, the truth can't be written off.**

But let us be encouraged:

*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.*

— **Ephesians 4:14**

If you cling to the Word as the truly stationary object in this universe, then YOU don't have a problem (you are still), EVERYONE ELSE has a problem. THEY are actually the ones causing the friction. The trickery of it all is that once the majority has let go of the stationary object, it's the minority that becomes the accused...and often so accused with vigor.

**Majority vote never dictates actual truth. The truth is always the same no matter how many people decide to accept it or not.**

For example, stealing is wrong. Shall I say, "we can't be friends because you're a thief"? That's what some religious morons have done historically. Or shall I dismiss God's Word and say, "well, that's an old commandment so I guess it's ok now"? I mean, something's got to give for this tension to go away, right??? Neither approach is required. Both are gross perversions of Truth. The Truth is that I can call stealing wrong and still be friends with a thief.

Again, I say from my own experience that people don't want to know that I am friends with the likes of those listed above. The big question is "why?" The answer is hidden behind a mask.

**The truth is that those wishing to deny the Word will invent ANY means**

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**necessary to discredit those who stand up for it.** Their minds have been made up and they are simply looking to find something that the majority can rally around to discredit the Word of Truth. Their real issue isn't with the person, it's with the Lord God. THEY desire to be "stationary" and proclaim the Word is "moving." It's nothing more than an attempt to shore up their own perspective as truth and propose real Truth as something fluid.

*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**

Don't be discouraged, my friends, this is not novelty:

*For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon!' The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.*

— **Matthew 11:18-19**

You see, the truth is that the majority is simply looking to discredit WHATEVER opposes their self-righteous designs on life. So, if you cling to Truth, you'll never "win." It's a fixed game. And Satan has done a good job at getting the majority to play along.

OK, back to my friends, then. The reality is that ALL of my friends are sinners. I'm a sinner, too. I love the sinner, but I hate the sin. That's the TRUTH. 'Tis why I'm free and the offended are in bondage.

The arrogant world can't handle accepting these simple facts because it ruins the counterfeit "peace" they proclaim. They say I'm being intolerant, a disturber of the peace, if I teach what the Bible says dogmatically about homosexuality. Oh, they want SO badly for this to be true - but it just isn't. I



have friends to this day that are homosexuals. I don't agree with the sin, but I don't judge the sinner - that's not my business. It is what it is. I have my own problems - trust me.

*Work out your [own] salvation with fear and trembling.*

— **Philippians 2:12b**

I may not hang out with homosexuals, but that's more because we have different lifestyles. It's no different than my not hanging out with drug addicts - we have different lifestyles. So be it. Doesn't change my love for them one iota.

It's "funny" because in general I find I'm MUCH less interested in the sins of others than the world is. Go figure, right???...and the world calls me intolerant. Cowards. Who's being intolerant here?...the person who teaches what the Word of God states plainly?...or the person who judges that person and keeps the world's ever-changing viewpoint as gospel?

**Seems to me the only real intolerance in view here is the world's intolerance of the Word of God.**

Well, that'll never be MY personal problem, nor yours if you cling to the Word. I like being able to see things plainly for what they are. I like not judging other sinners. I like having God's peace over the world's version of it. I like clinging to stationary objects - they make me feel secure.

I like Jesus Christ, the living Word...you know, the One who welcomed sinners into His own heart. And if that's offensive to some, then I guess they'll just have to stand in line.

*If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.*

— **John 15:20b**

Here's a List of My Friends...

I'll take what few friends I have and enjoy my time with them.

**I'll take the sinners without the masks...for we have bonded at a place called "humility" and it's truly freeing.**

We'll leave the hatred and the real intolerance to others. Their problem isn't with other human beings anyways, it's with God, Himself - they don't seem to like Him so much anymore because, darn it, He won't bend towards their human will. Go figure...

## **My Drug of Choice**

Ever bump your head and see double for a bit? Or drink too much alcohol and experience the same?

Under normal circumstances, we see with clarity. However, under the above conditions we might be seeing double for a bit.

Flip that around where seeing double is the norm, and where clarity is the temporary estate. Life seems like this, doesn't it? Even so, sometimes we have moments of absolute clarity. What a rush!

### **Clarity is my drug of choice.**

For years now I've taught a concept dubbed, "seeing it all as truth". In brief, what this means is that all we really seek, in humility, is to see things clearly, even if those things aren't good. We desire divine viewpoint, which is perfect clarity, including the good, the bad, and the ugly.

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.*

***But everything exposed by the light becomes visible - and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.***

— **Ephesians 5:8-14a**

This means that no matter what we see, as long as we are seeing it for what it truly is, the way God sees it, it is "light" and truth to us. This is goodness. Divine perception is good even when the thing we see is bad by God's standards.

To pretend something bad is good is ungodly. This is the source of spiritual "double-vision". Seeing double confuses us, crippling our sense of perception, precipitating double-mindedness and, therefore, instability in life. *"He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does"* (**James 1:8**).

**Hence the premium on clarity. Without truth, it's impossible to see anything clearly. Without truth, we live unstable lives.**

Most believers have a mixed bag of truth and lies circulating in their souls. These are antithetical to one another and the source of much stress.

*The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*

— **Matthew 6:22-23**

**A conflicted life is a miserable life.**

If a person believes very strongly in a lie, any truth that enters their soul will cause tension until either the lie or the truth is extinguished. To attempt, like most believers do, to live a life filled with lies and truth guarantees a stress filled life.

**The ultimate source of all truth is the Word of God. *"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth"* (John 17:17).**

Therefore, to "see it all as truth" one must possess the Word of God. Ultimately, it is the scriptures that provide us with wisdom. The Holy Spirit, our true mentor and teacher, assures us of this.

In **John 17:17**, the Lord says, *"Sanctify them,"* implying a lifelong process of deliverance from worldly thinking (aka lies). Our Creator knew this before

we were even born, so we can't be too hard on ourselves. The only human being to ever truly "see it all as truth" was Jesus. We can only hope to pursue such an end.

My encouragement to you is this. Spend some time in your Bible. Read the scriptures. Read truth, for the Word is truth. As the Word washes over you, learn to enjoy the purity of that moment. Enjoy the simplicity, the freedom. There's nothing like it.

Moments of absolute clarity are like a drug, a good one. They only come through the power of His Word. They are addicting, making us high on life, sending us into unparalleled bliss. Those moments don't last forever. Although I can say in confidence that, unlike the bad drugs that focus on altering the physical, spiritual "highs" increase in length the more we experience them.

That's all I want. Clarity. Gimme my drug of choice! :)

That's all any of us should really be asking for, even when it pertains to the good, the bad, and the ugly reflected in the mirror. We just want clarity.

Clarity accompanies humility as the starting point for sanctification. Sometimes it stings and it seems easier just to remain living in a lie, however, the Word, nay the Living Word, encourages us plainly:

*Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

— John 8:32

## Selective Hearing

*For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.*

— 2 Chronicles 16:9a

People often 'hear' what they want to hear. I mean, their ear drums receive all the sounds, but yet somehow, through 'selective hearing', they are able to discard the things that conflict with their disposition. If you have children, I needn't say anything more. :) Well, children grow up and become masters at selective hearing. I have found Christians to be especially astute.

**One of THE most important tenets of spiritual growth is accepting ALL aspects of Truth. If you don't want ALL of the Truth, then what is it that you're after? A perversion of God? A weak god? What is it, exactly?**

I'm afraid to speculate how many believers have been left in the dark because of selective hearing. In any case, this isn't a novel concept. For example the king of Israel, Ahab, suffered the consequences of selective hearing. For context, King Ahab was king over the ten northern tribes of Israel and King Jehoshaphat was king over Judah, which was comprised mostly of two southern tribes of Israel.

*Ahab king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat king of Judah, "Will you go with me against Ramoth-gilead?" And he said to him, "I am as you are, and my people as your people, and we will be with you in the battle." Moreover, Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, "Please inquire first for the word of the LORD." Then the king of Israel assembled the prophets, four hundred men, and said to them, "Shall we go against Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall I refrain?" And they said, "Go up, for God will give it into the hand of the king."*

What you don't see here yet is that King Ahab is seeking counsel from lots of so-called prophets, but they were not representatives of the Lord.

**Like many people today, King Ahab simply wanted a vote of confidence...someone to tell him what he wanted to hear. He didn't necessarily want truth that might conflict with his agenda.**

*But Jehoshaphat said, "Is there not yet a prophet of the LORD here that we may inquire of him?" The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the LORD, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me but always evil. He is Micaiah, son of Imla." But Jehoshaphat said, "Let not the king say so." Then the king of Israel called an officer and said, "Bring quickly Micaiah, Imla's son.*

— 2 Chronicles 18:6-8

**The king actually AGREES that Micaiah is the Lord's prophet, yet he STILL refuses to receive counsel from him. Why? Because he doesn't like what he has to say. He doesn't like the TRUTH! To this day, believers have access to truth but choose to ignore it or those providing it.**

King Ahab's messenger is disoriented also, proposing that Micaiah, the Lord's prophet, bow down to the will of the king, knowing it may be at odds with the will of the Lord.

*Then the messenger who went to summon Micaiah spoke to him saying, "Behold, the words of the prophets are uniformly favorable to the king. So please let your word be like one of them and speak favorably." But Micaiah said, "As the LORD lives, what my God says, that I will speak.*

— 2 Chronicles 18:12-13

Micaiah is a man of integrity. Reminds me of Paul when he says, "So have I

*become your enemy by telling you the truth" (Galatians 4:16)?*

**As the story goes, the king's distaste for Micaiah grows stronger (though in reality it is Truth that the king despises). So the king did what many people do, he takes it out on the messenger! As a pastor that teaches unadulterated Truth, I can relate.**

**Arrogance is tantamount to cowardice. Arrogant people will typically lash out the deliver(s) of truth rather than the source of it, the Word.**

*Then the king of Israel said, "Take Micaiah and return him to Amon the governor of the city and to Joash the king's son; and say, 'Thus says the king, "Put this man in prison and feed him sparingly with bread and water until I return safely"'.*

— **2 Chronicles 18:25**

In the end, that king died on the battlefield, just as the Lord had purposed.

*The battle raged that day, and the king of Israel propped himself up in his chariot in front of the Arameans until the evening; and at sunset he died.*

— **2 Chronicles 18:34**

Jehoshaphat at the time witnessed all of this first hand. He even tried to counsel Ahab to seek the Lord's will over his own, but it is apparent that Ahab's arrogance was too great. Jehoshaphat was looking for truth, Ahab was not. It's likely that Jehoshaphat's father, King Asa, had handed down the value of orienting to the Lord's will. This was something the Lord, Himself, had taught Asa:

*Now the Spirit of God came on Azariah the son of Oded, and he went out to meet Asa and said to him, 'Listen to me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: **the LORD is with you when you are with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake***



*you'.*

— 2 Chronicles 15:1-2

Selective hearing is a common mistake believers have been making since the Fall in the Garden. If we choose to listen to only those parts of a message from the pulpit, or only those parts of the Bible, or even those words of wisdom from our elders that appeal to our personal agendas, then we are forsaking the Lord. In those cases, we are no different than any other human being that has denied Truth its rightful place in our hearts.

**Selective hearing a terrible strategy for someone seeking happiness.**

**It's true, sometimes the Truth hurts. But so does surgery to remove a cancerous growth in your body. However, in both cases, the goodness lies beyond the procedure. A little pain now ('hearing' ALL of the Truth as opposed to exercising 'selective hearing') is worth the gain in the end.**

If you want His peace, you can have it. He's already promised it to those who seek Him with their whole heart!

*All Judah rejoiced concerning the oath, for they had sworn with their whole heart and had sought Him earnestly, and He let them find Him. So the LORD gave them rest on every side.*

—2 Chronicles 15:15

## The Spirit of the Law

**Laws are meant to protect. Unfortunately, there's no manmade law that is perfectly written. Good intentioned writers have done their best to capture the "spirit of the law" in the letter, but it's impossible. Only God is able to construct and convey perfect law and then judge against it likewise.**

We hire attorneys to help us deal with the complexities of the law. What are they especially adept at? Well, the good ones focus their time and energy on interpreting the law, trying to keep to the "spirit" of it, so as to protect the citizens under that law...their ultimate goal is to do what is right. However, the sleazy ones are looking for loopholes or gaps in the law in order to serve their clients' selfish interests.

**I've heard more than one person in my life utter the phrase, "If it's legal, then it's moral." Impregnated into that phrase is the freedom to assume that the law exists to either substantiate our cause when it favors us or circumvent another's cause when it doesn't. Under that premise, what defense does it offer against the craftiest of lawyers??? Minimal... arguably none. Shady lawyers could care less about the "spirit of the law"...their clients are no better.**

Satan means "attorney". Can you guess what camp he falls into?

On the other hand, we believers are held to a higher standard. We aren't just to abide by the law of the land, we are to abide by Christ's law, namely "love". *"Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law"* (**Romans 13:10**). There may be a time when you see a "way out" through a loophole (kids are famous for pulling this garbage within the 'law of the household'); however, God has promised us a conscience and His Spirit to convict us otherwise.

**"Getting away with something" based on a "technicality" isn't really getting away with anything. One must contemplate if avoiding penalty is worth the punishment one's conscience doles out afterwards. The same goes when we wrongly receive damages from another, as plaintiff. Is it ever right to make another suffer wrongly? Some are too self-absorbed to even ponder such things.**

*Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.*

— James 4:17

You see, to we believers, sin is not only evidenced by our transgression of secular law, it is evidenced by our breaking the law of love. The law of love becomes a sort of safety net for protecting others, when the imperfect written law fails to do so, precluding us from injuring them and “getting away with it”, often times premeditatedly. I often wonder how some lawyers are able to sleep at night...especially the ones that are believers. They must spend half their energy suppressing their own good conscience. Maybe the received compensation makes it worth it for them???

**Sin is not a formula, it is a heart issue. “The LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).**

**As a plaintiff, you may find a way to wrongly sue your neighbor and be awarded damages from a court of law - there are certainly enough bottom-feeder lawyers out there willing to help you with that evil endeavor. As a defendant, you may 'avoid' justice by slipping through a loophole. The courts may rule in favor of such evil, but God never will. “For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:14).**

People seem to forget that sin is just a name for something done against God's will. That's why a sin for one person may not be a sin for another.

There are no rulebooks in the “gray” areas of life. However, just because something is gray doesn’t mean you ought to assume God wants you to err on the side of self-serving. You may encounter a situation that neither the written law nor the Bible specifically addresses...well, at least not in writing. But your good conscience, if you’re willing to quell the noise of temptation, will speak to you...it will abide in the "spirit of the law".

**The law that is written on your heart will convict you of right and wrong. It is meant to do so if/when the written law fails.**

The final judge of sin is God. Always ask for His guidance in the moment, when the temptation to “have your way” with the written law arises in your soul. Ask yourself, “Is what I’m considering doing right or wrong, regardless of what the law (or my lawyer) says?”

If you’re a child living at home, then the law and the judges are your parents (in addition to governmental law). “*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right*” (**Ephesians 6:1**). Adults, if necessary, we ought to retain lawyers that are intent on doing what is RIGHT by the “spirit of the law”, not what is “best” for us. If there’s gray area, then may our good conscience demand what is right of all parties involved.

*In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.*

— Acts 24:16

## **The Spirit Told Me to Do It!**

“Johnny, why did you do it?!!!” Ouch. Scorn. He was cornered now and his teacher’s finger seemed preternaturally long as it wagged in front of his nose by what seemed mere millimeters.

“I...I...I dunno...Timmy from Mrs. Copton’s class told me to do it,” shoulders round.

“Well, if Timmy told you to jump off of a bridge, would you do that too?” As her scorn abated, her severity waned, making way for motherly concern. She was a good teacher, after all...simply concerned that little Johnny had gotten himself into trouble again. “Boys will be boys,” she muttered under her breath while thinking of her own three mischievous sons. God, she loved them. In a way, her students had calmed her ‘empty nest’ anxieties when they had all grown up and moved out. Little Johnny, though challenging, was a welcomed reminder of the privilege of motherhood. Nonetheless, she couldn’t allow her affections to usurp her integrity to discipline.

**It’s funny how as children our first response when ‘caught in the act’ is to point fingers at someone else. It’s not just a desperate act of self-preservation - its origins are traceable all the way to the Garden.**

*The man said, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.” 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” (Genesis 3:12-13).* Human beings are very adept at deflecting personal responsibility. Children, like little Johnny, often do it instinctively, reflexively. Their knee-jerk reactions are unsophisticated, though seldom short on vigor.

**As adults, the game hasn’t changed; however, we are much more refined, even premeditative. We manufacture situations that afford us built-in**

**controls, check-points, and bailouts. If worse comes to worst, our schemes leave someone else holding the blame. It's ugly, but the flesh is despicable. Cunning is an indispensable tool for many who succeed in the world system.**

The human flesh is so grotesque that it'll even venture to posture God the Holy Spirit as the source of its own inventions. Analogous to little Johnny in the story above, adults will make terrible decisions against a good conscience, fly in the face of God the Holy Spirit's convictions, and with a straight face proclaim, "I was moved by the Spirit." *"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" (James 1:13-14).*

**God doesn't accept blame for man's folly. His Spirit doesn't move man to act against his own good conscience. God gave man a conscience as the human faculty that His Spirit ministers to for the sake of discerning right and wrong. "For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you" (2 Corinthians 1:12).**

*Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God.*

— **1 John 3:21**

In the OT, the prophet Ezekiel had to deal with false prophets who were using the same strategy to lead God's people astray. *"Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who prophesy, and say to those **who prophesy from their own inspiration**, 'Listen to the word of the LORD! Thus says the Lord GOD, "Woe to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing. O Israel, your prophets have been like foxes among ruins"'" (Ezekiel 13:2-4).* The false prophets during Ezekiel's time were claiming divine inspiration (using the Holy Spirit's good name as an

endorsement), however, God sees the heart. Theologian Denis Lane characterizes the preaching during Ezekiel's day: *"It never rose higher than the preachers' own minds. It deceptively claimed to be God's word. It had no practical or useful effect. It offered cheap grace and a false peace. It simply endorsed the latest world view."*

**Does any of this sound familiar? It should. Situations change, but man's propensity for blaming others hasn't. Neither has his audacity to blame even God for his willful negligence. The flesh wants all the glory, all the accolades from the world, but none of the responsibility or the consequences.**

Like little Johnny's teacher, who saw his transgression with her own eyes, God sees man. His Spirit would never motivate a believer to do the things they do in sin. While fellow man might buy the lies of the flesh, God never will. It's far better to accept personal responsibility, confess our sins to God, and pray that we resist temptation next time around.

## **That's Pain On My Face, Not Judgment**

Imagine the cutest little kitten playing with a ball of yarn.

You're at a park with some friends and family. And over the course of the last few minutes, the entire group's attention has been diverted to this adorable scene. It seems all within a 20-yard radius are now completely enraptured in the moment...some are cheering her on, some have already given her names like "precious" or "cuddly-wuddly". Kittens have that effect, don't they? Yup.

But you...you are experiencing an entirely different emotion. While everyone in your party is so focused on the antics of the kitten, you see the big picture. Maybe it's because you're sitting a little off to the side of the picnic blanket, around that massive oak that seems to be blocking everyone else's view from the HIGHWAY!...the one the kitty is moving towards. So, instead of sharing in the joy (even though you must admit, the tiny fur ball is a great source of joy and smiling), YOU are experiencing a welling anxiety about where this poor, unsuspecting animal is heading. She, also, is far too preoccupied within her own little world that she doesn't perceive the doom just ahead of her...

...what do you do?

Do you move your seat a little so that the highway is now blocked out of view by the big oak tree? Do you then join the fray of hyperfocus on the kitten's immediate activities? Are you somehow able to play the "out of sight, out of mind" card and forget about what lies ahead for one of God's creatures? Or, realizing the gravity of the situation, do you jump up and run and grab little "precious" and steer her towards a safer destination? May I assume the latter?

Most days, I feel like 'you' in the story. Oddly, when it comes to eternal



things, I feel lonely, too.

Most days all I can see are God's children, young and old, walking towards doom while others cheer them on (I'm including believers, even educated ones, in this statement). I wish it wasn't so for selfish reasons, but my heart breaks every time I see a person walking, frolicking, entertaining others on their way to their own demise. And like most of you would've gotten up and redirected the kitty away from danger, I want to run up and redirect those walking towards personal ruin. That is where my attention lay - on their salvation. I won't apologize, either. Ever.

You know who that makes me?...it makes me the guy that typically comes off as the party-pooper...the guy who tries sometimes to manufacture a celebratory smile or a heartfelt congratulation, but whose heart is torn. I see things eternal, always. I focus on big-picture things...end games. I've been around long enough to recognize where certain pathways lead...heck, I've traveled many of them myself.

I know Satan and his devices far better than I ever really desired to. The Word equips me to see his fingerprints; the world is his canvas after all (**2 Corinthians 4:4**). I'm grateful for my perceptive ability, but it's a bit of a burden at times when you're the only person peering around the oak tree (or at least the only one not so enamored by worldly partiality so as to be blind to the facts concerning salvation).

I'm often misjudged, sometimes maligned, most often sort of sneered at. You see, most people see right through my synthetic smile (the one I try to engineer to "keep the peace"). Most are able to see that I'm enough of a gentleman to share in certain festivities. After all, I, too, enjoy seeing success and happiness in time (just never at the expense of eternal things). However, most are also able to see that my heart for Christ always wins and my countenance reads plainly. "Something's wrong here," is what others see on my face. It's often a misunderstood reality.

## That's Pain On My Face, Not Judgment

The crushing blow is that it seems most still choose to judge me. I've been accused of being slighting, jealous, crabby, disjointed, etc. On the rare occasions where I explain my heart and why I struggle to join in the celebration, some seem to get it, but not all. It seems easier just to judge...to write me off as a fanatic...so most judge me by assuming I'm being judgmental. Go figure, right? Twisted.

**Somehow a Christ-like heart makes a person a pariah. I'm not sure true love could EVER rejoice in a person walking off of a cliff.**

I find encouragement in the Word, of course:

*I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?*

— 2 Corinthians 12:15

**It takes a stronger love to stand for Truth instead of a lie. However, the more we love, the less we are to be loved - that's life.**

I suppose I can't complain given the fact that the Lord, Himself, came to save (not judge) and His own people nailed Him to a Cross. I've got to imagine that Jesus would've raced to save the kitty. What do you think?

*For I did **not** come to judge the world, but to **save** the world.*

— John 12:47

Now, I'm not Jesus - far from it - but I do share His heart on salvation. True love has a habit of revealing itself in ways that are offensive to those celebrating in the cosmos. True love forces us to consider the Gospel as the center of our viewpoint...as one of merely two primary reasons why God leaves us here as disciples after our OWN salvation:

*[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

— 1 Timothy 2:4

Simple right? Then why all the celebration over worldly success? What are you REALLY celebrating, anyways???

What good is celebrating someone else's worldly success if they remain unsaved and/or negative towards Christ? How joyful can one be as they sit back and watch little "cuddly-wuddly" run into traffic? How much agony is warranted in the soul of the person who not only sees the highway, but also sees that Satan is pulling the other end of the yarn towards the highway? How much joy is there when negative eternal things dwarf the positive temporal?

Now here's the thing. What those around me are seeing is pain on my face, not judgement. It's visceral.

I'm not judging a young couple who decide to move in together and have sex outside of marriage. The truth is that my heart breaks knowing what their Creator has to say about the damage caused by such a lifestyle. I'm not judging a gay couple that gets married, or a doctor that thinks he's a god, or the person selling their soul for a little success on a stage somewhere. These are not things that I judge - they are not mine to judge. Rather, these are activities amongst an infinite number that lead a person away from Christ in some way or another.

Sure, one could construct arguments based on corner cases, but history has proven that the cards are in Satan's favor.

**The further the activity is from Christ, the more the world celebrates it. How comfortable should we be with partaking in this? How partial should we be when it's family or friends? Is there even room for partiality in the Word?**

## That's Pain On My Face, Not Judgment

*Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this - not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way,*

— **Romans 14:13**

**Is it fair to say that a "stumbling block" is laid when a person encourages another on a pathway to ungodliness?**

People need Christ, not worldly success. One's definition of success must be a derivative of Christ's mind. When we all gather together and celebrate a person's worldly viewpoint of success, what are we saying to them about things eternal? When we can't find it within ourselves to embrace watching someone take another step away from abiding in Christ, should we celebrate? Should we justify such things?

I'm not sure about the rest of you, but it pains me to tears to see an unbeliever reaffirmed in the choices that take them further and further away from Christ. The same goes for the carnal believer. I don't judge a soul for doing it...but please don't ask me to celebrate with you.

All I want to do is make a dash for the kitty, scoop her up and give her the 'good news' about a life away from danger. And if Satan's disgusting fingers bleed a little from the tearing away of the yarn, then so be it - I'm glad. And if I happen to ruin someone's picnic by tromping through it on my way to the kitty, then I can live with their disappointment and possible judgment.

God sees the heart. Jesus felt this pain, I'm sure. Heaven doesn't rejoice over ungodly aspirations, nor does it when people encourage such things amongst themselves.

## The Truest Form of Leadership

**"How do I know if I'm a leader?", asks the youngster. "Look behind you," says the wise man.**

By definition, leading implies following, too...at least in the truest sense of the term. I mean, to proclaim a leadership role in an organization without any followers often means the so-called "leadership" position is fabricated. People love leadership titles, but few seem to fully understand what leadership really is.

To lead is to serve (others, of course). If you're not willing to be a servant, then don't aspire to leadership. Eventually, poor leaders are discovered and the only thing that keeps others under their command is enforced allegiance (e.g.: military).

**The simplest way to know if you're a leader is if people desire to follow you...not out of compulsion, but because they want to. Consider Jesus' example. *"And Jesus said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.'* Immediately they left their nets and followed Him" (Mark 1:17-18).**

Let's face it, too many people aspire to be leaders, even in the ministry, but since they don't qualify, no one ever truly desires to follow them. My advice to these individuals is straightforward. If you want to lead, make sure the fundamental tenet of leadership is in place - you have something and/or someone, at least, to lead. Don't look for assignments strictly because they are leadership roles; rather, in integrity, look for what needs to get done and do it.

**The best leaders are accomplished followers first. We are called to lead by example. Well, if you're a complaining, ill-tempered, difficult subordinate, what might your peers think of you as a leader? Either you**

**have authority-orientation or you don't. It's objective, mission-oriented thinking, never subjective.**

It's true, a virtuous follower will honor leadership even when it's terrible. But again, we're not talking about duty here; rather we are talking about the truest form of leadership. True leadership provides a blanket of security based on servanthood. Isn't it good to know that your leaders are looking out for you? Isn't it best to know that their hearts are serving you? Do you trust the ill-tempered follower's promotion to leadership?

**True leaders are meek, not weak. 'Wannabe' leaders are too weak to be meek. Meekness is strength under perfect control. *"For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding"* (2 Corinthians 10:12).**

True leadership takes time to develop. Patience is key. Consider the fact that Jesus didn't begin His formal ministry until the age of 30. Before that, He was being 'groomed', as they say in business. *"The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him"* (Luke 2:40). Did Jesus rush His appointment? Never! He learned to follow His Father's will first.

Once He was ready, just look at how others received His commission. *"And He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' And Peter answered and said, 'The Christ of God'"* (Luke 9:20).

**The greatest leader to ever live preferred that His disciples follow Him out of personal conviction. He didn't want to force His hand, rather as He went about serving others, they followed Him. *"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).**

**The most attractive thing about any leader is their desire to serve others.**

Now some false-leaders are shrewd enough to make a formula out of the above, serving as slaves of their own aspirations behind a facade. However, as wretched as man is, to his credit, he typically has the ability to sniff out a phony, if he's paying attention, that is.

**For the person that is truly open to serving others, to that person the door to leadership is often opened for them. You see, there's the distinction between true leaders and the rest. True leaders wait for someone else to open the door for them, inviting them to lead at that time when both parties are agreeable to such an arrangement. A good rule of thumb for developing leaders is:**

*Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.*

— Proverbs 27:2

That's right - let others encourage your leadership abilities, beginning with the Lord. Look behind you...is anyone there saying, "Press on, faithful one, I'm with you!"? Leadership is hard work when done correctly, which is why few do it well. The true servant embraces this fact just as strongly as they embrace their privileges as a follower. The whole of it begins, as always, with humility.

## **Why Are You Asking Me This?**

"Why are you asking me this?" said the father to his teenage son.

"Well, I wasn't sure what to do so I thought I'd ask you."

"I think you already know the answer, my son...huh?" The father had that unspoken look of 'you know better' on his face.

The son just sort of grinned sheepishly and replied, "I know, Dad, you're right...I do already know the right thing to do."

"Then why ask me?" The father already knew the answer but really wanted his son to arrive at the same conclusion without any prodding. He'd learned that this process was critical in his son finding his own wisdom on such things.

"I guess I was hoping that you'd give me advice that ran contrary to my own good conscience. I guess I wanted to shift some of the blame to you. It's totally not fair to you, Dad, and I'm sorry." His father had forgiven his son before he even finished asking the original question, knowing where the whole conversation was going before it even started. Being a good parent, knowing the value of the process, he walked this clumsy road with his son. He loved him.

**Good fathers love their sons. They have patience with them. Imagine how much our Father in Heaven loves us?**

**Ever heard His voice echoing in your own good conscience saying, "Why are you asking Me this?" Ever sat there on the precipice of a terrible decision that you knew was wrong and yet you exhausted yourself trying to find a loophole in your moral code? Ever called a friend and sought "bad" advice? I have.**



I think if we're honest with ourselves we'll admit that one of the "tricks" we use to justify making poor decisions (aka sinning) is to seek bad advice from friends. If we're really savvy, we might even withhold certain details about a situation to influence the advice we receive. Sound familiar? My kids would do this, at times, and as a parent I'd call them to the carpet with, "Why are you asking me this?" I'm sure my parents asked me the same thing when I was a kid.

*Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is a sin.*

— James 4:17

I just recently began teaching on a very sensitive subject, namely, human life in the womb.

One of the first questions I posed to the congregation was, "Why even ask if ending life in the womb is OK by the Lord God, the Creator of that life?" Seriously, why even ask that question? Isn't it obvious? Doesn't a believer already know the answer to that question? Why go through all the effort of trying to find loopholes in the scriptures to support such a thing? Why try to disprove human life exists in the womb? Did the Holy Spirit inspire the scriptures so that man could try to find loopholes or did He inspire it so that we might have the mind of Christ? (1 Corinthians 2:16)

*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

**The Lord created human life in the womb. He's not OK with man ending it prematurely. So why does mankind persist in asking about it?**

## Why Are You Asking Me This?

Another really sensitive subject is the subject of marriage. In the past, I have been approached with marital issues and asked for my advice. More specifically, being a pastor, people ask me if they can rightly divorce their spouse. My soul always responds the same, although I don't always communicate it to them for a variety of situational reasons. Mostly, I want them to find the answers in the scriptures for themselves so that the Holy Spirit can convict them. In any case, this question will ring in my head, "Why are you asking me this?"

**If you're asking a pastor whether or not he thinks you ought to get a divorce, there's a good possibility that you already know the answer.**

Jesus spoke of marriage quite simply, revealing the overarching will of God on the subject, *"So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate"* (**Matthew 19:6**).

Do I perform pregnancy and/or marriage counseling? I do not - well, at least not officially. Why not? Because I believe that the conviction one receives by means of their own good conscience, under the guidance of the Spirit working with the Word of God in the soul, surpasses ANY third-party advice, even a well-intentioned pastor's.

I believe that people who have taken the time to know Jesus Christ, not just as their Savior, but also as a Person, understand His heart on the things that matter most in life. I've learned that people who know Jesus Christ this way tend not to ask questions that precipitate the, "Why are you asking me this?" response. I've also learned that the vast majority of controversial questions may be more appropriately described as "jockeying for sin".

**People who have a true, loving, selfless relationship with Jesus Christ simply desire to do what is pleasing to Him. Most of us know what that is before we begin fishing around for advice that opposes it.**

**May I encourage you to seek Truth in the scriptures, not loopholes.**

## Learning to Relax

Knowing that you are going to spend eternity with God is deliverance on the grandest scale. This simple fact, living in the Gospel reality, affords a rightly oriented believer unfathomable peace. It is from this place of peace that a person finds rest.

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

— **Philippians 4:4-8**

**When God says, "I need to speak with you alone."**

*'Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words against this place and against its inhabitants, and because you humbled yourself before Me, tore your clothes and wept before Me, I truly have heard you,' declares the LORD.*

— 2 Chronicles 34:27

**"I have never felt alone." ...says NO ONE, ever!**

The winter holidays are likened to a very sharp two-edged sword. One side cuts through to things that matter most, Christ first, and the giving of thanks second for the privilege of being alive and the honor of serving Him and others. However, the other side of the sword cuts deep into the souls of the lonely. I speak as a man.

In a pristine world, it's easy for the educated Christian to spout off scripture that illuminates the infinite reasons why we should all be thankful, especially for Christ, Himself. It's so easy, in fact, that we often callously do just that...sometimes at the expense of another's heart. :(

**Everything in life is relative. Our successes, our failures - they are all relative to our own experiences.**

What might be a huge success to one person is but another feather in the cap for another. Likewise, what might be an agonizing failure to one person is but a scratch on the soul of another. Finally, what might be perceived as loneliness for one person is but a bit of peace and quiet for someone seeking alone time with the Lord.

**Perspective paints a different landscape for everyone. As perspectives change, so do the people. There's a good question for you to dwell on when you get the chance. What comes first, a change in perspective or a**

When God says, "I need to speak with you alone."

### **change in person?**

Whatever the case may be, 'tis often God's will to isolate you. On purpose. The key is in the perspective one adopts at that point in time when God says, "I need to speak with you alone." "But, but, but..." you say as you wrestle with Him for control, "...but I'm afraid to be alone, Father!" Notwithstanding the fact that the Holy Trinity indwells every believer (as to avoid the plain issue of insulting God), no believer ought to ever feel alone. Truly.

**Loneliness is an illusion that Satan would love for you to adopt as often as possible.**

Sometimes the easiest change in perspective is achieved by a relay-type process. Let me explain. In electronics, a relay is a micro-switch that, when flipped, routes much greater power to a secondary circuit. A perfect example of this is the starter relay in a car. When you turn the key on the steering column, a small amount of power is routed to the starter relay, which in turn, routes a LOT of power from the battery to the starter. In effect, a small circuit controls a larger one. But the larger one is dead until the smaller one is activated.

**Sometimes a change in perspective is like that. A smaller one acts as the trigger for a much larger one.**

When God says, "I need to speak to you alone", it's like turning the starter key and activating the relay. In essence, your time alone with Him is meant to facilitate a MUCH greater issue being addressed. The real power is in the secondary circuit. However, to start the "engine" the relay must first be flipped.

Now whether or not you understand all that mumbo jumbo about electronic circuits (LOL), the point is that if you understand how He works in us, then being alone isn't earmarked for loneliness, but rather something

to be appreciated. With the right perspective, you begin to see walks in the wilderness as gifts...times to be thankful for rather than bitter.

*God left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart.*

— 2 Chronicles 32:31b

If you make it a habit to read your Bible (and you really should), what you'll find is that God makes a habit of developing individuals in very unique ways, often for very unique callings, by totally isolating them. He did this same thing on a grander scale with His chosen people, Israel. Each instance, each area of growth, each passing or failing of a test, was manifest in isolation.

The greatest example we have is when Jesus was being prepared for His public ministry.

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.*

*And the tempter came and said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.' But He answered and said, 'It is written, "MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD."'*

*Then the devil \*took Him into the holy city and had Him stand 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, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'" Jesus said to him, 'On the other hand, it is written, "YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST."'*

When God says, "I need to speak with you alone."

*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 things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.' Then Jesus \*said to him, 'Go, Satan! For it is written, "YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY."'*

*Then the devil \*left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him.*

— **Matthew 4:1-11**

An ill-conceived perspective thinks of "the wilderness" as a curse or possibly even punishment; however, the godly perspective reveals something very different. God takes us out to the wilderness to be taught new things, often preceding promotion. Jesus spent 40 days in the desert before He received His promotion. Paul spent three years in the Arabian desert before he returned to begin his ministry, proper.

We have all been given personal ministries. Not all are like mine as a pastor, but all are real, nonetheless.

**If God calls you out to the wilderness, it means that He WANTS you to be alone. If you wallow in "loneliness" you miss your opportunity to be totally intimate with Him. You may fail that test a few times before you understand my words here - I know I have.**

The next time He calls you out to the wilderness say, "Shall I bring a tent, a can of beans, and some matches, Father?" See what He says...



## Love

God is love. He is the author, the wellspring, and the giver of it.

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for **God is love**. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

— **1 John 4:7-11**

We are created in love. Through Christ, we are able to glorify God. This was His plan, and so it shall come to pass.

*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 1:16-20**

The apostle Paul captures the magnanimity of love in his first epistle to the Corinthians.

*If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and*

*know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.*

*Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.*

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

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

**— 1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

## **BFFs**

BFF stands for "best friends forever". It is typically reserved for teenage girls, but I have decided to rip it off for my blog entry - LOL. BFF means what it sounds like, a proclamation made between two parties that they will be the best of friends forever. Seems like a trap to me.

They used to say that if you find one true friend in this life you've done well. I tend to agree, but maybe not so drastically. Maybe it is better to say that if you have one true friend at any given time in your life you're doing well?

Right off the bat, I like my version better since no matter what I've always got Jesus!

I think for the most part, the concept of BFF between human beings is a scam. Why do I dare offend so many teenie-boppers with my words? - because of experience and biblical wisdom. I have certainly had multiple best friends over the years, however that status has changed as the eras of my life have changed. In grade school, it was the kid down the street that was within bicycle riding distance. At the tail end of my junior high school career it was my first girlfriend. In high school I had two best friends, in college one, and so on. Am I still friends with these people? I'd have to answer "yes". However, we are no longer best friends, per se. How could we be when "best" is a superlative leaving me to choose but one for now? The good news is that since none of us pinkie-swore on BFF, nobody's disappointed. :)

When it comes to friendships, or any relationship for that matter, I submit Solomon's wisdom:

*There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven...A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.*

## — Ecclesiastes 3:1, 2b

I believe people put way too much romanticism into life. I mean, I'm just as much a romantic as the next person, but I think people read too many romance novels and watch movies where so-called BFF's are crossing the most extreme chasms to keep in touch, including alternate realities and even time travel! This kind of romance puts way too much pressure on our relationships, way too many expectations, which can only lead to one thing - disappointment. So why do that to each other?

It's a bit comical even that we'd EVER be disappointed in another that fails to hold up their end of the BFF bargain, especially since we horribly fail at this with the only faithful friend we've ever really known - Jesus Christ.

*God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

## — 1 Corinthians 1:9

It's awfully egocentric of us to expect others to maintain BFF status when we've proven time and again that we can't even do it with the PERFECT friend. This is why I say the concept of BFF is a scam.

**The critical flaw in BFF is that it mandates bidirectionality.**

We have a pure friend in Jesus, but we are impure. He's a BFF to us, but we are not to Him. Most of us incrementally trade Him out for other so-called friends in this life...only to learn how their friendship pales in comparison to His. Following our absence, we reach out to Him, and guess what? - He's always there. He reaches out to us and, well, we aren't always there, are we?

BFF implies "forever"...however, forever includes always, every step of the way. Any breaks and the pact is compromised.

So let's just be honest here. For the sake of setting proper expectations and avoiding any further disappointment in life, let's assume the best we can do in our current estate is BFFAT - "best friends for a time". I can live with that, can you? This relieves all the romantic pressure of BFF, something unattainable by mere man.

Let's walk this path together best we can, as friends, but without expectations or pacts that only add to the list of things that keep us in bondage.

How about this? If you want to be my BFFAT then go ahead and be it with reckless abandon! Go for it - love me like nobody's business. But PLEASE don't be disappointed if I don't return the sentiment.

**True friends have love for one another. Best friends love without expectation. They love because they are free to love. They are not in bondage to the expectation that their love is reciprocated. "Best friend" then becomes a unidirectional reality, something much easier to live with.**

In all fairness to the dynamics of life, we can't expect others to always feel the same about us as we do about them. We are ALL in very different places in our lives, be it a function of spiritual, intellectual, or emotional maturation. This fact alone ought to free us from the bondage of expectations.

**Being a "best friend" to someone is simple:**

*Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.*

— Jesus, Luke 6:31-32

**If being a "best friend" is unidirectional, then you can literally be a "best friend" to multiple people at once! You see, the chains of BFF are loosed when we think biblically. Practically speaking, this means that one person may be a "best friend" to many, yet another may be a "best friend" to none. Christ is a "best friend" to all and He's our prototype.**

I believe people in general need to be less romantic about their relationships and more biblical, which is tantamount to being more practical. This will save them a LOT of heartache and distress. I've often taught the following principle from my pulpit:

**Disappointment is nothing more than failed expectation.**

**Most romances are manipulative in nature. They consist of people trying to control others, all in the name of love. Yuck!**

**One of the THE greatest lessons one can ever learn in time is to expect nothing from others.**

Man is inherently flawed and will turn his back on you quicker than you can say, "Boo!". In light of this, I say set very low expectations towards others and be pleasantly surprised if/when they actually show you love. This also makes every day a bit more exciting because undoubtedly people will reveal their love for you.

**Such wisdom means same life, just a different perspective. Yet the change in perspective takes you from bondage to freedom!**

Now if you're among the adolescent teen girls that subscribes to BFF and may be offended by my words, may I submit the following to you, personally:

*Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.*

— Proverbs 27:6

I desire all to enjoy freedom in time. Bondage to romanticism is something that Satan promotes in this world. He's got everyone all spun up in it and it's an awful tragedy. None of us have ever proven faithfulness to Jesus; so then why in the world would we ever put that kind of expectation on ourselves towards others or visa versa?

Telling another person you're their BFF is like saying, "can you please hold this lit stick of dynamite for a second?" :)

*To expect unchanging happiness in a changing world, must end in disappointment.*

— Matthew Henry

## The Full Sphere of Perfect Love

*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 23:34

I'm not about to dispel anyone's love for anyone else here...but I do want to make a distinction...a very important one.

A lot of people claim to love. Some go so far as to presume they are able to love like He loved, or that they are loved by someone who loves like He loves. Now that may be true on occasion, under favorable circumstances, but I doubt very much that they love like Him for very long. I'm not saying that their love isn't genuine or even matured far beyond the way they used to love. I'm just suggesting that people who think like that are truly delusional.

**Even at its pinnacle, there's just no way any believer loves like Jesus loves, overall. To say they do is an insult to Him. To say such a thing is to lay claim to eternal love in its fullness, right now. It's true; our goal in this life is to love as He loves. "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). He is our example, after all. However, in all fairness to His example, in the practical sense, we all fall well short of the goal.**

Let's examine this:

For the sake of simplicity, let's assume the world is filled with two groups of people that you are able to interact with: friends and enemies. There's way more gray area than that in life, I know, but bear with me while I make a point.

How big of a test is it for anyone to love their friends? Not very, arguably.



How big of a test is it to love their friends when their friends wrong them? OK, maybe that's a bigger test...certainly a show of greater maturity if passed. Let's call that the left hemisphere, the "friends" hemisphere, of the full sphere of love. Most people concur that fulfillment to any degree in this hemisphere is quite a gift. I agree, it truly is.

**But that's only half of the sphere of love. The world doesn't even understand the other half, the hemisphere that we might call the right, or "enemies", half. What does it mean to love in that way?**

Jesus, our example of perfect, complete love, had something to say about this:

*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 [complete, matured], as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

— Matthew 5:43-48

**Perfect love is IMPOSSIBLE to lay claim to in time, given our flesh. However, mature love might be possible given maturity in BOTH hemispheres of the sphere of perfect love. There's a real continuum between spiritual infancy and Christ's perfect love. We all fall somewhere on the line. Unfortunately for them, most believers seem to have an inflated estimation of their love and therefore need to listen up.**

Consider this reality in your own lives then - brass tacks. Let's suppose your enemies had their way with you right now, and were "crucifying" you publicly, stripping you of all dignity and esteem, maybe even physically abusing you, spitting on you, mocking you as you remain fully aware of their hatred of you. They unfairly have you demoted at work, they rob your home and bank accounts of all possessions, even kill some of those whom you love dearly. How are you feeling so far?

How about if your enemies decide to hunt you down, making it their life's work to snuff out your very existence, if not your life then at least your legacy. Why? Who knows, they just don't like your face or what you stand for. Or maybe they're jealous - oh, THAT's a big one for sure! Maybe you'll never know all the reasons, but you know they aren't righteous. They don't care. YOU are going DOWN!!! They are coming for YOU! You feeling it yet? Put your fangs away...you get the point.

**Most believers wouldn't last a day under that kind of pressure in the "enemies" hemisphere of love. Most would "jump off their cross" and start retaliating, if not physically then at least mentally, leaving His love far behind. Heck, most do. Let's face it, we all do once we hit our threshold. But that's not Jesus' love, is it? He didn't jump off of His Cross, did He?**

*"But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Jesus - Matthew 5:39).* Those are words from the fullness of love. When's the last time you turned your cheek minus even a brief mental sin?

Where do you stand on the full spectrum of love? Until you accept what God sees in your heart, you are stuck. Why do you think I write these blogs??? It's for YOUR freedom! Your eyes will only hurt for a little while as they adjust to the Light. Learning to love our enemies is REALLY hard, but it's fundamental to being set free in time. Truly. Humility is the key. Light must be truth, YOUR truth.

**Who do you pray for the most? Now there's a good place to start your self-examination. In terms of maturity, I'd argue the focus of prayers are as follows: self, friends, enemies; in that order. As we mature, our focus shifts from left to right.**

Let's wrap this up. Who ARE our archenemies, anyway? At whom might we expect to direct this love once we mature into it? Who needs it the most?

Regardless of personality, circumstance, or history, our greatest enemies, whether we are learned enough to realize it yet, are those who are enemies of the Cross. These are individuals who stand against our Lord. They are His enemies, so they are ours, even though one can hardly tell with most believers.

*For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.*

— **Philippians 3:18-19**

**"Enemies of the cross" nailed Jesus up on His Cross and murdered Him there. Before He died at their hands, He prayed to His Father in Heaven, from within the full sphere of love, to forgive them. That's perfect love, folks. Only one man has ever stood on this earth in possession of it all.**

## Hugs

"Pastor, can I bother you for a moment?"

I was just about to make my exit-stage-left when I caught these words. The policy in the church for years has always been to let the pastor off the stage when he's through teaching. Why? - because teaching behind a pulpit is essentially being gripped by the Holy Spirit for at least an hour, sometimes more. It's arresting. It's exhilarating in its own way also, but by the end of a message, the man is an admixture of hyper-awareness, focus, and exhaustion. It's a unique experience. Depleting.

Because of this reality, most people in my congregation let me be unless it's truly important. I let them be the judge. For those who miss the mark too often, I employ my two deacons in the education process.

I turn and say, "sure, whatcha got?" I had heard the voice before seeing the face and when I turned, I learned it was coming from one of the newer members of the congregation. It was a dad wearing that look that adoring dads wear when standing with their children. One of his children, the younger boy, had already stepped a half step towards me; the older girl, still tucked under her daddy's wing.

**"My son would like to give you a hug for your birthday." Melt.**

My boys were so much bigger by then - this little guy was around three years old. He was tiny and with my standing on the first step of the stage and he on the floor, well, that meant he came up to about my knee. He was adorable in his Sunday clothes. His countenance outshone the entire scene. He was dressed in respect, sincerity, and a love that's reserved for the pure at heart, namely children.

"Awww - of course." All general protocol subsided to a simple request. No

complaints here.

He walked right up, toes against the bottom step, forcing me to squat way down low to allow his chin to reach over my shoulder. Again, his stature amused me. Funny how someone so little, so unexperienced, so unaware of protocols, can deliver something that waltzes right through to a man's heart. Such is the power of purity.

*To the pure, all things are pure.*

— Titus 1:15a

His older sister followed suit.

"Thank you so much," I said as I looked both of them in the eye to let them know they had done something genuinely good. I shook their father's hand and tried to convey the adult version of this. I was grateful, truly. I hoped they sensed it.

Later on that day, and still to this day, I knew that there was no way they could've known that my heart during that time was truly sore...sore from the abrasive nature of the lessons the Holy Spirit had lined up for me to teach.

Tough love has a habit of forming callouses on the soul of the deliverer. In my case, wielding the rod of a loving shepherd had formed many of those. The longer the stretch of corrective action passing through this vessel, the thicker my skin. It's a defensive measure, I suppose. It's useful, too, as it keeps what is otherwise a very tender-hearted man "in the saddle," so to speak. Love keeps me there. However, a certain warmth is lost. Sacrifice.

You know, love kept Jesus Christ on the Cross, too. How thick was His skin? How much did He sacrifice? Humility.

**Shepherds love their flocks...so much so that they sacrifice their own lives for the welfare of the sheep.**

*I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.*

— **John 10:11**

Love is what motivates a shepherd. Sometimes his love softly guides (with the staff), other times, it harshly corrects (with the rod). BOTH sides comprise the man. The lion and the lamb, so to speak.

The psalmist found comfort in this whole Person - "*Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me*" (**Psalms 23:4b**). Love is no less love when it corrects. It's the same. Our greatest assurance rests on it being so.

*For whom the LORD loves He reproveth, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.*

— **Proverbs 3:12**

Back to the hugs...

I was the weary, tough-skinned, calloused shepherd. The children were the little lambs. Their desire to express their own love towards their shepherd cut through his shell like butter - brought that warmth back to his soul. That's what well-timed, purely motivated hugs can do. They are little packages of love. :)

**Children make me smile. They are pure. They are unsullied with the cynicism of the world. They still believe that love can cross all chasms. And they unabashedly prove that it does. They are a wonderful reminder of our Lord's own heart.**

**Pure love cuts through anything. And the purer it is, the greater its reach. When a hug delivers it, even the thickest-skinned can, well...melt. :)**

## **I Aspire to Be Like a Child**

I remember being a child and enjoying a sense of freedom and wonderment that was truly transcendent.

I remember bolting outside first thing after breakfast in the mornings, particularly during the summer breaks from school.

I remember feeling the grass between my toes and thinking there's nothing better.

I remember smelling the summer air, feeling the warm sun and the breeze on my cheeks.

I remember sitting on the porch with my dog and talking to her, saying things like, "it doesn't get any better than this, does it?"

I remember my grade school teachers, my parents, my grandparents, and my aunts and uncles and loving them with abandon...just because they were there for me.

I remember life being a lot simpler.

I remember life being a lot easier.

I remember when life seemed so much less stressful.

I was carefree then and it was magnificent.

So, as a 45 year old man (putting my spiritual gift aside for the moment) I am bewildered some days at how any of that has ever been forgotten, or lost, however I might describe it. I ponder days past and compare them to days present, and sometimes when I'm feeling really adventurous, I ponder

days future. In each case, there arises a certain sadness. I am sad because I liked being a child. I miss it.

Not all has been lost, though. I've held on to my childlike fascination for as long as humanly possible, I believe. Many have commented on its presence over the years. I remain a pretty darn chipper guy considering some of the things the Lord has asked me to shoulder. I honestly attribute much of it to that thing that has kept me optimistic about life, that is, the faith of a child. It's a gift, you see. Faith is a gift, but the faith of a child rises above all other kinds. The Bible says so.

*And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, 'Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.' And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them.*

— Mark 10:13-16

Could there be a greater statement regarding the faith of a child? Can you imagine a purer scene than this? Jesus was most intimate with children. Gee, I wonder why?

Children love with a purity that has since been trampled in the hearts of most adults. We adults still love, but life has taken its toll, left its mark, scraped deep wounds and left many of us with stubborn scar tissue. Sure, we still love, but we are more cautious now, more reserved, more guarded. Our hearts are calloused. Sure we know what love is, but having been burned one too many times by it, we often stand at arms length from it.

Children don't do such things. They rush forward, they hug, they smile, they love. They are carefree with their hearts. A pain that might keep them



from being as such is completely foreign to them...yet it is not to us. Children freely praise, for they are without agenda. They mention beauty when they perceive it. They share joy when it occurs to them. They praise the Lord whenever they think of Him.

*And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they became indignant and said to Him, 'Do You hear what these children are saying?' And Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read, "Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have prepared praise for Yourself"?'*

— **Matthew 21:12-16**

Jesus, being pure love manifest in the flesh, understood the nature of children. More aptly stated, He presented them as an example that ALL might learn from.

So, I've learned to challenge myself over the years. I've learned to question my heart on matters that matter the most to me and to those I love, especially my Lord.

**I aspire to be like a child.**

That may sound backwards, but it is a very true statement.

I want to be carefree again. I want to love like I used to. I want to drop the shackles on the floor and step towards freedom, towards love.

I'm tired of being something awfully complex. I want to be simple again.

I want to be great, but not for me, for Him!

## I Aspire to Be Like a Child

*Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

— **Matthew 18:4**

## I'm No a Dog Whisperer, But...

*Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man.*

— Proverbs 3:3-4

Listen, I'm not claiming to be Cesar Millan, the "dog whisperer", but I've had enough dogs, both well-trained and ill-trained, to have observed a few commonalities in their behavior. Please allow me a little space (maybe even more than I deserve) so I can make an important spiritual point.

For some reason, most people train their dogs to do tricks. The standard approach is to offer them positive reinforcement, through the giving of rewards, whenever a desired behavior is completed. Bite-sized snacks are typically involved. Go to a circus and you can see the trainers constantly rewarding the animals for good behavior. We teach our pets to fetch, play tug-of-war, and even where to "do their business". Most domesticated animals, like dogs, will figure out the paradigm and orient to it for the rest of their lives. "My owner feeds me when I do this thing, so I'll keep doing it," I imagine a dog saying to itself.

Eventually, well-trained puppies figure out who the master is, submitting, if for no other reason than the base desire to be fed. We might conclude that when a dog is young, its authority-orientation is more out of respect for rewards, less for their master. This is a self-serving motivation. For as long as the puppy perceives something good for itself, it will 'perform'. This can be proven by asking a total stranger to show the puppy a snack and say, "Sit". The puppy, if trained, will obey with a gleam in its eye, expecting that reward it sees. Its loyalty is to the snack, not the person. Immature authority-orientation, though the master is getting their desired behavior out of the animal, pivots on selfishness.

**Selfish creatures may appear authority-oriented, but their respect is for personal gain, not for their master. Without respect for the master, authority-orientation is immature and therefore, when truly tested, will fail the master.**

I believe humans are the same way. Mind you, God sees the heart and is really interested in what motivates us. *“All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives” (Proverbs 16:2)*. A person who ‘acts out’ authority-orientation doesn’t always actually possess it. The issue is with the heart.

**If a person perceives a personal reward, such as approbation from their peers, or a pat on the back from their superior, or maybe even a religious promotion of sorts, and that is their primary focus, then whom are they truly serving? They are serving themselves even though outwardly it appears as if they are serving their master. Therein lies the hidden reality...the one that runs contrary to Jesus’ own heart.**

*It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*

— **Matthew 20:26-28**

Puppies are unruly and self-absorbed. I’m not casting stones at them, just stating the obvious. Immature believers are the same way. Both need to be trained up in humility, otherwise they will remain as such. As time goes on and the faithfulness of their masters proves real, a different kind of relationship forms. However, if a subordinate chooses to run away from authority, they remain immature and selfish, even dangerous in a variety of ways.

Ever seen a person at the park with their mature dog? It’s unmistakable...

the bond between them. It's a real friendship. If the master says, "Fetch," the dog bolts off and returns happily, gladly receiving an affirmation of adoration, nothing more. The relationship is symbiotic. A mature dog respects their owner and seeks to please them, not for the sake of personal reward (though it is there as friendship), but rather to affirm their own affection towards their master. Love gives.

**Likewise, our Lord (which means "our Master") isn't seeking vacant authority-orientation. He doesn't want you to follow His commands for merely personal reward. That would diminish the simple fact that He wants to have your love and respect. He doesn't want to have a 'coin-operated' relationship with you, where you "do this" and you can expect to "receive that". That's religion and it's ugly...that's all "authority-orientation" without respect is - religion. In religion, self is master; whereas the true Master stands disrespected, off to the side.**

Jesus wants to be our friend. We prove our friendship a lot like the mature dog does with its own master, by following commands out of respect and love. That is our base desire, regardless of promises for blessings. If/when we ever arrive at that kind of relationship with Him, our servitude is implied, no longer necessary to be asserted by either party...it just is.

**Love is a beautiful thing when it's void of selfishness. Authority-orientation WITH respect is a function of love...love being the pinnacle of spiritual growth.**

*This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.*

— John 15:12-15

## **The Indescribable**

In a row about 3 deep from the stage we all scrunched together, waiting for the music teacher to call little Seanie's name. The stage sat sort of naked with a single piano to one side and a stand-up mic in the center. It was dusty. I wouldn't classify it as inviting.

There was the typical line-up of family members, Tammy and I wedged between the obligatory presence of grandmothers and the aunt/uncle whose kids were grown up already. The experience is pretty much the same (you know what I mean if you've ever been to a children's recital of any form). Families sit and clap for an endless stream of children, most of who still struggle playing their instruments...either they are undersized, or their instrument is oversized...I think it's the prior. As David Feherty might say regarding a few of the performances, "it's like watching an octopus falling out of a tree." It's all good fun, though, since all musicians are clunky when they first start out unless they are a prodigy, of course. There were none of those present.

FINALLY...little Seanie took the long walk from his seat by my side. His little legs carried him up the stairs and ever-so deliberately over to the piano. He was to play two songs. Having been in that position myself as a kid (only I carried a trumpet up to a mic), my gut stirred. Would his nerves effect his little fingers?...would tightness preclude him from making that difficult stretch across keys? These were the occupants of my mind as he shimmed his chair up to playing position.

Musical instruments can be cold and unforgiving. They are impartial. They don't discriminate. They can make beautiful music, or terrible noise. Reminds me of life - but we'll get to that.

He played his first song without a hitch. The place went crazy and he got a wild standing ovation!!!...just kidding - LOL! Truthfully, the small

audience clapped on cue, but sort of hurriedly as the day was getting long. Papa smiled. :)

The second song was the difficult one. Little Seanie had shared some angst over it on the ride to the recital. I tried to help with, "don't just play mechanically, 'see' the music... 'feel' it"...sounded like the sage thing to say at the time. Not sure how much it helped, though. :o

He played. Were there mistakes? - yup. Was the beat constipated at times? - yup. But he was just learning and he was under a new kind of pressure. He did well. It's one thing to play in the teacher's studio or at home, but it's something entirely different when 100 strangers are staring at you and you KNOW you're not exactly Beethoven.

Here's the thing: music is an expression, not ink on paper. Staves and notes record something that exists inside an artist, but those are mere estimations of the music, the actual expression. Sheet music, therefore, is something to the "side" of the actual expression. It's an attempt to capture something multidimensional within the confines of fewer dimensions. Ever tried to draw something 3-dimensional on a sheet of paper? Even if you get really close, it still falls short of the original expression, right? Want to really get frustrated? - add time to your drawing. You get the point.

Regarding music, consider that even the original artists struggle to get what's "in" them onto a lesser medium. The translation of an emotion onto something flat and black & white (e.g.: sheet music) is daunting...stressful, even.

Yet, it's undeniable that even a little boy with beginner-level talent can find a piece of what inspired the musical expression that poured out of a genius centuries earlier. Was he Beethoven? - ummm...what do you think? However, in his own little way, on that fishbowl stage, "something" was expressed. It was someone else's masterpiece animated through him...even if only a few notes out of several hundred.

Can I describe this to you? I'll never fully be able to...nor do I care to try - I'd only muddy the purity of it. I can describe the experience, but I can't convey the content of it. I can share the memory, but I'm incapable of reproducing the emotions. You'd have to have been there. Such things are indescribable...they require the actual experience. And I'm really only talking about maybe a few notes here...trust me. :)

And none of the above, though analogous, even compares to the spiritual life.

Do you think that's why Paul wrote, "*Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift*" (2 Corinthians 9:15)?

In other words, **the Maestro has expressed Himself. He had something to share. It was His Son. He sent Him in the flesh, yet He was still God. He wrote copiously about Him in the Bible, yet in that book He says His Son is "indescribable."**

**For unbelievers, this is where God's expression remains...as "sheet music" in books.**

**For believers, God's expression comes alive. His Word is alive! It's beautiful.**

*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**

*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**



For believers, the Maestro has placed His very best INSIDE of them:

*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.*

— **Galatians 2:20**

God's overture played at the Cross over 2,000 years ago. His expression?... what He wanted to share?...that indescribable thing?...His son.

**His Son introduces His symphony - love.**

*We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us.*

— **1 John 3:16**

*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**

Salvation is when we first hear His overture. We are introduced to it. We embrace it. We cling to it. It resonates indescribably in our hearts...makes us want to stay in our seats and hear more! It's alive. It's motivating. It's everything to us, the very anchor of our faith...our hope...our own love. "We love, because He first loved us" (**1 John 4:19**).

**None of us are Jesus Christ. Yet each of us play a rendition of Him.** We may miss a few notes. We may resemble an octopus falling out of a tree. We may have every reason projected at us from within and from without to rationalize why we'd never play this song. Yet, we do.

How God's love could ever find expression through me?...I don't know -

it's supernatural. But His love DOES exist in me...and increasingly, I hear His symphony playing out in my life. I see others turning to listen...and likewise, I turn to them for the same reason. Unity is born.

**Jesus Christ, God's great expression of love, walks among us...not as "sheet music," for even the unbelievers can read sheet music.** But, rather He is expressed through we vessels of mercy (**Romans 9:23**). Collectively, as we play our individual instruments, we come together like a symphony orchestra. Our overture is the Cross...our lives play out the remainder of the piece. It's transcendent.

Be encouraged whether young or old at heart. This is His good work, His symphony. The real expression is His love, and it's truly indescribable.

## The Labor of Love

Does a good parent work hard to provide for their children because they want to be repaid? Of course not. That would constitute a love with strings attached...not the most nurturing thing a parent could convey to their kids..."I'll love you as long as I get something out of it in return." Sounds like a surefire way to raise a child in the sphere of insecurity, not love.

A loving parent gives unconditionally because they understand their children have needs that they cannot meet by themselves (it's how we rightly introduce our children to grace). Consider how hopeless and helpless a newborn baby is. Consider also the faith that baby has in its parents, especially the mother who may be breastfeeding it. The baby's faith is absolute, all-meaningful, all-encompassing...we might even say "life giving", for if the baby refuses to receive their mother's sustenance, he or she will die.

For good parents everywhere, providing for their children is a labor of love. On the flip side, awful parents (sadly, they exist) are often caught doing things for their children so that they somehow benefit. An example might be to buy a two-year-old a pair of eighty-dollar designer shoes / sneakers when the child could really care less. Heck, they may not even be orthopedically good for the toddler's feet! Who's that about, anyways? The child is a trophy, an idol, even, that the parents tote around for all to see. And all too often, those same parents aren't actually raising the child up in the faith, at least not faithfully...but I'll leave that discourse for another day.

**Grace is love's labor. True love gives unconditionally, selflessly, and exhaustively. For example, love hung on the Cross. How secure would you be if Christ's last words were, "Now it's YOUR turn to do something worthy of My death in response"?**

Jesus is our example. When it comes to the spiritual life, do we labor for wages or for love? I suppose that's the fundamental litmus test we can all take. Are we so entwined with Christ that we want to extol His virtues, His love, as "*lights to the world*" (**Philippians 2:15**)?...or are we simply following His commands for the sake of receiving blessings? Who's this about, anyways??? Is a slave even entitled to demand such things from their Master? What ought our righteous attitude be, then? What's our motivation for laboring in the spiritual life?

**The answer is simple. Love. Love is the motivation behind grace-orientation. True grace expects nothing in return...it gives (labors as necessary) because it desires to give, especially to those in need. Love regards others as more important than self (Philippians 2:3)...that's the CHRIST-ian example:**

*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**

Jesus is our perfect example in every way. He is our Master, but He also was an *obedient* slave to His Father (the title "Father" implies parenting). "*Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is*

sent greater than the one who sent him” (**John 13:16**). Jesus wasn’t preoccupied with Himself, He came to save (**1 Timothy 1:15**). He had a “joy set before Him” (**Hebrews 12:2**)...a joy for serving His own Master (His Father). He knew His Master loved Him, as we ought to know that Jesus Christ, our Master, loves us.

*Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also 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 so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.*

— **John 15:9-13**

**Such is the labor of love. It is comely. It is magnificently simply, expressing itself through obedience.**

*We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and **labor of love** and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.*

— **1 Thessalonians 1:2-8**

**The true blessing is being able to love. To express it is sublime...a divine**

**gift. To consider what it might invoke as a response in others, even before expressing it, is to slight its purpose and effect in you. Learn to love freely, as Christ has. Abide in His love and you'll understand His words, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20:35).**

## **Guest Blogger: The Language of Love**

“I have NO idea what you mean.”

Have you ever heard this after attempting to share a revelation you have had or some “deep thought” running through your mind?

I am confident that you answered ‘yes’. Why is that? Everyone has their own language, so to speak. Am I referring to English, Spanish, or Portuguese? No, but rather to the unique manner in which each individual expresses their own thoughts and receives those from others. Have you ever noticed how the same word or phrase can mean something entirely different to separate individuals? We see this quite often in different generations, or regions of the country, even. If you are paying attention, you will notice it just as distinctly from person to person, as well.

When you say something is ‘bad’, is that a negative or a positive? If someone says a person is ‘hot’, do you immediately think that maybe the a/c thermostat should be lowered? These are two silly examples, but even in their inanity, the point is made.

How is this language developed? Our experiences, both painful and pleasant, encouraging and disparaging, constructive and destructive, are what formulate, not only our thought processes, but also how we interact with the world around us. Because no one lives the same life, no two people speak exactly the same language. Since intimacy then entails learning a whole new language, it becomes quite a challenge.

**Wouldn’t it be great if there was some “common language” that would allow us all to communicate effectively?**

Hold that thought.

**The most important intimate relationship we have is with Jesus Christ.**

**He lived a unique life and His “language” is recorded for us... it’s called the Bible. So, in order to learn how to communicate with God, learn His language, we must read our Bible. In this way, we get to know Him, learn how to think and “talk” like Him.**

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

— **Romans 12:2**

So, let’s get back to the idea of a “common language”. How do we, Christians, communicate effectively with those in our lives? How do we develop and maintain intimate relationships even while having different communication styles? We are given the gift of a pastor who guides us as we grow in God’s grace and knowledge, as our relationship with the Lord blossoms.

**Only when we grow together in this way does unity exist through this beautiful common language- the mind of Christ. When we become fluent in His language, we can understand each other and know one another because we know Christ. In this way, relationships become stable and eternal because they are based on Him, the Rock, and not on unstable human emotions.**

*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**

**Being “fluent” in His language does not mean you go around uttering Bible verses all day. That would just be weird. It means, that your modus operandi becomes love. You think like Him, so you live and love like Him.**

*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

— **John 13:34**

*There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*

— **John 15:13**

You learn to adjust to the needs of others. You avoid “pressing people’s buttons” by getting to know what those buttons are. You give grace to those who press yours. You become flexible but always faithful to His integrity. You learn the language of love, which enables you to communicate with anyone. It is then that we may share in the joy that Paul expressed as He described how He shared the Good News of our Lord with whomever God placed in His path.

*Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free*

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*from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

— 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

**You only need to be fluent in one language in order to be an effective vessel for His service. So, read your Bible and stay faithful to the shepherding of your pastor. Learn God's language... the language of love.**

In His perfect love,

Monica Ledford

## People Are So Fickle

Little Johnny nudged his best friend, the only one he could trust not to open the note before it found its destination. For Sally, the love of Johnny's life (well, Johnny's only 10 years old so take his sentiments with a grain of salt :) ) was sitting on the other side of his best buddy.

The note read, "Do you like me?". Under that simple question were two crooked check-boxes that Johnny had labored over while ignoring Miss Ratchet's lesson on grammar. The top box was labeled, "Yes"; the bottom box was labeled, "No". Sally smiled, checked off the note and sent it back the way it came.

"YES!"

Little Johnny's heart leaped, his pulse quickened, his face warmed, and the smile he was trying to contain looked odd enough to Miss Ratchet that she asked if he was OK. He assured her everything was fine. He was on top of the world! Woo-hoo!

Lunch that day was magnificent...sitting there with his new girl. He even snuck in a little hug before they had to go their separate ways afterwards. He thought about how Sally had told him that she liked him because he had given her some Pringles at lunch the day before, her favorite chips.

Little Johnny was all set for a little more puppy love the following day... even spent a little more time than normal combing his hair in the morning.

During the same class period as the previous day, a note arrived from his buddy, the now "default courier" between Johnny and Sally. Johnny opened it up and his little heart sank.

Johnny noted Sally's cute penmanship as he read, "I don't like you

anymore. I like Stevie now." Somehow the cuteness had disappeared. Sally wouldn't even look over at him...she almost looked mad at him, yet little Johnny couldn't figure out why. He would learn later that Stevie had given Sally some homemade fudge on the school bus that morning, her absolute favorite desert.

The word "fickle" hadn't been deposited into little Johnny's vocabulary yet, but had he had it at his disposal that day, we can rest assured THAT's the word that would've percolated to mind. Looking back, Johnny would recall this incident the very first time he did learn that word, and he would assign a mental picture of Sally to it. Lesson learned.

This scene has played out countless times throughout human history. Though we can get a chuckle out of it now, at the time it represented something overwhelming within little Johnny's world.

**People have always been fickle. Maybe it's fair to say that most of God's creatures are fickle. Our affections ebb and flow, often dominated by the freshest of events only. As the pop star Janet Jackson once sang, "What have you done for me lately?" :)**

Every time I read the Book of Exodus I get that same "chuckle" that I alluded to earlier with little Johnny's plight. Moses reminds me of Johnny.

The people of Israel loved Moses, however they proved to be very fickle. Moses, ever-following God's commands, would deliver them from affliction and they'd applaud him. Then, he would put them to the test on God's command and those same people would turn on him! Same man, same divine will being expressed! People are so fickle!

The simple fact that Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt after 430 years of slavery ought to be enough to secure one's affection for him. You'd think, right? NOPE!

Shortly after being delivered from Egypt, the Lord tested Israel in the wilderness. Now remember that Moses is but the "mouthpiece" by which the Lord communicates / actuates His will. The people's response?

*The whole congregation [that means ALL of them!] of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The sons of Israel said to them, 'Would that we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you [notice the displaced blame on Moses vs. the Lord] have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.*

— Exodus 16:2-3

C'mon! Really, people? Yep.

**People are fickle because they are selfish lovers. Moses loved the people of Israel selflessly, knowing before Israel even grumbled that they'd blame him for their misery. Yet, he chose to accept the stripes for the Lord. He chose to take the punishment so that the Lord's will might be done through him, His chosen vessel.**

There will inevitably be times when we play the part of Moses. We will be "unloved" for doing what is righteous before God. Deliverance is in a very simple perspective - one that Moses clung to.

*So Moses and Aaron said to all the sons of Israel, 'At evening you will know that the Lord has brought you out of the land of Egypt; and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, for He hears your grumblings against the Lord; and what are we [Moses and Aaron], that you grumble against us?' Moses said, 'This will happen when the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening, and bread to the full in the morning; for the Lord hears your grumblings which you grumble against Him.*

***'And what are we? Your grumblings are not against us but against***

*the Lord'.*

— Exodus 16:6-8

There is our deliverance even to this day. Whenever we choose to follow the Lord, there will be those who "unlove" us. We will find ourselves challenged to stay the course. Let us follow Moses' example.

If we understand the short-sightedness of man's heart, then we will never be surprised when those we are laying our lives down for, as per the Lord, turn away from us in favor of the next person or thing to catch their immediate attention.

**Understanding gives us perspective. Perspective delivers us in time of affliction. Learn to focus on your end of relationships.**

**Love unconditionally the way the Lord has asked of you, never being disappointed by poor expectations towards others to love you back the same.**

*Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart.*

— 1 Peter 1:22

## **Pray for Your Enemies...ESPECIALLY When You Don't Want To!**

Jesus said:

*But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back.*

***Treat others the same way you want them to treat you.***

*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount.*

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

— Luke 6:27-35

Was Jesus serious with all of that? Yup!

"Love your enemies"??? C'mon, that's like that LAST thing I feel like doing...well, at least that's what my FLESH screams. My flesh is at the ready to retaliate, always. So is yours. The flesh is evil. Sometimes the temptation is so overwhelming that I dream up ways of getting back at my enemies in ways that I dare not repeat in public. And before you get all puffed up, judging me, remember all those times you had unseemly thoughts about your enemies. :o

## Pray for Your Enemies...ESPECIALLY When You Don't Want To!

Here's something else to think about. You'd suppose that Jesus' words in **Luke 6** above would be more of a paradox to children than to adults, right? But I'm not sure, truth be told. You'd think that a child would balk at such a suggestion, to "love their enemies", yet I've seen them love with abandon, even while being abused. On the flip side, you'd think that well-educated adult Christians would readily understand Jesus' words, yet I've seen them exhibit just the opposite. The scary thing about adults is that they tend to be MUCH more calculating in their retaliation. Yikes!

**In the end, we are ALL children of God, young and old. We all need His good counsel...not just to "keep the peace" in the ranks so we don't kill each other, but more so that we are delivered as individuals, even in the midst of an evil and oh-so-trying world.**

Mercy and forgiveness often bear the greatest fruit within the soul of the **giver**. That's another paradox that takes most people a while to digest. Interestingly, it is a close relative of the aforementioned "love your enemies". It takes a bit of love to pray for your enemies, doesn't it? You bet.

So, if we are to synthesize these two principles in our own lives, what we arrive at is the title of this blog entry, "Pray for your enemies... ESPECIALLY when you don't want to!" When someone slaps you across the face harder than the last person (literally or figuratively speaking), the greater triumph in your soul is to see past your assailant's weaknesses and see them for what they truly are...a child of God...a particularly needy one.

**The greater the test, the greater the testimony.**

Remember, even the angels are watching you! You stand for something...or should I say, someone - Jesus' good name: *"It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven - things into which angels long to look"* (1 Peter 1:12).



God leaves believers on earth after salvation as a living hope (**1 Peter 1:3**), that not all is lost, even though times are becoming increasingly desperate.

**So, as the paradox plays out, the time to REALLY love your enemies is when they are at their weakest!**

**Unfortunately for you, their weakest moment often means you receive the greatest bruise. The greater the blow, the needier they are of His love. Show it. That's much easier said than done, for most, but that's Christ's heart on the matter.**

*Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. 'But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.'*

***Do not become overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.***

**— Romans 12:17-21**

To be "overcome by evil" means that you have failed the test. Your testimony in that case is that you gave evil a place to breathe in your soul and it ended up suffocating you. It happens. You can't change yesterday.

Sometimes the best thing you can do when your enemies are on a tear is to step back, take a deep breath, remember how much He loves you and how you were once an enemy of the Cross, too. Let the initial spike of temptation to retaliate dissipate...and then pray for them. It's as much for you as it is for them, after all. :)

## Pretend You're a Light Bulb

*Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, 'I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life'.*

— John 8:12

There's an invisible force that exists between battery terminals. In physics, this is called a potential difference. Electrons have the ability to flow from one place to the next. However, unless an external force acts upon them they will remain where they are. Without electrons moving through a light bulb filament, the light bulb won't shine. Those are the facts.

If given the opportunity to flow, electrons will flow freely through a conduit from terminal to terminal on a battery (e.g.: connect a wire between the + and - terminals). The force that moves electrons is proportional to the magnitude of the potential difference between the terminals. Stick an appropriately sized light bulb in series on the wire and it'll light up. Voila!

**Love is like potential difference. Grace is like electrons. Love forces grace to flow. When it flows through a believer they light up!**

Pretend YOU'RE the light bulb. God's love desires to push grace through you so that you'll light up nice and bright. That brings glory to Him. To whatever degree you tap into His love, to that same degree you shall light up. As you grow spiritually, your light will shine brighter and brighter!

**The magnificence of being like a light bulb is that you have the blessing of revealing God's love to others. For nothing shines quite like a Christian "light bulb". Being lit by God's love is grace in action! He is revealed to others through you and you are warmed to the core. Blessings for everyone!**

Now I want to share a subtlety that I've seen. The world teaches us to be selfish lovers - to be clingy and possessive, even. God's grace cannot flow like that because the force of that love is very weak...like a dead battery. Remember, God's grace is His love in action...His expression, not just TO us, but also THROUGH us. To truly light up and be a blessing to all, His grace must pass through us unselfishly. This reveals His love. It seems too many saints hold fast to a perverted version of love, thus restricting His grace and ultimately dimming the light bulb.

*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us...God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.*

— 1 John 4:11-12; 16b

One of the great mysteries in the Word is that in order for you to fully experience God's grace (and therefore His love), you must allow it to pass THROUGH you. Too many people have the wrong perspective about grace. It seems as if in the same way a carnal person looks at money, a carnal person looks at grace. Their intention is to grab it and hold onto it as if THAT'S the blessing - to possess it for oneself alone. But nothing flows through them in this case because that's the antithesis of God's love. No illumination. :(

**The Bible says that in order to enjoy the full blessing of God's gifts, we must be conduits, not stockpiles. Freedom shares while insecurity hoards. Selfless lovers can't help but shine, whereas selfish lovers are dim. The prior reveals Christ's love, the latter the world's perversion.**

In order for YOU to enjoy God's grace, it must pass through you as an expression of His love. Just like a rheostat (an adjustable light knob), the more grace that flows through you, the brighter you become. Therefore, if a

## Pretend You're a Light Bulb

LOT of grace passes through you, you shall be as Jesus described, *"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**).

Unless a person becomes unselfish with love, they'll never shine. They'll never be motivated to express themselves as gracious. God's love isn't a keepsake; rather it's infinitely unbounded, meant to be expressed as grace, and able to illuminate even the darkest of souls. It's active in every way... so much so that it cannot help but express itself. Its benefits are universal - truly selfless in its aim and purpose. The thought of trying to contain it is simply awful.

**Our Father in Heaven has given us THE Light, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, to course through us...that we might be lights to the world, bringing glory to Him. We must learn to live freely, to express love unrestrictedly through grace.**

**To the loving goes the fullness of love itself...but we must love actively if we are to receive it all.**

*But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day.*

— Proverbs 4:18

## Whatever

*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

The word 'whatever' has gotten a bad rap.

"Oh, mom, WHATEVER!" says the disrespectful adolescent teenage girl to her mom - a scene I've seen played out WAY too many times publicly, specifically at shopping malls - not sure why that's the case, but whatever. ;)

Seriously, though, 'whatever' is an amazing word when considered how it is actually used in the Bible. Instead of it being a type of swear word in the likeness of the aforementioned secular exchange, and instead of it being something loose or describing something unrefined, it turns out that the apostles used it in very powerful, descriptive, freeing ways.

Now, there are multiple Greek words translated "whatever" in the New American Standard Bible, but the concept is consistent for the most part.

**'Whatever' implies a boundary condition on one side, but infinity on the other. It's an amazing way that the Word of God expresses freedom principles.**

In lay terms, it simply means that if you're on the 'righteous' side of the boundary condition, there's tremendous liberty afforded you while living the spiritual life. In other words, as long as you're living by means of God's grace gift of faith, *"for the righteous man lives by faith"* (**Romans 1:17b**), then the world is your proverbial oyster. Anything is possible.

Life becomes exciting. God's promises are renewed every morning. You roll

out of bed and say, "boy, what's He got in store for me today?...**whatever** it is, I can't wait to find out!" :)

Ever been with your bestest (I realize that's not an English word, but I like it so deal with it) friend in the whole world and you both have a full day off from work or school, and one of you says in response to the other, "I don't care what we do today, really...**whatever** you want to do"...and in your shared indecision, and in the **liberty** of that moment, you have an amazing day together? Why was that?

**'Whatever' inspires freedom.**

Now multiply that by a kazillion (again, not an English word - deal with it) and you get the power of living for Christ. I mean **BIBLICALLY** living for Christ...not by the works or the binding commands of some religion you were raised up in. I mean understanding that whenever you live wholly in the sphere of God's grace, you experience an indescribable freedom.

**Consider that the boundary conditions on earth will be gone in Heaven, therefore, 'whatever' will be expressed in its purest form.**

All earthly bindings we manage in life will be loosed in Heaven. The encouraging thing for believers today is that as citizens of Heaven, even now, we have a taste of that estate that is eternal life when we enjoy the liberty of 'whatever'. There's no user's manual to concern ourselves with, that's bondage, just whatever brings glory to God.

*Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*

— 1 Corinthians 10:31b

**With there being infinite possibilities to do whatever is pleasing to God, life becomes an open book. As long as something is done in good faith, you are free to do it by God's standards. To feel otherwise about the**

**spiritual life is to remain in bondage, a reality you were set free from at salvation.**

*"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).* Paul wrote that to protect his sheep from religion robbing them of their liberties...their ability to do **whatever**. If you're free, then enjoy it, he said.

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

— Galatians 6:7

In my personal experience, too many people apply **Galatians 6:7** in the negative sense instead of the positive. "*Whatever*" in this verse points equally to the person who lives by faith in Christ. That person reaps the promises of God, of which include *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law"* (**Galatians 5:22-23**). In other words, a free person isn't looking over their shoulder at every turn to ensure the law hasn't caught up with them, rather, they are free to enjoy the fruit of the Spirit in **whatever** they do.

**Sow peace and you reap peace. Sow mercy and you reap it. Sow love and you receive love. Sow whatever and you get it back!**

*Knowing that **whatever** good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.*

— Ephesians 6:8

Therefore, my encouragement to all is that you learn to live the life our Lord died for. You are free to do whatever you wish with the essential, earthly boundary condition that you do it by grace through faith.

*Whatever is not from faith is sin.*

— **Romans 14:23b**

Learn to focus on the upside of life.

*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**

Living by grace through faith will always produce love. If you struggle with your freedom, as most believers seem to do, then remember the great boundary condition the Lord gave us - love.

*Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. Beloved if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.*

*This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.*

— **1 John 3:18-24**

**There's the great boundary condition for the spiritual life - do whatever, in love.**



## Ministry

Every believer is a minister. Each of them has a “virtual pulpit”, whether or not they are an ordained communicator.

*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. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

— **1 Corinthians 12:4-7**

The beauty of God’s plan for the ages is that His Spirit enables and endorses the exercise of a variety of ministries in the Body of Christ. Since there are no two lives created identically, believers must learn to function within the commandments of the Lord, not claiming another person’s calling as their own. “Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called” (**1 Corinthians 7:20**). Ministries, if nothing else, are unique. Godly diversity is a beautiful thing.

*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**

Some believers are given the gift of “pastor and teacher” (one office). The calling demands much of a man, but the fruit is great for he who fights the good fight of faith.

*But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness,*

*godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.*

— **1 Timothy 6:11-12**

Because of the often extreme nature and stress on the lives of pastors, their circumstances are not the primary source of their joy; rather, their joy is the result of seeing their sheep grow in the grace and knowledge of God.

*“Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved” (Philippians 4:1).*

## A Love Letter To My Congregation

Let's say that a "humble" person is fundamentally "Christ-conscious". What I mean by this is that their interests, their attention, their LIFE is in Christ. That is their status quo. This confounds the arrogant, as a humble person's life is "hidden in Christ". *"For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God"* (**Colossians 3:3**). You don't have to be an unbeliever to be confused, either, as I learned recently with my own congregation...but I'll get to that.

Paul was a wonderful example of a Christ-conscious man. *"And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God"* (**1 Corinthians 2:1-5**).

**Although, admittedly, Paul wasn't perfect, I think it's fair to say that he fits our definition of "Christ-conscious". It's important to note also that Paul regularly reminded his sheep of his own humility...of his example, his "demonstration".**

Besides Christ, Himself, the best example we have of Christ-consciousness is with Adam and Eve before the fall in the Garden. Before the fall, they enjoyed complete devotion to their Lord. As a result, their status quo was peace, happiness, and contentment...such are the fruits of humility.

Enter the serpent.

By this time, Satan had already fallen himself. He was the epitome of "self-consciousness", such that his interests, his attention, and his life was "in

himself". To this day, Satan stands as the antithesis of Christ-centeredness. And to this day, like most arrogant creatures, his desire is to encourage others to follow his lead. The issue with doing so is to the peril of one's relationship with Christ.

**The issue is bondage to self as opposed to freedom in Christ.**

To the degree that a person focuses on self, they abandon their focus on Christ. This is the root cause of weakness. *"I can do all things **through Him who strengthens me**" (Philippians 4:13).* Satan knows this, hence the strategy that dates all the way back to the Garden, where he managed to tempt Adam (through Eve), the federal head of humanity, to tear his eyes off of the Lord in favor of self.

**The fundamental pattern, the base cause for stumbling, has never changed. The old creature, the flesh, is personified by self-consciousness. The new creature is personified by Christ-consciousness. These are ancient, though just as active, artifacts of the fall in the Garden. In fact, this pattern predates mankind and traces all the way back to Satan's fall.**

Misery loves company. Satan is a miserable wretch. Why? Because he is self-consciousness incarnate. He hates Christ, so the last thing he wants to do is focus on Him. He wants YOU to focus on self, not Christ. This, of course, occurs at the loss of all the blessings of Christ-consciousness. But HOW, practically speaking, does Satan go about doing this?

Look around. What do you see? If you "see" the world the way Christ does, then you'll understand, *"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).* A self-conscious man will entangle himself and others, whenever possible, in the web of misery that is void of Christ. However, a Christ-conscious man will be a "[light] in the world" (Philippians 2:15). *"For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart" (Matthew 12:34b).*

Now, back to the story I promised you at the outset...for this is supposed to be a love letter to my own congregation after all...

**Christ chooses His under-shepherds with ultimate clarity and conviction. They must be humble above all things, and loving. They must be willing and conditioned to lay down their lives for others (John 15:13)...for that is what their Great Shepherd demonstrated as the greatest love of all. They must follow His lead implicitly, regardless of how the sheep respond. "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2). Like Christ, they "know what [is] in man", so they are hard-pressed to be caught off guard by the devices of the sheep.**

I was once asked, "What is the greatest area of stumbling for a shepherd?" I responded simply, "Arrogance." Just about the worst thing a pastor can do is begin focusing on himself...to become self-conscious in his office. It doesn't matter how that manifests itself, just that its existence represents a seed for all kinds of rotten fruit.

We pastors are teachers. We present whatever the Spirit urges us to, "in season or out". I can tell you first-hand that it's not always a pleasant experience, especially when you're exceptionally private by nature, like myself, and the Spirit says, "Talk about yourself for a moment...and let the sheep see an example of humility. Don't worry about how they might respond, just do as I ask." The correct answer from the heart of the Christ-conscious pastor is, "OK, whatever you desire." A 'funny' guy like me might also add with a chuckle, "Well, this is going to be interesting, isn't it???" No matter. Orders received. Execute.

*"Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7).* That is scripture. It's not a "slip of the pen". It's there for the sheep to heed.

**If the Spirit has a shepherd share something of himself with the sheep, there's a reason for it. Therefore, the sheep's ultimate concern is to understand what the Spirit's trying to convey to them, THROUGH Christ's under-shepherd. It is NOT their commission to challenge the shepherd or to tempt the shepherd into becoming self-conscious in their office. That'd be like a real sheep biting a shepherd as he extracts them from the thicket (something harmful). Yet this very thing happens all the time...trust me.**

I was bitten recently by multiple sheep when the Spirit had me share some of my own experiences with the congregation. It was a surreal, sobering thing to realize that a portion of the flock had missed the point altogether. One of the bolder, more stricken sheep even sent me a smoldering email, attacking my integrity, grossly misrepresenting my heart, and challenging my authority...implying that they, too, were filled with the Spirit and that I ought to listen up! This all happened right before my family and I were heading out on vacation for a week in the Colorado Rockies. Thankfully, I had a full week to fellowship, undistracted with my Lord. It was a wonderful, God-sent time of reflection on the things I write about here.

The issue, as He so perfectly pointed out, was simple. It's the same pattern that has existed since the "falls". Arrogance, especially when pressed by the Spirit through the pulpit (and me, personally) was convicted. I call this the point of critical discernment. It's at this point of temptation that a person must choose to step back...and think, and pray.

**Arrogance always attacks the weaker vessel. In this case, between the Word and me, can you guess who got attacked? My lessons had made some of my sheep stumble, their arrogance flared, their insecurities raged, and they chose to attack the "weaker" vessel...their pastor. I had to walk parallel to my own Christ-consciousness to make the effort to identify multiple instances of self-consciousness in the flock.**

I had to love the ones who were biting me. I had to draw on His wisdom,

*“Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also” (John 15:20).*

**By attacking that which I was commanded to teach, the sheep were tempting me to become self-conscious in my vocation. If I had allowed that seed to be planted and subsequently watered by my own insecurities and fears, the ungodly deed would have been consummated. But as it was, I wasn’t faltering. The temptation was very real, but the Word readily and powerfully overcame it. I recognized it for what it was...my sheep needed time to absorb something the Spirit had me give them. I understood. I loved.**

Jeremiah was faced with similar circumstances. But his convictions, like any good shepherd's - or shall I say, like THE Good Shepherd's - were taxed by those in his charge. No matter. The Lord assured Jeremiah, as He’s assured yours truly, that it wasn’t his job to question His choice of vessels. His job was to remain humble, dedicated, and true. Accept the calling.

*‘Before I formed you [Jeremiah] in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.’ Then I said, ‘Alas, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, because I am a youth.’ But the LORD said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am a youth,” because everywhere I send you, you shall go, and all that I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,’ declares the LORD. Then the LORD stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me, ‘Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. See, I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant’.*

— Jeremiah 1:5-10

**Shepherds were chosen before human history even commenced. It's not for any sheep to question, nor is it their place to deny a shepherd their lot. I understand this clearly...however, my sheep do not always. Sheep are dumb, hence the running analogy in the Bible. My job is to press on.**

**Leading is mostly lonely.**

*'Now, gird up your loins and arise, and speak to them all which I command you. Do not be dismayed before them, or I will dismay you before them. Now behold, I have made you today as a fortified city and as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze against the whole land, to the kings of Judah, to its princes, to its priests and to the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, for I am with you to deliver you,' declares the LORD.*

— **Jeremiah 1:17-19**

**A shepherd must have unusual faith.**

I suppose that's why scripture encourages the sheep to "imitate their faith". The problem is that the self-conscious, arrogant sheep don't want to consider another's faith. Why? Their own self-consciousness precludes them from being truly objective. Rather, in their subjectivity, their insecurities percolate upwards, spewing venom at the one person trying to feed them the bread of life...and freedom.

**The self-conscious person makes an issue of the man behind the pulpit, behind the spiritual gift. Why? That's their playground...fleshly things. They are blinded in that moment, dysfunctional, "expecting" even the pastor to play along. A good one never will.**

The shepherd must understand all of this and maintain Christ's heart. *"Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15).* Satan's temptation is for the



shepherd to abandon their post and sin by becoming self-focused themselves. He wants the lot of us to tumble off the cliff, shepherd and sheep, wailing with regret as we fall headlong.

**But a true shepherd is stronger than that...stronger than the sheep he leads. He must be, lest the sheep begin leading the flock. That's the proverbial "ship of fools".** *"For My people are foolish, they know Me not; they are stupid children and have no understanding. They are shrewd to do evil, but to do good they do not know"* (Jeremiah 4:22). **Jeremiah inspires me.**

The final assault that typically befalls a shepherd like myself is the one that includes a proclamation that said self-conscious fruit is "from the Spirit" or "from the Lord". I often wonder what "spirit" is animating such things... could it be the likes of **2 Corinthians 11:4**? Could it be a moment of evil in the life of an otherwise well-intentioned sheep? You'd be surprised at what sheep are willing to swear by. *"And although they say, 'As the LORD lives,' surely they swear falsely"* (**Jeremiah 5:2**).

This "love letter" of mine might seem antagonistic to its very title, but I assure you, I write ALL of this with the utmost love, respect, and adoration for all of those children of God's still pressing on, despite the presence of their own flesh. I am very comfortable doing so, too. My job is to remain focused on Christ...to be truly "Christ-conscious" at all times...and to encourage those left to my charge, under the watchful eye of our Great Shepherd, to focus on Christ also.

Whatever wrong I've endured, I consider it all worth it. If I am to love more at the risk of my own heartbreak, then so be it. Paul understood, as do I this day, *"I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?"* (**2 Corinthians 12:15**).

**To love is to be delivered. It's a beautiful thing.**

## A Love Letter To My Congregation

*Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.*

— **1 Peter 4:8**

As I've taught recently in a pulpit series titled, "Our Struggle Is Ancient", there ought to be no real surprises here. To the day I die, there will be the threat of the accuser...and his treacherous, murderous words will find their way to my heart through his various agencies. I will be slandered, maligned, and accused, even from within my circle of friends...this I am ever-aware of, as was Jeremiah, "*For wicked men are found among My people, they watch like fowlers lying in wait; they set a trap, they catch men*" (**Jeremiah 5:26**).

**I will fight the good fight for you, I promise. And if the day comes when it seems I can't get dressed for battle, then I'll go to Him and ask for strength...for YOU! I promise.**

And please don't worry about yesterday's wrongdoings. Confess them to Him as I do. Know in your heart the error of your ways, and pray that you don't hurt others this day or the next...at least not in the same way. That's all we can ask of one another, right? :)

**I love you.**

## **“Father, My Heart Is Breaking”**

*Everyone faces adversity and must find ways to persevere through the oppressing moments of life. Everyone must get up and make breakfast, and wash clothes, and go to work, and pay bills, and discipline children and generally keep life going when the heart is breaking. But it's different with pastors - not totally different, but different. The heart is the instrument of our vocation.*

*Spurgeon said, 'Ours is more than mental work - it is heart work, the labour of our inmost soul'. So when our heart is breaking we must labor with a broken instrument. Preaching is our main work. And preaching is heart work, not just mental work. So the question for us is not just How you keep on living when the marriage is blank, and a child has run away, and the finances don't reach, and the pews are bare and friends have forsaken you; the question for us is more than, How do you keep on living? It's, How do you keep on preaching? It's one thing to survive adversity; it is something very different to keep on preaching, Sunday after Sunday, month after month when the heart is overwhelmed.*

*Spurgeon said to the students of his pastor's college, 'One crushing stroke has sometimes laid the minister very low. The brother most relied upon becomes a traitor...Ten years of toil do not take so much life out of us as we lose in a few hours by Ahithophel the traitor, or Demas the apostate.' The question for us is not, How do you live through unremitting criticism and distrust and accusation and abandonment; for us the question is also, How do you preach through it?*

***How do you do heart work when the heart is under siege and ready to fall?***

— John Piper

I recall the first time I read excerpts from Charles Spurgeon's "Preaching

“Father, My Heart Is Breaking”

*Through Adversity*” sermon. I had just weathered my own personal storm...“Just another wave,” I’d say to myself. “One day at a time.” I shared a little with my congregation - just enough to let them know a little extra prayer would be welcomed and to give them a glimmer of insight into an aching heart.

Speaking to other pastors has been like a lifeline to me...not because they are necessarily my “favorite” people (although some are), but rather because they are the only breed of folks that can actually relate fully to the words of Spurgeon above, or mine, however clumsily I might lay them out. They are the only other individuals enduring the uniqueness of this spiritual gift. I don’t say this to draw a line in the sand, “All pastors on this side, and everyone else on the other, ” - I don’t! I say this to make a point, though I struggle to do so. I know it. Forgive me.

Maybe it's best to try it this way instead. If our calling were a conversation with God, I suspect for most of us, it'd go a little as follows:

"Son."

"Yes, Father?"

"I have ordained that you possess a special gift, a spiritual one, to look after My children. I want you to listen closely to my Spirit as He opens up your heart. And never forget how much I love you...no matter what."

"OK, Father...are You sure You've got the right guy?"

"Trust Me, son, I've got the right guy."

Fast-forward a few years...

"Father, I'm overwhelmed by pain! I love these people. I know I could always do more, but I've given up so much already, laid down my life, and

I'm not sure the majority even cares all that much. Is this 'normal'?...I mean, Father, am I doing something wrong? Please tell me before I lose my sense of bearing here."

**"Trust Me, son, you are doing as I asked. I didn't tell you this when you accepted your assignment, but I will tell you now. Your heart WILL break. It will KEEP ON breaking until the day you die. I built you that way. It may sound cruel now, but I need you to be that person for me. Can you hold on, son?"**

"OK, Father, I understand. I can. I love You so much. Forgive me for faltering. I will press on. Thank You for the encouragement."

"Remember My Son, Jesus. He was impeccable, obeying every last word of Mine. He was a shepherd, too, My *'great shepherd'* (**Hebrews 13:20**). His love is so great that the universe cannot contain it, yet the objects of His love murdered Him on a Cross. Even in His last breaths, He uttered, *'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'* (**Luke 23:34**). Remember?"

"I remember. I'm just really sad sometimes. I see truth, YOUR truth, and I see most of Your children running away from it towards their own peril. I don't care about me - who am I anyways? But I DO care about them...I love them...or at least I try to. I want to show them Your love, but it doesn't seem to be working very well. I just need to know that I'm not failing You, Dad."

"You are not failing Me, son. You are obeying me and the world hates you for it. My children just get caught up in the world sometimes. Don't despair. Remember the words your shepherd, Jesus, left you with, *'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**)."

“Father, My Heart Is Breaking”

**"Father, my heart is breaking."**

**"Good. I planned it. Remember how much I love you."**

"I will. Oh, and one last thing. Am I wrong in sharing this with Your sheep? I mean, I don't want to make them stumble is all. I don't want them preoccupied with my heart or my own struggles. I don't want this to be about me...at all."

"Please do share, son. It's important. I have given you My Son's heart to share. Let them see it in you. Jesus wept (**John 11:35**). He got angry (**Matthew 17:17**). He laid down His life (**John 10:18**). In Him I am well pleased (**Luke 3:22**). Press on. Lead."

"Will do. I love You, Dad."

"I love you back, son."

## I Got Your Six

"I got your six, man."

"Huh?"

With a quizzical look, that only Ron Belcastro could've given, he said, "I got your back...you know, like six o'clock...weren't you in the military?"

"Yes, but I was in the Air Force and we didn't talk like that," I said, undecided about my facial expression.

"Oh, that's right, I forgot," he said, grinning. I know what he meant...it was a friendly jab. We both proceeded to laugh, Ron as an Army veteran, and me as, well, a "flyboy".

"You grunts like to talk like that, huh?"

"Yup!" And then on cue, as if to cement the notion, Ron began recounting a story with his patented, fully animated, physical humor about some training "back in the day". He couldn't believe how such a small rocket could've been responsible for such a large explosion. He was years older than me but he made the explosion noises like a little child. I miss him. He died from cancer a couple of years later, neither of us aware of what lay dangerously in his lungs, lurking. I miss him because I believed him...that he had my back, that is.

**It's a rare trust when a person is willing to surrender their vulnerabilities to the care of another. When it happens, an inextricable bond forms. This steely pact is forged ironclad when sown in battle.**

Whether or not we like to think about it, the fact is that we are all at war. This war predates mankind, even, and has spilled into human history by

virtue of our Lord God ordaining it. Satan against our Lord, Jesus Christ. Satan has his army, Christ has His. We are enlistees. *“Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:3).*

**War is violent, unconcerned with personal loss, cold, and, in this particular case, unrelenting. We need to band together. Our Lord commands it as our high general.**

Today, technology has replaced much of the harm that befell so many soldiers of yesteryear. I often imagine the horrors of medieval conflict, or even the U.S. Revolutionary War...these comprised of hand-to-hand combat and relatively archaic weaponry. I suppose that since even the very best soldiers only have one set of eyes, the gravity of being utterly exposed to an imminent deathblow from behind could only be allayed by knowing that someone had their back...someone worthy of the calling.

*“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).* At the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, CO, there’s a slogan above the archway to their ceremonial grounds that reads, *“Integrity First. Service Before Self. Excellence In All We Do.”* It used to read, *“Bring Me Men.”* In either case, the thought is to convey a sense of duty to others, putting others first, even. The standard being integrity to a higher purpose. It’s the very fabric of military organization. Without it, people die and wars are lost.

I’ve learned through the ministry that there are those who will never abide in such a creed, never truly abide in Christ. They don’t trust Him and they don’t trust others. They don’t fight fiercely for Him or others, only for self. When difficult battles are faced, they turn and run away to their own little secret foxholes. They wear a uniform, though dishonorably. They march in parades, but they are silently responsible for injury suffered by others. They breach unity in the ranks. They all have excuses, of course...typically well thought out and practiced, often laced with scripture. Heck, Satan makes sure of that. He used scripture wrongly, too,



remember (**Matthew 4:1-11**).

**It's difficult to convey, as a leader among sheep, how very critical unity is. It's a daily battle all by itself.**

The sophomores, in their arrogance, might suspect a pastor is 'gathering unto oneself', but they couldn't be further from the truth. The truth is that we shepherds know that local assemblies are military strongholds, ordained by God, existing as bulwarks against the onslaught of attacks from the kingdom of darkness. Uncommitted, rogue sheep are like AWOL (absent without leave) soldiers, creating two vulnerabilities through a single action. They expose themselves and they expose those they've abandoned in battle. Being selfish, they hardly even consider this.

**The worst soldier is the selfish one.**

I'd rather be buddied in battle with a new convert that I know won't leave my backside than a so-called mature believer that I can't trust to stay put. At least with the prior, I know what I'm dealing with (even if they are weaker than I); whereas the latter makes me insecure even going into battle in the first place. If there's ever a need for confidence, isn't it in battle? I don't want to have to second-guess. It's a distraction I don't need under enemy attack.

**Could there be a more damaging betrayal than to leave the brethren behind for selfish reasons? Yet it happens every day in churches like mine. Such is the nature of war.**

One more morsel to chew on. There seems to be a high correlation to human IQ and selfishness in battle. The higher the IQ, the greater the likelihood they will abandon you...or possibly never even show up. That has been my experience. Maybe they feel others are worth the risk of peril in order to preserve their 'greatness' for another day? Maybe they assume others are more expendable? I'm not going to judge anyone, for only the

good Lord knows...but I don't mind sharing this little tidbit as food for thought. It's not a blanket indictment against intelligence, for I have those close to me that I'd trust my life with that are quite smart...so please don't misunderstand why I mention this. Just think about it. Ivory towers have no place on a battlefield.

I have a portrait of my buddy Ron in my office. He was a simple man...a man seeking his next battle. With respect, I say he was a bit unrefined. He was often unkempt, by social standards, not at all that well-spoken, either. But his attitude inspired me...and that's not something that I encounter very often. In his edginess, by the stroke of his rough edges and his gritty peculiarity, he sharpened this 'old' soul. *"Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another"* (**Proverbs 27:17**).

"Thanks, man."

"For what?"

"For having my six down there. I missed you." That'll be how I greet Ron in Heaven. :)

**I'm grateful to anyone I can trust in battle. Learn to embrace those in your own lives who fit the bill, for they are wonderful gifts from above. If you have a faithful pastor, you have at least one in your life. Encourage others still cowering, as I try to, without judging them. Someday they may see the light and thirst for battle, selflessly. It's true, some seem to come bursting forth from the womb wielding battle axes, but all need to be trained. There's hope for everyone and there are certainly enough battles to go around!**

## My Cheerful, Broken Heart

*A joyful heart makes a cheerful face, but when the heart is sad, the spirit is broken...All the days of the afflicted are bad, but a cheerful heart has a continual feast.*

— Proverbs 15:13, 15

I was recently forwarded a devotional from a member of my congregation who has historically been very encouraging over the years. And I am truly grateful to this person for always being ready to lift me up, knowing how heavy my heart can get. **Proverbs 15:15** was included in that devotional, something I had been thinking about just before I received the email. That's how the Spirit nudged me to write this now.

I've always considered myself a "cup half full" kind of guy. I think most people would agree that I'm an optimist. Although, in all fairness, especially over the past few years, I think some may not be as convinced. It's understandable, too, because some folks have seen me often weighed down, moaning and groaning about the wretchedness of man. I'm sorry for bleeding all over people sometimes...truly...but my heart is pierced daily.

You see, this walk, which has only been amplified by my tenure in the ministry, is a double-edged sword. One edge is sharp enough to cut right through all the distractions and remind me of the abundant grace He's poured out upon this world. All of that is anchored to the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ, Himself, who personifies grace. In that sense, my heart leaps for joy with gratitude, thanksgiving, and prayer. Faith is a beautiful thing - truly.

However, the other edge of the sword is just as sharp, easily cutting right through all the rejoicing, puncturing my heart and bringing me right back to my knees, only for different reasons this time. Despite His mercy and grace, it seems an increasing number of people, many of whom I love

dearly, are leaving Him behind for Satan's deceptions. In many ways, it's like watching a fatal car crash occur in slow motion while screaming "Look out!" - but nobody's listening. It's truly awful.

*"The heart is the instrument of [a pastor's] vocation. Spurgeon said, "Ours is more than mental work—it is heart work, the labour of our inmost soul". So when our heart is breaking we must labor with a broken instrument."*

— John Piper

So therein lies the basis of this blog entry's title, "My Cheerful, Broken Heart." How very challenging each day is to live a peace that surpasses all human comprehension. *"And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (**Philippians 4:7**). To do so in a world where so many others are marching towards their own destruction is exceptionally challenging.

**Some say, "It's their own fault they are crashing!" It's true, and so it seems some are able to skip along. But I don't have the heart to leave it at that.**

How long can I go each day without being upset eventually by what I see? The more I mature in Him, the greater the chasm I see between Him and the world He came to save. The more joy I experience, personally, the more polar my emotions become when I consider how much others are missing out on. :(

It's not always easy to intimate such things with such a large audience, showing my "soft underbelly", but please know that I do so for your encouragement. I know that many of you share this same dichotomous cheerful, broken heart, seeing what I see and wondering how in the world Jesus' own heart wasn't torn into two pieces. We *"[fix] 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).

**When I weep, and I often do, I think of Him. *Jesus wept.* (John 11:35)  
Now I don't feel so bad. I know He understands. I'm not failing, I'm experiencing a small portion of what He did (and still does). I'm not weak, I'm strong enough to accept this heart, this gift, without dismissing the pain.**

I know that all of this will be over soon enough, that is our blessed hope after all. He'll keep my chin up by beckoning my gaze to Him. But I pray daily, truth be told, for those who won't share that gaze with me, in wonder and awe. I pray with a joyful, yet oft broken spirit, for this world. So many lost within it.

**May the grace and love of God keep this heart of mine knit together so that it doesn't tear apart and relegate me to drivel. May He afford me the privilege of being encouraged by you, and vice versa. And may you remember that you're not alone...not ever. When your heart is bleeding out, it's contents are mixing with mine.**

*For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine.*

— **Romans 1:11-12**

Forever pressing on.

## My Hospital Visit

When I was a child, I was convinced that I'd become a medical doctor someday. My heart was always knit with others that way...I just wanted to help somehow...as much as possible.

Growing up under the poverty line in the U.S., that dream became many things to a young boy, even a means of escape. I didn't know God, really. Don't judge me - my relationship with Jesus was a bit tenuous at the time. But that's another story for another day.

**I had a brand of hope, but it wasn't His brand yet. I hoped to help others, but my intentions were misplaced until He had my attention later on in life.**

I lost sight of all that somewhere during my middle school years. I think maybe the hormones trampled just about everything in their path, including my so-called dreams. That time period is a little grayed-out. By the time I got to college, after a four year stint in the U.S. Air Force, I was back on track to become "Dr. Edward J. Collins". My closest friend in college used to call me "Dr. Ed" even though we were just undergrads. I think he saw my heart, to be honest. He was brethren.

At the time, I didn't realize that my friend was a bit 'prophetic' in his nicknaming. Instead of becoming a medical doctor, caring for the physical ailments of the sick, my Lord had different plans for me. I was to become a "soul doctor", for lack of a better term, caring for the spiritual ailments of the sick. Reminds me of what Jesus said:

*It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*

— Matthew 9:12b-13

I'm getting ahead of myself here...let me get back to the college scene.

It turned out that, after doing an internship at the Cleveland Clinic, I realized that I'm not even that fond of hospitals. A bit of an 'issue' for an aspiring M.D., don't you think? I love the 'idea' of hospitals, healing the ill, but the actual environment wasn't for me. God had other plans, I see that clearly now, of course.

Today, whenever I go to the hospital, like I did just recently to visit a loved one, I think about how two things are typically going through a bedridden person's mind: mortality and spirituality. The prior seems to induce the latter. My heart is still the same so I always want to offer something helpful. Anything.

While I was visiting this person, who is in their nineties, I was asked out of the blue, "Do you really think God is fair?" "Of course," I said, "it's just an issue of faith, really, and accepting that we don't always know why He has ordained the things He has." I could see the roots of the question in this person, for they had been contemplating life. I understood, given their circumstances at the time.

Afterwards I was kicking myself, as I often do, feeling like I could have given this person more of Christ's heart. I thought that maybe I could've drawn out more of a conversation by asking, "How 'fair' is it that an innocent man died so that I may live?" I mean, if we're going to talk about 'fair' then maybe the right place to start would be right there at the Cross. Maybe then we'd avoid the cancer of self-absorption altogether and live a life of gratitude instead, even when we're shackled up in a hospital room.

**By man's standards, the Cross is totally unfair. However, Jesus Christ could care less about man's estimation of things 'fair'. This isn't about what WE think about fairness, it's about how much HE loves us!**

*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 5:7-8

**Eternal fairness, though beyond our own human comprehension, comprises an eternal scale of values. "A just balance and scales belong to the Lord; all the weights of the bag are His concern" (Proverbs 6:11).**

God uses whatever means necessary to incite eternal thoughts in man. The hospital is a pristine place to do just that. Sometimes He needs to immobilize us to mitigate distractions and get us to focus on His plan. Whatever He does, it seems to work, and I'm glad.

So, I never became a medical doctor, obviously. I became a "soul doctor" instead, something much weightier. People come to the "doctor's office" when they come to hear a lesson at the church or catch recordings off of the website. They show up sick and worn out, and I have the privilege of applying eye salve so that they can see again, or washing their feet with the Word so that they can walk straight and upright again.

I'm still a servant, as I knew I'd be as a kid. I'm just not the type of servant I thought I'd be. Mine is a calling that deals with things eternal. I help out.

To this day, I'm not all that fond of hospitals. I think it's a mixture of that sterile smell with the abundance of body fluids and pungent gases that fill the air. I applaud those who've been called to work in such a setting - truly. I also encourage them all, and anyone who spends time in a hospital to remember this blog.

**People are often on their knees in the hospital. They are pressed down,**



**forced to ponder the things they've historically put off by means of distraction. Their worldly concerns are often all but stripped away and they are left on a gurney, contemplating life. God works in mysterious ways.**

**Consider your opportunity.**

*The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. Other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it and choked it out. Other seed fell into the good soil, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great.*

— **Luke 8:5-8b**

As I see it, hospital visits are often among the ripest soil of all. God often has a person right where He wants them, whether they even realize it or not. I think about these things whenever I walk through the sliding doors, as the scent fills my nostrils, and I press into it even further.

**While I still don't enjoy the environment, I do relish the opportunity to plant a few seeds.**

## Patience and Preparation

Patience is a virtue, so says the Word of God.

*The end of a matter is better than its beginning;  
Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.*

— **Ecclesiastes 7:8**

Patience bears much fruit in the lives of those who possess it.

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

— **Ephesians 4:1-3**

If God is patient, and He is, then we ought to be as well.

*Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.*

— **James 5:7-11**

## **A Little Math To Explain Your Insecurity**

I have a friend that is a very successful professional. This person received their master's degree with honors, has had a high level of success in their field, and continuously receives praise from their peers as a valuable asset to the workplace.

About a decade ago, I was asked to review a document they had written. I was taken aback at the lack of ability they possessed to write even rudimentary sentences well. Now, if you've been reading my blogs, you should realize that I'm not claiming expert status in English grammar nor literary prowess. However, this person suffered something fundamental. So their writing, though I could hear their "voice" trying desperately to emerge from the wreckage, was not very good at all for someone with a master's degree.

The beauty of this story is that this person had the humility to return to the English grammar basics that they had learned back in elementary school! That's right - ALL the way back to fundamentals. To make a long story short, they put in the work, realizing they had been misguided about a few things, and made the necessary corrections in their education. Today, their writing, though sometimes still combating old habits, is much, much better.

**Learning is a cumulative process. The things we learn as fundamentals shape how we inculcate higher-level concepts.**

Each stage of learning represents a building block in our overall education. Our confidence in a subject depends upon how well we truly understand it. This most often means that we must have some experience with the nitty-gritty of it (think about doing all of those math problems back in grade school - painful, yet necessary for building confidence).

**If some portion of our education is tainted and produces a certain lack of**

**confidence in us, insecurity finds a seat at the table.**

A person can rectify a tainted education, drastically improving their overall confidence, by simply having the humility to go back to basics and refine their education as required. This is what my friend did and it has paid tremendous dividends. What used to haunt them has now become an area of strength!

As with the story above, the confidence of a believer depends upon each building block in their education. In theological terminology, we often refer to stages and building blocks as "doctrines."

Now, bear with me as I oversimplify a couple of things in order to drive home a key point.

Suppose for a moment that you have three imaginary bags. Each bag contains two items. The first item is absolute Truth from the Word of God (e.g.: you have experience with the scripture to back it up). Let's say we represent our confidence in it as "1", meaning that the probability that this item is true is 100%. The second item in the bag is a doctrine we may have learned from another (e.g.: pastor, theologian, friend, etc.). Because we haven't personally investigated all the scripture relating to this item, our confidence in it isn't 100%. In the case of our first bag, we assign the second item a ".80" - we have a good amount of confidence in it, but not absolute. Let's suppose this bag represents the "core doctrines" in the spiritual life... things like the depravity of man, salvation, spirituality, etc.

If we were then to reach into our bag of core doctrines, we'd have the following level of confidence in pulling out an absolute Truth. The probability of pulling Truth out of that bag is  $(1/2 \times 1) + (1/2 \times .8) = 0.9$ , or 90%. So, you have a pretty good chance at pulling Truth out, but not 100%, so your confidence suffers a little.

Now, what happens when we consider the fact that the core doctrines bag

represents the foundation for the next stage of our education? Let's walk through it to find out.

Suppose that you now reach into the second bag for Truth. Keep in mind that your overall education is cumulative and dependent on the confidence you have inherited from the bag of core doctrines. In other words, it's impossible for secondary level confidence to exceed that which it is founded on, which in our case here, is 90%. So, even if you have 100% confidence in this second bag, the overall confidence you have in your education is relegated to 90%.

The second bag contains two items, the first represents doctrine you have 100% confidence in, the second 75%. Following the same calculations previously made, we find that there's an overall confidence level in this bag that you'll pull absolute Truth out of it of 0.875, or 87.5%.

If we now consider the cumulative effect of the first bag being 90% and the second being 87.5%, the overall confidence that we have in our education, given the dependency of the second on the first, is  $0.9 \times 0.875 = 0.837$ , or 83.7%. This means that the overall confidence you have in your education is 83.7%, which is lower than either of the individual bags alone. That also means that there is a 16.3% level of insecurity in your education.

You should already see a trend...but, just in case you don't, let's consider one more stage of education (aka one more bag of doctrines that depend on the previous ones).

Our third bag contains two items, the first represents doctrine you have 100% confidence in, the second 85%. Following the same calculations previously made, we find that there's an overall confidence level in this bag that you'll pull absolute Truth out of it of 0.925, or 92.5%.

If we now consider the cumulative effect of the first bag being 90%, the second being 87.5%, and the third being 92.5%, the overall confidence that

## A Little Math To Explain Your Insecurity

we have in our education, given the chain of dependency, is  $0.9 \times 0.875 \times 0.925 = 0.812$ , or 81.2%. This means that the overall confidence you have in your education is 81.2%. Notice also that your level of insecurity has increased to 18.8%. That is a trend that is detrimental to your happiness, even.

The point of this little exercise is to help you understand how very important the fundamentals are to your spiritual education. What might we conclude?

- **Overall confidence in our education depends on each individual stage of our education. If we lack confidence in any one stage, it bears a ripple effect throughout.**
- **In order to increase our overall confidence, we must be humble enough to revisit those doctrines that we accepted as truth from someone else, but never actually took the time to verify in the scriptures for ourselves.**
- **The longer we go without checking the doctrines that formulate our education, the more insecure we become! The effects of insecurity increase over time.**

**Faith is the device that God bases His promises for deliverance upon. Without faith, we haven't the strength or the confidence necessary to overcome the world or its evil. Without faith, we live our spiritual lives on convictions we've borrowed from others...such is the pathway to insecurity, frustration, and discontentment. It is impossible to be happy if these things exist in our souls.**

If you feel you still lack deliverance in this life, please consider my words here today.

The remedy, then, is to go back into your own "bags of doctrine" and revisit those areas where you really don't possess the necessary confidence. And instead of repeating your first mistake when you accepted another person's

doctrines at face value, take the time to sort through the scripture for yourself. I suggest you don't even rely on anyone else's study outlines when you do this - just read your Bible with the faith of a child.

**When you find the evidence for your doctrines for yourself and you believe what the Word has to say, then true faith shall be imparted to you by grace, resulting in godly confidence and deliverance.**

It's time you take responsibility for your own soul. It's time you learn the Word for yourself. For some, the insecurity that has been compounded in their souls will work against their taking my advice. Let's pray for those individuals, that they push through such things and towards the freedom that Christ has set them free to enjoy!

*Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.*

— **Ephesians 4:14-16 - NLT**

## **“Cessna N1742\*, What Are You Doing?”**

At an abnormally rapid cadence, air traffic control belted:

"United heavy FLT 100\*, make an immediate right turn heading 180, maintain 4500"

"American heavy FLT 372\*, make an immediate left turn heading 270, maintain 5500"

"Hawaiian N593HA\*, maintain heading, climb immediately to 8500"

"Cessna N1742\*, what are you doing?"...

...I cringed and clicked the radio transmission button on the yoke, "Ummm...making a left turn to heading 120, climbing to 3500." Maybe once it came out I'd feel more confident about it???...maybe I wasn't really responsible for this scramble in the sky???

"Cessna N1742\*, you were supposed to make a RIGHT turn on climb-out... please maintain your current heading, climb to 5500 as quickly as possible, contact control on frequency 132.2\*"

"Ummm...sorry about that, maintaining heading 120, climbing to 5500, contacting control on frequency 132.2\*" ...that was painful.

I had destroyed the delicate, beautifully orchestrated 3-dimensional symphony that the mature professionals had been playing that day in the sky. I had run through like a clanging cymbal. Maestro (air traffic control) was not pleased with my performance.

Long before I had ever received my commercial pilot license, I was learning to fly out of Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu, HI. The radio exchange



above represents actual events that took place around 1990 over Kahului Airport in Maui, HI. I was a student pilot with less than 20 hours of logged time. I had just enough moxie to fly roughly 100 miles across the Pacific ocean to make it to Maui from Oahu. I accomplished this in a single-engine Cessna 172 with a cruising speed not much over 100 knots (115 mph).

Sure, Kahului Airport (OGG) was unfamiliar territory for me at the time, but heck, I learned to fly out of Honolulu International Airport (HNL) just fine...and besides, at the time HNL was a TCA (Terminal Control Area = largest/busiest airport designation) and OGG was an ARSA (Airport Radar Service Area = smaller/busy airport designation). If I could fly in/out of HNL then I could fly in/out of OGG without a hitch, right?

Long story short?...I did not complete said mission above "without a hitch," as you might have deduced based on the radio transmissions above! :o

An hour return flight in a small, single-engine airplane was a long time to reflect on what had happened. I recall worrying about being contacted by the FAA and getting my student license revoked. That didn't happen very often, but I just listened to an irritated air traffic controller peel a few commercial jumbo jets off vector so that a puny Cessna pilot could navigate his way out of the thicket. I'll never do it again, I thought. I never did.

On that lonely flight back to HNL, I kept retracing the instructions I had received while still on the ground at OGG. I had jotted down departure instructions on the pad strapped to my thigh. There were instructions in pencil on the paper, but were they accurate?

I had to admit something. The pressure in that moment had created an eerily quiet space in an otherwise raucous cockpit...and it was squeezing out the truth - I had indeed gotten a little confused when given departure instructions (have you ever heard an air traffic controller spewing out pilot instructions?...I can only liken it to an auctioneer - LOL - ok, that might be

“Cessna N1742\*, What Are You Doing?”

a stretch, but not by much!).

I should've asked for clarification, but I didn't. I mostly thought I heard "left turn"...but "mostly" isn't good enough in flying. "Mostly" can get people killed. I'm sure there are pilots in Heaven right now that "mostly" thought they could clear that mountain in time...or "mostly" thought they'd be safe flying into that squall line. "Mostly" isn't really a word that should occupy space in a pilot's vocabulary.

I should've dropped my pride and asked for confirmation...should've thrown "mostly" out the cockpit window onto the tarmac.

I should've ignored that awful surge of arrogance that kept my mic cold.

I should've listened to my good conscience...should've been thinking about the possibility of endangering others.

There's an old quote that resonates in my head to this day: **"truly superior pilots are those who use their superior judgement to avoid those situations where they might have to use their superior skills."**

In other words, a good pilot avoids situations that are over their heads. And if a pilot decides to take off into difficult conditions, they'd at least better have their facts straight on the ground.

This is the same in the spiritual life. We've all been given different flight plans from the Father - different points of origin, different destinations, different weather conditions. However, **if we aren't listening very carefully as to what comprises our own flight plan, we run the risk of upsetting the spiritual ecosystem in which we reside.** Worst case is we die or injure others along the way. Of course, God (Maestro) will reroute other pilots, but the unity may be upset for a bit.

*Therefore I [Paul the apostle], the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk*

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

— **Ephesians 4:1-3)**

Our "flight plan" is our calling. Humility keeps us from accepting "mostly" as proper clearance for flight. Gentleness, patience, and tolerance in love is what we receive from others when we fail the test. Our safety is in unity.

The revocation of my pilot's license never came - phew! I guess the flying community had a heart for the arrogant student. Rather than pin my flying career against the wall, they all swerved around me. I'm grateful for their patience. My good conscience clings to the lesson learned that day.

**It's often the "student pilot" out flying "solo" in the spiritual life that causes the most distress amongst the "flying" community. Arrogance is often the culprit.** These are the sophomores (the wise morons), who know just enough to be dangerous.

Unfortunately, not all stories end so well. However, I'm grateful for the superior pilots that surrounded me that day...and the adept responsiveness of air traffic control to provide all effected a safe route to their intended destinations. Grace.

Eventually, with enough hours logged in the cockpit, we all mature. Things settle. There's a peace and a unity as the Maestro conducts His symphony in the air. What seems chaotic to those outside the faith is actually a magnificent display of the fullness of His Son.

*Until we all attain 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 4:13**

“Cessna N1742\*, What Are You Doing?”

Before you take off next time, make sure you're not just "mostly" right about your departure instructions. And if you're already up there in the blue skies enjoying yourself, show a little patience and love for the student pilots - we were all there once...remember that.

\* the specific FLT / tail numbers and frequencies have been changed to protect the innocent :) I can't remember that far back, anyways - LOL!

## **Coming Up Empty-Handed Can Be a Blessing**

**Man often sets out on a journey to find answers. Specific ones are typically identified even before he sets out. There's nothing wrong with having goals, but inordinate attachment to them can be a snare.**

Lee Strobel, the now famous author of *The Case for Christ*, is a former legal editor of the Chicago Tribune. He used to be an atheist. Now he is an advocate for Christ. At the advent of his journey, Strobel expected to find enough evidence to prove that Jesus the Nazarene was not the Savior, not his nor anyone else's, hence unraveling the Bible altogether and putting this ongoing argument between atheists and Christians to bed once and for all. That was his goal.

However, Strobel came up empty-handed. Today he's written at least ten books, to my knowledge, that endorse Christ and the Biblical truth regarding Him. We believers shall see Strobel in Heaven someday!

You see, sometimes coming up empty-handed can be a blessing. In Strobel's case, he pierced the controversy with a vengeance, heavily equipped with contentious gall. However, even though he was an atheist with an agenda, he possessed integrity to truth. Therefore, his thesis died in battle, he was baptized in Christ, and he came back a new man, a believer! What a blessing!

Similarly, I frequently set out to find evidence for something I believe to be true. Of course, I always go to the one source I know I can trust - the Bible. If I can find scriptural evidence for what I believe to be true, then my faith is confirmed and my conviction increased. However, integrity demands that I accept **WHATEVER** I find, even if the evidence smashes my original belief. It's this latter case that seems to cause most believers fits.

**Christians aren't all that fond of abandoning their beliefs, even when the**

**evidence in the Bible clearly indicates the error in their doctrine. Folks, nobody today has it all right...nobody. The Word may be infallible and perfect, but man is not. Many a believer has been duped by overconfident preachers who claim to have 100% knowledge of scripture. That's a farce.**

**Since God holds YOU ultimately responsible for your own soul, then YOU need to hold yourself accountable to finding Truth.**

That's not to imply that the spiritual gift of pastor isn't crucial to your spiritual growth - the Bible says it certainly is! *"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"* (Ephesians 4:11-12).

I literally have hundreds of books by like number of authors in my two office libraries. I have access to thousands electronically. Every single one of them disagrees with the others in some way. Earlier in my career that used to bother me, but it doesn't anymore.

**I've learned to appreciate the courage it takes to express one's own thoughts publicly, even if those thoughts are inconsistent with popular opinion.**

When it comes to Bible doctrine, conformity can be the death of Truth. If the layperson never challenges what they believe to be true, as given to them from their pastors or parents or whoever, then conformity becomes something unhealthy.

**Conformity for believers is something we arrive at, not the impetus for the journey. The believer who's been forced into conformity can never be a true disciple. Unity in the faith is the end goal, not the driving force.**

**Do not confuse unity with love.**

*Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.*

— **Colossians 3:14-17**

Most people just want to belong to something bigger than themselves. It takes a certain kind of courage to step outside of a well-formed group, yet that is exactly what may happen if a believer investigates scripture for themselves. The so-called doctrines that keep said group 'unified' may not be Biblical at all, but rather manufactured by man. That's counterfeit unity.

**Counterfeit unity is mere man's estimation of love. There's no real peace in it because it's not from God.**

When a diligent disciple discovers a lack of evidence for popular doctrines, they are placed at odds with the larger group. Not the most comfortable situation. Integrity forces that person to choose truth over the counterfeit unity. I've been through it, as have many others in my congregation.

At the end of the day, each individual believer must decide what kind of relationship they desire to have with Christ. Do they want Him to be their 'trophy-lord', proclaiming, "I have the best one of all!" Do they just want to feel like they belong to a group of like-minded believers? Or, do they want an unfettered relationship with Him?

If you desire the last option, then be prepared to challenge what you think you already know. As I've taught my congregation over the years - never take anyone else's word on a subject as gold. Even if ninety-nine percent of

## Coming Up Empty-Handed Can Be a Blessing

the time your own Biblical investigation is in agreement with your pastor, never stop seeking your own convictions. The only way to truly possess such a thing is if you see the scripture for yourself. A good pastor will always encourage you this way.

**When you seek Truth diligently, you may not always come back with an affirmation of your faith. You may come up empty-handed. You have to ask yourself - what's worse: not knowing the truth, or knowing something that's not true? Don't both cases require your attention? Indeed. It's the latter case that scares people because it leaves them temporarily untethered, facing a new kind of insecurity.**

One of the hardest lessons to teach from the pulpit is the one that runs contrary to public belief. When it's time to unlearn something, I cringe a little because the labor can be excruciating, especially when having to watch a large number of people staring back at me, some scowling, some crossing their arms in defensiveness, some questioning my sanity, some just flat out embarrassed that they'd never taken the time to investigate something so obvious on their own.

So ask yourself: what kind of relationship do you desire to have with Christ - an active one or a passive one? Do you want to know Christ, personally, or do you want someone else to feed you details of their relationship with Him? Are you willing to drop doctrines void of evidence in the Bible or are you satisfied with taking someone's word on it?

**Learn to embrace those times when the thing you set out to gain isn't where you thought it'd be, or maybe it doesn't exist at all. Maybe you end up like Ponce de Leon and never find the so-called Fountain of Youth you so wanted to believe in. Maybe you come up empty-handed. Consider it a blessing, for you have found what REALLY matters in ANY investigation - Truth!**

Best wishes on your journeys - set your compass to 'true north' and don't



look back. Press on, even when those around you refuse to do so.

*But Jesus said to him, 'No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God'.*

— **Luke 9:62**

## **Gray Hair Rocks**

I used to fly a lot.

Not just in my dreams (which used to actually occur more frequently than I like to admit), but on airplanes. In my dreams, I'd do some sort of awkward, dodo bird-like takeoff, the weirdest swimmer's breaststroke-like flapping of my arms to sustain flight, and then a dodo bird-like landing. Yes, I'm THAT odd, folks - surprise! Listen, those dreams were awesome... but I digress (obviously). :)

In the U.S. Air Force, I used to fly a lot on military airplanes. In my professional life, I used to fly a lot on commercial airplanes. Regardless of the trip, I'd always make a point of leaning out of my seat and peering down the aisle towards the cockpit. I was looking for gray hair, particularly in the left seat, the captain's chair. I didn't care so much about the co-pilot in the right seat, but when it came right down to it regarding the left seat, there was a premium on gray hair.

To me, gray hair correlated to experience. Having been a jet mechanic for years in the Air Force and then learning to fly airplanes after that, I had a pretty good sense of all the things that might go wrong in flight. In the unlikely event of an emergency (I sound like a flight steward, huh?...I told you I've flown a LOT in my lifetime), I had an intimate knowledge of the kind of expertise it would take to safely land a distressed airplane.

So, judge me if you wish, but I wanted to see some gray hair on my captain!

**Gray hair represents age. Age often represents experience. There's no substitute for experience.**

**The Holy Spirit impregnated this truth in the Bible long before I began**

**rubbernecking as an airplane passenger.**

*The glory of young men is their strength, and the honor of old men is their gray hair.*

— Proverbs 20:29

Except for rare cases, wisdom is a much greater measure of true power and capability than physical strength. As the proverb states, young men are apt to gravitate towards the fleeting value of physical strength, even place their self-esteem in it. However, the older a man gets, the more he realizes that experience is a far greater asset to possess.

If an airplane I'm flying in begins to nose dive because it has lost its hydraulics, even the 8-time Mr. Olympia, Ronnie Coleman, with his ridiculously bulging biceps wouldn't be able to offer much help in pulling that yoke back. It's more likely that Mr. Coleman would be either screaming or praying - LOL. However, an experienced (gray-haired) captain would assess the situation calmly, throw a few switches, reroute the elevator hydraulics to a backup system, and simply pull the airplane out of its nose dive with a reenergized yoke.

**This is a scene I see played out so many times in the spiritual life. One person who places emphasis on human strength is screaming and praying during a nose dive, while another in the same situation is calmly applying the Word of God, watching its power deliver them.**

Jesus possessed more wisdom than any man ever has, hence He was the epitome of grace under pressure:

*And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being covered with the waves; but Jesus Himself was asleep. And they came to Him and woke Him, saying, 'Save us, Lord; we are perishing'!*

— Matthew 8:24

Hardly anyone I've ever known is able to handle real pressure their first time through it. Most people require at least one or two episodes with certain types of pressure before they are able to handle it gracefully. Even those with a lot of biblical knowledge must learn from experience. For example, it's one thing to understand obedience; it's another to learn it through suffering:

*Although He [Jesus Christ] was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.*

— Hebrews 5:8

**Man is famous for attributing too much honor to the weak things of the world. To assign power to human strength is the very definition of foolishness.**

*Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor. A wise man's heart directs him toward the right, but the foolish man's heart directs him toward the left. Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone that he is a fool. If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because **composure allays great offenses.***

— Ecclesiastes 10:1-4

Very few people maintain composure under pressure. Maybe it's fairer to say that everyone's got a limit to the amount of pressure they can withstand before they break stride? Composure is often a good indicator to ourselves how much intestinal fortitude we possess. For me, the older I get, the more faith I have, the greater my composure under pressure. If I had hair on my head, it'd be mostly gray like my soul patch and chest is nowadays.

It's funny, most people seem to have an issue with gray hair, as if it were a sign of a person losing strength or the ringing of the grim reaper's dinner

bell.

**Old is not weak, it's strength. Let the young beat their chests as they nose dive into the ground. I'll take the collected man of wisdom any day of the week and twice on Sunday.**

As far as the Bible is concerned, gray hair is a sign of honor. Or, at least it is designed to be: "*Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance. Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior*" (Titus 2:2-3a).

Consider the words in the passage above. How many of those adjectives are tested under pressure? How many times have we seen pressure annihilate the 'world' of a young person, destroy bravado, crush the young man's glory, only to see the 'gray hairs' standing firm like fortresses? I've seen it countless times - same scene, different pressure-cooker situation.

Therefore, we ought to give honor where honor is due:

*Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity.*

—1 Timothy 5:1-2

**I'm not proposing that all folks with gray hair are all-knowing, wise sages. However, whenever I see gray hair, a sense of appreciation for that person's own brand of wisdom, whatever it may be, washes over me. And I'm glad when that happens, especially when flying on airplanes. :)**

Gray hair rocks!

## The Hangover

I am what serious drinkers would call a "lightweight" because I'm not really a "drinker," per se. That means that any more than even 1-2 beers and the next morning, I don't feel well. In some ways, I suppose this has been a grace gift from God in that there's a strong deterrent against me ever drinking more than I ought to. As a pastor, I'm obviously also commanded not to ever become a "drinker".

*An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, **not addicted to wine** or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money.*

— 1 Timothy 3:2-3

However, I DO recall times in my earlier life where I drank too much. The not-so-funny thing is that I remember the physical agony of the hangovers more than the so-called "fun" leading up to them. I remember feeling polluted for days after being drunk. Ugh - what awful memories those are. One might rightly ask, "wasn't ONE hangover enough to keep you from ever drinking too much again?" You'd think that'd be enough, but given the plurality I've already disclosed, it's obvious that it wasn't.

I suppose the attractiveness of drinking to the point of intoxication is some temporary form of escape. However, the repercussions are so great, at least in my case, it's a wonder ANYONE ever drinks too much after a single episode. But they do - some habitually, even. It's self-abuse. I'm not judging, just stating the obvious.

There's a slogan in Massachusetts posted on the highways that reads, "Buzzed driving is drunk driving." In other words, intoxication occurs at a much lower level than many like to admit to. The scientific truth is that alcohol is poison. It kills brain cells.

It debilitates an otherwise functioning awareness of right and wrong, even.

In the end, nothing ever good comes from being intoxicated at any level.

The same goes in the spiritual life. We are meant to sip grace and dine on the bread of life. Yet, we so often choose to drink from the world's cup, willfully poisoning our souls. And the more we drink from that cup, the more intoxicated we become with the world. Worldly thinking, that which is opposed to the Word of God, has a certain appeal to the flesh. It is also abundantly available, just like the shelves in the liquor stores are always stocked.

**No matter how much we drink the world's poison, whether it's a little or a lot, we eventually become impaired.** Our judgment becomes clouded. We begin to make poor decisions. We increasingly ignore our own good conscience and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Such is the downward spiral towards spiritual drunkenness. It's effects can be devastating.

And let us not forget the hangover. As a "reward" for our time spent frolicking in the world, being intoxicated by it, willingly sinning along with it, there's always the "day after." There's always a period of time where we must recover from the poisoning of our souls. It takes time to regain our footing...to sober up. The longer the binge, the longer the recovery period. All the while we are exposed, debilitated, like wounded, helpless animals.

Like the hungover drunk, most try to "sleep it off." But that's nothing more than a bunch of wasted time, typically characterized by self-induced darkness, with closed curtains and light switches turned off. Counterfeit night.

*But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep and do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the*

*breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.*

— 1 Thessalonians 5:4-8

The issue with drunkenness, whether physical or spiritual, is that it isn't JUST the mere span of drunkenness that adversely effects us - it's the entire process of recovery from the hangover also. And it's during that whole period of time that we are weakened, susceptible, and vulnerable to attacks.

**While we are trying to "sleep it off," Satan seizes the moment.**

As my mom used to tell me as a kid, "you can choose to do whatever you want, Eddie, just know that there are consequences to every decision, whether good or bad. Choose wisely."

The Bible amplifies this wisdom this way:

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

— 1 Peter 5:8

Consider all things you choose to consume. Drink wisely, both in the physical and spiritual realms. Intoxication is the result of poisoning. The hangover is the unrelenting reminder of this fact. So, the next time you hear, "choose your poison!"...consider saying, "no, thank you," and ordering water from the Word of God instead.

*Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.*

— Ephesians 5:15-16



## Man-Math

Sorry fellas, but most of us are guilty of this in some way, shape, or form. If you're looking for politically correct, you came to the wrong blog :).

Man-math is when a person (often a man, hence the title) takes a one-time event that ends favorably, derives a formula from an identifiable cause & effect, and then attempts to leverage that formula for increasingly greater gains. He says, "well, when I did this, that happened. Soooooo, if I do MORE of this, then MORE of that should happen"...and so on. This may hold true for something like manufacturing light bulbs, but it can prove catastrophic in other areas of life, such as health, both physical and spiritual.

Maybe a fictional story (though maybe not so fictional for some reading this) will help?

OK - here goes:

So a man goes to his doctor's office because he's not feeling well. The doctor writes him a prescription that explicitly states, "take one tablet twice a day for 30 days." So the patient says, "great, I'll take two tablets twice a day for 15 days and I'll be healed in half the time!" - LOL! That's man-math.

But what about the NAME on the label? Doesn't that count for something? Didn't the man's doctor choose a certain dosage based on the man's physical attributes, history of health, etc.? For example, a good doctor isn't going to give a 200-pound man the same dosage as a 50-pound child. There's also the issue of keeping bodily tolerances to antibiotics at bay for as long as possible - for future reasons. And the list goes on, of course.

God the Father is like the doctor, the Holy Spirit is like the pharmacist. God the Father says, "you need this doctrine for this ailment." The Holy Spirit

says, "I'll let you know how and when to take it." If we ignore their counsel and use man-math, we risk making matters worse.

**When it comes to spiritual medicine, the how and when are just as important as the what.**

**And btw, the Bible never says the Father writes and the Spirit fulfills the same prescription for everyone.**

God has written unique "prescriptions" to every name under the sun. Your prescriptions are unique because YOU are unique. Your life is unique. Your background is unique. Your spiritual gift is unique. And the list goes on, of course.

*For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly...*

— **Romans 12:4-6a**

What God prescribes in the life of one person may not be what He prescribes in the next.

If you ignore His will (**1 Timothy 2:4**), that's like never going to the doctor's for a checkup. On the flip side, if you hear His will and then ignore the Holy Spirit's ministry in your life (e.g. man-math), that's like taking the wrong dosage. Neither case does a person any good.

A common mistake most Christians seem to make is "overdosing" on a single doctrine. That doctrine may be just the right medicine for one ailment, but completely wrong for the next. Just like doctors triage wounds in an hospital emergency room, God does the same - He will work from most severe (salvation) on down to the lesser. But, the healing will not be

overnight - it will take time, many visits to the doctor's office, and a variety of prescriptions written just for you.

Learn to go for regular checkups (**Romans 12:1-2**) and learn to heed the good counsel of the Holy Spirit (**John 14:16-17, 26**). The Lord God knows every hair on your head (**Luke 12:7**) and knows precisely what ails you and exactly the right prescription to write every time!

And read the label with YOUR name on it, for that prescription is just right for you in your unique circumstance:

*Eat honey, my son, for it is good; honey from the comb is sweet to your taste. Know also that wisdom is like honey for you: if you find it, there is a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.*

— **Proverbs 24:13-14**

However, do not overdose:

*If you find honey, eat just enough - too much of it, and you will vomit.*

— **Proverbs 25:16**

*It is not good to eat too much honey, nor is it honorable to search out matters that are too deep.*

— **Proverbs 25:27**

Be patient, be well - know that you are under the care of the perfect Physician!

*Who pardons all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases.*

— **Psalms 103:3**

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

Man-Math

— Psalms 147:3

## **The One Way Mirror**

Watch any crime show and eventually there's a scene with a one way mirror. On the reflective side of the mirror sits the suspect, often having a conversation with two cops, one "good," one "bad." On the other side of the mirror are other cops that the suspect cannot see. These scenes usually depict two rooms, often sound insulated as well, separated by this one way mirror.

The fundamental premise of a one way mirror is that those on the reflective side are relegated to their own limited environment and therefore they can relate only to those aspects they have knowledge of. However, the folks on the other side of the mirror have knowledge of both environments, the suspect's and their own, giving them a greater perspective and therefore an advantage.

The cops are often going back and forth between the two environments, but the suspect never does. This affords the cops the "upper hand," so to speak, and therefore a certain power. Over time, individual cops develop a certain wisdom about how suspects on the other side of the mirror react to specific lines of questioning. There is inherent value in said wisdom. Such is the general nature of one way mirrors...well, at least as far as cops are concerned. :)

The spiritual life is a lot like a series of one way mirrors - each mirror separating two rooms lined up in a continuous array. As we grow spiritually, grace unlocks the next room in the series, giving us the additional perspective of being in a reality that includes both the room where we just were AND this new room. Since these rooms are lined up in a row, we have a cumulative perspective of all the rooms we've previously been in.

Instead of a "mirror" affording us power over bad guys for the sake of

advantage, we are granted a certain power for the sake of others. We have an advantage, but we are called to wield it differently. As the old adage goes, 'with great power comes great responsibility.' The wisdom we gain puts us in a position where we can see things that other, more immature believers cannot.

Unfortunately, the temptation is to become self-absorbed and impatient with those still "behind" us. We say silly things to ourselves like, "geez, why are they so unsettled all the time?...why haven't they learned to cope with that thing yet?...why don't they just have a little FAITH, darn it?!!!"

You know, the person ONE room ahead of you could say the same thing about YOU when you're struggling with something you can't seem to get a handle on. After all, THEY can see the solution as clear as day...but, of course, their reality is different than yours, isn't it? Well, the same goes for you and the person you've lost patience with...they aren't quite as adept as you are yet because they lack the wisdom and perspective that you have from the other side of the mirror.

**What may seem plainly obvious to you may not be obvious to a less mature individual.**

**Most of our OWN advances in the spiritual life were granted on the coattails of our OWN struggles.**

God puts us through certain situations on purpose because that's how He forges wisdom in us.

**Most wisdom is serially linked. It is cumulative in nature. Life is the experience where true wisdom is wrought. One's lifetime is like a series of one way mirrors.**

Our "graduation" to the next room depends on God's sovereign grace.

*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

The first room in the series is a very large room, filled with unbelievers. Just think about how long the Lord waited for YOU to make your decision. For some that may have been decades!

*The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is **patient** toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.*

— 2 Peter 3:9

If God exercises unparalleled patience with unbelievers, can't we exercise a little patience while our fellow believers take some time to grow?

Learn to be patient with others as they need time, in the same way you did, in order to see the things you might be seeing. Perspective isn't given overnight. It's a long process.

**Belittling someone because they don't share your perspective is one of the most damaging things you can do.** Just sayin' here...Jesus wasn't a big fan of "stumbling blocks" placed in front of His "little ones" (cp. **Luke 17:2**).

**You may need to relate to another person from their limited perspective (aka "change rooms" temporarily), as effective communication with them from your perspective will only confuse and frustrate them. Love is taking the extra time to do this for someone else, but in the end, the effort is worth it.**

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

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

*Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

— **Colossians 3:12-16**

Remember where you came from, specifically how each new perspective trumps the old.

**Consider your wisdom as the power to do good, to reveal God's grace to others, to love.**

It's your responsibility.



## Guest Blogger: Preventative Medicine

Kaiser Permanente is a large health care organization operating in California. When you become a member, you are given a handy dandy welcoming gift, "The Healthwise Handbook". If you should feel unwell, you look up your symptoms and it tells you what you may have, how to treat yourself and when you should go see your doctor. I realize it is merely a creative way to keep people out of the ER and their MD offices, but I love this thing and often refer to it. My favorite parts are the sections describing the prevention of each affliction. Why? Well, if you read through the entire book, as I did, you will notice a few common suggestions: stop smoking, exercise regularly, and stay hydrated. You would be amazed at how many ailments can be prevented, or more quickly recovered from, by adhering to these 3 basic tips- everything from GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease) to colds to constipation to headaches. Where am I going with this?

**When you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and become a member of His family, you are often given a handy dandy welcoming gift, the Bible. It, too, describes the many ailments humans suffer from, how to recover from them, and, you guessed it, how to prevent them.**

I will not claim to be able to summarize the Lord's counsel into 3 basic tips, but here are 3 oft-repeated ones:

*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 your paths straight.*

— Proverbs 3:5-6

*It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*

— **Matthew 4:4**

*'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'.*

— **Luke 10:27**

**So, armed with this information for both physical and spiritual health, one might think people would rarely get sick and rarely make mistakes, right? Unfortunately, people do not take advantage of preventative medicine. Nope, we would rather do what we want, what feels good at the time, and deal with the consequences later.**

Yes, we tend to forget another one of God's important reminders:

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

— **Galatians 6:7**

For example, why does God say the following?

*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 6:18-20**

Is it to rob the human race of pleasure or love? No quite the contrary. He does so to protect our bodies from sexually transmitted diseases, protect our souls from wounds that leave painful scars lasting a lifetime, and to protect children from being born without intact families to support and

rear them, among other reasons. He instructs us this way to PREVENT pain, pain, and more pain. If you have ignored the verse above, you can attest to the lingering ache in your life that will probably always exist in some shape or form.

**But, there is hope.**

**GOD LOVES YOU! God wants you to stop making decisions that will only bring about misery in your life. Am I implying that if you obey God you will never suffer? Of course not! But...**

*For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.*

— 1 Peter 3:17

So, how do we obtain a life with less pain, less frustration, less “bad” days? We read the Bible, life’s most important instruction manual. We read it over and over and over, every day for the rest of our lives. Then maybe, just maybe, His good counsel- His preventative medicine- will absorb through our very thick skulls and maybe, just maybe, some of life’s most horrendous sufferings will be avoided- you know, the agony we bring on ourselves?

Oh, and don’t forget- stop smoking, exercise regularly and stay hydrated.

In Christ’s Perfect Love,

Monica Ledford

## **Guest Blogger: Stability Before Strengthening**

“Sit up straight”. My beloved Grandmother must have uttered these words to me hundreds of times while growing up. She was a stickler for good posture, as I am today. Though her concern was more about the slovenly image poor posture presents, she was onto something. You cannot sit with good posture, for any length of time, unless you have strong trunk muscles. So, sitting straight becomes an exercise, itself, until the appropriate muscles are adequately strengthened.

While reading Pastor’s blog, titled “Safety First” (11/24/14), the training principle of “stability before strengthening” came to mind. What this means is that before you can effectively strengthen one’s extremities for functional activities (standing, walking, lifting and carrying objects, etc.), you must first strengthen your core (back, abdominal, gluteal muscles). See, your core is what provides a base of operations, if you will, for your extremities. Your arms and legs are, not only, attached to you core but also rely on it for stabilization. If your core muscles do not have, at the very least, a functional level of strength, you can’t even sit unsupported, much less sit with good posture or walk. Dictionary.com defines core as “the central, innermost, or most essential part of anything.” So, you see, these muscles are essential for all functional mobility.

I am honored to lead the prep school ministry for North Christian Church. Pastor has provided a framework of what is to be taught to the children EVERY year. Interestingly enough, he refers to this body of lessons as “core doctrines”, which include: Salvation, Eternal Security, and Christianity vs. Religion. By the time a child is ready to “graduate” from prep school to pulpit lessons, they are 100% prepared to dine on the meals of the Word presented through Pastor. They are convinced of their Salvation, have unadulterated faith in their eternal security, and are ready to learn more about their Lord and Savior. How many children leave prep school and only know songs or stories? What are we commanded to do for the

children in our lives?

*Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.*

— **Proverbs 22:6**

What about adults who are currently unbelievers or new to God's Word? How are they to go about this spiritual life? Is there a different formula for adults?

*And he said: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'.*

— **Matthew 18:3**

I daresay many of us did it backwards. Instead of reading our Bible, getting to know The Lord Jesus Christ, mastering the Gospel, etc., we jumped into learning doctrines of men, theology, the tenses of the Greek, etc. There is nothing wrong with these things, but what good do they do us if we don't know Christ? What if, let's say, you don't understand the Gospel and you may not even be saved- what sense do doctrines make?

*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**

You can't write an essay or read a novel if you don't know your ABCs, right? Well how will you ever gain understanding of God's will for your life if you don't know who He is or who you are in Christ? Before you can excel at anything in this life, you must learn the fundamentals.

The Holy Spirit has been emphasizing, via the teaching from the pulpit,

that Salvation is not a one-time event, but, rather, a daily occurrence. Jesus Christ received our judgement and gave His life so we would be with Him for all of eternity. That is awesome, but does it stop at that? No, may it never be!! He has been showing us that we receive Salvation every day. EVERY DAY He is saving us. Do you understand what you just read? If you have never read your Bible in its entirety, if you are not really clear on The Gospel, and, therefore, really don't know Jesus Christ, then there is NO WAY you understood that. No judgement here, you just need to strengthen your core. Am I referring to your abs here?

*For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*

— **1 Timothy 4:8**

Godliness is eusebeia in the Greek (sound familiar?). It points to living a life that has God at it's center, or core, if you will. Sounds like a verb, a word denoting action, to me. Strengthening your spiritual core involves the same set of principles as strengthening your physical core. You must have motivation, dedication, discipline, and instruction in order to be successful in any training.

Taking this one step further: If at the core of your thinking is religion, arrogance, legalism and a comparative lens by which you view others, what will your life's work look like?

*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 7:17-20**

So, take the time to strengthen your "core". Read your Bible, take in His Word as God has allotted to you, and talk to Him. Get to know Jesus

Christ, so you can serve Him the way He sees fit.

And, please, sit up straight!!!!

In His Perfect Love,

Monica Ledford

## Strength Training

I just bought my first kettlebell - heard all the hype so I figured I'd dive in. I didn't even know what one looked like until recently. They look like something from the stone ages - a cast-iron ball with a handle...reminds me of something that might be used by those kilt-wearing pole-thrower dudes? Dunno.

Weightlifting is ok, but one of my gripes with traditional weightlifting is the lack of full body engagement. I, for one, don't have hours every day to spend in a gym isolating every muscle. So, whenever possible, I always opt for workouts that involve multiple muscle groups.

So, I took my shiny new kettlebell and found some basic workouts on YouTube. Squats, lunges, presses, swings, you name it! I can already tell that these exercises will build "real" strength.

**I've found there are two kinds of strength: gym strength and real strength.** These are not widely accepted terms so let me explain with an example.

When I was younger, I used to work construction. A lot of the younger guys would be all cut up, running around topless, flaunting their beach bodies (myself included :o). Many were seasonal workers. They all knew how much the other guys could bench-press in the gym and such. Most of the older guys were carrying around potbellies of various sizes, hardly anything you'd see on the cover of GQ magazine - lol. None of the latter group ever talked about how much weight they could lift in the gym. I don't think they really cared.

Oddly, it wasn't always the guys with the gym-borne beach bodies that could actually lift and maneuver the greatest amount of weight on the job. Ever carried a bundle or two of roofing shingles up a two-story ladder? It



was often the seasoned construction workers that proved to be the most durable and possessed the greater endurance.

That's what I mean by two kinds of strength. What I'm finding out is that my kettlebell workouts develop real strength because they demand your whole body to engage.

There are spiritual strength training analogies here, too.

For example, I know many people who have a lot of scripture memorized, doctrines, too. Some are like the aforementioned beach bodies, puffed up, comparing themselves to one another, flexing their vocabularies and such. Then I know of folks that have been "to hell and back in a hand basket", trusted in the Lord on that journey, exercised every last ounce of spiritual muscle they had, and now possess real spiritual strength. They may not look or sound that impressive, but they are the warriors.

**Life rarely isolates a single muscle. It doesn't say, "ok, sit right here in this chair and curl this bar while I support your elbows." Not at all. Life typically throws a medicine ball from some random, awkward direction, usually when you're already off-balance, and says, "catch this and don't drop it or else!"**

The first scenario is manufactured to show off "gym strength"; whereas, the second is designed to show off "real strength". If you possess real spiritual strength, all the little stabilizer muscles work in unison with the larger muscles to coordinate a response that keeps you balanced.

*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.*

**That phrase in 1 Peter 1:7, "the proof of your faith", reveals a prominent feature of the spiritual life. The emphasis is on the "proof". In order for faith to prove itself, you must exercise it. You must trust in it, His gift to you. This implies that you put it to work in your life. Let it deliver you time and again so that your confidence grows. THAT is where "real" strength comes from, NOT just from learning the Word of God, but rather learning and APPLYING what you've learned to life.**

*He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.*

— Isaiah 40:29-31

**Strength training is critical to success in the spiritual life. Life is very adept at revealing to us whether or not we possess "gym" strength or "real" strength. Don't be afraid to try new exercises, to take risks, to put the onus of deliverance upon the Lord's shoulders. That's faith.**

*Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation.*

— Isaiah 12:2

Eat well. Exercise well. Seek real strength.

## **The Universal Athletic Position**

Here's an experiment for you to try.

Hold your hands out in front of you like a football player who's ready to block someone. Tell yourself to "be at the ready" and see what your body does automatically. For most of you, especially you athletes out there, your body will immediately crouch a little and rock forward onto the balls of your feet. That is what a physiologist might call the "universal athletic position". Picture a shortstop in baseball as a pitch is being thrown, or a linebacker in football right before the ball is snapped, or a defender in basketball as their competition approaches the basket. That's the **universal athletic position**.

**Whenever we are faced with the potential to have to move quickly and with power, we find ourselves in this position. It is most often associated with defensive postures in sports.**

Now, while you're standing there (looking a little silly by now, I'm thinking - LOL), have a friend swiftly push on your hands. Resist falling backwards. Chances are, your body will respond athletically by leveraging its position and you will be successful in keeping your balance.

Get back into the universal athletic position and this time have your friend try to run around you without you being able to tag them. Chances are, you'll be able to spring from your position and tag them (unless they are Flash Gordon or something :) ). In any case, you get the point.

**The universal athletic position is fundamental to being "at the ready". We share a similar thought in the spiritual life.**

*Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO*

*NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, **always being ready to make a defense** to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.*

— 1 Peter 3:13-16

**As is the case in athletics, “being ready to make a defense” is something we must be prepared to do in order to compete as “athletes” in this “game” called life. We are very often put on the defensive as a result of the kingdom of darkness being in opposition to our standing in Christ.**

Back to our little experiment now. Instead of standing in the universal athletic position, rock back on your heels and stand up straight. Hold your hands out like before and have your friend push on them with the same force and velocity as last time. Chances are you will be quickly and easily knocked off balance. Try the other experiment, too, by having your friend try to run around you without being tagged. Chances are, they will be successful. Why? Because you weren't “at the ready”.

**We call this being found “back on your heels”, which is just about the worst position a defender can find themselves, in sport or in the spiritual life. From this position, it's very difficult to react, relegating a defensive maneuver to a low probability of success.**

Understanding these basics is wisdom, something often applied to our relationships with others. My last blog entry focused on loving our enemies, something that the flesh doesn't deem too wise at all.

**So, what does it mean to “be at the ready”? Firstly, it means understanding, in wisdom, who our enemies are. Secondly, it means responding to their attacks in grace. Being caught “back on our heels”**

**means a variety of things, such as not being able to identify our enemies until it's too late, or not responding with grace but rather with bitterness or strife.**

*Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.*

— **Colossians 4:5-6**

Failing to be in the universal “spiritual” athletic position means you’ve given your enemies an advantage. They will quickly realize that you are not a defensive threat at all...you just need a little nudge to be toppled. Or maybe in good sport, your enemies will decide to run around you while you stand flat-footed. Either way, they've beaten you.

That doesn't have to be the status quo in your life! Our Lord gave us His own wisdom on this subject.

There's nothing more powerful in this universe than God's love...you know, the love that He gives to us freely! To love is to be at the ready. *“If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love” (John 15:10).*

There you have it, folks...the “secret” to avoiding being caught on the heels of your feet. “Keep” [*tereo* (Greek) - to keep guard over, to preserve] His commandments, and you WILL abide in His love! That implies learning them first, of course. That's why men like me are given this spiritual gift (Ephesians 4:11-16)...so that you'll be built up in love and not tossed here and there by the deceitful scheming of your enemies.

**Abiding implies a lifestyle in the sphere of love, as a result of keeping His commandments, always being ready to make a defense...in the universal athletic position.**

## Politics

Believers, in general, seem to make the mistake of spending too much time and energy on worrying about politics. Paul reminds us, “*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**). He also reminds Timothy (and us) that, “*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**).

The Bible gives us everything we need to know regarding politics:

*Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good.*

*But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.*

— **Romans 13:1-7**

In many ways, politics are a mere distraction. Our attention ought to be focused on, “*the One who is able to save and destroy*” (**James 4:12**).

*Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.*

— **Colossians 3:22-25**

## Why Blame the Marionettes?

In a democracy comprised of 100's of millions of people, one must concede that elected officials represent the people. Without getting all bogged down with issues concerning lies, corner cases, crooked politicians, etc., it's fair to say that the folks that stand in office represent what the people want, in general. There's no such thing as a "perfect candidate" so it isn't worth deliberating over their so-called "imperfections" and failures, either. We are famous for electing folks and then crucifying them once in office...it's odd, actually.

**Politicians are like marionettes. A good marionette is tuned, has all it's strings in place, and even wears a permanent smile. They do exactly as the strings command them. But what good is a marionette without a puppeteer? If a marionette runs over and slaps a baby, making it cry, do we blame the puppet or the one pulling the strings???**

With all this controversy over homosexual marriage, in a democracy mind you, and with all the animosity slung at the politicians passing laws making it federally legal in all U.S. states, you'd think the marionettes are the ones to blame. They aren't, at least not in a democracy like ours.

If I ran for office and made the ridiculous statement that I think humans should be able to legally marry animals, I REALLY hope I'd not be elected. The people would likely run me out of town (save a few wackos, of course). My point is that in a democracy, it's the people pulling the strings...we are the puppeteers.

It used to be that the "puppeteers" in this country held Biblical standards regarding marriage. The Bible says clearly that homosexual acts are sinful, precluding marriage altogether between same-sex individuals. Do I support same-sex marriage? How could I, given the simple fact that my Creator doesn't? Do I think any less of a homosexual than even myself?



How could I, given the fact that my Creator doesn't? I'm a sinner saved by grace. I'm flawed. If I make it a point to judge a homosexual, or those getting "married" by law, then I'd better suit up with a robe and a gavel and sit behind a bench because, to be fair, I'd have to start judging ALL sins! That's not my job, nor my interest...not in the least.

I believe that a democracy is a fine manmade approximation affording folks the freedom to believe what they want to believe. If I disagree with something, I won't vote for it. If I'm too lazy to vote, then I shouldn't ever complain. If I agree with something, then I'll vote for it. Regardless, I'm living beside other citizens who have the right to vote. I need to respect that.

**If I don't like the democracy I'm living in, and my neighbors outvote my beliefs every time, then I have two choices: (1) leave the democracy; or (2) shut up and rally some more votes in favor of my personal beliefs. However, attacking a marionette won't accomplish ANYTHING except making me exhausted. The REAL issue is with the puppeteers!**

The hearts of Americans have shifted. They used to be aligned, at least fundamentally based on history, with the precepts found in the Bible, as inspired by God. However, the majority of the people in this democracy (that's all it takes to vote in new policies) have slipped away from our previously held principles. What are we supposed to expect other than what we see? The puppeteers have changed.

**I'm not ready to move. I love this country and ALL the people in it, even though I vehemently disagree with many of the things my neighbors believe. So be it. I'm not going to try to rewrite the constitution or become anti-American when America is following the path of its people. Democracy is working, just not in my favor. Christians need to realize that we are merely residents of this country, but we are not citizens, other than by law.**

## Why Blame the Marionettes?

*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**

If we're not citizens of the country we live in, then what are we? Hold that thought. We are "citizens" by the letter of the law, right? Of course. This is why we are called to abide by the law of the land, humbly submitting to our God-given authorities, even when we disagree with them.

*Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.*

*For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.*

*Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.*

— **Romans 13:1-8**

What are we if not "citizens"??? We are ambassadors for Christ, so we

ought to begin thinking this way, as representatives of Christ. Our job isn't to affect elected officials who are simply doing their job as a good service to a democratic nation. Our job is to influence individual souls! Our concerns ought to rest on spiritual, eternal realities, not earthly, temporal ones. I'm grateful to my country for lots of reasons, even served in the Armed Forces for her, as did my son and a good percentage of my congregation. However, my eyes are on better things...things that no politician or neighbor could ever change.

*Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

— 2 Corinthians 5:18-21

My cry to all believers in my country is simple. Be good citizens of the U.S., for that is your duty, not just to your neighbors, but to Christ, also. Quit expending all of your energy fighting a war at the wrong level. The battles are waged in the souls of individuals. The changes in our beloved country are merely symptoms of a disease that has affected the heart of its people...and it has NOTHING to do with politics. So quite blaming the marionettes, for they are merely reacting to the pulling of strings.

Christ will have His reign someday and we'll be with Him. Let's gather unto Him as many citizens in HIS nation while we still have today. That includes individuals even OUTSIDE the boundaries of our own 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).

## Why Blame the Marionettes?

The laws of our land will never change a heart, only influence. The same goes with marionettes - let not their dancing and painted-on smiles distract you from the Truth. Only the Word can change a heart and deliver a soul, resulting in eternal life. Where do YOU think the real battles lie?

**It's time to refocus.**

## Relationships, Family, and Kids

The Bible is about relationships. The most important consideration is how a person relates to God. The Gospel addresses this issue directly. Secondly, since man coexists with others, relationships are inevitable. God designed it so.

For believers, healthy relationships begin with God. *“We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19)*. The most important relationship we’ll ever partake in is our relationship with Him. We’ve been made alive because of Him. *“Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11)*. It’s through this relationship that we are able to relate to God. *“Jesus \*said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6)*.

It isn’t until we learn to love like God does, at least in part, that we are able to love others the way scripture commands. Jesus, Himself, discloses the height of our relationships through Him.

*“Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also 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 so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”*

— John 15:9-13

As Jesus states above, there’s great joy (“My joy”) for the believer who is able to relate to others in love, in Christ. Abiding in Christ’s love is the very best place we can be, the proof of this being that our final estate in Heaven will be consummated abiding love for all of eternity.

*For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.*

— **2 Corinthians 5:14-17**

As believers, our standards for relationships change. We no longer evaluate others the way the world does. Our love is transcendent. God pours out His love, filling our cup with abundance, so much so that eventually it overflows into the cups of others. As our love spills over, those closest to us are often the immediate beneficiaries of it. This pleases God. *“Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him”* (**2 Corinthians 5:9**).

God loves families. They are, after all, His invention. Families are one of only a few well-characterized institutions revealed in the Bible. They are the cornerstones of marriage and the rearing up of children. Healthy marriages begin with healthy relationships.

## **Be Strong and Courageous**

She was only 16 years old.

She was but a mere sophomore in her high school class.

She had just gotten her driver's license a week ago.

She was daddy's little girl.

These are the facts, as they were, when her doctor informed her that she was indeed pregnant.

Her first thought? "How will I ever make it through this?"

"Is my life over?" she asked herself as thousands of barbs scraped across her fragile mind, leaving deep ruts of fear behind. The rush made her nauseous. The accompanying nurse to her side recognized her weakness and caught her under her arms before she passed out.

"Sit down, dear. And to answer the last question you asked before you all but fainted - NO, your life isn't over." Somehow patient understood nurse, girl understood woman, believer understood believer. The woman's cross necklace dangled near the tip of her precious little nose as she was held in place. The woman standing over her understood, she just knew it. She just didn't know how much.

The nurse said, "I finish up my shift in about 15 minutes. Would you like to meet me at the frozen lemonade stand across the street? I have something I wish to show you."

At that point, the girl simply nodded. She dreaded the thought of delivering the news to her parents. The drive home alone would be

overwhelmingly agonizing. Putting that off seemed like her best option at the moment. There was enough welling up from within...crashing thoughts of school, college, parties, LIFE! What's going to happen?

She sat up straight and rigid at the isolated picnic table, as if portraying rigor mortis as a result of all that just seemed to die inside her...all her plans, her aspirations, her reputation...all of it had been killed in an instant.

The nurse gently put her hand on the frightened girl's hand.

She dug in her pocketbook and pulled out a small photo album. "This is my little Bubba. Well, his real name is Patrick, but until he gets old enough to where he outgrows Bubba, until he says, 'mom, PLEASE don't call me your little Bubba in front of my friends', I will call him that." She smiled. The corner of the girl's lip turned up just noticeably enough for the woman to find her own encouragement in this, a moment she certainly hadn't planned that morning when she woke up and kissed her little Bubba on the forehead. But here they were. God willed it.

Over the course of the next two hours, the woman explained how about 3 years ago she had been on a blind date, made a regretful decision, and gotten pregnant. She related all of her fears with the young girl whose sweet little heart had been cracked open across the street, whose body had gone numb, whose ears tried so hard not to hear those words roll off her doctor's lips, but whose eyes forced her to read them with acceptance.

In her first real act of initiation, the young girl asked, "What's that there on your purse? I see a Cross, but I can't see what's written under it."

"Funny you should ask, dear." She removed it from her purse, and without asking permission, attached it to the pink polka dotted purse still attached to the girl's shoulder. "I want you to have it. I don't need it anymore."



**"Be strong and courageous - Joshua 1:9"**, the girl mouthed the words inscribed under the small Cross pendent, barely audible as the woman smiled.

The woman dug again into her pocketbook and pulled out a small Bible. It looked worn. It was. Very.

She read, *"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go - Joshua 1:9.* After explaining how the Lord had delivered His people from their enemies she read, *"Joshua then said to them, 'Do not fear or be dismayed! Be strong and courageous, for thus the Lord will do to all your enemies with who you fight' - Joshua 10:25."*

"Sweetie, I know what you're going through. Trust me. Your greatest enemy right now might be your own guilt. Trust me when I say to you that the Lord shall never leave you! You may feel like you're under a hundred feet of water right now, but it'll pass. You won't drown, He promises."

**"I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you - Hebrews 13:5a,"** the woman read from a tabulated section of her Bible. The young girl concluded that the woman sitting across from her had read these same words of encouragement countless times to herself.

"You will feel alone, isolated, stigmatized, but keep your chin up. There's not a person you will EVER run into in this world that has lived a perfect life. Most people are 'funny' like that - they pretend when they hear something like your story as if it's the cataclysmic event of the century. People are flawed, so they will judge you. They will heap condescending stares upon you. They will secretly feel better about themselves because of your mistakes. So be it. You can't change such things." She drew her attention back to her Bible and read aloud again.

***"From my distress I called upon the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me***

*in a large place. The Lord is for me; I will not fear; what can man do to me? The Lord is for me among those who help me; Therefore I will look with satisfaction on those who hate me. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. - Psalms 118:5-8."*

That day, the young, pregnant girl went home and shared the news with her beloved parents. She wept uncontrollably. She struggled to look them in the eye. And even when she managed to do so, their faces remained out of focus through the stream of tears.

**This was going to be difficult. They all knew it. But it was their new reality. They accepted it the way their Lord so desired.**

**Time presses on and everything comes to pass. We can wallow in our mistakes or make the most of what we have, whether as fruit of success or failure. Does it even matter? Can't God glorify Himself through all of us, despite us? You bet.**

That was 20 years ago. Since then she has finished high school, gone to nursing school, raised a beautiful young daughter whom she affectionately called her little "bubette" until the girl would no longer stand for anything other than her proper name, Patricia. She was happy and content. They both were.

She was strong and courageous. As a matter of fact, she was uncommonly strong, inspirationally so. Still is. God has used her to reveal His glory.

**God is great.**

"Life is good!" - those are her words now.

## Children: Preparing the Soil for Harvest

*He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future.*

— Adolf Hitler

Hitler was most definitely evil, but I'm not sure anyone could rightly say he wasn't brilliant. A while ago I read some of his most famous work, *Mein Kampf*, on the basis of Sun Tzu's advice in the *Art of War*, "To know your enemy, you must become your enemy." It was an interesting, and trying, experience. In one sense, I was learning about how an enemy had found so much success; I even learned to "appreciate" the intellect of his strategy. However, in another sense, knowing the fruit of his labors, my soul was deeply abraded. It was a worthy exercise - one that left me sore, but more than anything, reinvigorated in this fight.

You see, Hitler knew the value of indoctrinating children into a system of thinking. He knew that children are any generation's future. He knew that if he could capture the hearts and minds of the children of Germany, he'd eventually "own" the country. So you see, his first war wasn't external at all - it was internally fought over the control of the children. He was preparing the soil.

*Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.*

— Sun Tzu

**What's amazing to me is how much time and effort someone evil like Hitler will invest in children, while folks in my own back yard won't invest in their own children's future in the war of all wars - the spiritual one.**

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers,*

Children: Preparing the Soil for Harvest

*against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*

— Ephesians 6:12

**What's amazing is how perplexed our own country seems to be at the degradation of itself. It's like a farmer who scratches his head at harvest time following a year spent neglecting his fields. Our children are like the soil in the fields. To plant a seed in unkept soil is to assure a poor crop. Sound familiar?**

*Jesus said, 'Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear'.*

— Matthew 13:3b-9

Many of us as children were taught the song *America (My Country 'Tis of Thee)*...what happened to this sort of preparing soil in our country???

*My country tis of thee,  
Sweet land of liberty,  
Of thee I sing...*

*Our father's God to, Thee,  
Author of liberty,  
To Thee we sing.*

*Long may our land be bright  
With freedom's holy light;*

*Protect us by Thy might,  
Great God, our King!*

I wonder how many parents are teaching their children the meaning of this song, particularly its final stanza. *“Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6)*. I wonder how many parents know of this scripture, or how many spend even half of the energy Hitler did on their children. Am I judging anyone? Not at all - I think these are fair questions to ask.

**As the children go, so goes the country. Better yet, as the heart goes, so goes the country. Without fertile soil being prepared...without children being where seeds can grow and bear fruit after their kind...without these things, our country is losing ground in this invisible war.**

This is not a novel concept, folks, as even the Psalmist conveys such thoughts regarding the nation Israel:

*Listen, O my people, to my instruction; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not conceal them from their children, but tell to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and His strength and His wondrous works that He has done.*

*For He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers that they should teach them to their children, that the generation to come might know, even the children yet to be born, that they may arise and tell them to their children, that they should put their confidence in God and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments, and not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not prepare its heart and whose spirit was not faithful to God.*

Children: Preparing the Soil for Harvest

— Psalm 78:1-8

**We have a responsibility to our children. Soil doesn't make itself ready for planting - it must be tilled, cultivated, made fertile. If we're absent farmers, what might we expect at all from our crops???**

## **“Familiarity” and “Family” Share the Same Root**

*Famil-* is the Latin root that means servant, domestic, household; members of a group; close relationships. Both *familiarity* and *family* are derived from this same Latin root.

### **Who are we more familiar with than our families?**

And when I say "family", I use it in the broader sense. Some folks have what they might call "extended families", and others may include their closest friends within the term "family". And then, of course, there's God's family, Father and children (you & I), which certainly contains a group of people that rightly call themselves "family".

But, as wonderful as the notion of family sounds, there's also an interesting dynamic in families that leaves one scratching their head at times. It comes to most as an unexpected surprise, but once the lesson is learned, it becomes something worth sharing with others still scratching their heads.

Again, the question on the table is, who are we more familiar with than our families? Typically, nobody. Now add the following concept:

### **Familiarity breeds contempt.**

I often think about our ability to evangelize. After all, it's part of Jesus' "great commission". *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* (**Matthew 28:19-20**).

One would think that the very first place you'd find success in spreading the gospel is with those closest to you, those in your family, those most familiar with you. You would think, right? Maybe we should consult Jesus

## “Familiarity” and “Family” Share the Same Root

on this one.

*Jesus went out from there and came into His hometown; and His disciples followed Him. When the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, 'Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?'*

*And they took offense at Him. <-- YOWZA, right?!!!*

*Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household.' And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. And He wondered at their unbelief.*

— Mark 6:1-6a

We can find great encouragement in the passage above, especially when we become frustrated with our perceived "failures" to evangelize those we are closest to. Do not feel bad - Jesus Christ, the MESSIAH, faced the same issues in His life!

**Even the members of His own immediate family doubted Him! "For not even His brothers were believing in Him" (John 7:5).**

Ouch! Yet, we see in **Mark 6:1b** that "*His disciples followed Him*". What a scene!

**Strangers were willing to follow Jesus as disciples. They couldn't get enough of Him. Yet His own family and His own hometown wouldn't even accept His message as true, never mind become disciples.**



Are you encouraged yet? I hope so.

I can't tell you how many times I've had someone in my family, whether immediate, blood, or church family, come up to me and say, "Wow, I just learned this or that from so and so...amazing!" Of course, as I stand there dumbfounded, I might say, "But I just taught you that not too long ago." The typical response is, "Huh? I don't remember that." Obviously - LOL.

I chalk up times like that as those closest to me suffering a bout of familiarity. It's just the way it is. People in our families get familiar with us. When that happens, the blinders go up.

**Familiarity blurs our 'vision'. It's analogous to a radio signal being distorted by interference. The receiver picks up parts of a broadcast, but most of the time there's too much 'noise' so the listener changes the channel.**

Those most familiar with us often tune us out because they know too much about us. Even though the message we're trying to convey might be pristine, they won't give it any weight. Listen, Jesus' own hometown wrote Him off as "just a carpenter"...yours can certainly write you off in a jiffy, as well. Don't let it get to you!

Find the encouragement in this and learn to roll with the punches. Remember Jesus the next time someone close to you won't hear the truth from you, whether you're trying to evangelize an unbeliever or you're trying to straighten out a believer. God will handle it in due time.

**God will send someone else along that your family will listen to... someone they're not so familiar with.**

## **For the Love of a Child**

### **Thanks be to God for loving mothers.**

*Then two women who were harlots came to the king and stood before him. The one woman said, 'Oh, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house. It happened on the third day after I gave birth, that this woman also gave birth to a child, and we were together. There was no stranger with us in the house, only the two of us in the house. This woman's son died in the night, because she lay on it. So she arose in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your maidservant slept, and laid him in her bosom, and laid her dead son in my bosom. When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, behold, he was dead; but when I looked at him carefully in the morning, behold, he was not my son, whom I had borne.'*

*Then the other woman said, 'No! For the living one is my son, and the dead one is your son.' But the first woman said, 'No! For the dead one is your son, and the living one is my son.' Thus they spoke before the king. Then the king said, 'The one says, "This is my son who is living, and your son is the dead one"; and the other says, "No! For your son is the dead one, and my son is the living one."' The king said, 'Get me a sword.' So they brought a sword before the king.*

*The king said, 'Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other.' Then the woman whose child was the living one spoke to the king, for she was deeply stirred over her son and said, 'Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means kill him.' But the other said, 'He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him!' Then the king said, 'Give the first woman the living child, and by no means kill him. She is his mother.' When all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had handed down, they feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to administer justice.*

This passage stirs my soul uniquely. I think it's mostly because of the true love the rightful mother has for her child. It is sacrificial...reminds me of what Mary, Jesus' mother, must have had to endure. I cannot fathom it, being a man. The standout character in the story, for me, is the selfless mother who was willing to give up her own child to save him. Contrarily, I also see the selfishness of the unrighteous woman as utterly grotesque.

**Like so many times in life, traumatic events generate polar opposite results, depending on the virtue and integrity of those involved. Love is the difference.**

And then there's King Solomon, whose wisdom is truly beautiful to see in action. It seems obvious that he had no intention of killing the child, just exercising his power a little to squeeze out the truth. God was truly with him.

When I was growing up, the one thing that I was able to cling to was the love of my mother. She wasn't perfect, but her four children knew that she loved them. We like to say that it was because of that one truth that we all ended up reasonably "normal", whatever that means. Based on experience, I just assumed for most of my life that all mothers were like mine. As an extension of that reality, it wasn't a stretch to assume they were all like the righteous mother in the story above. It wasn't until I got a little older that I realized that wasn't the case.

**Not all motherhood is worthy of celebration. It seems godly motherhood is slowly degrading, like every other bit of virtue left in this world. It's being consumed by selfishness, resulting in nothing less than abandonment issues. It's upsetting to me, to this day, even as I learn to expect more and more how awful the human flesh is.**

This is not an indictment against women, specifically, as men have been abandoning their children, it seems, long before this phenomenon with

women began, generally speaking. Even so, not all is lost or depressing in the story, for there shines God's lesson in love. As I wrote in a recent blog, "Grace shines when there's a 'need' for it."

**To me, few things are more beautiful than seeing a virtuous woman love her child. It exudes the most feminine, intrinsic aspects of womanhood. I can't imagine a more intimate bond than that which forms in the womb. A mother's love forms LONG before her baby is even born.**

But it's even more fundamental than that...for women who haven't personally reared children often reveal this same love towards children. Heck, even young girls exhibit early signs of it around babies. It seems motherhood is transcendent, not merely limited (though definitely amplified) by physical conception and birth. It's indescribable, really... makes sense, too. Remember that God is both masculine and feminine, as we know these things, "*God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them*" (**Genesis 1:27**).

**Seeing the love of the righteous mother in 1 Kings 3 is like seeing God's love in action. Theologically, we call that "grace" (grace is "love in action"). Grace gives without expecting reciprocation. The woman in the story was willing to give up what was rightfully hers, a lifetime spent loving her own child. Her sacrifice was for the child's sake. That kind of selfless love is what hung on the Cross.**

Virtuous motherhood, being feminine to the core, is a gift to us all from God, Himself. To live it is a gift. To receive it is a gift. To see it, even, is a gift. "*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**). The power of God's gifts is limitless, especially when it comes to family matters.

**A child who's known this kind of love has been truly blessed. For those children whose earthly mothers may have failed in this area, to you I**

**submit that God's the author of love, all aspects of it. For you, I say focus on Him, as His sufficiency is enough. Your wounds are healed just the same as with the motherly kiss consigned to a scraped knee or a bruised soul, with love. If you are the mother who failed, then you, too, ought to take supreme comfort in knowing these same things, for your sake as well as for your children's.**

I'm going to find that mother from **1 Kings 3** in Heaven and give her a big ol' squeeze for all of us. I'm going to thank her, personally, for encouraging us with such a wonderful illustration of true, selfless love. I'm going to thank her for showing me God's love in action. I'm going to thank her for showing me grace.

## Give Them Space

I'm a control freak. Well, let me qualify that a little. Like a teetotaling alcoholic, I like to consider myself a "recovering freak" - LOL. Let me explain.

I grew up insecure about a few things. You know, things that tend to haunt you if they aren't 'fixed' later on. The good news is that my Lord has since 'fixed' me, but the interesting part is the journey in between. Maybe you can relate. This is going to be difficult to articulate, so bear with me.

First, I thank God for my family. Growing up, we were a bit 'crazy' by most people's standards, but we loved each other. My single mom and her four scrappy kids were hardly the "model family" in the town I grew up in. My mom worked multiple jobs most of the time, so even though we all knew that she'd throw herself under a bus for us, the face-to-face expression of love was in short supply most days.

**Children scramble to find love wherever, whenever they can. It's within love's warm embrace that they find security. They learn it experientially. To the degree that it is missing, to that same degree insecurity makes a home in their soul. Oh, and of course, children grow up, and those issues don't just magically disappear. Typically, they are simply painted over with layers of denial and/or are hidden by an increasingly effective facade.**

What do insecure people do? They cling to whatever satiates their basic need to feel loved. Over time, most find strategies to keep said love around, but because insecurity is born of unhealthy circumstance, it tends to breed unhealthy tactics. Most try desperately to control their environment. Many are overachievers, yet unhappy because their motivation is based on finding 'approval' so that the love never stops. Others are overwhelmed by the sheer effort it takes to 'find love'.

**It's tragic given how much the Lord truly loves them...if they only remembered.**

Insecure people tend to be control freaks. Many of them learned to 'survive' on small rations of love growing up by clinging to whatever they could. Even when adults, who have been mostly delivered by the Word, find themselves in an unhealthy state of mind, symptoms of their insecurity are often evidenced in their sudden desire to manipulate others. Suddenly, their fear of losing out on a 'scrap' of love overwhelms them...even when most of the time the object of their attention is like, "huh?".

**Control freakishness is a bit of a sickness. Truly. But to the humble that are afflicted by it, let me say from experience that it is curable. That's the good news - fear and insecurity can always be overcome by love. If love overcame death on a Cross, then it can certainly overcome your insecurities.**

Here's what the Word has taught me:

*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.*

— 1 John 4:18

**Control freakishness runs contrary to the expression of love.**

*Cast your burden upon the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken.*

— Psalms 55:22

Being a parent, and more recently a pastor, let me intimate that it's not always easy to let go.

The coefficient to control freakishness is one's affection for the object(s) in focus. What I mean to say is that there's a very strong correlation between how much I love someone and my fleshly desire to control our environment. It sounds odd, but if I'm thinking unhealthily, that's the God's honest truth. I know, it's ugly and in a previous era of my life, I'd say it's shameful. Now? Well, now I'm just being transparent...no time for me to spend on shame when my Lord already bore it all on His Cross. I won't insult Him anymore like that.

So here's what I've learned.

**We must learn to give others their space. Suffocating them 'in the name of love' isn't the best solution for anyone. They really need to venture off and learn their own lessons without our intervention at every step. If they skin their knees, then maybe the right thing for us to do is simply encourage them to get back up. If they hurt us, maybe we just wait for their apology instead of jumping all over them with "I told you so!"**

**Consider the other person's growth. Looking at someone else's scars may be a good wake-up call, but it's never a substitute for experience. Give them the space to build their own portfolio of experiences and everyone's better off.**

Why would I want to retard another's spiritual growth by trying to manipulate them away from a good lesson learned? It's true, I may love them. But if I TRULY love them enough, then that love will overcome any fear I have in that moment...and I will let them flap their own wings and fly. Maybe they look like a dodo bird upon first landing, but you get the point...it's all good. :)

As a shepherd, some days it seems like my brood went from my two biological sons to a large number of adults. It's been a challenge to learn how to give them space while watching them hurt themselves (and often me in the process). My love for them seems to exacerbate and incite my



own insecurities. That's when the temptation to control comes out.

As Sun Tzu would say, "Know your enemies!" Well, my enemy wears a cape with two letters sewn on the back - C.F. (Control Freak) - LOL. It hangs in a closet nowadays, collecting dust more often than not. But you notice that I'm honest enough to admit that it's STILL in the closet. Sometimes, when I'm weak, I put it on. :o

**I know who my enemies are. They are not the ones I love, even though at times my great enemy, my flesh, tries to identify them as threats to my sense of security. My flesh is weak and fearful and insecure and doesn't know how to love. But I do. So I shall love and let it extinguish my enemies.**

The Lord gives His children space and HIS love is unfathomable. As awful as we are to Him, He's never insecure. Hmm...food for thought.

*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.*

— 1 John 4:11-12

## **God Knew You, Like He Knew His Own Son, In the Womb**

Two prolific writers in the Bible, Moses and Paul, were murderers. They admitted it. King David, ultimately described as a “*man after [God’s] heart*” (**Acts 13:22**), was, too. They weren’t crippled by it; they were ever humbled by God’s grace and forgiveness towards them.

**No sin, including murder, takes a person to Hell (only the sin of unbelief does that - Matthew 12:31). ALL sins were covered on the Cross, including abortion (which by definition, is murder). However, sins are still sins, and the rightful thing to do for any believer is to call them by their proper name, whether they are the ones committing the sins or not.**

The righteous response for a sinner is to confess (acknowledge) their sins to God. “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (**1 John 1:9**). If we’re unwilling to label something a “sin”, then what’s the likelihood we’ll ever confess it? Truth is what matters. He is Truth. We seek Him first so that we may find deliverance (**Matthew 6:33**).

Some may be saying, “But, at the time, I didn’t know,” or, “Someone I trusted told me there was no life in the womb...that it was my body and therefore my choice, as a woman, to choose...that it wasn’t a sin to get an abortion.” Theologically, we call that a “sin of omission”, referring to when a person commits a sin unawares. Extinguishing a life is a sin.

**Abortion is murder. Some may recoil at the starkness of that statement, but that’s just the flesh unwilling to accept the fullness of God’s grace. PS: there’s not one iota of judgement in my voice here...I understand grace...trust me.**

**To God, life itself is a personal issue. He IS life, after all. He chooses to impart life at conception in the womb. To complicate it any further is**

folly.

This simple truth is why we celebrate pregnancies as gifts from God, not just physical births. How many pregnant mothers refer to their unborn children as anything other than “my baby”? Why is that? It’s because it IS their baby...you know, the same one that kicks them and makes them want to pee at the worst possible times...the same one that calms down when sung lullabies to...the same one that forms an inextricable bond for nine months with their moms. Try telling a happily pregnant woman that the life that’s growing inside of them ISN’T their son or daughter. Good luck with that.

Biblical characters who referred to themselves considered their “person” to have existed in the womb long before they were even born. The perfect example is God's Son, Jesus Christ, who, as a person, existed before His incarnation. The Holy Spirit was involved in His conception in Mary’s womb. Are we to suggest that He wasn’t Himself during that time? *“But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20).* The “Child” refers to Jesus, the baby in Mary. The holy work of life was conceived in the womb by the Spirit. The womb is merely the first phase of life. There’s no Biblical reason to make distinctions otherwise.

The very thought of ‘no life in the womb’ or even 'divided life (e.g.: biological versus soul)' would have been completely foreign to the Biblical people, including Jesus. Rightly so, for it’s a lie. It wasn't because they were ignorant; rather to them, it was simple. It’s only modern scientific thinking that has muddied the simplest, purest viewpoint of life in the womb. Scientific thought has caused a division, figuratively and literally, on the subject of life, itself.

**Errant theologians and pastors have attempted to reformat our concept of life by using intellectualism to illuminate the Bible. Satan is a master at**

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**this. In the Garden he purposely intellectualized a very simple command by introducing 'critical thought' (Genesis 3:1-6). He tested Jesus in the wilderness with a similar strategy, even quoted scripture (Matthew 4:1-11), though Jesus didn't fall for it.**

**The Bible is used to interpret our experience. Our experience is never used to interpret the Bible, though that's what so-called 'intellect' suggests we do.**

Here's a typical example of the great prophet Jeremiah referring to himself as a person in his mother's womb. *"Because he did not kill me before birth, so that my mother would have been my grave, and her womb ever pregnant"* (**Jeremiah 20:17**). Job's another perfect example, *"Did not He who made me in the womb make him, and the same one fashion us in the womb"* (**Job 31:15**)? John the Baptist, while still in Elizabeth's womb, was stirred by the presence of his Lord in Mary's womb. *"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb"* (**Luke 1:41-42**)!

Can you imagine either of these two ladies suggesting that Jesus and/or John WEREN'T themselves??? It's inconceivable that either would consider aborting their babies as something godly. How would God feel about either of them aborting their sons under the so-called contemporary "Pro-Choice" movement? Would He have been OK with Mary quietly making her publicly embarrassing situation go away?

Can we quit playing games here??? Seriously. God created life in the womb - period...and that includes both body and soul...together as one...at conception. And don't condescend to me with garbage doctrines that mangle Hebrew phrases like *"mi beten"* (out from) or *"ruach-el"* (breath of life) in an attempt to support divisions that simply do not exist in the Bible. I've done the homework...all of it...have you?...or have you simply taken someone's word for it?...was your motivation pure when you did? Be

honest.

**The great Truths in the Bible NEVER require academic gymnastics to establish supporting evidence. They are always in plain view...such that even a child can understand them and be set free. Be careful of so-called "critical thinkers".**

One of THE most awful lies ever peddled by modern-day man is this concept of 'no life in the womb'...or 'partial life' only...or any variation thereof. These are new concepts, really, given the history of mankind. Yet *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever"* (**Hebrews 13:8**).

God, the author of life, is very clear on this subject...that you, me, and ESPECIALLY Jesus Christ were whole persons in our mothers' wombs...just tiny to start out. The ONLY reason contemporary people are confused on the subject is because intellectualism has mixed with wrong motivation. If a person chooses to receive the Word with the faith of a child, as Jesus, Himself, suggested, they'd have no reason to even suspect such a perversion as the one I write about here.

**God knew you, like He knew His own Son, in the womb. That's completely consistent with His heart and His Biblical revelation. The only ones confused about any of this are those who have lost sight of what a "person" really is. Shall we objectify babies in such a way before they're even born, when at their most vulnerable???...and for what cause? When man objectifies life, whose purposes are we serving?...God's?...the baby's?...or our flesh's??? You know the answer in your heart. Don't ever let anyone lie to you about this.**

*For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth; Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were*

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*all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them.*

— **Psalms 139:13-16**

## The Good Parent

I remember being down in Texas for training back in the late 1980's while in the U.S. Air Force and going to a McDonald's restaurant with an associate.

Granted, this young man was a bit odd as people go, but he had his own convictions. Although I don't agree with his actions here, they serve a purpose to this post.

So, we're standing in line behind a father and his two children, the boy was about 8 years old and the girl about 6 years old. The entire time we're standing there I can see my associate's face dimming as the older boy kept whacking his younger sister. And after every episode, the father would say, "stop that, son, or else!" This went on for at least 4-5 iterations in the short period of time we were all waiting to order.

Finally, apparently since the father wasn't following through on his promise to discipline his son, my associate leans forward and smacks the boy in the back of the head and says, "cut it out, or else!" Needless to say, I was stunned, possibly even more than the boy. The father says to my associate, "that wasn't necessary, but thank you." The boy stopped immediately.

Fast-forward two plus decades and with the shock of my associate's actions far removed, all I can think about is the relationship between the father and the children.

What does a child think of their father who never follows through on his promises? What does the naughty child conclude from their parent making empty promises to discipline them? Furthermore, what does the well-behaved child conclude? Is either child secure in that setting knowing that their parent is full of empty promises? And if the parent can't be trusted to carry out integrity in discipline, then how secure are those same children going to be when the parent promises something pleasant?

**Trust is impartial to the content of a broken promise.**

We have a Father in Heaven. Fortunately for us, He is perfect in His exercise of integrity. If He makes a promise, we can trust that He will justly execute that promise, for God cannot lie (**Titus 1:2**). If He says we will reap what we sow (He does - **Galatians 6:7-8**), then we will reap what we sow.

If He says we will be judged if we don't judge ourselves rightly (He does - **1 Corinthians 11:31**), then we will be judged. If He says a man will be sentenced to the lake of fire if he doesn't believe (He does - **John 3:18**), then that man will rightly be thrown into the lake of fire.

Our trust in our Father to discipline is just as important to our sense of security as our trust in Him to bless us is. Trust in Him cannot exist in its complete form if either facet of it is absent.

For believers, our greatest sense of security is with our salvation, for God promises that we are saved if we believe in His Son (**John 3:16; Acts 16:31**).

**If we doubt ANY of His promises then we are forced to doubt ALL of His promises**, including those regarding our own salvation. This is the proverbial house of cards.

Therefore, you WANT a God that follows through on ALL of His promises, whether regarding discipline or blessing. You WANT to have the security of knowing that your Father in Heaven is righteous and just. You don't want a God that reneges on His word - that is a weak and crippled god who's promises you cannot trust.

The good parent exercises integrity, even when it breaks their heart. The just thing is always the right thing. A loving parent covers all bases for the sake of their child (**Proverbs 13:24; Hebrews 12:6; 1 John 4:16**).

Our God is perfect integrity, absolute, immutable, faithful. THAT's our Father, the good Parent.



## **I Love Old People**

I came very close to deciding on a career in medicine. Before God interrupted my plans (yeah, He's like that - LOL!), I was going to become a medical doctor specializing in geriatric care. Why? - because I thoroughly enjoy the perspective of the older generations. They've been through so many changes, particularly over the past century, that I am mesmerized by their stories. I recall being "all ears" whenever my grandpa would talk about the great depression, his first radio, his first television, etc.

My best college buddy used to call me "Dr. Ed" because he knew of my plans. He was the more active Christian at the time so little did we know that God would call me out as a "soul doctor" rather than a medical one. :) And get this, God is so cool - my congregation is relatively mature, with LOTS of old people! Not only do I consider this a tremendous privilege, but I also get my wish to interact with old people. Life is good!

The Bible talks about the elderly, often from the perspective of the younger generations. It gives us gentle reminders and keeps us focusing not only on their ongoing needs, but also on their accumulating wisdom.

**Spend some time following God's commands to look after the elderly in your life and YOU reap countless benefits.**

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

— Proverbs 16:31

**There is no substitute for experience. Consider all that the eyes of the elderly have seen...and what you haven't yet. Consider their experience as more valuable than gold because it truly is. Material things can be bought, but nothing can buy wisdom.**

*Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors*

*there is victory.*

— **Proverbs 11:14**

Knowing this as Creator of all men, God provides us with commands to keep us engaged with the elderly, not just for their own good, but for ours as well. This is the "ecosystem" that God has set up for the benefit of ALL of His children.

*Don't be harsh or impatient with an older man. Talk to him as you would your own father, and to the younger men as your brothers. Reverently honor an older woman as you would your mother, and the younger women as sisters. Take care of widows who are destitute. If a widow has family members to take care of her, let them learn that religion begins at their own doorstep and that they should pay back with gratitude some of what they have received. This pleases God immensely.*

— **1 Timothy 5:1-4**

Too many of us are out working our tails off to "get ahead" in this world, Satan's world, potentially to the detriment of the elderly in our lives. Shall we abandon the crown jewels for worldly riches?

*A faithful man will abound with blessings, but he who makes haste to be rich will not go unpunished.*

— **Proverbs 28:20**

God gives us commands so that when we follow them, we get our socks blessed off! We have been given great freedom - but for what reason?...to serve self or to serve others?

*But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty [freedom], and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.*

— James 1:25

**We are free to serve! The Bible gives specific guidance regarding the elderly for a reason.**

*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

Therefore:

*Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD.*

— Leviticus 19:32

This is God's own heart on the matter. He considers the elderly as the wise in our population. We ought to learn whatever we can from them. Our access to them may be facilitated even by our caretaking responsibilities - two birds, one stone? Sounds like God's perfect plan. :)

The elderly represent the "end game" for man. Some have taken the righteous road and have become invaluable sources of encouragement. Some have taken the unrighteous road and are living proverbs of what NOT to do with our time on earth.

*Among all the peoples where God will take you, you'll be treated as a lesson or a proverb - a horror!*

— Deuteronomy 28:37

In any case, our role is to consider the elderly a wellspring of experience. Honor that truth, regardless of what it happens to be, good or bad, even. Their lives are teaching aids. We all find success and we all make

I Love Old People

mistakes...so let's not ever judge. Rather, may we find encouragement from those who have an abundance to share.

*Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise.*

— **Ephesians 5:15**

## Imagine Being Bill Gates' Child

Given the fact that Bill Gates is worth an estimated \$76 billion, most people would immediately suffer a swell of, "Boy, oh boy, what would I do with all that money? - woo hoo!" However, if you were indeed one of Bill Gates' three children, that question would never even be an issue since he isn't leaving his fortune to his kids. Like many of the ultra-wealthy, he and his wife, Melinda, have decided to leave relatively very little to their children.

Sting, the famous singer who's estimated worth is \$300 million, states, "I certainly don't want to leave [my kids] trust funds that are albatrosses round their necks. They have to work. All my kids know that and they rarely ask me for anything, which I really respect and appreciate." The list of folks goes on and on, echoing celebrity chef Nigella Lawson's sentiments, "I am determined that my children should have no financial security. It ruins people not having to earn money."

**Spiritual beliefs aside, there is great wisdom in protecting your children from the 'inheritance lie'. The very best we have to leave our descendants has nothing to do with money. If anything, the admixture of such a thing in the absence of capacity for it is often the cause of evil. *"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"* (1 Timothy 6:10).**

Imagine being Bill Gates' child now that you know the truth about how little of his massive fortune you'll be inheriting. Did anything change? Is it possible that your mind shifted from the money back to the parent...you know, the one that loves you? Are you resentful? Is it possible that you were temporarily blinded, objectifying the man and trampling the simple fact that he doesn't want to be the cause of suffering for the children that he loves? What parent wants to harm their own kids? One has to wonder, given their decisions regarding things left behind.

It's an interesting topic, because on the flip side is the fact that literally one of the final things a parent typically does is have their last will and testament executed upon their own death. It's part of their legacy. But should a legacy include potentially damaging those we love?

I've seen and heard of a LOT of elderly folks that would rather suffer unnecessarily, all in the name of leaving their children whatever wealth, great or small, that they have to their name. I've seen more seniors than I'd like to count refuse to tap their own resources, simply for the sake of leaving something for their offspring. Is it really about the kids or their own pride?

Progeny are experts at squandering inheritances. I call it the "rental car" phenomenon. I will NEVER buy a used rental car because people tend not to respect, and therefore abuse, things that aren't their own. Likewise, all the care and attention people have taken to build, invest, and guard their wealth is foreign to most of their descendants.

**Capacity for wealth isn't something that can be gifted from parent to child. In most cases, it must be wrought through personal labor. Respect for things earned is a function of the one who labored for them. As much as parents would like to believe that their children will share in their perspective for all that they've worked for, chances are they won't. It seems most of the time unearned wealth garners the exact opposite of its intended result, becoming a cause for stumbling not blessing.**

I recall having a conversation with an elderly person not that long ago about reverse-mortgaging their home. They did not like the idea at all for the simple fact that they wouldn't be able to leave their children an inheritance. Yet, my questions to them are, "What is an inheritance? Is it possible that the greatest 'inheritance' you could impart to them is wisdom regarding wealth? Is it possible that God gave YOU that wealth to take care of yourself in time of need? What are you actually DOING for them?"

Solomon wrote pretty starkly on this subject:

*Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun.*

*When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil.*

— Ecclesiastes 2:18-21

Solomon says that working hard your whole life and then leaving the wealth to a generation that hasn't shared in the labor required to obtain it is a "great evil". Seems many of the billionaires in this world understand this...then why not the rest of the population? Why is the average person with even a paltry financial portfolio so concerned about "leaving something for their kids"? Why the stubbornness, when the Word of God says there's the potential for evil in it?

**So, rather than simply imagining being Bill Gates' child, maybe we ought to imagine being Bill Gates, too. It's a fair exercise since, to some smaller degree, we all have to experience both scenarios.**

**Love looks for capacity before it gives. Rarely will it find it in those inexperienced with the process of acquiring it. There's just no substitute for experience. What most children need is wisdom, not an inheritance.**

As the old adage goes: "Give a person a fish and they eat for a day. Teach them how to fish and they eat for a lifetime."

## Jezebel

*My son, give attention to my wisdom, incline your ear to my understanding; that you may observe discretion and your lips may reserve knowledge. For the lips of an adulteress drip honey and smoother than oil is her speech; but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, her steps take hold of Sheol. She does not ponder the path of life; Her ways are unstable, she does not know it.*

— Proverbs 5:1-6

**Those are the words of a loving father preparing his son for life. Beware of the seductress!**

I wonder how well King Ahab would've fared had he been instilled with such wisdom. It seems Jezebel got the best of him. Together they toppled downward, becoming a proverb in the process.

I recall hearing the phrase as a young boy and never really understanding it, "Oh, that one there - she's a little Jezebel!" The scorn that typically accompanied that phrase was enough to cue me in to the fact that speaker had a fair amount of disdain for the one they were referring to.

As I grew older, the derogatory use of "Jezebel" gained depth and color. However, it wasn't until I became a man, and furthermore, a man of the Word, that I fully understood what was being conveyed by the symbolic term.

Like many things in spiritual warfare, a "Jezebel" is a splinter in the side of Christ's Body. To speak plainly, she's a whore. She's the one who steals the attention of God's children, leading them away through various forms of idolatry, be it today's most popular brand, sexual idolatry, or some other vice. The question on the table, though, is, "Should Jezebel be the real focus of our attention?" Sure, she's a sad case, a prostitute, but I'd argue that's not



the bigger issue. We'll get to that later.

The real Jezebel of the Old Testament was from idolatrous stock. Her father was aptly named Ethbaal, which means "A Man of Baal". Baal and Ashtaroah were pagan gods. Horrific sacrifices were made regularly to them. At the height of her prowess, Jezebel instituted 850 priests to serve them in the temples.

Jezebel was a slave to her own appetites, unscrupulous, conniving, and manipulative. Mary Hallet describes her relationship with Ahab, *"For without Ahab's authority, Jezebel would have been a serpent without fangs."* You see, Jezebel isn't the primary issue, even though she's a formidable foe. It's Ahab, the king that fueled her rotten aspirations.

Dr. Herbert Lockyer describes Jezebel in the following way: *"She possessed an extraordinary force of character, she was an ardent idolater, she was a dominating wife, she was a corrupt tree, she was a treacherous schemer, she loved personal adornment, and she died a horrible death"*.

Jezebel was only able to succeed in her ungodliness by seducing someone of power.

**Seductresses often target the weak and make quick work of them, parasitically syphoning whatever it is they are after from their host. Ahab was weak and Jezebel knew it, so she capitalized on it.**

Regarding Ahab, Hallet accurately states, *"His culpability in this hideous drama lies chiefly in his using his personal power as a means to Jezebel's wicked ends."*

Ahab, the king of Northern Israel at the time, is a tragic individual and, for all intents and purposes, ought to be the feature of this blog, not Jezebel. Truth be told, I used her name in the title because I feared that if I used his instead, fewer people would read the blog! Jezebel is far from unique in

human history, even though her legacy is magnanimous, as recorded in the Bible. In context here, the term 'Jezebel' symbolizes ANY seductress.

**Although Jezebel over the years has garnered all the attention, it's Ahab that ought to be the headliner in this story. He fell much further than Jezebel did; hence he's the greater tragedy.**

Ahab is like Shakespeare's Antony in his tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra*. Mark Antony was a triumvir of the Roman Republic, endowed with power and influence. Like Ahab, he fell for the wrong woman and paid a dear price in the end. Moreover, and truthfully more importantly, is the fact that Ahab failed in his godly duties. Lots of OTHERS paid a dear price in the end!

**Ahab was the one that had been given the responsibility to serve as king over God's people. Although Jezebel played the sleazy serpent, it's Ahab that ought to capture our attention as believers. His lust for Jezebel was his undoing.**

Consider our own calling, *"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God"* (**Romans 6:12-13**).

Since Ahab was too weak to control his wife, he became an unrighteous instrument. Ultimately, King Jehu was sent by the Lord to deal with Jezebel. Her second son, Joram, upon seeing the approaching fury of Jehu, preempted him, *"When Joram saw Jehu he called out, 'Good day, Jehu!' Jehu answered, 'What's good about it? How can there be anything good about it as long as the promiscuous whoring and sorceries of your mother Jezebel pollute the country'"* (**2 Kings 9:22 - Message**)?

The Lord had seen enough. In the end, Jezebel got what she deserved. Yet

as arrogant self-absorption would have it, Jezebel met her death in her own brand of glorious brashness:

*When Jehu came to Jezreel, Jezebel heard of it, and she painted her eyes and adorned her head and looked out the window. As Jehu entered the gate, she said, 'Is it well, Zimri, your master's murderer?' Then he lifted up his face to the window and said, 'Who is on my side? Who?' And two or three officials looked down at him. He said, 'Throw her down.' So they threw her down, and some of her blood was sprinkled on the wall and on the horses, and he trampled her under foot.*

*When he came in, he ate and drank; and he said, 'See now to this cursed woman and bury her, for she is a king's daughter.' They went to bury her, but they found nothing more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. Therefore they returned and told him. And he said, 'This is the word of the Lord, which He spoke by His servant Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 'In the property of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; and the corpse of Jezebel will be as dung on the face of the field in the property of Jezreel, so they cannot say, "This is Jezebel"'.  
— 2 Kings 9:30-37*

What I find interesting is that most people, including even unbelievers, know who Jezebel is, or at least the significance of her name.

However, most know nothing about Ahab, the greater tragedy here.

**Jesus Christ stated, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more" (Luke 12:48b). Our Lord essentially stated that Ahab was held to a higher standard than Jezebel. Such is the case with ANY situation where the seduced knows better!**

**There will always be whores in this world (both male and female). The objective for us believers is to remain faithful to our Husband, Jesus**

**Christ. We ought to focus on those suitors whose intentions are pure and godly.**

That same loving father that I quoted at the beginning of this blog entry says it best, I believe:

*Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated always with her love. For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress and embrace the bosom of a foreigner?*

*For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He watches all his paths. His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin. He will die for lack of instruction, and in the greatness of his folly he will go astray.*

— **Proverbs 5:18-23**

I realize it's futile in retrospect, but one must sometimes wonder what could've been had Jezebel been a woman of virtue, a woman willing to stir up godliness in her family with Ahab. What an opportunity lost! Instead, she was, as Lockyer describes, *"the absolute negation of all God meant woman to be, namely, a true help-meet of man."*

**Even so, the greater fall is rightfully assigned to Ahab. He failed as a husband, a father, and a king. But most of all, he failed as a disciple of the Lord.**

## Learning to Laugh Again

“Eddie, keep it down...boy, you’re SO loud!”

Out of muffled giggles, “Sorry.”

Moments later, “EDDIE!...SHHHH!!!” I’d have bursted forth again with a blaring, though “catchy” (as I’ve been told), laugh that’d fill just about any house. Only problem was that most households were adequately filled with something more comfortable for its residents...like peace and quiet. I had a habit as a child of upsetting household 'norms'.

“Sorry.” And I was...well, kind of...at least long enough to impose a moment of calm on myself before losing it again.

“EDDIIIIIIIIIIIIII!!!...GO OUTSIDE!” With a look unfettered by poor expectations, as I’d heard it at least a hundred times before, I’d make myself scarce. It doesn’t even matter who the parties were in this memory...let’s just say that this type of dialogue happened a LOT when I was a kid. My 2nd grade school teacher, Mrs. Lane (I’ll never forget that kind-hearted old woman), once flagged me down in my elementary school hallway and said, “Boy, you’re rambunctious!” I said, “What does that mean?” She responded, “Look it up when you get home.” I did. I remember chortling about it. How could I disagree?

**I will never apologize for laughing...only for my history of blurting it out at inappropriate times. Even then, I'd like to test the definition of "appropriate" with the offended...but that's another story. I'll never apologize for a gift from God, not this one, or any other.**

Laughter has often been my salvation from pain. Not an artificial escape; more like a relief valve. I dealt with a fair amount of discomfort growing up. As I intimated in my last blog, I was secure for the most part in the love

of my mother, but given the dynamics of our tumultuous circumstances, laughter was Heaven sent, my antidote. *"A joyful heart is good medicine"* (**Proverbs 17:22a**).

Looking back, the low times in my life were coupled with a shortage of laughter. I suppose that's not a unique thing, but in my case, it's an area of regret.

**Laughter is something that is available to anyone at any time in their life. It's free. To me, it's beyond that - it's FREE-dom. I can laugh in the face of adversity and my enemies...and they are powerless against it. I can laugh when I'm "supposed" to be crying and there's nothing or no one that can stop me. I can laugh whenever I want because God says I can. My laughter is often my deliverance. When all else fails, it's my ace in the hole. That's power.**

To lose my ability to laugh is to lose power. I don't want to lose anything God's given me. His gifts are precious, meant to be guarded. The thief? - a tendency to take things WAY too seriously. *"There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven...A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance"* (**Ecclesiastes 3:1,4**). I've had to learn to laugh all over again several times in my life as a result of becoming too serious.

Some may say, "You're acting like a child!" And they'd be correct. I'm not about to apologize for it, either, especially not when I believe Heaven will be filled with laughter (or some similar expression). I won't allow this decrepit world to rob me of something heavenly, not when my Lord and Savior said, *"Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all"* (**Luke 18:17**).

**Ever seen a toddler having the time of their life at a tragic funeral? I have. And it helped me at the time...helped me with my own perspective. Children are good at that, aren't they?...resetting our perspectives when**

**we least expect it. They are gifts, you see, from the same source of laughter - God.**

I know I'm not the only person who's ever suffered. We all suffer at different times in our lives and in vastly different ways. I'm not suggesting you "smile it all away" as that'd be rude and insensitive of me. All I'm saying is that somehow, some way, learn to laugh again if you've lost the ability. Find the humor in the ridiculousness of your own flesh if you must...or in the silliness of modern science's attempts at explaining away God...or more simply, at the wonderful cooing of a baby.

There's always ample time for serious matters. We just need to be careful not to let them overrun us, no matter how severe. And if we are beset by them then we must learn to laugh DURING those hard times...at ourselves, with others, at the situations that befall us.

**Some may scorn, "Why are you laughing at times like this?!!!" I say, "Why not?" Who's better equipped in the moment, the one bound up with crippling tension or the one freely enjoying a relaxed attitude?**

*All the days of the afflicted are bad, but a cheerful heart has a continual feast.*

— **Proverbs 15:15**

You see, affliction is here to stay. But a cheerful heart can overcome anything. Jesus' final days were "bad", but He had a joy set before Him (**Hebrews 12:2**). It's all about perspective. Isn't everything?

## Men, Have You Been Wearing Your Wife's Skirt?

“Oh, man, I’ve gotta go, the ball-n-chain will be calling soon...and I’ve got to grab some cough syrup for my brats on the way home,” says the man as he rushes out the door, beer spilling over the tip of his index finger, slurping one last sip from a mug that seems to naturally fit his hand. He looks like a blend of cockiness and despair...confusing, actually, even to himself. This is a guy who’s lost his manhood and chooses to counterfeit it by gathering with other men with similar issues. The bar seems as good a place as any for the endeavor.

I remember my days in the US Air Force, as a teenager, before I was positive towards the Word of God. I recall scenes like the aforementioned occurring many times, whether at a bar or at a weekend gathering. Unmarried at the time, I’d be one of the idiots screaming, “Whipped!... you’re whipped, you pansy...go on home to your wifey!” Shame on me, I know (gimme a break, that was a long time ago and I was still confused about manhood...obviously! :). Unfortunately, that’s part of the accepted culture in the Armed Services as my son, who just recently finished his commitment to the US Army, will attest. It’s ungodly in many ways, especially when it comes to family matters (even though their literature paints a very different picture).

In any case, these cockeyed men exist in this world...lots of them, sadly. While they continue living this charade, others encourage them from their own weaknesses. They are the proverbial “ship of fools”, “*He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm*” (**Proverbs 13:20**). That completes the scene that exists away from the home.

Let’s now turn our attention to the families of these men...you know, the ones who God has divinely ordained to be under their charge and protection...the ones who would relish a husband and father who WASN’T



still acting like a frat house boy. Yeah, those people...the ones who have all but been objectified by the wimp of a man that comes through the door still stinking of that awfulness he roused up at the bar, or wherever he's been (this isn't about drunks, it's about ANY absentee husband / father, regardless of his chosen excuse). This is the scene, the home scene, that stirs my soul terribly.

*“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart”* (Colossians 3:18-21). These four simple verses are profoundly important to our families; however, this blog is focusing on the men of the household...the husbands and the fathers. Some are like the soldiers who wear the uniform but dishonor it by becoming “conscientious objectors” when the going gets tough.

Wives and children long to cling to their husbands and fathers, as much as any godly desire within them. However, most men are merely shadows of what God intended them to be, making it virtually impossible for the precious members of their families to find security in them. A shadow gives a person nothing to grab hold of...it exists as a taunt, as if to remind others what could be, but never has been, or what still might be, but given history, likely won't become.

The Word of God says, “*Act like men, be strong*” (1 Corinthians 16:13b). A good Christian friend of mine made a CD for me and in it was the song “*Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?*” by Paula Cole. At first, I was like, “Hey, that’s not a Christian song!” However, after listening to the words closely, I knew what this person was saying. She was casting a shout out to the world, as a single woman...sharing in a little of her own frustration with what she sees. We see so many women out their dating and marrying wraiths, mere phantoms with masculine outer shells. So goes the cycle as little girls grow up thinking that all men are like their fathers.

## Men, Have You Been Wearing Your Wife's Skirt?

**Men, we are supposed to LOVE our wives. Women are built, by God, to respond to us as our helpmeets, “Then the LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18). If we give them nothing to respond to other than whispers of hope that we’ll maybe someday actually BE men, then what ought we to expect from them???**

If men were better to their wives, more loving, more fatherly to their children, maybe they’d have less to "complain" about. I’m not supposing that all men only are at fault here, as the Bible addresses the contentious woman, too, “It is better to live in a corner of a roof than in a house shared with a contentious woman” (**Proverbs 21:9**). There are some truly awful women out there; however, this blog is isolating the men only, for the sake of conciseness.

Women are predisposed, and desire to be, good helpmeets. A man may go his whole life and never recognize the gem he’s been given by God. What a shame. “An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life” (**Proverbs 31:10-12**).

I have known and enjoyed fellowship with a small percentage of men that I’d consider godly. Of the married ones, I can’t think of one that goes out of his way to complain about his wife or his kids. They may objectively make certain unpleasant statements about the reality of the flesh in their homes, but their overarching viewpoint is through the lens of love. In keeping with the gist of this blog, one of the most enjoyable realizations is that when I meet their wives and kids, or spend any time with them, personally, they are generally happy and secure. To them, the man of the house is real, not a shadow.

There’s an old saying, “A happy wife means a happy life.” There’s some truth to that. A man isn't supposed to kowtow to his wife’s every desire in

order to make her “happy” ...that’s no good either. However, a good man will always seek to love his wife and keep her happy in the lot in which God has placed her soul. The same goes with their children.

**Men have a unique ability to set the tone in the household. If they’re absent, then how will that ever happen? If they’re off complaining about the natural responses of those they are failing to love, who’s to blame?**

**To the majority of men out there, the Spirit has a message for you, “Grow Up!” A steady paycheck and an occasional word of “wisdom” doesn’t constitute “presence” in the lives of those who are looking to you for leadership, for affirmation, for encouragement, for security, for love.**

The next time one of your buddies hollers to you, "Pick up your skirt, man!" Instead of laughing it off, ask yourself a solemn question: have you left home wearing your wife's skirt again?...is she left there wearing your pants??? What do your kids think of that? More importantly, what do you think God has to say on the subject?

## My Son Is Back Home

*For the Lord is a God of knowledge, and with Him actions are weighed.*

— 1 Samuel 2:3b

God sees things that man doesn't. This happens more often than not. He is omniscient after all.

He saw the day I watched the U.S. Army fleet vehicle drive my son, Joey, away that morning 5 summers ago. He looked into this veteran's heart and saw the swirl of emotions. He saw the pride followed by the twinge of fear. And I'm sure He also noted some things that even I hadn't identified just yet.

That was a while ago yet, as with all big changes in life, remembering it seems much closer.

That was a moment in time when Joey took action. God saw it. He saw that it was good. He protected him, nurtured him, pressed him, and delivered him back home in the end. He left a boy, came back a man. Such is life.

Joey had been deployed into hostile territory twice in his Army career. I recall intimating to him the strange, new feeling of helplessness I felt as his father. I was supposed to be the protector of him, not the other way around - at least that's what I had struggled with during that time. Something didn't feel quite right about it. But so it was. And all I could do was say "thank you" to the son who decided to protect his father.

The Spirit's had our church's evangelist, Scott, teaching on thanksgiving lately. The messages have been especially impactful with Joey's return.

My son could've been killed in action over there, during either tour of duty.

He wears a tattoo in memory of having to standby while friends suffered that fate. I get it, but I don't, having never been deployed into a hostile area myself. I wish I could relate, but, then again, I'm glad I haven't had to.

**I think about how my Father in Heaven chose to crush His own Son on the Cross, yet He spared my son.**

*"But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief" (Isaiah 53:10a).*  
My Father's Son accepted His fate voluntarily.

Having my own son step into harm's way voluntarily has changed me. It forced a difficult hand. It also forced me to accept that I was no longer able to protect my son in the same way. I had to let go while he laid down his life for others.

**I had to learn to let God's promises settle me. Danger to Him is not like it is for us. God doesn't relate to such things the way we do. Danger is a manward issue and so is fear of it.**

**Our deliverance is abiding in faith. When we shrink away from God's promises, our hearts abide in fear. When we cling to his promises, our hearts abide in love. "Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:8a).**

So, even though my natural instinct was to find a way to fight to protect my son, I knew that emotion was wasted energy. I have become a spectator for the most part, no longer the same warrior.

*For not by might shall a man prevail. Those who contend with the Lord will be shattered.*

— 1 Samuel 2:9b-10a

All the great warriors in the Bible had one thing in common. Faith. Think of David and Goliath or Gideon and a mere 300 men against the Midianites

## My Son Is Back Home

who were "*as numerous as locusts*" (**Judges 7**). They prevailed because of God's hand in their efforts. They accepted His course of action as their own.

My natural, fatherly instinct is to fight for my children, protect them, lay down my life for them. But what does a father do when life calls his son to battle while the father is too old to enlist? The father must cling to his faith. He must seek encouragement from the scriptures.

*The Lord your God who goes before you will Himself fight on your behalf.*

— **Deuteronomy 1:30a**

I suppose for every father in my shoes there exists a separate battle that wages, far removed from the distant lands where some of our sons pay the ultimate price. For fathers, these internal battles test our mettle. It's a different kind of test, but a wholly good one.

I've learned to trust Him on this.

My son is home now and I am very grateful for it.

I am also grateful for the good work our Lord has done in me, his father.

## Satan's Secret Weapon

I have the privilege of leading a relatively small congregation. I enjoy it because I get to stay pretty close to the members, even seeing their body language and facial expressions while teaching them face-to-face. This also means that whenever a new face shows up, I take notice immediately.

Eventually, one of the leaders in the congregation will get around to chatting with them. We don't ask for names and addresses or anything - it's all in the name of fellowship. Nonetheless, certain details are sure to come up.

Can you guess what one of my first questions is? It's, "Are they single?" Why? Is it because I'm looking to set them up with single members of my congregation??? - LOL - may it never be! I ask because history has proven something to me. History has shown me Satan's secret weapon.

The running "joke" between my deacons and myself is, "How long will it take for a member of the opposite sex to come prancing on the scene and sweep this new congregant away?" Seriously, it is painful to write that, but **I'd estimate that 80-90% of ALL single people that have left the congregation have done so because of a relationship with a member of the opposite sex.** I have even had multiple 60-something-year-olds recently walk away because of this! It never ends!!!

You might be saying, "C'mon, Pastor Ed, that viewpoint seems a little extreme!" But you'd be wrong. You also may not understand how agonizing this reality is to me. Truly.

**I'm confident that most of you reading this blog have some idea who King Solomon was. He was King David's son, exceptionally wise, and very wealthy. But do you know the rest of Solomon's story? I mean, do you know how his life ended? Let me share some scripture.**

*Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you. I have also given you what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that there will not be any among the kings like you all your days.*

— **1 Kings 3:12b-13**

Solomon was blessed tremendously! He had asked only for wisdom, but God graced him out with much more!

*So King Solomon became greater than all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. All the earth was seeking the presence of Solomon, to hear his wisdom which God had put in his heart.*

— **1 Kings 10:23-24**

Solomon continued to walk after his father, David's, heart until...

*Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, 'You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods.' Solomon held fast to these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away.*

— **1 Kings 11:1-3)**

**Do you see what I see? Does it ring a bell? Did the great King Solomon actually fall away from his Lord because of his affinity for the opposite sex? YUP!**

*So the Lord said to Solomon, 'Because you have done this, and you have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will*



*surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant.*

— **1 Kings 11:11**

And so it came to pass.

Such is the pattern that I see even today in the churches. Every believer is given so much by the grace of God, but their access to it is impeded by their disobedience to His Word. The blessings of the kingdom are torn from them along the pattern of Solomon.

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

— **Matthew 6:33**

What I see are times of wonderful acceleration into the kingdom abundantly supplied to newbies. I see their hearts begin to open up like flower buds beginning to bloom. And then BAM!!! - an attractive member of the opposite sex swoops in. Most often the seducers are unbelievers (believe it or not), and the fresh, vibrant flower dies right there on the vine.

**It's awful, but that's how Satan works. He's a sleazeball. He seduces most believers away from their Husband, Jesus Christ.**

It upsets me terribly, but I must also understand that Satan's been playing this game for years. Even Paul warns the congregation at Corinth:

*Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?*

— **2 Corinthians 6:14**

**What a great question, huh? What in the world does a romance between a believer and an unbeliever even look like? What is it based on? I'm**

**always amazed at how low a believer will set their standards to find a mate.**

I have a lot of questions, and sometimes, given the right circumstances, I ask them of folks who have followed Solomon's pattern and walked away from their first love (Jesus Christ) for another. It's always the same thing in a nutshell. They are blinded by the lust of the flesh. Same old story.

Ironically, Solomon made this very statement, *"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).

So, if you're single and you notice a real progress to your spiritual life, may I say, "Watch out!" Do not be bamboozled, seduced, or drawn away! Satan's got his sights set on you.

**If you are single, you are in the crosshairs of Satan's secret weapon.**

*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 13:12b-14**

## Teaching Our Children How To Eat and Get Dressed

**True wisdom, such as Solomon's here, often includes solemn consideration of our children:**

*Unless the LORD builds the house,  
They labor in vain who build it;  
Unless the LORD guards the city,  
The watchman keeps awake in vain.*

*It is vain for you to rise up early,  
To retire late,  
To eat the bread of painful labors;  
For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.*

***Behold, children are a gift of the LORD,**  
The fruit of the womb is a reward.  
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,  
So are the children of one's youth.*

*How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;  
They will not be ashamed  
When they speak with their enemies in the gate.*

— Psalms 127:1-5

I'm going to use the word "we" to refer to the plurality that is our society here.

**What are we teaching our children? Is there any real substance to it, or is it vapid? Where are our priorities? Are we setting our kids up for a life of happiness or years of painful extraction from errant ideologies, the likes of which many of us have had to endure ourselves? These are questions worth our consideration.**

## Teaching Our Children How To Eat and Get Dressed

Some say, "Well, that's what our public schools are for...to teach our children." Sure, if you're talking about equipping a child to get a JOB when they graduate. Anything beyond that expectation is garbage and a parental cop out of the worst kind. I for one wouldn't put the spiritual/emotional well-being of my child in the hands of a 22 year old college graduate, who in many ways is still wet behind the ears (no offense to the teacher intended). I certainly wouldn't trust that person to teach my child eternal things. Is it even fair to saddle them with such lofty expectations? Do I have a right to complain when my child comes home confused about life and is then left unattended to? With such expectations, I'd be failing as a parent. Yet isn't that what many of us expect nowadays? Aren't an increasing number of parents punting their God-given responsibilities to the unsuspecting public school teachers?...you know, the ones that were trained to teach math and English and such...NOT the Bible.

I have family and friends that are professional teachers at all levels, from pre-school through high school. They are mandated to teach evolution, but must walk on egg shells when it comes to God...and forget about Jesus... He's become like a swear word. So, even a well-intentioned Christian teacher is shackled. Yet ridiculous parents persist with their ungodly expectations.

If we want our children to be happy, WE need to teach them about the LORD! *"All your sons will be taught of the LORD; and the well-being of your sons will be great"* (Isaiah 54:13). It's that simple. Except for private Christian schools, the Lord cannot be taught in a classroom. Even then, the onus still falls on the parents.

**As the Spirit's been impressing on my congregation from the pulpit, as of late, children need to be lead in their spiritual walks. This requires active parenting. It's not enough to just physically feed and clothe a child, they must be spiritually fed the "bread of life" (John 6:48) and be taught how to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14).**

Children require *"discipline and instruction"* (**Ephesians 6:4**). Consider that even the oldest adult is called a "child" of God in the Bible. I guess we ALL need to be lead, huh? Maybe that's why Jesus said what He said about the heart of a child. *"And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all. And He took them in His arms and began **blessing** them, laying His hands on them"* (**Mark 10:13-16**).

**Might you, as a parent, play a part in the blessings your child receives? Isn't there one key introduction that we need to make in our child's life, that is, to Jesus? Are we expecting our public education system to bless our children???**

Jesus showed His personal favor to children...and He taught onlookers many simple, yet profound, lessons in HIS classroom. I like the simplicity of J. Vernon McGee's commentary on **Mark 10:13-16**, *"Our Lord says that He wishes the adults would become little children. We hear so much today about going on and growing and developing. That's wonderful - after you have become a child of God. But, actually, most of us are going the wrong way. We need to leave our cleverness and our sophistication and our great knowledge that we boast of today and return to the simplicity of childhood - with simple, childlike faith, trust Christ Jesus. Our Lord took the children up in His arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them. He never did take anybody else up in His arms like that, friend."*

**We all want to leave our children with something, don't we? We all want a legacy, so to speak...one that endures beyond our years. Well, our greatest legacy is our undying worship of Jesus Christ. Our greatest contribution to our children has always been knowledge of Christ, His Word, and its activity in our lives.**

## Teaching Our Children How To Eat and Get Dressed

*Grandchildren are the crown of old men, and the glory of sons is their fathers.*

— Proverbs 17:6

If we teach our children about the Lord, we've done the very best we can ever do for them. Even leaving them something worldly, like financial security, pales in comparison. What's temporal wealth when we can give our children that which is eternal? *"A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, and the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous"* (**Proverbs 13:22**). A wise parent understands the substance of eternal inheritance. *"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints"* (**Ephesians 1:18**).

**The worldly man boasts in his ability to give his children his worldly wealth...to teach them also how to occupy themselves with it...that's his legacy. The godly man, though he may just as rightly endow material wealth, boasts in Christ alone and favors teaching his children of eternal wealth...that's his legacy. The prior children may be rich for a lifetime, but the latter are rich for all of eternity.**

*Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent'.*

— Revelation 3:17-19

**"God forbid" a child shows up to a public school malnourished and underdressed...the parents might, rightly, get a phone call. Yet, so many send their kids out spiritually undernourished and naked...and the**

phone never rings.

## The Woman's Desire

Women are magnificent creatures. I truly believe that. The good Lord certainly created the perfect complement to that which He had already made in man in the Garden of Eden.

*"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him'" (Genesis 2:18).* The original Hebrew here reveals that the Lord made the woman to complement the man. To steal from the movie Jerry Maguire, the man could've easily looked at the woman and said, "You...complete...me." :)

And that's the way it was for some untold period of time. Perfect bliss in the Garden. Man and woman, complementary, in the image of God. *"God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27).*

Life was simple and good!

[crashing sound]

It wasn't until after the fall in the Garden that things got complicated. And the effects of that fall have resonated throughout human history ever since. The context between man and woman may have changed, but the fingerprints of the curse are still very identifiable, IF you're willing to open your eyes.

There's not enough real estate in a single blog to elaborate on both sides of the equation, so let's focus on the woman's side, keeping in mind her original design as helpmeet, complement, helper (**Genesis 2:18**).

*"To the woman He said, 'I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children; yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will*



*rule over you*" (**Genesis 3:16**). Notice that a part of the curse is this newly mentioned "desire", which is the Hebrew word *teshuqah*. Notice also that part of the same thought being conveyed is that the man will "rule over" the woman. After the fall, there was a new dynamic between Adam and Eve. However, the pervasiveness of the curse, even as it exists today, doesn't become totally clear until we investigate the word *teshuqah* a bit more.

This same Hebrew word is used to describe sin's desire to rule over man. Just before Cain failed and murdered his brother, he struggled with this. The Lord said to 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**). The word for "desire" here is *teshuqah*. It conveys the same base desire that fallen woman has towards man. The same dynamic is expressed here, only it's sin this time that desires to rule over man.

**The Hebrew word translated "desire", namely *teshuqah* here, carries with it the fundamental dynamic of rulership. The desire is to rule over, but in both cases above, that desire is ungodly. In both cases, the Lord gives the godly counter to the desire. Man must rule over both the woman and sin.**

**Woman wasn't designed to rule over man. Man was designed to rule over woman.**

That's not my opinion or some unholy effort to solidify an evil agenda. As I started out, I believe women are magnificent creatures. They just struggle with this desire to rule over men. It's base to their existence.

The problem today is that most men, even Christian men, are wimps. I'm not, trust me. Hence, I've got no problem whatsoever writing this blog. I represent the Lord's heart here, nothing else. Only women whose "desire" has run rampant will be offended by this blog. And only men who have allowed themselves to be ruled over will take offense. Too bad. Take it up

with God.

**People need to step back, revisit the fundamentals of His beautiful creation, understand the original design in the Garden, and at least accept the fundamental issues that exist between man and woman as a result of the fall. Part of the curse is this tenuous relationship. That's life.**

For the record, I blame the men in this world much more than the women. Why? Because, as I alluded to earlier, most men are too weak to counter the women in their lives. As far as I can tell, unabashedly drawing from my own experience in the United States, if this long-standing dynamic were a tug-of-war, it is currently being taken over by women. It's a pathetic scene and it's getting messier by the day.

Let me give some substance behind my last statement. Maybe you agree with what I see. And I'll only deal with believers, for now, as there are too many variables and corner cases otherwise.

**The Heart.** The aforementioned ungodly "desire" must be ruled over. This is a heart issue in a woman, meaning the primary issue is what exists as "normal" in a woman. Does she live by a feminist standard? Does she believe that God designed her to rule over men? How does she 'look' at men? Has she followed the masses and objectified man? To what degree are any of these things present in her soul?

The heart of the woman sets the direction of her "spiritual vector", meaning it is the root cause of any issues down the line. Such as:

**Marriage.** Jesus is her Husband. Some women have earthly husbands as well. Both are men. In both cases, her heart is designed to respond to man. If she bucks him, she abides in her own perverted version of the husband-wife relationship. She'll cling to that version for as long as she can...that's her "desire", after all. If her husband is weak, this becomes the status quo.

**Jesus is the strongest Husband ever and some women regularly dishonor Him. So men can't feel too badly when it comes to some women...it seems nobody can gather them. Nonetheless, men certainly shouldn't exacerbate things by being the weaker vessel.**

*You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman.*

— 1 Peter 3:7a

**One doesn't need to look very far to see that women, at least in the United States, are taking control over a variety of aspects of life that naturally ought to fall on the shoulders of men. But what ought we expect when the shoulders of men have become narrower than the women's?**

I think the Hoover Dam can relate to man's plight. Holding back a woman's "desire" to rule over man is like being a dam. There's a constant pressure. A dam never quits; nor should a man. If he does, for even a moment, he risks a massive flood with enough power to destroy all the tranquility and good labor below, often wreaking havoc in the lives of many others, including children, family, friends, community, etc.

**Family.** What happens when a woman rules a household?...when the man spends all his time in his "man cave" and the woman is left steering the ship? The children learn quickly from their primary examples (mom & dad) that, "Mom must be in charge around here, because dad's not doing so much. Dad's like a little puppy dog. Mom sets the household agenda, dad follows it. Dad's weak, obviously. Heck, mom even chooses what churches we attend."

**Most people have "daddy issues" because their dads weren't men enough to fulfill their godly obligations to rule over their wives and subsequently take on the mastership role as the head of the family.**

How about the next divinely ordained institution?

**Nation.** What happens when women begin dominating political agendas? ...when the women of power have objectified men? Other women cheer them on...vote for them...join them in their ungodly causes. Can you blame them with so many wimpy men around? Even the men in the highest offices of our own nation today pander to the feminists. Well, who voted these people into place? WE did! Spiraling.

**BTW, Satan's laughing his butt off at all of this. He's been watching the erosion of our country and pushing all the right buttons along the way: feminism, pro-choice, women's lib, socialist feminist organizations, etc...these are all fingerprints of the curse established way back in the Garden.**

The most painful area that I see percolating up in recent years is the one that hurts me the most to even write down.

**Ministry.** I believe the final frontier in the maturation of this ungodliness is in the ministries. Jesus Christ is a MAN...not a woman. He's our "*great shepherd*" (**Hebrews 13:20**). EVERY shepherd in the Bible, EVERY context of shepherding, EVERY apostle, EVERY single instance noted is in the masculine. Only weak, perverted churches allow women to stand behind pulpits.

**When it comes to shepherding God's flock, it's a man's job.**

**Then why are there so many women out there with public ministries trying to lead His sheep? Some are still crafty enough to avoid calling themselves pastors, but they are usurping the office with their actions.**

The answer is simple, it's an extension of what's going on in the marriages. "*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and give Himself*

*up for her*" (**Ephesians 5:24**). It's WORK to "love" a woman whose base desire is to rule over you!

**This means that to fail to rule over her is to fail HER! If a man truly loves his wife, he'll put forth the required effort to rule over her. If she bucks him, then he needs to buck back harder. It's a simple equation.**

If a woman perceives men as generally weak because her primary examples, her father and/or her husband, are weak, then her base desire to rule will extend to all men. This is manifest in a woman's desire to supplant man in the ministry over the Church as well.

This is ungodly. Husband over wife is the illustration of Christ over His Bride. If the prior gets mangled, the latter often follows suit eventually.

I believe that Christian ministries are the last frontier in the general degradation of what was originally designed by God to exist in mankind. The dam has been suffering cracks and leaking for a long time now...and it's about ready to burst. Both men and women are at fault.

**Look around you. Look for all the ways in which a woman's desire to rule over man has been institutionalized, even. It's not a difficult project. Whether bluntly obvious or subtle, there are fingerprints of the curse everywhere.**

Since most men are too pathetic and weak to address this situation with a strong hand in their hearts, their marriages, their families, their countries, and even their ministries, I believe we'll remain on this vector until the Lord returns to collect His Bride. Since most women cannot control their own desire to rule over man, they will continue to exploit his weaknesses, beginning with the objectification of man in their souls, their marriages, their families, their countries, and even in ministries.

I will continue to fight the good fight, as should you. Speculating that things likely won't change ought never dissuade a person from continuing

to do what's right today.

*Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.*

— **Galatians 6:9**

Some curse, huh? Phew!

## Suffering and Pressure

Suffering is the hallmark of true Christianity, for it is in His precious name that we find our beloved existence. *“Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach” (Hebrews 13:13).* If we are indeed members of His flock, we will suffer.

*For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who 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, but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher.”*

— 2 Timothy 1:7

Pressure is a way of life for a believer. Learning to cope with it daily is one of the great graces given to every maturing believer. In fact, the more a person matures, the more God will apportion to them a measure of faith to counter increases in pressure.

*The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*

— Romans 8:16-18

## #%\$\*@ Rolls Uphill

Whoever said that certain unpleasant substances roll downhill may have been smoking crack at the time. :P

Seriously - either that or they had very little leadership experience. OR, they were just murmuring about being called to the mat regarding subordinate responsibilities. Whatever the case may be, they were WRONG!

#%\$\*@ rolls uphill. I am convinced of this. (Please don't ask me to explain what #%\$\*@ means, either, as I am a pastor, ya know, and I need to maintain some kind of propriety here :) ).

**Here's what I've learned from the variety of leadership positions I've held in the military, business, family, and even in the ministry. Pressure is inevitable. Everyone's dealing with it. Everyone has a threshold. Everyone lets off steam when that threshold is met.**

**When a person is pushed beyond their limits, they tend to "share" pressure with those who they perceive can handle it. If they are subordinate to a sound leader, that person is often the targeted receiver.**

In some ways, being the consistent target of someone else's pressure-relief is a complement, and might be considered favorable in that vein of thought. However, in other ways, it can be challenging for the leader. Allow me to share.

There are "perfect storms" in life, where everyone in my periphery seems to be dealing with increased pressure. As a sound, confident leader, I am often the aforementioned "target" for my subordinates. "Sharing" one person's pressure wouldn't be too bad, but multiply that by 3, 5, or 10 people, and the cumulative effect can be daunting. Since most subordinates are in "fight



or flight" mode already, they aren't really too concerned with the "perfect storm" that may be brewing in my life.

Honestly, in that moment, I've learned they really don't care about my problems. Some may take the time to reflect later on and apologize, but most don't. It's just part of being a leader. People expect you to take their blows and never give up. That's what I do, anyways...I never give up. I won't. Heck, I can't. I love Him too much to let any one or even the collective be the cause for quitting.

Whenever I get contemplative like this, I think about Jesus first, of course, and I find a wellspring of encouragement:

*But Jesus was saying [while on the Cross], 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.*

— **Luke 23:34**

Talk about weathering a perfect storm!!! They cheered for His entry into the city and then, in the blink of an eye, they chanted "crucify Him!" These are the people He came to save! Comparatively, I've got nothing to complain about, obviously. So, I won't, but that won't keep me from articulating the facts. This blog is worth your time.

I also think of Moses, who had to lead a group of fickle, murmuring, horribly self-centered individuals out of slavery. Here he does this tremendous good work for THEIR benefit, and all they do is complain to him about their individual problems. It's so ridiculous that when I read Exodus all I can do is laugh (though simultaneously, in a small way, I empathize with him and the agony this must've caused him).

I can also relate to Moses because like him, I was a reluctant spiritual leader, so to speak. I mean, I never pursued this ministerial office

like some do. I was pretty content NOT leading a flock. I wouldn't change a thing, of course - just sharing the early details of my calling.

*But Moses said to God, 'Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?'*

— **Exodus 3:11**

*Then Moses said, 'What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, "The Lord has not appeared to you".'*

— **Exodus 4:1**

*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.'*

— **Exodus 4:10**

As most of you know, Moses remained steadfast and faithful to the Lord. Israel was delivered from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Moses led the way. You'd think that fact alone would be cause enough for unending gratitude to be showered on Moses by the people. Nope - not even close! Just the opposite was true.

*Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, 'Give us water that we may drink.' And Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' But the people thirsted there for water [just a simple test from the Lord that they failed, of course]; and they grumbled against Moses and said, 'Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?'*

— **Exodus 17:2-3**

It seems almost incredible that the same people Moses led out of slavery became spiteful towards him, even though all he was doing was remaining

faithful to the Lord. That's people. And the account above is one of many recorded in scripture.

**People are generally self-absorbed. It seems doubly apparent when it comes to "sharing" with their leaders.**

Did not Moses have his own pain and suffering to deal with at a personal level? Absolutely. *"Choosing rather to endure the ill-treatment with the people of God"* (**Hebrews 11:25a**). Did those he was leading care about his well-being when faced with their own suffering? Why didn't they collectively join forces and try to relieve some pressure from Moses? Why didn't they see the perfect storm they were creating? Self-absorption.

**Thankfully, Moses had what every sound leader has - faith. His faith delivered him every time (and even those grumbling against him). It may have been a painful journey, but he survived and brought glory to God.**

**Please don't take my words here wrongly. I am not venting so much as simply setting the record straight about a certain directional flow of unpleasanties. A subordinate may receive pressure from a single leader, but that leader receives pressure from a multitude of subordinates.**

Too many people forget about their leaders and the amount of pressure that they must endure for their sakes. In the ministry alone, it is pretty much unending, I assure you. Not complaining, just stating a fact.

**I love those I lead - truly. However, I love my Lord much more than any of them. I endure for His sake. My faith is in His promises. My hope is in His eternal life. My love is from Him, through Him, and for Him.**

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

— 1 Corinthians 13:13

#%\$\*@ Rolls Uphill

I will live to tell about any perfect storm this world can throw at me. #%  
\$\*@ may indeed roll uphill, but I'll just keep on taking in the Word and  
letting it wash me clean. All glory and honor be to God!

*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*

— **Philippians 4:13**

## **A Brief Walk In the Sewer**

Please excuse the tone of this blog. Sometimes, to sugarcoat is to rob the thought of its impact.

So, I won't be doing that here. I won't be "tidying" things up to ensure nobody's offended. I'm sure once you begin reading, you'll be able to relate, even though it's not the prettiest of scenarios or the traditionally encouraging approach. Read between the lines, though, and you shall be encouraged appropriately, I promise! :)

Some days I find it difficult to even make a trip to the local shopping mall. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not a monk or a recluse (not yet anyways - lol). However, the more I realize how much our God has done for us, and continues to do for us, the more challenging it is NOT to be totally turned off by mankind.

**This world stinks! It reeks! It's grotesque in the worst of ways!**

Here's the thing. Humanity has been distancing itself from God ever since the dawn of man. However, lately it seems it is sprinting away from Him. Even in my brief 45 year lifetime I've noticed a rapid acceleration. When I was a child, only those on the fringes of society seemed bold enough to be antagonistic towards God. And there weren't many of them, at least not in my periphery. So, most of us dismissed them as castoffs.

Today, things are very different. 'Jesus' has become a swear word. The world still 'tolerates' the concept of a god or gods, but definitely not THE God of the universe. Oh, there are myriad idols (take your pick), just none of them are Jesus.

**If this world's view of Jesus were qualified as a scent, it'd come off as sewage.**

**It'd be nice to breathe some fresh air once in a while, but "whatever". I'll breathe in scripture for that and let the world scoff. Someday it's going to swallow its own venom and choke. That'll be just about the time when the Lord Jesus Christ slams His foot on the tip of the Mount of Olives, splitting it in two (Zechariah 14:4). But that's another story for another day.**

There are days when I step out into the world and by the time I get back home I feel like I need a 'shower' to cleanse myself. I feel dirty.

I feel like to live is to walk through a sewer pipe. I guess I'm increasingly realizing what Paul was saying when he wrote, *"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain"* (**Philippians 1:21**).

**Life is short. That's a fact. Walking through this world is like taking a brief walk in the sewer.**

Gross? Indeed. A cause for throwing in the towel? May it never be! Just the opposite, actually! God's got something to show the antagonists, starting with Satan, himself, the chief of that camp (**2 Corinthians 4:4**).

Jesus walked through this sewer pipe before we ever did, and the world hated Him for being so clean and pure. He was a sweet aroma to His Father in Heaven, but offensive to the world, so the world extinguished His life (well, tried to anyways). Understanding His own destiny, Jesus prayed on our behalf, *"I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one"* (**John 17:14-15**).

So, if my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, wants me to stay put, then I will. He showed me how to do it - by grace. *"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me"* (**Philippians 4:13**). I'd rather be in Heaven right now, free from this awful stench, but I know there's work to be done here in time. I'm

tired of the smell most days, but even a farmer with his hand to the plow must endure the pungency of manure while he labors.

*But Jesus said to him, 'No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God'.*

— Luke 9:62

**There are days when life just flat out seems to get the best of us. But I, for one, will never give up. I won't. I can't. Jesus gave all for me. I'd like to think I can at least press on.**

I don't have to be smiling all the time, but I can cling to a certain joy set before me, on the inside, where He is also. *"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).*

I am encouraged.

*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 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

**If my Lord wants me to slosh through the sewer, then I'll do it. If doing so makes Him happy, then I'm in. And I mustn't forget that I flush my toilet into the sewer system from time to time. That's part of life, too - a big part of realizing how wretched I am all on my own. So I'm not necessarily pointing my finger at individuals, just the world as a whole.**

Walk in the sewer and your feet become covered in filth. That's life. So be it.

It doesn't have to end there, though - I have the Word always available to cleanse me! I'll even wash others' feet if they let me (**John 13:14-15**). It's nice to breathe in a little fresh air amongst friends, after all.

*Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of the water with the word.*

— **Ephesians 5:25b-26**

Statistically, I'm well beyond the halfway point in my physical life. God's grace has proven more than sufficient. I moan and groan from time to time, but that's just me venting. Every so often, the relief valve pops and a little steam comes out. I'm human.

Thanks for bearing with me.



**Ay, Caramba!**

Convergence.

I couldn't sleep. Again. Not terribly uncommon these days, but nonetheless, no less frustrating. No, let's drop 'frustrating' and go with 'interesting' instead. Dare I say 'exhilarating'? Let me explain.

Running on fumes. When I say that to myself, I try to remember the sweet, intoxicating fumes at the gas pump. Unrelated? Yes. But when you're this tired, who cares what brings a little smile to your face, even if the muscles around your mouth are too fatigued to carry the expression all the way through. Fumes aren't all bad - every cloud has a silver lining, right?

The old adage is, "When it rains, it pours!" I've learned that the Lord is the author and the executor of that. I'm not disgruntled, just pooped out. I'm not angry, just irritable. I'm not upset, just on edge. Oddly, I get it. I understand.

Ever been there?

I sometimes make the mistake of thinking that I'm being weak by addressing such feelings straight on, calling them out as plainly as I see them. But, over time, I've learned that this "place", if that's what you want to call it, is an estate where God does some of His best work. Well, at least that's been the case in my life. I'm convinced it's due to a single reality - that I am one tough cookie...in the flesh. That may sound like I'm complementing myself, but as I see it nowadays, it's more of an insult.

*That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

— 1 Corinthians 12:10

Ay, Caramba!

Before I learned the truth about the spiritual life, I was what most people, including myself, would call a "self-made man". That's right, I said it. And to whatever degree I believed that to be true, to that degree I have suffered in letting go. I'm a survivor. I like to blame my tumultuous childhood, but that doesn't even matter...that's just another form of arrogance wrapped up in blame.

**God doesn't desire independent survivors, He desires dependent children.**

In order to get us to that place of dependency, He'll often orchestrate the convergence of many things all at once. When those things are challenging, the sum total can make a person who's trying to maintain superior "survivability" in the flesh go batty. Seriously. Been there, done that. Look up 'futility' in the dictionary, and you might see my face.

After losing the battle with God for superiority, when I have nothing left but fumes in the tank, and I fall back in exhaustion, I often say to myself, "Ay, caramba!" And then I'll laugh. Seems like an odd thing to do, but what else can a person do who's just suffered defeat and THEN figured out that their loss came by the hand of God?

I'm SO tired right now. Physically. Mentally. Emotionally. There's a certain numbness, though don't ask me to explain it. If you've been here, you know what I'm talking about. And please don't think I'm complaining - I'm actually grateful for this work He's doing in me, despite my "issues". When you're as resilient and resourceful as I am in the flesh, it can be a long and arduous fight with Him. In the end, He always wins, of course.

**For some of us stubborn folks, God needs to knock us all the way down to our knees before He'll show us what we need to see. Most often, it's because we'd otherwise be too blinded by our own self-righteousness to see the truth about ourselves.**

**What good is showing us Jesus Christ's character being formed in us if every time we catch a glimpse of Him we take credit for it?**

God won't have it! His desire is to PROVE to us that we have limits, and they are very human. Therefore, part of His good work is preparatory. He prepares us for growth by smashing any progress the flesh has made in convincing us that we are "self-made" men.

This reminds me of Gideon. He was called to do battle with a fierce enemy. At the start of it, he had 32,000 soldiers, however:

*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

As the story goes, the Lord whittled Gideon's army down to 300 men! "Ay, caramba!" screamed Gideon (well, he didn't as far as we know, but maybe he uttered something of the sort? :). Oh, and btw, his enemy was estimated at 135,000!

*The Lord said to Gideon, 'I will deliver you with the 300 men who lapped and will give the Midianites into your hands; so let all the other people go, each man to his home'.*

— Judges 7:7

And so it came to pass. The Lord proved Himself as the true deliverer. But first, in preparation, he stripped the Israelites bare. This was a very good thing.

**It's a very good work in you that the Lord does when He strips you bare. When He knocks you down all the way to your knees and you're**

Ay, Caramba!

**pleading for deliverance, then, and only then, is He satisfied to commence the greater work. Some of us are so unbelievably conditioned to seek deliverance on our own that the process of figuring out the futility in that approach is agonizing.**

Learn to let go. The Lord's not impressed with your strength or your stamina and, frankly, the world scoffs at it. The only thing powerful enough to deliver you is the Word.

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.*

*Stand firm then, with the belt of the truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.*

— Ephesians 6:12-17

**The next time life becomes overwhelming, step back and consider what the Lord might be trying to accomplish in your life. He may be simply trying to remind you of how weak you are in the flesh. Once He's accomplished that good work in you, then your soil is fertile, made ready for growth.**

## **Crushed, Healed, and Sanctified**

About a year or so ago I asked the members of my congregation to raise their hands if they had been diagnosed with Lyme Disease. Over one third raised their hands. I was flabbergasted. A few had been suffering for years. A couple of those were on PICC lines (semi-permanent intravenous lines for administering antibiotics), indicating the severity of the infection. Their responses got me thinking about how many folks were suffering physically, beyond the one illness. It turns out the majority of my congregation is suffering at any given point in time.

Chronic pain is interesting to me, not because I desire to experience it nor do I have a morbid curiosity about it. It's interesting to me because of the emotional and spiritual (these two things are intrinsically connected for a believer) ramifications. It's one thing to suffer a broken limb and make the journey through the healing process. It's an entirely different experience for someone faced with the hopelessness of persistent discomfort. Chronic pain doesn't go away. It's always there. It's not just a diagnosis. There's no closure. I believe those of us without it cannot fully understand it. Hence my interest as a non-sufferer.

Unlike a temporary injury that heals, chronic sufferers face much more daunting challenges. Their pain spreads from, "OK, I've got to get through this," to, "I need to manage this into my lifestyle because it's not going away." These are very different mindsets, almost as vastly different as babysitting and having a child of your own (not that all children are "painful" to bear - LOL!). The permanency of pain becomes the source of many other issues, not the least of which are psychosomatic (Google.com definition: (of a physical illness or other condition) caused or aggravated by a mental factor such as internal conflict or stress).

*For some people, the stress and depression resulting from chronic pain can become consuming, and can even worsen and prolong the*

*pain. Increased pain can, in turn, lead to increased stress and depression, creating a cycle of depression and pain that can be difficult to break.*

— *Spine-Health.com*

If the experts at Spine Health are accurate, then a “soul-doctor”, such as myself, must concede that there are very real, pressing issues that believers suffering from chronic pain must cope with. I can’t personally empathize, but I can try to sympathize and, in turn, try to offer encouragement through scripture. That’s my “ointment” ...for the soul.

For example, I know that Paul suffered something, described only as “a thorn”, that left a very tough man crying out for relief.

*Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me — **to keep me from exalting myself!** Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, **'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'** Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 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 12:7-10**

What do you see in Paul’s discourse above? I see a man whom God ordained suffering for a good reason...“to keep [him] from exalting himself”. Do I know, specifically, what that meant for Paul? I do not. However, the scripture does reveal the fundamental reason for it. We can only assume that some folks are in a similar boat. Paul needed pain to intimate him with grace. Is that what others need? I suppose.

**Pain, as a concept, is also very interesting as it is a critical facet of sanctification, both in establishing humility and in healing.**

**Ever since the fall in the Garden, man has been subject to pain. It's a part of our curse until we get to Heaven, "*and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away*" (Revelation 21:4). Until then, we must accept pain as a godly device meant to somehow orient us to His plan.**

Even our Savior, the perfect One, suffered for a good reason, "*But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief*" (Isaiah 53:10a). Such is the nature of healing, it is preceded by pain. Consider how God's grace is revealed to mere humans in time...it requires a point of application, doesn't it?

**Grace shines when there's a 'need' for it.**

Faith is the pathway to healing, beginning with 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). You were destined for eternal pain, but by grace through faith, you have been sanctified, healed. Christ suffered for your salvation, however you must suffer as part of your sanctification after salvation.

**Some of us require healing that can only be accomplished through intense suffering. Pain has a unique way of drawing out the truth in us by wearying the flesh and bringing us to our knees in the process, squashing our arrogance. Only God knows all the details, but being crushed and then healed is a good thing. Without the prior the latter could never be fully understood. Faith needs to be tested for it to bear its greatest fruit.**

*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

I have aches and pains that are typical for even a healthy forty-six year old, so I'm told. I'm grateful that I've not had to deal with any chronic physical ailments. I tip my cap to those finding deliverance as their pain remains steadfast. His grace truly is sufficient.

I do suffer chronic pain, truth be told. Only as a shepherd, it is spiritual. As I've written in the past, my heart breaks daily. I have asked Him to deliver me from this pain, but He always responds the same, "NO! I need you to feel this pain, for My sake, for that is My heart in you. To lose the pain would be to lose the heart." So I press on. I can only imagine that those suffering ANY form of chronic pain can relate. I am grateful to you all and I thank you for your example...never forget your impact in this world. Your vision may be narrowed as you wince in pain, not able to see those in your periphery...but they are watching, trust me...I'm one of them. If the angels could speak to us, I'm confident they'd say the same.



## The Diver's Watch

Why is it that some people are unfazed by pressure, while others crumble?

**If there were only a "How To" website or a "Pressure For Dummies" book...well, there kind of is...but we'll get to that.**

Believers are like divers' watches, each with their own limits as to how much pressure they can withstand before they begin leaking. The better the watch, the deeper it can go and still function properly. The utility of a good diver's watch is to withstand immense outside pressure while ensuring internal intricacies remain undisturbed. These watches are given "water resistance" ratings depending on their ability to withstand said pressure. So goes the human mind...it must be "resistant" to pressure so that the human can think straight while "underwater".

**The only person who never crumbled under pressure was Jesus Christ. His faith was absolute...His mind like an impenetrable vault. He's left us His mind, thank God...it's called the Bible... "But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16b). The more we learn to depend on His mind, the "deeper" we can go!**

Oh, and btw, Jesus did NOT use His deity to overcome the pressures He faced.

*Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

— **Philippians 2:5-8**

**Jesus faced unparalleled pressure as a human being. He had faith. He had conviction. He never "leaked". He wants to share His mind with you now so that you can join Him in exploring at greater depths.**

*"Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong" (1 Corinthians 16:13). The Greek word for "stand firm" is steko, which means to stand, to stand fast, to be stationary; (figuratively) to persevere - Strong's. This is what strong men do, as Paul describes it (strong women too, of course). The lynchpin is the next phrase, "in the faith", which is translated from the Greek word pistis, which means faith, belief, trust, confidence; fidelity, faithfulness - Strong's. Paul's faith was the strength behind his conviction. The object of that faith, the Word (Christ's mind), was the source of his conviction. Put these thoughts together and you have a very powerful statement in the Word of God...the germ of a "How To" book. :)*

**The greater your faith, the stronger you'll be in the face of pressure. The object of your faith is the substance of your convictions. To whatever degree your faith or its object is weak, to that degree your convictions will be weak. The strongest faith is faith in the Word of God, which is the strongest object in the Universe. The sooner you accept this as truth, the sooner you'll be delivered.**

**The first chapter in the "How To" book then, is titled, "Humility" and the second is, "Learn the Word".**

**Too many people, arrogant believers even, possess human faith, where the object of their faith is extra-Biblical, guaranteeing weakness. They wonder why they implode under pressure.**

*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. Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are*

*being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world.*

— **1 Peter 5:6-9**

For years I felt the burden of carrying more weight on my shoulders than I ought to have. I was ignorant and arrogant...in fact, it was my arrogance that kept me in a state of ignorance. I often found myself flipping back to the words of my Lord, "*For My yoke is easy and My burden is light*" (**Matthew 11:30**) and wondering, "What am I missing?" I'd seen the scripture, but I hadn't had a change of heart yet. I was still in my own way.

It wasn't until after years of being in a relationship with Jesus Christ that my **perspective** was changed such that I began to feel the weight on my shoulders lift. For me, I needed more of the object of my faith imparted to my soul, namely the omnipotent Word. I needed more substance than just the knowledge I had of Jesus when we first met. I have prayed and He has delivered. He's promised to keep on sanctifying me for as long as I press on, believing in His personal integrity towards me.

**Pressure is here to stay...we are assured of this fact (John 15:20). You can't grant yourself faith...it is the gift of God. You can only believe what you receive as the object of your faith, the Word. "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). In this way, even the process of removing the old yoke, the exhausting one, is His good work in you...so there's no pressure to "do" that, either. Therefore, the righteous perspective, which is really humility, is that it's GOD's job to take all that pressure you've been dealing with and place it squarely on the shoulders of His Son, the Word.**

**1 Peter 5:7** says "*casting all your anxiety on Him*". "Casting" is from the Greek word *epiripto*, which means *to throw*. In context, it means to "throw" your issues on Him. Why? Because "*He cares for you*". He knows that if you allow Him to bear your burdens, then you'll be able to give Him your undistracted devotion...and your relationship will flourish. It's a win-win!

**Just a word to the wise, lest you lose your humility - when He does keep His promises to you, and He will, don't make the mistake of taking the credit for it like many do, sending themselves right back to square one!**

Jesus likes to tell us things before they happen so that when He brings them to pass, we will have all the more reason to know that it was Him. *"From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He"* (**John 13:19**).

**Don't hijack His grace with your arrogance.**

Quit the self-life and the feeble attempts at shouldering pressure on your own...it's an act of futility. The strongest are the humblest. *"When I am weak, then I am strong,"* (**2 Corinthians 12:10b**). And don't be surprised at the distance that forms between you and the rest of the world. As you stand firm in your faith, as your knowledge of the Word and your wisdom increases, others will fall away, crushed by the pressures of life..."leaking" horribly and struggling to catch their breath. Even the most primitive human functions will be threatened by disarray. Be grateful it's no longer you.

It is said that there are depths of the ocean floor which remain uncharted. Well, Jesus has seen it all and He's inviting us to join Him on an adventure...it's called "life". But you've got to be able to "go deep" in order to appreciate His creation. You've got to be trained to resist the pressure and keep on 'ticking'.

## **I'm Sick**

Right now.

I mean, as I write this, I am literally sick. I've been sneezing, coughing, fighting fatigue, and trying to concentrate "through" a headache so I can write.

I complain a little to myself, but my self-absorption doesn't last very long. Why? - because all I have to do is remember why I've been left here on earth after salvation. All I have to do is stop and consider the vast chasm between this discomfort and the discomfort my Lord endured on the Cross. Reality check.

I realize that my suffering, as fleeting as it is, is still legitimate and is my body's way of telling me to slow down a bit. However, the challenge is to never lose perspective. Dealing with a momentary affliction is the least of my concerns.

**Just because I'm physically sick doesn't mean I ought to allow myself to become spiritually sick. This applies to all levels of sickness.**

Perspective keeps me healthy where it matters, even when my body is enticing me to wallow in self-pity. There's work to be done, and time doesn't stop because I'm fighting a cold...or whatever it is this time around.

*For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things*

*which are not seen are eternal.*

— **2 Corinthians 4:15-18**

Heck, even writing the words of the apostle Paul above, given the magnitude of the afflictions that he had to deal with makes my little cold seem insignificant. Alas, perspective!

The world says, "go ahead and shut down when you're not feeling well. Awww - the widdew boy has a snuffle?...awww - why don't you go be pathetic somewhere...and maybe call your mommy over to wipe your nose for you." Yuck! I say, "pick up your skirt and be a man!"

I recently read an article about Dr. Zenko Hrynkiw, a brain surgeon who hiked 6 miles through a snowstorm to perform a life-saving brain surgery. Regarding his patient, he is quoted as saying, "He had a 90 percent chance of death. If he didn't have surgery, he'd be dead. It's not going to happen on my shift." That's what I'm talking about!!! Sacrifice, suffering, perseverance in the face of mounting odds...not for self, but for someone in need.

How much more does the Cross speak to us, then?

*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 5:3-8**

How can I let a little cold stop me? I can't. How can any of us let any sickness stop us? We shouldn't.

I think about my sister, who's been living a 3+ year nightmare ever since her Lyme disease went undiagnosed, or the congregant who's been stuck in Boston hospitals for months while her two beautiful children live with her sister, or the cancer patient that hardly ever misses class, or the one with a chemical imbalance in their brain that they were born with, or the one with the broken heart, or the one still coping with child abuse, or the one...and the list goes on. C'mon, Ed, what's a cold in comparison to these situations, even?...nothing, I say.

And as bad as any one of the above appears, it still pales in comparison to Jesus' suffering on our behalf.

So, I'm sick - it's true. But I'm also well, spiritually, where it truly matters... where I get my perspective from. And I thank God every day for it. It's a gift, a life-saving one. As I might say to a small child, "being sick is caca-poopie." (yes, I can be that juvenile in my speech, so? :) ) But things could be a LOT worse.

**I just have to remember the Cross. Always.**

The kingdom of darkness wants to chip away at my resilience - yours, too! Let's say we resist the temptation to give in - no matter what may come. You in?

*Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.*

— 1 Corinthians 16:13

**Life is short. It's full of challenges. From God's perspective, every challenge has already been met with grace. Keep your perspective and you keep His grace. Keep His grace and you are delivered every time, without fail. He promises.**

If His grace was sufficient for our Lord's work on the Cross, then it certainly is enough for whatever it is that we are dealing with.

If you've been sick for a while, choose the perspective that considers it an opportunity to LIVE by grace, so the whole world can see how beautiful you are in Christ. Go ahead - show them! If you've been sick for just a little bit, like me, then suck it up, my friend. Are you a soldier or not? Stand firm.

... 'nough said.



## Peacekeeping Displays Greater Strength Than Fighting

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

— Ephesians 4:1-3

"Oh boy, here she comes, little miss know-it-all!"

"I know, right, she's such a pain, huh?"

"Yeah, that's right...she's a real pain in the 'you-know-what!'"

"Do you know that I loaned her over \$1,000 to help her out with her bankruptcy lawyer a year ago and I haven't seen a penny of it returned yet? The nerve!"

"No way! Oh, what a jerk she is for sure! First the bankruptcy and now this?!!! Let's tell the rest of the congregation to steer clear of this one!"

"Uh-huh, totally agree - let's do this!"

By now, some of you might be shaking your heads. Yet, when's the last time you loaned someone that much money in the first place? And when's the last time you were stiffed for it? How about \$2,000 or \$3,000 or \$10,000? Anyone?

Paul shares Jesus Christ's heart in **Ephesians 4** so that we might step back and assess every situation we come across with objectivity.

If we loan someone a \$1 and they "forget" to pay us back, do we ever really break the peace between us over a mere \$1? It's not likely we would. But

## Peacekeeping Displays Greater Strength Than Fighting

there are thresholds, aren't there? What's yours? ...\$50? ...\$100? ...\$500 ...  
am I getting warmer?

How about when someone breaks a promise or a vow to you? Something  
maybe a little closer to your heart.

I recently had a conversation with a 60-something year old man that has  
been divorced twice, and BOY is he a bitter man! Phew. You know the  
type...the one people scatter from when they seem him coming. I like to  
dub folks like that, "Moses", because they can part a "sea" of people - LOL.  
I'm poking fun, but it really made me sad to speak to this man, whom I  
truly love, btw. It breaks my heart to think of him. :(

### **The bond of peace begins with YOU!**

People are GOING to fail. They are GOING to let you down, personally.  
They are absolutely going to betray you, lie to you, steal from you,  
disappoint you, stab you in the back when you're not looking, threaten  
you, gossip about you, etc. So what? What are you going to do about that?  
The only place where things like that will truly cease to happen is Heaven.

**Keep the peace. That's what Jesus wants you to do. Keep the peace by  
loving others even when they are doing everything in their power to  
destroy said peace between you.**

### **Stand up for peace.**

Anyone can drop the hockey gloves and get into a brawl. Heck, I could  
throw an ape into a ring and eventually he'll go fisticuffs with a taunting  
jackass. Fighting is easy.

I remember being a kid when every time two brawlers were torn apart and  
questioned, they'd each point to the other as the "one who started it." Who  
cares? What's important anyways?...blame or reconciliation?

**If the end goal is peace, because that's the most fertile soil for Christ's love, then who cares if the other person's being a jackass? YOU be the mature believer and seek peace. God is pleased with that.**

We are said to love others even more than ourselves. That's what Jesus' example portrayed, right?

*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.*

*Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. 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 the 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?*

— **Matthew 5:38-46**

At our very worst, after we've recoiled from a horrible mistake, what do we desire the most? To be loved. Do we always properly express it to those we seek it from? Nope! We often play the stubborn jackass still bucking and making a ruckus...yet we just want to find some peace. We are weak like that.

If that's what we want, might we assume that's consistent with everyone? If that's true, then SOMEONE has to hold down the fort of peace, right? It

## Peacekeeping Displays Greater Strength Than Fighting

might as well be YOU! Maybe the person on the other side of the fence is having a horrible day. It happened to you not that long ago, right?

**So don't be a hypocrite about it. Step back, remember that people are weak, and love them instead. Everyone involved will be better off in the end.**

*Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.*

***If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.***

*Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. 'But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.'*

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

— Romans 12:9-21

Someone has to stand up for peace. The flesh believes fighting is the highest expression of strength, but Christ believes reconciliation is. He could've fought with those persecuting Him, but He suffered, even died, for them instead, so that they, too, might be reconciled to Him. That's our

pattern.

**We expect to suffer for others, like Jesus Christ. If we suffer so that peace might be found, and that is what is pleasing to Him, then that is what we must do. That's real strength.**

*Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.*

**— 2 Corinthians 5:18-19.**

## **Guest Blogger: People Testing**

**"I hate this world and everyone in it!!!" Now, just give me a second to explain.**

This was my thought during an exceptionally trying day at work last week. Are you surprised? If you know me, personally, you just thought "not at all" - LOL. Let me give you a little context here.

I am a physical therapist in several nursing homes in MA and RI. So, my day is filled with people at their absolute worst. They are sick, in pain, exhausted, many have cognitive and, even, psychological issues. That is only a description of the patients! I have not even begun to describe the overbearing, self-centered family members or the inattentive, uncompassionate staff. These are not blanket statements, I am merely describing a percentage (sadly, a rather large one) of the people I interact with every day.

On top of that is the ever-increasing pressure from the health care system to produce more and more, often with the expectation that one lay aside one's own integrity. Ya...fun stuff. Anyway, after a while, thoughts and emotions reflected in my opening statement began to surface.

Interestingly enough, during that same day I had conversations with two friends who expressed remarkably similar sentiments. One added, (I paraphrase) "I wonder what is going on with all the people testing lately?"

So, after a week of reflection, I have a few thoughts to share.

**Our relationships in this life are designed to provide us the opportunity to reflect God's love, for the benefit of others, as well as for our own.**

*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**

How will we know that we are being transformed into the beautiful image of Christ (**2 Corinthians 3:18**) if we are never provided the opportunity to demonstrate these aspects of Him? How will we know that we are patient, kind, gentle and self-controlled if not put to the test? More importantly, how will others know? We are called to be a living proof of His love, lights of the world.

*You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

— **Matthew 5:14-16**

**I believe the reason "people testing", especially on the job site, is so intense is because we are SO different. We do not think like everyone else, act like everyone else, feel like everyone else. This is expected and should be the case for all Christians. Love should be the driving force in our day and what causes us to stand out from the crowd.**

*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

— **John 13:35**

**We are also called to share in the suffering of our Savior, Jesus Christ.**

*Now if we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

— **Romans 8:17**

How did our Lord suffer in the hands of our fellow man?

*If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason'.*

— **John 15:24-25**

*They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again.*

— **Matthew 27:30**

What about his friends? You know, the twelve men who spent every day with Him for three years and were blessed to see His love, His miracles, and His perfection firsthand. What did they do when the Lord's sacrificial suffering was beginning?

*Then everyone deserted him and fled.*

— **Mark 14:50**

**So, if we are bestowed the honor of partaking in His suffering, why are we surprised when we are mistreated? Why do we crumble under the most insignificant of slights? How should we respond to aggravations and hostility, even? I am going to go out on a limb here and say we should emulate Him who suffered and died for our eternal salvation.**

*Jesus said, 'Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'.*

— **Luke 23:34a**



One more thing. This should be the most obvious, but because we are so darn arrogant, it most likely is not.

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

— Romans 3:23

You know how there is that one person...arggg...you see their face, hear their voice, even hear their name, and you are instantly annoyed? You know the one - you are thinking of them right now and frowning. Guess what? Someone is thinking of you.

Hahahaha! Yup, you are the MOST annoying, MOST selfish, MOST frustrating person to someone else.

You know what else? The person you should have seen in your mind's eye is YOU!!! No one causes you the extent of emotional, physical, and soul distress as you and your dumb, dumb, dumb decisions do.

So, maybe when you are having "one of those days" and "everyone else" is behaving deplorably in your eyes, you should consider the following and remember that it pertains first to you.

*From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness - only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with olive oil.*

— Isaiah 1:6

Now, in the very same breath, remember this...

*For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

— John 3:16

'Nuff said? Ya, I think so too!

In His Perfect Love,  
-Monica

## **This, Too, Shall Pass**

"...but I don't feel like even getting up in the morning, Ma."

"Eddie, I can't tell you how many times in my life that I've been so low that...well, if it weren't for you kids, I'm not sure what I'd be doing to be honest. But I learned something from my Alcoholics Anonymous group that I've clung to ever since and it's truly helped me out." My mom was saying this with as much confidence about anything I had ever seen from her.

"This, too, shall pass," she said plainly.

At 15 years old, I hadn't enough life experience yet to fully understand where she was coming from, but I trusted my mom like no other on issues of the heart. She was wise and tenacious, and I knew it. So I listened.

We were both believers. However, neither of us had learned a whole lot of the Word of God at this point back in the early 1980's. But as is so often the case, God was using someone special in my life to plant a seed that later He would personally water.

I took her advice that day. And turns out she was right. My problems, those things that seem to suffocate hormonal 15 year old boys, dissipated over time. I learned to be still.

Ever since then, with increasing efficiency, I've learned to identify those times where I get all "spun up" and go into "problem-solving" mode, trying to fix things. Instead of stressing out, I've learned to be still.

**Sometimes, the best solution is to do nothing.**

If you have patience issues like I do, then this is quite a test of faith.

But here's what I've learned from the Bible. We are encouraged to "be still" and wait on the timing of God.

**His timing is always perfect. Our stress is in forgetting this.**

*On that day, when evening came, He said to them, 'Let us go over to the other side.' Leaving the crowd, they took Him along with them in the boat, just as He was; and other boats were with Him. And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. Jesus Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke Him and said to Him, 'Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?'*

*And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Hush, be still.'*

*And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. And He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?' They became very much afraid and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?'*

— Mark 4:35-41

What a beautiful picture of our Lord's own faith, of His calm.

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

— Hebrews 11:1

Jesus' calm was entirely internalized, never a function of outside stimuli. Hence, He slept right through the storm.

Contrarily, His disciples' calm (or lack of) was a function of external

stimuli, hence their distress during the storm.

**Stability in life is learning to find your calm from within, where Christ, Himself, resides in you. Faith takes us there. Grace provides.**

Storms are part of life. Since we don't control them, we learn to wait them out in the stern of the boat, where Christ is. Why not catch up on some sleep while you're waiting? It's entirely possible. Maybe not rational by human standards, but we are talking about a supernatural calm.

There's an old proverb, "Sometimes He calms the storm, other times He calms the child." The calm child is the greater work.

Storms are tests. If we endure them gracefully, we bring glory to God. WE bring glory to God - imagine that!...hence the "greater work." Through faith, we hear Him whispering in our ear, "hush, be still." Test passed. Even the angels applaud.

Now, from what I understand of meteorological things, I don't believe there exists a storm system that perpetually rages on. Eventually, all storms pass. Same goes in life.

Find Christ during the storm and you'll find your calm. Find Him and rest while others are stressed out. When we put our faith in Him, He delivers us where it matters, on the inside.

*"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Do you believe that? Therein lies the fate of your OWN calm.*

"This, too, shall pass."

What a fantastic seed planted 3 decades ago by a loving mother. God has watered it so often in my soul that it now stands as a beautiful flower...a steadfast calm that can only be attributed to His good work in me,

This, Too, Shall Pass

sometimes despite my own distress signals along the way.

**There's always a storm brewing somewhere. But, they all pass, eventually. "Steady as she goes," says our Helmsman.**

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*

— Hebrews 13:8

## Warriors Aren't Smiling In Battle

*The Christian life is not comfortable. God makes us no promises to remove difficult circumstances, or alleviate our pains, or protect us from suffering, but He does promise sufficient grace for all our wants and needs.*

— Tony Reinke's *Newton and the Christian Life*

**There's a lie being peddled by a crowd of self-proclaiming "spiritually mature". They may not use that exact language, but by their assumption of righteousness, by their endeavor to prove themselves as having "arrived", and by their audacity to lie about what it means to abide in Christ, they are guilty of the lie that grace makes one's life a life of increasing comfort.**

The challenge with trying to uproot something so insidious is that it's inherently counterintuitive to those who don't abide in Him. It's difficult, especially for younger believers, to disagree with these professing "seniors"...after all, from all they've been shown by the world, Christianity is an "escape" of sorts...Christianity is where the weary and the worn end up when they've all but given up on "succeeding". But that, too, is a lie...based on a network of lies...like a web that catches so many who lack the desire for Truth.

Upon recently presenting this topic publicly, I was asked, "If we are in the devil's world, what do believers expect?". It's a good question. My response was, "I think people expect what they are falsely told...that life in Christ, when you supposedly "arrive" (by definition of the self-inflated crowd), is meant to be wrought with progressively less suffering. It's an awful trap that I see increasing numbers falling into...especially the younger crowd (as they are being misled by rogue Christians)".

Well-intentioned Christians ought not be dissuaded or disappointed by

any of this. As I often say from the pulpit, "Disappointment is nothing more than failed expectations". The Word of God says that we WILL have peace (not necessarily comfort) if we depend on His grace.

*'I am nothing, Christ is all' (John Newton). The all-sufficient grace of God provides us the context for discovering our insufficiencies...Our owning of personal weakness is one of the results of the active presence of grace. And our weakness is how we broadcast the grace of God to others.*

— Tony Reinke's *Newton and the Christian Life*

**The key point I'm trying to convey here is that Christians ought not make the grave, life-limiting mistake of pursuing grace for the sake of finding some mythical comfort. Grace pursues us! If we think we've "arrived" because we've become comfortable, then where does that put Christ? He, our prototype, suffered in ways we can't even fathom, having "grown in wisdom" Himself (Luke 2:40), revealing the progressive nature of growing up spiritually as a human being. He NEVER stopped growing, yet at the END of His life, the capstone of His time on earth, He SUFFERED! Are we to suppose that He was somehow "comfortable" carrying and hanging on His Cross? Guess what? "*Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple*" (Luke 14:27). "Cross" means suffering. You'd think the barometer for spiritual growth was shedding discomfort, given the garbage being peddled as Truth in Christianity today...a bunch of smiling phonies rallying others in agreement.**

**Grace provides peace, it never guarantees comfort. Those who believe otherwise are actually sacrificing their peace in the process. Misery loves company, so beware.**

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



*content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*

— 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

I've had people tell me that their spiritual lives have gotten better since they've effectively become what I have dubbed "rogue Christians". These are the folks that refuse grace for the sake of gaining personal comfort. These are the folks that don't understand that suffering is the result of living for others, not self. These are the same folks that peddle this lie the Spirit's bringing up in this blog. Listen - grace is Christ, therefore grace means suffering. If you're moving away from suffering, you're moving away from grace (and Christ).

**Sanctification certainly does not imply comfort; otherwise, Christ Himself was deceived. Sanctification is wrought with pain and suffering, all met exceedingly by grace. If you have an issue with that, take it up with God.**

*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 suggest to you now, that you evaluate your life...it's never too late to realize grace for what it truly is...and it's NOT as the "shiny, comfortable" Christians will have you believe. Ours is a bloody, bruising calling; one that was walked by Jesus, though with a joy set before Him (Hebrews 12:2). His was an extremely uncomfortable walk.**

**Do a search this day in the Bible and see how often it says that He was even smiling...good luck with that. Watch for the “smilers” ...they are often selling the lie.**

**Is there anything wrong with smiling or happiness, or being comfortable? May it never be! Jesus illustrated all of these things. Just don't buy the lie that this life, this Christian war, is anything but fierce. It's not for the faint of heart; it's for warriors. Let the posers play pretend on the sidelines, shaking their pom-poms and smiling while the warriors get it done. I've neither heard of nor have I seen any warriors smiling in the heat of battle...just sayin'.**

*Thus sorely prest, I sought the Lord,  
To give me some sweet, cheering word;  
Again I sought, and yet again;  
I waited long, but not in vain.  
Oh! 'twas a cheering word indeed!  
Exactly suited to my need;  
“Sufficient for thee is my grace,  
Thy weakness my great pow'r displays.”  
Now I despond and mourn no more,  
I welcome all I fear'd before;  
Though weak, I'm strong; though troubled, blest;  
For Christ's own pow'r shall on me rest.  
My grace would soon exhausted be,  
But his is boundless as the sea;  
Then let me boast with holy Paul,  
That I am nothing, Christ is all.*

— John Newton (1725-1807)

May I humbly echo Paul's, the warrior apostle's, sentiments in closing,  
*“Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.*

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12-14).*

## **You Don't Know Your Own Limits**

In September 490 BC, Pheidippides, the legendary Greek messenger, was so excited about the good news of victory that he ran nonstop from the battlefield of Marathon to Athens, a distance of 26 miles and 385 yards, to be exact. This was AFTER he had just fought in the battle! As he burst into Athens he exclaimed, "We have won!" He ran so hard for so long that he died right there. I'm going to assume that he died fulfilled.

At the risk of sounding grotesque or prophetic, even, I hope I go in a similar manner (if not raptured first, of course). I want to run so hard that my heart bursts, taking God's grace to the limit!

*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.*

— **1Corinthians 15:10**

The average marathoner spends between 4-5 hours running nonstop. That's a LONG time...not just in terms of wear and tear on a human body, but even more so in terms of mental endurance.

Like most sports, and certainly most challenges in life, the longer an event lasts, the more our success depends upon mental toughness, determination, and integrity. In my experience, running anything over 5 miles takes a person to a different plane. I recall running 13 miles once (that's ONCE! - lol - that was enough, thank you! :) ) and the challenge was much different than expected. I had to rewire my preconceptions about how far I could actually run. Each mile ratcheted my perceived "limit" up a notch. At the end of the run, I was like, "Wow, didn't know I could run that far!"

**Life is a marathon.**

**Until you've pushed yourself to the limit, you technically don't know what your limit is. That's a very fair statement. And even then I'd argue that since NOTHING is impossible with God, no human will ever know their limits as it pertains to grace! Who knows how far He'll decide to take any one of us? Only humility can reveal such a thing!**

**If you truly desire to explore your personal limits - stay humble.**

**Contrary to what the world will tell you, arrogance puts artificial caps on abilities. Humility is open to whatever the omnipotent God decides. Therein lies one of the great satanic deceptions...that WE define our limits. That's horribly arrogant.**

*Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in false humility [arrogance].*

— **Colossians 2:18a**

The individual that sets their own limits is denying grace its fullness in their life. Humility isn't proclaiming limits, it's embracing limitlessness.

*And looking at them Jesus said to them, 'With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible'.*

— **Matthew 19:26**

If your Creator asks you to run a race and you say, "I couldn't possibly finish that!" What are you REALLY saying to Him? Is it fair to say that you trust your own judgment over His? Is it fair to say that you have more faith in your **inabilities** than faith in His **abilities**? ← reread that last statement a few times before moving on. It's important.

*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

**The fact is that you don't know your own limits. God does, but you certainly don't...at least not until you've seen what His grace can do, despite you! And even then, I'd argue that it's only your experience that has been enhanced. There's great wonderment in realizing God's potential in ourselves, which truthfully, is limitless.**

If you stand at the starting line of the Boston Marathon and say, "I can't do this", then you won't. Your arrogance wins in that scenario. If you stand at ANY starting line in life and say, "I can't do this", then chances are, you won't.

However, if you stand at the starting line and say, "May the good Lord's will be done", then whatever obstacle, challenge, or trial that befalls you, you WILL be successful! If you fail, then it is likely due to one of two options: either you're in the wrong race or you're arrogance squashed His grace before He could deliver you through it.

In any case, the next time you lace up, consider my words here. Should you even be focused on so-called "limits" or should you be simply focused on the prize? Should you be more like Pheidippides, so preoccupied with spreading the good news that you forget about limits altogether?

**Forget what YOU think you can do...remember all that HE is able to do through you!**

*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

— Philippians 3:14

## Violence

Violence seems to be only partly understood. Most people associate it with physical phenomena; however, the Bible speaks to a much greater violence that exists in the invisible spiritual realm. Violence began with the same creature, Satan, who instigates and propagates it even today.

*By the abundance of your trade  
You were internally filled with violence,  
And you sinned;  
Therefore I have cast you as profane  
From the mountain of God.  
And I have destroyed you, O covering cherub,  
From the midst of the stones of fire.*

— Ezekiel 28:16

As believers, we must keep our wits about us and never lose sight of the simple fact that political wars pale in comparison to the violence perpetrated in the souls of every human being to ever have lived.

*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*

Violence

*SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*

— **Ephesians 6:10-17**



## Pure Violence

*The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked, and the one who loves violence His soul hates.*

— Psalms 11:5

“Violence against humanity!” I’ve heard this phrase used by politicians, humanitarians, so-called “concerned” college students, and activists alike. It certainly is an effective battle cry. I understand where they are coming from, and I agree with the simple fact that man is cruel to his neighbors, whether the scope is a backyard squabble or a military war between countries. No doubt the violence is real and deserves our attention.

**Even one instance of human atrocity is too much. However, I’ve been thinking a lot about this lately. What’s the greatest, most vile and offensive thing man has ever done? I mean, is there a sin so foul that it is indeed unforgivable? The answer to these questions is also the answer to, “What is the purest violence?”**

*He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters. Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but **blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven [ref: the sin of unbelief]**. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.*

— Matthew 12:30-32

**Of all the sins listed in the Bible, only ONE is considered unforgivable. That is the sin of unbelief. This one sin and all of its fruit is far more violent than any other sin. Why? Because it leads people to everlasting death.**

**Merriam-Webster.com has "violence" defined as follows:**

- 1a) exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse (as in warfare effecting illegal entry into a house)
- 1b) an instance of violent treatment or behavior
- 2) injury by or as if by distortion, infringement, or profanation
- 3a) intense, turbulent, or furious and often destructive action or force <the violence of the storm>
- 3b) vehement feeling or expression; an instance of such action or feeling
- 3c) a clashing or jarring quality
- 4) undue alteration (as of wording or sense in editing a text)

Violence is much more abstract than a single definition implying physical harm. If violence were measured on scales of magnitude, then the greatest violence ever perpetrated is injury against our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. After all, He's the only perfect person to have ever lived, yet He suffered the worst kind of death...spiritual (separated from God)...even though He was completely innocent.

**Since Christ is the Creator of humanity, died for humanity, and intercedes still for humanity, violence against Him is the purest form of violence against humanity itself. He is our great Benefactor. Yet violence against Him is not only rampant, it is tolerated. This is especially grotesque when many tolerators are believers.**

Why are we not screaming like the humanitarians with their mantras, "Violence!...violence against the Messiah!?" When someone suggests that it's OK to ignore the Word of God, to dispel of the Gospel, leading masses to everlasting death, but it's not OK for someone to be injured in a skirmish over land or for standing up for something they believe in, what are they implying? What's more important here...physical, emotional, or spiritual violence? Well, which one is eternally weighted? There's your answer.

**Matters of spiritual death are infinitely more violent than those of**

**physical death. Physical pain, suffering, and even death are all temporal issues, regardless of salvation status. Spiritual pain, suffering, and death is forever for an unbeliever. To mislead a person towards the latter is to encourage them to suffer the worst injury possible.**

While violence emerges worldwide as a result of differences of opinion, all too often resulting in unwarranted physical death, the reality is that these are still forgivable sins. However, the purest violence, that of unbelief, is unforgivable. Blaspheming the Spirit at Gospel presentation is abhorrent. Yet everyone seems to be hyper-focused on the so-called “violences against humanity”.

I’ve lost count of the times I’ve been at social gatherings and watched as believers say nothing when a brash unbeliever slights our Lord. Yet when some humanitarian topic arises, they rear up in indignation. It’s a “funny” thing. Have we become so numb? Why are we so upset with such inferior violence while we shrug our shoulders at the greater issue? Isn't that passive-aggressiveness towards our Lord? Isn't that a form of violence if we get right down to it? *“He who is not with Me is against Me”* (**Matthew 12:30a**).

The greatest war is invisible. Likewise, the greatest violence and resultant casualties are spiritual. *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places”* (**Ephesians 6:12**).

Most believers need to open up their eyes and see past all the white noise and the distractions. The reality is that untold violence is being committed against all of humanity...but you won't see newscasters replaying it over and over. You won't see pictures of it in the newspapers. And you can't Google for images of it.

**Salvation and deliverance is by grace through faith alone in Christ. The**

**purest violence of all is anything or anyone standing opposed to this single truth. Is it possible that you have not thought of this? And by being passive about it, is it fair to say that you've played a part in the violent aggression against our Lord? Food for thought.**

*For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.*

**— 2 Corinthians 11:4**